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fallen stars

Gérard de Nerval – the man who walked lobsters

Raymond Cavanaugh Jr

Gérard de Nerval, a.k.a. Gerard Labrunie, was born in Paris in 1808. The son of a military doctor in Napoleon's Grande Armée, de Nerval's mother died shortly after his birth.

The young child was sent to a maternal relative in the French countryside, where he spent several years. De Nerval was eventually reunited with his father in Paris; however, he would occasionally return to that seemingly boundless landscape which had kindled his imagination.

Though de Nerval would produce his own creative works, he first made his mark at the age of 20 with a heralded translation of Goethe's epic *Faust*. The young man would undertake other translations, and he has been credited with introducing the poems of Heinrich Heine to French readers.

Concurrent with those endeavours, de Nerval joined a very bohemian peer group consisting of brilliant misfits who together pursued the artificial paradise of hashish.

Though one must be wary of attributing artistic composition to hashish, de Nerval clearly did manifest a strong drive for altered states of consciousness. He kept pursuing an exalted 'spirit world' as opposed to the material world he dismissed as a 'hovel and place of ill-repute' before proclaiming: 'I am ashamed that God should see me here'.

As part of his preferred 'spirit world', de Nerval placed much significance on dreams, a priority which would later find emphasis in the Surrealist movement. Fellow Frenchmen, such as Marcel Proust, have felt his dreamy influence, and T. S. Eliot's groundbreaking *Wasteland* epic would include the second line of de Nerval's sonnet *El Desdichado*.

In 1841, de Nerval's world of spirits plunged into disarray when he suffered his first nervous breakdown. He embarked on *Les Illuminés*, a series of short novels on the theme of mental instability.

Around this time, de Nerval began to acquire quite a reputation for walking a pet lobster on a leash through the Palais Royal Gardens in Paris. 'I have a liking for lobsters', he declared. 'They are peaceful, serious creatures who know the secrets of the sea and don't bark'.

Though he provided a rather compelling explanation, the sight of de Nerval circling Paris with a pet lobster only added to suspicions of insanity. Beset by subsequent nervous breakdowns, his financial situation worsened; at one point he was 'accosted by the mayor for stealing from the lobster nets'.

On a morning in January 1855, de Nerval was found dangling beneath the splintery grate of a rooming house, having hanged himself with bondage wire snatched from an adjoining brothel. He left a note which read: 'Do not wait up for me this evening, for the night will be black and white'.