

**DESPAIR AND SUICIDE ARE A RESULT OF CERTAIN CIRCUMSTANCES,  
FATAL FOR NON-BELIEVERS IN IMMORTALITY, IN ITS AGONIES AND JOYS**

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*Abstract: Throughout our study, we attempt at illustrating synthetically that the Gérard de Nerval's (1808 – 1855) inner mapping acquires diverse connotations, falling into four larger entities: a space of communication with the other – through love; an Orphean space – a realm of purity; a space covered by a journey to the origins of humanity; and a space of supreme revealing unreality – that of the dream. It is only natural that these four entities should not be approached without reference to the constituent temporal dimensions.*

*Keywords: Gérard de Nerval, , space of communication, Orphean space, journey, dream*

The journey to this imaginary Nervalian land accounts for an act of existential purification and recovery of the profound self by the one who has envisaged it. The ardent fictional consciousness never forsook the writer, not even in the hallucinatory pages of *Aurelia*, this “diary of insanity”, a gift of insanity of compensated deceptiveness, integrated as a zone of illusory subtle psychic changes, preceding the discovery of poetic lucidity. A poetic lucidity primarily reached at the formal level in his sonnets. “It may seem surprising that Nerval – a poet of the nocturnal and dream, of the chaotic and uncontrollable – chose a poetic form that is so precise and strict. Some exegetes interpreted this option [...] as a means of annihilating shapelessness, an order meant to protect him against obscure nebulosity and an anarchically unleashed fantasy” (Mureșanu Ionescu 2008: 206).

Nerval does not release the inner pressure exerted by his obsessions, anxieties, memories, phantasms, projections, thoughts, through the catharsis of the creative activity. On the contrary, he sees himself more and more enclosed and seasoning in a circle. Writing does not represent for the author of *The Chimeras* a relief, but a confinement to the inner space governed by a more profound self, a plunge into memories and representations of the past, which reach the dimensions, as well as the healing and poisoning functions of a *pharmakon*. The escape from the death circle would be effected in a detachment from time through the soul's freeing itself from the grasp of the senses, which push a falling life down the slope of insanity. Nervalian writing bespeaks of the fundamental steps in releasing and reconquering the living soul, in a world deeply felt as schismatic. This attempt at escaping from the tough circle of fixity is made by traversing the geographical space in search of something mysterious and, in this context, it becomes synonymous with the nostalgic dream of absolute love.

It her triple stance of mother, lover and goddess, the female archetype sets out the relays of the strenuous draining of inspiration, from the quaint character Sylvie (and the “daughters of fire” Angélique, Adrienne ori Octavie) to the generic essence of Aurélia. Nerval deconspires poetically the overlapping of masks of this unique woman, whose concrete dimensions are obscured by idealisation and sacralisation. The desire of fitting all masks to the same face expresses the intention of considering the prismatic uniqueness of a woman,

which belongs to her maternal nature: the life-giving mother, the lover and the devouring death. Nerval heads for life through a plunge in himself and a contemplation of the phenomenal world. This plunge remains the essential act of self-knowledge, as long as the primordial fact of his creation is knowledge of identity.

Affected by the irredeemable absurdity of existence, in which he is sinking without any guarantee of escape, Nerval is trying to defeat his solitude and will enter the world which is fascinating in itself due to the artifice of its performance to take part in the costumed dance of the great world Theatre. (One must not forget his stage temptation, including his infatuation for actress Jenny Colon – which was fatally damaging for his mental state). The fictional consciousness appears as graduated and diverse, from the ludic mystifications of pseudonyms to the obsessive motif of the double.

Nerval created his most accomplished works after his mind got cloudy and they altogether can be defined as a genuine autobiography, based on the exploration of two complementary “veins” in the formation of the author: erudite information (magic, occultism, heraldics, and literature) and existential experiences. These veins are revealed in designing his work as a mental journey, whose prototype is represented by dream (considered at the beginning of *Aurélia* as “a second life” – Nerval 1974: 209), errancy and incessant lifelong travelling. Thus, Nerval discovers the virtues of travelling in time, symmetrical with travelling in space. Time travels are either progressive or regressive, produced in a present equivalent to metachrony or uchrony. The temporal axis is much more important for the author of *Journey to the Orient* than spatial positioning, as movement is a correlation of some psychological or biological levels with the temporal dimension; what geographical place is to a real journey is represented by time for an imaginary one.

The return to the past and the time travel thanks to memory represent the essential form of existence of Nervalian consciousness, for which travelling undertaken for “transgressing the limits of good and evil” paradoxically indicates the desire for stability. Nerval explores different chronological stages of the past and by repeating it, he wants to recover, beyond the lapse of time, a more profound identity. Called from memories, sensations, feelings, objects of the past become permanent psychological realities at image level, where the past becomes once again present and the present can be converted into memory. Before Nerval, the past and the universe of memory were not perceived other than objectively, through a voluntary and mechanical exercise of remembrance. This exercise was the object of an immediate, subjective knowledge, caused by an anamnestic disorder or anxiety. “From now on, the path is open to an authentic *search of lost time*, manifested not only in Proust’s work and in a school of thought related to Bergsonism, but clearly present in the nineteenth-century literary creation (s.a.)” (Jean 1964: 133).

Therefore, for Nerval, owing to his filtering personal psychic experiences, the nostalgia of individual roots regained a performative, active character. The recovery of a certain time presupposes using and organising space; through movement, space becomes time. Alienating from the Paris he had inhabited, that is, from the present, Nerval descends into the past in search of his originary condition of a lost country. Valois region represents his physical and spiritual matrix, the framework of his self-knowledge: a geographical and spiritual *continuum* which was the starting point of what was to become the kingdom of

France. Being a Valois meant belonging to an impenetrable history and to a space that cancels the fatality of time.

But the ancient land of Valois - "where the heart of France had beaten for more than a thousand years" (Nerval 1974: 123) - is the link between the two poles that attracted Nerval. What we mean is that the poetic geography of *The Chimeras* is located in the ancient South (Greece, Italy), the place that allowed the poet to set fantasy and to create myth, while Germany means his maternal and paternal space. All journeys beyond the Rhine River may have the significance a travel transcending death and a quest for his mother's grave. "I never knew my mother, who wanted to follow my father in the war, just like the women of ancient Germans; she died of fever and fatigue in a frozen land in Germany, and even my father could not settle a child's mind at ease. The region where I grew up was full of strange legends and odd superstitions" (Ibid: 244-245). If the North hosts his existential and historical prototype, the South is an elective embodiment of Eden.

The nostalgia for that full season that corresponds to an ideal of beauty can be cured by the metaphor of Italy where pomegranates grow under the warm Mediterranean sun and in the vicinity of Alpine snows. Let us see his northern and southern roots: here lies an antagonistic oscillation, an opposition and a dissension that put a strain on the Nervalian spirit. The entwining of opposites is possible by calling the fantastic vision and, thus, Nerval uses mythical topography – the only one that gives the impression that he can reach the *Centrum*, from where to access the South and the North.

His vital force, restless sensibility driven toward mystery, his plastic imagination of Southerner feed naturally on the Oriental world, seen and described in *Journey to the Orient*. An affinity with the discretion, sophistication and rigour of Oriental art will lead Nerval to an in-depth understanding of those movements which confer the individuality of a race and civilization. The traveller will describe the image of a symbolic Orient and of religious syncretism, in which the original sense of life is manifested, proving the nostalgia of reducing the double contingency of being to unity and "temporal essence."

But as auroral time bursts and splits in divergent times (empirical time and space) by negative symmetry, the original gesture of the traveller to the Orient – in a counter-clockwise direction – diverges into two opposite and complementary impulses: an extroversion in the actual space that the eye scans and gradually envelops and an introversion whose pace is chanted by the steps of the outer journey. Here is how a sunrise is felt: "What a strange thing our life is! Every morning, in this transition state in which reason slowly vanquishes the mad fantasies of the dream, I feel that it is only natural, logical and compliant with my Parisian roots, to get up to see the light of a grey sky, to hear the sound of wheels grinding pavements, in a drab room with edgy furniture, where imagination runs into windows like a trapped insect, and I get left in an awe, each time even more intense, a thousand leagues from my homeland. My senses are slowly awoken to the vague calls of a world that is a perfect antithesis of our world [...] The black sun of melancholy, which sheds dark rays on the forehead of the dreaming angel of Albrecht Dürer, sometimes rises on the bright plains of the Nile, as on the banks of the Rhine, in the cold world of Germany. I would confess that, without mist, dust casts a gloomy veil on daylight in the Orient" (Nerval 1977: 141-142). The palpable, phenomenal Orient is a provisional objectification of the inner space of consciousness cancelled by the empirical journey as they undertake it in progressive

“veiling”. This provisional time-dependent space tends asymptotically toward a “zero point”, which rapidly absorbs its identity of “essence”.

In contrast to this auroral time, full of healing promises, there lies the nocturnal kingdom. We know that for Romantic writers, night represents the supreme poetic atmosphere for self-absorption and for contact with the transcendent, allowing an experience of feelings in an atmosphere of inner light, which intensifies the darkness outside. In the case of Gérard de Nerval, the problematisation of the exterior nature is doubled by a symmetrical questioning of inner nature. Contemplation and reverie in nature as a space of melancholy (to cover the romantic psyche along with its reflexivity) show the effect of the same reintegration in the whole through a certain state of the deeper self. The dialectical reaction remains that of focusing on oneself through what is called *topophilia*.

The discourse on light is oxymoronic only insofar as it constitutes an ontic ground: material/ immaterial, bright-dark. The thanatic experience confessed in the sonnet *El Desdichado* articulates the dramatic portrait of the hero who lost unity and is dominated by the black sun of melancholy. Nerval discovers his nature of participant to another order, different from the real one, being animated by the thrill of knowing two worlds. “Man, caught in the middle, finds himself drawn to a pole or another and we will see Nerval down in the bowels of the earth, hoping to discover the secret of creation” (Uster 1970: 92). “Star”, “destiny”, “melancholy”, “grave” are words that focus on a hallucinatory world, words-abysse, black suns where the inner turmoil shines. Thus, the melancholy that overwhelms him is tinged by the darkness of death.

Nerval’s black sun governs the perceptive field darkened by symbolic darkness. This star is not visibly shining in the sky, but radiates in the very dreary night engulfing his being, filling the void in his desperate soul. A soul for which the opacity of the mythical sun darkens the whole universe. And as Nerval is trying to perceive the transparency of the heavenly body beyond the opacity of the matter, he is also striving to reach the inner self and look through the accumulated density of its haunting metaphors. Under a parade of Baroque masks, there is always the same persistent identity, conjugated in the first person (“I the misty one, - widower – inconsolable” – Nerval, 1979: 63) and setting the immutable essence of *the same*. To find himself exactly the same in different regions of space and time, he deludes himself with the illusory and pleasant feeling that he is being totally known to him, but risks losing – as demonstrated by Jean-Pierre Richard – the safety of his true identity: self-consciousness: “The proliferation of the same does not remain innocent unless the being displays its masks without having to attach any. For Gérard to escape insanity, the feeling of *ipseity* should have dominated and taken control over his constantly proliferating identity. But things were different: wanting to be *the same*, Gérard fails to be *himself*” (Richard 1974: 75).

Instead of confidently asserting its identity, the Nervalian self will falter and ask questions: the “I am” will succeed the “will I be?”, “and” will follow “or”, repetition – alternative “Am I Phoebus or Amor? ... Lusignan or Biron? “There is a cold and an inner void felt when reading the sonnet. The scission of a person is performed through Orphic asceticism: “On the lyre of Orpheus appearing with one hand / In moans of a saint and screams of a fairy” (Nerval, *Ibid*). Nerval, affected by a severe nervous disorder, feels himself as double because his being detaches itself and falls behind, delayed in another layer of existence; between feeling and expression, there is a fracture as seen from the somniloquence

of Aurélia: "A terrible thought came to my mind: "The man is double, "I said. "I'm two people" wrote a Father of the Church. The collaboration of two souls has sown this double seed into a body exposing two sides, repeated in all its organs. In every man, there is a spectator and an actor, the one who speaks and the one who answers. The Orientals have seen in these two enemies: the good and the evil genius. "Am I the best? Or the worst?, I told myself. Anyway, the other is my foe [...]" (Nerval 1974: 232). The natural consequence is that mental schism arises together with the breaking of inner continuity, identity becoming duality at all the levels of a being. And thus, "For all sides, at circumference and at the center, Nerval finds himself trapped in his magic circle. Not up, not down, not eccentrically or concentrically, it is not possible to escape from himself. Everywhere he meets the same image of self, a double, a brother-enemy. All exits are blocked; walled under the gates of Salvation" (Poulet 1987: 253).

Nerval's imaginary universe of the sonnet is polarized into two opposite sides: an upper region, bright and celestial, and a lower region, gloomy and demonic. The being, trapped in the middle, is drawn to each pole and, hence, we see the poet crossing the river of hell to discover the secret of creation: "And unabated, twice have I crossed the Acheron" (Nerval 1979: 63). The Nervalian alter-ego suffers from a tragic hallucinatory duality in *Sylvie*, considered by Marcel Proust "a model of diseased haunting" (Proust 1971: 240), but especially in *Aurélia*. The oscillation between divergent states leads to a suicidal swing, which can no longer be censored from the organic fund, constituent of a healthy man.

During another delirious dream, narrated in *Aurelia*, the river of hell could be even Seine: "When I arrived to Concorde Square, I had in set in my mind to kill myself. On several occasions, I headed for the Seine, but something kept me from fulfilling my decision. The stars were shining in the sky. At one point, I thought they would go out all at once, as the candles I had seen in church. I thought that time had run out and we were on the doomsday eve, heralded in St. John's Revelation. I seemed to see a black sun in the desert sky sun and a blood red globe above the Tuileries garden. I told myself, "The eternal night is beginning, and it will be dire. What will happen when people realize that there is no sun?" (Nerval 1974: 248-249).

Facing eternal becoming, the vanity-seized soul longs for death through the integration in the peaceful movement of the elements and the disintegration in the Great Whole. But Nerval, dominated by dualism and paradoxical in logic and feeling, cannot ask for the total extinction of the universe. More natural for his vitality is the thought of violent death: scenes of his own death are moments of facing real death, which he provokes in order to know its power. However unfulfilling the seal of death is in his creation, he never believed it to be triumphant over that moment when he grasps it and imposes the desired transfiguration, as it happens during the noctambulist journey of Aurélia, called "the outpouring of dream into real life (Ibid: 213). The conclusion drawn by the writer himself is that "despair and suicide are the result of certain circumstances, fatal for non-believers in immortality, in its agonies and joys" (Ibid: 245-246). Gérard de Nerval shared this belief.

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