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Aki Taguchi, *Nerval. Recherche de l'autre et conquête de soi. Contribution au suivi d'une genèse du "Voyage en Orient."* Bern: Peter Lang, 2010. 326 pp. Footnotes, bibliography, and appendices. \$65.00 U.S. (pb, eBook); ISBN 978-3-0343-0460-3; 978-3-0351-0116-4.

Review by James Smith Allen, Southern Illinois University Carbondale.

Gérard de Nerval's *Voyage en Orient* (1851) did not much interest historians for more than a century. Of course, literary specialists explored the psychological, as well as cultural constructions of reality in Nerval's apparent travelogue to Vienna, Cairo, Beirut, Constantinople and back, whose dream-like qualities the surrealist André Breton admired in the interwar period.[1] Much has also been written on the book's manifestations of Nerval's mental illness, which led ultimately to his suicide, in the book's autobiographical storyline; this particular thread runs through a patchwork of personal correspondence, diary musings, travel-guide descriptions, intertextual borrowings, and newspaper dispatches of events.[2] The publication of no fewer than four critical editions of Nerval's studies in the 1950s unleashed a minor flood of work on its esotericism, ethnography, poetic language, and genres of expression (p. 293). Nerval's erudition has long dazzled his serious readers.

None of this literary scholarship, however, captured the historical profession's imagination quite so much as Edward Said's summary assessment of Nerval's achievement. "After his voyage the earth remained dead, and aside from its brilliantly crafted but fragmentary embodiments in the *Voyage*," Said wrote, "his self was no less drugged and worn out than before. Therefore the Orient seemed retrospectively to belong to a negative realm, in which failed narratives, disordered chronicles, mere transcription of scholarly texts, were its only possible vessel. At least Nerval did not try to save his project by wholeheartedly giving himself up to French designs on the Orient, although he did resort to Orientalism to make some of his points." [3] Such a dismissive, *ad hominem* judgment formed the basis for many subsequent historians' explorations of orientalist discourses, which underlie European cultural hegemony to this day. Nerval was merely one of many comparable, imperialist voices.

Aki Taguchi's well-informed and detailed study of Nerval's travel writing, drawn from various newspaper articles written in the 1840s, suggests another historical perspective. Instead of lamenting Nerval's discursive passivity, personal failings, and cultural projections, Taguchi describes the literary craftsman fashioning his text, deliberately and steadily, from the 120 articles he had published over the course of a decade. Engaged and purposeful, Nerval knew precisely what he was doing; and the hegemonic implications of his writing, much revised during a major crisis in French foreign policy on the Middle East, challenge Said's critical allegations. Defender of the Druses in Lebanon against the depredations of the Maronite Catholics on the one hand and the Syrian Moslems on the other, Nerval inserted himself into local conflicts at the expense of both English and French interests in the Eastern Question in 1839-1840 (pp. 213-232).[4] Nerval did so as a novelist, not a journalist, creating a narrative persona self-consciously involved in the cultures he endeavored to understand discursively. "En traçant l'évolution spirituelle et littéraire du *Voyage en Orient* de Gérard de Nerval," writes Taguchi, "nous avons constaté que la position de l'écrivain passe de *reporter* à personnage

romanesque” (p. 276). In short, his contribution to another type of orientalist language was much more creative and restorative—one akin to the universalist aspirations of the Saint-Simonian socialists—than what Said would have had us believe (p. 225).

How Taguchi develops this approach to Nerval’s work is her book’s principal historiographical contribution. She walks the reader, step by step, through the composition of the published volume, pieced together from the newspaper and journal articles Nerval had written from his first trip to Vienna in 1839-1840 until the corrections of the galley in 1851. Nerval had also published two volumes—*Les Femmes du Caire* (1848) and *Les Femmes du Liban* (1850)—which served as preliminary versions of the final publication. Taguchi meticulously traces the revisions, and the revisions of revisions, that Nerval undertook in this twelve-year period to complete his book. The result is an over-the-shoulder view of a writer at his desk, re-working the various sources he had at hand (the articles and published volumes, but also and perhaps most important, the works of other European travelers to the Middle East: William Lane, F.-R. Chateaubriand, and Alphonse de Lamartine, among others). It is clear that Nerval was an omnivorous reader who frequently inserted the texts of other writers directly into his work-in-progress in order to fill out the changing conception he had of himself, but also of Middle Eastern religious life, in the course of his book (pp. 49-52).

Concludes Taguchi, “Le curieux se régénère en chercheur de la croyance première et salvatrice. Le feuilletoniste se régénère en écrivain soucieux de la structure de son oeuvre” (p. 272). Clearly, Nerval’s personal and literary trajectory in his travelogue was from mere observer of himself and the scenery he saw to probing analyst of the creative self and the religious culture he had studied. His fascination with demonstrating his recovery from mental illness was transformed into an erudition worthy of a romantic artist immersed in his craft. By the time Nerval had finished writing his book, he had left behind a dilettante’s antics—such as walking a pet lobster on a ribbon in the Tuileries gardens—to assume the responsibility of establishing a reputable alter ego. His crowning accomplishment is a novelistic work of sympathetic understanding. “Et au titre d’écrivain il ne s’agit pas seulement d’un travail descriptif et pittoresque, mais de l’appréhension, dans un voyage réel, de l’itinéraire personnel et spirituel qui sou-tendra ensuite toute son oeuvre” (p. 279). Contrary to Said, Taguchi makes Nerval’s text worth reading.

Taguchi’s study is precise and accurate in a positivistic tradition of literary scholarship that can try the reader’s patience. There is the philologist’s delight in recounting the textual differences from one publication to the next. The beginning of each section actually lists all the articles about to be examined (pp. 19-20, 89-90, 125, 176-178, 213-215, 251-254). Occasionally Taguchi is so immersed in tracing the genesis of Nerval’s text that she misses connections culture specialists would readily make, such as to Philothée O’Neddy, one of Nerval’s youthful Bousingots whom Taguchi mistakes for Théophile Gautier, in one of the author’s cryptic dedications (p. 36). Nevertheless, her book is well-conceived and well-executed, and it forces historians to reconsider the discursive origins and consequences of French (and British) orientalism. For that achievement alone, Taguchi’s book is of value to cultural historians of the nineteenth century.

NOTES

[1] André Breton, *Manifestes du surréalisme* (Paris: Jean-Jacques Pauvert, 1962), pp. 34-35.

[2] See, for example, Michel Jeanneret, *La Lettre perdue. Ecriture et folie dans l’oeuvre de Nerval* (Paris: Flammarion, 1978).

[3] Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), p. 184.

[4] Cf. Gérard de Nerval, *Voyage en Orient*, ed. Jean Guillaume and Claude Pichois (Paris: Gallimard, 1984), pp. 460-469.

James Smith Allen
Southern Illinois University Carbondale
jsallen@siu.edu

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