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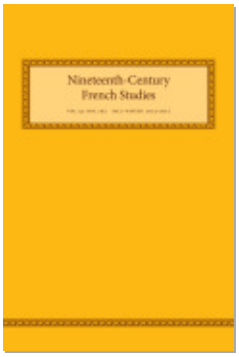

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From Identity to Identifications: Depersonalizing the Subject of the Nervalian *Chimère*

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In both his texts and his writing practice, Gérard de Nerval (1808–55) manifests a propensity toward subjective fragmentation and instability. This fragmentation is not simply a symptom of a psychological disorder, but is itself a positive value in the context of Nerval's un-self-centered poetics. Through his presentation of the actor Brisacier in "À Alexandre Dumas" (1854), Nerval suggests that the writing subject's relation to what it writes is one of serial identification not intended to arrive at any unified identity. This mobility of identifications is evident, for example, in the unwieldy intertextuality of the sonnet "El Desdichado" (1854), which resists synthesis and makes hybrids of both poem and lyric subject. The circulation of images and subjects in the poem makes it not a work of self-expression or self-creation, but rather a site of encounter for a proliferation of subjects.

On 1 March 1841, Jules Janin dedicated his column in the *Journal des Débats* to the recently institutionalized Gérard de Nerval. In what Nerval would later call a "biographie anticipée" (4), Janin wrote him off as surely as if he had died, presenting a first sketch of the caricature of Nerval that fellow writers and critics would elaborate in the years to come.[1] Nerval cuts a hapless figure in the article, coming across as a wandering, impractical eccentric who stumbled into his talent, a profligate who squandered his inheritance and spent his time on his friends' literary projects rather than investing in his own career. The Nerval presented here is still familiar to us: *doux Gérard*, childlike and ill-suited to the demands of real life. He prefigures the Nerval we have come to know, trapped in his own world of haunting memories and obsessive reveries that, however charming, never quite opens onto the world around him.

At the heart of Janin's portrait is Nerval's troubling lack of ambition, a

trait that suffices to call into question the writer's reason. Janin links this lack of ambition first to Nerval's status as the very personification of "la *poésie*"—a dubious honor from the outset: "C'était tout simplement [. . .] un de ces jeunes gens sans fiel, sans ambition, sans envie, à qui un bourgeois ne voudrait donner en mariage même sa fille borgne et bossue; en le voyant passer le nez au vent, le sourire sur la lèvre, l'imagination éveillée, l'œil à demi fermé, l'homme sage, ce qu'on appelle des hommes sages, se dit à lui-même:—Quel bonheur que je ne sois pas fait ainsi!" (1). The quintessential "poète" in Janin's description is the pariah of reasonable society, though the poet seems oblivious to his own exclusion. He is a pitiable figure for any "homme sage," to whom the banner of "*poésie*" under which he sails is a curse: "Quel bonheur que je ne sois pas fait ainsi!" The poet, as exemplified by Nerval, is "un enfant" (1), lacking the qualities of a properly developed subjectivity required to be a man. Nerval seems, in Janin's depiction, to be a particularly extreme case of this childlike "*poésie*," singular even among poets:

> [I]l se passionnait pour les livres d'autrui bien plus que pour ses propres livres; quoi qu'il fît, il était tout prêt à tout quitter pour vous suivre. "Tu as une fantaisie, je vais me promener avec elle, bras dessus, bras dessous, pendant que tu resteras à la maison à te réjouir"; et quand il avait bien promené votre poésie, ça et là, dans les sentiers que lui seul il connaissait, au bout de huit jours, il vous la ramenait calme, reposée, la tête couronnée de fleurs, le cœur bien épris, les pieds lavés dans la rosée du matin, la joue animée au soleil de midi. Ceci fait, il revenait tranquillement à sa propre fantaisie qu'il avait abandonnée, sans trop de façon, sur le bord du chemin. (1)

Even for a writer, Janin suggests, Nerval demonstrates a remarkable lack of drive, so that it becomes a personal rather than a professional trait. In Janin's description, Nerval is so completely ensconced in his imagination that he happily sets aside his own work with no concern for credit or compensation; he is the negative image of a very different kind of writer: a Hugo, perhaps, or a Dumas (or a Janin), who puts himself forward and cultivates his career. Thus, in spite of Nerval's large body of work as a translator, poet, journalist, and playwright, he does not appear in Janin's account as a serious writer because he has failed to consolidate himself in the public eye, evaporating instead into the kind of self-effacement that Gautier later diagnosed when he described Nerval as a writer who disappeared at the mere mention of his own name (Gautier 74). Janin goes on to link Nerval's eccentricity as both a man and a writer to his recent breakdown, so that his professional self-effacement and indifference to recognition are but the symptoms of a deeper problem with his subjectivity.

With this hermeneutic of subjective failure, Janin's necrology anticipates and perhaps launches an influential current of Nerval studies, in which Nerval's writing practice is understood above all as a symptom of a kind of identity disorder. The description of Nerval in Janin's "biographie anticipée" may seem to corroborate this view of Nerval as a man who lives apart from the world in the private universe of his psychopathology. But this is importantly not what Janin's description in fact represents. Janin's portrait of Nerval certainly shows him to be indifferent to professional recognition, but it does not show him isolated within himself. On the contrary, it depicts Nerval as enamored first and foremost of what does not belong to his own subjectivity; he is more interested in another's "fantaisie" than in his own. His turning away from his own projects and reputation does not appear as a failure, but as an affirmation of something else. This alternative, with its collaborative orientation, was of little interest to Janin, but seems to be the crux of his insight into Nerval's literary practice. Nerval's interest in the literary endeavor, as described by Janin, is remarkably un-self-centered, concerned with the way ideas and projects are shareable and borrowable, revitalized by their circulation among different writers. Janin's article suggests that it was participation in this circulation that mattered most to Nerval, rather than an individualistic concern with self-expression and literary ambition.

While Janin might have seen this practice as a kind of literary madness, we need not read it that way. Taking up the notion of circulation as a literary value rather than a psychological symptom, I propose here to explore Nerval's engagement with writing as a de-personalized practice. I will argue that this engagement makes itself evident in the proliferation of intertextual gestures that characterizes his writing: the endless series of references, citations, and borrowings that serve to "promener la fantaisie" of other writers and so displace Nerval as the origin and center of his own writing. This intertextual displacement will be read as the affirmation of a poetics that resists Romantic conceptions of lyricism even in Nerval's most apparently lyrical texts. By considering the metaphorics of acting and the intertextual operations in his most famous poem, the sonnet "El Desdichado," I will show that what is often read as a psychological tension between narcissism and fragmentation of the self can in fact be read as a literary commitment to the collectivist poetics that Janin saw but did not recognize.

LE TÉNÉBREUX: BRISACIER AND "EL DESDICHADO"

"El Desdichado" is, for many readers, an essential text for understanding Nerval's writing practice. In what is generally seen as a lyrical body of work, this sonnet offers the most acute reflection on lyric subjectivity. It is

a poem that explicitly explores the poet's identity and the problems thereof, presenting itself as a series of assertions and interrogations that seem never to arrive at a definitive answer.

> 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 cœur désolé,
> Et la treille où le pampre à 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[2] traversé l'Achéron:
> Modulant tour à tour sur la lyre d'Orphée
> Les soupirs de la sainte et les cris de la fée. (645)

This sonnet is often read as a crucial scene of self-identification for Nerval's lyric subject, the moment where his attempts at self-definition come up against their own negativity and the crisis of identity at the heart of the poet's psychological experience. The lack of an outward affirmation of the self that struck Janin is evident here, where the "je suis" is undermined and effaced by the "suis-je?" As Baudelaire's poetry was for Benjamin the lyrical expression of a historical crisis of subjectivity, so "El Desdichado" has been for many critics a lyrical expression of Nerval's personal crisis of subjectivity; for others, its grappling with the uncertainty of its lyric subject has represented a telling breakdown of lyricism itself.[3]

From the very first predicates of its opening lines, however, "El Desdichado" resists these readings of lyrical failure and failed lyricism. With a simple reference, it breaks open the closed lyric circuit between self and expression that these readings imply. The poem opens with an echo, repeating precise language to make itself the reverberation of the preface to *Les Filles du feu* (the 1854 volume to which "El Desdichado" and the other *Chimères* were appended). The words repeated come from an extended citation within the preface, drawn from Nerval's unfinished epistolary *Roman tragique*, in which the actor Brisacier writes to his lost love to lament the humiliation he

has experienced: "Ainsi, moi, le brillant comédien naguère, le prince ignoré, l'amant mystérieux, le déshérité, le banni de liesse, le beau ténébreux, [. . .] je n'ai pas été mieux traité que ce pauvre Ragotin, un poétereau de province, un robin! . . ." (452). The first assertions of the *je* of "El Desdichado" (and thus of the *Chimères*) are in fact reiterations of the roles played by the actor of the preface: "le déshérité" is masked only by translation in the poem's title, and the divested "prince" and "ténébreux" figure directly.[4]

The sonnet thus presents itself not as an integral piece of self-expression, successful or otherwise, but as a bookend to *Les Filles du feu*'s prefatory reflection on acting and writing. The names it gives to its subject are not straightforward assertions of identity, but roles the lyric subject plays. This playing does not imply as its opposite some more authentic form of being that the poem fails to attain; it is not the failure of lyrical self-expression, but the staging of an alternative relationship of the writing subject to what it writes. From the sonnet's opening lines, this relationship is compared to the actor's relationship to his roles as it is laid out in the prefatory letter of *Les Filles du feu*, addressed "À Alexandre Dumas." The echoes in the first verses thus transform the poem, not only by placing the sonnet in relation to a broader gesture than its own fourteen lines, but also by invoking a dual theory of acting and writing in which identity is suspended in the provisionality and mobility of identifications.

THE ACTOR'S IDENTIFICATIONS, PROVISIONAL AND DELUSIONAL

Nerval's treatment of acting in "À Alexandre Dumas" lies at the heart of that text's interrogation of the limits of authorial identity. In this preface, Nerval portrays acting as an exemplary mode of identification with what is written, which does not allow for anything as stable as identity and does not promote self-expression. As such, this depiction of acting is central to the preface's project of explaining the singularity of Nerval's writing practice in response to the condescending account of it given in a recent article by Dumas.[5] In the tradition of Janin's necrology—albeit with less cruelty—Dumas had portrayed Nerval as a kind of kook, "rêveur" to the point of losing his identity: "Tantôt [. . .] le roi d'Orient Salomon, [. . .] tantôt [. . .] le sultan Ghera-Gherai, comte d'Abyssinie, duc d'Égypte, baron de Smyrne [. . .]."[6] Dumas had depicted Nerval's propensity to identify with his characters as a kind of double-edged sword, both the source of Nerval's skill as a story-teller and the sign of his madness. Like Janin thirteen years earlier, Dumas had explained Nerval's writing practice as a symptom of a pitiable lack of proper subjectivity.[7]

The preface to *Les Filles du feu* has often been read as Nerval's acquiescence to Dumas's diagnosis: Nerval cites directly from Dumas's article in what is

taken to be a confession of the subjective pathology that drives his writing.[8] But the irony of the prefatory letter is on par with the condescension of the article to which it responds, bearing behind its apparent submissiveness an adamant refutation of Dumas's charge and its implicit understanding of subjectivity. Nerval's response to Dumas shows that Dumas, like Janin, had missed the point of the very characteristics he observed. The treatment of acting in Nerval's preface demonstrates that Dumas's interpretation fails because of its preoccupation with identity and its blindness to the significance of identification as a form of circulation.

Nerval agrees that he and Dumas are very different sorts of writers. Nerval is prone to "s'incarner dans le héros de son imagination" (450) and thus to implicate himself in the blurring of fact and fiction in his writing, while Dumas remains master rather than object of the "jeu" through which he draws history into his inventions (451). In other words, Nerval writes fiction in the first person. However, Nerval insists that while Dumas was right to note Nerval's tendency to identify with his characters, he misunderstood that identification: the fluidity of identity that Dumas mistook for a delusion must be understood as a *textual* phenomenon rather than a psychological one.[9] To clarify the mechanism that is at stake in this phenomenon, Nerval turns to the figure of the actor, invoking the exemplary case of Brisacier through a long citation from the *Roman tragique*, which begins thus:

> Renonçant désormais à la renommée d'inspiré, d'illuminé ou de prophète, je n'ai à vous offrir que ce que vous appelez si justement des théories impossibles, un *livre infaisable*, dont voici le premier chapitre [. . .] jugez-en:
>
> "Me voici encore dans ma prison, madame; toujours imprudent, toujours coupable à ce qu'il semble, et toujours confiant, hélas! dans cette belle *étoile* de comédie, qui a bien voulu m'appeler un instant son destin." (450–51)

The citation interrupts Nerval's first person writing with the character's own, playing up the tension between identification and distance inherent in the writer's relationship to his characters. The citation thus seems to respond directly to Dumas's critique of Nerval's identificatory practice, and yet it is not at all clear what kind of response the citation is meant to be.

Nerval claims to cite Brisacier as an example of a character with whom he had identified, but Brisacier's exemplary status is confused by the fact that he, too, is wont to identify with his characters, even to the point of disaster. The example thus creates a kind of nesting effect (Nerval identifying with Brisacier, who identifies with his own roles), and Nerval offers no explicit guidance for interpreting this structure. It might seem, given the apparent

analogy between Brisacier's story and Dumas's version of Nerval's story, that the identification between the two is simply the sign of a deeper identity—that the nesting is in fact mere doubling. The actor might seem to stand in for the writer, so that Brisacier's disastrous slippage of identity with one of his own roles is Nerval's vicarious confession in response to Dumas's accusation. We would be mistaken, however, in thus reducing Brisacier's *je* to a mere disguise for Nerval's own and his story to a simple *mea culpa*, for Nerval troubles the passage from identification to identity with his character by containing Brisacier in a well-marked citation. Nerval demonstrates identification by lending his voice to the character, temporarily substituting one *je* for the other, but the *guillemets* prevent any blurring between the two *je*. The care with which Nerval maintains Brisacier's difference suggests that the two levels of nested identifications cannot be collapsed into the writer's loss of identity, but rather that the actor's story has significance of its own. Indeed, it is through the story of Brisacier and the theory of acting it suggests that Nerval draws out the complexities at stake in identification and so positions his writing practice.

Brisacier's is importantly not the story of *one* identification, nor even of one kind of identification, but of a veritable transformation of identification: Brisacier begins as a successful actor and ends in madness. There is nothing in his initial acting practice that necessitates its eventual breakdown; he seems to become the role while safely maintaining his difference from it. The vitality of his performance emerges from the careful balance he strikes between sympathy and distance. Brisacier writes intimately of the characters he played, describing the kinship he felt with them, but he also describes the reserve he experienced, the ways in which the artifice of the play inserted itself between him and his role. Playing Achilles, for example,

> Moi, je m'indignais parfois d'avoir à débiter de si longues tirades dans une cause aussi limpide et devant un auditoire aisément convaincu de mon droit. J'étais tenté de sabrer pour en finir toute la cour imbécile du roi des rois, avec son espalier de figurants endormis! Le public en eût été charmé; mais il aurait fini par trouver la pièce trop courte, et par réfléchir qu'il lui faut le temps de voir souffrir une princesse, un amant et une reine; de les voir pleurer, s'emporter et répandre un torrent d'injures harmonieuses contre la vieille autorité du prêtre et du souverain. (453)

The actor certainly feels sympathy with the character here (perhaps even more than most actors), but this does not imply that he loses all distance; the effect he aims to create for the audience—and the implausible delay required to produce it—prevents him from merging with the character in spontaneous action. There are thus strict limits on the continuity between

the actor and his role, making the identification palpable but partial. The balance between sympathy and distance, sincerity and artifice, is what makes Brisacier an actor, able to merge with his character, but only temporarily, so that the series of his roles might continue. This relationship to role as serial, partial identification appears as the norm of Brisacier's career, operating up to a point even in the disastrous case of Nero that is his downfall.

The break in his healthy practice of provisional, actorly identifications comes only in a moment of crisis, when the actor's self-conscious artifice is disrupted and his series of identifications is halted in a single role. A hiss from the audience cuts him deeply, following as it does on a snub from his lover, and all at once the space between actor and character collapses: he is spurned by the audience and by his beloved just as Nero was spurned by the people of Rome—and suddenly Brisacier and Nero are one. Brisacier is overtaken by his role, inspired to rise to the level of Nero's murderous desire and undertake an action as great as the burning of Rome: "j'ai eu un moment l'idée, l'idée sublime, et digne de César [Néron] lui-même, [. . .] l'idée auguste enfin de brûler le théâtre et le public, et vous tous! [. . .]" (455). The actor here loses control of his identification and mistakes it for his identity: "mon rôle s'est identifié à moi-même, et la tunique de Néron s'est collée à mes membres qu'elle brûle [. . .]" (456). The series of provisional identifications that characterizes the actor's craft stops, and the actor is stuck in a delusion.

What Brisacier's story reveals, then, is the danger that lies not in the mobility of identification, but in its fixity. The actor becomes a madman at precisely the moment when he loses the dynamism of the "tantôt, tantôt" of Nerval's imaginative identification, which Nerval himself does not seem to have lost. Even in his relationship to Brisacier in the preface, his coincidence with his character is provisional: he stages the actor (as the actor stages a role) just for the length of a citation, without mistaking Brisacier for himself. Indeed, Brisacier fulfills his explanatory role in "À Alexandre Dumas" not because he is Nerval, but because his story demonstrates the difference between delusion and a mode of identification as mobility. Such is the mode of identification at work in Nerval's writing, in which his identity never fully coincides with that of a character. This is importantly not to say, however, that his is a voice apart or a face hidden behind these masks. Rather, the writing subject's identity, like the healthy actor's, lies in the series of roles he plays insofar as they are serial ("le prince ignoré, l'amant mystérieux, le déshérité, le banni de liesse, le beau ténébreux"); his identity lies nowhere if not in his identificatory capacity itself, in the "tantôt, tantôt."

What Nerval's writing subject voices is thus neither authentic self-expression nor a deceptive appropriation; his writing subject is strictly neither authentic nor inauthentic, as in Jean Rousset's stipulation that Molière's Don Juan acts neither sincerely nor in bad faith.[10] The relation between writing

subject and character is one of illusion, which does not pass into delusion (except in extreme cases like Brisacier's), but maintains the mobility of the series of illusions acknowledged as such. In this, it resembles not only Rousset's Baroque actor, but also the impersonal actor of Gilles Deleuze's *Logique du sens*: an actor who is none of his roles but the point of their reflection.[11] The actorly writing subject of "À Alexandre Dumas" must be understood in this way, as a naked identificatory capacity, outside of an opposition between the truth and falsehood of its identifications in which identity would serve as the standard of truth. The writing subject neither reveals nor hides itself, is neither consolidated nor fragmented by the act of writing, but circulates among the voices it performs as the actor stages his roles.

THE MOBILE SUBJECT OF THE *CHIMÈRE*

Nerval's treatment of the actor in "À Alexandre Dumas" thus implies a theorization of his writing and a reading of "El Desdichado" that differ significantly from the ones often built on the metaphorics of theater. The theater has often provided a figure for the apparent failure of Nerval's writing to coincide with itself, figuring the artifice that signals his dispossession of a coherent lyric subject.[12] Restoring the poem's relationship to the Brisacier of the preface suggests, however, that the actor's significance lies elsewhere. Nerval's treatment of Brisacier does not present the provisionality and artifice of the actor's identifications as obstacles to identity or signs of its failure; it rather poses identity itself as a failure, the breakdown of identification. The series of roles is not significant in its difference from an authentic *je*-face that it either hides or surreptitiously reveals, but rather as the mobility of the *je*-masks. The only possible identity is the faculty of identification that binds them together in their difference.

Through its allusion to Brisacier in the opening verses, then, the subject of "El Desdichado" declares itself to be an entirely different sort of subject than the one Dumas criticized Nerval for failing to be. It is worth noting that the poem had already appeared in print when it was published in *Les Filles du feu*: Dumas had included it in his "Causerie" (against Nerval's wishes) as a symptom of Nerval's madness. In the context of *Les Filles du feu*, then, it operates in tandem with the preface to set Dumas straight.[13] Echoing Brisacier, the subject of the poem presents itself from the outset as a kind of hybrid, spatializing the actor's mobility in the form of a sonnet. The poem inscribes the series of provisional roles as a composition of disjointed parts with no identity except in its capacity for this disjunctive conjunction, just as the actor is no one but his faculty of receptivity.

This hybrid subject, already evoked by the mythological "chimère" that

lends its name to the collection of sonnets, provides a way of thinking through the tensions in "El Desdichado" between the assertion of subjective identities and their partialness, without seeing in it an erosion of logical predication itself by multiplicity or a failed attempt at unity. As an alternative to the concepts of subjective disintegration and narcissistic syncretism that often structure readings of this poem, the concept of hybridity allows the fragmentary nature of "El Desdichado" to appear as the affirmation of an aesthetic in which fragmentation need not be transcended. Both poem and subject retain their disjunctive character, nullifying lyricism as self-expression within the sonnet. We do not find ourselves faced with a lyric poem, putting forth a subject and a symbol; nor with an attempt (successful or not) to overcome the impossibility of such a poem, transcending its lack of such a subject and such a symbol. Instead, the figures of the actor and the "chimère" embody the displacement within "El Desdichado" of such lyricism and such symbolism by the ceaseless circulation of identities and images.

This is the mobility, not to be stopped or synthesized, that makes itself evident in the unruliness of the sonnet's intertextual references. Any reading of "El Desdichado" must contend with the difficulty these references cause, the sense that the poem is always eluding our interpretive grasp. This difficulty is often attributed to the supposed esoterism and intimacy of the poem's intertexts, which could be understood only by meticulously reproducing Nerval's field of personal references. Reading the poem in this way, however, renders it at once more arcane and more manageable than it is. On the one hand, it overemphasizes the obscurity of the poem's references, which are drawn as much from the cultural mainstream (classical mythology, fashionable literature, and iconic images) as from oneiric or hermetic sources, and which are ostentatious rather than concealed: the poem's very title is an allusion to Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe*, and three of the poem's references are placed in italics in the version published in the *Chimères*, as though to point them out to readers who might have missed them in *Le Mousquetaire*. The references make an open invitation to culturally literate readers of Nerval's day, referring to a collective body of readerly experience (Scott, Hugo, Shakespeare). Even what seem to be autobiographical allusions refer, we must not forget, to Nerval's previously published texts and so belong to a shared, literary imaginary as much as to a purely private one.

On the other hand, attempting to decrypt the poem tames its multiplicity by referring it to a coherence that lies elsewhere: the symbolic significance that the poem thwarts through its constant motion is simply sought out on another plane, in a unified symbolic imaginary elaborated over all of Nerval's works.[14] The tradition of this kind of hermetic reading locates both the

sonnet's obscurity and its ultimate coherence in a private symbolic universe, and in so doing produces unity only by bracketing the poem's existence as a text to be read. The difficulty readers encounter is simply attributed to their difference from Nerval, who is assumed to be the ideal reader, the only one capable of fully operating the promised synthesis. This approach is never wholly satisfying because it discounts the significance of the experience—compelling and strange, inviting and challenging—of reading the sonnet. It fails to take seriously the irresolvability of the intertextual references in their overwhelming proliferation.

Take the myriad resonances between Nerval's works (girls, vines, seas, gods), which seem to suggest an established stable of images: no matter how carefully we trace them, they tend to spiral out of control, to follow one after another, creating series and branches of references that never arrive at any fixed symbolic universe (even an extra-poetic one). So it is, for example, that the references to Italy in the second quatrain of "El Desdichado" (to Posillipo and the sea, to a trellis covered with vines and roses) do indeed reach out toward the Neapolitan stories of "Octavie" and "Un Roman à faire," but both of those texts imply so many of the particulars of their narratives that they introduce more complexity than clarity into the quatrain.[15] Then, too, this Italian quatrain also resonates with the "rose trémière" of the sonnet "Artémis" and the Posillipo and intertwining hydrangeas and myrtles of "Myrtho," as well as the grotto of "Delfica" and the Vatican trellis of the novella *Pandora*. No amount of cataloguing makes this Italian landscape feel like solid ground for the reader.

These intertextual connections do not so much explain the Italy of "El Desdichado" as set it in motion, revealing its relations with other elements and its transformation by them. The intertextual energy of Nerval's writing does not assimilate meaning so much as disperse it: the proliferation we observe opens up each moment of the text onto a variety of other moments that undermine its singularity. The fairy that closes "El Desdichado" is the hybrid Mélusine (half woman, half serpent), locked in a tower as in "Angélique," but she is also the prophetess Manto, i.e. Daphne, who figures in the sonnet "Delfica." Webs of meaning open up between these works, not signaling a unified symbolic imaginary but initiating a ceaseless motion. The sonnet escapes the enclosure of a single symbolism (even one that transcends it) by keeping its images in circulation, referring each one to another without ever allowing the series to stop in a definitive origin.

This motion not only short-circuits the symbolic coherence of the poem, throwing it open to an unsynthesizable figural hybridity, but also evades the coherence of a writing subject that might be identified by its own expression.

The relentless intertextuality of "El Desdichado" reaches beyond Nerval's own works, so that in identifying itself by way of these disparate citations, the sonnet's subject itself becomes a hybrid of other writing subjects. So it is that the title character of the poem is not simply an avatar that proclaims the subject's self-identity, but can be seen to open the poem outward through its allusion to Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe*, just as the title of an earlier version of the poem, "Le Destin," alludes along with the "étoile" of the third verse to the lover-actors of Scarron's *Le Roman comique* (as well as, of course, to Brisacier and Nerval's *Roman tragique*). In the same way, the "*Soleil noir* de la *Mélancolie*" refers to the famous engraving by Albrecht Dürer, while the "prince d'Aquitaine à la tour abolie" recalls the medieval Black Prince with his ruined lighthouse who figures in Shakespeare's *Edward III*, opening the poem's subject to include a host of others.[16]

These wide-ranging textual references partake in the same proliferation and undecidability as the networks of figures within Nerval's own corpus, referring the reader always outside of the poem, beyond its limits, but not to any place where we might rest. Take, for example, the series of figures in the first verse of the first tercet: "Suis-je Amour ou Phébus? . . . Lusignan ou Biron?" Though this set of figures can be initially divided into pairs of mythological and historical references, it begins to bloom on further inspection as it invokes a great network of intertexts. "Amour" suggests not only the god Eros, but also a character in the *Roman de la Rose* (where the beloved is, of course, a "fleur"). "Phébus" is not only Apollo but also the Captain Phoebus of Hugo's *Notre-Dame de Paris* and Phoebus de Lusignan, a fifteenth-century marshal who was a cousin of the Guy de Lusignan of Boccaccio's *Decameron*, who figures in the verse as well. Likewise, "Biron" calls to mind the duke of Biron, who figured in the "Chanson de Biron" in "Chansons et légendes du Valois," but also Berowne, the character he inspired in Shakespeare's *Love's Labor's Lost*, as well as perhaps Lord Byron himself. Though some of the many intertexts suggested to the reader by these names may seem more plausible than others, what is essential is that none of them cohere clearly enough to rule out the rest. The reader is left with a sense of the multiplicity and unruliness of the references that make of the poem not a unified symbolic expression, but a many-headed creature.

"El Desdichado" thus seems composed not to establish its own meaning or to predicate or produce the identity of its own writing subject, but to serve as a site of encounter between other texts. What it sings (unlike Orpheus) is not its own song, but a compilation of "Les soupirs de la sainte et les cris de la fée" (645). Literary creation appears in the poem not as an act of self-expression or self-creation, but as a setting-in-motion of existing tropes that

the writing subject embodies as the actor embodies his roles. These tropes do not (nor are they meant to) reveal, conceal, or generate the identity of a unified lyric subject because there is no such thing. There is rather a mobile, actorly subject whose primary identifying feature is his receptivity. There is, as first Janin and then Dumas noted, no consolidated subject in this writing—but this disjunctive character is neither evidence of a subjective failure nor a literary remedy for such a perceived failure.[17] It is rather the mark of an aesthetic of hybridity that refuses to privilege a singular lyric subject as its origin.

It is in this way that we might understand the enigmatic phrase, "Je suis l'autre," that Nerval inscribed above the engraved portrait that served as frontispiece to the Eugène de Mirecourt biography published just months after *Les Filles du feu* and the *Chimères*.[18] The "je suis" and "suis-je" of "El Desdichado" seem to reach their fullest articulation here, in what is often read as a proto-Rimbaldian expression of the melancholy of self-dispossession. We might, however, read "Je suis l'autre" quite differently by way of the hybrid, intertextual subject of "El Desdichado," as an affirmation of the subject's impersonality. Just as Nerval attributed to the actor a capacity for identification rather than an identity, the *je* here is the circulation of "l'autre" as the voices and the texts of others. With this inscription, Nerval responded to yet another "biographie anticipée" that characterized him as a charming incompetent. Mirecourt, like Janin and Dumas before him, noted but did not see that Nerval's literary endeavors were of a completely different kind. He characterized Nerval's weakness, his lack of ambition, in a comparison that suggests (without really acknowledging) the alternative values in the name of which Nerval turned away from ambition: "Les uns [écrivains] sont les frelons, les autres sont les abeilles. Butinant ça et là, chaque jour, au milieu des plaines fleuries de l'imagination, Gérard apporte des richesses à la ruche et garnit les alvéoles du suc le plus pur. [. . .] Plus qu'un autre il avait droit à la récompense, et nous voyons les mouches paresseuses manger son miel. Il en rit le premier" (23). Nerval was indeed one of "les autres," not a self-centered "frelon" but an "abeille" interested in the text as a kind of hive of collective production. When he wrote, "Je suis l'autre," as when he wrote, "Je suis le ténébreux," he seems to have pointed up his critics' error. The *je* of his writing is not to be found in any portrait or any biography, but in the buzz of the circulation of shared images and ideas in the hybrid text.

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NOTES

1. Critics disagree as to whether the article was intended as an obituary (Janin having been misinformed about Nerval's death) or simply a memorial to Nerval's reason, but they agree that Nerval paid great emotional and professional costs as a result of Janin's premature necrology. See, for example, Jeanneret 136–37, and Brix 23–24. Nerval cites at length from Janin's article and responds to it in the 1852 preface to *Lorely*, addressed "À Jules Janin" (4–11).

2. This version of "El Desdichado," published in the *Chimères* in early 1854, differs slightly from the version Alexandre Dumas had published in *Le Mousquetaire*, most notably in the substitution of "vainqueur" for "vivant" in this final tercet.

3. Psychoanalysis plays an important role in both of these readings, by way of either biographical or post-structuralist concerns (as in the work of Claude Pichois and Michel Brix, in the first case, and Shoshana Felman and Julia Kristeva, in the second).

4. Though not explicitly invoked, the "amant mystérieux" and "banni de liesse" find their echoes in the poem as well: the first might be seen in the subject of the Italian quatrain, apparently addressed to the beloved; while the second, which served as a sobriquet for two poets (Jean Meschinot and François Habert), might seem to name—in a characteristically indirect way—the disguised lyric subject of the sonnet as a whole (Nerval 452).

5. Though Dumas's article was markedly less disdainful than Janin's, Nerval was nonetheless "profondément blessé" by Dumas's representation of him (Pichois and Brix 339).

6. Dumas. Nerval cites this portion of Dumas's text in "À Alexandre Dumas," changing "sultan de Ghera-Gherai" to "sultan de Crimée" (450).

7. On Dumas's "Causerie" and the irony of Nerval's response to it in "À Alexandre Dumas," see "L'écriture dialogique de la folie" in Hisashi Mizuno's *Gérard de Nerval, poète en prose* (169–80).

8. In his reading of "À Alexandre Dumas" in *Subjects of Terror: Nerval, Hegel, and the Modern Self*, Jonathan Strauss acknowledges the irony of the letter while nonetheless reading the confession earnestly (88–96). The irony with which Nerval treats Dumas's writing practice in *Les Faux saulniers* (where he mocks the historical novel for its tidy combinations of reality and fiction that sap the vitality of both) excludes a sincere reading of his ostentatious deference here and rather reinforces a more strategic reading of the letter.

9. Though Nerval does initially seem to attribute identification to metempsychosis, there is immediate slippage between mystics like Pythagoras and figures like Crébillon fils who only *wrote* about mysticism without themselves being adepts (451).

10. 149. Rousset's conception of the Baroque serves here as a third term alongside the Classical and the Romantic, bridging their ideals of perfect insensibility (exemplified by Diderot's *Paradoxe sur le comédien*) and perfect sincerity. On its relevance to Nerval, see also Chamarat-Malandain. Our use of this third term

distinguishes our reading from Mizuno's reading in "La poètique du vrai en art," which insightfully places the *Roman tragique* in the context of the renewed battle between Classical and Romantic theater sparked by the revival of tragedy in 1844; however, his reading of the *Roman tragique* as a polemical gesture in favor of Romanticism disregards the disastrous consequences of Brisacier's convergence with his character. See Mizuno 65–77.

11. 176. Deleuze distinguishes what the actor participates in from what is commonly called illusion—illusion understood as mere appearance, a kind of untruth—associating it instead with *simulation*, which exists apart from truth and untruth as an *effect*. The series of the actor's masks that does not resolve into a face (because it does not belie one) is assimilated to the production of effects through simulation. These effects cannot be judged as false in comparison to something originally true, but enjoy their own status, that of the simulacrum. They partake in the lack of individuality or personality of the event, which is composed instead of nomadic, preindividual singularities (304).

12. The theatrical metaphor is a crucial one for, among others, Felman and Kristeva.

13. The usefulness of the *Chimères* as a provocation to Dumas is evident in the preface, where Nerval seems to dare Dumas to undertake a synthesis of his fundamentally unsynthesizable work: "Ils ne sont guère plus obscurs que la métaphysique d'Hégel ou les *Mémorables* de Swedenborg, et perdraient de leur charme à être expliqués, si la chose était possible [. . .]" (458).

14. Such an *a priori* imaginary is epitomized by the erudite scholarship of Jean Richer, but is to be found far beyond the usual bastions of thematic reading and relies not only on Nerval's biography but also, for example, on the mythological genealogy.

15. In the case of texts like "Octavie" and "Un Roman à faire," the tendency to synthesize images across works relies on biography as its extra-textual plane of coherence.

16. Even the double passage of the Acheron in the final tercet echoes Pückler-Muskau's account of twice traversing the funereal Lake Qarun (a scene that Nerval mistakenly attributes to *Lettres d'un mort* when he cites it in "À Jules Janin") (11).

17. Cf. Strauss's reading of "El Desdichado" (155–205). Our reading owes much to his, which emphasizes subjective displacement and plurality. However, given that Strauss understands Nerval to be distressed by his own lack of subjective coherence, the poem appears in his reading as both a demonstration of and a textual remedy for that lack: "I, but really I and not the mere image of I, am structured and self-similar in these jokes and monsters that are only words" (198). We are concerned here rather with the possibility that, for Nerval, identification might not lead circuitously to identity ("self-sameness"), but displace it entirely as a value.

18. Jeanneret 135. The portrait was engraved by Étienne Gervais from a daguerreotype by Adolphe Legros, taken in late 1853 or early 1854 and thus dating from the same period as Dumas's "Causerie" and Nerval's "À Alexandre Dumas."

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