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The Novel Map

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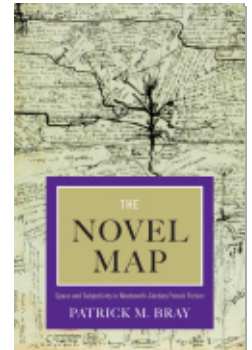
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CHAPTER THREE

Orientations: Writing the Self in Nerval's *Voyage en Orient*

Heading East

Gérard de Nerval's *Voyage en Orient* would appear to be the long first-person travel narrative of a Parisian erudite, who travels from Paris to Constantinople via Geneva, Constance, Vienna, Cerigo (Cythera), Cairo, and Beirut. Inscribed within the very popular genre of exotic travel literature, the text repeatedly claims to be the truthful account of its narrator's experience: "Ce que j'ai écrit, je l'ai vu, je l'ai senti. Ai-je eu tort de rapporter ainsi naïvement mille incidents minutieux, dédaignés d'ordinaire dans les voyages pittoresques ou scientifiques?" (*Oeuvres II*, 624) ("What I wrote, I saw, I felt it. Was I wrong to report in a naive way the thousand little incidents, ordinarily ignored in picturesque or scientific travel narratives?"). More truthful than mere picturesque voyages, such as the ones written by Chateaubriand and Lamartine that use the Orient as an object of style, more real than scientific accounts because it incorporates the subjective experiences of its narrator, the *Voyage en Orient* attempts to portray the perfect balance of ethnographic literature, anticipating Leiris and Lévi-Strauss by almost a century. This apparent balance, however, is only attained through the synthesis of two distinct trips taken by Nerval, the direct lifting of other travel logs and studies of the Orient, and the assimilation of various Western and Eastern mythologies. Neither entirely true, nor entirely fictitious, Nerval's work transcends categories and genres to create a unique work of literature based on paradox and the emergence of the subject as text.¹

At the end of October 1839, Nerval traveled through central Europe, passing Lyons, Geneva, Berne, Zurich, Constance, Munich, Salzburg, and finally Vienna, where he stayed until March 1840. In a letter to his father, dated December 2, 1839 (*Oeuvres I*, 836), Nerval expressed the desire to

continue on to Constantinople from Vienna on a mission from the French government, but his request was denied. This first excursion inspired a work published the following year, *Les Amours de Vienne*, which divides the narrator into two different characters, awkwardly distorting the facts of the journey. Before Nerval could realize his desire to travel to the Orient, he underwent his first documented mental breakdown and internment in an asylum in Paris at the beginning of 1841. In March of that year, Nerval's friend Jules Janin published a biting "biographie anticipée" (reprinted by Nerval at the beginning of *Lorely*, in *Oeuvres II*), the fallout of which threatened to destroy Nerval's personal reputation and literary career.²

It was not until more than a year later, on December 23, 1842, that Gérard de Nerval finally set out on a journey to Constantinople. In the numerous letters to his father and to Théophile Gautier, he continually justified his decision to leave, claiming that it would improve his physical and mental health and demonstrate his sanity to the reading public.³ Thus before it had even begun, Nerval's journey had a literary end: to regain the respect of his peers, to re-create himself through the construction of a vastly complicated literary tour de force. Nerval's goal was to follow his imagination, his dreams, and his illusions of the Orient to their very limit, in order to accomplish his literary work and renew himself in literature. This creates a paradox, according to Ross Chambers, since he cannot travel both to escape his insanity and at the same time to intensify it (*Gérard de Nerval et la poétique du voyage*, 23). Travel intensifies perceptions, like an attenuated version of madness, promising to reveal other worlds, while remaining firmly entrenched in the real. Through travel, as he reiterates in his letters, Nerval will find a way to pursue his visions and collect material for his work by living his future text.

Nerval began negotiating the publication of his *Voyage* in the middle of the voyage itself. The first published account was an open letter to Gautier in the *Journal de Constantinople* on September 7, 1843 (*Oeuvres I*, 1436–37). Yet due to the vicissitudes of publishing houses and the Revolution of 1848, fragments appeared at uneven intervals; the crucial sections dealing with the initiation myths ("Les Pyramides," "Histoire du calife Hakem," and "Histoire de la Reine du matin") appeared only in 1850 (Bowman, *La conquête de soi par l'écriture*, 146–47). The two-volume *Voyage en Orient* blends the trip to Vienna and the one to Constantinople into one, often inventing itineraries not followed by Nerval (such as the journey across the Adriatic to Cerigo). It was finally published in 1851, some ten years after Nerval first planned his voyage to Constantinople, and only four years before his death.

The *Voyage* holds a privileged place in Nerval's corpus: it marks a regeneration of his literary career, it stands as his first major (first-person) narrative, and it introduces themes that will be central to all of his subsequent texts. A study of the construction of this text and a close analysis of the relation of the narrating subject to space will provide the key to understanding Nerval's final works (the subject of the next chapter). Tightly structured chapters present episodes and places that correspond, leading the narrator not so much in a circuitous journey as in a spiral, returning to the same place but not on the same plane.⁴ Similarly, the narrator follows a double trajectory: as his experiences and knowledge of the Orient he perceives widen (destroying the illusions he had formed in Europe), the place reserved in the text for observation narrows until the recounting of myth dominates. The myths themselves repeat each other and increasingly reflect the experience of the narrator. Subject and subject matter, narrator and text, eventually become indistinguishable from each other, just as the "real" voyage was from the beginning both lived and literary, real and imagined. Nerval's subject becomes entangled in the fabric of the text; his final works *Sylvie* and *Aurélia* will attempt to free him.

Illusions, Lost and Found

The ninety-page introduction to the *Voyage en Orient*, entitled "Vers l'Orient," recounts the narrator's trip from Paris to the East (of Europe), south to the Greek islands, ending at his arrival in Alexandria. On a smaller scale, it reproduces the spiral structure of the whole, anticipates the themes, places, and myths of the remaining three chapters, renders the familiar neighboring Western countries as foreign as possible, while positing truth, as he imagines it, in the Orient. The continual disappointments faced by the narrator foreshadow his general disillusionment; his experience becomes progressively literary and textual as he approaches Alexandria. The narrator⁵ addresses the text to a friend, describing himself as "un touriste parti de Paris en plein novembre" (*Oeuvres II*, 3) ("a tourist who left Paris in the middle of November"), without any particular itinerary or destination, depending on chance ("j'aime dépendre un peu du hasard" 12), and traveling on the tightest of budgets. Gérard's lack of entourage, absence of fixed plans, and minimal budget contrast with the extravagance of most European literary travelers (notably Chateaubriand) in the way they translate the instability of this textual and literary subject. Only when he arrives in Geneva does he "orient" his wander-

ings, and subtly suggests the purpose for the voyage/text: “Où vais-je? Où peut-on souhaiter aller en hiver? Je vais au-devant du printemps, je vais au-devant du soleil . . . Il flamboie à mes yeux dans les brumes colorées de l’Orient” (12) (“Where am I going? Where can you want to go in winter? I am going ahead of the spring, ahead of the sun . . . It flashes before my eyes in the colored fogs of the Orient.”) Finding himself in the Alps in winter, surrounded by snow, Gérard is inspired by the metaphorical flames of sunset which transform into the colored haze of his imagined Orient. Already the perceptions of his sublime surroundings evoke their paradoxical opposites, transcending reality and reaching toward the heights of the imagination. This imaginary trip will render time spatial, as the narrator travels ahead of spring, ahead of the sun, to a country with an eternal summer, an unforgiving sun (his feelings of the Egyptian climate will become decidedly less optimistic: “Je ne veux pas dire, qu’un éternel été fasse une vie toujours joyeuse. Le soleil noir de la mélancolie” (132) (“I do not mean that an eternal sun always makes for a joyous life. The black sun of melancholy”). The narrator’s motivation for traveling to the Orient is from the beginning expressed in terms of a renewed poetic imagery (“Le soleil noir de la mélancolie” will reappear in his much later poem “El Desdichado”), a surpassing of the subject’s place in time.

The mechanism of the subject’s inscription into text, the power of metaphor to bridge the distance between subject and object, along with the dangers involved in this process, are already apparent in the next paragraph: “Ce sont bien les hautes Alpes que l’on découvre de tous côtés à l’horizon. Mais où est le mont Blanc? . . . J’ai fini par l’admirer sous la forme d’un immense nuage blanc et rouge, qui réalisait le rêve de mon imagination” (12–13) (“Those are really the high Alps that one can see on all sides of the horizon. But where is Mont Blanc? . . . I ended up admiring it in the form of an immense white and red cloud, which fulfilled the dream of my imagination”). Searching for the ideal mountain, with all its symbolic majesty, in the “dream of his imagination,” Gérard necessarily misses the real mountain. Nineteenth-century graphic representations of Geneva often exaggerated the view of Mont Blanc (the 1984 edition of Nerval’s *Oeuvres complètes II*, 1406n), thus offering the narrator a misleading image. This “Mont Blanc,” “Mount Blank,” or phonetically “My Blank,” is an illusion lacking a base, a blank in which the imagination can inscribe itself. The quest for the imaginary, as apparent here, progresses by a rewriting over the blank of perception. The “real” Mont Blanc can only cause him “little impression,” as the imaginary one has already been imprinted. The real danger involved in this deceptive metaphor is humor-

ously portrayed by the image of Gérard walking into the void to plant a flag on top of his cloud/mountain.

This scene is paralleled in the chapter “Druses et Maronites,” when Gérard, led by a guide named Moussa (“Moses”) (310), penetrates into the mountains of Lebanon. Just as the colorful sunset of Geneva called up images of the Orient, the whiteness of the Lebanese mountains evokes the Alps (330). He imagines all the possible etymologies of the word Lebanon (“Liban” in French), placing enormous symbolic value on the journey:

En entendant ce mot *leben*, je me rappelais qu’il veut dire en allemand *la vie*. Le Liban tire aussi son nom de ce mot *leben*, et le doit à la blancheur des neiges qui couvrent ses montagnes, et que les Arabes, au travers des sables enflammés du désert, rêvent de loin comme le lait [*leben* in Arabic]—comme la vie!⁶ (318)

The blankness of the snow, the fantastic plurality of meanings of the word “leben,” delude the Arab travelers as well as Gérard, just as the snows of Mont Blanc (l-[e]-banon) melt into the clouds. Instead of finding “life” near the summits, he happens upon the perpetual civil war between two religions, rendering literal the danger of Mont Blanc, the danger of confusing metaphors with objects.

Gérard’s impressions of Constance develop even further his desire to transcend opposites, to pursue the illusions of the imagination, and divine the Orient from the Occident (17–18). Constance is a beautiful “name” (evoking permanence and calm), a beautiful “memory,” the seal binding the contradictions of Europe together. It is also geographically and symbolically homologous to Constantinople (Constance/tinople), and is used by Nerval to tie together conflicting cultures as well as the chapters of his text. Constance, the “Stamboul d’Occident” (19) (“the Istanbul of the West”), however, does not live up to its imagined reputation: “En approchant, on trouvait ensuite la ville elle-même indigne de sa renommée et de sa situation merveilleuse . . . à la place de Constance, imaginons Pontoise, et nous voilà davantage dans le vrai” (19) (“Approaching the city, one then finds it unworthy of its reputation and marvelous setting . . . instead of Constance, imagine [the Parisian suburb of] Pointoise, you would be closer to the truth”). Time after time, Gérard describes the beauty of a city from afar, only to be disappointed at its vulgarity or unimpressive size seen from up close (as he will do most notably for the Pyramids and for Constantinople). The “true” Constance can never be one with itself, since it cannot embody the entirety of associations locked in its name:

either it is the unspectacular Pontoise, or it is the distant and faded reminder of Constantinople.

The narrating subject that passes through these cities must necessarily be elsewhere as well, existing in two different places (one imagined and one perceived), and often different times, simultaneously, as a reader engrossed in a novel or a spectator at the theater. The experience for the idealistic traveler is fatiguing, in so far as he becomes disenchanted with the world:

C'est une impression douloureuse, à mesure qu'on va plus loin, de perdre, ville à ville et pays à pays, tout ce bel univers qu'on s'est créé jeune, par les lectures, par les tableaux et par les rêves. Le monde qui se compose ainsi dans la tête de l'enfant est si riche et si beau, qu'on ne sait s'il est le résultat exagéré d'idées apprises, ou si c'est un ressouvenir d'une existence antérieure et la géographie d'une planète inconnue.⁷ (19)

The imaginary universe created by the child dreamer, and destroyed by the adult traveler, seems too beautiful, too full, not to be true. That this universe could be the memory of a past life and of another planet hardly seems like an extravagant idea to the narrator. Indeed, the text itself undertakes the mapping of the geography of the imagination and the exploration of the past, echoed in the three different initiation myths, all of which contain elaborate descriptions of an underground world open only to the privileged few who can unlock the past.

Instead of avoiding the possibly corrupting “readings,” “paintings,” and “dreams” that facilitated the creation of the imaginary universe, the text increasingly relies on their active presence to drive forward the voyage and the narrative. He compares Munich to a star in the fantastic voyages of a d'Assoucy or a Cyrano de Bergerac, where the only inhabitants are painters and where their creations have material existences. Every building in Munich seems to be the painted copy of a famous model; its museums overflow with precious canvases (24). His observations of Munich's other artistic treasures are tainted by the comparison, and thus he leaves the city the same day, before his theories can be disproved.

In order to describe his “impressions *sentimentales*” (“sentimental impressions”) of Vienna, the “avant goût de l'Orient” (“the foretaste of the East”), Gérard calls upon the help of Sterne, Casanova, Captain Cook, Byron, and Molière (31–32). The plethora of citations across geographical and temporal boundaries creates a confusing web of references that threatens to prevent any authentic experience of Vienna for the narrator (and for the reader). Consequently, Gérard's first real impressions of the

city are not favorable; he wanders the streets confused by the culture, ignorant of the language. Arriving in Vienna without understanding the local dialect, he sets out to find “quelque jolie personne de la ville qui veuille bien me mettre au courant du langage usuel” (31) (“some pretty person from the city who would like to catch me up to speed with everyday language”). In a theater he meets his perfect “interpreter”: “Imagine que c’est une beauté de celles que nous avons tant de fois rêvées—la femme idéale des tableaux de l’école italienne, la Vénitienne de Gozzi, *bionda e grassota*, la voilà trouvée!” (33) (“Imagine that she is a beauty like those we have so often dreamed about—the ideal woman from the paintings of the Italian school, Gozzi’s Venetian, *bionda e grassota*, has been found!”). His relations with the text’s first love interest belie his obsession, not with romance, but with an artistic and linguistic ideal. The woman as walking canvas becomes an allegory for the city and the language: “J’ai expliqué à cette beauté qu’elle me plaisait, surtout—parce qu’elle était pour ainsi dire *Austro-Vénitienne*, et qu’elle réalisait en elle seule le Saint-Empire romain, ce qui paraît peu la toucher” (33) (“I explained to this beauty that I liked her especially because she was, so to speak, *Austro-Venetian*, and that she incarnated by herself the entire Holy Roman Empire, which seemed to touch her little”). She becomes, as Constance was the seal of Europe and Vienna the bridge between East and West, a symbol for the overcoming of opposites and a vehicle for the narrator’s imagination, to her own genuine indifference. Needless to say, they fail to communicate effectively, and Gérard finds other loves, only leaving Vienna because of an eventual broken heart. Like Cairo, which it foreshadows, Vienna differs from the other cities in that it first appears vulgar, and only gradually discloses its splendor, like the lifting of a veil. It would seem to be a city that allows the narrator to create the story of his own adventures (56), adventures inspired by actual (sentimental) experience that enable him to let go of his previous images: “A Vienne, cet hiver, j’ai continuellement vécu dans un rêve. Est-ce déjà la douce atmosphère de l’Orient qui agit sur ma tête et sur mon cœur?” (60) (“In Vienna, that winter, I lived continuously in a dream. Was it the gentle atmosphere of the Orient that acted on my head and my heart?”).

The Viennese dream ends on the Adriatic, and Gérard attempts in vain to realize an artistic ideal of the classical world on his journey past Greece. His first stop to this mythic land is Cerigo, the island of Cythera, inspiration for Watteau and home of a cult to Venus. The narrator bases his knowledge of the cult on the account by Francesco Colonna, itself related by a novella, *Franciscus Columna*, by Charles Nodier. Colonna, a Renaissance monk who wrote a bizarre treatise on erotic mysticism

(*Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*), becomes the archetype in the text for the mythic initiation of all artists (Schaeffer, 38–39). Colonna’s description of Cythera is entirely imagined, his knowledge of true love as well. Gérard laments his own need for real experience and empirical evidence: “Et moi qui vais descendre dans cette île sacrée que Francesco a décrite sans l’avoir vue, ne suis-je pas toujours, hélas! le fils d’un siècle déshérité d’illusions, qui a besoin de toucher pour croire, et de rêver le passé . . . sur ses débris?” (67) (“And I who am going to stop on this sacred island that Francesco described without having seen it, am I not still, alas! the son of a century disinherited of illusions, which needs to touch in order to believe, and to dream of the past . . . on its ruins?”). Literary invention and imagination would be superior to empirical observation, and Gérard’s need to experience the real, to wander ruins, reveals the inferiority of those who were born after the Revolution. However, Francesco’s literary invention, and the citation of Nodier’s interpretation of it, betrays Nerval’s own literary fabrication. If Gérard is *el Desdichado*, the disinherited of illusions, Nerval himself certainly was not; like Colonna, he never traveled to Cerigo, basing his account solely on other texts and his own imagination.

The resurrection of imagination through writing is confirmed upon arrival in Alexandria, the city where Greece meets Egypt and the introduction comes to a close. Paradoxically, the narrator begins by writing, “Tu auras compris sans doute la pensée qui m’a fait brusquement quitter Vienne . . . je m’arrache à des souvenirs” (89) (“You will have understood probably the idea which suddenly made me leave Vienna . . . I am tearing myself away from memories”). Only after thirty pages of text that describe the ideal Greece of Gérard’s memory and imagination does he “confess” to the reader that he is running away from his memories. More accurately it would seem that his memories are tearing him away from reality, or even away from life. The last paragraphs of the “Introduction: Vers l’Orient” not only elaborate the general aspects of Alexandria and Egypt, but also the psychological state of the narrator:

L’Égypte est un vaste tombeau; c’est l’impression qu’elle m’a faite en abondant sur cette plage d’Alexandrie, qui, avec ses ruines et ses monticules, offre aux yeux des tombeaux épars sur une terre de cendres. Des ombres drapées de lincaux bleuâtres circulent parmi ces débris. . . . J’aurais mieux aimé les souvenirs de l’antiquité grecque; mais tout cela est détruit, rasé, méconnaissable.⁸ (89)

Remarkably similar to Stendhal’s Rome, another “city of tombs” that marks the death of the author and the birth of the textual subject, Alex-

andria is only a wasteland of ruins and ashes, the burial ground of the classical world. The ruins of Pompeii's Column and Cleopatra's Baths do not inspire Gérard's weakened imagination. The hills are too small to provoke the sublime emotion of the Alps, the 1,500 years of the "modern" Alexandria pales next to the mere memories of the ancient city. The narrator who attempts to "tear himself away from memories" admits to having "la pudeur de la souffrance, comme l'animal blessé qui se retire dans la solitude pour y souffrir longtemps ou pour y succomber sans plainte" (89) ("modesty with regards to suffering, like a wounded animal which cowers in solitude in order to suffer a long time or to die there without a whimper"). The suffering alluded to after Vienna, the mounting deceptions of Greece, and the desolation of Alexandria suggest not that Gérard is fleeing a romantic fiasco, but rather the lost world of his illusions, the death of himself as author or authority. The narrator's European imaginary, continually at odds with perceived reality, has been buried at the end of the introduction, allowing for the creation of a new, "Oriental," imaginary that will be written into the text in harmony with the narrator's experience and apprenticeship in Arab myth. The narrator will, from now on, be written with and into the text, until he will eventually become indistinguishable from it.

Assimilations and Translations

The remaining three chapters of Nerval's *Voyage*, "Les Femmes du Caire," "Druses et Maronites," and "Les Nuits du Ramazan," find Gérard attempting to assimilate Islamic culture and document his experience as a foreign "inside" observer. In contrast to the "Introduction: Vers l'Orient," where his imagination never coincided with perceived reality, the Orient itself will prove to be a continual mystery to be unraveled through the interpretation and rewriting of fragmentary information (personal observation, citation, and imagination). If Edward Said is correct, then the Orient is more a cultural construction of the Occident (which constructs itself in the process) than an actual geographical entity; the system of knowledge concerned with the Orient describes it less as a place "than [as] a *topos*, a set of references, a congeries of characteristics, that seems to have its origin in a quotation, or a fragment of a text, or a citation from someone's work on the Orient, or some bit of previous imagining, or an amalgam of all these" (*Orientalism*, 177).⁹

The Orient would, in short, be a text; one to be read, interpreted, condensed, or copied. In the distinctly literary pilgrimages undertaken by

Lamartine, Flaubert, and Nerval to the Orient, despite the sometimes overbearing presence of a “narrative consciousness” (in this case Gérard) that centers the text around the uniqueness of its experiences, there is the eventual realization on the part of this very narrative consciousness “that pilgrimage is after all a form of copying” (*Orientalism*, 177). Gérard, ever the polytheist, will make many pilgrimages to different temples, copying the various discourses that make up the “Orient” (and the Western subject), and reorienting them, layering them for the creation of a new textual subject. The *Voyage en Orient* is, then, not only the fictionalized work of Nerval’s already literary voyage to Constantinople, but also Gérard’s voyage through the text that is the Orient. In assimilating himself to the culture of the Orient, in becoming “Oriental,” he becomes text. Indeed, this assimilation, this becoming text, happens through the learning of Arabic, the deciphering of cultural codes, the apprenticeship of religious and Masonic initiation rites: that is, through translation and writing.

The first of the “Oriental” chapters, “Les Femmes du Caire,” relies on an extended allegorization of the city of Cairo as a veiled woman. The veil is a privileged figure of the allegorical mode, as it draws attention to the truth that allegory seeks to reveal and to hide (since allegory is to say one thing while meaning another).¹⁰ The veil is, obviously, a screen that covers a woman’s face, but it also is a screen onto which the gazing subject can project any image. As Gérard discovers, behind the screen of the veil is a woman gazing back, upsetting the power dynamic of the Western male subject objectifying the Oriental woman. If a veiled woman is an allegory of Cairo, then the narrator’s experience of Cairo exposes his relationship to allegory and to language in general as the locus of repressed desire.

The first sentence states clearly, “Le Caire est la ville du Levant où les femmes sont encore le plus hermétiquement voilées” (90) (“Cairo is the city of the Levant where the women are still the most hermetically veiled”). Within this sentence, there is the anticipation that the veil will be lifted, the words “still” and “Levant” (in French “raising” or “lifting”) suggesting that it is only a matter of time before Egyptian women conform to modernity. According to the narrator, the veils of Egypt discourage the “frivolous” European traveler, who usually only stays in Cairo a week. He sets himself apart by proclaiming that “la patience était la plus grande vertu des initiés antiques. Pourquoi passer si vite? Arrêtons-nous, et cherchons à soulever un coin du voile austère de la déesse de Saïs” (90) (“Patience was the greatest virtue of ancient initiates. Why pass through so quickly? Let us stop and try to lift up a corner of the austere veil of the goddess of Saïs”). Gérard thus places himself in the position of an initiate into the ways of the Orient, though already conflating the ancient (the

worship of a pharaonic goddess) with the modern (the veil as an element of Islam). His initiation will take place over time and will end with the lifting of the veil and the truth of the city: “La ville elle-même, comme ses habitantes, ne dévoile que peu à peu ses retraites les plus ombragées, ses intérieurs les plus charmants” (92) (“The city herself, like its inhabitants, only unveils little by little its darkest retreats, its most charming interiors”). As opposed to the cities of the North that offered all of their mysteries immediately (Gérard only spends one day in Geneva, Constance, and Munich), the space of Cairo, its mysteries, and the changes in Gérard’s own consciousness unfold slowly over many months.

The initiation begins when the narrator decides to follow a wedding procession into the “labyrinth” of Cairo’s streets. By following the wedding, by witnessing the husband’s “journée de triomphe et d’illusion” (100) (“day of triumph and illusion”) when he is finally able to lift his wife’s veil, Gérard will simultaneously have a better understanding of “Les Femmes du Caire” and a map to the city streets. City space and the woman’s veil are repeatedly confused. His dragoman, Abdullah, warns him of the danger of exploring the city at night, and so Gérard disguises himself to blend into the crowd. He witnesses the spectacle of dance and song that accompanies the celebration, comments on the variety and colors of the veils, and lists the various Arabic words that describe the event. Fearing that his identity will be revealed, he strives to imitate the gestures of the crowd; but he wishes to continue the procession indoors, as he is aware of the need for spoken language. His dragoman gives the first language lesson: “*Tayeb!* c’est une réponse à tout . . . Et d’ailleurs je suis là pour détourner la conversation” (97) (“*Tayeb!* is a response to everything . . . And anyways I am there to change the conversation”). Abdullah does in fact lead conversations, but not always where the narrator would like. *Tayeb* is the narrator’s one-word pass into Egypt, a substitute word, like a blank, that allows him to be inserted into the Cairene populace:

C’est un mot qui, selon l’intonation qu’on y apporte, signifie toute sorte de choses; on ne peut toutefois le comparer au *goddam* des Anglais, à moins que ce ne soit pour marquer la différence qu’il y a entre un peuple certainement fort poli et une nation tout au plus policée. Le mot *tayeb* veut dire tour à tour: *Très bien*, ou *voilà qui est bien*, ou *cela est parfait*, ou à *votre service*, le ton et surtout le geste y ajoutant des nuances infinies.¹¹ (97)

Unlike Figaro’s “goddam,” which marks the speaker’s relation to the world as one of revolt and negation in the face of a policing society, the nar-

rator's *tayeb* underscores his general philosophy of affirmation and his willingness to place himself on the same level as his interlocutor. Those who use this word are very "polie" ("polite" or "polished"), permitting a smooth transition across space and language. This verbal passport of affirmation gains him access to any location in the city, and stands in place of any detailed knowledge of the language.

Gérard's observations of marriage rites become more personal when he is told by his neighborhood sheik that in order to rent a house in the non-European area and conform to local custom, he must live with a woman. Ensnare long negotiations with the sheik, various consultations with friends and the French Embassy as to his options, and descriptions of the Coptic, European, Islamic, African, and Asian candidates. This gives the narrator the opportunity not only to attempt to delineate the class and racial categories of Cairene women (which proves impossible), but also to underscore the tight social fabric of Islamic society. Gérard, the solitary wanderer who travels on hardly any budget, inadvertently finds himself at the head of an important household, employing seemingly dozens of people in order to integrate into a society that is not his own.

Still obliged to find a woman in order to become a "citizen of Cairo," but unwilling to marry a woman who is not his ideal, he settles upon the idea of buying a slave who can also cook. His good European conscience promises to set her free at the end of the journey and to treat her with respect. Reversing his European prejudices, the expectations of his slave reveal the complexities of Islamic society, where according to Nerval the women wield more real power than women in Europe and where the masters have more responsibilities than the slaves. Gérard's greatest difficulties in appropriating his slave are linguistic. She is from the Indian Ocean, perhaps Javanese, and so doubly foreign to the narrator. When he is in negotiations to purchase her, he asks for her name, in order to make the process appear less commercial:

Je demandai son nom . . . j'achetais le nom aussi, naturellement; *-Z'n'b !* dit Abd-el-Kérim. *-Z'n'b*, répéta Abdallah avec un grand effort de contraction nasale. Je ne pouvais pas comprendre que l'éternuement de trois consonnes représentat un nom. Il me fallut quelque temps pour deviner que cela pouvait se prononcer Zeynab.¹² (173)

Unable even to buy her name, he can never truly possess her, and must make do with approximations and condescension.

His second Arabic lesson after *tayeb* occurs when he tries to communicate with her to discourage her from looking out the window at some

young men (183–84). He remembers the word *Lah*, the relatively polite way of saying “no,” but is taught by Zeynab a harsher word as she refuses the food he offers. Only later does he discover that the word, *Mafisch*, “comprend toutes les négations possibles” (190) (“includes all possible negations”). *Tayeb* and *mafisch* represent the affirmative and the negative, creation and destruction, inscription and erasure, acceptance and refusal, providing the two poles on the axis of language that allow Gérard to navigate the Orient. Armed with his slave and these two words out of which his intelligence will supply the rest of the language (189), Gérard can now dismiss his dragoman, and attempt to live without an interpreter. He no longer requires the mediation of the “Oriental,” since he now imagines that he has immediate access to the Other.

Through his relationship with his slave, Gérard begins to understand the allegory of Cairo, to see what is underneath the veil. The veil has been lifted, his ideal glimpsed, but his desire is not fulfilled. At the end of his stay in Cairo, Gérard, on top of the Great Pyramid, is told by a traveler from Berlin the first of the three myths that structure the *Voyage*. According to various authorities, the ancient Egyptians held initiation rites under the pyramids; the neophyte had to find his way across many obstacles through labyrinths over a period of forty days. He then would witness the veil of the goddess Isis fall, and his ideal woman would appear for a brief instant. His last test would be similar to the story of Adam and Eve: placed in an idyllic garden with the incarnation of this ideal woman, would he take the forbidden fruit? If the neophyte imitates Adam, “sa punition devait être alors d’errer dans le monde, et de répandre chez les nations étrangères les instructions qu’il avait reçues des prêtres” (226) (“his punishment was then to wander the world, spreading to foreign nations the teachings he had received from the priests”). Gérard’s first initiation is similarly unsuccessful. The “secrets” of Cairo prove to be pleasant, but hopelessly domestic and full of responsibility, like the day after a honeymoon. Having lifted the allegorical veil, his desire for the fruit of knowledge is frustrated and he is destined to wander.

A Deadly Dénouement

The following chapter, “Druses et Maronites,” presents Gérard’s travel in Lebanon through his discovery of two of its religious sects, the Druse and the Maronites. Once again he will proceed literally to initiate himself into the Orient through symbol and marriage, but in an even more explicit way than in Egypt. Though still accompanied by and devoted to Zeynab,

the narrator decides to marry a young woman from this “sol sacré qui est notre première patrie à tous, que je me retrempe à ces sources vivifiantes de l’humanité” (338) (“sacred soil which is everyone’s first homeland, where I bathe myself again in the invigorating springs of humanity”). Marriage to a woman from Lebanon would be marrying into the sacred culture of humanity that would complete the narrator’s assimilation into the Orient and guarantee a rebirth in the text.

The cliché of the Orient as the rejuvenating source of civilization and the renewal of the self through marriage is here taken at face value, despite the anticipation of the reader’s mockery (338). The ironic tone of the next passage suggests that there is now a critical distance between the text and the narrator, one that will soon close up as the author/narrator’s “life” becomes a novel:

J’aime à conduire ma vie comme un roman, et je me place volontiers dans la situation d’un de ces héros actifs et résolus qui veulent à tout prix créer autour d’eux le drame, le noeud, l’intérêt, l’action en un mot. Le hasard, si puissant qu’il soit, n’a jamais réuni les éléments d’un sujet passable, et tout au plus en a-t-il disposé la mise en scène; aussi, laissons-le faire, et tout avorte malgré les plus belles dispositions. Puisqu’il est convenu qu’il n’y a que deux sortes de dénouements, le mariage ou la mort, visons du moins à l’un des deux . . . car jusqu’ici mes aventures se sont presque toujours arrêtées à l’exposition.¹³ (338–39)

Here, near the center of the work (page 338 out of 624), the theories of the novel, of the *Voyage*, and of marriage are fused together in a complicated syllogism. The novel, according to the narrator (and the placement of this citation in the text), centers all the apparently divergent discourses of fiction through drama, the narrative knot, “interest,” and action on the “active and resolute hero,” in this case, the often inactive and irresolute Gérard. Conducting his life like a novel, or more precisely writing himself into a roman-ticized travel narrative, the narrator becomes his own author (and thus does away with the implied author). The master of his own textual destiny, he can write himself into the text of the Orient.

“Le hasard,” chance or perhaps simply reality, has never been able to unite the various elements that make up a “passable subject”: both in the sense of the subject of theater (the truth is stranger than fiction, and so does not make for good drama) and in the sense of the subject as individual who must create an origin and a narrative in order to tie together the random events that make up lived experience. If left to chance, everything fails. The only solution, according to this passage, would be to embrace

the conventions of theater, of literature. By confusing life and text, everything is given meaning in the teleological economy of narrative, where there are no remainders and every event leads to the dénouement. Now in the middle of the text, Gérard has already placed himself in a narrative, but must invent an ending that will make sense of his wandering. The conventions of theater only allow two types of dénouement, marriage or death, and Gérard chooses the least grim. Though it may seem comic that both marriage and death have the same effect, the narrator takes this literally. The end of the text would also mean the end of the textual subject, an eventuality to be avoided at all costs. The remainder of the *Voyage* will see the narrator successively approach and then move away from any sort of dénouement.

Gérard's chosen object of affection is a young blond Arab woman, Zeynab's friend at the French School in Beirut. What piques his interest is not only the paradoxical fact, for Gérard at least, that she is blond and Arab, thus reuniting supposed opposites, but that her father is the imprisoned rebel Sheik Eschérazy, member of the mysterious Druse religion. The narrator's goal is to use his connections and his stature as a European to arrange for the release of the father with the hope of obtaining the hand of the daughter, Salèma. Through multiple ruses, Gérard coaxes the sheik to explain the details of his secret religion, one that blends elements of Christianity, Judaism, Islam, and a belief in the transmigration of souls (354). Predictably, this "universal" religion, whose believers worship indiscriminately in mosques or in churches, represents for the narrator (like Salèma's blond hair) the key to bridging East and West, and by extension text (in the form of the Orient) and subject.

The sheik's story corresponds to the second myth of the text, the forty-page "Histoire du caliphe Hakem." Nerval's Hakem (Al-Hakim) is more or less in conformity with the more fantastical versions of history: as the ruler of Egypt around 1000 A.D., he married his sister and set fire to Cairo in a bout of insane rage reminiscent of Nero. According to Nerval's account, the caliph had a *ferouer*, a double, who reigned in his place, while the real Hakem was imprisoned. The story of this divine madman intersects with Nerval's own preoccupations, hints of his previous mental health problems, and foreshadows *Aurélia*. Within the text itself, the caliph's projected marriage with his sister, the incarnation of the ideal woman, repeats the theme of the first myth heard on the Great Pyramid, and the narrator's own obsession with the daughter of the storyteller. This second myth reflects not only the beliefs of the Druse, but invokes other places and passages within the text (the story is told in Lebanon, but refers back to Cairo), and events in the life of the author, Nerval. The

distinction between the life of a reincarnated god and the life of the narrator and author, the tensions between first-person travel narrative and fictional novel, have been so blurred that they coexist on the same level in the text.

After listening to the sheik's story and negotiating his release from prison, Gérard asks for Salèma's hand in marriage. The sheik refuses since the narrator is not a Druse, and the Druse accept no converts: "*la plume est brisée, l'encre est sèche, le livre est fermé*" (426) ("*the pen is broken, the ink is dried, the book is closed*"). No one, it is implied, can enter the Druse communion whose ancestor was not also Druse; the book of members is shut; it is impossible for Gérard to write himself into the Oriental text, since it has already been written. Desperate, he remembers vague similarities between the beliefs of the Druse and Freemasonry, convincing himself and the sheik that the Knights Templar (spiritual ancestors of the Masons) adopted the ways of the Druse during the Crusades (an affirmation not unique to Nerval's work). For further proof, Gérard presents his Masonic diplomas, full of cabalistic signs, to the sheik, who finally agrees to the union (429). Through a ruse bordering on forgery, the narrator is able to pass himself off as "Oriental," to insert himself into the closed book of the Druse.

However, just as the marriage becomes a possibility, Gérard suddenly comes down with a suspicious fever whose only remedy is to leave the country (432). Gérard claims that "*l'homme s'agite et Dieu le mène*" (432) ("man moves about and God leads him"), inferring that the "man of action" who wrote his own destiny is now at the mercy of a higher power. Moreover, the subchapter following the sheik's tale is entitled "Correspondance (Fragments)," the "chain" of time is broken (421), the succession of logical events is fragmented. Renouncing his hopes (or fears) of marriage, he places Zeynab in the care of the sheik and his daughter, and travels on to Constantinople. The narrator continues to flee any deadly dénouement, and abandons any agency to God or, perhaps, to the text.

The concluding chapter of the *Voyage*, "Les Nuits du Ramazan" ("Ramadan Nights"), brings the narrator to Constantinople, and metaphorically back to the beginning of the text as this city recalls Constance. As Constance was the "seal" that held Europe together, Constantinople is "*le sceau mystérieux et sublime qui unit l'Europe à l'Asie*" (622) ("the mysterious and sublime seal which unites Europe and Asia"). The city serves as a real and metaphorical bridge across the Bosphorus, literally translating ("moving across") the languages and cultures of the East and West. The narrator is constantly surprised, and often bewildered, at how European the city is, culturally, religiously, linguistically, and politically. The vastly

different ethnic and religious groups all cohabit in relative peace, providing a model for Gérard's ideal society of "universal tolerance" (624). Having traveled from the closed spaces of the mountains of Europe and Lebanon, the islands of Greece, the stifling deserts and marshes of Egypt, Gérard has finally arrived at the liminal space of the Ottoman capital. The stage is set for other translations and transitions. Constantinople is even personified as a translator of nature, as it transforms the sublime swamps of the Egyptian delta into the harmonious northern landscape (609).

This final chapter finds Gérard no longer at the center of the action. His interest in marriage has waned, and, perhaps as a result, death poses no immediate threat. While avoiding the two possible dénouements, he has still found a way to narrate his life in literature, though indirectly, through translation. He is now the unassuming observer of his surroundings, relating to his French readers his insights on this paradoxical society (while in Constantinople, Nerval had Gautier publish his letters, and Gérard claims to write for journals as well). Whereas his goal in Cairo and Beirut was to become "Oriental" through initiation and marriage, his purpose in Constantinople is simply to give "l'idée d'une promenade à travers ses rues et ses places à l'époque des principales fêtes" (622) ("the idea of a walk through its streets and squares during the principal holidays"). This statement of apparent banality hides a more complex experience that the text elaborates: in order to participate in the religious holidays, in order even to enter Stamboul, the narrator must pass for Muslim.

He performs the same role as the city itself, continually moving from the "franc" sector, Pera, to the Islamic sector, Stamboul, and interacting with Armenians, Greeks, and Muslims indiscriminately. In order to penetrate the city and stay at an inn during the nights of Ramadan when non-Muslim visitors are prohibited, Gérard dresses like a Persian and must abstain from speaking any European languages (470). During the day when the revelers of Ramadan are sleeping, he travels back to Pera, in order to "reprendre langue avec les Européens" (472) ("take up language again with Europeans"). His relation to the two parts of the city is thus linguistic, spatial, and symbolic: Stamboul is the city of night and Oriental mystery, Pera its mirror opposite. Gérard becomes a mediator for the two cultures, successively occupying the position of outsider and insider, Oriental and Occidental.

Yet this role of mediator is brought about not through interpretation, which would imply that Gérard was in both places simultaneously and communicated the information orally, but rather through translation,

that is, through reflection and the mediation of a text across space. Now that he claims authority as an authentic Oriental, or at least as someone who can pass for one, he is free to provide his own translations, with his own particular distortions. This leads him to inscribe himself to an even greater degree in the text. Though effacing his place in the narrative, since he no longer heads toward any goal, his presence in the translated stories is ubiquitous. No other chapter in the *Voyage* is as anecdotal: for every observation the narrator offers for a local custom, an elaborate and witty story or theatrical play (opera, vaudeville, or marionette show) provides an illustration and proof.

The most revealing of these translated stories is the “Histoire de la Reine du matin et de Soliman prince des génies” (“Story of the Queen of the Morning and Solomon Prince of Genies”), which dominates the chapter, spreading over one hundred pages (it was published twice separate from the *Voyage*). Sitting in a café during Ramadan, surrounded by various sorts of artisans (who will be the indirect heroes of the tale), the narrator listens over a period of several days to a professional storyteller. Gérard admits that he only knows the most “indispensable” words of Eastern languages (504), but with the help of his friends and his imagination, he is able to understand the subject. The very complexity of the story betrays his own additions to the translation.¹⁴ The role of the storytellers themselves is to come up with a different way of recounting familiar tales (504). Gérard will follow this tradition by composing his own version of the story of Soliman (Solomon) and Saba (Queen of Sheba), borrowing from the Bible, Oriental dictionaries, Masonic legend, and his own imagination (Richer, *Nerval et les doctrines ésotériques*, chapter 8, “La Reine de Saba”).

The “Histoire de la Reine du matin” performs the same function as the other two myths of the *Voyage*: it heightens the experience of the narrator by its correspondences within the text that tie religious myth to the life of Nerval. It is the rewritten tale of King Soliman, his gifted architect Adoniram (Hiram), and the Queen Saba, who has come to Jerusalem to marry Soliman, but then prefers Adoniram. Like the founding myth of the Druse, the two men are described as mirror opposites, struggling for power and for the love of an ideal woman. Soliman, a mediocre poet and planner of Cartesian cities, attempts to trick death and decay through logic and science, conjuring spells to stave off the animals that prey on dead bodies. This vain attempt to “accomplir l’INFINI” (“accomplish the INFINITE”) (605) fails, and he decomposes in his gem-filled mines. Adoniram, by contrast, discovers that he belongs to the race of Geniuses and is a descendant of Cain (as the narrator of *Aurélia* will also claim);

destined to creativity and rebellion, he reveals the power of workers. He secretly weds Saba, but is killed by three fellow artisans under the order of Soliman (one of the Masonic rites is to pursue the murderers). He lives on through Saba's child and the cries of rebellion against kings (perhaps a reference to the Masonic role in the French Revolution) (602).

This "double" dénouement, the marriage and death of Adoniram, centers the narrative on the architect, who fittingly deprives Soliman of either kind of dénouement. In order for the text to follow the narrative laws that Gérard draws up in the middle of the *Voyage*, a marriage or death must occur. The narrator refuses to perform either of these and so, like Scheherazade, tells more and more tales to postpone his textual execution. He replaces his own death and marriage with those of other characters. This substitution is made possible by Gérard's disguise as an "Oriental" and his liberal translations that graft elements from the rest of the *Voyage* to ensure a smooth transition. This last-minute exchange provides for the textual subject's material safety, as it is only the rewritten incarnation of an older text, destined itself to be rewritten in Nerval's own future texts. Just as an autobiographical simulacrum made Henri Beyle's metamorphosis to Henry Brulard and then to Tristram Shandy almost imperceptible, Gérard escapes death through the virtual metempsychosis of intertextuality.

