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WOMAN AS MYTH
IN THE WORKS OF GÉRARD DE NERVAL

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WOMAN AS MYTH IN THE WORKS OF GÉRARD DE NERVAL

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Today we are in the midst of a critical reappraisal of Gérard de Nerval. Year by year his star rises in the literary firmament, not unlike that star he saw from the Paris street, that seemed to grow as he watched it. The past decade has witnessed a score of books on him by the most discerning of French critics, who have laid aside their studies of Stendhal, Verlaine and Montaigne to investigate a man who was known to his contemporaries slightly as "le pauvre Gérard" and sometimes indulgently as "le fol délicieux."

Those who are acquainted with the work and life of Nerval cannot help but rejoice at this assumption to Parnassus, tardy as it is. For there was never a man who seemed less destined for the externals of fame, nor who, indeed, cared less for the externals of our mortal existence. Illness, poverty and an almost compulsive spirituality kept Nerval from ever fully appropriating the rôle of littérateur. He was rather a man of letters, in the singularly

French application of that term. For Nerval, writing was a means of livelihood, as it was for Sainte-Beuve and Gautier. He travelled--to Germany, Belgium, Egypt--partly from romantic yearning, but mostly because his travels provided material for magazine articles and his pockets were always empty. He wrote many plays, always with the hope of the one box-office success that would make his fortune. His plays ran a few weeks and closed. None of them is acted today. He founded a theatrical magazine that soon went bankrupt. He invented a printing system that no one was interested in. He fell in love with an actress who married somebody else. Last of all, he went mad and killed himself. One finishes the great Aristide Marie biography with a feeling of profound sadness. There are no doubt sadder lives in literary history, but few which evoke so poignantly the tragic solitude of an individual--a cosmic solitude of which our own age has a particular knowledge and which, perhaps, more than anything else, renders Nerval understandable for us.

Our age has seen a renaissance of interest in a group of writers who, though they may be of disparate temperaments and schools, nevertheless share a common misfortune: they were misunderstood or quite ignored by their own times. Such was the fate of Baudelaire, of William Blake, of Rimbaud, to mention only a few. Their fate differs from the mere bourgeois contempt in which the artist has been held since the Industrial Revolution. The writers of whom we are

speaking, though they may have been read by considerable numbers of people, were yet never understood. Their unique fate was to belong to a future of which they had only the dim hope of ever arriving--a future that for some, indeed, has not yet arrived.

A quality shared by these writers--at least by Baudelaire, Blake, Rimbaud and Nerval--was an inveterate inability to share the social and cultural vision of their contemporaries, and a corresponding gift for creating personal visions of their own which, though unique to them in their times, have since become social and cultural realities. If these isolated artists were not quite the creators of this new reality, they were nevertheless instrumental in articulating the form and direction of that future that has arrived.

But the signal characteristic of these writers is their concern with Man in isolation from his society, divested of his beliefs and orthodoxies, in that state in which he invests the world, not with borrowed meanings, but with meanings that derive from an inner world of consciousness.

It is this inner world of psychic reality which Gérard de Nerval asserts in his poetry and prose. It is the intricate geography of this region which he attempted to chart by a unique faculty that he called "l'épanchement du songe dans la vie réelle." Through the medium of this subliminal faculty Nerval gained access to a new life--a life so remote from that of our quotidian perceptions that we are wont to label

the experience pure madness, and yet so familiar, so much our own, that we must perforce abandon, in Nerval's case, the criteria by which we define madness and sanity.

Among Nerval's subliminal discoveries was a world of archetypal figures who coincide, in a quite unaccountable way, with the figures of mankind's historical myths. To the casual reader it may at first seem a critical pretension to bestow the term "myth" on the creations of a psychotic nineteenth century journalist. We tend to think of myths as quite grand, collective phenomena--the fruit of racial tragedy and endeavor. Yet it is one of the Nervalian paradoxes that as he defined these elusive figures, and particularly as he wrought them into artistic form, they came ever more closely to coincide with the figures of the Classical mythologies, in value and meaning and form. Nerval's creations are neither fictional "characters" nor biographical prototypes, though it will be seen that they partake of both these identities. They are not, indeed, so much people, as something which people--as we sometimes come to realize in life--can be made to represent. They are human qualities, or the ideational ciphers of whole families of human qualities--that is, they are archetypes. It should be pointed out that this has little to do with the more familiar Wordsworthian "personification" which is the translation of abstract qualities into human form. Nerval's creations are just the opposite: they are the translation of human qualities into idea.

It should be asserted, however, that Nerval was a poet and not a Platonic philosopher. The archetypes interested him, not as the ingredients of dead syllogisms, but as artistic realities. Although Nerval's mythical creations are ideas, they held for him the power of living beings, and are the repositories of all the emotional force he brought to their distant biographical prototypes. Aurélia spoke to him, and it is not for nothing that her mystic symbol was the hollyhock, a flower of the kitchen-garden.

In the present work we have attempted to define and categorize the mythologic content of Nerval's prose and poetry, with special emphasis on the figure of Woman as she is manifested in the numerous heroines and allusive figures of the Nervalian oeuvre. It is with some apology that we have imposed logical criteria on a work that is inherently illogical, poetic and multiform. Nevertheless, it will be seen that there are among Nerval's heroines certain traits to which the very logic of their author's mythical apprehension gave form and organization. We have departed from more familiar character studies in that Nerval's heroines have, one and all, a symbolic dimension which derives not only from their author's poetic vision, but also from the dictates of his psychic needs. For this reason, great attention has been paid to Nerval's personal life as well as to the literary influences that helped to form his private myths. Nerval is supremely subjective and self-obsessed,

but his work is not without debt to his contemporaries--especially to Nodier, Hoffmann and Goethe. Moreover--for all its richness of form, for all his claim as a psychological innovator--both the work and the man fall heavily beneath the shadow of Rousseau. Like the hero of La Nouvelle Héloïse, Nerval believed that "hors l'Etre existant par lui-même, il n'y a rien de beau que ce qui n'est pas." Instead of through lyrical frenzy or romans larmoyants, Nerval was to render this "beauty which is not" into tangible concepts and through the immediacy of symbol and myth. The artistic achievement was also a psychic gain for Nerval, for by defining the unknown in his own spirit, he partially delivered himself from the dictates of a tyrannical unconscious.

The writer has attempted to heed Carl Jung's implicit advice for those who approach the symbol:

Symbols are not signs or allegories for something known; they seek rather to express something that is little known or completely unknown.¹

The "unknown" in this case is Nerval's soul, the terra incognita of another's psychic existence. Only the literary purist would attempt to divorce this existence from its creation, and to contemplate the Chimères, Sylvie and Aurélia in the chill vacuum of the explication de texte. The loss would be the same as it is for those who read The New Testament as "literature." Indeed, Aurélia is not unlike the

¹C. J. Jung, Symbols of Transformation, (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1956), p. 222.

Apocalypse of St. John. It, too, is a testament, and testaments are something more and less than literature. They are the recrudescence of a living reality. We turn from the pages of Aurélia to regard something beyond diversion, beyond beauty--something that warns and exhorts and reveals, as only the deepest communications of Truth can do.

CHAPTER II

THE ROAD TO AURÉLIA

Nerval is his own biographer. The significant experiences of his life are to be found in his works. He recorded his loves in Sylvie, his psychotic breakdown and dream-life in Aurélia, his travels in Voyage en Orient, the romanticism of his youth in Petits Châteaux de Bohème. We know what books he read and what countries he visited. It is strange, therefore, that one leaves his works with a hunger for something more--for the forgotten events, the minutiae of his daily existence. In this realm Nerval was not only negligent, but often purposely misleading. Alice Coléno sums up the tacit despair of the biographer when she says:

Nerval ne garde de son expérience mystique que ce qui peut nous intéresser, il est muet sur tout le reste. Une allusion nécessaire à l'explication de sa recherche sur Aurélia. Comment l'a-t-il connue? Qui fut-elle? Tout est tu. Ne demeure que le récit d'une prodigieuse et cependant vraisemblable aventure spirituelle, d'un exemple qui dépasse l'individu.¹

Various biographies have attempted to circumvent

¹Alice Coléno, Les Portes d'Ivoire, (Paris: Librairie Plon, 1948), p. 239.

Nerval's reticence and artistic distortions. At their best they are scholarly reconstructions, using all available documentation, such as Aristide Marie's definitive work:

Gérard de Nerval, le poète et l'homme. At their worst they are that step-child of science and art, the biographical novel, which may often ignore known facts and even seize on established falsehoods. In between lie those "thumbnail" biographies which compensate in certainty for what they may lack in completeness. It is in this modest genre that the present chapter must take its place.

Among the biographical certainties is the date of Nerval's birth, May 22, 1808, in Paris. Nerval's father, Dr. Etienne Labrunie, was a physician in the Grande Armée, obtaining his commission only a month after the birth of Gérard. In December of 1808 he was attached to the Armée du Rhin, and his wife, Marguerite-Victoire, though frail in health, accompanied him in his campaigns, leaving their newborn child in the care of a wet nurse at Loisy, a short distance from Mortefontaine. There then occurred perhaps the single most important event in Nerval's life: his mother died, November 29, 1810, at Glogau in Silesia. The exact circumstances of her death are not known, but Gérard reports it as the result of a fever "qu'elle gagna en traversant un pont chargé de cadavres, où sa voiture manqua d'être renversée."¹

¹Gérard de Nerval, Oeuvres, ed. Henri Lemaitre (2 vols.; Paris: Editions Garnier Frères, 1958), I, 465.

It is difficult to estimate the emotional effects of this event on the young Nerval. His own testimony is of the greatest interest, but in our age of psychoanalytic subtlety and clinical suspicion, we wonder if he has said the last word on the subject:

Je n'ai jamais vu ma mère; ses portraits ont été perdus ou volés; je sais seulement qu'elle ressemblait à une gravure du temps, d'après Prud'hon ou Fragonard, qu'on appelait la Modestie. La fièvre dont elle est morte m'a saisi trois fois, à des époques qui forment dans ma vie des divisions singulières, périodiques: toujours à ces époques je me suis senti l'esprit frappé des images de deuil et de désolation qui ont entouré mon berceau...¹

There is about this passage, as about so many of Nerval's reminiscences, more vraisemblance perhaps, than reality. The bridge covered with corpses, a mother who resembled a portrait by Fragonard, the mysterious hereditary fevers--all have the persuasiveness of art, but that is their fault for the biographer. One wants to exclaim with Coléno: "Comment l'a-t-il connue? Qui fut-elle?" Other questions arise. Why did Mme. Labrunie leave her only child to the possible negligence of a wet nurse? It will be remembered that she was alive--and absent--during the first two years of Nerval's life. Is there not, beneath Nerval's longing for his lost, perfect mother, some faint realization that she was not so perfect--a disappointment for which he compensates again and again in his creations of perfect women in his art? We will return to this question in the discussion

¹Nerval, Oeuvres, I, p. 465.

of the later myths and archetypes.

Until the age of seven Nerval was raised by his maternal uncle, Antoine Boucher, who carried on a tobacco and grocery trade at an inn in Mortefontaine. Little is known about this man of whom Sebillotte says:

... c'est la seule figure masculine que Nerval ait tracée avec tant de respectueuse tendresse et l'on peut croire qu'elle a pris dans son cœur la place d'un père qu'il aurait aimé sans réserve.¹

The picture that emerges is that of a self-taught man, of some imagination and aesthetic sensibility, perhaps not unlike Rousseau's father, with whom the young Jean-Jacques shared so many youthful enthusiasms. Aristide Marie suggests the influence of eighteenth century occultism on the uncle's personality:

Peu cultivé sans doute, mais friand de lectures, Antoine Boucher, dont les parens avaient vécu, qui lui-même avait été élevé dans l'entourage et la demi-domesticité des seigneurs de Mortefontaine, avait subi quelque peu la contagion de ces fervens illuminés.²

His only recorded utterance is his famous answer to Nerval's childish question about God: "Dieu," he said, "c'est le soleil." It would seem, in view of Nerval's later religious and philosophical development, that the remark did not go unheeded by the child. It not only echoes the essential message of eighteenth century rationalism, but lends

¹L.-H. Sebillotte, Le Secret de Gérard de Nerval, (Paris: Librairie José Corti, 1948), p. 244.

²Aristide Marie, Gérard de Nerval, le poète et l'homme, (Paris: Librairie Hachette, 1955), p. 21.

itself, as well, to mystic and occult interpretations. It is only a step from this to the cosmogony of a Swedenborg and to Nerval's later theory of planetary essences and spirits.

Whatever Antoine Boucher's influence, there is no doubt that Nerval fell under the spell of his uncle's library of occult and illuminist works. Gérard leaves the impression that it was extensive, though later authorities insist it probably consisted of only a few dozen volumes. Aristide Marie declares it included le marquis d'Argens, Saint-Martin, l'abbé de Villars, Pico della Mirandola, and very possibly Swedenborg. He speculates that it was "au milieu de cette Babel magique" that Nerval developed his conception of the migration of spirits. Certainly the library was to cultivate Nerval's taste for the recondite and the little known, and it was the beginning of his life-long bibliophily.

In 1815 Dr. Labrunie returned from the wars--having taken part in Napoleon's retreat from Moscow--to claim his son. His first act was to snatch Gérard from the green paradise of Mortefontaine and take him to Paris. Despite the fact that we have numerous letters from Gérard to his father, written over the poet's whole lifetime (his father was to outlive him), and much indirect evidence of Dr. Labrunie's character, he emerges as one of those unfathomable personalities who seem either to possess no emotions or else are

incapable of showing them. To mention but one instance, when the aging physician learned of his son's suicide in the rue de la Vieille Lanterne, he reportedly said:

Ah! le jeune homme est mort. Le pauvre garçon! Je le regrette fort, c'était un bon sujet. Pauvre jeune homme! Il revenait de temps en temps, par intervalles.¹

Taking into account the physician's advanced years and the great temperamental differences that separated him from Gérard, the remark still seems a good deal less than we would expect from a man who, for over forty years, received only the tenderest consideration from his son.

At least it can be said that Dr. Labrunie did not neglect Gérard's education. The boy was enrolled in the lycée Charlemagne as a day student, and it was there he met Théophile Gautier, and there began a friendship that was to last until the tragedy in the rue de la Vieille Lanterne. Moreover the inscrutable doctor conferred at least one other favor: he taught the boy German. In a letter written shortly before the end of his life, Nerval acknowledges this debt:

C'est toi qui m'a appris l'allemand; je te dois donc le peu de gloire que j'ai attiré de mes traductions.²

As early as 1827, at the close of his school days at the lycée Charlemagne, Nerval had begun work on a translation of Goethe's Faust. He had long been interested in the Faust

¹Marie, p. 354.

²Charles Dédéyan, Gérard de Nerval et l'Allemagne, (2 vols.; Paris: Société d'Édition d'Enseignement Supérieur, 1957) I, p. 19.

legend, having come upon it by way of Mme. de Staël's De l'Allemagne. He was also familiar with the lithographs of Delacroix, executed in 1826 and 1827, which illustrated the Stapfer translation. The fact that no adequate translation had yet appeared in France must have been a challenge to one who found in the work a reflection of his own spiritual dilemma. It was one of those happy marriages of author and translator which result in a sort of masterpiece once-removed. Goethe was so delighted with it, he was moved to say:

Je n'aime plus le Faust en allemand, mais dans cette traduction tout agit de nouveau avec fraîcheur et vivacité. Il me passe par la tête des idées d'orgueil quand je pense que mon livre se fait valoir dans la langue de Bossuet, de Corneille et de Racine. Je vous le répète, ce jeune homme ira loin.¹

The translation proved to be a passe-partout for Gérard into the salons and cénacles of literary Paris. He became famous overnight. Indeed, even his later masterpieces did not win him the acclaim of the Faust translation. Gautier, Musset, George Sand, Balzac, Hugo--all knew Faust through the Nerval interpretation, and many used it as the inspiration for their own Faustian works. As a final tribute, Hector Berlioz adapted it for his Huit scènes de Faust which appeared in 1829, later to become la Damnation de Faust.

It is difficult to follow the events of Nerval's life

¹Ibid., Vol. I, p. 46.

between his move to Paris in 1815 and his entry into the literary world of the early 1830's. These years are the subject of much romantic speculation, for they contain the real-life characters and experiences of Sylvie. We know that Nerval returned, during summer vacations, to his uncle's house at Mortefontaine. The tantalizing question remains: was there ever a real Sylvie? Was there, for that matter, ever an Adrienne? We can answer the second question with more certainty than the first.

The woman represented in Sylvie as Adrienne, in the sonnet "El Desdichado" as the sainte, and who was one of the twin poles of Nerval's erotic life, was in reality the Baronne de Feuchères, one of the landed gentry in the region of Mortefontaine. Far from being a nun, she was an English adventuress who, after a series of alliances with noble roués, became the mistress of the duc de Bourbon. In order to cloak her questionable position, the duke married her off to a baron Adrien de Feuchères. When the baron discovered her infidelities he divorced her, and the baronne returned to the duke, becoming sole mistress of Chantilly and of the estate at Mortefontaine.

It is there that Nerval no doubt saw her, for she liked to attend local festivals and lawn parties, dressed as a huntress or shepherdess. It is likely that at some such fête he danced with her, as is recorded in Sylvie. Still, it is one of the enigmas of Nerval's life that, on

the basis of this slight encounter, he evolved a complex myth concerning the baronne. During his nervous crisis in 1854, it was one of his delusions that he would return to Mortefontaine and marry this phantom lady, although she had been dead for fifteen years.

As for Sylvie herself, there is no evidence of any such rustic Beatrice. She seems to be a composite of several peasant girls Nerval knew during these adolescent years. The name may be derived from a work by Théophile de Viau that Nerval read: La Maison de Sylvie.

By 1826 Nerval had launched his literary career with Napoléon et la France Guerrière and, in 1827, Elégies nationales et satires politiques. These were youthful poetic efforts, echoing the style and themes of Béranger. Their only interest is that they reflect a Napoleonic obsession that was to reappear in the Chimères thirty years later. Fame was to come from other quarters.

Through the Faust translation Nerval was recognized as a Romantic and was drawn, gradually, into one of the minor coteries that met at the studio of the sculptor, Jehan du Seigneur, on the rue Vaugirard. To this atelier came some of the strangest literary figures of the 1830's: Célestin Nanteuil, Augustus MacKaet, Eugène Devéria, Joseph Bouchardy, Philothée O'Neddy and Pétrus Borel, the titular head of the group. Save for Borel and the artist Nanteuil, these names are relegated to footnotes today. Yet perhaps

we should not underestimate their importance in the formation of the Romantic Movement. Enid Starkie, in her biography of Borel, has identified their governing spirit:

These young people were what might be called the war generation, that is, those who had reached adult life at the time of the July Revolution, having been born and having spent their childhood during the worst years of the Napoleonic era, in an atmosphere of impending doom, in the midst of increasing bad news--lost battles and military disasters. Their parents were weary of war, disgusted with tyranny and despairing of the future, and the children inherited the restlessness of their elders so that, when they reached maturity, they developed a passionate desire to destroy everything and to leave no vestige of the past.¹

Originally the group called itself the Petit Cénacle, to distinguish itself from the coteries of Victor Hugo and Nodier. It later assumed the name Jeunes-France, and still later, as it became more politically directed, the name Bousingots.

Francis Dumont, in his book, Nerval et les Bousingots, makes an interesting case for the political identity of the Bousingots and, in particular, tries to demonstrate Nerval's political commitment to Liberalism. It would seem that this is to approach the Bousingots, and the Romantic Nerval, with more sobriety than either warrants. Most sources persuade us to see the Bousingots as an anti-political society, the first articulation in nineteenth century French letters of l'art pour l'art. Jehan du Seigneur, Pétrus Borel, and

¹Enid Starkie, Pétrus Borel, the Lycanthrope, (London: Faber and Faber, 1954), p. 49.

even Gérard himself, were dedicated dandies. Gautier wore a frock coat with brandenburghs. Jehan du Seigneur brushed his hair up from two side partings into a high peak rising above his forehead, to simulate, says Gautier, the flame of genius. Devéria wore a Rubens hat and a Velasquez coat and his fingers were studded with diamonds.

It is true that the Bousingots did not escape the attention of the police, especially in their final period, when they had abandoned du Seigneur's studio for Borel's apartment in the rue d'Auvergne. As Francis Dumont describes it:

Pendant cet été-là on avait délaissé l'atelier de Jehan du Seigneur pour habiter une maison isolée par la verdure, de grands arbres et même de fourrés. C'est dans ce jardin que la camaraderie avait dressé des tentes; on y vivait en sauvages, dépouillés de vêtements, étendue sur des tapis de peau de bêtes; on y faisait aussi grand tapage et c'est ce qui inquiéta fort le voisinage.¹

Both the police and the Paris journals seemed to misunderstand the aims and behavior of these young eccentrics. The Figaro mistook them for étudiants émeutiers attempting to overthrow the Monarchie de Juillet. The police followed suit and in a rafle de suspects arrested the most unlikely of the agitators, Gérard de Nerval. He was kept eighteen hours in jail at the Palais-Royal and several days at Sainte-Pélagie. As Aristide Marie sympathetically says:

C'était bien durement expier quelques cris nocturnes au retour d'un dîner de bousingots. L'enquête la

¹Francis Dumont, Nerval et les Bousingots, (Paris: La Table Ronde, 1958), p. 136.

plus sommaire, encore que longuement menée, fit apparaître sa parfaite innocence et aboutit à une ordonnance de non-lieu.¹

Before leaving the Bousingots, we should perhaps mention their influence on the legends that arose after Nerval's death. All too famous is the tale of Gérard's perambulations in the Tuileries Gardens with a lobster on a pale blue ribbon, which he explained by saying that crustacea pleased his reflective turn of mind, for they didn't bite like dogs nor chatter like children when he wished to meditate.² Equally familiar is the story of his immense Renaissance bed, in which he never slept. These legends, coupled with our knowledge of Nerval's later mental illness, have given rise to the image of a congenitally erratic personality, a mind that was deranged from the first. However, we have only to compare Nerval with the fashionable Marquis de Saint Crieg, a "sane" member of society. It is said he would arrive at the Café Tortoni, order tea and then empty the contents of the salt cellar into the pot. After tasting it, he would pronounce the beverage undrinkable and order a fresh pot. Such personalities were not rare nor, surprisingly enough, were they considered mentally ill. Nerval's early excesses do not necessarily indicate mental instability, but are rather extreme, but socially feasible, expressions of individualism.

On January 19, 1834, Nerval's maternal grandfather

¹Marie, p. 55.

²Starkie, p. 91.

died, leaving him an inheritance of 29,901 francs--a modest fortune, but one that, with prudence, might have assured him a lifetime of security. On the basis of these bright prospects, he moved from his father's house, first to the rue Vaugirard and later to Célestin Nanteuil's studio. He began to indulge his life-long passion for the theatre also, attending the Variétés Theatre regularly. It was this innocent pastime that was, ultimately, to change the course of his life.

His destiny took the form of a mildly talented, conventionally pretty young actress by the name of Jenny Colon. About Mlle. Colon's life and death, her career and her character, we know all we need--and perhaps more than we care--to know. Yet in spite of this, we are virtually ignorant of the facts of Nerval's relationship with her. Above all we are ignorant of what, in Mlle. Colon's personality, could have aroused so deep an adoration, so fatal a passion.

Perhaps the explanation lies in the nature of theatre itself. As Aristide Marie points out:

Pour Gérard, le théâtre est surtout le monde factice où la vie se déforme ou s'embellit: ce rideau qui se lève, c'est la porte qui s'ouvre sur les mondes de la fantaisie.¹

Marie-Jeanne Durry explores this possibility more fully:

Ce ne sera pas un accident que l'amour de Nerval pour une femme de théâtre. Elle incarne en elle toutes les héroïnes comme elle sera un jour cherchée en toutes les femmes, mais surtout elle est, hors de la réalité,

¹Marie, p. 48.

dans l'irréalité de la scène, et là il l'adore,
comme il l'adorera dans l'irréalité des fantômes.¹

Indeed, it would seem that Nerval loved Jenny Colon more in the "irréalité de la scène" than he apparently did in real life. There are various and contradictory reports, both from close friends and from the lovers themselves, but it would seem that Nerval not only never consummated his passion for her, but that, for reasons we shall discuss later, he seemed to avoid the opportunities for doing so.

We know that, as an actress, Mlle. Colon enjoyed moral liberties denied to young ladies outside her profession. We know that she had many lovers and was absent from the stage several times, evidently because of childbirth. Nerval was twenty-six, with his own share of good-looks and verbal talents for captivating a femme sensible. Several authorities point out that Mlle. Colon was of a practical nature, and that she rejected Nerval's suit for marriage because the flutist, Leplus, offered her more security. One can only say that her decision would seem improvident in view of Gérard's rising fame, his newly acquired fortune, and the extent of his kindness to her in founding the Monde Dramatique, which devoted pages to her popularization in the theatrical world. Ultimately we are driven to the conclusion that the secret of the failure of their liaison lies in Nerval's own character.

¹Marie-Jeanne Durry, Gérard de Nerval et le mythe, (Paris: Flammarion, 1956), p. 24.

Perhaps the most telling information about their affair comes from Mlle. Colon herself. Théophile Gautier reports a conversation with her in Brussels in 1841, only a year before her death, and long after the dissolution of her relationship with Nerval:

Je l'ai vu une seule fois, lorsqu'il est venu m'offrir pour moi un opéra, la Reine de Saba, dont Meyerbeer devait faire la musique; je recevais des bouquets, sans trop savoir d'où ils venaient; j'ai entendu bavarder de cette histoire dans les coulisses, je n'y ai pas attaché d'importance. Ne m'accusez pas de l'avoir fait souffrir; quand celui qui aime est muet, celle qui est aimée est sourde. Dites à votre ami Gérard de Nerval que je suis innocente du mal qu'on m'attribue.¹

Mlle. Colon was married by this time, and no doubt unwilling to be led into compromising reminiscences. On the other hand, her words have an unrehearsed veracity about them. If they are true--if the great passion of Nerval's life was in its externals nothing more than a proffered bouquet and a few back-stage rumours--then there emerges the image of a Nerval vastly more socially isolated, more morbidly imaginative, than any of his personal testimony leads us to suppose.

However, Nerval was anything but "muet" in the indirect manifestation of his love for Jenny Colon: le Monde Dramatique. He launched the periodical in May of 1835. Its ostensible purpose was the portrayal of the life of the stage--its actors, actresses, designers, even stage-hands. A perusal of the issues, however, reveals Gérard's secondary

¹Marie, p. 119.

object of furthering the career of Mlle. Colon. Usually gentle and all-forgiving, Nerval showed himself to be implacable when the talents of his lady were questioned:

Mais que l'on discute les mérites ou seulement la beauté de l'actrice, voilà ce que Gérard ne peut admettre: lui si doux d'habitude, devient acerbe, et son ironie prend un tour agressif. Il faut lire, à la fin du premier volume du Monde Dramatique, sa riposte à Jules Janin, qui s'était permis de traiter légèrement les avantages physiques de Mlle. Colon.¹

The magazine did not prosper. The following year Gérard was forced to abandon its managership and was left with a debt of 10,000 francs, which explains, Marie adds dolefully, "le secret de son incurable gêne, pendant les années qui vont suivre."² To pay off his many collaborators, he distributed among them all the remnants of his ephemeral opulence: objets d'art, antique furniture and valuable books. He was never to recover financially.

His days as Parisian rentier over, Gérard settled down to the more prosaic life of Parisian journalist. In 1837 he joined Alphonse Karr in reviving the temporarily defunct Figaro. Both writers were plagued by editorial interference, however, and Gérard soon gravitated to La Presse, where he became dramatic co-editor with Gautier, the two friends often signing their joint articles "G. G." At the same time, Nerval never abandoned his dramatic aspirations. One of these efforts, Piquillo, was written in collaboration

¹Ibid., p. 106.

²Ibid., p. 127.

with Dumas, with music by Monpou. The play had its première October 31, 1837, with Jenny Colon in the role of Sylvia. Of Gérard's many theatrical works, Piquillo stands as his lone triumph, being, as Aristide Marie says, "l'oeuvre théâtrale dont Gérard tira le plus de profit, sinon le plus de gloire."¹

Nerval's many travels are the challenge and the despair of the chronologer, for Nerval often telescoped two different trips, or attributed the events of a later one to an earlier. We know that as early as 1834 he visited Italy. It was during this visit that he met a young Venetian embroiderer of church apparel who resembled Jenny Colon, and who figures prominently in the story Octavie. In 1836 he visited Belgium with Gautier. Little is known of this journey, save that Nerval fell ill on the way back--the first of several illnesses that seem to be related to his later mental disorders.

Of more interest, perhaps, are his trips to Germany, (1837-1838-1839-1849-1854). Certain critics, such as Dédéyan and Cellier, see in these journeys the reflection of Nerval's ardent Germanism and cultivate the image of a Nerval held in the sway of a Teutonic Muse. They attribute this fascination with Germany to the events of his early childhood, particularly the death of his mother in Silesia:

D'autre part, l'Allemagne, où repose à jamais la mère, devient la terre sacrée, caractère sacré que

¹Ibid.

révèle une ambiguïté essentielle: l'Allemagne, accueillante comme une mère, sera aussi le pays de la maladie et de la mort, le pays qui a tué sa mère. Sur le Rhin, transformé en fleuve infernal, la fatale Lorely monte garde, et le voyage en Allemagne se trouvera finalement assimilé à la descente chez les mères et à la descente aux Enfers.¹

There is no question that Nerval was interested in Germany and in German literature, as his many plays and translations attest. The controversy over his Germanism would seem to revolve around another point: were his best works, the works of his maturity--Sylvie, Aurélia, the Chimères--essentially German or French in spirit? No less an authority than Aristide Marie takes a negative view of this problem:

De la forêt germanique, il n'a détaché que de grêles rameaux: la sève puissante et trouble qu'il en a recueillie s'est fluidifiée à son contact; sous son clair génie français la pensée se précise et devient lucide, mais aussi perd son attrait mystique, et sa puissante évocation de symbole.²

In any case, Nerval devoted much of his creative energy during the later 1830's to works inspired by German themes, particularly the plays Léo Burkart and l'Alchimiste, not to mention his translation of the second part of Faust. The plays were works of collaboration with Dumas, who joined Nerval in Frankfort in September 1838 for that purpose. Both plays were presented in Paris in 1839, but enjoyed only a modest success.

¹Léon Cellier, Gérard de Nerval, l'homme et l'oeuvre, (Paris: Hatier-Boivin, 1956), p. 12.

²Marie, p. 235.

Germany was also to provide an emotional adventure for Gérard--a minor one, perhaps, but the only affaire de coeur which compares favorably with his great passion for Jenny Colon. This was his acquaintance with the concert pianist, Marie Pleyel, whom he met in Vienna in the winter of 1839. The episode is recorded in both Pandora and Aurélia. It seems to have been a bantering courtship in which Nerval showed his usual disinclination for commitment: after writing her a passionate letter, he finally confesses "qu'il s'est trompé lui-même en l'abusant"--an admission not calculated to please the lady.

The Pleyel affair is important in demonstrating Nerval's overriding fidelity to his theatrical mistress, even though the latter had married another, and withdrawn as any active presence in Nerval's life. However lightly Jenny Colon had taken their relationship, there is no doubt that it had inscribed an indelible mark on Nerval's unconscious life. It is interesting that he was attracted to both the Venetian embroiderer and to the Viennese pianist because they reminded him of Jenny, yet he recoiled from them because they were not the true beloved. As we shall see, these chain-like attractions were to culminate in Nerval's theory of resemblances and in his creation of the archetypal woman, Aurélia.

Jenny was not to die until 1842, but it would perhaps be more accurate to say that her spiritual death had already

occurred for Nerval by 1840 or 1841. Whether because she had married the flutist Leplus, or because of his own neurotic interdictions, Nerval henceforward treats her as one departed from this life, and she slowly takes on that occult identity which she retains until the tragedy in the *Vieille Lanterne*. In Aurélia he records how, while walking along a Paris street one night, he noticed a house number dimly lit by a street light:

Un soir, vers minuit, je remontais un faubourg où se trouvait ma demeure, lorsque, levant les yeux par hasard, je remarquai le numéro d'une maison éclairée par un réverbère. Ce nombre était celui de mon âge. Aussitôt, en baissant les yeux, je vis devant moi une femme au teint blême, aux yeux caves, qui me semblait avoir les traits d'Aurélia. Je me dis: "C'est sa mort ou la mienne qui m'est annoncée!"¹

It is apparent here that powerful unconscious forces are at work in the poet's mind. An ordinary house number is charged with some occult meaning which he must divine. His waking hours begin to be invaded by hints and warnings from an invisible world. Life is no longer what it seems to be, but has taken on the magic and fatal quality of dream. It is, as he himself described it, "l'épanchement du songe dans la vie réelle."

It is evident that Nerval has, by February 1841, entered a different plane of existence. One evening, after visiting his friend, Paul Foucher, he announced he was not going home. "Où vas-tu?" asked Foucher. "Vers l'Orient,"

¹Nerval, Oeuvres, I, p. 757.

Nerval replied. He then walked in an easterly direction, following a star he felt had some occult influence on his destiny. At the intersection of three streets he stopped and declared:

"Non! ... je n'appartiens pas à ton ciel. Dans cette étoile, sont ceux qui m'attendent. Ils sont antérieurs à la révélation que tu m'as annoncée. Laisse-moi les rejoindre, car celle que j'aime leur appartient, et c'est là que nous devons nous retrouver."¹

He then resumed his walk toward the star, singing a mysterious hymn remembered from another existence. At a rise in the roadway, he disrobed and stood with arms outstretched, waiting to be drawn magnetically toward the star. Before this transmigration could be accomplished, a night patrol arrived and subdued the poet after a violent scuffle. He was taken temporarily to a hospital in rue Picpus, and later to the asylum of Dr. Esprit Blanche.

The subjective aspects of the crisis are nowhere better described than in Aurélia. It was a time of apocryphal visions, conversations with departed friends, delirium. These frenzied periods were followed by relative calm and he was allowed to visit with friends. The latter, however, often went away saddened by the alteration in the poet's personality. He requested one visitor, Alexandre Weill, to take off his shoes so that he could tell his lineage. His letters were a mixture of the lucid and the erratic, one of them being signed: Gérard Napoléon della torre Brunya.

¹Ibid., p. 759.

On November 21, 1841, he was released from Dr. Blanche's asylum, and seemed, to all who knew him, to be completely cured. We can see, with the benefit of hindsight, that Nerval was far from cured, for twelve years later there were renewed symptoms, culminating in an even more devastating mental crisis. Nor is it probably correct to assume he was "well" during this twelve year interval. As Aristide Marie says:

Cependant il semble bien que, dans son esprit, une baie soit restée ouverte sur le subconscient: des émanations s'en dégagent encore par intervalles: messages subliminaux, qui montent des régions obscures du moi sensitif vers la claire zone de l'esprit lucide et raisonnant. Or, il en résulte pour son cerveau un état d'instable équilibre que de plus en plus gouverne le rêve, mais qui fait jaillir cette partie de son oeuvre qui sera son meilleur titre de survie.¹

R. M. Albérès sees in Nerval's mental breakdown the true beginning of his vocation as mystic and voyant. Speaking of the period following the crisis of 1841, he declares:

A partir de ce moment, il n'est plus le même. Ce style limpide qu'il avait eu jusque-là sur des thèmes faciles et même artificiels, il le reporte maintenant sur des oeuvres toujours aussi aisées, mais fascinantes et inquiétantes, qui ouvrent des perspectives multiples, sondent toutes les épaisseurs de la vie, s'éloignent de plus en plus du romantisme théâtral et conventionnel pour devenir vraiment nervaliennes.²

Such critical estimates seem to consider the writer apart from the man. However much Nerval's art may have

¹Marie, p. 176.

²R. M. Albérès, Gérard de Nerval, (Paris: Classiques du Vingtième Siècle, 1955), p. 15.

profited from his loss of reason, it is likely he experienced the humiliation of all those who have been locked out of society because of mental illness. His reaction was a defensive insouciance and wit. Writing to Mme. Dumas, he declares:

Au fond, j'ai fait un rêve très amusant et je le regrette: j'en suis même à me demander s'il n'était plus vrai que tout ce qui me semble seul explicable et naturel aujourd'hui.¹

Word of his illness had reached literary Paris, especially through an unfortunate article written by Jules Janin in the Journal des Débats. Other friends hastened to reassure the public that Gérard had lost "neither his life nor his reason," as Houssaye wrote in l'Artiste. Nerval realized that to protect his literary reputation he must somehow efface the preceding nine months and bring the public proof of his continuing equilibrium. It was thus he resolved on a trip to Egypt.

As Aristide Marie points out, we cannot rely on Nerval's itinerary as recorded in Voyages en Orient. The real journey must have precluded any visit to the island of Cythera, or his having seen the famous gibbet there, a scene which Baudelaire borrowed for his poem "Voyage à Cythère." Rather we must imagine a prudent Nerval, well provided with baggage down to "tout ce qu'il faut et plus encore, jusqu'à

¹Marie, p. 177.

des lunettes bleues et garnies contra la poussière."¹

We know that Nerval tried, as much as possible, to lead the life of the native Egyptian Musulman, eschewing tourist hotels in Cairo and installing himself in a house in the native quarter. He wore Arabian garments and cut his hair and beard in the Levantine style. An even more surprising concession to the exotic mores was his taking to wife a young Javanese girl, who cooked and kept house for him. This was justified by the fact that contemporary Egyptians considered celibacy highly suspect, if not downright immoral, and much pressure was put on him to abandon his single state. Remembering Nerval's pathological reticence with the fair sex, one concludes it was an act of necessity. The "marriage" was dissolved upon his leaving Cairo, and reminds us, in its externals, of the later Pierre Loti's marriage to the unfortunate Madame Chrysanthème.

An interesting notebook survives from this journey, containing jottings made during states of revery and subliminal perception. Certain passages seem almost an anticipation of the Illuminations of Rimbaud:

"Les rêves et la folie--l'étoile rouge de l'Orion--
l'Europe s'élève--le rêve se réalise--les mers--
souvenirs de brouillards à travers--climat où ma
tête repose--Amours laissées dans un tombeau--Elle
je l'avais perdue--je l'avais faite grande--Italie
--Allemagne--Flandre--Vaisseau d'Orient--Amour de
Circe--Rosalie ...

¹Ibid., p. 181.

Poursuivre les mêmes traits dans des femmes diverses.
 Amoureux d'un type éternel ...
 La fatalité ..."¹

Such writing is removed in time and spirit from the fashionable romanticism of Nerval's early short stories or the conventional odelettes of his twenties. As Albérès insists, Nerval has embarked on a new voyage and the messages he casts adrift were not to be picked up until decades had passed--by Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Mallarmé and the Surrealists.

The notebook raises the question of why Nerval chose Egypt for his destination. The romantic search for exoticism must be considered a secondary rather than a primary cause. We know from his letters to Gautier at this time that any belief in the reality of his romantic dreams was soon dispelled:

Toi, tu crois encore à l'ibis, au lotus pourpré, au Nil jaune; tu crois au palmier d'émeraude, au nopal, au chameau peut-être ... Hélas! l'ibis est un oiseau sauvage, le lotus un oignon vulgaire; le Nil est une eau rousse à reflets d'ardoise, le palmier a l'air d'un plumeau grêle, le nopal n'est qu'un cactus, le chameau n'existe qu'à l'état de dromadaire ..."²

Aristide Marie suggests there was another quest--a search for the real and historical equivalents of the mythical archetypes which dwelt in his own subconscious:

N'est-ce pas l'Egypte, la terre du Sphinx et des grands tombeaux, la patrie d'Hermès et d'Osiris, qu'il doit visiter, au seuil de son pèlerinage esotérique? En cette terre maternelle, devant la statue voilée d'Isis, son intellect défaillant ne

¹Ibid., p. 190.

²Durry, p. 27.

va-t-il pas retrouver ses normes et son harmonie?¹

Although the Egyptian gods were dead, and Isis had not been worshipped for over a thousand years, still Nerval found in the Egyptian scene, and especially in nearby Syria and Lebanon, a spiritual climate and a religious attitude akin to his own. Voyages en Orient records this discovery, but leaves us with the usual problem of determining what part of his adventures were factual. Did he really meet, and even become betrothed to, the blond Saléma, daughter of the Drusian sheik Said-Eschprazi? If so, it was a feat worthy of the redoubtable T. E. Lawrence. The romantic grandeur of the episode, following so soon on the heels of his delusional period at Dr. Blanche's hospital, leaves many doubts. At least we may be sure he absorbed the tenets of the Drusian religion, with its heritage of Pythagorean and Gnostic doctrines, its belief in the transmigration of souls and in the existence of the mysterious "double" or ferouer which every soul is alleged to possess. These doctrines were, for Nerval, like the recollection of a forgotten life. Here were social and religious manifestations of some of his most cherished fantasies. But as with all influences he merely found, in this organized religious cult, what was already his own.

Back in Paris Nerval faced much the same problems he had left. His finances were exhausted and the future uncer-

¹Marie, p. 181.

tain. However, the trip to Egypt had furnished him with invaluable material for books and articles, and it was an age which hungered for the exotic. His articles on the theatre were welcomed by l'Artiste and la Presse, and his novels found favor with la Revue des Deux Mondes and la Revue de Paris. Whatever the vicissitudes of his personal life, he seemed to enjoy a continuing success as a journalist. As one critic has pointed out, the Parisian journals of the '40's and '50's not only gladly accepted his articles but felt privileged thereby.

During the next four years Nerval was to fail repeatedly at his longed-for theatrical success. He wrote several plays in collaboration with Méry and others, but they all met with the box-office nemesis of his earlier dramas. The culminating blow was the failure of his Imagier de Harlem, produced December 27, 1851. The play was inspired by the Faust theme, though its hero was the Dutch printer, Laurent Coster. Nerval had long meditated a French parallel of the Goethean masterpiece, and though critics still disparage its literary quality, it is evident Nerval invested much work and hope in its creation. Méry reported Nerval's shock and despair when word came of the play's financial failure:

Gérard eut un éclat de rire nerveux, se saisit le front, le visage convulsé, tandis que des larmes perlaient dans ses yeux sombres: il voyait s'évanouir son dernier rêve et triompher l'inéluctable.¹

¹Marie, p. 237.

The plays might fail, but there remained to Gérard the sure gift of the poet. In 1848 la Revue des Deux Mondes published Les Poésies de Henri Heine, translated by Nerval. For some time the two poets had been meeting at Heine's home to collaborate on a translation of the Buch der Lieder, Romanzen and Intermezzo. A close friendship developed between the two owing much, perhaps, to the good nature of Gérard. Heine has left us the most generous and flattering of all portraits of Nerval:

C'était vraiment plutôt une âme qu'un homme, je dis une âme d'ange, quelque banale que soit le mot ... rien de l'égoïsme artiste ne se trouvait en lui: il était d'une délicatesse de sensitive; il était bon, il aimait tout le monde; il ne jalousait personne ...¹

It is difficult not to take these words seriously, coming as they do from a man known to be somewhat bitter and suspicious in his relationships. In addition, Heine had nothing but praise for Gérard as a translator:

Sans beaucoup comprendre la langue allemande, il devinait mieux le sens d'une poésie écrite en allemand que ceux qui avaient fait de cet idiome l'étude de toute leur vie.²

Nevertheless, the years between 1848 and 1852 were fraught with persistent failures, and gradually Gérard's latent melancholy revived. The symptoms became serious enough that by April 1849 he was again forced to seek psychiatric help, this time from a Dr. Aussandou, who treated the poet for a time at his clinic. The exact nature of

¹Ibid., p. 236.

²Ibid.

these symptoms is not known, but we may speculate that the poet was, by this time, reaching a spiritual impasse. Jenny Colon, his deepest--if most illusory--relationship, was now only a thing of the past. The voyage to Egypt, though affording him much literary material, had only deepened his realization that far countries and the mythic past were much like the here and now. It was that stage during which certain men acquire wisdom and resignation, and abandon their dreams for a wiser acquiescence to reality and the human domain. With Nerval, however, the disappointments of reality only encouraged a further retreat into dream, into the past, and the inner world of the unconscious archetypes.

Thus we see him, during 1850, returning to the scenes of his childhood, to the country of Valois:

Pour le mieux évoquer, pour en mieux savourer les voluptueuses langueurs, il retournera sans cesse vers les solitudes aimées, il en explorera, en tous sens et en toutes saisons, les hameaux et les forêts. Mais plus rien ne subsiste de ce qui fit les joies de sa jeunesse et il n'y rencontre que tombeaux.¹

At the same time, his life in Paris was becoming more and more nomadic. As Aristide Marie says: "Après 1851, il ne s'agit que de véritables campements."² Many of his best friends, such as Théophile Gautier, did not know where he lived and saw him only rarely. He was becoming increasingly detached from external things and, as one friend reported,

¹Ibid., p. 244.

²Ibid., p. 247.

offered to give away once all the possessions in his apartment. It was as though he were preparing himself for the final act of his drama.

Aurélia tells us much about the subjective nature of Nerval's second attack of mental illness and yet, as L.-H. Sebillotte has pointed out, it withholds from us the ultimate causes. In addition, we are left without any true clinical picture, for the records of Dr. Blanche, who treated Nerval during 1853 and 1854, are lost. Much information comes from friends such as Georges Bell and Arsène Houssaye, who visited Nerval at the hospital, or who were even present during crucial moments of his madness. In the end, however, we must rely on Aurélia and the poet's own testimony.

The center of this mental storm, which broke upon him in 1851, and culminated in his commitment to an asylum in 1853, was Jenny Colon, and the poet's imagined guilt concerning her. In Aurélia he relates how, wandering the streets of Paris, troubled in spirit, he encountered a funeral procession. He believed that it was bound for the Montmartre cemetery where the actress was buried. Going thither, he tried unsuccessfully to find her grave. Rushing home, he searched for a small casket containing a map of the cemetery and mementos of his beloved, and again departed for the cemetery, but changed his mind. He felt unworthy of kneeling at the grave of a Christian woman.

During later wanderings he again attempted to visit

the Montmartre cemetery, but found it closed and took this for an evil omen. On his way home he witnessed a street fight and tried to part the combatants but without success. At this moment a man crossed the square carrying a child on his left shoulder, and the poet took him for Saint Christopher carrying the Christ child, and concluded thereby that he was condemned for his failure to stop the fight. At Notre Dame de Lorette, he threw himself on the altar, imploring pardon for his sins, but an inner voice replied: "La Vierge est morte et tes prières sont inutiles."¹ Leaving the church, his thoughts are even more disordered: he contemplates suicide and believes the end of the world to be near:

Arrivé sur la place de la Concorde, ma pensée était de me détruire. A plusieurs reprises, je me dirigeai vers la Seine, mais quelque chose m'empêchait d'accomplir mon dessein. Les étoiles brillaient dans le firmament. Tout à coup il me sembla qu'elles venaient de s'éteindre à la fois comme les bougies que j'avais vues à l'église. Je crus que les temps étaient accomplis, et que nous touchions à la fin du monde annoncée dans l'Apocalypse de Saint Jean. Je croyais voir un soleil noir dans le ciel désert et un globe rouge de sang au-dessus des Tuileries. Je me dis: "La nuit éternelle commence, et elle va être terrible. Que va-t-il arriver quand les hommes s'apercevront qu'il n'y a plus de soleil?"²

Walking through the rue Saint Honoré, during this same episode, it seemed to him several moons were racing through the clouds, that the earth had left its orbit and

¹Nerval, Oeuvres, I, p. 802.

²Ibid., p. 803.

was wandering in space like an unmasted ship. At last, broken with fatigue, he returned home and threw himself on his bed. Outside, he believed he heard children repeating, "Christe, Christe, Christe," in chorus. "Mais le Christ n'est plus! me disais-je; ils ne le savent pas encore."¹ Getting up, he walked to the Palais-Royal, and ate a few bites of food to give himself strength to reach Heine's house. Once there, he told the poet and his wife that all was over. Heine summoned a cab and Nerval was accompanied to the Dubois mental hospital.

He remained there one month. On May 26, he wrote to his friend Stadler telling him he was much improved. After his release he resumed his wanderings in the region of Paris, going once to Rheims to visit the cathedral and more important, returning to the scenes of his childhood in Valois. As early as 1852 Nerval makes allusion to Sylvie in a letter to Buloz, to whom he promised the novel for the pages of the Revue des Deux Mondes. The work appeared in print August 15, 1853.

Eight days after the publication of Sylvie, August 24, new symptoms of derangement appeared. While supping at a boulevard café the poet began throwing coins in the air. Later, near Les Halles, he picked a quarrel with a passerby and actually struck the man. That evening, evidently to expiate these hostile acts, he visited his father's house

¹Ibid., p. 803.

and left there a bouquet of marguerites.

Wandering deliriously he reached the house of his friend, Georges Bell, who recognized the morbid symptoms and put his friend to bed. It was on this occasion that Nerval had the occult vision recorded in Aurélia. A lady appeared to him in the guise of the goddess Isis, saying:

Je suis la même que Marie, la même que ta mère, la même aussi que sous toutes les formes tu as toujours aimée. A chacune de tes épreuves, j'ai quitté l'un des masques dont je voile mes traits, et bientôt tu me verras telle que je suis ...¹

Later in the day his friend Bell accompanied him on a walk, but Nerval's behavior was so bizarre a crowd soon collected, following them through the streets. Realizing the gravity of the symptoms, Bell and two other friends plucked him from the crowd and drove him to the Hôpital de la Charité. Believing himself there on a divine mission, Gérard patrolled the wards, laying hands on the inmates to cure them of their maladies. At one point, unwatched, he drank a whole bottle of ether and harangued the doctors on the uselessness of their art. He was finally put in a strait-jacket and conducted to Passy, the hospital of Dr. Emile Blanche, whose father had treated Nerval during the attack of 1842. This was to be, save for short and miserable intervals of freedom, Nerval's abode until his death in 1855.

Toward the end of September Nerval was judged suffi-

¹Ibid.

ciently improved to be released, However, the decision was premature, and he was brought back to Passy, where a more severe regimen was prescribed. One of his letters to his father at this time shows that Dr. Blanche's precautions were all too justified:

Ne donne pas l'ordre de faire mon déménagement car j'ai des papiers que je ne voudrais pas voir entre toutes les mains: nous vivons dans une époque de complots et je me méfie de tous, excepté de ceux que je sens bienveillants. Ils sont rares. Enfin Dieu est grand. ... Ton fils: ¹Gérard Labrunie de Nerval. ... le 7 octobre 1853.¹

The letter suggests an aspect of Gérard's illness rarely glimpsed in the pages of Aurélia. As Léon Cellier has observed, Nerval's madness is too often thought of under its benevolent aspects:

On imagine trop souvent Nerval dans sa folie sous les traits d'un doux maniaque, tenant les propos extravagants et se livrant à des manifestations excentriques. Inévitablement sont rappelées deux anecdotes: on l'évoque promenant un homard en laisse au Palais-Royal, imposant les mains à ses compagnons d'asile pour les magnétiser. Mais sa folie, observe judicieusement M.-J. Durrty, "a été la dure, la sinistre aliénation où l'on brise des glaces et des chaises, où l'on se cache derrière un arbre pour lancer une pierre sur un visiteur, où l'on gifle un inconnu qui n'en peut mais, où l'on n'est maîtrisé que par la camisole de force."²

For the most part, Nerval's confinement at Passy resembled that of any patient who finds himself in a hospital: part of the time he was, indeed, too ill to leave, but much of the time he felt too well to remain. The periods of

¹Marie, p. 277.

²Cellier, p. 85.

delirium or delusion were intermittent. There were much longer periods when time weighed heavily on him and he mourned his lost liberty. Numerous letters have survived, addressed to Dr. Blanche, to relatives and to friends. They are filled with pitiful assurances of his complete recovery and sometimes show a childlike contriteness concerning his illness, as if it were the result of some moral lapse rather than of conflicts over which he had no control.

Toward the end of November Nerval wrote to Dr. Blanche:

J'arrive ainsi à débarrasser ma tête de toutes ces visions qui l'ont si longtemps peuplée. A ces fantasmagories malades succéderont des idées plus saines, et je pourrai reparaitre dans le monde comme une preuve vivante de vos soins et de votre talent. C'est moralement surtout que vous m'aurez guéri et vous aurez rétabli dans la société un écrivain qui peut encore rendre des services. C'est un ami surtout et un admirateur que vous avez conquis.¹

The balanced Racinian sentences, if not the tone of clerical sobriety, evidently swayed the doctor, for Gérard was allowed to visit his father for a short while, but had, perforce, to return. In mid-December came a more supplicating and insistent letter. This time Gérard begs the doctor to consider his career as writer and the unfortunate effects of a long literary silence.

Il ne faut donc pas que je disparaisse trop, sans quoi je me trouverais dans la position où j'étais quand j'ai voulu sortir de chez votre père et dont je n'ai été sauvé que par un long voyage.²

¹Marie, p. 286.

²Ibid., p. 287.

Also he complains bitterly that his friends have abandoned him and that those who have remained faithful to him visit him only rarely. He writes repeatedly and at length to Georges Bell and to Stadler, and it is in a letter to the former that he makes that telling statement, so often quoted by critics: "Je me nourris de ma propre substance et je ne me renouvelle pas."¹

His more illustrious friends, the "grands occupés" as Marie calls them, had little by little come to think of Gérard as incurably mad. In his preface to the sonnet, "El Desdichado," Alexandre Dumas alludes rather patronizingly to "cet esprit charmant et distingué dont l'imagination, cette folle du logis, chasse momentanément la raison ..."²

Nerval read this unkind notice, but reacted to it with his usual selflessness, only alluding to it with light irony in a letter to Dumas. His real life was elsewhere for, despite his illness and internment he was, throughout the last months of 1853, preparing one of his most important works for publication: Les Filles du Feu. The various chapters of the book had appeared separately in Parisian journals during Nerval's career. Jean Gaulmier has provided us with a clue as to why Nerval brought these diverse, or apparently diverse, nouvelles together into one book:

¹Ibid., p. 289.

²Ibid.

Ces héroïnes sont des médiatrices dans la recherche désespérée que Nerval poursuit en vue de vaincre la mort, de remonter le cours du temps perdu. Il est obsédé, comme le sera plus tard Proust, par l'idée que le temps est notre ennemi le plus redoutable.¹

It was during this period of his internment that a singular episode occurred at Passy. Nerval became interested in a fellow patient--evidently a catatonic schizophrenic--who had refused any nourishment for some time and who was being fed by means of a tube introduced in the nostril. Nerval was wont to spend hours with this patient, gently holding him by the hand and silently willing him to speak. At last his ministrations were rewarded, and the patient spoke a few words. Nerval records in Aurélia that soon after this event he had a portentous dream in which Aurélia appeared. She said to him:

L'épreuve à laquelle tu étais soumis est venue à son terme ... Rappelle-toi le jour où tu as imploré la Vierge sainte, et où, la croyant morte, le délire s'est emparé de ton esprit. Il fallait que ton vœu lui fût porté par une âme simple, dégagée des liens de la terre. Celle-là s'est rencontrée près de toi et c'est pourquoi il m'est permis à moi-même de venir et de t'encourager.²

It was during this same period that Nerval submitted to the Mousquetaire perhaps his most famous poem, "El Desdichado,"--"ce noir diamant" as Aristide Marie calls it. One wonders what must have been Dumas' reaction on reading it. The fact that he published "El Desdichado" the very

¹Jean Gaulmier, Gérard de Nerval et les Filles du Feu, (Paris: Librairie Nizet, 1956), p. 28.

²Marie, p. 293.

next day shows that he must have seriously revised his opinion of Nerval's sanity, or at least realized there was genius in the madman's ink.

By April of 1854, Nerval was no longer able to endure confinement at Passy. Dr. Blanche was aware of the probable dangers for his "fragile pensionnaire" in the outside world, but Gérard's apparent recovery did not legally permit a longer internment. On May 27, 1854, exactly nine months after entering the hospital at Passy, Nerval was released. After saying goodbye to friends in Paris, he immediately departed for Germany.

This final chapter of his travels was not to be the happy one of his Egyptian journey. It was, as Marie says, a mixture of playfulness and sadness, of confidence and anxiety, of a return to life and also to dark discouragement. The only surviving documents of this epoch are long and touching letters to his father. One stands amazed before this devotion that would seem to have so undeserving a recipient:

Je voudrais bien, maintenant que je suis loin, te revoir le plus tôt possible; l'homme est fait ainsi; d'ailleurs je ne m'inquiète que de tes craintes et non de ta santé, meilleure que la mienne et raffermie par la force morale et par cette bonne hygiène que je voudrais bien imiter. Que j'ai eu le coeur serré en te quittant. ...¹

There is only an occasional flash of insight into the reality of their relationship:

¹Ibid., p. 307.

Si je mourais avant toi, j'aurais, au dernier moment, la pensée que, peut-être, tu ne m'as jamais bien connu. Pardon de ces idées noires. ...¹

As usual, Nerval was expending energies during his voyage that he was unable to renew. His letters to Dr. Blanche assume a darker cast, and the latter, becoming alarmed, urges him to return to the security of Passy. In July Gérard returned to Paris and in August 1854 was again committed to the hospital at Passy.

No critic has declared, no alienist averred, at what point, precisely, the course of Nerval's illness became irreversible. In explaining this illness, the Freudians point back to the traumas of childhood, others to the fatal love affair with Jenny Colon, still others to the more immediate effects of poverty and ill health. In any case, it still seemed possible, at the time of his last remission from Passy and the ensuing German trip, that Nerval might find some twilight zone of equilibrium between health and madness. The German voyage was decisive, however. The world of Passy had become long since intolerable, and now he found that the outer world was also. The final episodes of Nerval's life are not so much biographical facts as they are clinical data. Yet one senses, in the presence of this sinister denouement, the manifestation of a strange and consistent fatality. It could not--one somehow feels--have ended otherwise.

Against Dr. Blanche's better judgment, friends secured

¹Ibid., p. 308.

Nerval's release from Passy. Without money or lodgings, he wandered the winter streets of Paris, always carrying with him a dirty piece of cord which he claimed was the garter of the Queen of Sheba. The day of his death he called at the home of Joseph Méry, but his friend was out. Nerval left one of his last sous, marked with a cross, which Méry rightly took for a message of despair.

That night the poet tried to get lodging at a hotel in one of the lowest streets of Paris, the rue de la Vieille Lanterne. The hostess heard his knocking, but as it was very late, refused to answer. At dawn Nerval was discovered by some market gardeners. He had hanged himself from a grating at the bottom of the stone stairs leading to the rue de la Tuerie, by means of the cord he carried with him. It is said--and the detail is too improbable not to be true --that a pet raven hovered above his head, reciting the only words it had been taught: j'ai soif. In Nerval's pockets were the final pages of Aurélia. The Extrait des Archives de la Morgue, dated January 26, 1855, gave the manner of death as suicide.

CHAPTER III

GENESIS OF THE MYTH

Those familiar with Nerval and with Nervalian criticism sooner or later become acquainted with a term used in application to the author and his work. The term is "myth." It is used so often and in such a variety of ways regarding the Nervalian oeuvre, that it seems appropriate to investigate what critics mean by it, as well as to try to ascertain how this myth-making faculty evolved in a poet whose early works seem to give no promise of the elaborate mythology that was to follow.

We have seen in the preceding chapter how it was Nerval's unique experience to dream, as it were, wide awake. He gave his own appellation to this experience: "l'épanchement du songe dans la vie réelle." His dreams were not confined to the night, but intersected areas of his waking experience. L.-H. Sebillotte, in his book Le Secret de Gérard de Nerval, has given us a more precise definition of this subliminal experience:

Ce qu'il a appelé "l'épanchement du songe dans la vie réelle" nous paraît bien, d'après la description qu'il en donne, correspondre à un état d'onirisme entretenu par des illusions ou des hallucinations

visuelles, mais sans confusion mentale vraie, et dont par conséquent Nerval a pu garder un souvenir précis.¹

We have also seen how, in conjunction with this strangely acquired faculty, there was also a gradual evolution toward an inner vision or, in more clinical terms, an increasingly obsessive concern with the past figures of his emotional life: Jenny Colon, the Baronne de Feuchères, Marie Pleyel, and especially the absent mother of his childhood. These figures came to be, in the end, more real than the living figures of his waking life, and his communion with them became the substance of his literary works. Indeed, these figures achieved a dominance not alone attributable to their importance in Nerval's past life, but became in a sense greater-than-life. They became identified with figures that already existed in Nerval's unconscious and that, we must assume, exist in the unconscious of all men. They merged with the eternal archetypes, which are incarnations of our unconscious needs and fears and desires and which, certain authorities insist, are transmitted from generation to generation by a sort of "racial memory."

In addition to this subliminal faculty and to the powerful obsessions which people Nerval's visionary world, there is also the incalculable influence of Nerval's vast reading and erudition. Nerval not only sought the fugitive archetypes within himself, but also sought to establish

¹Sebillotte, p. 4.

their external reality and validity in the myths of man's past, which included not only the classical mythology of Greece and Rome, but the more exotic mythologies of the Near East, the folklore of Germany and France, and any other figures of history or literature whose lives or deeds coincided with the archetypal images of his unconscious. To read the later Nerval is to be plunged into the collective history of the race, and it is no surprise to see a Greek god mentioned in the same line with a medieval French hero, as in the sonnet, "El Desdichado."

As a general rule it was with himself that Nerval identified the male heroes of various mythologies: the duc d'Aquitaine, Biron, Lusignan, Prometheus, Orpheus--the list is endless. And it was usually with the loved ones of his past life that he identified the female mythical figures. However, this is not strictly true, for we shall see that certain female, or at least androgynous, figures who appear in Aurélia and elsewhere, seem to represent some totality of Nerval's unconscious life, that entity which Carl Jung and others have called the anima. What is important is that the result of these various identifications was something different from either the biographical figure with whom Nerval was obsessed, or from the mythological figure with whom he identified this person. In some cases the biographical figure emerges as a sort of private archetype, unadorned by mythical allusion, as in the case of the figure of Aurélia.

In other cases, the "classically" mythical figure seems to gain dominance, and to absorb its real-life prototype, as in the figures of Artémis, Isis, and others. But in each case it would seem that Nerval has done something to the mythical or biographical figure which renders it completely his. The figure has passed through a sort of magic looking-glass from the world of historical myth or subjective dream, and entered a private arcanum where it possesses meaning only in reference to Nerval and to his life-drama.

It is in this area of private meaning that we must look for any viable definitions of "myth" as applicable to the creations of Nerval. In this area it will be seen that Nerval's myths coincide both with the traditional definition of myth as "a story telling of origins and destinies,"¹ and with the more modern use of the term which encompasses several literary phenomena:

For literary theory, the important motifs are, probably the image or picture, the social, the supernatural (or non-naturalist or irrational), the narrative or story, the archetypal or universal, the symbolic representation as events in time of our timeless ideals. . . . The term is not easy to fix: it points today at an "area of meaning."²

Vague as this definition is, it yet does not render "myth" a faute de mieux expression, for the great myths of the world are also "areas of meaning" which have resonance

¹René Welleck and Austin Warren, Theory of Literature, (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1956), p. 180.

²Ibid., p. 180.

and depth for great numbers of people. The Nervalian myth differs from the historical myth only in its personal nature, and even then it must be added that Nerval was able, to an extraordinary degree, to convey the universality of his private myths, either by identifying them with their historical prototypes or by creating the illusion of the timelessness and universality of his own drama through art.

But as we have been in the preceding chapter, there was, indeed, a "road to Aurélia," that is to say, Nerval's literary history is a gradual evolution of the myth-making faculty, and the discovery of the great archetypes was long and emotionally costly. Just when this evolution began, and why, are questions which continue to occupy the Nervalian critical arena. Unfortunately, the question of Nerval's myths impinges on the question of his mental illness, for the two problems seem inextricably bound together.

It would seem there is a general tendency among the critics to avoid the impasse posed by the purely clinical interpretation of Nerval's personality, or to explain the myths with reference to his mental illness. Not a few have chosen to ignore the morbid symptomatology of Nerval's case.

Schizophrenie, cyclothymie, des mots qui n'expliquent rien plus que l'hystérie du temps où Arvède Barine rangeait Nerval parmi les névrosés.¹

Others, such as Léon Cellier, prefer to invoke the more benign term "neurotic":

¹Gaulmier, p. 170.

Nerval fait partie de la grande famille des névrosés incapable de sortir d'eux-mêmes, prisonnier de leur propre drame.¹

Critics such as Durrty and Albérès do not deny the reality of Nerval's spiritual struggle and eclipse, but hesitate to invoke the terminology of the psychoanalyst's couch. Rather, Albérès sees in the Nervalian drama the willful act of a man who has embarked on a mystical adventure--an experience corresponding in many ways to that of Rimbaud.

Voué aux puissances du songe et de la folie, il ne se donne jamais pour tel et n'y cède dans son style qu'aux derniers mois de sa vie. Il faut respecter cette "volonté littéraire," car c'est, sans doute, très sciemment et très volontairement que ce visionnaire a donné à sa double vue la forme qu'il souhaitait.²

The question of the voluntariness or the inevitability of Nerval's illness is one we are not qualified to deal with here. It should be mentioned, however, that the great psychoanalytic interpreter of Nerval's work, L.-H. Sebillotte, is the most anxious not to demolish the valid interpretations of criticism, nor to explain the myths in a deterministic manner:

Non que ces disciplines se puissent flatter de bouleverser les données et les hypothèses établies avec tant de perspicacité, de patience et d'amour par les historiens et des critiques, tels Aristide Marie, Pierre Audiat, Jules Marsan, Albert Béguin ...³

On the contrary, M. Sebillotte is rarely content with

¹Cellier, p. 5.

²Albérès, p. 69.

³Sebillotte, p. 10.

diagnostic appellations, but probes to a deeper level, to that psychic arena where Nerval's latent conflicts and frustrations gave rise to the compensatory mythology of his art. He dismisses the rigid and doctrinaire approach of pure science:

Quand on a déclaré qu'il fut atteint de psychose-maniaque-dépressive ... il semble qu'on ne serait guère avancé. Le problème essentiel n'est-il pas de discerner les relations entre la vie, la maladie et l'oeuvre de Nerval?¹

Whether Nerval's mythical creations coincided with the onset of his illness, or whether such creations are, generally speaking, the inevitable result of such types of illness--these are questions which M. Sebillotte does not answer fully, and which perhaps cannot be answered with assurance. In a very interesting portrait of Nerval, Sebillotte sums up his character as seen from the point of view of psychoanalysis. The passage is important because it makes several tacit assumptions about Nerval's character, particularly the assumption that he was, from the beginning, of an introspective turn of mind--a "schizoid character" destined from birth for the malady that beset him:

Lui n'a jamais connu la tendresse d'une mère. Dès l'enfance il vit avec des vieillards, puis avec un père bizarre et lointain qui ne le comprenait pas; jamais ses témoignages d'affection n'ont reçu l'accueil qu'il espérait. Pourtant c'est sans rigueur qu'il s'en plaint, et ses sentiments ne se sont pas modifiés. Ainsi, depuis toujours, Gérard est habitué

¹Ibid., p. 49.

au repliement; la rêverie lui est familière, et il se crée un univers imaginaire, selon ses désirs. Il porte en lui le poids des confidences tues. Plus tard, il aura des amis, mais ne sortira guère de cette réserve dont il a pris l'habitude. Aucun d'eux n'a jamais connu sa vie secrète, car il cache ses trésors, comme l'enfant qui divine vaguement que la valeur des choses est différente pour les grandes personnes. Gérard préfère son illusion qui l'enchanté. Là, du moins, il est tout-puissant et sa fantaisie s'exerce librement; pour avoir accès à ce royaume, il faut entrer dans le jeu. Aussi est-ce seulement par boutades, par plaisanteries, comme pour se préserver de cruelles déceptions, qu'il confiera ses plus intimes croyances à ses amis qui s'amuse de ce "fol délicieux."¹

There are troubling discrepancies between Sebillotte's portrait of Nerval and that we find in the Aristide Marie biography, or in a recent study of Nerval's participation in the Bousingots. It seems somehow unjust to say that Nerval hardly ever withdrew from the reserve that had become habitual. Prior to his first breakdown of 1841, Nerval led a life that cannot be said to be dictated by reserve or "repliement." His record as a member of the Bousingots is at variance with any such aloof and solitary personality. One also remembers his participation of the Battle of Hernani, which was something less than that of a spiritual hermit. One feels that the portentous traumas of Nerval's early life --the death of his mother, the indifference of his father-- have given to Sebillotte's portrait the unwarranted cogency of hindsight. The portrait seems rather to describe the Nerval of the asylum at Passy, at a time when his inner

¹Ibid., p. 33.

world of fantasy had eclipsed the outer world of reality. Sebillotte would seem, then, to be of that school which asserts a changeless, but congenitally sick, Nerval, whose productions are compensatory in nature, and rooted firmly in the events of his early life.

It is interesting to compare this view of Nerval's experience with that of other critics, and especially with Nerval's own conception of his experience. In both cases there would seem to be asserted a far greater degree of volition on the part of the poet, and far less inevitability. The critic Albérès insists that Nerval's work prior to 1841 in no wise suggests the mystic that was to come. Rather this work was in the order of "workshop Romanticism" of the day.

Avant 1840, tout le fantastique nervalien n'est que romantisme d'atelier, dans le style du Souper des Armures de Gautier. Après 1843, il échappe totalement au romantisme pour être aux prises avec sa seule voix intérieure. Déceptions sentimentales, première crise de folie, contact avec les religions et les mythes de l'Orient, ces trois événements essentielles se produisent tous entre 1840 et 1843.¹

Albérès does not tire of emphasizing his conception of "two Nervals," the first, prior to 1840, an undistinguished hack journalist and "fantaisiste" of the Gautier school; the second--following a traumatic love affair--a madman and mystic, preoccupied with themes absent from his early works. Unfortunately, Albérès' approach seems to cut

¹Albérès, p. 16.

the ground from under any speculation on the biographical genesis of the Nervalian myths, and suggests that nothing prior to 1841, either in the life or the works, presages what was to come.

On the other hand, there seems to be substantial evidence that Nerval's myth-making faculty--though fertilized by previous life experiences--operated in a volitional way, and certainly possessed an adventurous and experimental dimension. The opening passage of Aurélia breathes that spirit we find in the great works of scientific discovery, the spirit of self-possession and intellectual challenge:

Le rêve est une seconde vie. Je n'ai pu percer sans frémir ces portes d'ivoire ou de corne qui nous séparent du monde invisible. Les premiers instants du sommeil sont l'image de la mort; un engourdissement nébuleux saisit notre pensée, et nous ne pouvons déterminer l'instant précis où le moi, sous une autre forme, continue l'oeuvre de l'existence.¹

There are other reasons, however, for assuming that Nerval's myth-making gift antedated by many years his breakdown of 1841.

Several of the early poems of Petits Châteaux de Bohème, antedating by a decade his first mental breakdown, would seem to contain themes that point both backward to biographical experiences--preoccupation with the lost mother--and forward to the archetypal themes of Aurélia and the Chimères. One such poem is "Fantaisie," which appeared in the Annales Romantiques in 1832. The poem is an evocation

¹Nerval, Oeuvres, I, p. 753.

of the era of Louis Treize, a period dear to Nerval's heart. The two final stanzas, in particular, contain the nucleus of what was later to become Nerval's preoccupation with memory and with memory's power to incarnate the individual loved-one.

Puis un château de brique à coins de pierre,
 Aux vitraux teints de rougeâtres couleurs,
 Ceint de grands parcs, avec une rivière
 Baignant ses pieds, qui coule entre des fleurs;
 Puis une dame, à sa haute fenêtre,
 Blonde aux yeux noirs, en ses habits anciens,
 Que, dans une autre existence peut-être,
 J'ai déjà vue ... et dont je me souviens!¹

Here we see, as Durry says, "l'autre clef du labyrinthe intérieur." The key is memory, and the transmuting powers of memory.

The setting of the poem is evidently the period of Louis XIII. A castle is evoked, of brick and stone, set in a green park. One remembers immediately the château of Mortefontaine which Nerval knew as a child, and where he briefly saw the mysterious Baronne de Feuchères. The allusion is reaffirmed in the last stanza, where a lady appears at an upper window "en ses habits anciens."

One notices that neither the lady nor the castle is actually identified, nor do they seem to exist in any identifiable conjunction of space and time. The only clue to the lady's identity is that she is someone whom:

... dans une autre existence peut-être,
 J'ai déjà vue ... et dont je me souviens!

¹Ibid., p. 20.

She is, as Durry says, but the memory of a memory--the memory of a disincarnated ghost which is itself a memory. The musical airs in the first stanza are tunes that are recognized rather than heard. They are memories of real sensations, of an ancient and supernal vision:

L'exactitude de quelque détail--les coins de pierre--redevient anonyme par les pluriels et les indéfinis--grands parcs et non tel parc déterminé, une rivière et dont les berges, l'herbe des bords ont disparu sous des fleurs des saisons.¹

As Mlle. Durry points out, this is not so much literary impressionism as it is allegory and myth. Where impressionism does make use of the residue of sensations, it is not, like allegory or myth, concerned with the unity of these sensations. "Les sensations répondent, mais la réponse paraît garder quelque chose de fortuit."² The lady and the castle of "Fantaisie" are not the blurred evocation of something seen, but rather are on the threshold of allegorical meaning. They stand for something that is not apparent in the poem, something that can only be summoned from the psyche of the individual reader. That they do have this portentous meaning is reaffirmed by a remark of Nerval's elsewhere:

Peu d'entre nous arrivent à ce fameux château de briques et de pierre, rêvé dans la jeunesse--d'où quelque belle aux longs cheveux nous sourit amoureusement à la seule fenêtre ouverte, tandis que les vitrages treillisés reflètent les splendeurs du soir.³

¹Durry, p. 20.

²Ibid., p. 21.

³Nerval, Oeuvres, I, p. 34.

Let us turn to another poem appearing in the same volume and which, as Mlle. Durry has declared, expresses "la loi la plus véritablement déterminante" of Nerval's literary credo. The poem is "La Grand'mère."

Voici trois ans qu'est morte ma grand'mère,
--La bonne femme!--et, quand on l'enterra,
Parents, amis, tout le monde pleura
D'une douleur bien vraie et bien amère.

Moi seul j'errais dans la maison, surpris
Plus que chagrin; et, comme j'étais proche
De son cercueil--quelqu'un me fit reproche
De voir cela sans larmes et sans cris.

Douleur bruyante est bien vite passée:
Depuis trois ans, d'autres émotions,
Des biens, des maux--des révolutions--
Ont dans les coeurs sa mémoire effacée.

Moi seul j'y songe, et la pleure souvent;
Depuis trois ans, par le temps prenant force
Ainsi qu'un nom gravé dans une écorce,
Son souvenir se creuse plus avant!¹

As Mlle. Durry points out, the literary merit of the poem scarcely exceeds that of the early François Coppée, and would be of little interest were it not for the last two stanzas, particularly the final one, which expresses a curious attitude toward grief. The intensity of Nerval's grief was not to be measured by tears, but by the strange and persistent duration of memory. We are reminded of the scene in Le Temps retrouvé, where the narrator, stooping to tie his shoe in the Guermantes' driveway, is smitten with the memory of his grandmother. Where Proust is explicit, Nerval merely suggests, that the power that is at work here is an uncon-

¹Ibid., p. 21.

scious one. Nerval's grief finds no conscious means of expression ("sans larmes et sans cris") but nevertheless persists. Not only so, but it increases with time ("se creuse plus avant"). Elsewhere Nerval speaks of this involuntary action of memory:

Les souvenirs d'enfance se ravivent quand on atteint la moitié de la vie. C'est comme un manuscrit palimpseste dont on fait reparaître les lignes par des procédés chimiques.¹

Even the imagery of this remark is somehow reminiscent of Proust, in giving scientific concreteness to evanescent psychic processes. One can see how Cellier is driven to exclaim: "Proust d'une part, le surréalisme de l'autre, telle est la véritable postérité de Nerval."²

It would still seem to require some explanation that Mlle. Durry calls the poem "la loi la plus véritablement déterminante" of Nerval's literary credo. However, one has only to remember Jenny Colon and her eventual transmutation into Aurélia to realize that time erected no barriers between Nerval and his lost loved ones, and that this early attitude toward the death of his grandmother was to find an even more intense expression twenty years later, upon the death of Jenny Colon.

It would seem, then, that the genesis of the Nervalian myths preceded by many years the poet's mental breakdown. Even in these youthful poems we find the emotional attitude

¹Marie, p. 244.

²Cellier, p. 225.

and the literary techniques that create myth and allegory. It is hard to see, therefore, how Nerval's literary career can be parcelled into two separate categories, preceding and following his mental crisis of 1841. It would seem, rather, that the illness crystalized already existing concepts and techniques and that the myths can be seen to be the final evolution of methods employed in the youthful poems.

That Nerval's literary career and personality possessed a continuity, and were not merely prey to the disruptive forces of mental illness, is borne out by the testimony of one of his closest friends:

Georges Bell, qui fut son ami intime, pensait avec raison qu'il "a passé sa vie à mettre en oeuvre les idées qu'il avait conçues dans sa première jeunesse."¹

It should be mentioned that this preoccupation with youthful ideas relates Nerval to another great myth-maker of French letters, the author of Le Grand Meaulnes, Alain Fournier. Indeed, the analogies in the life and work of the two writers would seem to point to a profound spiritual kinship.

¹Ibid., p. 40.

CHAPTER IV

THE RUINED TOWER

Although Les Chimères forms the final section of Les Filles du Feu, and was published with that book in 1854 (Editeur Giraud), its importance as the arcanum of Nervalian myth, and especially its treatment of Woman in terms of myth and symbol, would seem to demand separate treatment. It is hard to share one critic's opinion that Les Chimères "ne font que reprendre les thèmes épars dans les sept nouvelles des Filles du Feu."¹ It could as easily be said that these poems are the distillation of all Nerval's books, to say nothing of their being perhaps his greatest claim to literary immortality.

The critic Albérès has called Les Chimères "la fleur nocturne" of Nervalian myth and "le dernier mystère nervalien."² Elsewhere he has called them:

... objets d'art, faits de mots dont la suite est incertaine, Nerval les a construits en pensant à sa propre vie, en s'enthousiasmant pour des mythes religieux souvent périmés, en utilisant les termes et les images du livre lu la veille. Les saints et

¹Gaulmier, p. 127.

²Albérès, p. 107.

la théosophie, les souvenirs sentimentaux et les symboles alchimiques, les gestes du destin et les actes de l'homme s'y mêlent selon le hasard des associations d'idées qui est l'humble liberté de la pensée humaine lorsqu'elle veut sortir de ses limites pratiques.¹

This definition suggests, but hardly emphasizes enough, the hermetic quality of Les Chimères--a quality that has led critics down bypaths of exegesis and interpretation until, indeed, there are almost as many "keys" to the poems as there are critics who have written about them. Jeanne Moulin, G. Le Breton, André Rousseaux, Y. G. Le Dantec, François Constans, G. Rougier, Jean Richer and Albert Béguin are only a few who have devoted monographs, chapters or whole books to the subject. As Jeanne Moulin has pointed out, not a little of this criticism has tended to obscure the essential nature of the Chimères, since it has attempted to apply logical systems to a work that is pre-eminently illogical, associative and multiple in meaning.

One can do no better than to invoke Albérès' warning:

En fait, Nerval a voulu que ses sonnets aient plusieurs sens, qu'ils s'interprètent selon plusieurs perspectives et sur plusieurs plans.²

And elsewhere:

Les sonnets des Chimères sont faits pour évoquer toutes les interprétations sans se figer dans l'une d'elles. Cette interprétation n'est-elle pas conforme à la vérité de Gérard de Nerval, qui croyait que toute réalité a plusieurs significations?³

¹Ibid., p. 111.

²Ibid., p. 109.

³Ibid., p. 109.

But since the poems of the Chimères are undeniably obscure, full of baffling allusions to gods and goddesses "qui se combattent, lancent leur cri vainqueur, font tressaillir les volcans, meurent et reparaissent toujours triomphantes,"¹ and since there are many allusions to the Tarot and to medieval alchemy, it is not to be wondered at that some critics have found, or believe they have found, some unified system or underlying organisation of the sonnets. Of these many theories, perhaps G. Le Breton's is the most ingenious in trying to prove that each of the sonnets is an allegorical description of the search for gold or the philosopher's stone. Both Albérès and Moulin point out that Nerval could scarcely have devoted a work of art to proving something which he elsewhere manifestly denies, e.g., the validity of any occult system or religion:

Toutefois, me disais-je, il est sûr que ces sciences sont mêlées d'erreurs humaines. L'alphabet magique, l'hiéroglyphe mystérieux ne nous arrivent qu'incomplets et faussés soit par le temps, soit par ceux-là mêmes qui ont intérêt à notre ignorance ...²

And, as Albérès points out, why would Nerval have written intricate sonnets on alchemy when he could so easily have performed the experiments for himself elsewhere. Jeanine Moulin adds:

Le caractère trop systématique de ces assertions nous incite à les accueillir avec grande réserve.

¹Jeanine Moulin, Les Chimères, (Genève: Librairie Droz, 1949), p. xlii.

²Nerval, Oeuvres, I, p. 790.

Pourquoi le poète, dont l'oeuvre entière demeure ouverte à toutes les croyances, aurait-il adopté exclusivement celle qu'il a le plus critiquée?¹

There is, then, no single key to the sonnets of the Chimères, nor is this surprising in view of the fact that Nerval wrote the poems over a period of eleven years, between 1843 and 1854. Of the 1854 edition of Giraud, nine of the poems had already appeared in the pages of the Mousquetaire and l'Artiste, and only three ("Horus," "Artémis" and "Antéros") were yet unpublished. The story of the publication of "El Desdichado" has already been recounted: how Nerval hesitantly submitted the masterpiece to Dumas and the latter, despite his misgivings, published it the next day, December 10, 1853.

Nevertheless, the sonnets do possess a unity, and it is not for nothing that Nerval assembled them under the title, Les Chimères. In Greek mythology, the Chimera was a fabulous creature which possessed the various anatomies of the lion, the goat and the serpent. It was Bellerophon, mounted upon Pegasus, who killed the monster:

Il est permis de voir là une allégorie du poète, dominant la matière ignée la plus rebelle par la force de l'inspiration. Dans les poèmes de Nerval, c'est bien de cela qu'il s'agit.²

But we will recall another remark by Nerval himself, which throws light on the origin of the term as he used it.

¹Moulin, p. xlvi.

²Jean Richer, Nerval, Expérience et Création, (Paris: Hachette, 1963), p. 537.

It occurs in an essay on Heinrich Heine, published in the Revue des Deux Mondes, September 15, 1848.

Ce qu'il y a de beau dans Henri Heine, c'est qu'il ne se fait pas illusion; il accepte la femme telle qu'elle est, il l'aime malgré ses défauts et surtout à cause de ses défauts; heureux ou malheureux, accepté ou refusé, il sait qu'il va souffrir, et il ne recule pas;--voyageant, à sa fantaisie, du monde biblique au monde païen, il lui donne parfois la croupe de lionne et les griffes d'airain des chimères. La femme est la chimère de l'homme, ou son démon, comme vous voudrez--un monstre adorable, mais un monstre ...¹

One cannot help but see, in this alleged portrait of Heine, Nerval's own strange dedication to Woman: "accepté ou refusé." We will remember Jenny Colon's "rejection" of him and his continuing fidelity. More important, we find here one of the first examples of Nerval's technique of turning human relationships into myth.

Of the eight poems which constitute the Chimères in the 1854 edition of Les Filles du Feu, it can be said that in only two--"Le Christ aux Oliviers" and "Vers dorés"--is woman absent. In the others she regularly appears, now in the guise of goddesses, now as folkloric or historical personages, or else in the form of personal myths, original to Nerval. We are sometimes surprised to find how remote these personages are from the biographical figure they represent, but it is none the less certain that they represented for Nerval objective realities impregnated with the force of his

¹Gérard de Nerval, Oeuvres Complémentaires de Gérard de Nerval, ed. Jean Richer (8 vols.; Paris: M. J. Minard, 1959), I, p. 89.

emotional life:

Il semble que Nerval ait accordé aux images nées de son esprit, le maximum de croyance; il les a acceptées comme extérieures à lui et douées de réalité objective. C'est pourquoi sans doute il n'est pas parvenu à s'évader du monde des images pour entrer vraiment dans celui des idées pures et abstraites.¹

In the first, and most famous, of the Chimères, "El Desdichado," there are four allusions to Woman. However, none of them possess the individuality of specific mythical personages. Rather, they are aspects of Nerval's relationship to certain biographical figures, or the archetypal qualities and values these figures evoked in the poetic unconscious.

Suis-je Amour ou Phébus? ... Lusignan ou Biron?
Mon front est rouge encor du baiser de la reine;
J'ai rêvé dans la grotte où nage la sirène ...

Et j'ai deux fois vainqueur traversé l'Achéron:
Modulant tour à tour sur la lyre d'Orphée
Les soupirs de la sainte et les cris de la fée.²

The siren and the queen; the saint and the fairy: such are the specific allusions to Woman in the sonnet. As we shall see, these figures circumscribe, in a general way, the characteristics of numerous personages in the prose works, and can be taken as archetypal entities whose persistence and recurrence point to profound obsessive meanings in the poet's unconscious. However, the first two quatrains of the sonnet reveal allusions to Woman of a different order:

¹Richer, Nerval, Expérience et Création, p. 18.

²Nerval, Oeuvres, I, p. 693.

Je suis le ténébreux,--le veuf,--l'inconsolé,
 Le prince d'Aquitaine à la tour abolie:
 Ma seule étoile est morte,--et mon luth constellé
 Porte le soleil noir de la Mélancolie.

Dans la nuit du tombeau, toi qui m'as consolé,
 Rends-moi le Pausilippe et la mer d'Italie,
 La fleur qui plaisait tant à mon coeur désolé,
 Et la treille où le pampre à la rose s'allie.¹

Thus the reader is faced with a plethora of images that follow each other in rapid succession, and which seem to possess no work-a-day relationship, but which nevertheless evoke a sense of mystery and strange familiarity: "De leur rapprochement fortuit se dégage une sensation de dépaysement et de mystère."²

We have discussed the term "myth" elsewhere and seen that it may be defined both as a system of historical narratives--"the Greek myths"--and as an area of meaning, poetic or religious, and private to the writer. It is sometimes difficult to isolate this term with regard to Nerval's archetypal figures, for we find images that are at the same time symbols, allusions to historical mythology and figures in Nerval's own poetic pantheon or mythology. Sometimes Nerval comes to our aid as when, in the manuscript of Les Chimères, he writes secondary meanings and substitute images in the margin.

In addition, the ultimate identity of the myth in question may depend on the "key" one chooses to apply to the

¹Ibid., p. 693.

²Moulin, p. xlvii.

poem. Thus Jean Richer sees in "El Desdichado" a discussion of the poet's fate in terms of astrology:

Il nous semble, que les images du sonnet "El Desdichado" sont nées, pour une grande part, d'une méditation¹ du poète sur son thème astrologique de naissance.

But if the sovereign mythology of the poem were astrologic, how is it that the sonnet is aesthetically satisfying, if not yet completely understandable, to those readers who know nothing of astrology. The response of these readers would seem to indicate that the images of the sonnet have more primary meanings--meanings that depend sometimes on a casual knowledge of classical mythology or of the events of Nerval's life, but which may be apprehended even without recourse to these systems.

What is more obvious is that the poem deals with the loss of love, or of loved ones, with the deprivation of woman, and the poet's restitutive triumph or spiritual failure following this échec. Hence the key words, "veuf" and "inconsolé" in the first quatrain. It follows, then, of whom is the poet the "veuf"? The third line supplies an oblique clue: "Ma seule étoile est morte." Of this image Jeanine Moulin says:

Pour lui, comme pour Dante, l'étoile représente la pureté inaccessible de la femme aimée. Symbole le plus fréquent de ses aspirations, elle surgit dans ses écrits comme une véritable obsession.²

¹Richer, Nerval, Expérience et Création, p. 555.

²Moulin, p. 11.

We will remember how, during his attack in February of 1841, Nerval was following a star along the Paris street and cried out to his imaginary company:

Dans cette étoile sont ceux qui m'attendent. Laisse-moi les rejoindre, car celle que j'aime leur appartient, et c'est là que nous devons nous retrouver.¹

It should also be mentioned how in Sylvie Nerval compares his heroine to a star:

Ermenonville, tu as perdu ta seule étoile qui chatoyait pour moi d'un double éclat ... c'était Adrienne ou Sylvie, c'étaient les deux moitiés d'un seul amour. L'une était l'idéal sublime, l'autre la douce réalité.²

For those who seek the most occult allusions, it should be mentioned that the Star figures as one of the emblems in the cards of the Tarot (Arcanum XVII). We are reminded of how, in the asylum at Passy, Nerval drew the figure of a giant woman surrounded by seven stars, the woman herself representing Aurélia.

Thus we see how in this single image Nerval has brought to bear an immense compression of personal references, poetic allusions, and allusions to necromancy, none of which, however, is necessary in order to apprehend the image's meaning in the context of the poem. Whether the image "étoile" is a metaphor or a part of a myth depends on critical viewpoint and on the arrière-fond in which the image is placed. Although the star image leads back to Dante,

¹Nerval, Oeuvres, I, p. 759.

²Ibid., p. 624.

Pythagoreanism and to episodes in Nerval's mental breakdown, its poetic value is rather as part of the total mythology of the poem, in which the poet--"le prince d'Aquitaine"--triumphs or fails, Promethean-like, under the eyes of the gods.

In the image, "le soleil noir de la Mélancolie," we also find an allusion to Woman, for Nerval has in mind here the figure of Melancholia as painted by Albrecht Dürer. The painting is of a brooding angel in the form of a woman. In the distance, a dismal star ("le soleil noir") sheds its rays over the mournful scene. It is a work which obsessed Nerval and which he mentioned several times:

Je ne veux pas dire qu'un éternel été fasse une vie toujours heureuse. Le soleil noir de la mélancolie qui verse des rayons obscurs sur le front de l'ange rêveur d'Albert Dürer, se lève aussi parfois aux plaines lumineuses du Nil, comme sur les bords du Rhin, dans un froid paysage d'Allemagne.¹

The allusion in the first line of the second quatrain, "Dans la nuit du tombeau, toi qui m'as consolé," may find some clarification in the story Octavie which forms part of Les Filles du Feu. In this nouvelle, largely autobiographical, Nerval recounts how, during his voyage to Italy in 1834, he met a young English girl at Portici. He spends the evening with a young gypsy who embroiders church vestments and ornaments. In this strange atmosphere there reappears the image of the lost Jenny Colon. The poet leaves the

¹Nerval, Oeuvres, II, p. 607.

gypsy's house and arrives toward morning at the cliffs of Pausillipus where he contemplates suicide. However, the thought of the rendezvous for the next day with the young English girl banishes these thoughts. Thus, as Jeanine Moulin says: "La blonde étrangère le détourne un instant de 'la nuit du tombeau'".¹

Jean Richer attributes a different meaning to "toi qui m'as consolé," and identifies the consoler with the goddess Artemis. In the original manuscript Nerval had written in the margin beside "veuf" the word "olim," which is thought to be an anagram of Mausole, the legendary king of Caria, who married his sister, Artémise. In this case Nerval would be identifying himself with Mausole who is consoléd by Artémise. It is certain that Nerval was intrigued with the name of this legendary queen, and called the second sonnet of the Chimères after her. It is this sort of secondary, or associative, meaning, to which Albérès is referring when he speaks of "plusieurs perspectives" and "plusieurs plans" of the Chimères.

In the manuscript belonging to Paul Eluard, Nerval had written beside the line: "la treille où le pampre à la rose s'allie," "le Jardin du Vatican." Richer sees in the line an allusion to the Bacchic initiations of the pagan world. Moulin reminds us, however, that almost the same line occurs in Sylvie: "Je revois sa fenêtre où le pampre

¹Moulin, p. 14.

s'enlace au rosier."¹ In either case, we see how biographical material has been transposed into symbol and legend.

Even in the line, "Suis-je Amour ou Phébus, Lusignan ou Biron," the figure of woman is evoked, for Lusignan was the widower of Mélusine, just as Artémise was the widow of King Mausole. Mélusine was the mythical foundress of the medieval family of Lusignan, and it was believed that by her cries she warned the family of impending dangers. Hence: "les cris de la fée." Biron, another semi-mythical hero, served under Henri IV. Nerval identified him with the famous Montmorency, both of whom were decapitated. Thus, out of the two lines of the first tercet, Jean Richer evokes four curious parallels which do, however, bear scrutiny:

Amour et Psyché (Dieu et mortelle)
Phébus et Daphné (Dieu et nymphe)
Lusignan et Mélusine (homme et fée)
Biron-Montmorency et Sylvie (homme et sainte)²

Richer notes that in all four cases there is an obstacle to the consummation of love:

Pour deux des couples, l'être masculin (Amour et Biron) passe de l'autre côté du miroir, pour les deux autres, c'est l'être féminin (Daphné ou Mélusine) que l'amoureux ne peut plus atteindre.³

However that may be, it is evident that the poet is in some wise seeking his identity as lover, and in this respect the sonnet echoes the great themes of Aurélia and Sylvie. We

¹Nerval, Oeuvres, I, p. 597.

²Richer, Nerval, Expérience et Création, p. 565.

³Ibid., p. 565.

will remember the scene in Sylvie where Aurélia, in riding habit, declares to the hero:

Vous ne m'aimez pas! Vous attendez que je vous dise: la comédienne est la même que la religieuse; vous cherchez un drame, voilà tout, et le dénouement vous échappe.¹

In the margin beside the line, "Mon front est rouge encor du baiser de la reine," Nerval has written: Reine Candace. The image of this queen occurs several times in Nerval's writings, particularly in Voyage en Orient. Candace was the generic name of the sovereigns of Ethiopia, and this particular queen was a descendant of Queen Balkis and Solomon. We will remember that Nerval dreamed of composing a great opera in which Jenny Colon would play the part of Candace. In the weeks preceding his death, he carried a dirty piece of string which he declared to be the garter of the "Reine de Saba."

The allusion to the crossing of Acheron in the last tercet refers, of course, to Nerval's two attacks of mental illness in 1841 and 1853. He is a new Orpheus seeking his lost Euridyce. We will recall the epigraph which opens the second part of Aurélia: "Euridyce! Euridyce!" and the first line of the text: "Une seconde fois perdue."² Richer also reminds us of a similar line in the Aeneid:

Si tu as un grand désir, une telle avidité de traverser
deux fois les flots Stygiens, de voir deux fois le

¹Nerval, Oeuvres, I, p. 623.

²Ibid., p. 788.

sombre Tartare, et s'il te plaît d'entreprendre cette tâche insensée, écoute d'abord ce que tu dois faire.¹

The figures of the last tercet, the "sainte" and the "fée" are the twin poles of the Nervalian mythos: mystic love and magical love. However, there is disagreement among the critics as to whom in particular each of the figures represents. Rousseaux, Moulin and Richer all agree that the "sainte" probably refers to Adrienne, the character in Sylvie who entered a convent. The fairy is less easily identifiable. Perhaps another clue can be found in Sylvie where the heroine cries: "Ah, je vais avoir l'air d'une vieille fée," at the moment of trying on the wedding clothes of her aunt. Whereupon the hero declares: "La fée des légendes éternellement jeune: dis-je en moi-même."² In this case, Adrienne would be the saint and Sylvie herself the fairy. On the other hand, we will recall that the fairy Mélusine uttered cries from the towers of the Lusignan castle when misfortunes were about to strike the family. Whatever the specific person Nerval had in mind, it is certain that the line sums up the polarity of the feminine principle in his work, and indicates the double nature of his quest for both the divine and earthly in the form of woman.

The saint and the fairy not only signify two aspects of woman, but by extension may be said to sum up the essen-

¹Richer, Nerval, Expérience et Création, p. 569.

²Nerval, Oeuvres, I, p. 606.

tial duality in Nervalian thought. No one has described this duality better than has the critic Cellier:

Nerval crée un univers à son image. Il vit dans deux mondes qui s'opposent, et tout ce qui est s'ordonne selon cette dichotomie: les éléments, les couleurs, les contrées et les créatures. C'est d'une part le monde des ténèbres, de la nuit, de la mort, d'Amour, de la terre, de la matière: monde d'en bas, monde du rêve, de la mélancolie, du désir et du tragique, monde de la magie noire, de Typhon et de Caïn. C'est d'autre part le monde de la lumière, du jour, de la vie, de Phébus, du ciel et de l'esprit: monde d'en haut, monde du réel, de la joie, de la tendresse et du romanesque, monde de la magie blanche, d'Osiris et d'Abel.¹

It may be said, then, that the saint and the fairy represent two divergent aspects of Nerval's mystic quest. As we shall see, the biographical prototypes of these two figures--the baronne de Feuchères and Jenny Colon--come to be merged into a single image, that of Aurélia, the archetypal woman, to whom the poet is linked through eternity.

We have attempted to trace the various allusions to woman in "El Desdichado" to their biographical and literary sources. However, it remains to investigate what the sonnet means as a whole. At the same time, it is well to remember Nerval's warning that the poems of the Chimères "perdraient leur charme à être expliqués, si la chose était possible."²

Various critics have spoken of the pessimism of the sonnet. Whether we espouse Richer's explanation of the poem as astrologic biography or the more pragmatic interpretation

¹Cellier, p. 191.

²Nerval, Oeuvres, I, p. 503.

of Jeanine Moulin, it is evident that the poet is describing some grave spiritual trial from which he has emerged only half alive:

Ce sonnet se présente comme un autre sonnet-épitaphe:
c'est un mort qui parle, un mort-vivant.¹

And Albert Béguin adds:

Après chacune de ses explorations aux terres du rêve, il se trouvait plus sûrement averti de son échec, rendu à une connaissance nue de son impuissance, à l'inapaisable tourment d'un désir autre, d'un désir auquel il eût tant voulu donner son vrai nom.²

The spiritual message of the sonnet closely parallels that of another work of Nerval's, the Aurélia, and in discussing that work we shall see more fully just what Béguin refers to by "échec" and "impuissance." Even if, as L.-H. Sebillotte maintains, Nerval's erotic failure was his own doing--the result of unconscious conflicts--we are no less in the presence of a masterpiece in "El Desdichado." The poem seems to be chiseled on a monument and to possess some inner vitality which renders it understandable despite all its allusive complexities:

Le regard est ramené sur le premier vers du sonnet d'où déferle à nouveau, dans l'enchaînement d'une strophe à l'autre, la grace infinie du poème. Aux couleurs sombres du premier quatrain s'opposent les touches lumineuses du second, le rouge du premier tercet et le flamboiement baigné de lueurs inquiétantes du second.³

¹Cellier, p. 236.

²Albert Béguin, Gérard de Nerval, (Paris: Librairie José Corti, 1945), p. 108.

³Moulin, p. 19.

Although the sonnet "Artémis" belongs to the latter part of the Chimères, it is linked in subject matter and mood to "El Desdichado," and both poems, in turn, are spiritually related to the Aurélia. Moreover, Marie-Jeanne Durry ranks the two sonnets as among Nerval's three claims to immortality:

Dans "El Desdichado," "Artémis," "Erethéa," tout est réduit à l'essence. C'est un étrange événement qu'à eux seuls, imprévisibles chef-d'oeuvres tranchant sur toute une oeuvre, trois poèmes suffisent à faire un poète immortel.¹

In addition to their artistic pre-eminence, the two sonnets resume in their short spans much of the content of the Nervalian mythos. "Artémis," in particular, is concerned with the conflict between Nerval's esoterism and an equally pressing need for the comforts of orthodox religion. Not only did Nerval invest certain secular ideas, especially earthly love, with the values reserved for religion but, as we shall see in "Artémis" and later in Aurélia, he endeavored to render occult even the orthodox symbols of Christianity. He was unable, unlike many Romantics, to coordinate the conflicting demands of passion and orthodoxy. Aurélia records the reasons for this rejection of orthodoxy:

... pareille à la chirurgie, elle (la religion) ne sait que retrancher l'organe qui fait souffrir; mais pour nous nés dans les jours de révolutions et d'orages, où toutes les croyances ont été brisées, élevées tout au plus dans cette foi vague qui se contente de quelques pratiques extérieures, et dont l'adhésion indifférente est plus coupable que l'im-

¹Durry, p. 164.

piété et l'hérésie--il est bien difficile, dès que nous en sentons le besoin, de reconstruire l'édifice mystique dont les innocents et les simples admettent dans leur coeur la figure toute tracée; l'arbre de science n'est pas l'arbre de vie.¹

It is interesting that after quoting this passage Aristide Marie comments: "Est-il dément? Le fut-il jamais?" And indeed, there is supreme sanity in the way in which Nerval faced the philosophical issues of existence. If he rejected the easy way of orthodox faith, the sonnet "Artémis" reveals that he did so knowing full well he had opened a door on Nothingness.

In the manuscript discovered and published by Yves-G. Le Dantec, the sonnet was entitled "Ballet des Heures." That it was connected in Nerval's mind with "El Desdichado" is shown by the fact that the two poems were submitted to Dumas on the same manuscript page with the remark: "En voici un autre." But most puzzling, perhaps, was the inscription at the bottom of the page:

Vous ne comprenez pas? Lisez ceci:
D. M. Lucius Agatho Priscius.

For many decades the epigraph went undeciphered, and many critics concluded it was one of the unfortunate examples of Nerval's diseased mind. Jeanine Moulin, in her exhaustive study of the sonnets, asks:

Gérard s'amuse-t-il? ou quelqu'un découvrira-t-il un jour le mystérieux personnage et, en même temps, quelque source inconnue de ces vers étranges?²

¹Nerval, Oeuvres, I, p. 788.

²Moulin, p. 54.

It remained for Jean Richer, that most erudite of Nervalian critics, to unlock the mystery. The three names are a not-infrequent formula used by medieval alchemists in seeking the philosopher's stone: Agatho meaning "good"; Lucius meaning "one enlightened by natural and divine light," and Priscius meaning "one born in the Golden Age and not in our enlightened century." But the inscription has another meaning that relates it more directly to the feminine symbolism of the poem:

Il se trouve en effet que ces trois noms représentent aussi la mise au masculin des noms de trois saintes infernales: sainte Lucie, vénérée à Syracuse, sainte Agathe à Palerme, et sainte Pricille, enterrée à Rome. Par une sorte de second baptême mystique, Nerval se met sous le patronage de ces saintes du feu et de l'abîme, en s'attribuant leurs noms.¹

The title of the poem is significant on several scores, resuming as it does the identities of several women in Nerval's life. Artémis was the goddess of the moon and also a huntress, and we will remember how it was in the guise of huntress that Nerval first saw the baronne de Feuchères on her estate at Mortefontaine. In Sylvie, Aurélia appears in her costume of amazone in the scene in which she rejects the hero's love. And lastly, it should be mentioned that it was Nerval's intention to entitle Aurélia, Artémis ou le Rêve et la Vie. Thus the figure of Artémis would seem to be a fusion of the two women, Sophie Dawes and Jenny Colon, and to be the result of that syncretism which permitted

¹Richer, Nerval, Expérience et Création, p. 595.

Nerval to merge all his loved ones into a single archetypal figure.

The first quatrain is at once the most beautiful and enigmatic of all the verses of the Chimères:

La Treizième revient ... C'est encor la première;
Et c'est toujours la seule--ou c'est le seul moment;
Car es-tu reine, ô toi! la première ou dernière?
Es-tu roi, toi le seul ou le dernier amant?¹

Beside the first line, Nerval has written: "La XIII^e heure (pivotale)" Thus at once the poet sets the theme of the sonnet, e.g., the cyclical nature of events and the theme of the eternal return. For the thirteenth hour is but another name for the first hour, since the clock dials of the ancient world carried above the numbers 1, 2, 3, the numbers 13, 14, 15. Nerval was particularly interested in the number 13. We will remember how frequently it is mentioned in Aurélia and in Voyage en Orient. It is likely that in "Artémis" Nerval is using it in its fatal Cabbalistic sense, as the number of death. Moreover, the thirteenth card of the Tarot deck is the card of death.

It is significant that Nerval personifies the number: La Treizième. He would seem to be merging the arcane significance of the number with the mystery and fatality which Woman exercises in his life, and suggesting also that Woman, in her mythical and archetypal form, exists outside time:

De même que la treizième et la première heure se
fondent dans l'éternel recommencement, ainsi la

¹Nerval, Oeuvres, I, p. 702.

treizième et la première amante ne font pour Gérard qu'un seul être. Le temps est aboli. Artémis échappe, comme la femme mythologique de Goethe, à la fatalité des lois humaines.¹

The image of "reine" in the third line is perhaps self-explanatory. We will recall Nerval's use of it in "El Desdichado," as well as how Jenny Colon was prospectively to play the part of Queen Candace in his unwritten play. In addition, there is an allusion, perhaps, to his belief in the royal descent of the baronne de Feuchères from the Valois. As Jeanine Moulin points out, the repetition of the words "première, dernière, seule" evokes the eternal recurrence of things, the plenitude and the immortality of love. Not a little of the beauty of the poem derives from this audacious repetition of the same words, which at once lull the reader and prepare him for the more visual imagery to come.

In the second quatrain the poet evokes that other love, which was perhaps the prototype of all his loves:

Aimex qui vous aima du berceau dans la bière.
Celle que j'aimai seul m'aime encor tendrement:
C'est la mort,--ou la morte--O délice! ô tourment!
Et la rose qu'elle tient, c'est la rose trémière.²

It is evident that the poet is here thinking of his mother, for whomever we may love "dans la bière," it is only one's mother that is loved "du berceau." But we notice that, in the short space of the quatrain, Nerval performs a mystic

¹Moulin, p. 57.

²Nerval, Oeuvres, I, p. 702.

resuscitation of this lost love. The person loved is his mother, but also the archetypal entity, Aurélia-Artémis:

Elle emplit de sa présence ses rêves de dément et le mène vers la rédemption. L'expression du berceau dans la bière est empruntée à Faust: "Depuis le berceau jusqu'à la bière, aucun homme ne peut digérer le vieux levain."¹

Death, or the personification of Death, which has haunted the poet since adolescence, here reappears, and with it the reassurance of immortality and the certitude of the co-existence of all the souls whom he has loved. However, the poet is torn with doubt, for there is the possibility that his own soul will not survive and that he will not again see Aurélia. The figure of Death is both a delight and a torment, for it gives hope of seeing the beloved once more, but no assurance that he is worthy of seeing her. It is to this unworthiness that he refers in the second part of Aurélia: "Il est trop tard! Elle est perdue!" And again: "Eurydice, Eurydice, une seconde fois perdue."

But as if the poet's vision had suddenly cleared, he sees that the ambiguous figure of Death is indeed that of Aurélia, for she is carrying the rose mallow, or hollyhock, in her hand. The same image is used in Aurélia:

La dame que je suivais, développant sa taille élancée dans un mouvement qui faisait miroiter les plis de sa robe en taffetas changeant, entoura gracieusement de son bras nu une longue tige de rose trémière ...²

¹Moulin, p. 58.

²Nerval, Oeuvres, I, p. 773.

The symbol of the "rose trémière" is at once occult and oriental in origin. Richer has pointed out the curious etymology of the term: trans mare, "beyond the sea." It possesses, moreover, an anti-Christian meaning:

For Nerval, this common flower symbolizes, not Christianity, but the religions both before and beyond Christianity. Indeed, in the next five lines he repudiates Christian orthodoxy with unmistakable force.¹

The first tercet reveals the combat in the poet's soul between the conflicting demands of Christianity and esoterism. He addresses himself to those feminine saints whose names are linked with the scenes of his travels:

Sainte napolitaine aux mains pleines de feu,
Rose au coeur violet, fleur de sainte Gudule:
As-tu trouvé ta croix dans le désert des cieux?²

The figure of Saint Rosalie appears in one of Hoffman's works, Les Elixirs du Diable. She is also mentioned in Nerval's novelette, Octavie.

Une figure de Sainte Rosalie, couronnée de roses
violette, semblait plus loin protéger le berceau
d'un enfant endormi.³

This would explain the poet's association of "rose au coeur violet" with Sainte Rosalie. The figure of Gudula, patron saint of Brussels, is less easy to explain. Gudula is often represented carrying a lantern. According to tradition, the lantern went out and was relighted by the Virgin's prayer.

¹The Poem Itself, ed. Stanley Burnshaw (New York: World Publishing Co., 1960), p. 7.

²Nerval, Oeuvres, I, p. 702.

³Ibid., p. 643.

In the original version Nerval had written: "soeur de Sainte Gudule" instead of "fleur," It may be that he had in mind the relationship of the prototypes of the saints, for Rosalie and Gudula are sisters in the same way that Jenny Colon and the embroiderer of Naples are sisters:

In all likelihood he replaced soeur by fleur not merely for euphony, but also in order to achieve a subtle synthesis of the two saints. Saint Rosalie is usually represented holding a flower and Gudula a lantern. Nerval, by transposing these emblems, could combine the Latin and the Nordic to form a new symbol of Christianity.¹

The line "As-tu trouvé ta croix dans le désert des cieux" has been variously interpreted. Moulin finds that the words "feu" and "désert" suggest the aridity of the mystic quest. However, it would seem that the poet is addressing the saints seriously, even though for him the answer of Faith may be negative. If we assume he is addressing Jenny Colon in the guise of the saints, then the question is reminiscent of many similar questions asked in Aurélia, at times when Nerval's faith was at a low ebb:

J'ai surpris un jour le nom de Jésus sur ses lèvres.
Il en coulait si doucement que j'en ai pleuré. O mon Dieu! cette larme, cette larme. ... elle est séchée depuis si longtemps! cette larme, mon Dieu! rendez-la-moi.²

Or that anguished cry wherein he realizes he is separated from Aurélia by his own love of esoterism:

¹The Poem Itself, p. 7.

²Nerval, Oeuvres, I, p. 788.

J'ai adoré, selon les rites païens, celle dont le dernier soupir a été consacré au Christ.¹

Whatever its allusive meaning, the line is singularly Nervalian in its imagery--the conjunction of affirmative and negative symbols into a sort of surrealistic synthesis. The word "cieux" with its secondary meaning of "heaven" or "paradise" is here equated with a mere wilderness or desert. It brings home to us the anguish Nerval experienced in his disbelief:

O terreur! voilà l'éternelle distinction du bon et du mauvais. Mon âme est-elle la molécule indestructible, le globule qu'un peu d'air gonfle, mais qui retrouve sa place dans la nature, ou ce vide même, image du néant qui disparaît dans l'immensité?²

However, the cross of redemption was not to be found, even in the wilderness of the skies, and the poet turns resolutely toward that antipodal hagiography, the saints of the abyss:

Roses blanches, tombez! vous insultez nos dieux,
Tombez, fantômes blancs, de votre ciel qui brûle;
La sainte de l'abîme est plus sainte à mes yeux!³

The "roses blanches" would seem to be an allusion to the shower of white roses mentioned in the second part of Goethe's Faust. André Lebois has found an obscure but equally relevant explanation of the image:

On célèbre à Senlis une fête qu'on nomme le Bouquet, et ce mot désigne en pyrotechnie les fusées qui montent en gerbes et retombent en roses blanches. Rosalie, patronne de Palerme, y est honorée du 11 au 15

¹Ibid., p. 792.

²Ibid., p. 811.

³Ibid., p. 702.

juillet par des illuminations et des feux d'artifice. Il est possible que Nerval ait assisté à Naples à ces feux ...¹

The gods who are insulted are, of course, the gods of Paganism, to whom the poet has dedicated himself in his studies of esoterism. Here, then, is the definitive rejection of Christ and the hagiography of Christian saints in preference to the saint of the abyss, Aurélia-Artémis:

Artémis réalise le syncrétisme de toutes les apparences féminines et de tous les aspects de la religion. Elle est la reine d'un abîme ouvert à toutes les formes de croyances: les divins mystères, la pensée de Pythagore, celle du Christ, les dieux antiques, enfin, le monde goethéen "où les intelligences subsistent et se liguent pour protéger et rétablir l'harmonie universelle."²

In the sonnet "Artémis" we find the irreconcilable conflicts that underlay Nerval's mystic speculation. That stream of thought, stemming from Dante and the Provençal Courts of Love, which places Woman at the centre of man's psychic universe, has led Nerval also to that impasse where Love can be gained only at the cost of Immortality. Nerval's efforts to erect a syncretic universe that might include Christianity and thereby insure an immortality of love, ultimately failed. He recognizes this by placing his supreme symbol--Aurélia-Artémis--in the regions of the abyss, "aux enfers." It is perhaps surprising, as Jeanine Moulin points out, that so few critics have seen the inevitability of

¹André Lebois, Vers Une Elucidation des Chimères, (Paris: Archives des Lettres Modernes, 1957), p. 11.

²Moulin, p. 63.

Nerval's suicide:

Mais personne n'écoute la voix du poète. L'aveu qu'il nous a laissé dans Aurélia: "Le désespoir et le suicide sont le résultat de certaines situations fatales pour qui n'a pas foi dans l'immortalité, dans ses peines et ses joies," nous montre que son drame se dénoua selon les lois d'une impitoyable logique.¹

In the sonnet "Myrtho" Woman is evoked in her character of Muse and Grecian prototype:

Je pense à toi Myrtho, divine enchanteresse,
Au Pausillipe altier, de mille feux brillant,
A ton front inondé des clartés d'Orient,
Aux raisins noirs mêlés avec l'or de ta tresse.²

The key symbols of the sonnet, "hortensia" and "myrthe vert" are almost coldly academic in comparison with the feverish symbols of "El Desdichado" and "Artémis." As Jeanine Moulin says: "L'impulsion fiévreux qui rythme Les Chimères subit un temps d'arrêt."³ The rather ponderous Greek allusions provide that aspect of Nerval's work which gave rise, in the last century, to the belief that he was a Classicist and nothing more.

The sonnet "Delfica," however, again returns to the world of private archetype and personal myth. When it appeared in 1845, the poem was entitled "Vers dorés." Later Nerval changed the title to "Daphné" and finally to "Delphica." There are several variants of the sonnet, and at

¹Ibid., p. 64.

²Nerval, Oeuvres, I, p. 696.

³Moulin, p. 25.

least one of them, entitled "Erythrea," would seem to dispute in literary quality the version that has survived in Les Chimères.

Delfica, a priestess invented by the poet, unites those aspects of femininity which symbolize the sought-for but lost world of Greco-Roman freedom, the world of esoterism which, for the poet, provided the only philosophical alternative to Christian orthodoxy:

La connais-tu, Dafné, cette ancienne romance,
Au pied du sycomore, où sous les lauriers blancs
Sous l'olivier, le myrte, ou les saules tremblants,
Cette chanson d'amour qui toujours recommence? ...¹

The quatrain unites the symbols of antiquity--Apollo's laurel, Minerva's olive and Venus' myrtle--with the symbol of Christianity--the sycamore. The trees seem to sway together, whispering a prophetic hymn, and we feel that longing for syncretic unity which animates the first two quatrains of "Artémis." In the second quatrain a temple is mentioned, evidently of some Greek god--perhaps Apollo:

Reconnais-tu le Temple au péristyle immense,
Et les citrons amers où s'imprimaient tes dents ...²

As so often, Nerval has here conjoined the historical and the personal, for the lemon with the imprint of a girl's teeth is a reminiscence of his trip to Naples, later recorded in Octavie. The personal is here identified with the world of antiquity--Apollo's cave. But the cave which conceals

¹Nerval, Oeuvres, I, p. 700.

²Ibid.

the germs of rebirth and lyrical exaltation is held in check by the "Arc de Constantine."

Cependant la sybille au visage latin
Est endormie ençor sous l'arc de Constantin
--Et rien n'a dérangé le sévère portique.¹

The world of Christianity, symbolized by Constantine's Arch, stands grave and impassive, impervious to the predictions of esoterism.

The meaning of the poem is clear, but as several critics have pointed out, its beauty relies on a subtle conjunction of weighty themes and the style of a sentimental song. Gilbert Rougier has mentioned a possible source of the style pattern of the poem in a song by Mignon:

Connais-tu la contrée où dans le noir feuillage
Brille comme un fruit d'or le fruit du citronnier
Où le vent d'un ciel bleu rafraîchit sans orages
Les bocages de myrthe et les bois de laurier.²

In the present chapter we have paid especial attention to those sonnets--"El Desdichado," "Artémis," "Delfica,"--which seem to unite the world of historical myth and the world of Nerval's personal experience. The exegesis of the sonnets is interesting in itself, but its purpose for the present study has been to demonstrate Nerval's technique of rendering personal the historical and the universal and his corresponding facility for making the personal universal. As we have seen, the recondite imagery of such sonnets as "El Desdichado" and "Artémis" is accessible to

¹Ibid.

²Albérès, p. 108.

biographical interpretation. Figures such as Saint Rosalie and Saint Gudula, the priestess Delfica and the goddess Artémis, do not only represent biographical figures, but are the transmutation of these figures into a personal mythology. The term "mythology" is justified since, in the process of transmutation, the biographical figure approaches ever more closely that standard of universality by which we measure the prestige of the historical myths. The baronne de Feuchères, in her apotheosis to "la sainte," gradually attains those absolute qualities by which we define both the psychic archetypes of the unconscious and the mythical figures of history.

The obscurity of the Chimères derives in some part from the elliptical way in which the biographical figures and episodes are presented. The reader is in the presence of the final result but is not witness to those steps by which the biographical figure attained its mythical identity. As we have seen, however, this does not constitute a poetic defect, for in its personal apotheosis the figure has come to coincide with those myths and archetypes that are so universal as to be recognized by all.

Whether Les Chimères belongs, in style and content, to the age of Hernani and La Nuit de Décembre, or whether it is rather to be placed in the age of Baudelaire, Mallarmé and the Surrealists, depends, in large part, on one's definition of Romanticism. There can be little doubt that Nerval

was Romantic in his love of the occult and the little-known, the bizarre and the esoteric. Paul Valéry has eloquently summed up this contribution:

Nerval dispose du trésor désordonné que font luire dans les ténèbres érudités, l'antiquité en tant qu'elle est ésotérisme, le christianisme en tant qu'il est allégorie, le moyen âge en tant qu'il est féerie, le panthéisme pour autant qu'il est poésie. Ce savoir composite dont les éléments sont un à un douteux et suspects constitue toutefois une riche et enivrante substance de lyrisme; la sainte, la fée, le chevalier de la mort, la sirène et la Sybille, le Christ, le Dieu Kneph, tous ces noms assemblés en quelques vers et le poète d'un mot s'identifiant à chacun d'eux, cela communique une sensation confuse, mystérieuse et piquante de métempsychose, d'évocations synchrétique, de mots et d'êtres légendaires qui viennent vivre vaguement sur les confins de la fausse mémoire et de la création poétique.¹

Interesting as this summation is, it would seem to reduce Les Chimères to content alone and, indeed, to the most superficial aspects of content. There is no mention of that subterranean world of meaning which animates these "clichés" of Romanticism and which gives Nerval's work the stature it now enjoys.

Perhaps, after all, this is not to say that Nerval was not a Romantic, but that he was Romantic in a truer sense than many writers who are identified by that school. As Léon Cellier has said:

Si Nerval ne ressemble pas aux autres romantiques, c'est parce qu'il est le seul romantique en France.²

¹Paul Valéry, Au sujet de Nerval. Textes et prétextes, (Paris, Daragnès, 1944), p. 19.

²Cellier, p. 204.

CHAPTER V

THE VOYAGE TO CYTHERA

Little in Nerval's star-crossed life gives hint of the promise of which Sylvie is the fulfillment. The performance is all the more astonishing when we remember that Sylvie was composed during one of the more turbulent periods of Nerval's mental illness when, as he later said, he could not read "deux lignes de suite." One imagines that if the learned Dr. Blanche had ever read Sylvie, he would have revised many of his notions as to the nature of mental illness and of its empire over the total personality. For in Sylvie, it is as if Nerval had ceased to be ill or despairing, and had become the noble hero of his aspirations.

However, to those who are acquainted with Nerval's other works, Sylvie does not present such a formidable lacuna. It differs from these works, yet only in degree. For in Sylvie we find the dreams that are characteristically Nervalian and that animate the other masterpieces.

Indeed, it must be stressed that the seemingly work-a-day characters of Sylvie have a poetic conception which relates them to the more obviously mythical characters of

Les Chimères and Aurélia. Sylvie, though but a peasant girl of the Valois, is in a sense that same sibyl who reclines before the sévère portique of "Delfica." And the beautiful Adrienne is that same saint who found her cross "dans le désert des cieux." The poetic impact of Sylvie derives in no little part from this dual conception of character--characters who are at the same time gods and mortals, archetypes and humans. The archetypal aspects of the characters are blended imperceptibly into the daylight world of human traits and behavior. The mythical and the human are conceived together as an organic whole.

Just as Les Chimères and Aurélia, Sylvie is concerned with Woman as myth and symbol, and the work has the added advantage of showing her in various stages of mythical development. In Sylvie we see her before she has reached the final apotheosis into the Eternal Isis or the all-encompassing Aurélia. Rather we see her in those three forms which persistently obsessed Nerval: the Human, the Religious and the Divine. Sylvie is, therefore, a sort of document in the progression of Nerval's mystical thought.

One of the most interesting aspects of Sylvie, when approached from the standpoint of the genre of the novel, is its sense of Time. Brief as the novel is, it is almost unsusceptible to those chronologies many critics apply to the great works of fiction. As one scholar has said:

On est obligé à tout moment de tourner les pages qui précèdent pour voir où on se trouve, si c'est le

présent ou rappelé du passé.¹

Another has expressed it with, one feels, the same sense of bafflement:

Sylvie est composé sur plusieurs plans à la fois. Le présent s'y relie à des moments successifs du passé, à des événements échelonnés sur différents époques de l'autrefois.²

This presentation of the present in terms of the past produces a quality of timelessness, and has not a little to do with the poetic élan which pervades the novel. To recall Sylvie in retrospect is to remember not chronological events, but scenes which unfold with the inevitability of dream. The order of the novel is not temporal, but hinges rather on the interplay of a series of significant "myths." The hero of Sylvie goes backward and forward in time with much of the ease of Proust's hero, and the analogy so often applied to A la recherche du temps perdu--that of music and musical organization--would seem to apply also to Sylvie. However, Nerval, unlike Proust, was concerned with certain personal myths which exist in an eternity outside Time, but which the temporally bound hero might reach through a unique theory of ressemblances. As Jean Gaulmier has said:

Essentiellement, Sylvie est un court roman sur le thème platonicien des ressemblances: tout se tient dans la pensée de Nerval, et Sylvie est inséparable des travaux qu'il termine ou prépare pendant de longs mois qu'il passe à élaborer sa nouvelle. D'abord

¹Cellier, p. 221.

²Durry, p. 134.

... de ses rêveries sur Restif de la Bretonne.¹

It was to Restif de la Bretonne that Nerval was indebted for his theory of resemblances, for the latter, like Nerval believed he had always loved the same woman in the guise of many women. There are other striking parallels between the two writers: Restif believed himself descended from the Emperor Pertinax, just as Nerval claimed descent from the Emperor Nerva. There is the similarity of Restif's nostalgia for his native countryside. But more pertinent to the present subject, was Restif's search for the ideal woman:

La recherche par Restif de la femme idéale est à travers les égarements de ses passions, car c'est toujours la Jeannette Rousseau de son enfance dont M. Nicholas poursuit le fantôme charmant.²

We shall see the application of this theory of resemblances in the myth of the Actress and the Saint, which figures so importantly in Sylvie.

It is with the image of an actress that the novel opens. The actress is, of course, Jenny Colon, and we see her in this passage as Nerval must have seen her in all the innocence and purity of first love:

Je me sentais vivre en elle, et elle vivait pour moi seul. Son sourire me remplissait d'une béatitude infinie; la vibration de sa voix si douce et cependant fortement timbrée me faisait tressaillir de joie et d'amour. Elle avait pour moi toutes les perfections, elle répondait à tous mes enthousiasmes, à tous mes caprices--belle comme le jour aux feux de la rampe qui l'éclairait d'en bas, pâle comme la nuit,

¹Gaulmier, p. 59.

²Ibid.

quand la rampe baissée la laissait éclairée d'en haut sous les rayons du lustre et la montrait plus naturelle, brillant dans l'ombre de sa seule beauté comme les heures divines qui se découpent, avec une étoile au front, sur les fonds bruns des fresques d'Herculanum.¹

The passage might be dismissed as yet another paean in the Romantic strain, were it not for the allusion at the end, which renders it so intimately Nervalian. The "étoile au front," the "fresques d'Herculanum" lead us away, albeit subtly, from the glare of the Parisian stage, to the archetypal past, to a world vastly anterior, larger, eternal. It is the first hint of the resemblances which will figure so largely later on. It is the first example, as well, of that sub-structure of classical allusion that pervades Sylvie and helps to lend to the novel its quality of timelessness.

The allusion is expanded still further in the succeeding passage, where the actress is compared to queens of antiquity:

Je m'en informais aussi peu que les bruits qui ont pu courir sur la princesse d'Elide ou sur la reine de Trébizonde.²

Then, as if aware that the nature of his love required some explanation, Nerval sums up, in a memorable passage, some of the signal characteristics of the Romantic temperament--the vague yearnings common to those who could not share the smug materialism of nineteenth century France. Although

¹Nerval, Oeuvres, I, p. 590.

²Ibid.

Nerval ascribes this state of mind to "l'époque de Pérégrinus et d'Apulée," one feels it can be found in any epoch, including our own:

Nous vivions alors dans une époque étrange, comme celles qui d'ordinaire succèdent aux révolutions ou aux abaissements des grands règnes ... c'était un mélange d'activité, d'hésitations et de paresse, d'utopies brillantes, d'aspirations philosophiques ou religieuses, d'enthousiasmes vagues, mêlés de certains instincts de renaissance; d'ennuis des discordes passées, d'espoirs incertains, quelque chose comme l'époque de Pérégrinus et d'Apulée. L'homme aspirait au bouquet de roses qui devait le régénérer par les mains de la belle Isis; la déesse éternellement jeune et pure nous apparaissait dans les nuits, et nous faisait honte de nos heures de jours perdues.¹

Certain Nervalian symbols can easily be distinguished from the mere stock ideas of Romanticism. It is the "belle Isis" with her "bouquet de roses" who will regenerate man, and not a political creed or artistic school. Here Woman reappears in her role of rédemptrice, as in the first part of Aurélia and in several sonnets of the Chimères. Especially interesting are Nerval's singular standards of love and the values he attributes to the loved one:

Vue de près, la femme réelle révoltait notre ingénuité; il fallait qu'elle apparût reine ou déesse, et surtout n'en pas approcher.²

Thus the author announces at once the nature of his hero's love as well as the secret identity of the beloved. The latter cannot be mistaken for the mask she wears, nor,

¹Ibid., p. 591.

²Ibid.

indeed, can the hero's love be mistaken for ordinary love, even of the most romantic kind. Nerval makes this clear in the scene in which the hero meets one of the actress' admirers at a café, and dismisses him in a manner quite uncharacteristic of a jealous lover:

Que m'importe, dis-je, lui ou tout autre? Il fallait qu'il y en eût un, et celui-là me paraît digne d'avoir été choisi. Et toi? Moi? C'est une image que je poursuis, rien de plus.¹

In this brief remark there looms the most fundamental questions concerning Nerval's mystic experience. What, precisely, did he pursue in the guise of Woman? A lover who neither experiences jealousy nor entertains hopes of fulfillment is a strange lover indeed. It seems evident we are not in the presence of that kind of love, however idealistic it may have been, entertained by the Romantics towards their amantes. Rather one must return to the Provençal Courts of Love, or to that concept of mystical love set forth by Dante, to find any parallel of that love which is merely an "image" and "rien de plus." Indeed, Nerval claims this kinship in a succeeding passage:

Elle ressemblait à la Béatrice de Dante qui sourit au poète errant sur la lisière des saintes demeures.²

Like Alain Fournier, author of Le Grand Meaulnes, Nerval juxtaposes the city and the country--Paris and the Valois--as conflicting regions of the heart or, to use the

¹Ibid., p. 592.

²Nerval, Oeuvres, I, p. 596.

term Fournier loved: domaines. The hero of Sylvie no sooner leaves the café and returns to his room, than he is plunged into a reverie of the lost countryside of his childhood. He recalls a rural festival where young girls danced on the lawns of a chateau. It is an evocation of the same castle described in the poem "Fantaisie." In this story-book setting, the second of the archetypal figures of Sylvie appears: Adrienne. We will recall that the biographical prototype of this character is Sophie Dawes, later known as the baronne de Feuchères. Like Jenny Colon, the baronne was to undergo a strange metamorphosis and become the religieuse of Sylvie and the sainte of "El Desdichado."

La figure d'Adrienne reste seule triomphante--mirage de la gloire et de la beauté, adoucissant ou partageant les heures des sévères études. Aux vacances de l'année suivante, j'appris que cette belle à peine entrevue était consacrée par sa famille à la vie religieuse.¹

We shall see that the figure of Adrienne recurs like a leitmotif in the pages of Sylvie, and appears significantly at the end. Criticism has devoted little space to this mysterious person, yet one feels that her elusiveness only underscores her importance both in Sylvie and in Nerval's obsessional system. It should be mentioned that of all the women in Nerval's life, Sophie Dawes was the oldest, and quite possibly the most maternal-seeming, to his youthful eyes. May not her relegation to sainthood result from that

¹Ibid.

interdiction against incest which Sebillotte points out in the evolution of the Aurélia myth? As we shall see, Adrienne comes to be identified with Aurélie, the actress of the novel. This strange rapprochement burst upon the hero with the force of a mystical vision:

Aimer une religieuse sous la forme d'une actrice! ... et si c'était la même! Il y a de quoi devenir fou! c'est un entraînement fatal où l'inconnu vous attire comme le feu follet fuyant sur les joncs d'une eau morte. ... Reprenons pied sur le réel.¹

Immediately following this declaration, the hero thinks of Sylvie, the peasant girl of Valois, whom he had forgotten for three years. It is, as Sebillotte points out, Sylvie who represents the "réel" to the hero and to Nerval. He remembers her freshness and beauty, and reflects that she may have gotten married in the interval of their separation. He remembers that tonight is the feast of Saint-Barthélemy where Sylvie will be dancing with the youths and maidens of Loisy, and his decision is taken to join her--that is, to re-enter the past. It is not only Nerval's personal past that is evoked here, but the historical past of France. In the carriage to Loisy, the hero seems to be traversing time and history:

Au delà, des carrés de verdure et de terre remuées, bornés à gauche par les collines bleuâtres de Montmorency, d'Ecouen, de Luzarches. Voici Gonesse, le bourg vulgaire plein de souvenirs de la Ligue et de la Fronde.²

¹Ibid., p. 597.

²Ibid., p. 599.

Part of the magic of Sylvie is its suspension of earthly disappointments, its dream-like abolition of temporal change and conflict, for the hero returns to find his pays natal as resplendent as it shone forth in memory. Sylvie is there, along with all he loved and remembered. The festival is in progress, resembling, as Nerval points out, Watteau's painting: Le Voyage à Cythère. A strange ceremony ensues, in which a captive swan is released from a huge basket:

A la fin du repas, on vit s'envoler du fond de la vaste corbeille un cygne sauvage, jusque-là captif sous les fleurs, qui, de ses fortes ailes, soulevant des lacis de guirlandes et de couronnes, finit par les disperser de tous côtés.¹

What is the meaning of the swan? Sebillotte passes over this symbol in silence yet, one feels, it is akin to several key symbols found in Aurélia, particularly the gigantic fallen angel which struggles but cannot regain the Empyrean. Is the swan not the anima of Nerval's psyche--this time, in the controlled dream-work of Sylvie, regaining its freedom and the poetic equipoise for which Nerval longed? It is significant that the swan is released only after the hero has returned to Sylvie--that is, to reality. It would seem that the hero's Parisian life represents an alienation from the forces of stability and security which lay in the past, and in a symbolic sense, in the historical past of France. It is possible that the historical arrière-fond in

¹Ibid., p. 601.

Sylvie is one manifestation of the author's need to erect for himself a biographical past--a past that was, in reality, quite barren and rootless. If he were, indeed, a son of France, a child of the Valois, then the self-alienation of his illness might dissolve and vanish. Certainly this regional nostalgia is one aspect of the symbolism of Sylvie's character, for she beckons the hero to the simple, ceremonious life of rural France. But like Adrienne and Aurélie, she offers the hero an identity which, for obscure reasons, he cannot accept.

After the festival, the hero considers returning for the night to the house of his uncle at Montigny, a fictional name for Mortefontaine. Instead he goes astray and ends up sleeping among the hedgerows under the starry sky. Waking at dawn, he realizes he is near the convent of Saint S ... Seeing the convent, he loses his lightheartedness of the preceding evening:

Cette nuit m'avait été douce, et je ne songeais qu'à Sylvie; cependant, l'aspect du couvent me donna un instant l'idée, que c'était celui peut-être qu'habitait Adrienne.¹

For a moment he thinks of peering over the convent walls, but rejects the idea like a profanation. As the sun rises, his thoughts return to Sylvie. He goes back to her cottage and finds her busy at her lace-work--a detail which evokes the brodeuse of Naples, with whom Nerval spent the

¹Ibid., p. 603.

evening before climbing the cliffs of Pausillipus.

Sylvie has planned an adventure for them: a trip to her great aunt's house at Othys. On the way, the hero tells Sylvie of the novels of Rousseau while she, unmindful of his mystical intensity, picks strawberries.

The visit to the aunt at Othys is another return to the past--this time to the racial past, to the generations from whom Sylvie and the hero are descended. The aunt embodies this past--a coarse, gentle, honest woman who is herself the personification of rural French peasantry. It is interesting that her first gesture on meeting the hero is to stroke his hair and remark on the transience of youth:

J'embrassai à mon tour la tante qui dit: "Il est gentil ... C'est donc un blond! Il a de jolis cheveux fins, dit Sylvie.--Cela ne dure pas, dit la tante; mais vous avez du temps devant vous."¹

The remark seems to encompass the hero and Sylvie in some ancient inevitability, in a network of generations, each like the last, yet each existing for a while in Time. It is the theme of recurrence and the eternal return, so dear to Nerval. As we shall see, it is fully exploited here in the episode of the wedding clothes. Sylvie decides to explore the attic chamber while the aunt is cooking breakfast. There are echoes of the fairy tale in the odd dialogue between Sylvie and her aunt:

Dites donc, si vous en avez des morceaux de l'ancienne, cela me fera des modèles.--Eh bien! va voir là-haut,

¹Ibid., p. 604.

dit la tante, il y en a peut-être dans ma commode.
 --Donnez-moi les clefs, reprit Sylvie.--Bah! dit la tante, les tiroirs sont ouverts.--Ce n'est pas vrai, il y en a un qui est toujours fermé.¹

What, one wonders, is the symbolism of the drawer which is locked to Nerval, but to which Sylvie has the key? In the upper room they find portraits of the aunt and uncle in their wedding attire. The hero is astounded that the wrinkled crone downstairs is indeed the lovely girl of the portrait. A very Nervalian observation escapes him:

Cela me fit penser aux fées des Funambules qui cachent, sous leur masque ridé, un visage attrayant, qu'elles révèlent au dénouement.²

We notice that it is age which is the mask, and youth which is, as it were, the reality. The aunt is Sylvie and Sylvie is the aunt, and Time has been abolished. The remark reveals that persistent Nervalian effort to discover the reality which exists outside Time, and we may interpret racial recurrence to be one aspect of that reality. The aunt lives again in Sylvie, and "rien n'a dérangé le sévère portique" of Eternity. However, the scene has perhaps another meaning, more crucial to Nerval's erotic life and to the conflicts that animated his illness. The couple find the wedding clothes in the drawer "toujours fermé" and put them on. Sylvie dresses first and then exclaims:

Habillez-vous vite! dit-elle, et entièrement vêtue elle-même, elle me montra les habits de noces du

¹Ibid., p. 605.

²Ibid., p. 606.

garde-chasse réunis sur la commode. En un instant, je me transformai en marié de l'autre siècle.¹

It requires no psychoanalytic talent to see here the fulfillment of Nerval's deepest wish: marriage--that is, orthodox attainment of the beloved. But we notice that the circumstances of this "marriage" are tentative and unreal. It is all make-believe, and they are only children who have dressed up for the amusement of an old woman. There is also, perhaps, an element of cruelty in their innocence. Showing themselves before the aunt, the latter exclaims:

O mes enfants! dit-elle, et elle se mit à pleurer, puis sourit à travers ses larmes.--C'était l'image de sa jeunesse--cruelle et charmante apparition!²

It is perhaps not unwarranted to suspect that the aunt symbolizes here Nerval's lost mother, or at least, that she embodies those maternal interdictions which prevented the consummation of his love. What better revenge on this tormenting and longed-for creature than to hold upⁱ to her the mirror of her vanished youth? At the same time, the aunt's presence is also the solution of the dilemma, for she permits the two children to "marry." We shall see in Aurélia how similar scenes--for all their seeming innocuousness--mask turbulent biographical problems.

Following this mystic wedding, the events of the novel pursue their dream-like course. The hero finds himself with

¹Ibid., p. 607.

²Ibid.

the brother of Sylvie, visiting the ancient abbey of Châalis.

Les figures des saintes et des anges se profilent en rose sur les voûtes peintes d'un bleu tendre, avec des airs d'allégorie païenne qui font songer aux sentimentalités de Pétrarque et au mysticisme fabuleux de Francisco Colonna.¹

In the contrapuntal organization of the novel, we are prepared for the reappearance of the religious archetype: Adrienne. At a festival held near the abbey, the latter does indeed appear, this time in the guise of the "sainte de l'abîme" who figures in "Artémis."

Un esprit montait de l'abîme, tenant en main l'épée flamboyante, et convoquait les autres à venir admirer la gloire du Christ vainqueur des enfers. Cet esprit, d'était Adrienne transfigurée par son costume, comme elle l'était par sa vocation.²

This vengeful spirit, reminiscent of the disquieting visions of Aurélia, seems to cast a pall over the remaining chapters of Sylvie and to mark the point at which both Sylvie and the hero emerge from childhood. After an unknown interval of time, the hero sees Sylvie again and, although she is the same as before, "un jeune homme se tenait près d'elle."³ It is the jeune frisé whom the hero has known in childhood and who, as we shall see, represents the double or Doppelgänger of the hero. After somewhat bantering conversation, the hero becomes serious, falls upon his knees and all but succeeds in declaring his true feelings for Sylvie. Fate

¹Ibid., p. 608.

²Ibid.

³Ibid., p. 610.

intervenes, however, in the form of Sylvie's brother, and a true declaration is never made.

We have seen how the image of the swan in the earlier chapters symbolized the hero's love for Sylvie and the aspiration toward poetic balance and perfection. A corresponding image occurs in the final chapters--this time a parrot, symbolizing resignation and the loss of youth:

Allons voir le perroquet, dis-je au fermier--Le perroquet demandait à déjeuner comme en ses plus beaux jours, et me regarda de cet oeil rond, bordé d'une peau chargée de rides, qui fait penser au regard expérimenté des vieillards.¹

The image of the parrot prepares us for the change which transfigures Sylvie and the hero. In their final encounter, the hero finds her at home as usual, but there are subtle displacements in the arrangement of her room. She no longer makes lace, but gloves, and has acquired an ugly "instrument en fer" for their manufacture. Moreover, the aunt, the hero discovers, has died, and Sylvie has worn the magical dress of the wedding scene to an ordinary dance. The hero realizes that Sylvie is no longer a simple child of the Valois; she has transcended the rôle of nature spirit to which he had relegated her. On their country outing he begs her to sing the folksongs she once sang, and accuses her, jokingly, of knowing only opera now. To his consternation, she intones a popular aria. As Jean Richer says:

La perte de l'enfance chez Sylvie est symbolisée par

¹Ibid., p. 612.

le fait qu'elle module quelques sons d'un grand opéra moderne: Elle phrasait.¹

But we will remember that the Actress of the novel, Aurélie, is also an opera singer, and the theme of resemblances makes its reappearance. It would seem that, unable to fuse the identities of the religieuse and the actress, the hero makes one final effort to merge the symbolic entities of Sylvie and Adrienne. This is evident in the scene where he leads Sylvie into the room of the castle where he had heard Adrienne sing. There is something obsessed, if not demented, in the way he forces her to repeat the song after him:

--C'est bien triste! me dit-elle.
 --C'est sublime ... Je crois que c'est du Porpora,
 avec des vers traduits au XVI^e siècle.
 --Je ne sais pas, répondit Sylvie.²

The amorous feelings of the hero seem to disintegrate following this failure of identification. Walking back from the castle, he can think of nothing but vulgar expressions or "quelque phrase pompeuse de roman." He resolves this dilemma by deciding that, after all, he did not desire Sylvie:

D'ailleurs, un amour qui remonte à l'enfance est quelque chose de sacré ... Sylvie, que j'avais vue grandir, était pour moi comme une soeur. Je ne pouvais tenter une séduction.³

¹Richer, Nerval, Expérience et Création, p. 316.

²Ibid., p. 617.

³Ibid., p. 618.

It is interesting that the mystic star of Aurélie now rises in the firmament of the hero's affections once Sylvie has suffered this eclipse. His thoughts return to the Parisian actress, and he imagines her playing the rôle of some princess in a new drama. The hero's efforts to idealize Sylvie have failed: she is too practical. In this final encounter with her, she warns him that "il faut songer au solide." It is the same warning that Jenny Colon had uttered before marrying the flutist Leplus. But it is, of course, the one thing the hero cannot do.

Returning to Loisy, the couple find the père Dodu--a somewhat paternal character, evoking the traits of Nerval's uncle--and Sylvie's new suitor, the frère de lait of the hero. The latter does not at first recognize the grand frisé who played with him in childhood, save to note his "cheveux ébouriffés, qui ne m'étaient pas inconnus."¹ He learns that it is now a question of marriage between Sylvie and the grand frisé, who is planning to open a bake-shop at Dammartin. The disillusionment of the hero is now complete. The next day he returns by carriage to Paris.

One notes, however, that Sylvie is not completely dismissed or forgotten. It would seem that the hero--and Nerval--could not invest such excessive idealism in a woman without, as it were, turning the mortal clay to marble. In memory, safe from the vicissitudes of sexual conflict and dis-

¹Ibid.

appointment, Sylvie is now apotheosized:

Si j'écrivais un roman, jamais je ne pourrais faire accepter l'histoire d'un coeur épris de deux amours simultanés. Sylvie m'échappait par ma faute; mais la revoir un jour avait suffi pour relever mon âme: je la plaçais désormais comme une statue souriante dans le temple de la sagesse. Son regard m'avait arrêté au bord de l'abîme.¹

L.-H. Sebillotte finds in this apotheosis of Sylvie the resolution of the author's neurotic dilemma. It is not that the hero has failed sexually, but rather that the beloved, through an excess of ideal qualities, is rendered sexually undesirable:

Quoi d'étonnant que toutes les femmes aimées par Nerval aient pris place parmi les déesses, et le dernier trait que nous voulons souligner est l'inhibition résultant de cette divinisation de l'amante, nous devrions dire plus exactement la modification de son attitude qui laisse intacte le sentiment amoureux, mais interdit jusqu'à la pensée d'un comportement viril qui a pour but d'assouvir les pulsions sexuelles.²

If we may paraphrase M. Sebillotte's thesis, it would seem, then, that each woman in Nerval's life was rendered divine as a neurotic measure, to counteract forbidden incestuous wishes. In this case, the theory of resemblances would be a means of rendering his passions innocuous. Sebillotte emphasizes this view in his explanation of the Aurélie-Adrienne identification:

Cette situation a précisément l'avantage de tirer Nerval d'embarras; identifier l'actrice à la religieuse, c'est du même coup justifier sa retenue et

¹Ibid., p. 621.

²Sebillotte, p. 164.

faire comprendre son renoncement à l'amour. Un indéfinissable pressentiment l'aurait empêché de commettre une profanation abominable, puisque devenir l'amant de Jenny Colon eût été abuser d'une religieuse vouée¹ par les engagements les plus sacrés à la virginité.

It would seem that an isolated study of Sylvie might confirm this thesis for, as we have said earlier, Sylvie represents an intermediate stage in the development of the woman-myth, anterior to the revelation of the feminine archetype in Aurélia. Jean Richer also recognizes in Sylvie this effort to merge the women of the novel into a single archetypal figure, and also the novel's failure to do so:

Les trois personnages féminins sont présentés tour à tour dans les premiers chapitres. Dès les premières pages, l'actrice Jenny Colon-Aurélie prend figure d'Etoile et de déesse infernale. Dans le deuxième chapitre, Adrienne, qui doit beaucoup à Mme. de Feuchères, est comme la reine du pays d'enfance, elle est en quelque sorte divinisée à son tour. Enfin, au chapitre IV, Sylvie incarne la Vénus Cythérée. Les trois déesses échangent leurs attributs et leurs rôles, car le poète espère parvenir à les fondre en une figure unique.²

It is possible that, at the time he wrote the novel, Nerval was unaware of this underlying attempt at mythical fusion, and that it was reserved for his later subliminal experiences and "l'épanchement du songe dans la vie réelle" to reveal to him the archetypal figure embodied in Aurélia. This would seem to be borne out in that chapter of Sylvie where the hero takes the actress, Aurélie, to the castle of

¹Ibid., p. 174.

²Richer, Nerval, Expérience et Création, p. 311.

Adrienne and reveals to her his life-long obsession: Aurélie, true, no doubt, to the character of Jenny Colon, is uncomprehending, and mistakes the poet's obsession for romantic obfuscation. She says:

Vous ne m'aimez pas! Vous attendez que je vous dise: la comédienne est la même que la religieuse; vous cherchez un drame, voilà tout, et le dénouement vous échappe. Allez! je ne vous crois plus!

Cette parole fut un éclair. Ces enthousiasmes bizarres que j'avais ressentis si longtemps, ces rêves, ces pleurs, ces désespoirs et ces tendresses ...¹ ce n'était donc pas l'amour? Mais où donc est-il?

One cannot entirely agree with M. Sebillotte that the dénouement was to escape Nerval until the very end. The hero's reaction to the actress' words--his momentary confusion and doubt--seems to presage that long act of discovery of which Aurélia was to be the fulfillment.

¹Nerval, Oeuvres, I, p. 623.

CHAPTER VI

IN THE SHADOW OF VESUVIUS

Les Filles du Feu has seemed to require a degree of critical justification which Nerval's other books do not demand. Certain critics have questioned the integrity of the collection, since the nouvelles were composed at various times and only later assembled into a book. There is, moreover, a certain unevenness of quality among the stories. On the other hand, other critics have been anxious to prove the inviolability of the text and the subterranean cohesion of the nouvelles:

Le premier soin d'un critique devrait être examiner les diverses parties d'un ouvrage composite dans la suite que l'auteur leur a imposée, selon l'ordre qu'il a lui-même choisi. Ce n'est pas le hasard qui l'a guidé,¹ mais une intention déterminée qu'il faut ressaisir.¹

That Nerval wrote the stories over a period of ten years does not, of course, prove any lack of unity among them. On the contrary, the unity they do possess would seem to attest to the persistence of certain Nervalian themes and to the essential relatedness of his unconscious productions.

¹Gaulmier, p. 8.

For indeed, it is no accident that the book possesses its enigmatic name, which Nerval arrived at with great care, after rejecting several others, among them Les Amours perdus. For the four central stories of the collection relate themselves, in one way or another, to Nerval's voyage to Italy and to his memories of Vesuvius in particular. In his lengthy preface to Alexandre Dumas, Nerval gives no direct clue to the meaning of the title. Rather, it is in other texts, particularly Aurélia, that we encounter Nerval's obsession with the myth of Fire, and with an imaginary subterranean world gleaned from his occult reading and from the tireless inventiveness of his own imagination. There is the significant passage in Aurélia:

Je me sentais emporté sans souffrance par un courant de métal fondu, et mille fleuves pareils, dont les teintes indiquaient les différences chimiques, sillonnait le sein de la terre comme les vaisseaux et les veines qui serpentent parmi les lobes du cerveau.¹

Among occult works, it is likely Nerval was particularly influenced by that of Kircher, especially the latter's Mundus Subterraneus (1645). Concerning this influence, Jean Richer has declared:

L'inépuisable Kircher a consacré deux chapitres ... aux pyramides, et son grand ouvrage Mundus Subterraneus décrit avec minutie l'intérieur du globe: ses pierres, son feu et ses monstres, avec toute l'autorité d'un chercheur qui s'était fait descendre dans le cratère du Vésuve attaché à l'extrémité d'une corde.²

¹Nerval, Oeuvres, I. p. 765.

²Jean Richer, Gérard de Nerval et les Doctrines Esotériques, (Paris: Editions du Griffon d'Or, 1947), p. 63.

Whatever the effect of these occult sources on Nerval's poetic sensibility, we know that there were also biographical experiences which left their residue of poetic ferment, particularly his encounter with the Italian brodeuse, immortalized in the sonnet "Myrtho" and expanded fully in the nouvelle, Octavie. It was no doubt a conjunction of the two--occult reading and the experiences of travel--that gave rise to the myth of the "Feu central" and of the demiurges who inhabit this region. In the constellation of Nervalian myths, it might be said that the "Feu central" represents a sort of Purgatory, an intermediate region between the "descente aux enfers" and the beatific vision of Aurélia. Gaulmier has emphasized this purgatorial meaning of the myth:

Les Filles du Feu, ce sont ces créatures illusoires sur lesquelles Nerval a tenté de s'appuyer pour vaincre le temps, comme Pérégrinus sur la fiancée des Pyrénées: il attend d'elles le secret de l'Univers--qui ne lui sera donné finalement que par l'ascension d'Aurélia. Elles sont autant de tentations de ce monde souterrain qu'il a si magnifiquement évoqué dans son conte symbolique la Reine du Matin.¹

A further justification of the title Les Filles du Feu may be found in the fact that each of the nouvelles carries the name of a different heroine. Indeed, Nerval arrived at this conformity sometimes at the expense of abandoning other titles. The story Angélique is actually an extract from an earlier work entitled Les Faux Saulniers. The nouvelle Emilie had previously been called Le Fort de Bitche. Lastly,

¹Gaulmier, p. 29.

it will be remembered that Les Chimères--with its allusion to Woman as the "chimera" of Man--forms the final portion of Les Filles du Feu. The reader acquainted with Les Filles du Feu will likewise remark the absence of Sylvie in the present chapter. We have discussed Sylvie elsewhere, since its literary merit and its mythological richness seem to invite a separate perusal. It must be emphasized, however, that both Les Chimères and Sylvie are integral parts of the Neapolitan myth which underlies the nouvelles.

The nouvelles of Les Filles du Feu embody both Nerval's talents as story-teller and his vocation as mystic and visionary. It is, indeed, sometimes difficult to divest the nouvelles of their realistic superstructures and to arrive at the underlying myths and symbols. This problem is nowhere more in evidence than in the story Angélique. Where a work such as Sylvie seems to have magically fused the real and the unreal, the myth and the work-a-day, Angélique presents a façade of almost impenetrable realism. Out of the context of Les Filles du Feu, it would seem to resemble a conte à la Anatole France, with its bibliophilic montages, its medieval eroticism and its strong reliance on plot. It is in the context of the Nervalian oeuvre, however, that one soon perceives the underlying Nervalian obsessions and concerns.

Angélique is, above all, an excursion into the half-glimpsed domain of Nervalian bibliophily, and reading it, one recalls that the author's room in the asylum at Passy

was piled high with books and that Nerval was an inveterate and life-long reader. Indeed, one suspects that the narrator of Angélique--the mild little man zealously sleuthing a bibliographic mystery--is at last identical with the Nerval of real life, and is not, as in the grander works, the projection of an unconscious animus.

The construction of Angélique belongs to the genre of coq-à-l'âne, used by Rabelais, Diderot, and later to be employed by Proust. Indeed, Nerval acknowledges this debt to Diderot in the final pages of the nouvelle.

"Et puis ..." (C'est ainsi que Diderot commençait un conte, me dira-t-on.)

--Allez toujours!

--Vous avez imité Diderot lui-même.

--Qui avait imité Sterne ...

--Lequel avait imité Swift.¹

--Qui avait imité Rabelais.¹

The nouvelle is in the form of twelve letters, only a few of which deal directly with the life of Angélique de Longueval. The remainder recount the story of the narrator's search for the books which tell the story of her life. For the most part, this bibliographic detective story is far from Nerval's usual mythic concerns, save in one or two digressions:

La bibliothèque d'Alexandrie et le Serapéon, ou maison de secours, qui en faisait partie, avaient été brûlés et détruits au Quatrième siècle par les chrétiens--qui en outre, massacrèrent dans les rues la célèbre Hypatie, philosophe pythagoricienne.²

¹Nerval, Oeuvres, I, p. 587.

²Ibid., p. 511.

It will be remembered that Hypatia was the victim of Christian fanaticism and that the reference here is, however obliquely, to that dichotomy of Christian and Pythagorean thought which pre-occupied Nerval and which constituted perhaps his greatest intellectual conflict. As Jean Richer has pointed out:

... certains des problèmes soulevés par cette oeuvre
... qui ont trait ... à la synthèse du platonisme et
christianisme, dépassent infiniment son individualité;
elles concernent le devenir de notre civilisation et
même le destin de l'espèce entière.¹

The story of Angélique's life bears a superficial resemblance to Manon Lescaut, in its surgically detailed recounting of the trials of a socially unfeasible romance. In this case, however, the rôles are reversed and it is the heroine, Angélique, who abandons her class and position for love. She is the daughter of Jacques de Longueval, "conseiller du roi ... maréchal de ses camps et armées." She is, in addition, of an enigmatic and, in many ways, unfeminine disposition:

Dès l'âge de treize ans, Angélique de Longueval, d'un caractère triste et rêveur--n'ayant goût, comme elle le disait, ni aux belles pierres, ni aux belles tapisseries, ni aux beaux habits, ne respirait que la mort pour guérir son esprit.²

Despite the sacrifices Angélique makes for love and her dedication to Le Corbinière, her father's man-servant, her motives and true personality remain obscure. Angélique

¹Richer, Nerval, Expérience et Création, p. 648.

²Nerval, Oeuvres, I, p. 526.

betrays her father, steals the family silver and embarks with Le Corbinière on a lifetime of indigence and hectic travel across Europe. Their survival is for the most part due to gifts from Angélique's many admirers. Despite the familiarity of this plot, Angélique emerges as something quite different from the usual heroines of such escapades. The difference lies in certain details that can be traced back to familiar Nervalian obsessions.

Despite their many nocturnal trysts while they are under her father's roof, Angélique and Le Corbinière remain "purs." Even in the description of their married life, any carnal relationship is silently passed over by the author. Indeed, in the end, Le Corbinière becomes a brutal taskmaster and any excuse for Angélique's strange fidelity seems to disappear.

The relationship is reminiscent of that theory of love practiced by the hero of Sylvie who, we will remember, declared: "Moi? C'est une image que je poursuis, rien de plus." That Angélique's is a Platonic love, Nerval suggests in an oblique allusion:

C'était l'esprit du temps--où la lecture des poètes italiens faisait régner encore, dans les provinces surtout, un platonisme digne de celui de Pétrarque.¹

One is tempted to see in Angélique's character a disguised projection of Nerval's own personality. Certainly her dramatic rebellion against her father echoes Nerval's

¹Ibid., p. 531.

secret hostility toward Dr. Labrunie which, though never manifested, yet seems all the more evident for that reason. Certainly Angélique possesses a masculine side. It is she who plans the elopement with Le Corbinière and who has the foresight to provide for their future life. And yet, one feels, this is not the dimension of Angélique's character Nerval wished to emphasize. Rather, her masculinity has the function of negating her human, feminine traits, and she emerges as an asexual being--a principle, a spirit. Angélique as a character seems on the threshold of mythic identity, and is at least akin, if not identical, to those Nervalian goddesses--Aurélia, Adrienne--who are not flesh, but the embodiment of mystical ideals.

The story Octavie is closely related to the title of the collection, for Octavie and the other female characters of the nouvelle are true filles du feu. As Jean Richer has remarked:

L'examen des lettres de la fin de l'année 1853 concernant la composition du recueil des Filles du Feu, montre avec netteté que les textes dont l'action se passe au pied du Vésuve, c'est à dire Octavie, Isis, Corilla, constituaient la base première du recueil.¹

Brief as this nouvelle is, it contains in miniature many of the themes which obsessed Nerval. Among these themes are: the Neapolitan background, or région du feu, the image of the mysterious English girl eating a lemon, the Neapolitan brodeuse with her symbolic image of Saint Rosalie,

¹Richer, Nerval, Expérience et Création, p. 334.

the image of the undine--"la sirène" of "El Desdichado"--and the central theme of suicide which reappears at different points in the story. These various themes are held together by the slenderest of plots, in this case the story of an insoluble amorous triangle.

As in Sylvie, the hero of Octavie takes flight from Paris because of unrequited love for a femme de théâtre. Reaching Marseilles, he goes swimming on the beach at Château-Vert and encounters the heroine-undine, Octavie. The passage introducing her is filled with mythological suggestions:

Cette fille des eaux, qui se nommait Octavie, vint un jour à moi toute glorieuse d'une pêche étrange qu'elle avait faite. Elle tenait dans ses blanches mains un poisson qu'elle me donna.¹

The hero sees her again at a theatre in Civita-Vecchia, this time accompanied by her father "qui paraissait infirme, et à qui les médecins avaient recommandé le climat de Naples."² The next day, on the wharf, he meets the jeune anglaise who is seen eating a lemon ("elle imprimait ses dents d'ivoire dans l'écorce d'un citron.")³ This is an image that is to recur in the sonnet "Delfica" as well as in Voyage en Italie, and whose subjective meaning for Nerval remains a mystery.

¹Nerval, Oeuvres, I. p. 640.

²Ibid.

³Ibid.

Following an evening at the salon of the marquis Gargallo, the hero writes a lengthy epistle to his friends in Paris, recounting his meeting with the Italian brodeuse, thus introducing the third member of the love-triangle. The unnamed brodeuse would seem to represent the Infernal Goddess, the "sainte de l'abîme" who appears in the sonnet "Artémis." The description of her apartment is especially interesting:

La chambre où j'étais entré avait quelque chose de mystique par le hasard ou par le choix singulier des objets qu'elle renfermait. Une madone noire couverte d'oripeaux, et dont mon hôtesse était chargée de rajeunir l'antique parure, figurait sur une commode près d'un lit aux rideaux de serge verte; une figure de Sainte Rosalie, couronnée de roses violettes, semblait plus loin protéger le berceau d'un enfant endormi ...¹

The detail of the child would seem to suggest another identity of the brodeuse, that of the eternal Isis, nurturing the child Osiris. It is interesting that the brodeuse speaks an unknown language which the hero guesses to be Hebrew or Syriac, also suggesting the identity of Madonna, mother of the Christ Child.

The identity of the brodeuse is further revealed by the apparent confusion into which she throws the hero. After their strange, midnight encounter, he climbs the cliffs of Pausillipus and contemplates suicide. The reason, though obscurely rendered in the nouvelle, is not hard to find. The brodeuse represents that moral échec which always

¹Ibid., p. 643.

occurs at those moments when the Nervalian hero reaches out for normal love. It occurs when the hero of Sylvie glimpses the walls of Adrienne's convent, or in those numerous visions in Aurélia where the goddess appears to warn or exhort the hero. In Octavie, the hero is confronted with normal love in the form of the jeune anglaise, and he retreats from her either because, as Sebillotte insists, he doubts his masculine powers, or because the feu follet of Platonic love beckons him to another destiny.

Henri Lemaître has called the story Isis, "la libre adaptation d'une source livresque," and it is apparent that much of the text of this nouvelle is lifted from a German work, Die Isis-Vesper, by Carl A. Böttiger, which appeared first in the journal *Minerva* in 1809. Nerval has adapted the latter work for his own purposes and eliminated many passages that occur in the German text.

The story opens with a brief reminiscence of Nerval's voyage to Italy in 1834, and proceeds to a description of a gala fête given by one of the ambassadors at Naples, in which the guests arrive attired in antique costumes, representing famous figures of the Classical world. The description of the fête digresses imperceptibly to a description of the cult of the goddess Isis in the ancient world. Interesting as these details are, one suspects they are borrowed wholesale from the learned work of Böttiger. However, the loving care with which Nerval recounts these forgotten rites

and rituals attests to his consuming interest in everything pertaining to the goddess.

Of more interest are the Nervalian asides, which sometimes reveal the author's philosophical conflicts and his effort to attain a religious syncretism. Sitting in the moonlight near Vesuvius, he reflects:

Enfant d'un siècle sceptique plutôt qu'incrédule, flottant entre deux éducations contraires, celle de la révolution, qui niait tout, et celle de la réaction sociale, qui prétend ramener l'ensemble des croyances chrétiennes, me verrais-je entraîné à tout croire, comme nos pères les philosophes l'avaient été à tout nier?¹

This is not the only instance in which Nerval mourns the "siècle sceptique" in which he finds himself. We will recall the hero of Sylvie uttering the same anguished cry about his century. Nerval says:

Si la chute successive des croyances conduisait à ce résultat, ne serait-il pas plus consolant de tomber dans l'excès et d'essayer de se reprendre aux illusions du passé?²

The critic Dédéyan sees in the Isis myth the dominating figure of the poet's vision. Nerval was particularly taken with an engraving of the goddess found in the Oedipus Aegyptiacus of Kricher and speculates on the impression this picture would make on one who had spent a motherless childhood. As Dédéyan points out, the Isis myth not only parallels Nerval's familial experiences, but it also echoes the

¹Ibid., p. 656.

²Ibid.

tragedies of his erotic life:

Elle est devenue l'image de la mère, qui l'a porté dans son sein et si peu dans ses bras, morte à la place de son fils, comme l'amante Aurelia est morte à la place de l'amant. Dans cette interversion des rôles s'inscrivent la passion et la mort de Gérard, ses descentes infernales. Elles sont périodiques d'abord, suivies de résurrections, de l'allégresse des hosannas, des visions lumineuses et consolantes, des présences qui réchauffent et pansent le coeur meurtri.¹

Isis, for all its brevity and despite its indebtedness to Böttiger, remains one of the significant works of Nerval. The goddess Isis, far from being an illusion, was fundamental in the poet's search for the ultimate origins of his unconscious archetypes. To reconcile the lost gods of the antique world and the living "gods" of Christianity was not a recondite pastime, but an effort to reconcile the divergences of his sundered personality. As the critic Gaulmier has said:

Ce qui pour Quinet, pour Thales Bernard, pour Leconte de Lisle, n'est que système philosophique, devient pour lui sensation profondément sincère, parce qu'à la mythologie commune il se mêle sa mythologie personnelle. Le syncrétisme religieux n'est à ses yeux de visionnaire que la traduction symbolique du mystère de l'unique amour. Les dieux successifs sont toujours les mêmes, "et rien n'a dérangé le sévère portique."²

Corilla is of special interest as being the only dramatic work included in Les Filles du Feu. It requires some explanation that Nerval chose to include this genre in a

¹Dédéyan, II, p. 641.

²Gaulmier, p. 158.

collection otherwise exclusively narrative.

The text of the play was first published in La Presse in 1839, then in the Revue Pittoresque in 1844. Reprinted in Petits Châteaux de Bohème in 1854, Nerval finally chose to include it in the definitive version of Les Filles du Feu of 1854. As for the genesis of the play, we know that after abandoning the opera, La Reine de Saba, which he was to write for Meyerbeer, Nerval decided to try a less ambitious work, a prose one-act opéra comique. The result was Corilla, which Gaulmier calls: "une pièce dont la légèreté de proverbe à la Musset masque la profonde mélancolie."¹ And indeed, the plot of the play is far from original, being reminiscent both of Musset's work as well as such longer imbrolios as Le Jeu de l'Amour et du Hasard. However there are infused into this comic opera plot those recurring obsessions that are the hallmark of Nerval's work.

The play is contemporary with the two years of Nerval's strongest infatuation with Jenny Colon (1837 and 1838), and is a sort of memorabilia of his passion for the actress. The hero, Fabio, is but a thinly disguised Nerval, and the actress, Corilla, is associated even by name with the Italian version of his beloved's name: Colonna.

As we shall see, the familiar comic opera plot conceals a presentation of Nerval's theory of resemblances.

Fabio is in love with the San Carlo actress and singer,

¹Ibid., p. 105.

Corilla. Through an intermediary, Mazette, he gains a brief interview with the actress in a public garden, and secures the promise of a later rendezvous. In the interim, Fabio meets another cavalier, Marcelli, who informs the astonished Fabio that he, too, has been promised a rendezvous with the actress for the same evening, but in a different place. The jealous Fabio, believing he has been deceived, spies on the nocturnal meeting of Corilla and Marcelli, and rushing from his hiding place, confronts them with their treachery. The go-between, Mazetto, is dragged in and confesses his duplicity. Knowing his mistress has two admirers, he has arranged a rendezvous between Corilla and Marcelli, and for Fabio has substituted a flower girl who resembles the actress. The victorious Marcelli leaves with Corilla, urging Fabio to meet his "flower girl," which the chagrined Fabio eventually does.

In the ensuing scene, Fabio tells the bouquetière of his love for the divine Corilla. He is amazed at her resemblance to the actress, but says that, after all, the illusion is not complete, for she cannot sing like Corilla. Whereupon the bouquetière delivers a beautiful aria, and the stunned Fabio realizes that she is, indeed, the true Corilla, and that it is Marcelli who has been duped. This complicated ruse was the actress' plan to discover the nature and sincerity of her admirers' love. In the dénouement she declares that both have failed to meet her amorous prerequisites:

Marcelli is "trop mondain" and Fabio is "trop poète," but she obligingly consents to have supper with both of them.

Beneath this almost banal comic opera plot, one perceives the recurring Nervalian hantise--the obsession with resemblances, and its related obsession, the juxtaposition of reality and illusion. We have elsewhere discussed Nerval's concern with resemblances and the strong influence of Restif de la Bretonne in his work. Added to this is the concept of the double, or Doppelgänger, this time projected onto the rôles of the female characters. Henri Lemaître has summed up this aspect of Corilla:

Le couple ressemblant, la femme et son double, sont une des constantes de l'obsession nervalienne (Adrienne-Aurélie, Jenny Colon et la brodeuse dans Octavie, l'archiduchesse et l'autre dans Pandora.) Une des sources de cette obsession de la ressemblance est peut-être dans les souvenirs d'enfance de Mortefontaine, dans la ressemblance entre Mme. de Feuchères et quelque villageoise, qui peut bien avoir été--sans que Gérard en ait eu connaissance--la propre soeur de Sophie Dawes.¹

Nerval's quest for poetic truth was perilously chained to the quest for an ideal woman, who would incorporate the disparate virtues of the archetypal figures of his poetic unconscious. He had to find a woman possessing the purity of the saint and the seductiveness of the siren. This is, perhaps, the parable that underlies Corilla:

Le recours au double rôle est en effet l'expression détournée du désir que la bouquetière et l'artiste, loin de représenter deux formes d'amour inconciliables, soient les visages d'un seul amour. La courtisane doit

¹Nerval, Oeuvres, I, p. 675.

être un ange; la femme fatale, une soeur de charité.¹

No such woman could exist, and indeed, one feels that even at the height of his passion for Jenny Colon, Nerval knew that she was not--despite the transfiguring powers of his imagination--such a woman. This is perhaps the meaning of his remark, following the actress' death: "Elle m'appartient bien plus dans la mort que dans la vie." That is to say, the vision now belonged to him, undisturbed by the reality. The irreconcilables were at last reconciled in the alchemical retort of dream. It is for this reason that Corilla--seemingly a pastiche in the total Nervalian oeuvre--is nevertheless an excursion into those ideal polarities that will later be reconciled in the archetypal figures of Aurélie and Isis, and is thus a way-station on the road to the final vision.

The nouvelle Emilie is sometimes omitted from current editions of Les Filles du Feu. Although Nerval chose to include it in the 1853 edition, later critics have questioned the rightness of his decision, observing that its rather off-the-scene heroine cannot be considered a true fille du feu. There is some justice to this criticism, for the characters of this Franco-Prussian war tale are far, indeed, from the mythe du feu and the Neapolitan mythology of the other tales. On the other hand, there are certain aspects of the story which relate it to mythical concepts found outside the mythe

¹Cellier, p. 61.

du feu and central to Nerval's neurotic obsessional system. One such aspect is the appearance of the Doppelgänger in the person of the hero of the story, Desroches.

At the opening of the story, Desroches is recovering from wounds inflicted during a skirmish with the Prussians at Fort de Bitche. During his convalescence he makes the acquaintance of an elderly lady and her niece, Emilie, both of whom are Prussian. Despite this political obstacle, his friendship for Emilie ripens to love, and he returns with her to her home, where a civil marriage ceremony is performed. The only shadow over this idyllic scene is the presence of Emilie's brother who, remembering the death of his father at the hands of the French, is at first resentful of Desroches. Through a series of fortuitous events, Emilie's brother learns that it is none other than Desroches who killed their father. Luring Desroches to Fort de Bitche, the scene of the tragedy, he confronts him with this terrible discovery. Through the intervention of a parish priest, the two antagonists are separated, and the stunned Desroches returns to the army, unable to remain with the daughter of the man he has killed. A month later the report comes of his death in action. However, this sad dénouement is only eclipsed by another: Emilie has meanwhile taken holy orders and retired to a convent at Butte-aux-Lierres.

The almost cinematic banality of the plot conceals, however, numerous biographical details and a constellation

of Nervalian obsessions. The descriptive details of both Desroches and Emilie's brother are reminiscent of aspects of Nerval's personality reported both by himself and by others. Crushed by the discovery of his guilt, Desroches contemplates suicide, and the author explains his hero's solution as follows:

Vous savez que ce malheureux avait été nourri à l'école des matérialistes du dix-huitième siècle. Toutefois, depuis sa blessure, ses idées avaient changé beaucoup. Il était devenu l'un de ces chrétiens à demi sceptiques comme nous en avons tant, qui trouvent qu'après tout un peu de religion ne peut nuire.¹

The energetic and aggressive Desroches represents, as it were, a projection of Nerval's wistful dreams. He is the antithesis of Emilie's brother who, nevertheless, possesses qualities that are also characteristic of Nerval--Nerval the writer, the introvert and dreamer.

Ses cheveux blonds étaient rares déjà, comme s'il eût été miné par l'étude ou par les chagrins; il portait des lunettes bleues à cause de sa vue, si faible, disait-il, que la moindre lumière le faisait souffrir.²

One cannot help but see in this curious doubling of Nerval's personality a foreshadowing of the conflict with the double who appears in Aurélia. In that work, it is the Doppelgänger who married Aurélia, thus triumphing over the powerless narrator, just as it is Desroches who marries Emilie and thus threatens Nerval the dreamer and invalid. But as

¹Nerval, Oeuvres, I, p. 343.

²Ibid., p. 334.

we have seen, the dynamic situation in Emilie results in an échec for all the characters concerned. Desroches' marriage is never consummated ("car Desroches couchait seul, n'étant mari qu'au civil").¹ He dies virtually as a result of his abortive marriage, to say nothing of his having killed the symbolic father who, on one level, is both the father of Emilie's brother and of Desroches, since these are but two aspects of Nerval. In addition, Emilie is translated to a mystic plane, as are all of Nerval's heroines, beyond the reach of carnal love. Like Adrienne, she retires to a convent.

Thus Emilie, for all its melodrama, conceals elements which relate it to Aurélia and to such nouvelles as Sylvie and Octavie. These are, as it were, the same tale, told a variety of ways--the tale of an abortive love, forever thwarted by the insoluble conflicts of Nerval's personality.

Although La Pandora was never included in the 1854 edition of Les Filles du Feu, it is known that Nerval intended the nouvelle to form a portion of that work, but was unhappily prevented from finishing it in time. It therefore seems permissible to discuss La Pandora in the present chapter, not only because of Nerval's editorial intentions, but because the work possesses a strong spiritual kinship with the other nouvelles of Les Filles.

Like the other tales, the genesis of La Pandora lies

¹Ibid.

in the events of the poet's life, in this case his journey to Vienna in the winter of 1839-1840, during which he met--or allegedly met--the famous pianist, Marie Pleyel. The details of this encounter have been related in Chapter II, and it may only be added, that considerable mystery surrounds Nerval's affair with the pianist. It seems plausible to assume that their relationship never went beyond the most bantering sort of flirtation, and indeed, La Pandora does not lead us to believe otherwise. The rest--that is to say, the obsessive details contained in the nouvelle--is myth, in the sense that the allusive mythologies of Sylvie and Octavie constitute myths. What is most striking about La Pandora is the abrupt way Nerval has translated a real experience into myth, as if the force of the experience had caused a mystical upheaval that he could not attenuate by his usual artistic techniques. In the majority of Nerval's works the reader is spared any sense of the travail, the suffering and the bizar-
rerie of Nerval's subjective experiences, for these experiences are clothed in a language so mellifluous it has won its creator fame in its own right. In La Pandora, on the other hand, there is evidence of the less happy side of Nerval's spiritual struggle. The suffering is not softened, but shines through, up to the narrator's culminating outcry: "O Jupiter! Quand finira mon supplice?"¹ The work contains bizarre juxtapositions; the plot is loosely organized or non-

¹Ibid., p. 746.

existent, and throughout, dream merges into reality and reality into dream. Even Nerval was led to say:

J'ai donné au Mousquetaire des fragments bizarres que Dumas a imprimés sans faire observer que cela n'a ni queue ni tête.¹

The heroine of La Pandora is never named save by her sobriquet--a detail that at the outset lends a quality of unreality to the nouvelle. We learn that she is to be seen at the "théâtre de Vienne," a detail that would seem to merge her identity with that of Jenny Colon. However, she is not described in any professional situation, and it would seem that at the outset Nerval were in plein mythe. Moreover, the narrator declares that it is of her, La Pandora, that the enigmatic alchemical formula applies: AELIA LAELIA. Nec vir, nec mulier, nec androgyna, etc.² We have mentioned this obscure formula in Chapter II, and shown that it may be translated: "ni homme, ni femme, ni androgyne, ni fille, ni jeune, ni vieille, ni chaste, ni folle, ni pudique, mais tout cela ensemble." It is clear that in this formula Nerval is pointing out the essential mythical identity of Pandora. One also notes the elements of syncretism and amalgamation here, for Pandora is not one person, but the embodiment of various ideal qualities. It is a case of the éternel retour, and we are in the presence, not of a Viennese pianist, but of Nerval's archetypal woman.

¹Ibid., p. 729.

²Ibid., p. 733.

The plot revolves around one or two encounters with the beautiful Pandora, in which real memories and bizarre fantasies are mixed. The narrator secures an interview with his beloved in her boudoir, but finds himself mocked because of his black suit--an unstylish attire, since the other gallants of Vienna are wearing blue suits with gold buttons. The detail of the "habit noir" is made so forcefully that one feels Nerval intends a symbolic meaning--perhaps that he is dead to love. For there arises throughout the story the specter of the other, the beloved of whom Pandora is only the pale image: Jenny Colon. As in Sylvie and Octavie, we find in La Pandora that constellation of female characters, all of whom mysteriously complement each other. In this case, it is "La Kathi," a character whom we may assume is a prostitute, and who comforts the narrator through his trials of rejection with Pandora. La Kathi is described as "bionda grassota," a type of beauty of which Nerval was especially fond and to which he alludes in his letters to Gautier. The passage mentioning Kathi is significant, for it hints at two secret identities, familiar to the readers of Aurélia and Sylvie:

La Kathi vint me voir, souriante et parée, bionda grassota, comme toujours, et me dit des choses charmantes dans son patois mélangé de morave et de vénitien. Je ne sais trop quelle fleur elle portait à son corsage, et je voulais l'obtenir de son amitié.¹

The narrator offers to buy the flower, but La Kathi

¹Ibid., p. 738.

goes away furious, declaring "qu'elle irait trouver son vieux baron qui lui donnerait de plus riches étrennes."¹

The detail of the flower seems too arbitrary to be other than a mythological element, as does Kathi's patois. The flower would seem to be an echo--however remote--of the rose trémière which Aurélia carries in her hand. The patois morave is perhaps also a parallel of the strange language of the brodeuse in Octavie. In this case the flower--an obvious Freudian symbol--is prostituted and degraded. It is accessible to the hero for money, whereas the divine flower of Aurélia is the very antithesis of this. Whatever the significance of these symbols, one feels that Kathi represents, in her brief appearance, a counter-figure to the divine Pandora, just as Sylvie is a counter-figure to the inaccessible Adrienne and to the fugitive Jenny Colon.

While the hero is awaiting a second rendezvous with Pandora, he writes her a letter in which he compares his fate to that of Prometheus, and accuses his beloved of the malice of her mythologic namesake.

Je lui rappelais les souffrances de Prométhée, quand il mit au jour une créature aussi dépravée qu'elle. Je critiquai sa boîte à malice et son ajustement de bayadère. J'osai même m'attaquer à ses pieds serpents,² que je voyais passer insidieusement sous sa robe.²

As Jean Richer has pointed out, Nerval had long cherished an

¹Ibid.

²Ibid., p. 743.

identification with Prometheus, who embodies, strangely enough, certain characteristics of Satan, Faust and Christ:

Le Prométhée nervalien peut, en effet, être considéré comme une autre représentation du héros romantique; il réunit en lui certains traits caractéristiques qui l'apparentent à Caïn, au Satan miltonien, à Faust: il se révolte contre le dieu régnant, il aspire à la connaissance suprême, il dérobe le feu.¹

Of more interest in the passage last cited from La Pandora are the demonic qualities of the heroine, her "pieds serpentins" and her "ajustement bayadère." In these details we see again the conjunction of the "sainte" and the "fée," for Pandora belongs also to that race of temptresses among whom number the femme de théâtre of Sylvie and the brodeuse of Octavie. That we find such disparate elements in one figure is evidence of that syncretic effort of Nerval's which will give rise to the single archetypal myth of Aurélia.

La Pandora has no ending, no resolution. The lovers part, to meet again briefly in "une froide capitale du Nord." At this juncture Nerval seems to abandon all literary realism, and his characters' words are the utterances of those locked in a dream:

"Te voilà encore, enchanteresse, m'écriai-je, et la boîte fatale, qu'en as-tu fait?
--Je l'ai remplie pour toi, dit-elle, des plus beaux joujoux de Nuremberg.
Mais je me pris à fuir à toutes jambes vers la place de la monnaie.--"O fils des dieux, père des hommes!

¹Richer, Nerval, Expérience et Création, p. 247.

criait-elle, arrête un peu. C'est aujourd'hui la Saint Sylvestre comme l'an passé ... Où as-tu caché le feu du ciel que tu dérobas à Jupiter?¹

Here we see the complete evolution of reality into dream, and narrative into myth. Where Sylvie and even Octavie represent way-stations on the road to Nervalian syncretism, La Pandora completes the journey, whether we regard the work as a manifestation of Nerval's madness or as a further ascent into the mystic Empyrean. In La Pandora Nerval would seem to have become aware of the archetypal quality of his creations. They can no longer be translated back into the ambiguities of real life, but have achieved the singularity of their inherent meaning. They are now myths, and no longer merely fictional creations.

It seems unfortunate that Nerval was unable to include La Pandora in the 1854 edition of Les Filles du Feu. It forms a fitting ending to that work--looking backward toward the dawn of his visionary evolution, and forward to the full noon of Aurélia.

¹Nerval, Oeuvres, I, p. 746.

CHAPTER VII

THE BLACK SUN

Aurélia seems to defy literary classification. The most proximate category is autobiography, yet it is as far from that genre as Augustine's Confessions from the Essais of Montaigne. That it did not assume an essay or documentary form, like Montaigne's work, is perhaps due to the fact that Nerval was primarily a visionnaire in the literal sense of that term. His insights were rendered in the form of scenes and characters and indeed, Jean Richer goes so far as to call Aurélia a kind of opera--a genre it curiously resembles and one to which Nerval would probably not have taken exception. We will remember that his great and unfulfilled dream was to write an opera--La Reine de Saba--which would glorify his feminine archetype in the characterization of Jenny Colon. Instead we have the Aurélia, a work that transcends any pale libretto and more nearly approaches those mystical works that lie on the margin of literary category: The New Testament, The Prophetic Books of William Blake, or the enigmatic Chants de Maldoror.

R. M. Albérès has called the work a "glose."

Avec Aurélia, Nerval a écrit un commentaire de son oeuvre dont il livre la "genèse" aussi bien que la définition. On a parfois tenu ce livre pour une expérience mystique fuligineuse et apocalyptique, pour une "illumination" qui se veut prophétique: la part réellement ésotérique de Nerval, on la trouve dans les trois cycles de légende, l'Orient, l'Italie, et le Valois, ainsi que dans les Chimères. Aurélia est la glose.¹

Elsewhere the same critic has said:

Aurélia est une confession qui explique les mythes antérieurement élaborés et en livre le secret: le don de double vue, le privilège de voir les événements et les êtres sous deux perspectives différentes.²

It has been commonly believed that Aurélia was conceived and written between the years 1853 and 1855, during Nerval's second attack of madness. It would seem that Dr. Blanche sought to utilize Nerval's literary talents for the benefit of his illness and encouraged him to write, in his spare time, anything that pertained to his hallucinatory experiences. In a letter of 1854 Nerval wrote to the good doctor, saying:

Je vous envoie des pages qui doivent être ajoutées à celles que je vous ai remises hier. Je continuerai cette série de rêves, si vous voulez.³

However, few critics have doubted that the memories which make up Aurélia derive from events long antedating the composition of the book. After all, Nerval describes two attacks of madness, and the events of the first are indisput-

¹Albérès, p. 107.

²Ibid., p. 101.

³Cellier, p. 145.

ably those of 1841. Jean Richer has evolved a quite unique theory attempting to prove that the book was actually begun as early as 1841:

Notre propos au début du présent chapitre est d'essayer de montrer qu'il y a eu deux et peut-être trois textes successifs d'Aurélia, et que l'ouvrage, sous la forme que nous lui connaissons, est le fruit d'une lente élaboration, poursuivie pendant des années, et non pas seulement durant les mois d'internement à Passy. Car il nous semble que les premières ébauches d'Aurélia datent, en réalité, de 1841.¹

This would indicate that Nerval had begun the elaboration of his mythical archetypes much earlier than is usually believed, thus giving the continuity to his work which Marie-Jeanne Durrty insists upon in her discussion of the youthful poems. Not only so, but it would ring the death knell to that popular persuasion that Nerval was a mere fantaisiste and journalist until his last attack of madness in 1853. Albérès is likewise persuaded of this when he says:

Toutefois, Nerval précise au début de la phrase: "A dater de ce moment, tout prenait forme ..."; ce moment précis est, d'après le contexte, celui où en 1841, il a eu, au cours de la première crise nerveuse, une vision qui l'attirait vers l'Orient.²

If we have dwelt on these problems of chronology, it has been in an effort to assert what--for some readers at least--is not at first evident: that Aurélia is primarily a work of art, and not the document of an attack of mental illness. It is so much a work of art that it is, as Sebillotte points out, not to be trusted:

¹Richer, Nerval, Expérience et Création, p. 419.

²Albérès, p. 102.

Sommes-nous en présence de confidences, de mémoires romanesques, d'un plaidoyer dissimulé? La sincérité de Gérard est hors de doute, mais dans quelle mesure interprète-t-il les souvenirs du passé; est-ce que la crise actuelle ne colore pas les crises antérieures? Est-ce que le souci de cacher certains détails ne le conduit pas à leur en substituer d'autres? Est-ce qu'il ne cherche pas, presque inconsciemment, à présenter sa maladie de façon touchante? N'y a-t-il pas dans Aurélia des confusions psychologiques comme il y a des confusions matérielles?¹

The contribution of Aurélia lies in the importance Nerval attached to "l'épanchement du songe dans la vie réelle." For Aurélia was something quite new in its time. While writers such as Montaigne and La Rochefoucauld had explored the hidden motives of personality, no writer--save perhaps Diderot--had endeavored to record and organize the primeval stuff of the unconscious, to treat the processes of "le rêve" as material worthy of investigation. Indeed, Nerval was to give a different and new meaning to the term "rêve." In the opening lines of Aurélia he sets forth the nebulous object of his investigation: dream, sleep, and the regions of the unconscious. The passage is strangely reminiscent of the opening lines of A la Recherche du temps perdu:

Le rêve est une seconde vie. Je n'ai pu percer sans frémir ces portes d'ivoire ou de corne qui nous séparent du monde invisible. Les premiers instants du sommeil sont l'image de la mort; un engourdissement, nébuleux saisit notre pensée, et nous ne pouvons déterminer l'instant précis où le moi, sous une autre forme, continue l'oeuvre de l'existence.²

¹Sebillotte, p. 54.

²Nerval, Oeuvres, I, p. 753.

What psychologists a hundred years later were to refer to as the "ego," Nerval intuitively recognizes and calls the "moi." It is interesting also that in the following passage he establishes the identity of night dreams and reverie or hallucination: "Swedenborg appelait ces visions Memorabilia; il les devait à la rêverie plus souvent qu'à un sommeil."¹

Dream, then, is to be the subject of his work. But it is dream in the sense of a new and different life--a life that supplants that of waking reality and follows immutable laws of its own. On the one hand, Nerval calls this new life an illness--"maladie," at the same time seeming to question the validity of this term, for the dreamer has maintained the usual rational powers associated with health. He prefers to call it a Vita Nuova, and, like Dante, attributes its onset to the intervention of Woman:

Cette Vita Nuova a eu pour moi deux phases. Voici les notes qui se rapportent à la première.--Une dame que j'avais aimée longtemps et que j'appellerai du nom d'Aurélia, était perdue pour moi. Peu important les circonstances de cet événement qui devait avoir une si grande influence sur ma vie.²

The allusion is to Jenny Colon, yet it is not clear whether it is to her death or to her marriage with the flutist Leplus that he is referring. Nothing is mentioned of his real relationship with the actress, but only the repercussions of this relationship on his psychic life.

¹Ibid.

²Ibid., p. 754.

The poet relates how, following this coup navrant he endeavors to lose himself in amusements and travel:

J'affectai la joie et l'insouciance, je courus le monde, follement épris de la variété et du caprice; j'aimais surtout les costumes et les moeurs bizarres des populations lointaines, il me semblait que je déplaçais ainsi les conditions du bien et du mal.¹

The passage reveals the twin aspects of Nerval's nomadism: his longing for the romantically picturesque and also his inability to be "conditionné" to the customs or moral beliefs of the countries he visited. His displacement of the conditions of good and evil also hints at that resurgence of guilt which is to become the primum mobile of his illness.

This suggests that curious aspect of Nerval's illness: his insights into his own motivations. As Sebillotte points out, he was never to see quite deeply enough into the main-springs of his behavior. Nevertheless, Nerval was to see quite clearly, for example, the dangers of his own idealism and romanticism:

Quelle folie, me disais-je, d'aimer ainsi d'un amour platonique une femme qui ne vous aime plus! Ceci est la faute de mes lectures: j'ai pris au sérieux les inventions des poètes, et je me suis fait une Laure ou une Béatrix d'une personne ordinaire de notre siècle. Passons à d'autres intrigues et celle-là sera vite oubliée.²

With the realization that his love for Jenny Colon was an illusion, the poet leaves for Vienna and there meets

¹Ibid., p. 755.

²Ibid.

Marie Pleyel, the only other rival in his affections for Jenny. Sebillotte looks on this affair as a sort of substitute romance, a means by which Nerval proved his continuing powers as a lover:

Il est fort possible que Gérard ait voulu s'étourdir pour chasser des souvenirs pénibles, mais n'avait-il pas besoin de se prouver qu'il était capable de connaître, comme d'autres, les plaisirs de la jeunesse.¹

Moreover, Jenny Colon was a woman whose intellectual endowments must have occasionally disappointed the poet. In Marie Pleyel, on the other hand, he found a woman of intelligence and quality:

Mais voici qu'il s'éprend d'une femme à tous égards digne de lui et qui répond favorablement à ses avances. Dans son bonheur, quel soulagement de se découvrir un pouvoir qu'il croyait perdu; quelle revanche éclatante aussi de se montrer comblé de faveurs d'une dame de cette qualité.²

The affair with Pleyel would seem to be the turning point, not only in the poet's erotic life, but in the spiritual life recorded in Aurélia. Nerval is vague and guarded, it must be admitted, in his explanation of the dénouement of the affair:

J'essayai de la convaincre; mais, quoi que je voulusse lui dire, je ne pus ensuite retrouver dans nos entretiens le diapason de mon style, de sorte que je fus réduit à lui avouer, avec larmes, que je m'étais trompé moi-même en l'abusant.³

Nerval does not explain what is meant by "le diapason"

¹Sebillotte, p. 95.

²Ibid., p. 100.

³Ibid., p. 756.

de mon style," nor why what began as a sexual affair, or the prospect of one, ended as a Platonic friendship. Sebillotte finds an obscure, though not untenable, explanation in the nature of Nerval's affair with Jenny Colon. The latter relationship was carried on almost entirely by means of letters and could remain on an idealistic plane where his prowess as a lover might never be called into question. With Pleyel, however, he found himself face to face with neurotic fears for which his mythologic creations were the only psychic solution:

En effet, aussitôt qu'il se trouve devant l'artiste, alors qu'on s'attendait à le voir manifester par son attitude ce que sa lettre avançait, Gérard se trouble et perd tous ses moyens. Comment va-t-il s'en tirer? D'une piètre façon, en avouant à Marie Pleyel qu'en elle c'est une autre femme qu'il aimait et qu'il l'a involontairement abusée en lui adressant des hommages que son coeur destinait toujours à Jenny.¹

Sebillotte's theory gains credibility when we resume our reading of Aurélia and see how the poet's échec with the pianist, Marie Pleyel, is followed by the opening of the ivory doors of dream and vision. For when Marie Pleyel intervenes on his behalf with Jenny Colon, the poet finds in his renewed love for Jenny many of the archetypal qualities that will go to make up the Aurélian vision.

J'y crus voir le pardon du passé; l'accent divin de la pitié donnait aux simples paroles qu'elle m'adressa une valeur inexprimable, comme si quelque chose de la religion se mêlait aux douceurs d'un amour jusque-là profane, et lui imprimait le caractère de l'éternité.²

¹Ibid., p. 100.

²Nerval, Oeuvres, I, p. 757.

But it is as if vision and madness were unconsciously linked in the psyche of the poet, for with the supernal vision of Jenny and the realization of her archetypal identity, there comes also the morbid premonition of his beloved's death. While walking the Paris streets, he sees a street number which is the same as his own age:

Aussitôt en baissant les yeux, je vis devant moi une femme au teint blême, aux yeux caves, qui me semblait avoir les traits d'Aurélia. Je me dis: "C'est sa mort ou la mienne qui m'est annoncée."¹

Although this vision probably occurred at a different time from that designated in Aurélia, it was, in any event, the beginning of the mental confusion which characterized his periodic internments in the maisons de santé of Paris. As Sebillotte points out:

En tout cas, à partir de cet instant il n'arrive plus à se maîtriser, et le lendemain, mardi gras, 23 février, Gérard va voir ses amis qui remarquent l'alacrité de ses propos.²

After the spectral vision of the woman "aux yeux caves," the poet that night dreams of a vast building through whose corridors he wanders. In one hallway he comes upon a strange being that can only be identified in the light of Jungian psychology:

Un être d'une grandeur démesurée--homme ou femme, je ne sais--voltigeait péniblement au-dessus de l'espace et semblait se débattre parmi des nuages épais. Manquant d'haleine et de force, il tomba enfin au milieu de la cour obscure, accrochant et froissant ses ailes

¹Ibid.

²Sebillotte, p. 3.

le long des toits et des balustres. Je pus le contempler un instant. Il était coloré de teintes vermeilles, et ses ailes brillaient de mille reflets changeants. Vêtu d'une robe longue à plis antiques, il ressemblait à l'ange de la Mélancolie d'Albrecht Dürer. Je ne pus m'empêcher de pousser des cris d'effroi, qui me réveillèrent en sursaut.¹

The vision is interesting on many scores. The asexual quality of the creature--neither man nor woman--would seem to relate it to the androgynes familiar to occult literature. It would also seem to be, as Sebillotte points out, a symbol of that totality of the psyche which is known in Jung's works as the anima. That it had this meaning for Nerval is evinced by his obsessive interest in the Dürer engraving, and by his later seeing over the Paris streets the "soleil noir" that appears in that engraving. Above all, the vision has qualities familiar to readers of mystical literature. William Blake was particularly given to seeing colored visions, and endeavored in his paintings to capture their elusive tints. One thinks also of Saint Teresa and her vision of the Holy Dove:

While in this condition, I saw a dove over my head, very different from those we see on earth, for it had not feathers like theirs but its wings were made of little shells which emitted a great brilliance. It was larger than a dove and I seemed to hear the rustling of its wings.²

Whether Nerval's androgyne and Teresa's Dove are of the same psychic significance is not so important as the fact that in

¹Nerval, Oeuvres, I, p. 758.

²Selected Writings of Saint Teresa, ed. William J. Doheny (Milwaukee, Bruce Publishing Co., 1950), p. 29.

both cases the visionary emphasizes the presence of color. Color, according to Aldous Huxley and other students of subliminal perception, emanates from the most primeval levels of the unconscious. This, and Nerval's intense reaction to the vision, would seem to place it among the most significant experiences of his visionary life. Sebillotte points out that there must have been behind it "des sentiments très personnels pour provoquer une réaction si affective que Nerval se réveillât en sursaut."¹ He goes on to say:

N'oublions pas que pour Nerval, il signifiait l'imminence de sa mort, c'est donc qu'il s'identifiait à cet être étrange cherchant à s'élever dans les airs et, faute de force, retombant pour mourir. N'est-ce pas le symbole d'une aspiration au bonheur, qu'il ne peut atteindre, n'ayant pas l'énergie nécessaire.²

The following day Nerval's behavior would seem to prove the prophetic quality of the vision, for he is now en pleine folie, discussing with his friends those subjects dear to the schizophrenic: the significance of colors, the meaning of numbers, and, in general, feeling himself to be omniscient and omnipotent:

Je dissertais chaleureusement sur des sujets mystiques; je les étonnais par une éloquence particulière, il me semblait que je savais tout, et que les mystères du monde se révélaient à moi dans ces heures suprêmes.³

But the "heures suprêmes" are short-lived at best, and lead only to the sordid episode of his arrest by a night patrol

¹Sebillotte, p. 60.

²Ibid.

³Nerval, Oeuvres, I, p. 758.

for what we would now call indecent exposure. Following his mystic star, in which he believes the spirit of Aurélia dwells, the poet divests himself of his garments and stands awaiting his assumption into the magnetic rays of the star, uttering the already quoted phrase: "Non, je n'appartiens pas à ton ciel ..." Henri Lemaître has pointed out how the episode reveals the spiritual struggle that underlies Nerval's mystic experience:

Telle est précisément la lutte spirituelle qui forme le sujet de toute l'oeuvre mystique de Gérard, la lutte entre le rêve occultiste ou néo-païen, et la tentation chrétienne qui emportera finalement.¹

Especially interesting is Nerval's ability to apprehend both the subjective and objective aspects of the event --to see, as it were, his own madness through the eyes of another. Fearful of losing the credulity and respect of his reader, he announces, in a passage of singular poignance, the mission of the writer and the moral principles that underlie art:

Si je ne pensais que la mission d'un écrivain est d'analyser sincèrement ce qu'il éprouve dans les graves circonstances de la vie, et si je ne me proposais un but que je crois utile, je m'arrêteraï ici, et je n'essayerais pas d'écrire ce que j'éprouvai ensuite dans une série de visions, insensées peut-être, ou vulgairement maladives ...²

The série de visions which follow are what Jean Richer calls "le songe des ancêtres." They constitute perhaps one

¹Ibid., p. 759.

²Ibid., p. 761.

of the most difficult and obscure portions of the Aurélia. The work-a-day mind can scarcely follow the poet through this labyrinth of Dantesque phantasmagoria, nor is it always clear whether the poet is experiencing mere night dreams, waking hallucinations, or the occult visions of a religious mystic.

The poet is transported to the shores of the Rhine, to a house with green shutters, that would seem to be an evocation of the house of Nerval's uncle at Mortefontaine. There is also a brief allusion to the Lorelei:

Les tableaux ébauchés étaient suspendues ça et là,
l'un d'eux représentait la fée célèbre de ce rivage.¹

An aged servant appears whom Nerval calls Marguerite:

Une vieille servante que j'appelai Marguerite et
qu'il me semblait connaître depuis l'enfance me dit:
"N'allez-vous pas vous mettre au lit? car vous venez
de loin, et votre oncle rentrera tard; on vous ré-
veillera pour souper."²

Lying down on the bed, he notices opposite him a wall clock on which a bird is perched, and the bird commences to speak in a human voice. The voice seems to be that of Nerval's ancestor, Antoine Boucher, and it speaks to him of various members of the family, living and dead, "comme si elles existaient simultanément."³ The bird, as Henri Lemaître points out, seems evocative of both Poe's "Raven"--a work

¹Ibid., p. 764.

²Ibid.

³Ibid.

with which Nerval was acquainted--and also a very real raven tied to one of the shop-fronts on the rue de la Vieille Lanterne. In addition, the speaking bird is reminiscent of occult beliefs in the transmigration of souls. This reincarnation of the poet's uncle is evidently Antoine Boucher in the rôle of spiritual father--the only parent Nerval knew before Dr. Labrunie took the boy to Paris:

En réalité, transporter sur les bords du Rhin la maison de Mortefontaine, c'est pour Gérard fondre en une image unique le souvenir du père spirituel, et celui du pays des ancêtres paternels supposés.¹

As so often in the progression of Nervalian imagery, the peaceful is followed by the terrible, and no sooner has the bird ceased to speak than the poet finds himself hurled into an abyss that seems to traverse the globe--an evocation, perhaps, of pre-natal existence:

Je crus tomber dans un abîme qui traversait le globe.
Je me sentais emporté sans souffrance par un courant
de métal fondu.²

In the chain of visual impressions which follow, he sees an old man who is cultivating the earth, and recognizes him to be the same as he who spoke with the bird's voice. The old man leaves his work and accompanies the poet to a nearby house where his parents and ancestors are gathered. It is a family banquet, precisely of the sort that must have been absent from Nerval's early life. As the various guests come

¹Richer, Nerval, Expérience et Création, p. 469.

²Nerval, Oeuvres, I, p. 765.

forward and embrace the newcomer, one surmises Nerval's no doubt intense longing to belong to such a family circle. There follows a dialogue between the poet and his uncle. Through some mystical communication, the latter reveals to him the certainty of immortality:

Cela est donc vrai! disais-je avec ravissement, nous sommes immortels et nous conservons ici les images du monde que nous avons habité. Quel bonheur de songer que tout ce que nous avons aimé existera toujours autour de nous! J'étais bien fatigué de la vie!¹

Few passages in Aurélia so poignantly evoke those human aspirations which animated the mythology of the poet. This longing for spiritual survival and for the continuance of the known would seem, in one respect, to be the basis for the creation of Aurélia--both book and myth. One is also struck by the way in which the revelation of the immortality of his loved ones is revealed to the poet: "L'explication m'en devenait claire aussitôt et les images se précisaient devant mes yeux comme des peintures animées."² Sebillotte has indicated the mystic quality of this apprehension:

Le fait important ici est que l'idée précède l'image, la suscite, se concrétise en elle; sa pensée s'exprime en scènes qui se déroulent devant lui, et le ravissement qu'il éprouve tient à l'adéquation de l'image à l'idée. Ce n'en est pas seulement la représentation visuelle, mais encore et surtout l'explication, connue d'une manière ineffable dans une sorte d'illumination spirituelle.³

¹Ibid., p. 766.

²Ibid.

³Sebillotte, p. 73.

There follows the evocation of a "paradis perdu"--a spiritual utopia that is reminiscent of other ideal societies both in French and English literature. The poet first encounters a mysterious city:

Je me vis dans les rues d'une cité très populeuse et inconnue. Je remarquai qu'elle était bossuée de collines¹ et dominée par un mont tout couvert d'habitations.

Sebillotte finds little of interest in this passage save to remark that Nerval could probably not resist "la tentation de composer un tableau charmant."² On the other hand, Jean Richer finds in the dream city many echoes of previous utopias in literature, such as that of Lucien or Sebastian Mercier. There is also the utopia evoked in Heine's Intermezzo, with which Nerval was acquainted. Lastly one is reminded of Jung's dictum concerning the appearance of cities in dreams: "The city is a maternal symbol, a woman who harbours the inhabitants in herself, like children."³

The inhabitants of the city are dressed in white, evidently a symbol of their purity, for Nerval describes them as "ni corrompus, ni détruits, ni esclaves, purs ..."⁴ In their celestial faces the poet recognizes those whom he has lost in this world, but who have mysteriously survived

¹Nerval, Oeuvres, I, p. 768.

²Sebillotte, p. 74.

³C. G. Jung, Symbols of Transformation, (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1956), p. 208.

⁴Nerval, Oeuvres, I, p. 769.

in the other. One citizen approaches him and says, weeping: "N'est-ce pas que c'est vrai qu'il y a un Dieu?--Oui, lui dis-je avec enthousiasme." Thus in this supernal vision, which would seem to be a projection of the poet's deepest longings, he is assured of the eternity of his love and the survival of his loved ones:

Ainsi ce doute éternel de l'immortalité de l'âme qui affecte les meilleurs esprits, se trouvait résolu pour moi. Plus de mort, plus de tristesse, plus d'inquiétude. Ceux que j'aimais, parents, amis, me donnaient des signes certains de leur existence éternelle et je n'étais plus séparé d'eux que par les heures du jour.¹

In the succeeding dream Nerval finds himself again in the house of his "aïeul" as he evidently designates his uncle. Three women are working in one of the rooms, and the eldest speaks to him in a voice he recognizes--possibly that of the baronne de Feuchères. Suddenly the poet finds himself dressed in a small brown suit of an antique cut:

Il était coquet, gracieux et imprégné de douces odeurs. Je me sentais tout rajeuni et tout pimpant dans ce vêtement qui sortait de leurs doigts de fée, et je les remerciai en rougissant, comme si je n'eusse été qu'un petit enfant devant de grandes belles dames.²

So far there is nothing extraordinary in this return to childhood and to its narcissistic joys. The dream takes a different turn, however, as one of the ladies rises and walks out into the garden. The garden itself is in a strange disorder and filled with objects and plants that evoke both

¹Ibid., p. 771.

²Ibid., p. 772.

Christian and pagan ideas. There are statues "noircies par le temps" and a stream pours into a nearby pool.

L'aspect général du jardin, les fleurs revenues à l'état sauvage, tout trahit un retour à la religion naturelle. Mais un néo-paganisme s'organise dans cette âme et y enfonce de profondes racines. Là croissent le peuplier de Jupiter, le pin de Cybèle, l'acacia maçonnique.¹

There then appears one of those portentous figures which, like the fallen angel mentioned earlier, seem to occupy a special category of the Nervalian mythos. For the lady who had previously walked into the garden, appears now in the guise of Aurélia, carrying the "rose trémière" and dressed in "taffetas changeant." Her form grows larger and larger until she finally seems to engulf the garden and the sky above it. As Nerval describes it: "Je la perdais dans sa propre grandeur." The poet cries out: "Oh, ne fuis pas! car la nature meurt avec toi." At this decisive moment he falls against the angle of a wall, at the foot of a statue. In the face of the statue he recognizes the traits of Aurélia and, looking about him, sees that the garden has become a cemetery.

There are various and contradictory interpretations of this dream. Jean Richer, who confines himself to the context of the poet's own symbolism, identifies the gigantic woman as "La Grande Isis." Another critic, of strong psycho-analytic orientation, makes the bold hypothesis that the

¹Richer, Nerval, Expérience et Création, p. 473.

figure of the dream is Nerval himself, or the projection of his anima.

Cette image féminine présentée par le rêve n'était, elle aussi, que le symbole de l'âme de Gérard de Nerval, symbole qu'il projetait sur les femmes réelles et qui se trouvait liés à une grandeur infantile.¹

M. de Becker's theory would seem to suggest that Nerval did not recognize the cause of his illness, which derived from an excessive idealism. The same critic finds in the dream of the fallen angel a symbol of Nerval's own fall from the Empyrean, in which his tormented soul could not sustain itself. Similarly, in the present dream, the woman vanishes because the dreamer is no longer in touch with physical and psychic realities. She is a ghost who slips through the dreamer's fingers:

Le rêve disait avec netteté: "A force de grandir et d'idéaliser l'image de la femme, tu la fais s'évanouir à tes yeux et son ombre s'échappe à tes mains; en poursuivant cette transfiguration, tu ne peux que transformer les jardins en cimetières et l'amour en mort."²

De Becker's Freudian approach is interesting in showing the hortatory and functional aspects of the poet's dream. Particularly interesting is the fact that De Becker identifies the symbols of the fallen angel and the lady in the garden with Nerval's own ego. This would explain, as almost nothing else does, the terror and anxiety Nerval experienced

¹Raymond De Becker, "Aurélia, Notes psychologiques," Bulletin de Parapsychologie, (XIII-XIV, January-April 1958), p. 68.

²Ibid.

when he was faced with the prospect of being rejected by, or separated from, Aurélia. It would also follow, then, that her death or extinction would be his own--a possibility which does, indeed, threaten the poet later on.

For the poet, the vision has quite another meaning: the physical death of Aurélia. As he expresses it: "Je ne le sus que plus tard. Aurélia était morte."¹ But this is followed by a strange, compensatory idea, that Aurélia belonged to him more closely in death than in life:

D'ailleurs, elle m'appartenait bien plus dans sa mort que dans sa vie ... Egoïste pensée que ma raison devait payer plus tard par d'amers regrets.²

But as Sebillotte asks, if she indeed belonged to him in death, why did he experience torment at seeing her image vanish into the sky? It would seem that there is some ambiguity in the meaning of the symbol of the lady in the garden, or else that the poet's unconscious fears did not coincide with his conscious belief that "elle m'appartient bien plus dans la mort ..." In any event, this vision would seem to mark the beginning of a series of sinister omens which follow each other in swift succession--omens of the coming loss of Aurélia and the poet's "descente aux enfers." Among the first of these is the symbolic episode of the opal ring:

Je lui avais donné une bague d'un travail ancien dont le chaton était formé d'une opale taillée en coeur. Comme cette bague était trop grande pour son doigt,

¹Nerval, Oeuvres, I, p. 774.

²Ibid.

j'avais eu l'idée fatale de la faire couper pour en diminuer l'anneau; je ne compris ma faute qu'en entendant le bruit de la scie. Il me sembla voir couler du sang.¹

At least one aspect of this episode is its manifest sexual symbolism. One is reminded of Sebillotte's dictum concerning Nerval's emotional obstacles and failures: "Toujours surgit quelque obstacle au moment où Gérard est sur le point de goûter à ce qui lui est mystérieusement défendu."² Even the most remote symbol of fulfillment carries its tormenting omen of defeat.

To pass the time in the maison de santé of Dr. Blanche, Nerval creates, on one of the walls of his cell, a vast drawing of his beloved. It is not a realistic portrait, but an apotheosis "peinte sous les traits d'une divinité."³

Sous ses pieds, tournait une roue, et les dieux lui faisaient cortège. Je parvins à colorier ce groupe en exprimant le suc des herbes et des fleurs. Que de fois j'ai rêvé devant cette chère idole! Je fis plus, je tentai de figurer avec de la terre le corps de celle que j'aimais.⁴

Here we see--whether we regard it as madness or mystical vision--the full épanouissement of the Aurélian vision. Whatever the human prototype of Aurélia, she has now ceased to be a mortal, even a remembered one. Neither is she a mere fictional or imaginative creation. She is rather a myth,

¹Ibid.

²Sebillotte, p. 74.

³Nerval, Oeuvres, I, p. 775.

⁴Ibid.

none the less real for being personal to Nerval, and as vast in her associative meanings as are those goddesses who figure in the pantheons of the religions of the world. Indeed, she is akin to these, for Nerval points out that "les dieux lui faisaient cortège." Unsusceptible as she is to logical criteria, the critic Cellier has perhaps summed up her disparate identities:

Le mythe de l'Eternel Féminin atteint alors son plein épanouissement. Toutes les images féminines se superposent. Isis et Marie, la déesse et la femme, la mère et l'amante, Marguerite et Hélène, la Sainte et la Fée, Sophie et la Rose, se fondent en une représentation unique, celle d'Aurélia, transfigurée et radieuse, qui reçoit le nom sacré d'Aurélia. Car à elle seule appartient d'illuminer le ténébreux, d'épouser le veuf et de consoler l'inconsolé. Mariage mystique? Bien plutôt mystique chevauchée, qui couronne l'initiation. Ainsi se ferme le cycle, puisque Nerval unit d'une façon prestigieuse à l'image apocalyptique de la fin des temps le souvenir de la poésie allemande et les souvenirs d'enfance.¹

Following this beatific vision, the poet is again swept into visions that constitute a Dantesque "descente aux enfers." He is witness to the creation of the world and of the awful beasts who inhabit this epoch:

Puis les monstres changeaient de forme, et, dépouillant leurs premières peaux, se dressaient plus puissants sur des pattes gigantesques.²

Later the poet is transported to the mountains of Africa, the site, according to certain occult theories, of the origin of mankind. The people of the region seem devas-

¹Cellier, p. 159.

²Nerval, Oeuvres, I, p. 777.

tated by both social and physical evils about which the poet is somewhat vague, save to say that they are "décimés par des maladies." There is also an evocation of the Biblical Flood. In the midst of this chaos, which one may take to represent figuratively the poet's own emotional eclipse, he sees a woman:

Seulement, je vois encore, sur un pic baigné des eaux,
une femme abandonnée par eux, qui crie les cheveux
épars, se débattant contre la mort. Ses accents plain-
tifs dominaient le bruit des eaux ... Fut-elle sauvée?
Je l'ignore. Les dieux, ses frères, l'avaient con-
damnée; mais au-dessus de sa tête brillait l'Etoile du
soir qui versait sur son front des rayons enflammés.¹

Jean Richer has pointed out the similarity of this scene to the Etoile card of the Tarot deck, where Water, a Woman and a Star are all seen in conjunction. In any case, the star would seem to be the characteristic emblem of Aurélia and--remembering De Becker's identification of Nerval with that figure--the woman's plight might be interpreted to be that of one whose mind is being engulfed by the waters of the unconscious.

These cataclysmic visions fade, and the poet suggests that an interval of time has passed during which there is some remission of his malady. However, the origins of his guilt and remorse have not been discovered or resolved, and a relapse occurs in the form of a physical accident. While descending a stairway in a friend's garden, he trips and bruises his chest on the corner of a piece of furniture.

¹Ibid., p. 779.

The accident is interpreted as an omen:

La fièvre s'empara de moi; en me rappelant de quel point j'étais tombé, je me souviens que la vue que j'avais admirée donnait sur un cimetière, celui même où se trouvait le tombeau d'Aurélia.¹

In the mental crisis and internment which ensues, there figures that recurring symbol which seems to be central to the Nervalian mythology: the double or Doppelgänger. At a dark moment in this period of his illness, feeling he has lost Aurélia and that he has outraged her memory through "faciles amours," the poet suddenly confronts the image of himself:

Le même Esprit ... passa devant moi, non plus dans ce costume blanc qu'il portait jadis, ainsi que ceux de sa race, mais vêtu en prince d'Orient. Je m'élançai vers lui, le menaçant, mais il se tourna tranquillement vers moi. O terreur! ô colère! c'était mon visage, c'était toute ma forme idéalisée et grandie²

The figure of the double or Ferouër is also to be found in Nerval's book, Voyage en Orient, hence the guise of the twin as a "prince d'Orient." Sebillotte finds in the figure of the double the solution to the guilt feelings of the poet. The double is, Sebillotte suggests, a projection of the unacceptable impulses of the poet's personality.

Enfin, l'angoisse de la mort et le sentiment de culpabilité amènent l'homme à ne plus prendre sur lui la responsabilité de certaines actions de son Moi, mais à en charger un autre Moi, son double.³

¹Ibid., p. 781.

²Ibid., p. 782.

³Sebillotte, p. 127.

Such a theory would explain the puzzling events which follow, and also the tragic outcry which ends Part One of Aurélia. In this final vision the poet finds himself in an enormous room where are assembled various persons, living and dead, whom he has known. A marriage is announced, and he quickly realizes it is to be the marriage of his Double and Aurélia. The poet's grief is so violent he must be quieted by those around him. At this fatal moment, a workman enters carrying a large bar of iron, red-hot from the ovens, and begins to brandish it about the poet's head. This strange behavior is interrupted by a piercing scream:

Le cri d'une femme, distincte et vibrant, empreint
d'une douleur déchirante, me réveilla en sursaut.
Les syllabes d'un mot inconnu que j'allais prononcer
expirait sur mes lèvres ... c'était la voix d'une
personne vivante, et pourtant c'était pour moi la
voix et l'accent d'Aurélia.¹

In this vision the Freudian symbols present themselves so patently they cannot be gainsaid. The symbolic marriage from which the poet is excluded, the menacing bar of iron, the woman's cry of anguish--all go to make up an Oedipal fantasy fraught with terror, sadism and pain. The mystic marriage is none other than that of Nerval himself with the beloved Aurélia. What, then, is the obstacle to its accomplishment? As Sebillotte says:

Mais quel est ce tabou si puissant qui interdit l'accouplement de son double avec l'ombre d'une actrice qui fut rien moins que vertueuse?²

¹Nerval, Oeuvres, I, p. 787.

²Sebillotte, p. 133.

The Freudian answer--and it is not necessarily at variance with more literary interpretations of Aurélia--is that Nerval's love for Jenny Colon, Sophie Dawes and Marie Pleyel was in no little part the search for the maternal love lost in childhood, with its corresponding threat of incestuous guilt. These women assumed the aspect of deities in Nerval's mythical world precisely because their deification precluded any possibility of carnal desire on Nerval's part--a desire that would not only arouse the threat of incest, as we have said, but also of sexual impotence. According to this interpretation, the divinisation of Nerval's loved ones was a means of sustaining the "paradis perdu" of childhood despite neurotic interdictions:

On conçoit les avantages de cette régression qui élimine complètement toute possibilité d'acte sexuel compensée par une effusion de tendresse dont nous verrons peut-être plus loin d'où provient le besoin.¹

The anguished cry of Aurélia would seem to presage another step in the descente aux enfers of the poet. By the end of Part One, it is evident the poet has undergone some crushing psychic defeat. This tragic eclipse is summed up in an image of sombre grandeur:

Les ombres irritées fuyaient en jetant des cris et traçant dans l'air des cercles fatales, comme les oiseaux à l'approche d'un orage.²

Several critics have remarked the change of attitude

¹Ibid., p. 131.

²Nerval, Oeuvres, I, p. 787.

and tone which characterizes Part Two of *Aurélia*. Most typical of this change is a transition from personal myth and symbol to the more orthodox myths of Christianity. For the first time, the poet becomes concerned with God and with the redemptive function of religion. That this is almost unprecedented is shown in the opening paragraph: "Pourquoi donc est-ce la première fois, depuis si longtemps, que je songe à lui?"¹ As if to support this tentative élan toward orthodoxy, the poet recalls that, after all, *Aurélia* had not been without faith:

Elle, pourtant, croyait à Dieu, et j'ai surpris un jour le nom de Jésus sur ses lèvres. Il en coulait si doucement que j'en ai pleuré. O mon Dieu! cette larme--cette larme ... Elle est séchée depuis si longtemps! Cette larme, mon Dieu! rendez-la-moi.²

Indeed, the notion of God is so alien to Nerval's writings that it requires some explanation why--for one so concerned with spiritual unity and the immortality of the soul--this obvious solution did not present itself. Nerval often speaks of his doubts of orthodox faith, but these doubts seem to be directed toward the more narrow aspects of Christian ethics and discipline. The question of the existence and reality of the Deity arises only in Part Two of *Aurélia* and in the philosophical poem, "Le Christ aux Oliviers." It would seem that for Nerval the question could only be approached through the baffling and indirect avenues

¹Ibid., p. 788.

²Ibid.

of Occultism. At least up until the mental crisis of 1851-1853, Nerval's God is the God of Lucretius, "impuissant et perdu dans son immensité."¹

One feels that the concept of the Christian God held some threat to the consummation of Nerval's deeper wishes--of that profound dream of joining the beloved Aurélia: and that, moreover, this concept threatened the very nature of his beloved.

Loin de remédier à leur angoisse, les pratiques religieuses dont on espère qu'elles auront un effet magique, peuvent parfois susciter une révolte contre le Dieu qui semble rester inaccessible et indifférent. Tout paraît se liguier contre le malheureux en proie à l'angoisse qui l'assaille, et les paroles les plus charitables ont l'air d'une dérision, puisque personne ne peut deviner sa souffrance, ni lui dire d'où elle provient.²

It nevertheless remains curious that Nerval, who endured such deprivations in his quest of earthly love, and whose faith in the substance of things hoped for is nowhere short of heroic--this inventor of a personal, unsubstantiated mythology--should take exception to that easier and far more accessible faith, unless there were in that faith some threat to the values he cherished.

Sebillotte believes that the transition to God in Part Two of Aurélia is the result of the nightmare which concludes Part One, wherein the mysterious Double or Ferouër espouses the beloved. He points out that the Double is unconsciously

¹Ibid.

²Sebillotte, p. 136.

identified in Nerval's mind with some ideal, omnipotent force--God. The poet's only recourse, then, is to join forces with the invincible Double:

Pour triompher dans ce combat inégal, quelle ressource restait à Nerval, sinon de puiser des forces dans l'adoration de Dieu. Ce qui veut dire qu'il fallait surmonter ce sentiment d'infériorité, cette impuissance, qui diminuaient ses chances de vaincre le Double, plus beau, plus fort et armé.¹

Such a theory, while explaining some mild resurgence of faith, fails to explain the almost total absence of the Deity in Nerval's mythology and thought. One concludes, in want of critical affirmation, that Nerval's rejection of the Deity derived from a deep disappointment in the male image in his early life, beginning with a rejection of the father and a corresponding overcompensation of the mother who, though absent, came to be embodied in the figure of Jenny Colon and finally in the archetypal myth of Aurélia. There is, additionally, the influence of the maternal uncle, Antoine Boucher, to whom may be credited Nerval's predilection for the occult and the notion of the multiplicity of gods. God is excluded, because his very nature is subsumed by the primordial nature of Woman:

Pas une fois il ne nomme le Père Créateur, ni les trois personnes de la Trinité chrétienne. Le fils, qui assume notre nature humaine, malgré son essence divine, retourne à la mère qui contient tout.²

The introduction of Christian ideas into the Nervalian

¹Ibid., p. 140.

²Ibid., p. 116.

mythology is to give that quality of sombreness and tragedy that pervades the last chapters of Aurélia. It would seem that the acceptance of God awoke in the poet intense guilt feelings that had previously lain dormant.

Je comprends, me dis-je, j'ai préféré la créature
au Créateur; j'ai déifié mon amour et j'ai adoré,
selon les rites païens, celle dont le dernier soupir
a été consacré au Christ.¹

He begins to realize, as do those who turn full-face upon their obsessions, how much his love for Aurélia has cost him in friends and loved ones. A nurse of his childhood visits him in dream and says:

Tu n'as pas pleuré tes vieux parents aussi vivement
que tu as pleuré cette femme. Comment peux-tu donc
espérer le pardon?²

However, it would seem that this "conversion"--if such it were--had come too late to effect for Nerval any deliverance from his malady, or to alter the immutable course of his mythology. The vision of Aurélia, so integral to both his mystical life and to his illness, is never relinquished. Indeed, the dictates of reason come to him through the medium of the divine Aurélia. In one such vision the goddess appears, saying:

Je suis la même que Marie, la même que ta mère, la
même aussi que sous toutes les formes tu m'as tou-
jours aimée. A chacune de tes épreuves, j'ai quitté
l'un des masques dont je voile mes traits, et bien-
tôt tu me verras telle que je suis.³

¹Nerval, Oeuvres, I, p. 792.

²Ibid., p. 796.

³Ibid., p. 805.

The passage reveals, as almost no other does in the Aurélia, the nature--at once eclectic and uniform--of the obsession which haunted Nerval throughout his later life. Aurélia was one woman and at the same time all the women the poet had ever known. The multiplicity of her biographical prototypes is not proof of any vagueness of meaning, but rather proof of the concentrated power of myth:

Les affections de Nerval se concentraient sur un Eternel féminin qu'il nommait la Reine de Saba, forme d'Eve, épouse et mère qu'il appelle ailleurs Isis ou Aurélia.¹

It is to the image of Isis, the Eternal Mother, that Nerval returns again and again in the final pages of Aurélia. That occultism which obfuscates, seemingly, much of Nerval's philosophical thought, is here both lucid and meaningful. His choice of the Isis image is not dictated by any mere love of the recondite and the exotic, but by a need to find the supreme symbol, the ultimate myth:

Je reportai ma pensée à l'éternelle Isis, la mère et l'épouse sacrée; toutes mes aspirations, toutes mes prières se confondaient dans ce nom magique. Je me sentais revivre en elle, et parfois elle m'apparaissait sous la figure de Vénus antique, parfois sous les traits de la Vierge des Chrétiens.²

Much has been written in an effort to elucidate the meaning of the Aurélia myth. We have attempted, in the present chapter, to present contemporary theories--both psycho-

¹Richer, Gérard de Nerval et les Doctrines Esotériques, p. 84.

²Nerval, Oeuvres, I, p. 811.

analytic and literary--toward that elucidation. As we have seen, however, the motives and needs of the poet neither explain nor circumscribe the product of his imagination. Aurélia exists quite apart from the pathological, historical or literary obsessions which set her in motion, just as the great characters of fiction never correspond entirely to the biographical prototypes in their creator's life. Aurélia is not Sophie Dawes, nor Jenny Colon, nor even, for that matter, the goddess Isis. We have judged best, in the labyrinth of the Nervalian mythos, not to look for allusive meanings to the mythical figures, but rather to seek those emotional needs which gave rise to the mythology. In this respect we have perhaps erred on the side of the psychoanalysts. A mystical work, such as Aurélia, offers few avenues of approach to the critic, for the mystical faculty is not the faculty of the imagination on which the novelist so completely relies. Its roots lie rather in a deeper level of the psyche. The mystical creation is not concerned with man's confrontation with man, but with his confrontation with God and with the meaning of the world. Such a work is, in a sense, beyond criticism, for each man must find his own meaning, and the critic can but stand aside and trace the awesome lineaments of his chosen gods.

If there is some master key to the Aurélia myth--some ultimate quest of the poet--it has perhaps been summed up by Marie-Jeanne Durry in her perceptive book on Nerval:

En vérité, rien compte pour Nerval que ceci: parvenir à la certitude de l'immortalité et de la co-existence de toutes les personnes qu'il a aimées.¹

¹Durry, p. 145.

CHAPTER VIII

THE GATES OF HORN AND IVORY

In the present work we have confined ourselves to a discussion of Woman's rôle in the mythology of Gérard de Nerval. It should be added, however, that this is far from an inevitable choice for those who wish to explore the depth and range of the Nervalian oeuvre. Critical studies exist (Jean Richer: Nerval, Expérience et Création) which encompass the whole spectrum of Nerval's mythology--a vast pantheon of historical and mythological figures, of which the female archetype is only a part. We have not discussed, for example, Nerval's obsession with the Napoleonic drama and his mystic identification with the dictator. We have done little justice to Nerval's concern with the Faustian theme, or his identification with various Classical heroes such as Prometheus, Orpheus, or with Biblical figures such as Cain, Solomon. We have only touched on that arcanum of Gallic folklore, including such figures as the Duke of Aquitania, Lusignan, Biron--of which, indeed, there seems to be need of a separate study. As we have said, to read Nerval, is to be plunged into the collective folklore and mythology of the human race.

But if the present work suffers from exclusiveness, it nevertheless deals with the single most significant theme in the Nervalian mythology. Woman is never long absent from the pages of Gérard de Nerval. The titles of his books are a varied incantation of her name: Sylvie, Octavie, Angélique, Emilie, Isis, Pandora, Aurélia--these are but a few. And we are speaking not only of Woman as she is evoked fictionally, as "characters," but of Woman in her poetic evocation--the idea of Woman which, it should perhaps be added, is not to be confused with the ideal of Woman. Not all of Nerval's female characters are heroines in any conventional sense. Even the divine Aurélia is too tormenting a figure to be loved by any but a saint, which is what Nerval--in his curious disguise--perhaps was. Nerval's heroines are rather the embodiments of unique qualities--qualities so irreducible that they are scarcely to be found in Nature at all, and yet qualities so familiar that each of us has encountered them in our dreams, and feels a strange recognition when they are presented in fictional form. We are speaking of the archetypes, the ideal figures that inhabit the human unconscious, and of which real people and fictional characters are sometimes the pale representation and sometimes the confusing obfuscation, but always a dim and relevant reflection.

There are those--and they are many--who will maintain that the archetypes do not exist. It is not within the scope

of the present work to defend a philosophic thesis, nor to embark on that metaphysical dialogue which revolves about the term: "exist." It can only be said that to such people Nerval does not speak. His intricate mythologies have no meaning for them. We are speaking of those people who seem to be unaware of the symbolic dimension of human experience and its translation into art--in short, of people who do not like poetry.

It is no accident that critics, when discussing Nerval's strictest narrative forms, refer to him as "the poet." A poet is not necessarily a rhymers or maker of verse. This is demonstrated by Nerval's stories and novels and essays. They break out of the mould of narrative and logical transition, and overflow into fantasy and dream and symbol. They possess overtones and resonances that belong to the realm of Poetry. Even Nerval's most quotidian speculations lead always on to ultimates, and ultimates belong, in the realm of speculative thought, to Religion and Philosophy, and in the domain of literature, to Poetry.

A writer--particularly a great and gifted writer--is no respecter of the categories of human endeavor, nor willingly confines himself to certain genres of speculative thought. His work is apt at best to be a microcosm of the racial endeavor and a synthesis of contemporary accomplishment. Nerval is no exception, and the student of Nerval is hard pressed to follow his author to the frontiers of philo-

sophical implication, particularly an author who does not offer the comforts of logical thought, but casts his philosophies in the most recondite and hermetic symbols--who withdraws, as it were, into the clouds of mysticism and vision.

It is perhaps necessary, at this point, to attempt to classify Nerval as thinker, rather than merely to leave him with the designation "poet." We have examined Woman's rôle in the Nervalian myths, and we have seen that she represents extraordinary values--values more often possessed by religions and by the great religious figures of man's past. We have seen that this deification was, in part, the result of Nerval's life experiences: the absence of a mother, and a corresponding compensation for that absence. Her importance was further fostered by Nerval's neurosis which, as far as can be known, precluded normal sexual relations and again led to the aggrandizement of the unattainable love object. These are the sound and solid explanations offered by our contemporary civilization, with its orientation in philosophical determinism and Freudian psychology. And yet these are strangely unsatisfying explanations when we measure Nerval's artistic accomplishment against those artists who are considered neither neurotic nor environmentally determined. There is, in short, a certain necessity to divest Nerval's work of its biographic footnotes; to separate--difficult as this is to do in Nerval's case--the man and the work. It is only then that we begin to apprehend the significance of Woman in the Nervalian philosophy.

We have said that Nerval was not concerned with the idealization of Woman but with her inner essence, her archetypal aspect. Yet perhaps there is, withal, a certain idealism inherent in the making of symbols--in the translation of reality to thought and thought to artistic image. This sort of idealism is related to the Platonic concept of Beauty and Truth, and we are not alone in asserting the relation of Nerval's work to the Platonic tradition. As Jean Richer has said:

S'il nous fallait trouver, au moins à nos propres yeux, une justification à l'effort considérable fourni pour rassembler et commenter l'oeuvre de Nerval, nous dirions ceci: certains des problèmes soulevés par cette oeuvre, en particulier ceux qui ont trait aux rapports du rêve et de la vie, aux possibilités pour l'homme d'accéder à des états de conscience différents des états ordinaires, à la synthèse du platonisme et du christianisme, dépassent infiniment son individualité; elles concernent le devenir de notre civilisation et même le destin de l'espèce entière.¹

Of special interest here is the mention of the "synthèse du Platonisme et christianisme." It is a happy choice of terms, for the two doctrines do seem to encompass, in a very general way, those manifold polarities that we find throughout Nerval's work--polarities which are encountered on every level of his intellectual and emotional life, and whose conflict was perhaps the basis of his madness and death.

Within the Platonic tradition may be included not

¹Richer, Nerval, Expérience et Création, p. 648.

only Nerval's concern with the archetypes of the human psyche, but also his concept of love. The heroes of Nerval's novels and sonnets are in quest of some supernal reality of love, not to be found in the love object itself. As Cellier points out, it was a quest which Proust also shared with Nerval.

Proust observe lui-même que presque toutes les oeuvres de Nerval pourraient porter pour titre celui qu'il avait donné d'abord à un de ses romans: Les Intermittences du Coeur. Nerval connaît le caractère subjectif de l'amour. L'être aimé n'est pas l'être réel, et l'amour est une sorte de rêve.¹

We have mentioned previously the similarity of Nerval's concept of love to that theory of love known as Courtly Love, evolved by the Provençal troubadours of the Middle Ages. If there is a Platonic tradition of thought in the West, it would seem to be an influence deriving from the Courts of Love of Provence, and including such writers as Dante, Petrarch, many poets of the Pléiade in France, and even--with some qualifications--Proust in our own day. It is not so important to establish any direct influence of this stream of thought on Nerval--though this could conceivably be done--as to assert that Nerval is a spiritual participant in this tradition.

The picture of love which emerges in Aurélia and in the nouvelles of Les Filles du Feu, as well as in the sonnets of Les Chimères, is familiar and at the same time

¹Cellier, p. 221.

strange. Its familiarity derives in part from its kinship to the theory of Platonic love evolved by the poets of Provence, and further developed by the Pléiade poets. Its strangeness results from Nerval's having introduced into this code a private mystical mythology and a poetic apprehension of personal experience that are uniquely his own.

Alexander Denomy, in his book The Heresy of Courtly Love, sums up the three main aspects of Courtly Love:

The novelty of Courtly Love lies in three basic elements: first, the ennobling force of human love; second, in the elevation of the beloved to a place of superiority above the lover; third, in the conception of love as ever unsatiated, ever increasing desire.¹

In this theory, Woman is the tangible vehicle of "soul," and therefore any relation with her takes on a mystical, or at least, moral, complexion. Obviously sexual fulfillment is ruled out, though not necessarily desire. There is nowhere in Nerval's work any suggestion of sexual ardor on the poet's part, much less any hint that the divine Aurélia or the beatific Adrienne are sexually accessible. This is not moral reticence on Nerval's part, but reflects the author's concept of love as being on another plane than that of sexuality. To this concept must be added, of course, the very real interdictions of Nerval's neurosis which, we may suppose, forever sealed the fate of his heroines as inaccessible divinities.

¹Alexander J. Denomy, The Heresy of Courtly Love, (New York: The Declan X. McMullen Company, Inc., 1947), p. 20.

It is apparent that the theory of Courtly or Platonic Love, though not a metaphysical philosophy or religion, nevertheless incorporates some of the values of metaphysics and religion. It gives eternal values to the concept of earthly love, and thus unites the spiritual and the mortal. This is its essential heresy for Christianity. It is this heresy which Nerval recognizes when he relegates his archetype to the nether regions, where she becomes the "sainte de l'abîme." It is also this heresy which constitutes, in a general way, the poet's angoisse in the final pages of Aurélia, when he realizes that, as Platonic lover, he is forever shut out from the beatific vision of the Beloved. This also suggests the Faustian identity of the poet. The Faust theme was not only a direct influence on Nerval, but may be taken as another expression of that heretical love encompassed by the Platonic tradition. Nerval, like Faust, lost his soul through love. It is no exaggeration to say that this is one of the meanings of Nerval's madness and suicide.

Another aspect of Nerval's mysticism is the denial of the reality of the real world and the quest for a world which lies beneath appearances. Expressed differently, it is the endeavor to make the exterior world correspond to the inner, subjective world of eternal love and moral perfection. Alice Coléno is speaking of this endeavor when she says:

Le désir de Nerval, de Baudelaire et de tous a été
précisément d'abolir cette séparation entre l'essence

et l'apparence,¹ de fondre le monde familier et l'univers spirituel.¹

Where the traditional mystic reached the spiritual plane through fasting and vision, Nerval attempted to reach it by "le rêve," and "l'épanchement du songe dans la vie réelle." But as in the case of Alain Fournier, whom Nerval so much resembles, the mystic quest incurred grave personal risks, since it was directed by no orthodox church or religious doctrine. Both Fournier and Nerval were lay mystics, and for them the path to perfection was uncharted and beset with the dangers of their own unstable psyches. The greatest dangers were self-doubt and guilt arising from a very understandable failure to meet the impossible moral goals they had set for themselves. Nerval, more historically conscious than Fournier, must have been keenly aware of the difficulties of mysticism divorced from orthodoxy. Hence his nostalgia for Christianity, as evinced in Part Two of Aurélia; hence also his effort to erect a private mythology based on man's myths and the historical past of the race. In the myths of the past Nerval found not only a secular religion, but the vindication of many of his personal longings and objectives, for myths are the repositories of man's most primitive and elemental desires. As Durry has remarked:

Les mythes sont la manifestation de la spiritualité à travers les âges. Ils peuvent être un asile pour une pensée qui ne trouve de repos que dans l'abolition du temps car ils sont pourtant l'illustration

¹Coléno, p. 69.

intemporelle d'un besoin humain de tout temps. L'histoire est le cours naturel; il est le foyer où se projette le cours de l'âme et où brillent les reviviscences des choses primitives, dieux, ciel, problèmes de l'immortalité ou du salut.¹

We have spoken of Nerval's nostalgia for Christianity, and indeed, it would seem that Nerval's orthodox religiosity never progressed beyond what is suggested by that term. His references to Christianity always also allude to certain ineradicable doubts that had their inception in earliest childhood, perhaps under the tutelage of his agnostic uncle at Mortefontaine. Part Two of Aurélia, in which we find recorded Nerval's sincerest efforts to adopt the Christian attitude, seems, despite its sincerity, to be a product of the poet's illness rather than of his health, and is therefore unconvincing. One is reluctantly forced to agree with Jean Richer who has said: "Rien ne permet d'affirmer qu'il reconnaisse la divinité du Christ."²

This is not, however, to deny Nerval's religiosity and a spirituality that is almost unmatched among nineteenth century French writers. One cannot read Aurélia without recognizing the transfiguring power of the spirit, and it is the Spirit, perhaps, that lies at the center of the Nervalian universe:

Au sommet et au fond de tout, il ne met pas exactement Dieu, mais l'âme, l'esprit ... Beaucoup plus

¹Durry, p. 80.

²Richer, Gérard de Nerval et les Doctrines Esotériques, p. 179.

qu'un Dieu personnel, Nerval réclame un univers qui soit une spiritualité. Esprit, il s'identifie avec une nature que meut l'Esprit.¹

In the end, perhaps, Nerval eludes all our categories. In his personality and work, the subjective and the universal are intricately mixed--so much so that it requires both the techniques of modern psychology and substantial cultural erudition to assess his contribution. As in many geniuses, Nerval's vast intellect towered precariously above a foundation of clay. His great gifts were chained to all-too-human needs. His motivations are obscure and, perhaps, unworthy--at least when judged by our civilization's sometimes harsh standards of maturity and worth. The quest for his absent mother could so easily have formed but a footnote in a manual of the mental diseases, or more likely, have been remembered by no living soul. Instead, it led to a transcendent spiritual adventure in which the immediate goal was eclipsed and lost in the resplendent irradiations of the human intellect.

¹Durry, p. 197.

CHAPTER IX

CONCLUSION

We have seen how Nerval's work resists those categories that make many writers so easily identifiable. The epithet "mystic," though useful in delimiting the overall nature of his accomplishment, does not do justice to the writer's intellect, to his vast erudition, and to his excellence as a man of letters. The paradoxes which continue to resound in Nervalian criticism--Romanticism and Classicism, Orthodoxy and Paganism, Gallicism and Universality--are the same polarities we encounter when we approach even one aspect of the poet's work. Woman in the work of Gérard de Nerval partakes of that complexity he brought to his other obsessions and concerns, and She is no more uniform in his mythical creation than was that library of books the poet kept at his bedside in the asylum at Passy.

Nevertheless, among the host of women characters Nerval created or alluded to in his poetry and prose, there emerge certain types which bear a sort of family resemblance, and who continue to appear throughout his work under various guises. These are the archetypes--figures who, though

cloaked in biographical and imaginative detail, nevertheless represent irreducible qualities or values. The sonnet "El Desdichado" mentions, if not all, at least most of these archetypes which obsessed the poet: the saint and the fairy, the queen and the siren. Even in those cases where the character seems most removed from mythical elaboration, it will be seen by subtle hints that Nerval has in mind one of the various archetypes--in the cases, for example, of Sylvie or Angélique de Longueval.

We have seen how Nerval's mythologizing faculty was apparent in his youthful works and gained strength with the advent of his first mental breakdown in 1843. We have seen also how this faculty was given impetus by various events in the poet's life, such as the initial absence of his mother and the later death of Jenny Colon, so that, although it cannot be said that the events produced the myths, they would nevertheless seem to have given them form and direction. The poet's predisposition toward myth-making, coupled with a large erudition in the historical myths of the world, give to his mythology its strange character of subjectivity and universality. Thus, as we have seen, such universal and archetypal figures as Isis and Artémis have, in the works of Nerval, a subjective dimension which their historical identity does not suggest. Conversely, such biographical figures as Sophie Dawes or Jenny Colon conceal the archetypal identities of the saint and the fairy, with the result

that Nerval would seem constantly to shift from myth to reality and from reality to myth. For this reason it is apparent that Nerval's mythology does not precisely coincide with any classical definition of that term, but is rather a pantheon of those archetypes that inhabited the unconscious of the poet and that have their origin in Nerval's cultural and personal past.

We have also observed in Nerval's work a progression of the myth-making faculty and a quest for ever more inclusive archetypes. We have noticed how certain mythical figures seem to dominate the others, as in the cases of Adrienne, Sylvie and Jenny Colon. Les Filles du Feu represents only a partial success in this effort at amalgamation and simplification. In Les Filles du Feu, the female characters are only partially realized as myths. They represent conflicting values which it was the ultimate effort of the poet to reconcile. In each of the nouvelles we have observed the same triangular constellation of women characters: the saint, the actress, and the wholesome girl of real life. In each case the hero is drawn now to one, now to another, and in the end succumbs to some mystic inertia which precludes decision or the consummation of his love.

In Aurélia, on the other hand, the poet has neared the end of his mythic quest. Through a kind of purgatory or "descente aux enfers," he succeeds in reconciling the disparate claims of his feminine figures, and approaches

the final synthesis of the conflicting archetypes. We have seen how the visionary apprehension of this archetype coincides with the mystic experience of the orthodox religions. The dominating archetype--Aurélia--though but a synthesis of figures already present in the poet's work, now takes on extraordinary values that are usually to be found only in the supernatural figures of religion. Not only is this archetype the synthesis of all previous mythical figures in the poet's work, but she is also the fusion of all his earthly loves--especially of his mother and the beloved Jenny Colon.

But we have observed how this "road to Aurélia" was not traversed without great spiritual danger and emotional cost to the poet. The quest for the supreme archetype was accompanied by a strange indifference to physical necessity and by a loss of mental equilibrium. Thus the problem of Nerval's mystical adventure is inextricably mixed with the problem of his madness, with the result that it is perhaps convenient to deal with both problems as if they were aspects of the same thing, at least until such time as the relationship between mental illness and the mystical experience is more fully explored.

In the over-evaluation of the feminine archetype, there was a corresponding devaluation of the Christian Deity, and hence a loss for Nerval of the comforts of orthodox religiosity. Part Two of Aurélia represents an attempt at

reconciliation with the lost "masculine archetype." Nerval's ensuing death by suicide would seem to point to the failure of this attempt.

We have seen how Nerval's accomplishment far transcends the apparent limits of his subjective motivations. His archetypal creations are remote, indeed, from the work-a-day creatures whom they supplanted in the poet's psyche. Certain works of Nerval--Sylvie, Les Chimères, Aurélia--possess a literary stature that is wholly independent of biographical apology or the attenuations of critical schools and ideologies.

Indeed, it is curious that the dilettante is more apt to appreciate Nerval at face value than is the specialist. The casual reader is apt to believe that Nerval "succeeded" in his unique adventure, while the specialist wonders if, after all, he did not fail. Sylvie is an optimistic work only for those who do not know what happened in the rue de la Vieille Lanterne.

The question of Nerval's suicide far transcends its importance as a biographical peculiarity. We scrutinize the police documents not alone for the cause of a death, but for the death of a cause. In a writer whose life was but the transcription of his work, we cannot but feel the tragic weight of this final gesture.

However, tragedy is not failure, and if anything, Nerval's death underscores the supreme values at stake in

the life and in the work. As Jean Richer has said:

Nerval appartient à la cohorte des rares poètes: Shelley, Hölderlin, Baudelaire, qui risquent leur vie dans leur oeuvre, jusqu'à la perdre, tandis que nous nous interrogeons avec angoisse sur le destin de leur âme.¹

¹Richer, Gérard de Nerval et les Doctrines Esotériques, p. 189.

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