



# Nineteenth-Century Contexts

## An Interdisciplinary Journal

ISSN: 0890-5495 (Print) 1477-2663 (Online) Journal homepage: <https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/gncc20>

## Nerval's journeys in verse and in prose

Sarah Gubbins

To cite this article: Sarah Gubbins (2019) Nerval's journeys in verse and in prose, *Nineteenth-Century Contexts*, 41:1, 75-84, DOI: [10.1080/08905495.2018.1545430](https://doi.org/10.1080/08905495.2018.1545430)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/08905495.2018.1545430>



Published online: 17 Dec 2018.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 79



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



## Nerval's journeys in verse and in prose

Sarah Gubbins

School of Languages, Cultures and Linguistics, University College Dublin, Dublin, Ireland

The sonnets of Gérard de Nerval's *Les chimères* (*The Chimaeras*) of 1854 are full of places: Greece, France, Italy, Egypt, Belgium, the Holy Land, even the underworld.<sup>1</sup> These places (whether mentioned explicitly or evoked through historical or mythological figures) act both to anchor and to proliferate associations. It is perhaps unsurprising that in this collection, which takes its name from a hybrid monster, multiple – often, seemingly incompatible – traditions come into contact with, and modify, one another. However, a different kind of syncretism is evident in Nerval's prose, particularly his travel writing. I shall consider the extent to which geographical and generic explorations coincide in *Les chimères* and *Voyage en Orient* (*Journey to the Orient*, 1851), as well as addressing Nerval's evocations of otherness in verse and prose.

In *Les chimères* (Nerval 1984–1993, 3:645–651), visions of place arise from within the sonnet framework. Though the most famous sonnet of the collection, “El Desdichado”<sup>2</sup> shares a name with the disinherited knight from Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe* (1819), Nerval can draw on the riches of a sonnet tradition dating back to the thirteenth century. The twelve sonnets of *Les chimères* are quite regular in formal terms, despite not complying with the rhyme scheme of abba-abba-cdd-ede that Théodore de Banville argues is the only acceptable arrangement for the “regular” French sonnet (1872, 171–174).<sup>3</sup> Each sonnet has two a-rhymes and two b-rhymes in the quatrains, with only minor variations, such as alternating rhymes rather than enclosed rhymes in the quatrains of certain sonnets, and a slightly irregular distribution of rhymes in the tercets. Nerval exploits the spatial potential of the sonnet in his evocation of places. Most obviously, place names are given a privileged space in the sonnet structure, either in the rhyme position – “Italie” (“El Desdichado”), “Orient” (“Myrtho”), “Grèce,” (“Myrtho”), “Solyme” (Solyma, or Jerusalem) (“Le Christ aux Oliviers [IV]”) – or at the end of the first hemistich: “Aquitaine” (“El Desdichado”), “Pausilippe” (“El Desdichado”). Since Nerval respects the traditional limit of two rhymes in the quatrains, many place names resonate throughout the octave, and are linked with other key words through rhyme. In “El Desdichado,” “Italie” (line 6) rhymes with “abolie” (stricken<sup>4</sup>) (line 2), “Mélancolie” (line 4) and “s'allie” (unites) (line 8). In “Myrtho,” “Orient” (line 3) rhymes with “brillant” (line 2), “souriant” (smiling) (line 6) and “prient” (praying) (line 7), while “Grèce” (line 8) rhymes with “ivresse” (intoxication) (line 5), “enchanteresse” (line 1), and “tresse” (line 4). In the fourth sonnet of “Le Christ aux Oliviers,” “Solyme” (line 4) rhymes with “victime” (line 1), “estime” (line 5) and “crime” (line 8). The logic behind these connections is aesthetic rather than discursive, and it complicates the identity of each place.

Other words in the rhyme position call to mind, and draw together, traditions from different parts of the world. In the tercets of “Horus,” the Egyptian god Osiris (line 11) is linked through rhyme with Iris (line 14), the personification of the rainbow in Greek mythology. In “Antéros,” “Cocyste” (Cocytus) (line 12) – one of the rivers of the Greek underworld – rhymes with “Amalécyste” (Amalek) (line 13), the name of a tribe that was decimated by the Hebrews. Also, “Dagon” (line 11), a Philistine idol, rhymes with “dragon” (line 14), a reference to the one killed by Cadmus, whose teeth, when planted in the ground, sprouted into armies of warriors who eventually established a new civilization. The collision of cultures in *Les chimères* is unprecedented among nineteenth-century French sonnets, and results in significant ambiguity.

The sonnet structure holds these incongruous associations together in a precarious state of tension, but it is clear from the poet’s significant reworking of his sonnets that the configuration of these different traditions was only ever provisional. Many of the poems in *Les chimères* had previously been published, often with variations.<sup>5</sup> By considering unpublished manuscripts, such as the Manuscrit Dumesnil de Gramont α (Guillaume and Steinmetz in Nerval 1984–1993, 1:1760–1764), we can see that Nerval’s changes went beyond tinkering with small details to incorporate extensive structural revisions. The version of “Delfica” in *Les chimères* mixes the quatrains of “À J-y Colonna” with the last tercet of “À Mad<sup>e</sup> Aguado,” both sonnets from the Manuscrit Dumesnil de Gramont α.<sup>6</sup> The title of “Delfica” also changed over the years – it was first published in 1845 as “Vers dorés,” (“Golden Verse”)<sup>7</sup> then as “Daphné” in *Petits châteaux de Bohême* (*Little Castles of Bohemia*) in 1853.

It seems plausible that these rearrangements constituted unsatisfactory attempts to arrive at definitive versions of the poems that would succeed in synthesizing different worldviews. The ambiguity that exists in “Myrtho” regarding the multiple meanings of the hydrangea (“Le pâle Hortensia” [line 14]) is seen in “À J-y Colonna,” an earlier sonnet from which “Myrtho” takes its tercets. Nerval re-uses the quatrains of “À J-y Colonna” in “Delfica,” making a more obvious contrast between Christianity and Greek mythology in the first tercet (“Ils reviendront ces dieux que tu pleures toujours!” [They will come back, those gods that you still/always mourn] [line 9]), and an explicit reference to Christianity in the second tercet, borrowed from “À Mad<sup>e</sup> Aguado:” “Cependant la sibylle au visage latin / Est endormie encor sous l’arc de Constantin” (Meanwhile, the sibyl with the latin face / Is still asleep under the the arch of Constantine) (lines 12–13). Nerval thus seems, belatedly, to clarify the symbolism of the hydrangea, despite the fact that it is not explicitly mentioned in “Delfica.” The presence in “Delfica” of Daphne, who was turned into a laurel in order to escape from Apollo, connects the poem to “Myrtho,” where it is suggested that it is “sous les rameaux du laurier de Virgile” (under the branches of Virgil’s laurel tree) (line 13) that the hydrangea is united with the myrtle. However, “Delfica” contains its own ambiguities in relation to the opposition between pagan and Christian traditions. While Nerval’s modifications point to the possibility of a broader fusion of seemingly incompatible elements, like the chimaera, the sonnets of *Les chimères* are never entirely balanced.

On the surface, the structure of *Voyage en Orient* is much simpler. Originally published in instalments in a number of periodicals,<sup>8</sup> the text presents itself as an account of the male narrator’s travels. The itinerary moves from Paris to Vienna via Geneva, Bern, Zurich, Konstanz, and Munich; from Vienna to Trieste, where the narrator boards an Austrian

ship for Syra, visiting Cythera on the way; crosses the Mediterranean to Egypt; visits Lebanon, Smyrna, and Constantinople; and returns to France via Malta. The text is addressed to “un ami” (a friend).<sup>9</sup> Instalments that are signed generally bear the name “Gérard de Nerval,” though one is signed “Gérard,” and initials are occasionally used. However, Nerval never made the journey described in *Voyage en Orient*. In October 1839, he travelled from Paris to Vienna, passing through Geneva, and then returned to Paris. In January 1843, one year after the end of his first breakdown, he travelled from Marseilles to Malta, Syra, Egypt, Lebanon, and Constantinople, then back to Syra, Malta, Naples, Pompeii, and Herculaneum, before arriving in Marseilles in January 1844 (Pichois in Nerval 1984–1993, 2:1369). Although Nerval visited Italy on his way back from the Orient, the country is evoked in *Les filles du feu* (*The Daughters of Fire*) of 1854, rather than *Voyage en Orient*. Notably, Nerval never visited Cythera, the description of which inspired Baudelaire’s “Un voyage à Cythère” (“A Journey to Cythera”) in *Les fleurs du mal* (*The Flowers of Evil*) in 1857.

It is clear from a letter published in *Le Messager* on 18 September 1838 that the objective “truth” of travel accounts was not particularly important to Nerval:

Il est de tels poètes aussi, qui, sans sortir de Paris, devinent complètement la couleur et l’effet des régions étrangères, et qui ne trouvent plus rien à dire quand la réalité succède à cette sorte de mirage intellectuel et magique. Tels sont, par exemple, Balzac, Janin, de Musset et Eugène Sue, et croyez que je me ferais plus volontiers à ces voyageurs d’imagination et d’intuition qu’à bien d’autres qui ont traîné leurs semelles sur tous les chemins des deux mondes. On pourrait leur appliquer la magnifique pensée d’un sonnet de Schiller sur Christophe Colomb: “Va devant toi, et si ce monde que tu cherches n’a pas été créé encore, il jaillira des ondes exprès pour justifier ton audace; car il existe un Éternel entre la nature et le génie, qui fait que l’une tient toujours ce que l’autre promet.” (1:455).

(There are also certain poets who, without ever leaving Paris, accurately guess the color and the effect of foreign regions, and who no longer have anything to say when reality takes the place of this sort of intellectual and magical mirage. This is the case, for example, for Balzac, Janin, de Musset, and Eugène Sue, and, believe me, I would much rather trust these intuitive and imaginative travelers, than the many others who have dragged their soles across the half the world. The magnificent message of Schiller’s sonnet on Christopher Columbus could apply to them: “Go forth, and if the world you are searching for has not yet been created, it will rise up from the waves just to justify your boldness; for there is an Eternal between nature and genius, which means that one always holds what the other promises.”)

Indeed, the narrator of *Voyage en Orient* regrets the loss inherent in visiting places that one has initially encountered through reading, art, or in one’s dreams:

Aussi bien, c’est une impression douloureuse, à mesure qu’on va plus loin, de perdre, ville à ville et pays à pays, tout ce bel univers qu’on s’est créé jeune, par les lectures, par les tableaux et par les rêves. Le monde qui se compose ainsi dans la tête des enfants est si riche et si beau, qu’on ne sait s’il est le résultat exagéré d’idées apprises, ou si c’est un souvenir d’une existence antérieure et la géographie magique d’une planète inconnue. Si admirables que soient certains aspects et certaines contrées, il n’en est point dont l’imagination s’étonne complètement, et qui lui présentent quelque chose de stupéfiant et d’inouï. (2:189)

(In fact, it is a painful feeling, as you go on further, from city to city and country to country, to lose all of the beautiful universe that you created when you were young, through reading, looking at paintings, and dreaming. The world that takes shape in this way in children’s minds is so rich and beautiful that it is difficult to know whether it is an excessive elaboration

of ideas we have learned, or if it is a memory of a previous existence and the magic geography of an unknown planet. However admirable certain sights and lands may be, there are none which completely surprise our imagination, none which offer it something stupefying and unprecedented).

The complex interplay between “reality” and imagination in this text suggests that the “journey” in *Voyage en Orient* is as much about the creative process as it is about travel.

Michel Butor (1974) has noted that, in *Voyage en Orient*, Nerval eschewed the traditional route taken by Chateaubriand (1806) and Lamartine (1835), instead plotting out a course of his own choosing. By avoiding Rome, Athens, and Jerusalem, and choosing Cairo, Beirut, and Constantinople as main destinations, the narrator distances himself from his predecessors. Unlike Chateaubriand and Lamartine, who travelled with servants and were surrounded by guides, the narrator of *Voyage en Orient* seeks out direct contact with local people and welcomes the unplanned events that befall him.

Nerval is among the first authors to exploit fully the “legends” supposedly told by locals in his travel writing (Bony 1990, 322n142).<sup>10</sup> However, neither of the *contes* (tales) included in the text is actually a folk tale: *Histoire de la reine du matin* (*The Story of the Queen of the Morning*) is based loosely on a story that features in the Qur’an and the Bible but with significant alterations; *Histoire du calife Hakem* (*The Story of Caliph Hakem*) contains borrowings from the work of Western writers, namely Silvestre de Sacy’s *Exposé de la religion des Druzes* (*Exposition of the Religion of the Druzes*) of 1838 and Pierre Vattier’s *L’histoire mahométane* (*Mahomedan History*) of 1657 (Guillaume and Pichois in Nerval 1984–1993, 2:1532). These stories are respectively presented as having been told to the narrator by a sheik and a professional *conteur* (storyteller). However, Nerval’s oriental *contes* contain themes that reflect the narrator’s preoccupations in the rest of the text and other works. Both Adoniram and Hakem are typical Nervalian protagonists, in that they are victims of ill fortune for reasons beyond their control, experiencing visions and paranoia. They are the archetypal sons of Cain – unlikely characters in an authentic folk tale. The fabrication of oral communication by people native to the visited countries may serve to render the narrator’s account of the journey more authentic.<sup>11</sup>

One seemingly paradoxical way in which Nerval sets himself apart from earlier travel writers is his extreme reliance on literary borrowings. The use of textual sources in travel writing was not new: Chateaubriand’s *Itinéraire de Paris à Jérusalem* (*Itinerary from Paris to Jerusalem*) of 1811 and Lamartine’s *Voyage en Orient* of 1835 are littered with borrowings from historical and literary works. However, Nerval takes this practice to a new level. His appropriation of the work of others in *Voyage en Orient* is pervasive, ranging from acknowledged citations to hidden borrowings and word-for-word transcriptions. Plagiarism is systematic in *Voyage en Orient*. Nerval’s unacknowledged borrowings come from scholarly works by orientalists, or from travel literature. Some chapters in the section entitled “Les femmes du Caire” (The Women of Cairo), such as “Les mystères du harem” (The Mysteries of the Harem) and “Le Sirafeh” (The Sirafeh) are very close adaptations of sections from *The Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians* by Edward William Lane (1836). Much of the description of Lebanon is borrowed from Vattier, and Nerval plagiarizes several passages from *Lettres sur la Turquie* (*Letters on Turkey*) (1839) by Jean-Henri-Abdolonyme Ubcini in his section on Constantinople (Richer

1963, 363–364). Rabâa Ben Achour-Abdelkéfi suggests that the journey described in *Voyage en Orient* is simply a frame for Nerval's literary memories (2005, 87).

This structuring, modifying and arranging of artefacts to form a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts is very similar to the way in which places are treated in *Les chimères*. We are certainly reminded of the synthesizing aesthetic of the sonnets when the narrator states that his intention in visiting the hill of Aplunori on Cythera was to “remplir mes poches de débris mythologiques” (Fill my pockets with mythological debris) (Nerval 1984–1993, 2:242). Like the verse poems, *Voyage en Orient* displays a tendency to make links between cultures. Some of these are comical and could be seen as condescending, such as when the narrator notes that women in Cairo are just as interested in fashion as those in France: “Les Femmes sont les mêmes partout” (Women are the same everywhere) (2:287). Others go deeper, such as when he argues for the equivalence of different religions:

Ainsi Orphée, ainsi Moïse, ainsi ce législateur moins connu de nous, que les Indiens appellent Rama, emportaient un même fonds d'enseignement et de croyances, qui devait se modifier selon les lieux et les races, mais qui partout constituait des civilisations durables. (2:346)

(And so Orpheus – like Moses, and like that legislator less well known to us whom the Indians call Rama – took away the same foundation of teachings and beliefs, which was modified according to place and race, but which, everywhere, formed lasting civilizations.)

The narrator is particularly interested in the Druze religion, which he describes as “formée de débris de toutes les croyances antérieures” (formed out of the debris of all previous beliefs), and as allowing its followers to “accepter momentanément toutes les formes possibles de culte comme faisaient jadis les initiés égyptiens” (momentarily accept all the possible forms of religion, as the enlightened Egyptians did in bygone days). He also maintains that this religion is only “une sorte de franc-maçonnerie, pour parler selon les idées modernes” (a kind of Freemasonry, to speak in modern terms) (2:466). Finally, as in the short text *Isis*, which forms part of *Les filles du feu*, the narrator of *Voyage en Orient* connects the Egyptian mother goddess with the Virgin Mary, as well as with Venus:

Dès lors, imitant les chastes amours des croyants de Vénus-Uranie, ils se promirent de vivre séparés pendant la vie pour être unis après la mort, et, chose bizarre, ce fut sous les formes de la foi chrétienne qu'ils accomplirent ce vœu païen. Crurent-ils voir dans la Vierge et son fils l'antique symbole de la grande Mère divine et de l'enfant céleste qui embrase les cœurs? Osèrent-ils pénétrer à travers les ténèbres mystiques jusqu'à la primitive Isis, au voile éternel, au masque changeant, tenant d'une main la croix ansée, et sur ses genoux l'enfant Horus sauveur du monde? (2:238)

(From then on, imitating the chaste love of the followers of Venus-Urania, they promised one another to live separately during life in order to be united after death, and, bizarrely, it was in the form of Christian faith that they accomplished this pagan wish. Did they think they saw in the Virgin and her son the ancient symbol of the great divine Mother and the celestial child who sets hearts alight? Did they dare to go back through the mystical shadows as far as the primitive Isis, with the eternal veil, the changing mask, holding the ankh in her hand and on her lap the child Horus, savior of the world?)

A similar link is made in the sonnet “Horus,” when Isis is described as having “fui sur sa conque dorée” (fled on her golden conch), an image which is more often associated with Venus.

In *Orientalism*, Edward Said contrasts Nerval's "personal mythology" of the Orient with Lamartine and Chateaubriand's "transcendent quasi-national egoism" ([1978] 2000, 179). In the Pléiade edition of *Voyage en Orient*, Claude Pichois notes the "sympathie" (sympathy) and "tendresse inquiète" (worried tenderness) that the narrator shows toward the various downtrodden people he meets on his travels (Pichois in Nerval 1984–1993, 2:1381). Mina Apic sees Nerval as a pioneer in rejecting Western stereotypes of the Orient and representing its inhabitants as individuals:

Nerval se distingue de ses précurseurs romantiques, en se donnant comme objectif un combat assidu contre les préjugés européens typiques sur l'Orient, en essayant d'aller au-delà du jeu des costumes, des conventions et des rôles sociaux, pour creuser jusqu'aux profondeurs floues et instables de nos identités. Nerval sera le premier à créer des personnages indigènes dont l'individualité dépasse le cadre de la catégorisation des groupes homogènes. (2016, 266)

(Nerval distinguishes himself from his Romantic precursors in setting himself the objective of an assiduous fight against the typical European prejudices on the Orient, in trying to go beyond the game of costumes, conventions, and social roles, to dig down to the blurry and unstable depths of our identities. Nerval would be the first to create indigenous characters whose individuality goes beyond the framework of the categorization of homogenous groups).

It is true that the narrator demonstrates an openness to experiencing everyday life in the countries he visits. He hires a cook to make him real Egyptian food, rather than eating at Western hotels, and dresses according to local custom rather than in Western clothes. While adopting local clothing was not particularly original among travelers to the Orient, Dominique Jullien (2012) argues that Nerval's use of this trope was more complex than that of earlier writers because it was bound up with his own troubled identity. Sarga Moussa (2011) points out that the description of the different intermediaries used by the narrator to resolve the problems around his living arrangements paints an accurate picture of the multicultural nature of Egypt at the time he was writing. Nerval's narrator also argues on several occasions that oriental beliefs are no stranger than Western ones:

Mais, m'écriai-je, tout cela est-il plus extraordinaire que tant de choses naturelles qu'il nous est impossible d'expliquer? Puisque nous croyons bien à la création, aux anges, au déluge, et que nous ne pouvons douter de la marche des astres, pourquoi n'admettrions-nous pas qu'à ces astres sont attachés des esprits, et que les premiers hommes ont pu se mettre en rapport avec eux par le culte et par les monuments? (2:366)

("But," I exclaimed, "is all that any more extraordinary than so many natural things that it is impossible for us to explain? Since we certainly believe in creation, angels, the flood, and since we cannot doubt the movement of the stars, why shouldn't we admit that those stars have spirits attached to them and that the first men managed to communicate with them through religion and monuments?")

He demystifies the practice of polygamy in Egypt for a European audience, explaining that it was, in practice, very rare:

Voilà donc une illusion qu'il faut perdre encore, les délices du harem, la toute-puissance du mari ou du maître, des femmes charmantes s'unissant pour faire le bonheur d'un seul: la religion ou les coutumes tempèrent singulièrement cet idéal, qui a séduit tant d'Européens. (2:371)

(That is another illusion of which we should rid ourselves: the delights of the harem, the all-powerful husband or master, charming women united in the goal of pleasing him: religion and customs radically temper this ideal, which has seduced so many Europeans).

What is more, as Patrick Bray notes, the description of the journey from Paris to Syria emphasizes the foreignness of supposedly familiar European countries (2013, 67). In Vienna, we hear a good deal about the narrator's surprise regarding the ways in which men and women behave toward one another, in comparison with French customs:

Toute femme que vous abordez se laisse prendre le bras, reconduire; puis, à sa porte, où vous espérez entrer, elle vous fait un salut très gentil et très railleur, vous remercie de l'avoir reconduite et vous dit que son mari ou son père l'attend dans la maison. Tenez-vous à la revoir, elle vous dira fort bien que, le lendemain ou le surlendemain elle doit aller dans tel bal ou tel théâtre. Si au théâtre, pendant que vous causez avec une femme seule, le mari ou l'amant, qui s'était allé promener dans les galeries, ou qui était descendu au café, revient tout à coup près d'elle, il ne s'étonne pas de vous voir causer familièrement; il salue et regarde d'un autre côté, heureux sans doute d'être soulagé quelque temps de la compagnie de sa femme. (2:208)

(Every woman that you approach allows you to take her arm, to walk her home; then, at her door, through which you hope to enter, she gives you a very kind but very mocking salute, thanks you for walking her home and tells you that her husband or her father is waiting for her in the house. If you insist on seeing her again, she is quite likely to tell you that the next day, or the day after that, she has to go to this or that ball or theatre. If, in the theatre, while you are chatting with a woman who is alone, her husband or her lover, who had gone for a stroll around the gallery, or who had gone down to the bar, suddenly reappears next to her, he will not be surprised to see you speaking familiarly with her; he will greet you and look the other way, no doubt happy to be relieved for a while of the company of his woman).

*Voyage en Orient* is certainly not free from a sense of Western superiority, though. Ali Behdad puts it diplomatically when he argues that “the irregularities of Nerval’s narrative” constitute “subtle ruptures in Orientalism’s discursive system” (1994, 33). In Egypt, the narrator agonizes over the ethical dilemma of whether to buy a slave or not – in principle, he is against the idea, but the norms of nineteenth-century Cairo dictate that a single man is not allowed to rent a house, meaning that he must purchase a slave, take a wife, or stay in a hotel. The ensuing description of the process of buying the slave is difficult to reconcile with the narrator’s supposed “worried tenderness.” Ethiopian slaves are quickly rejected on the grounds that they are reminiscent of monkeys:

À voir ces formes malheureuses, qu’il faut bien s’avouer humaines, on se reproche philanthropiquement d’avoir pu manquer d’égards pour le singe, ce parent méconnu que notre orgueil de race s’obstine à repousser. Les gestes et les attitudes ajoutaient encore à ce rapprochement, et je remarquai même que leur pied, allongé et développé sans doute par l’habitude de monter aux arbres, se rattachait sensiblement à la famille des quadrumanes. (2:325)

(To see these miserable forms, which, it must be admitted, are human, you reproach yourself philanthropically with having lacked consideration for the monkey, this neglected relation that our pride as a race persists in rejecting. Their gestures and bearing further add to this rapprochement, and I even noticed that their feet, most likely lengthened and developed by their habit of climbing trees, clearly belonged to the *Quadrumana* family).

The narrator eventually settles on a lighter-skinned young woman from Java. He displays some concern for her welfare, and is determined to teach her French so that they can

communicate. However, the phrase he chooses to have her repeat as part of her first French lesson is “Je suis une petite sauvage” (I am a little savage) (2:375). Particularly problematic is the narrator’s use of this young woman to justify both his treatment of her and the concept of slavery more generally. When the narrator laughs at the foreign pronunciation of the aforementioned sentence, the woman asks the narrator’s servant to translate. Following the translation of the sentence, the narrator reports:

N’y trouvant pas grand mal, elle répéta avec beaucoup de grâce: “Ana (moi)? bétit sovaze? ... mafisch (pas du tout)!” Son sourire était charmant. (2:375)

(Not seeing any harm in it, she said, very gracefully, “*Ana* [me]? ittle zavage? ... *mafisch* [not at all]!” Her smile was charming).

Similarly, the narrator insists that Islamic law ensures that slaves are well treated in Egypt, and that many of them fear being set free because they would live in worse conditions. To justify this opinion, he describes seeing a woman crying at a slave market and thinks about buying her to set her free. However, he drops the idea when his dragoman explains that she is not really for sale – her master has sent her to the slave market to give her a fright, without any real intention of selling her. The narrator appears to accept such treatment as an unproblematic argument in favor of slavery. Finally, the links that Nerval draws between the narrator’s own culture and those he encounters on his travels sometimes threaten to minimize the significance of non-European achievements. For example, when visiting the pyramids, instead of praising them on their own cultural terms, he exclaims that it would be a wonderful space for a performance of Mozart’s *Magic Flute* (2:391).

In conclusion, *Les chimères* and *Voyage en Orient* are constructed around a synthesizing aesthetic that draws links between faraway places and disparate traditions. In conveying to European readers similarities between cultures, Nerval dispels some myths about the Other. However, the links that he draws between Eastern and Western traditions are more likely to involve mythology than dealings with ordinary people, and Western culture is always the default to which new discoveries are compared. In the sonnets, where the form’s brevity favors suggestion over discursive explanation, the fissures in Nerval’s engagement with different cultures are hardly perceptible, except through the pressure that the multiplicity of associations places on this quintessentially Western form. However, considering the sonnets in relation to the poet’s journeys in prose may alter our perspective on his syncretism. Like the ambiguities of the sonnets, the cracks in the narrator’s attempts to make the foreign familiar in *Voyage en Orient* hint at the enormity of the challenge of evoking otherness in all its complexity – we are left with the impression that an adequate synthesis will always remain out of reach.

## Notes

1. See, respectively, “Myrtho” (3:646), “El Desdichado” (3:645), “Myrtho” (3:645–646) and “Artémis” (3:648), “Horus” (3:646), “Artémis” (3:648) featuring Sainte Gudule as the patron saint of Brussels, “Le Christ aux Oliviers” (3:650), and “El Desdichado” (3:645).
2. In *Ivanhoe*, the meaning of “desdichado” is given as “disinherited,” but Paul Bénichou has pointed out that a more accurate translation is “unhappy” (cited by Pichois in Nerval 1984–1993, 3:1277).
3. Banville even excludes the established “sonnet marotique” (abba-abba-ccd-eed) from his definition of the “regular” sonnet. In “El Desdichado,” Nerval commits two of the crimes

- against regularity described by Banville: he uses alternating rhymes instead of enclosed rhymes in the quatrains, and rhymes the first line of the first tercet with the first line of the second tercet. Five of the twelve sonnets of *Les chimères* use alternating rhymes rather than enclosed rhymes in the quatrains. The quatrains of “Artémis” use *both* alternating rhymes and enclosed rhymes (abab-abba) and its tercets are arranged in the irregular pattern of cdc-cdc. However, this was not very unusual at the time Nerval was writing: Théophile Gautier and Alfred de Musset both occasionally used alternating rhymes in the quatrains of their sonnets and slightly irregular arrangements of rhymes in the tercets.
4. This sense is offered in Peter Jay’s translation (1981), as opposed to the literal meaning of “abolished.”
  5. “Delfica” had appeared in *L’Artiste* on 28 December 1845, in *La Revue de Paris* in November 1851, and in *Petits châteaux de Bohême* in 1853. “Le Christ aux Oliviers” had been published in *L’Artiste* on 31 March 1844, and in *Petits châteaux de Bohême*. “El Desdichado” had been published in *Le Mousquetaire* on 10 December 1853 (Steinmetz in Nerval 1984–1993, 3:1276–1283).
  6. It was previously thought that this manuscript dated from 1853 (Guillaume and Steinmetz in Nerval 1984–1993, 1:1763). However, Paul Bénichou has made a strong argument for dating it from 1840–1845 (1967, 144–164).
  7. This title was given to a different sonnet in *Petits châteaux de Bohême* in 1853, and one in *Les chimères* in 1854. The sonnet known as “Vers dorés” in *Les chimères* was originally published as “Pensée antique” (“Ancient Thought”) in *L’Artiste* on 16 March 1845 (Nerval 1984–1993, 3:1167).
  8. *La Presse; L’Artiste; La Revue de Paris; La Revue des Deux Mondes; Le Journal; La Sylphide; La Silhouette; Le National; La Revue Pittoresque.*
  9. The friend has been identified as Théophile Dondey de Santeny, whose anagrammatic pseudonym was Philothée O’Neddy (Pichois in Nerval 1984–1993, 2:1398).
  10. Chateaubriand’s *Itinéraire de Paris à Jérusalem (Itinerary from Paris to Jerusalem)* of 1811 contained no fully articulated local legends or stories. On the other hand, Lamartine and Gautier included some legends in their travel writing, and Hugo made legends an essential part of *Le Rhin (The Rhine)* in 1842.
  11. In this issue of *Nineteenth-Century Contexts*, Heather Williams notes that Michelet’s attitude towards the Welsh farmer he meets on his travels demonstrates his Romantic belief that “the songs of peasants gave access to an authentic past.” As she notes about Michelet, one can imagine that translation issues would have affected any such encounter.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## Notes on contributor

*Sarah Gubbins* is a Teaching Fellow in French at University College Dublin. She has published on the poetry and prose writings of Gérard de Nerval and Charles Baudelaire. Her research interests include nineteenth-century French poetry, issues relating to genre in literature, and the relationship between literature and journalism in the nineteenth century.

## References

- Apic, Mina. 2016. “Le *Voyage en Orient* de Gérard de Nerval en tant que remise en question de la perspective eurocentriste.” *Revista de Filología Románica* 33 (2): 257–275.
- Banville, Théodore de. 1872. *Petit traité de poésie française*. Paris: A. Le Clère.

- Behdad, Ali. 1994. *Belated Travelers: Orientalism in the Age of Colonial Dissolution*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Ben Achour-Abdelkéfi, Rabâa. 2005. *Appropriation culturelle et création littéraire dans le "Voyage en Orient" de Gérard de Nerval et "Le testament français" d'Andreï Makine*. Paris: Maisonneuve and Larose.
- Bénichou, Paul. 1967. *L'écrivain et ses travaux*. Paris: Corti.
- Bony, Jacques. 1990. *Le récit nervalien: Une recherche des formes*. Paris: Corti.
- Bray, Patrick M. 2013. *The Novel Map: Space and Subjectivity in Nineteenth-Century French Fiction*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.
- Butor, Michel. 1974. "Le voyage et l'écriture." In *Répertoire IV*, 9–29. Paris: Minuit.
- Jay, Peter. 1981. "Les chimères: A Version." *PN Review* 22. [www.pnreview.co.uk/cgi-bin/scribe?item\\_id=7933](http://www.pnreview.co.uk/cgi-bin/scribe?item_id=7933).
- Jullien, Dominique. 2012. "Oriental Disguise and the *Thousand and One Nights* in Nerval." *French Forum* 37 (3): 31–48.
- Moussa, Sarga. 2011. "L'Égypte de Michel Butor au miroir de l'ethnographie nervalienne." In *Écrivains et intellectuels français face au monde arabe*, edited by Catherine Mayaux, 107–116. Paris: Champion.
- Nerval, Gérard de. 1984–1993. *Œuvres complètes*. Edited by Jean Guillaume, and Claude Pichois. 3 vols. Paris: Gallimard.
- Richer, Jean. 1963. *Nerval: Expérience et création*. Paris: Hachette.
- Said, Edward. (1978) 2000. *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient*. London: Penguin Books.