

# *Gerard de Nerval: A Reappraisal*

by H. KAY MOON\*

Unfortunately, scholars have generally neglected or ignored Gérard de Nerval as a possible precursor to modern tendencies in literature. It will be my purpose in the pages that follow to (1) explore the elements of his biography that seem to contribute to an understanding of his development as a writer,<sup>1</sup> (2) venture a few observations regarding his short prose fiction, and (3) suggest briefly the possible extent of his relevancy in the flood of literary trends since his time.

Seven months after his birth in May, 1808, Gérard de Nerval was left with a wet nurse in the village of Loisy, near Mortefontaine. Upon the death of his mother two years later, he was sent to live with a great-uncle in Mortefontaine. By the time his father returned some seven years later to take him to Paris and begin his studies, the Valois countryside had etched its indelible impression upon Gérard's sensitive nature. When school days were over, he invariably returned to Mortefontaine to his childhood friends, as he later returned to try to capture his childhood memories. A great many of the details of his life in Mortefontaine are found in his *Sylvie* and *Promenades et souvenirs*. There is no question that the region of Valois had a great effect upon his life and his subsequent works. Especially significant was Sylvie, who came from the neighboring hamlet of Loisy, and who provided him with a kind of pagan balance to the other elusive, mystic love whom he also came to "know" in the region of Valois, i.e. his Adrienne. He walked and played with Sylvie, and with her learned to know and love the countryside and its people. She was the principal object of his nostalgic reminiscence in the story that bears her name.

Adrienne, whom Gérard, accompanied by Sylvie, met at a village festival, was to become for him a Pandora and a Beatrice —at once his tormentor and savior. The few extant facts re-

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<sup>1</sup>This biographic account is admittedly sketchy, since the purpose here would not be enhanced by cumbersome detail. Only the most salient points are covered. Aristide Marie's account of Nerval's life is perhaps the most thorough and complete: *Gérard de Nerval* (Paris: Librarie Hachette, 1914).

garding this event would indicate that the person Gérard met and kissed in a dance in the above-mentioned festival was the worldly Sophie Dawes, who by marriage to Baron Adrien de Feuchères, could claim the far more glamorous title of Mme de Feuchères.<sup>2</sup> It is apparent that Gérard was either not aware of her true identity, or the ideal woman that he saw in this Adrienne could not be erased by ugly realities. His quixotic pursuit of this ideal love was to be the foremost quest of his life.

Another Valois influence on Gérard was his great-uncle's musty attic library, which was replete with books of theosophic and cabalistic deliberations. There were nondescript treatises on Buddhism, alchemy, magic and germane theosophies, neo-Platonic, Orphic and Pythagorean myths.<sup>3</sup> Gérard would amuse himself for hours in the fantasy of this discarded library. His great-uncle's own pantheistic bent was also destined to affect him, though he was constantly in touch with Catholic dogma in Valois, largely through the efforts of one of his aunts. He was ultimately to represent in his own beliefs an admixture of pagan and Christian elements which led him on one occasion to claim adherence to seventeen different religions.

Gérard was also a more than passive reader of Jean Jacques Rousseau, who had spent his last years near Montefontaine. The fact that his most characteristic writing is, like Rousseau's, confessional suggests that he was spiritually drawn to the eighteenth century *philosophe*. But the importance of his Parisian life and education cannot be minimized. He owes his initial literary success to the knowledge of German which his father had been careful to impart to him in the earliest years of his instruction, for his translation of Goethe's *Faust* in 1827 was his first literary effort of rewarding merit. It betrays not only an adequate knowledge of German, but more important, an affinity for the Faust theme.

One of the most singular events in his life and works is his platonic love affair with Jenny Colon, an actress in whom Gérard saw the reembodiment of his ideal love, Adrienne. Ironically, Jenny was almost as worldly as Sophie Dawes, his

<sup>2</sup>S. A. Rhodes, *Gérard de Nerval, Poet, Traveler, Dreamer* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1951), p. 26.

<sup>3</sup>Rhodes, pp. 14-17. A complete treatise on the esoteric background and tendencies of Nerval is the aim and *raison d'être* of Jean Richer's *Gérard de Nerval et les doctrines ésotériques* (Paris: Editions du griffon d'or, 1947).

Adrienne. Gérard's love for her was destined, from the moment it was conceived, to dominate the remainder of his life. He first saw Jenny Colon early in the year 1834, but it was several months later that he actually met her. It is doubtful that he ever possessed her, though he lavished gifts and money on her and founded *Le Monde dramatique*, an elegantly edited theatrical magazine, for the dual purpose of swelling her reputation and pleasing his father, who never approved of his son's literary penchant. But Gérard proved, like Balzac, to be a genius of financial disaster. Although some of the foremost names of the day contributed to its publications, *Le Monde dramatique* was destined shortly to pass into other hands, and finally into oblivion, for it soon became a mere altar upon which Gérard made anonymous adorations and sacrifices to Jenny until it had devoured the whole of the modest legacy he had received in 1835. It was at about that time, too, that he chose his pseudonym, Nerval, from a field (Clos be Nerval) near Mortefontaine, which belonged to his great-uncle's family. Jenny not only received limitless adoration and favors from him, but it was for her that he wrote the bulk of his unsuccessful plays. Ironically, his best play, *Leo Burckart*, was written after Jenny Colon had left him.

Gérard traveled frequently. He went often to Italy, and in fact traveled all over the European continent, and visited extensively Egypt and the Near East. He wrote many accounts of his travels, but most notable is his *Voyage en Orient*, which exposes his preoccupations with cabalistic and esoteric religions. The embroidery of his account lends it charm and interest. His letters to his unimaginative father describe the trail of reality in his itinerary. The trail of charming fancy is followed in *Voyage en Orient*.

The last decade, approximately, of Gérard's life was punctuated by periods of actual insanity and confinement. He had lived for many years in a twilight state in which the line of demarcation between dream and reality was to him very dim. It disappeared entirely at intervals, the first of which occurred on February 28, 1841, when he was confined to Dr. Émile Blanche's asylum. It is even believed that he suffered two such confinements that year.<sup>4</sup> A series of reverses and further mental

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<sup>4</sup>Pierre Audiat, *L'Aurélia de Gérard de Nerval* (Paris: Librairie Ancienne Honoré Champion, 1926), pp. 15-17.

strain precipitated a relapse in the form of a sort of cataleptic fall and consequent chest injury in 1851. For this seizure he was sent for a brief period to Dr. Dubois' private asylum. He was once more interned there in the spring of 1853, but again only briefly. Between this confinement and the subsequent relapse of the following year, he wrote *Sylvie*. In 1854 he was committed again to the care of Dr. Émile Blanche, in whom he expressed complete trust. He was released for the last time in October of that year. Between periods of confinement his life was characterized by hallucinations and vagabond wanderings into the Parisian underworld, with which, by now, he was well acquainted. His subjective description of these wanderings, and some of the accompanying hallucinations, appear in *Les Nuits d'octobre*. In spite of his demented condition, this period was one of his more fruitful, and is unequivocally the most important. The uncompleted manuscript of his *Aurélia* left the asylum with him in his penultimate release. The final pages were found in his pocket following his death on January 26, 1855. He died, it is commonly conceded, by hanging himself with an apron string which he maintained at various times was the corset string of Madame de Maintenon or Marguerite de Valois, or, more often, the Queen of Sheba's garter.

## II

Nerval's early prose works are by no means as significant as the final burst of literary activity in the last few years of his life. They mostly reflect the influence of his great-uncle's molding attic library. They represent a type of horror story then in vogue. His output was not very great. He is best when he is autobiographical. Even the stories in which he supposedly avoids his own preoccupations are fraught with overtones of the Adrienne love theme. For example, his *Jemmy*, which is a translation of an obscure story by the German author Charles Sealsfield,<sup>5</sup> portrays the same scene found in *Sylvie* between Gérard and Adrienne.<sup>6</sup> At a harvest festival, Jemmy and Toffel, surrounded by a group of young people, are obliged by custom to exchange kisses. The tone is idyllic—pastoral in essence. Its setting is in America, its theme is largely one of primitivism

<sup>5</sup>Jean Gaulmier, *Gérard de Nerval et Les Filles du feu* (Paris: Librairie Nizet, 1956), p. 82.

<sup>6</sup>Gaulmier, pp. 83-84.

à la Chateaubriand. This and other stories merely represent Nerval's ability to follow the literary current of his time.

It is, of course, of greater pertinence to consider the more typical style of Nerval's *Sylvie* and *Aurélia*. The former is a conscious attempt to reconstruct his childhood through a work of art. It represents his primitivism, his reaction against the prevalent materialism, his own "recherche du temps perdu." It is autobiographical, written with a type of pre-Proustian flashback technique. It is the key to his obsession for the ideal woman, whom he saw personified first in Adrienne, then in Jenny Colon, who was to him a kind of Pythagorean reincarnation of Adrienne. *Sylvie* reveals Gérard's concept of ideal womanhood, his Venus in three phrases. Jean Gaulmier explains it thus:

*Sylvie . . . nous donne aussi une image des Trois Vénus: dès le premier chapitre, l'actrice Jenny-Aurélia prend figure de déesse infernale aux feux de la rampe qui l'éclairait d'en bas et Gérard éprouve devant elle une terreur sacrée: Je craignais de troubler le miroir magique qui me renvoyait son image. Au chapitre II, Adrienne, reine du pays d'enfance, est la Vénus céleste, véritable vision paradisiaque. Enfin, la complexe Sylvie, après l'apparition d'Adrienne en sainte, Sylvie qui a perdu sa pureté primitive, qui fabrique des gants à la mécanique au lieu de son ancienne dentelle, qui chante l'opéra et a oublié les vieilles romances, Sylvie devient, elle aussi, une sorte de Vénus infernale.*<sup>7</sup>

Gérard's fascination with time and memory is arresting.

*Aurélia*, his most important work, is, again, autobiographical, or more specifically confessional. It is Gérard's symbolic descent into hell, his personal *Divine Comedy*. He describes quite faithfully, if we can count on his own word, his hallucinations, his visions—his insanity. This work is the summation of his cabalistic, Pythagorean, pantheistic, and Christian tendencies. It is his portrayal of his mental strife. Unattainable

<sup>7</sup>Gaulmier, p. 62. "Sylvie . . . also gives us an image of the three Venus. From the first chapter, the actress Jenny-Aurélia assumes the form of an infernal goddess under the glare of the footlights which illuminated her from below and Gérard feels a sacred terror before her. "I feared to disturb the magic mirror that sent me her image." In the second chapter, Adrienne, queen of the land of childhood, is the celestial Venus, a true paradisiacal vision. Finally, the complex Sylvie, after the appearance of Adrienne as a saint, Sylvie, who has lost her primitive purity, who makes gloves with a machine instead of the lace-work of former years, who sings opera and has forgotten the old ballads, Sylvie too becomes a kind of infernal Venus."

love was the cause of his madness, and represents for him his salvation. His manias become apparent, allegedly at least, to the initiated in psychology.<sup>8</sup> He was plagued with feelings of guilt for the outrages he had committed against his love for Aurélia (ideal woman), because he had indulged in "facile love affairs."<sup>9</sup> He had profaned her memory. He also felt pangs of guilt for his compromise of doctrine, though he never felt that he could embrace Christianity alone. His descent into hell teaches him the way to atone for these sins. He fancies that in these visions he is able to learn secrets withheld from him in his normal consciousness. He sometimes regrets his conscious state and awaits anxiously the time for his visionary sleep, but for the most part his visions are frightful trials to which he is subjected. It is, in Dantesque fashion, his Aurélia that represents to him his salvation when she appears and assures him:

L'épreuve à laquelle tu étais soumis est venue à son terme; ces escaliers sans nombre que tu te fatiguais à descendre ou à gravir étaient les liens mêmes des anciennes illusions qu'embarrassaient ta pensée, et maintenant rappelle-toi le jour où tu as imploré la Vierge sainte et où, la croyant morte, le délire s'est emparé de ton esprit. Il fallait que ton voeu lui fût porté par une âme simple et dégagée des liens de la terre. Celle-là s'est rencontrée près de toi, et c'est pourquoi it m'est permis à moi-même de venir et de t'encourager.<sup>10</sup>

His *Aurélia* is not his only account of a descent into hell. There is another of a sort in *Les Nuits d'octobre*, in which he tells of his nocturnal wanderings and the progressively horrifying descent into the Parisian underworld. In fact, his guide at one point tells him, as Virgil to Dante, "Or sie forte ed ardito; omai si scende per si fatte scale."<sup>11</sup>

<sup>8</sup>L. H. Sebilotte, *Le Secret de Gérard de Nerval* (Paris: Librairie Jose Corti 1948), p. 128 et seq.

<sup>9</sup>Rhodes, p. 283.

<sup>10</sup>Gérard de Nerval, *Oeuvres Choisies*, introd. Gauthier-Ferrieres (Paris: Bibliotheque Larousse, n.d.), p. 212. "The ordeal you have undergone is coming to an end; these countless stairways which wore you out so going up and down are the bonds of old illusions that impeded your thoughts; now remember the day when you implored the Holy Virgin and, thinking her dead, were possessed of a frenzy of the mind. Your vow must be carried to her by a simple soul, one free from the ties of the earth. She is near you and that is why I myself have been permitted to come and encourage you." Translation by Geoffrey Wagner, *op. cit.*, p. 172.

<sup>11</sup>*Oeuvres Choisies*, p. 111. "Be strong and bold; only through such steps does one descend here."

As though anticipating that his reader might doubt the verisimilitude of his account, Gérard states in *Aurélia*, "Si je ne pensais que la mission d'un écrivain est d'analyser sincèrement ce qu'il éprouve dans les grâces circonstances de la vie, et si je ne me proposais un but que je crois utile, je m'arrêterais ici, et je n'essayerais pas de décrire ce que j'éprouvai ensuite dans une série de visions insensées peut-être, ou vulgairement maladiques. . . ."<sup>12</sup> This passage is illustrative of his very personal style. The tonal unity in this work, as in *Sylvie*, is impeccable. It is a tone of madness, analyzed with seemingly cold objectivity, which arouses a curious observation regarding Nerval's latest literary output, i.e., that his works, far from suffering from his madness, seem to be enhanced by it, or even contingent upon it.

"Le bon Gérard" was not capable of the consistently mordant satire of Merimée, but satire does appear in his works. Nothing in all his writings is more delightfully whimsical than his account of his relationship with his Mohammedan slave Zeynab (Z'n'b). What could have greater exotic appeal than this Malaysian with almond-shaped eyes, pearl-like teeth, long, burnished hair, tawny skin, and a regal air of distinction, and what could be more in keeping with a romantic bent? But on the other hand, what could be more useless? Their relationship was hardly exotic. She was quite ignorant, she could not cook or sew, and she could not learn French in order to interpret for him; but his moral reservations would not admit of placing her back on the slave market. She was little more than extra weight in his travel plans. But, he observed, "Her smile was delightful!"<sup>13</sup> The satirical elements are typically good-natured, by no means bitter nor abusive, but even this would tend to contribute to the decline of Romanticism, because he is, after all, laughing at its exaggerated exoticism.

### III

Defining the extent of an author's influence is at best an elusive task. Gérard de Nerval's role and importance are still

<sup>12</sup>*Oeuvres Choisies*, p. 163. "If I did not think that a writer's duty is to analyze with sincerity what he feels in grave moments of life, and if I had not in view to be useful, I would stop here, and make no attempt to describe my later experiences in a series of visions which were either insane or, vulgarly, diseased." Translation of Geoffrey Wagner, p. 121.

<sup>13</sup>Rhodes, p. 190.

being assessed. Guy Michaud, the latest authority on French Symbolism, points out that Nerval went well beyond his fellow *Romantiques* in establishing norms for passing from Romanticism to modern tendencies.<sup>14</sup> Arthur Symons traces the origin of symbolist literature to Nerval, largely on the basis of the ideas and style apparent in *Aurélia*.<sup>15</sup> Gérard's opening statement, "Le rêve est une seconde vie," simple as it is, supplies an initial basis for Symons' claim on him as the father of the symbolists' and surrealists' muse. Symons further maintains that Gerard's genius, ". . . to which madness had come as the liberating, the precipitating spirit, disengaging its finer essence, consisted in a power of materializing vision, whatever is most volatile and unseizable in vision, and without losing the sense of mystery, or that quality which gives its charm to the intangible."<sup>16</sup> Certainly, Gérard represents a change in libido, a shift from the visible to the invisible, or more specifically, from the material to the spiritual, which is in essence the basis of Symbolism. S. A. Rhodes, whether accurate or not in his evaluation, is certain that Baudelaire felt his influence, and through him ". . . the long lineage of symbolist, post symbolist, and surrealist poets, all of whom experienced what Jean Cocteau has described as the 'incalculable . . . repercussion . . . of a Nerval. . . .'"<sup>17</sup>

The duality theme in *Aurélia* is identical to the symbolic duality of Hakim-Biamr-Allah and Yousouf, who appear in a tale in *Voyage en Orient*. In this tale, Yousouf, who is Hakim's double, strikes the first blow that fells Hakim, just as Gérard's double, who in one of his visions is his mortal enemy, prepares to strike him.<sup>18</sup> This "double" of Gérard's is undoubtedly the phase of his personality responsible for his own death, which is symbolically prefigured in the tale of Hakim and Yousouf.<sup>19</sup> Gérard and his spiritual twin die together, just as Hakim and Yousouf, one inflicting the death blow upon the other. This is the epitome of Nerval's power to "materialize vision."

<sup>14</sup>Guy Michaud, *Message poétique du Symbolisme* (Paris: Librairie Nizet, 1951), I, 33.

<sup>15</sup>Arthur Symons, *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* (London: Constable & Company, Ltd., 1911), p. 3.

<sup>16</sup>Symons, p. 33.

<sup>17</sup>Rhodes, p. 1. He quotes Cocteau from *Essai de critique indirect* (Paris: Bernard Grasset, n.d.), p. 44.

<sup>18</sup>*Oeuvres Choisies*, pp. 177-180.

<sup>19</sup>Gérard de Nerval, *The Women of Cairo*, a translation of *Voyage en Orient* (London: George Routledge & Sons, Ltd., 1929), II, 61-70.

Marcel Schwob, whom no less an authority than Pierre Champion places squarely in the mainstream of Symbolism,<sup>20</sup> offers affinities for Nerval which tend to substantiate Symons' postulation regarding Nerval's contribution to the development of Symbolism. Schwob no doubt heard his father speak of Nerval, for the elder Schwob had been associated with him and Charles Baudelaire in the printing of a literary review, the *Corsaire Satan*. While still a teen-ager, Schwob wrote an erotic version of *Faust*, and about two years later another work, "Les vierges du feu," which bears notable resemblance to *Les filles du feu* by Nerval. Also, Schwob gave the title *Les Faux-Saulniers* to one of his *contes*, after Nerval's *Faux-Saulniers, Histoire de l'abbé de Bucquoy*, his sentimental journey through the countryside of his childhood. While still in his youth, Schwob composed a "Ballade pour Gérard de Nerval pendu à la fenêtre d'un bouge." Recently, in 1959, John A. Green has brought to light an article written by Schwob with the title "La chanson populaire,"<sup>21</sup> the essential theme of which he shows to derive from Nerval's statement in "Chansons et légendes populaires de Valois" that the old "Chansons populaires" represent "la memoire et la vie des bonnes gens du temps passé;" therefore, continues Nerval, "il serait à désirer que de bons poètes modernes missent à profit l'inspiration naïve de nos peres, et nous rendissent . . . une foule de petits chefs-d'oeuvre qui se perdent."<sup>22</sup> Moreover, it is apparent that this admiration for Nerval follows Schwob even in his mature years. According to his dossier at the Archives Nationales, on December 12, 1894 (nine years before his death), he requested fifteenth-century documents formerly communicated to Nerval, probably for no greater purpose than to review material in which Nerval had shown a lively interest. He had learned from Nerval's comments regarding the documents that they contained an autobiography of Angélique de Longueval, about whom Nerval

<sup>20</sup>For a brief introduction to Marcel Schwob and his works, see John A. Green's "Marcel Schwob and 'The Talking Machine,' a Tale à la Poe—Via Thomas A. Edison," *B.Y.U. Studies*, VI (1964), 41-46. It is interesting that since 1950, four American doctoral dissertations have been written on Marcel Schwob.

<sup>21</sup>See John A. Green, "The Literary Career of Marcel Schwob," unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Washington, 1960, p. 54.

<sup>22</sup>*Oeuvres Choisies*, p. 62. ". . . the memory and life of good folk of yesteryear; . . . it would be desirable if good modern poets were to profit by the simple inspiration of our forefathers and return to us a wealth of little masterpieces which are disappearing."

wrote in *Les Filles du feu*. Schwob seemed bent on utilizing the same material to compose a play, perhaps in an attempt to surpass his master, but death overtook him before the project could be completed.

A close relative of Symbolism is its descendant Surrealism. "Surrealism aims to transcend the accepted limitation of reality, to bring into literature material hitherto unused, the dream and the automatic association, and to synthesize the experiences of the conscious and unconscious minds."<sup>23</sup> Its basic idea is derived ". . . from a combination of dadaism with Freud: the automatic, illogical, uncontrolled fantasies and associations of the mind represent a higher reality than the realistic. . . world."<sup>24</sup> This, certainly, defines the basic approach in *Aurélia*. It is thus that André Breton, author of the surrealist manifesto, is able to declare, "It seems indeed that Nerval possessed exactly the spirit we claim kinship with."<sup>25</sup> On the other hand, though Gérard sometimes preferred his dream world to the world of reality, he rarely failed to recognize the difference between them.<sup>26</sup> C. G. Jung states the case for many of the surrealists: "Intellect remains imprisoned within itself so long as it does not voluntarily sacrifice its supremacy, and admit the value of other claims. It shrinks from taking a step beyond itself, and will not allow that it does not possess universal validity, for everything outside its own view is nothing but phantasy."<sup>27</sup> Gérard was always willing to "admit the value of other claims." For the surrealists, the insane world is a mere prolongation of experience in the sane. The subtitle of *Aurélia* is *Le Rêve et la vie*, not *ou* *la vie*, and Gérard opens the narrative with "Le rêve est une seconde vie," *another* life, not a prolongation of the conscious world. Hence the difference between him and his spiritual twin, his double. Though the general spirit and tone

<sup>23</sup>Dictionary of World Lit., p. 403.

<sup>24</sup>Reader's Companion to World Literature, gen. ed. Calvin S. Brown (New York: The Dryden Press, 1956), p. 429.

<sup>25</sup>Rhodes, pp. 1-2. He quotes André Breton's *Manifeste du surréalisme* (Paris, 1929), p. 44.

<sup>26</sup>A letter sent to Ida Ferrier (Mme Alexandre Dunas) is one of the few staunch avowals on the part of Gérard that would tend to refute the claim that he always recognized the difference between fantasy and reality. In this letter, he claims that he is as he had always been and was surprised to discover that people thought him different under the spell of his madness (Rhodes, pp. 171, 172).

<sup>27</sup>C. G. Jung, *Psychological Types* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1933), p. 75.

of his writing is very closely akin to Surrealism, there is that basic difference.

Another unexplored possibility as regards Nerval's range of influence is Latin America. Following the belated Romantic movement in that area, which was obviously on the decline in 1870, the writers of that generation demanded, for the most part, a more subdued treatment of verse than had been practiced by the followers of Byron and Hugo. The Modernist movement in Latin America captures and characterizes much of the spirit of Nerval's writing, particularly the nostalgic reverie and the accompanying disdain of materialism evident in *Sylvie*. The following might have been part of their manifesto:

Nous vivions alors dans une époque étrange . . .  
 L'homme matériel aspirait au bouquet de roses qui devait le régénérer par les mains de la belle Isis; la déesse éternellement jeune et pure nous apparaissait dans les nuits, et nous faisait honte de nos heures de jours perdus. L'ambition n'était cependant pas de notre âge, et l'avide curée qui se faisait alors des positions et des honneurs nous éloignait des sphères d'activité possibles. Il ne nous restait pour asile que cette tour d'ivoire des poètes, où nous montions toujours plus haut pour nous isoler de la foule. A ces points élevés où nous guidaient nos maîtres, nous respirions enfin l'air pur des solitudes, nous buvions l'oubli dans la coupe d'or des légendes, nous étions ivres de poésie et d'amour. Amour, hélas! des formes vagues, des teintes roses et bleues, de fantômes métaphysiques!<sup>28</sup>

This finds an echo in Darío's own statement, "Yo detesto la vida y el tiempo en que me tocó nacer."<sup>29</sup> Compare the above quotation from *Sylvie* with the following definition of Modernism: "Modernism may be described as the literary expression

<sup>28</sup> *Oeuvres Choisies*, p. 20. "We were then living in a strange period. . . . Material man longed for the bouquet of roses which would regenerate him from the hands of the divine Isis; the goddess in her eternal youth and purity appeared to us by night and made us ashamed of our wasted days. We had not reached the age of ambition, and the greedy scramble for honors and positions caused us to stay away from all possible spheres of activity. The only refuge left to us was the poet's ivory tower, which we climbed, ever higher, to isolate ourselves from the mob. Led by our masters to those high places we breathed at last the pure air of solitude, we drank oblivion in the legendary golden cup, and we got drunk on poetry and love. Love, however, of vague forms, of blue and rosy hues, of metaphysical phantoms!" Translation by Geoffrey Wagner, pp. 50-51.

<sup>29</sup> *An Anthology of Spanish American Literature*, ed. E. Herman Hespelt (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1946), p. 489. "I detest the life and the time in which it was my lot to be born."

of that mood of unrest and of dissatisfaction with the prevailing worship of material success that marked the last few years of the nineteenth century. The young idealist of those days felt himself thrown by fate into an environment to which he did not belong. He had a soul above the sordid aims of his fellow-men, and his art and his ideals were things beyond their comprehension.”<sup>30</sup>

The term “ivory tower,” for which Gérard more than perhaps anyone else was responsible, was adopted by the Modernists.<sup>31</sup> Their inspiration was admittedly French, their champion Rubén Darío an avid reader of all the nineteenth-century masters. Their disdain of the materialistic led them, like Nerval, to explore new doctrines, desire new experiences, discover new truths. Julián del Casal was attracted by Japanese verse patterns and philosophy, Amado Nervo was a student of Buddhism, and James Freyre ardently studied Scandinavian mythology and philosophy, and particularly the works of Emmanuel Swendeborg, likewise a favorite of Nerval’s.

It is difficult to assess the extent of Gérard’s influence, through his preoccupation with time and memory, on Marcel Proust. It is known that Proust read him extensively and regarded him highly, but did Nerval make any contribution to his literary output? Perhaps Proust would have written just as much, just as well, and perhaps he would have said it just the same way if Nerval had never existed. But the style of *Sylvie*, the nostalgic search for his lost childhood, and his idea of involuntary memory in *Aurélia* suggests that Proust built his novels on the foundation laid by Nerval. Jacques de Lacretelle recalls one of his last visits to Proust, when the latter spoke of Nerval and quoted some of his poetry. As Lacretelle departed, he tells us, “. . . il me parut que Nerval et lui s’étaient unis pour me donner la clef de son oeuvre.”<sup>32</sup> Proust himself, in an unpublished notebook in the possession of Madame Mante-Proust, acknowledges, however indirectly, “. . . a more than normally

<sup>30</sup>G. Dundas-Craig, *The Modernist Trend in Spanish American Poetry* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1934), p. 3.

<sup>31</sup>*Selected Writings*, p. 39.

<sup>32</sup>Laurent Lesage, *Marcel Proust and His Literary Friends* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1958), p. 104. Lesage quotes Lacretelle from “Allocution de M. Jacques de Lacretelle,” *Bulletin de la Société des Amis de Marcel Proust*, IV (1954), p. 35. “. . . it seemed to me that Nerval and he had united to give me the key to his work.”

ardent friendship . . . a shared taste."<sup>33</sup> The following passage from *Sylvie* suggests, at the least, a "shared taste": "Je regagnai mon lit et je ne pus y trouver le repos. Plongé dans une demi-somnolence, toute ma jeunesse repassait en mes souvenirs. Cet état, où l'esprit résiste encore aux bizarres combinaisons du songe, permet souvent de voir se presser en quelques minutes les tableaux les plus saillants d'une longue période de la vie."<sup>34</sup>

What, finally, is Nerval's bearing, if any, upon the twentieth century? This is, of course, impossible to determine definitively. He is not widely read; it is not the direct influence of his works that constitutes his present significance. The "mal du siècle" of which he was a victim is still extant. The disdain of materialism which characterized his generation still exists. This feeling, persisting in the guise of existentialist nausea, is not his doing, nor is he the first to introduce the relativity of truth. But in this area, his ideas are still relevant, even though they are only the echo of ideas already expressed in previous ages. "What may I believe?" was Gérard's constant query. He felt a kinship with a certain Mohammedan cult which, aside from its Pythagorean foundation that always attracted Gérard, held truth and error to be equally deceptive. "God knows, we do not!" was their cry.<sup>35</sup> This spirit permeates Gérard's works and echoes in the minds of those, like André Gide, who find it impossible to stipulate definitively the difference between truth and error, and those who in far greater extremity, like van Gogh or Hölderlin, belong with Gérard de Nerval to the group of "great abnormals."

<sup>33</sup>André Maurois, *Proust: Portrait of a Genius* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1950), p. 212.

<sup>34</sup>*Oeuvres Choisies*, p. 22. "I went to bed but could not rest. Lost in a kind of half-sleep, all my youth passed through my memory again. This state, when the spirit still resists the strange combinations of dreams, often allows us to compress into a few moments the most salient pictures of a long period of life." Translation by Geoffrey Wagner, p. 53.

<sup>35</sup>*Women of Cairo*, II, 240.