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The Novel Map

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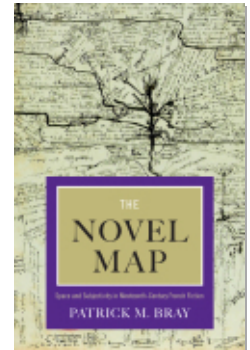
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PART II

Nerval Beyond Narrative

Comme Henri Beyle, mais sans aucune ironie, Gérard de Nerval semblait prendre plaisir à s'absenter de lui-même, disparaître de son oeuvre, à dérouter le lecteur. Que d'efforts il a faits pour rester inconnu!*

—Théophile Gautier, cited in Chotard, *Nerval: Mémoire de la critique*, 55

Théophile Gautier was often an astute reader of his childhood friend Gérard Labrunie (known by his most common pseudonym, Gérard de Nerval). Gautier's characterization of Nerval as a version of Stendhal without the irony is more apt than Gautier himself could have imagined. Stendhal's *Vie de Henry Brulard* was not published in Gautier's or Nerval's lifetimes, and yet the similarities between the two men's works (at least concerning the stakes of first-person narrative) are remarkable. The first common trait would be what Gautier describes as the pleasure both writers take in sidetracking the reader through the play of the text. Both Stendhal and Nerval were obsessed by pseudonyms and the possibilities of inscribing the subject in a literary text while erasing the trace of an author (the subject of my analysis of *Voyage en Orient*). The second similarity between the two involves their understanding of the role of space in the creation of a textual self. Stendhal's maps propose two opposing systems of conceiving the subject in time which are explored in their own way by Nerval (seen in detail in chapter 4). The third parallel

*Like Henri Beyle, but without any irony, Gérard de Nerval seemed to take a pleasure in absencing himself, disappearing from his works, throwing the reader off. What effort he made to remain unknown!

between them, what Gautier considers the most salient, are the renewed attempts to “disappear” from their works, to write the self out of the text, and therefore to escape the dangers of textuality. The end of *Brulard* is strikingly similar to the *Voyage en Orient* and to *Sylvie*, where the narrative abruptly ends and the narrator replaces himself with another textual character. These literary substitutions allow the narrators to flee the death inherent in autobiographical narrative, as it is openly defined by both authors. Nerval, however, marks an advance in respect to Stendhal in his last work, *Aurélia*, where he directly confronts death by analyzing the process by which the narrated and narrating selves are fused.

Whereas Stendhal explored the boundaries of autobiography and fiction in one work, Nerval slowly modified the function of first-person narrative from the *Voyage en Orient* up until *Aurélia*, which was published immediately after his death. To write thematically about Nerval risks confounding the endless repetition of events, characters, and symbols with a real progression in style and narrative structure. The following two chapters analyze the structures of four of Nerval’s key works (the *Voyage en Orient*, the “Généalogie fantastique,” *Sylvie*, and *Aurélia*) in order to trace the development from a subjectivity where any one character can be substituted for the narrator in a text (as Stendhal had done with Tristram Shandy and Nerval does with exotic myths) to a subjectivity formed by a first-person subject who is able to incorporate multiple perspectives within a novel map (as Stendhal had done with his view of Rome and Nerval will do in *Aurélia*). The first chapter, “Orientations,” studies how the *Voyage en Orient* introduces for the first time in Nerval’s work a semi-autobiographical first-person narrator. The role of the narrator and the voyage is to write the subject in the text and to render the world of the imagination literal text (as the “Orient” is already a construction of the Western unconscious). The narrator becomes entangled in, and inseparable from, the references and citations in the text. He avoids the death inherent in narrative by substituting heroes of Arabic myths for himself at the close of the text. The second chapter, “Unfolding Nerval,” follows the subject’s attempts to untangle itself from the labyrinthine spaces of the text. In the “Généalogie fantastique” and in *Sylvie*, the spaces of memory and the spaces of the text envelop the subject; space isolates the subject from the harmful effects of textuality, time, and difference. In *Aurélia*, the “novel subject” itself is dissected into its two irreducible parts: the narrating (sane) “je” and the narrated (insane) “je.” The two “je” inhabit the same textual space but radically different places and times. Together they invent a novel map, a dual perspective similar to that of Stendhal’s bird’s-eye view. The dual perspective of this novel map, or in Nerval’s words,

“double aspect,” allows the subject to view itself as both same and other across time. It both replicates the divide between Nerval’s sane and insane selves and produces a palliative image of a unified self in time and in discourse.

