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Gérard de Nerval, *The Salt Smugglers: History of the Abbé de Bucquoy*. Translated from the French by Richard Sieburth. Brooklyn, NY: Archipelago Books, 2009. Notes and translator's postscript. 147 pp. \$16.00 US (pb). ISBN 978-0-9800330-6-9.

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Gérard de Nerval's *Les Faux saulniers: Histoire de l'abbé de Bucquoy* appeared originally as a *feuilleton* (serial publication) in the left-leaning newspaper *Le National*, in twenty-seven installments between October 24 and December 22, 1850. At the end of the serial publication, an off-print of the text was produced and distributed to the *National's* subscribers. In 2009, a facsimile reproduction of the off-print was published by the Editions du Rapapéou. Richard Sieburth's fine translation of the text, based on the French Pléiade edition, established and annotated by Jacques Boni, makes this text available, for the first time, to English-speaking readers. It is also the first edition to try and replicate the way the text appeared originally on the newspaper page, where *feuilletons* occupied four columns at the bottom third of the front and reverse pages.

Nerval is primarily known for his hermetic poems (*Les chimères*) and a relatively small number of prose writings, including the novellas collected as *Les Filles du feu* (of which the most famous is "Sylvie") and *Aurélia*. These texts are marked by melancholic lyricism, often mixed with irony (at the end of "Sylvie" the narrator says: "Sometimes I call her [Sylvie] Lolotte and she finds a certain resemblance in me to Werther, except for the pistols, which are no longer in fashion..."), testifying to Nerval's understanding of himself as a belated Romantic.[1] Readers therefore may be surprised to find a somewhat different Nerval in *The Salt Smugglers*—a political satirist, high-spirited and witty, a writer more in the tradition of Diderot and Sterne (the references to Diderot are multiple) than in the high-Romantic tradition of a Hugo or a Lamartine.

*The Salt Smugglers* is an ex-centric and heterogeneous text. The salt smugglers of the title make only a couple of brief appearances; the story of the abbé de Bucquoy, announced in the subtitle, accounts for only about a third of the text. The rest of the text consists of two main parts: the various adventures of the narrator himself, including his travels in the Valois—a narrative interspersed with songs and poems; and the story of the abbé's great-aunt, Angélique de Longueval. The miscellaneous nature of the text made it possible for Nerval to recycle parts of it in his other writings. The story of the abbé was incorporated into *Les Illuminés* (1852), Nerval's construction of an alternative Enlightenment, while the story of the abbé's great-aunt became "Angélique," one of the *Filles du feu* (1854), and the tale of the narrator's travel in the Valois was rewritten in "Sylvie" (published for the first time in 1853). This recycling and rewriting suggest that, first appearances notwithstanding, *The Salt Smugglers* is far from an anomalous text in the Nervalian corpus and remind us that his oeuvre is often marked by fragmentariness and repetition. Texts consist of disparate parts that can migrate from one "whole" to another while they are also variants of each other.

As the narrator tells us, he first had the idea of telling the story of the abbé de Bucquoy when he saw at a bookseller's stall in Frankfurt a volume, printed in 1719, entitled, "Incident of the

rarest sort, or History of the *abbé count de Bucquoi, Esq.*, especially his escapes from Fort-l'Évêque and from the Bastille, with several works in verse and prose, most notably the whole *gamut* of women..." (p. 8; italics in the original)—a *mise en abyme* of the volume we are reading. He decided not to buy the book because of its high price, thinking he would find it easily in France. But the book turns out to be hard to locate (or, as the narrator puts it, its hero proves to be an "eccentric and ever-so-slippery figure," [p. 11]) and, unable to tell us the adventures of the abbé, the narrator is forced to treat us instead to the tale of his own "futile peregrinations in search of the abbé de Bucquoi" (p. 20) as well as to the story of the abbé's great-aunt.

But the text of *The Salt Smugglers* is determined not only by the obstacles the narrator encounters in his quest for the slippery abbé; it is also shaped by the laws concerning serial publication. Coming back from Frankfurt, "a sovereign city-state" known for its flouting of the law (providing a safe haven for both religious refugees and printing houses, [p.7]), he finds Paris in turmoil in response to the recent Riancy amendment to the laws of July 16, 1850 regulating the press, which sought to force newspapers to stop publishing the popular *romans-feuilletons* (serial novels) by imposing a prohibitive fine on such publications. Though initially the part of the newspaper called *feuilleton* was devoted to a miscellany of literary criticism, theater news and so on, since the serial publication of Balzac's *Une vieille fille* in *Le Siècle* in 1837, it gradually became dominated by novels—hence *roman-feuilleton*. Its popular and commercial success (it increased the circulation of newspapers in an unprecedented way), culminating in the two blockbusters, Eugène Sue's *Mystères de Paris*, (1842-43) and Alexandre Dumas' *Le Comte de Monte-Cristo* (1844-46) has turned it into a formidable social organ by the late 1840s. That Sue had recently been elected to the Assemblée Nationale in the wake of his literary success only increased the government's fear of the influence of the *roman-feuilleton*. Hence the attempt to suppress it.

With the Riancy amendment in force, the narrator's desire to find the book telling of the abbé's adventures acquires a new urgency: it would be proof that what he writes is not fiction and would allow him "to speak of this character in an historical rather than in a novelistic fashion" (p. 8). While looking for the book, he can tell the "charming love story" of Angélique without fear of compromising the newspaper that will publish it since he found it in the archives and it is "completely historical" (p. 32). As to his own adventures, they consist of "absolutely factual details about [his] experiences as a painstaking researcher" (p. 43); when he tells of what befell others (such as the arrest of the archeologist) he assures the editor that the episode is entirely true and he can supply proof of the matter (p. 65). Obviously, all this exaggerated concern with historical veracity serves to mock the idea that one can separate clearly and rigorously the writing of fiction from that of history, that is, it questions the very grounds on which the Riancy amendment rests. Thus, the narrator argues, though interpreters of the Riancy amendment may "question his right . . . to engage in the *mise en scène* (or *mise en dialogue*) of certain portions of his narrative" he can answer that "Froissart and Monsterlet filled their narratives with dialogues whose authenticity they would certainly have trouble proving. Old Daniel and Mézeray followed the trick perfected by Titus-Livius, Tacitus and others of having their characters deliver long harangues..." (p. 88; italics in the original). Thus Nerval does not attack the law (as did others, most notably Hugo); rather, he engages in an ironic dialogue with the law that allows him to escape censorship by constantly speaking about it.[2]

It would be a mistake, however, to read *The Salt Smugglers* simply as a reaction to the Riancy amendment or even more generally as a critique of censorship—though obviously it is both. First, in claiming repeatedly that "This is not a novel" (pp. 14, 20), Nerval, echoing Diderot's text "*Ceci n'est pas un conte*," inserts himself in a literary tradition that, as he tells us, goes back all the way to antiquity. In so doing Nerval emphasizes the literary, or inter-textual

determination of his work (as opposed to a mimetic one: “this is a faithful record of what actually happened,” or a fictional one: “this is the product of my imagination”):

And then... (This is how Diderot began one of his stories, someone is bound to remind me.)  
 --Go on!  
 --You have merely imitated Diderot.  
 --Who had imitated Sterne...  
 --Who had imitated Swift.  
 --Who had imitated Rabelais.  
 --Who had imitated Merlinus Cocaius.  
 --Who had imitated Petronius.  
 --Who had imitated Lucian. And Lucian had imitated numerous others... (p. 88).

At the same time, the narrator’s relation to the historical figures whose life he reads in the old books and documents seems peculiarly intimate. The abbé’s name “has always echoed through my thoughts like some childhood memory” (p. 41). His various travels in search of the book take him to the region where the family of both Angélique and the abbé lived and which is also the scene of his own childhood (as becomes clear in his conversations with his friend Sylvain). How are we to understand the relation between the search for the book as guarantee of historical grounding and the intimate proximity the narrator feels to the characters of the books he reads?

The tale of the abbé de Bucquoi is mentioned in another text by Nerval: the letter to Alexandre Dumas that serves as a Preface to the *Filles du feu*. In this short but crucial text Nerval, trying to describe the onset of his madness, discusses one of his earlier texts—the fragment *Le Roman tragique* which, published in 1844, has remained unfinished. It is the story “of a character who appeared, I think, around the time of Louis XV, under the pseudonym of Brisacier. Where did I read the fatal biography of this adventurer? I found that of the abbé de Bucquoy but I feel quite incapable of stitching together the least historical proof of the existence of this illustrious unknown! What would have been nothing but a game for you, Master [i.e. Dumas] . . . became for me an obsession, a vertigo. To invent is, ultimately, to remember again [*se ressouvenir*], said a moralist; unable to find proof of the material existence of my hero, I suddenly believed in the transmigration of souls . . . From the moment I thought I had grasped the series of all my previous existences, it cost me nothing more to have been a prince, a king, a sorcerer, a genius and even God; the chain was broken and marked hours for minutes.”[3]

In the case of the abbé de Bucquoi, Nerval could finish the story since he had the proof that the abbé existed independently of him—he has found the book. In the case of Brisacier (who too existed and whose adventures, according to Béatrice Didier, Nerval read in the *Mémoires* of the abbé de Choisy [4]), by contrast, his inability to locate the book resulted in *un vertige*: a dizzying doubt about the reality of what is outside him, its replacement by the “I,” an expansion of that “I” that eliminates all alterity and severs the link to the outside world.[5] The narrator’s “need” to find the book is thus not simply related to constraints on publishing imposed by the Riancy amendment. It touches the very core of Nerval’s sense of self and/in its relation to writing. His identification with the characters about whom he reads (what he calls in the letter to Dumas “*l’entraînement du récit*”) and which we see in the way both the abbé and his great-aunt seem to him *heimlich*, linked to his childhood, is contained and mastered by the certainty that they are in reality different and separate from him. When this certainty fails him, the *heimlich* becomes *unheimlich*: the double appears menacing, the self feels threatened, persecuted, the world around him melts away. Thus the experience of loss that marks all of Nerval’s writing (“*Je suis le Ténébreux,—le Veuf,—l’Inconsolé... ma seule Etoile est morte,*”[6]), while it may or may not be the origin or cause of his madness, is certainly one of its clearest manifestations.

In his Postscript, Sieburth states that Nerval of *The Salt Smugglers* “reveals himself to be one of the savviest political novelists of the short-lived Second Republic. Like *The Charterhouse of Parma*, Nerval’s newspaper serial provides a deft satire of the modern police state” (p. 139). Without diminishing the value of *The Salt Smugglers* (or of the *Charterhouse of Parma*) as political satire one should note that, like Stendhal, Nerval’s interest in the police state is determined not only by current political events but also by his sense of self-identity, especially in its relation to writing. Whereas in Stendhal’s case this is expressed through multiple pseudonyms, plagiarism, and compulsive memoranda to self, in Nerval’s text it is manifested through the repeated cases of mistaken identity (both the narrator and the abbé get in trouble because they are mistaken for someone else, see pp.25, 92, 96, 120, 123; the confusion also applies to books, see p.12); the possibility of imposture (“the alleged count de Bucquoi,” p.13; “the interloper who supposedly usurped the identity of the descendant of the count of Bucquoi,” p.51; note also that “salt smugglers” in French are “faux [false] saulniers”: “these fake salt merchants,”p.88); and the presence of doubles (e.g., the bibliophile, p.66ff; Dumas, p.19).

*The Salt Smugglers* should be of interest to a wide variety of readers: historians of culture and literary historians interested in the press, the relation between literature and politics, and in the *roman-feuilleton* as well as literary critics interested in the relation between identity and writing. Sieburth’s translation captures well Nerval’s style and tone and is a pleasure to read; his notes and postscript provide much useful historical, biographical, and literary information. Except for a couple of pages where the proofreader seems to have lost attention (pp.74-75), the text is free of typographical errors and is beautifully produced.

## NOTES

[1] Gérard de Nerval, “Sylvie,” in *Les Filles du Feu*. Ed. Béatrice Didier (Paris: Gallimard/Folio, 1972), p. 165. Translation mine.

[2] Daniel Desormeaux, “Sans foi ni loi: (Nerval et Marx) pour ou contre le roman-feuilleton.” *Les Lettres romanes* 58 (2004): 47.

[3] *Les Filles du Feu*, p. 29. Translation mine.

[4] *Les Filles du Feu*, p. 378, note 1 to p. 29.

[5] For a full analysis of this dynamic see Jonathan Strauss, *Subjects of Terror: Nerval, Hegel, and the Modern Self* (Stanford, Cal.: Stanford University Press, 1998).

[6] Gérard de Nerval, “El Desdichdo,” in *Aurélia, Les Chimères, La Pandora*. Ed. Béatrice Didier (Paris: Livre de poche, 1972), p. 177.

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