

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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## **El Desdichado** (*Les Chimères*, Michel Lévy frères, 1856) Gerard de Nerval. (1808-1855)

To this point, our concern with the productions of French Romanticism has taken multiple forms: dealing with a time interval marked off by the early Enlightenment— from the first third of the Enlightenment to the last third of the nineteenth century AD in Europe. (Blithe, admittedly, to try characterizing our own movement, 2006) There is obviously no single genre which qualifies this or that text as romantic, within this period. Romanticism is itself an artifice of the mind designed to help us reflect on the range of developments to which we might so far have been tempted to apply romantic terminology.

We have to this point been looking at tales, theater, essays, philosophical thinking, and in fact, at whatever falls under the rubric of the self-dismantling classical tradition, as it ‘turned toward’ the Romantic. From the era of Pope and Dryden to that of Coleridge it will have to have become noticeable, that one literary form, the Romantic lyric, is still far from the prominence it would later acquire in the forefront of literary expression. A perusal of Eighteenth century Continental texts will easily enough show us major poets whose flavors carry the Romantic sense with them. (I think of that aroma of Weltschmerz, passion, loss, innocence we find in Shelley or Keats, Lamartine or. Hugo, Leopardi or Musset. Romanticism is prominent in all of these writers.)

We are thus thrown brusquely into a literary form, the Romantic lyric, which of course is as ancient as western history itself—Sappho, Archilochus, Solon, Mimnermus—and deeply joins the move of seventh century B. C. Greece toward individualism and personal expression. (Nor is it to be supposed that this practice was confined to the Greco Romans for we have a large body of Egyptian lyrics dating from the last centuries B.C.) The advent of the Roman Empire subsequently introduced us to a full blown lyric blossoming in Catullus, Horace, and Tibullus. (We will find the lyric thrives in the milieu of Empire). That Romantic Western lyric has its long trajectory been tracking the ins and outs of Western literary feelings and emotions, and there is no doubt that, in its trajectory, it has tended to sweep along with the classical repertoire of emotions. With the advent of the latter half of the nineteenth century there is a recurrence in France of the old tradition of public and popularly published poetry.

We choose for our current example, of the wrenches awaiting our Romantic tradition as it survives itself into a new century,

### ***El Desdichado. The shattered; The depressed; The hopeless, by Gérard de Nerval***

A poem born out of the poet’s madness—Gerard was a regular in mental institutions, suffered constantly from what we might call personality disorder; we might do well to consider the whole self-exposing poem that follows as a medical working through. In other words this testimony in language leaves us no room to borrow interpretations of it, not least because the poem refuses to be read as anything other than language. We are on the edge of a new sense of language as self referential. This function is only an indicator but it will point to an increasingly evident trait of the kinds of language use that will characterize poetic action from the nineteenth century on, and that will increasingly set poetry apart from the other styles of language art that constitute a nation’s body of work in language.

We are at a broad point, as we deal with Nerval’s blocks of jammed and often impenetrable language, where we feel that our direction further inside literary historical development is itself blocked.

## Nerval's Poem

*Je suis le Ténébreux, – le Veuf, – l'Inconsolé,  
Le prince d'Aquitaine à la tour abolie :  
Ma seule étoile est morte, – et mon luth constellé  
Porte le Soleil noir de la Mélancolie.*

*Dans la nuit du tombeau, toi qui m'as consolé,  
Rends-moi le Pausilippe et la mer d'Italie,  
La fleur qui plaisait tant à mon cœur désolé,  
Et la treille où le pampre à la rose s'allie.*

*Suis-je Amour ou le? ... Lusignan ou Biron?  
Mon front est rouge encor du baiser de la reine;  
J'ai rêvé dans la grotte où nage la syrène...*

*Et j'ai deux fois vainqueur traversé l'Achéron :  
Modulant tour à tour sur la lyre d'Orphée  
Les soupirs de la sainte et les cris de la fée.*

*Author's Rude translation of Nerval's poem*

*I am the murky, the widowed, the inconsolable the prince of Aquitaine of the ruined tower. My guide star is dead and my sharp tuned lute Bears the Sun of Gloom and one banner, Bile. In the nobility of old night of the tomb you who consoled me return the joyous Italia of the author's coast the flower of joy for my heart made of ashes....*

*Am I love or the battered nobility of old  
My forehead is ruddy from the kiss of the queen I've dreamed through the grotto where the sirens swim  
I've twice crossed the River of the dead  
Singing the cries of the saints  
And the whimper of the spirits*

**Final observations:** *Narrative and sequence*

The above is designed as an entry in a narrative prose Encyclopedia. In the course of any narrative there is flow to follow. Flow tends to emerge from the course of narrative, which of course can be of many kinds. Flow can simply be what we mean by congruence, the propriety with which, in a novel, a character's actions—"he grasped the night stand as though he might fling it"—may quite properly be taken to indicate homicidal intentions—the logic of the novel is predictable though as we watch our film, read our short story, re read Homer's Odyssey, we appreciate the pleasure of 'finding things where they belong,' of finding where sequence leads us to expect them to be. The prerogative of poetry, not to mention the freely associative poem which in Nerval's time was earning the descriptor Symbolist, was sequential freedom, not to mention elliptical freedom within a chosen genre. One might say that the historical setting of such poetry as Nerval's –Baudelaire and Mallarme, farther into the century, would exceed him in this—promoted aleatory and combinatory investigations, in language, which on 'wings of chance' had scarcely been envisaged in early nineteenth century France. Aleatory, meaning free flowing and on the 'wings of chance' had to be leading ever farther into the deep bush of literary theory in the ambience of Nerval's time, a time of the dissipation of a great Empire of Napoleon, which was dissipating into the cultural back waters of Early Modernity. To be precise, we are at a European moment

when a great autobiographical-critical text like Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria* was the potent opening up of a sense of the extent and power of the imagination. It was this sense, of course, which Coleridge brilliantly imported from Immanuel Kant's *Aesthetic*—so that we can once more import Mme de Stael into the conversation, calling to mind once more the ardor which she urged the French to turn to Germany. The Coleridgean vision of an imaginative power which can transform daily reality is clearly an insight congenial to the kind of poetry Nerval invites us to in *El Desdichado*. So what is Nerval's poem about if not mental transformation? The narrator introduces himself as in a state of profound depression, in which bad luck has been fatefully mixed? He is murky and widowed, without support...though he has in the past been a noble prince, his tower has been destroyed. His lyre is longer attuned to the patterns of the heavens. He has seen the night of the tomb, has fallen into eternal darkness, but his guide has left him. He is *desdichado*.