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“The Persistence of Influence”
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The Persistence of Influence

The Chimeras

Poems by Gérard de Nerval

Translated by Peter Jay, with an essay by Richard Holmes

Published by Black Swan Books

When a writer makes an allusion, it's at least partly with the hope that interested readers will go back to the original work. This is why Eliot, for example, provides this footnote to line 430 of “The Wasteland”: “V. Gérard de Nerval, Sonnet *El Desdichado*.” Most readers, of course, refused the hint — and that's too bad, especially in the case of Nerval, whose poetry and prose deserve to be read as something more than “influences.” Perhaps this new translation of Nerval's *Les Chimères*, which opens with the great poem to which Eliot alludes, will contribute something toward that end.

Gérard de Nerval was born on May 22, 1808 — the son of an army surgeon then stationed in Paris — and hanged himself with an old apron-string, which he'd often insisted was the Queen of Sheba's garter, on January 25, 1855. Between these two parentheses Nerval

traveled widely, fell in love with an indifferent actress on whom he squandered his inheritance, drank at parties from a skull he claimed was his mother's, strolled through the gardens of the Palais-Royal with a lobster on a pale blue ribbon (when asked why, he replied that he preferred them to dogs or cats because they knew the secrets of the deep). He was, in other words, an eccentric typical of other great eccentrics of his time — Gautier, Hugo, Dumas, Dondey and the rest. I note this because the oddities of Nerval's writing may strike some readers as forced, even calculating, but they are in fact natural to a man and a generation who were steeped in arcane and exotic influences, such as German folklore, freshly excavated Egyptian ruins, the Tarot and other occult philosophies.

Remote as those influences might seem to us today, they retain much of their force in the poems of Nerval, especially in these marvelous translations by Peter Jay. Here, for example, is Jay's striking version of “El Desdichado”:

I am the shadowed—the bereaved—the unconsoled,
The Aquitainian prince of the stricken tower:
My one *star's* dead, and my constellated lute
Bears the *Black Sun of Melancholia*.

You who consoled me, in the tombstone night,
Bring back my Posilipo, the Italian sea,
The flower that so pleased my wasted heart,
And the arbour where the vine and rose agree.

Am I Love or Apollo? . . . Lusignan or Biron?
My brow is red still from the kiss of the queen;
I've dreamed in the cavern where the siren swims . . .

And twice a conqueror have crossed Acheron:
Modulating on the Orphic lyre in turn
The sighs of the saint, and the fairy's screams.

This version captures much of what makes Nerval’s writing great — what Richard Holmes, in “A Letter on a Line by Nerval” (included in this volume), defines as “simple grammar, simple vocabulary, a series of clear sharp images.” And yet Nerval is famously “difficult,” and it’s easy to see why. Like Eliot, the range of his references is vast and unsystematic; like Yeats, he combines bits and pieces of many different cultures and filters them through himself so thoroughly that they take on another life.

It is this kind of difficulty that made Nerval a hero to the Symbolists, who relished what they saw in him: an artist who located the source of art in himself, rather than in the external world. The Surrealists too claimed him as one of their spiritual fathers, though as much because of his late and often romanticized insanity as because of his art.

What Nerval would have thought of all this is hard to say, though it seems clear from his writings that he did not rely on his inner life at the expense of his experience. In fact, there is little in Nerval’s work that *isn’t* autobiographical, however much the details are transformed by his imagination. This is why his work can still speak to us so strongly today, long after the excesses of Symbolism and Surrealism have ceased to illuminate our lives. We know that only a genuine marriage of outer and inner worlds can authenticate our being, which is what Nerval meant by the opening line of his great prose work, *Aurelia*: “Le rêve est une seconde vie” (*Our dreams are a second life*). Or, as Éluard (the most Nerval-like of the Surrealists) wrote, “There is another world, but it is in this one.”

Amazingly, this difficult balance — which Nerval himself never achieved so perfectly as in his poetry — is apparent in Jay’s translations, poem after poem. We don’t need Jay’s beautiful essay on translating Nerval (though how wonderful to have it included here!) to tell us that these translations are works of love. As a final example, here’s Jay’s version of “Vers Dorés,” which has been second only to “El Desdichado” in attracting translators for several generations:

Golden Lines

So then — all things feel!
—Pythagoras

Do you believe that thought, free-thinking Man,
Is yours alone in this world that bursts with life?
Your liberty controls the powers you have,
But the universe is absent from your plan.

Respect in animals an active mind:
Each flower to Nature is a blossomed soul;
A mystery of love inhabits metal;
“All things feel!” And all sway humankind.

Beware the blind wall with its watchful gaze:
Tied to the heart of matter is a word . . .
Make matter serve no use that’s impious!

Often a God lives in obscure things hid;
And like an eye at birth veiled by its lid,
Under the skin of stones a pure soul grows!

Strange, isn’t it? Traveling back to 1845, when “Vers Dorés” was written, to find such a fine example of “new age” consciousness!

One last note about this edition of *The Chimeras*. Black Swan Books deserves praise not only for presenting these works, but for offering them in a manner we don’t see much anymore.

Not only is this book lavishly produced (the cover is a full-color reproduction of Corot’s “Recollection of Mortefontaine,” and nine other black and white illustrations grace the pages), but there is an illuminating preface by Peter Jay, a fine biographical sketch of the poet, the previously mentioned essays by Jay and Richard Holmes, a useful “Select Bibliography of Translations,” and a terse poem-tribute to Nerval by the Hungarian poet János Pilinszky. It’s as if we’re visiting Nerval in the company of mutual friends, and that makes the experience of reading *The Chimeras* even more rewarding.