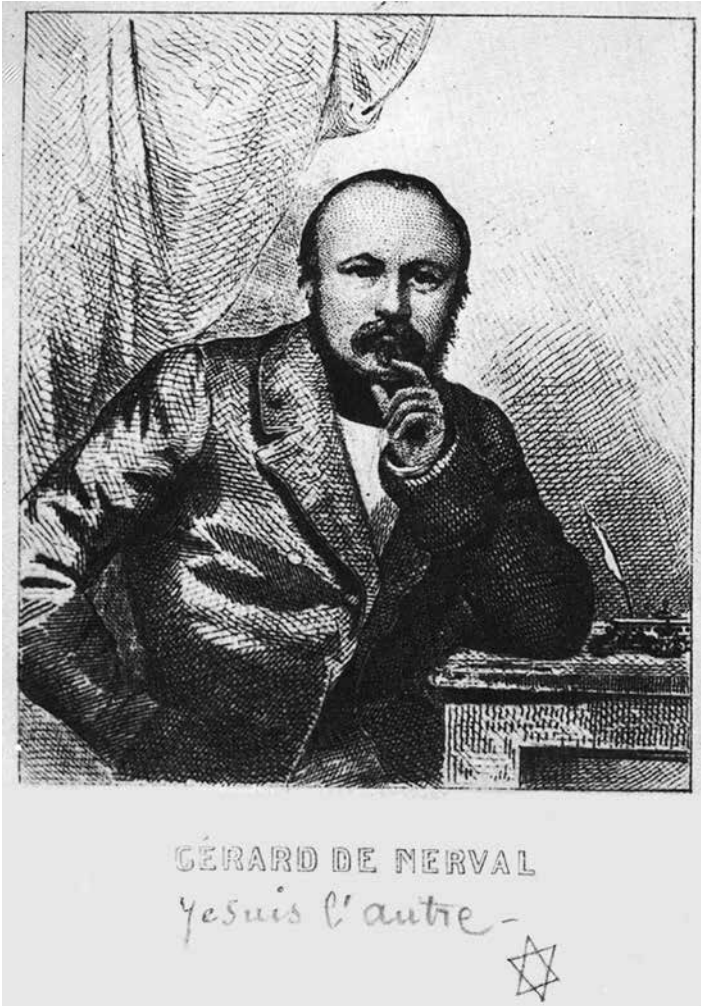


Les Chimères

SAMPLER



Engraving of Gérard de Nerval, from a photograph by Nadar (Gaspard-Félix Tournachon, 1820-1910), late 1854 or early 1855. Nerval wrote on the above print, "Je suis l'autre".

Gérard de Nerval

Les Chimères

Translated from French by
William Stone

SAMPLER

with accompanying texts by
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SAMPLER

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Foreword

I am very pleased to see these translations in print, having read the first drafts and taken a small part in their development. I have enjoyed several afternoons discussing words and their meanings, on one or two occasions putting forward a suggestion.

Any translation is a brave undertaking because, in a sense, it is like a poem which is never finished. There will always be that one word which should be changed, or a phrase which could be altered. And Nerval's *Les Chimères* are an extraordinary challenge.

Nerval has been described as 'a spirit both bizarre and exquisite'; for me Will Stone's translations have managed to rapture just that; he has expressed the passionate energy which carries one almost breathless through anger, love, despair and desolation to the 'Golden Verses' which hold both a warning and great hope.

The more I read these poems the more immersed and involved I have become. They are not for the faint-hearted or for a reader looking for an immediate understanding. The understanding is to be found in the emotional content, the inner depths. The place where the Muse dwells. To have them explained risks losing that fire-breathing illusory fancy where the divine enchantress leads the reader into other realms.

ANNE BERESFORD

SAMPLER

Introduction

I

If, as David Gascoyne once wrote, ‘madness is the logical development of romanticism’, Gérard de Nerval was a more thoroughgoing romantic than any of his more famous contemporaries in France. If only for that reason, he deserves to be taken seriously by all those interested in that powerful movement, which was not confined to the arts but affected the feelings and the behaviour of many recent generations in the civilised West. In the twentieth century, romanticism lives on, though often in forms which it is difficult to connect with any academic definition of the term; while any *conscious* return to romanticism now constitutes a kind of classicism, the romantic impulse itself is active in surrealist and primitivist art, in the doctrines of the anarcho-syndicalists, hiking, nudism and many other modern amenities which would have horrified Rousseau, Wordsworth or Nerval.

In France, the Romantic movement was short-lived and quickly yielded to Realists on the one hand and Parnassians on the other; both of these schools, however little they seem to have in common, were on the side of reason and conscious control and both were succeeded in their turn by writers representing the opposite principle, Symbolists, visionaries, exotics and Dadaists. In the arts, as in politics, there is a continuous and complex interaction between the representatives of order and the representatives of freedom; and a revolutionary school, once established, is challenged both by extremists and by reactionaries. Romanticism is a revolt against the restraints and the abuses of urban civilisation; though its manifestations are always changing, it is not likely to disappear.

In 1830, when Gerard was twenty-two, he supported the Romantic faction at the ‘battle of *Hernani*’, which opened the theatres to his friends Hugo and Dumas; Theophile Gautier, a friend of older standing – he and Gérard were schoolmates

at the Lycée Charlemagne – was a prominent and capable co-belligerent. Twenty-five years later, when Gérard was dead, Hugo had become a public figure, a political exile and self-appointed defender of the people against Napoleon III; Dumas had become a literary industrialist, a mass-producer of novels and plays always more or less historical; and Gautier had evolved new artistic theories which later superseded those of the Romantics. Gérard alone had remained faithful to his past; oblivious of public favour, political attitudes and aesthetic fashions, he had travelled in space and time, acquired much amorphous learning and memories that had a habit of getting magically mixed, had changed four times from a lovable eccentric into a formidable madman and produced unique works, many of which cannot be classified. In one of his visionary sonnets ‘El Desdichado’, he describes himself:

Je suis le ténébreux, – le veuf, – l’inconsolé,
Le prince d’Aquitaine à la tour abolie;
Ma seule étoile est morte, – et mon luth constelle
Porte le *Soleil noir* de la *Mélancolie*.

Dans la nuit du tombeau, toi qui m’a consolé,
Rends-moi le Pausanippe et la mer d’Italie,
La fleur qui plaisait tant à mon cœur désolé,
Et la treille où le pampre a la rose s’allie.

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 syrène ...

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.

see p.27 for the translation

Characteristically, the symbolism is mixed; myth and history, classical, medieval and modern allusions contribute to the self-portrait.

Le Destin.

Je suis le Ténébreux, — le Veu⁽¹⁾, — 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 Melancholie.

Dans la nuit du Tombeau, Toi qui m'as consolé,
Rends moi le Caucasi⁽²⁾ et la mer d'Italie,
La fleur⁽³⁾ qui plaisait tant à mon cœur désolé
Et la treille où le pauvre à la Rose s'allie⁽³⁾

Suis-je amour ou Shooban?... L'oiseau ou Biron?
Mon front est rouge encor du baiser de la Reine⁽⁴⁾
J'ai rêvé dans la grotte où nage la Syène⁽⁴⁾

Et j'ai deux fois vainqueur navigé l'Archon
Modulant tour à tour sur la lyre d'Orphée
Les soupirs de la sainte et les cris de la Fée.⁽⁵⁾

(1) ~~le~~ ^{olim: Mansole} (2) ^{(1) insolie} (3) ^{Jardin de Valence}
(4) ~~Reine Canack~~ (5) ^{mechime ou Mante.}

II

Gérard Labrunie – ‘de Nerval’ was an adopted name – was born in Paris; soon after his birth his parents entrusted him to relatives at Mortefontaine in the Valois, the region of France which Gérard loved more than any other part of the world, often revisited in later years and fondly recalled in ‘Sylvie’, the most evocative and the most faultless of his prose works. He never saw his mother again; when he was two years old, she died in Silesia where his father, an army doctor, was serving at the time. After Napoleon’s defeat, Dr Labrunie returned to Paris; Gérard joined him there in 1816 and lived with him till 1834, when he inherited a considerable sum of money and left for Provence and Italy.

He was already famous; before he was twenty he had published twelve books, including the translation of the first part of Goethe’s *Faust*, which earned him a sincere compliment from the author. In 1830 he published a book of translations of German poetry; his own poems, patriotic elegies and satires, were published in 1826. Before the age of twenty-five he had also spent two brief terms in prison.

In 1834, after his first journey, he fell in love with Jenny Colon, an actress, and founded a review, *Le Monde Dramatique*, largely devoted to her praise. This hopeless attachment lasted till 1837, during which time Gérard lived with two fellow artists, Camille Rogier and Arsène Houssaye; but although a rupture occurred in that year, he visited her in Brussels several years later and never ceased to love her. ‘Nothing is more dangerous,’ he confessed, ‘for people of a dreamy disposition than a serious passion for a person of the theatre; it is a perpetual lie, a sick man’s dream, the illusion of a madman. The whole of life becomes attached to an unrealisable chimera which one would be happy to maintain at the stage of desire and aspiration but which fades away as soon one wants to touch the idol.’

In 1836, he travelled in Belgium and England, visiting Germany in 1837 and again in the following year with Dumas, with whom he was collaborating. In 1840 he was in Vienna, the

scene of his 'Pandora' and 'Amours de Vienne', and it was there he translated the second part of *Faust*. After another journey to Belgium, during which he visited Jenny, he returned to Paris and experienced the first of his breakdowns; nearly the whole of 1841 was spent in various institutions. He is said to have walked about Paris with a live lobster on a length of blue ribbon; on another occasion – according to his own account in *Aurélia* – he was arrested on a carnival night while walking quite naked under the stars, in the hope that one of them would attract his soul. In his letters written at that time he was mainly concerned with reassuring his father and his friends; throughout his life he apologised to his father for the worries he had caused him. Dr Labrunie, gruff but affectionate, survived his son.

Jenny, who had married a musician, died in 1842; in December Gérard embarked at Marseilles, visited Malta, the Greek Islands, Egypt, Syria, Lebanon and Turkey. Unlike the common tourist, Gérard entered into the life of Cairo; he wore oriental dress and claims to have bought himself a Javanese slave, whom he treated with perfect gallantry. Z'n'b – pronounced Zeynab – gave him, he says, a great deal of trouble, though she was attached to him, or more likely to his companion in Egypt, Fonfrède.

After his return, he went to Holland in 1844, England in 1845, Germany in 1849, Holland and Belgium in 1852. While in Paris between 1845 and 1849 he helped Heinrich Heine to translate his poems into French. In 1848 he had his second breakdown.

In May 1854, after thirteen months of insanity, he was discharged and paid his last visit to Germany; in August, he was back in the asylum at Passy, ran away, returned and was again discharged in October. He was now homeless and destitute. At six o'clock on the morning of 26 January 1855 he was found hanged from a railing in the rue de la Vieille Lanterne. It is generally held that he committed suicide, but some believe that he was murdered; it is true that in his last and unfinished work, *Aurélia*, he mentions a stranger whose face he slapped and whose vengeance was to be feared, and that in a letter from Strasbourg,

written seven months before his death, he mentioned that he intended to take fencing lessons for the same reason.

III

'J'arrange volontiers ma vie comme un roman,' Gérard wrote in a letter; and all his mature works are autobiographical fragments, experience transfigured by memory and imagination.

As a playwright, Gérard could not do without a collaborator; all his more successful plays, *Piquillo*, *L'Alchimiste* and *Léo Burckart*, were written with Dumas.

In 1848, Gérard published 'Les Femmes du Caire', the first part of his reminiscences of the East; his descriptions of scenery, historical digressions and comments on customs and character make this a fascinating book. On the island of Cythera, then a British possession called Cerigo, he saw a gibbet which, with new significance, reappeared later in a great poem by Baudelaire.

Gérard called himself 'a dreamer in prose'; from 1848 until his death he produced the prose works which, together with the seven marvellous sonnets which he called *Les Chimères* and a few of the 'Odelettes', represent his true achievement. The second part of his Eastern reminiscences, 'Les Femmes du Liban', appeared in 1850, followed by *Lorely: Souvenirs d'Allemagne* (Germany was the country to which, ever since his father had taught him the language, Gerard was most irresistibly drawn), *Les illumines*, *Contes et Faceties* – which included 'La Main Enchantée', a burlesque fantasy and a masterpiece of its kind – *Petits Châteaux de Bohême*, recollections of his bohemian youth in Paris, and *Les Nuits d'Octobre*, a part fantastic, part realistic account of his wanderings in and around Paris. Finally, there were *Promenades et Souvenirs* and *Aurélia* – 'madness dictating its memoirs to reason', as Gautier described it – both published in part before Gérard's death, with publication completed posthumously, and *Les Filles de Feu* (1854), a collection of stories and sketches centred around girls of different nationalities and periods, in which truth and fiction are no longer separable.