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**NERVAL'S *ILLUMINÉS*, ECCENTRICITY, AND  
THE EVOLUTION OF MADNESS**

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## THESIS ABSTRACT

This thesis looks at the changing status of madness in French psychiatric and literary culture in the first half of the nineteenth century, considering the ways in which shifting interpretations of this phenomenon were inseparable from the specificities of this precise historical and ideological context. The work of Gérard de Nerval, in particular *Les Illuminés* (1852), is central to the thesis.

The early decades of nineteenth-century France saw a revolutionary transformation in the understanding of the concept of madness, reflecting the broad ideological changes wrought by Enlightenment philosophy and the 1789 Revolution. Part One examines the appropriation of the study and treatment of madness by the newly emergent psychiatric profession, considering the way in which age-old religious and supernatural interpretations of madness were now replaced by the pathologising discourse of medical science. Whilst the study of mental abnormalities had previously been considered the prerogative of the Church, religion in this period became identified as both a cause and a symptom of madness, and this thesis studies the emergence of the controversial diagnostic category of religious madness. The early psychiatric concept of religious madness was two-fold: either excessive religious sentiment was perceived as the cause of mental alienation; or pathological religiosity was interpreted as a symptom of madness. On the one hand, the idea, central to early psychiatry, that imbalanced passions were the primary source of mental illness, implied that the emotive dimension of religious experience was a major cause of madness. At the same time, apparently visionary and mystical experience was increasingly interpreted as pathological hallucination and considered symptomatic of mental illness, leading to the highly controversial psychiatric practice of “retrospective medicine”, which involved reinterpreting the visions of influential historical and religious figures. This section of the thesis also looks at the identification of multiple forms of partial madness, in particular the distinctly nineteenth-century concepts of monomania and eccentricity, considering the way in which the latter concept, besides gaining a pathological dimension, became bound up, in both medical and Romantic writings, with enhanced creative and intellectual capacities. Part One closes with a consideration of these themes within the general writings of Gérard de Nerval, examining the way in which he evokes his own diagnosis with madness, especially the subcategories of religious madness, or monomania, theomania and demonomania, in his writings. It looks, in particular, at the theme of religious madness within his semi-autobiographical *Aurélia* (1855), and how the narrative of this text oscillates between medical and metaphysical discourse relating to religious madness, while never explicitly identifying with either ideological perspective.

Part Two focuses specifically upon Nerval’s *Les Illuminés*, a collection of portraits of historical visionaries and madmen, associated, to varying degrees, with mystical and esoteric belief systems. The theme of religious madness is central to this work, which depicts ambiguous phenomena, such as hallucination, prophetic vision, and dream, which were increasingly analysed from a scientific perspective in psychiatric writings, but which continued to elicit religious and mystical interpretations.

Nerval's narrative simultaneously embraces and rejects contemporaneous psychiatric ideas in relation to these themes. In the preface to *Les Illuminés*, Nerval's narrator twice describes his subjects as "excentriques", and the present thesis considers how the six portraits contained within this text reflect contemporaneous popular and psychiatric ideas relating to this newly emergent nineteenth-century concept. Exploiting the inherent ambiguity of eccentricity, Nerval attaches both a positive and negative dimension to his subjects, fusing pathologising discourse with suggestions of privileged mystical vision, enhanced creativity, and even genius. In *Les Illuminés*, Nerval portrays various states of madness and eccentricity in a distinctly ambivalent manner, mediating between medical, Romantic, and mystical perspectives of madness, and depriving the reader of a stable authorial perspective. This thesis shows that, if the subjects of *Les Illuminés* cannot be described as *illuminés* in any conventional, historical sense of the term, in relation to the eighteenth-century Illuminist movement, they nevertheless adhere to a later definition to the term, which appeared in dictionaries from the middle of the nineteenth century, and which is concerned with the impassioned pursuit of irrational and illusory phenomena.

This thesis offers a fresh reading of Nerval's *Les Illuminés* in light of nineteenth-century psychiatric writings regarding madness, monomania, and eccentricity, particularly in relation to deviant or excessive religious and mystical beliefs.

## **DECLARATION PAGE**

This is to certify that the work contained within has been composed by me and is entirely my own work. No part of this thesis has been submitted for any other degree or professional qualification.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

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# INTRODUCTION

In a letter of 21<sup>st</sup> October 1853, Gérard de Nerval, whilst under the care of the psychiatric doctor, Emile Blanche, writes: “espérons qu’Esculape nous sauvera d’Hippocrate” (III, 817).<sup>1</sup> Pitting the Greek god of healing, believed to cure the sick through dream visitations, against the founding father of medical science, Nerval captures the broad ideological tension between religious and scientific thought that pervaded post-Revolutionary French culture. Nowhere is this tension more apparent than in early nineteenth-century discourse on the concept of madness. The way in which madness is understood and depicted in any specific cultural and historical context is highly revealing, since this concept is necessarily defined in relation to preconceived social, cultural, and even physical norms, which themselves are bound up with far-reaching ideological concerns. Since madness is conceived in terms of the departure from the analogous and equally problematic concept of reason, ideas surrounding this phenomenon are necessarily dependent upon the epistemological framework from which it is considered.

Since its beginnings, fiction has constituted a major platform for the exploration of the theme of madness, both engaging with and undermining prevalent theories and ideas surrounding this problematic phenomenon. This thesis was originally inspired by my previous work on depictions of *yurodivy* or “holy fools” in nineteenth-century Russian literature, and especially in the novels of Fyodor Dostoevsky. Writing in a context in which religious interpretations of such figures were increasingly rejected in favour of the pathologising discourse of the newly established psychiatric profession, Dostoevsky’s literary depictions of holy fools capture an age of deep-rooted ideological transformation. The shift from the authority of the sacred to the authority of the scientific, especially in relation to the understanding of abnormal mental states, was also characteristic of the early decades of nineteenth-century France. Besides the fact that at this time science had replaced religion as the dominant discourse for the interpretation of abnormal mental states, psychiatric science increasingly identified religious fervour as a major source of mental

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<sup>1</sup> Gérard de Nerval, *Œuvres Complètes*, ed. by Jean Guillaume and Claude Pichois, 3 vols. (Paris: Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1984-1993), I (1989), II (1984), III (1993). All references to Nerval’s writings are to this edition, indicated in the body of the text as volume number followed by page number.

alienation and considered mystical or visionary experience to be symptomatic of mental illness. Writing against this shifting ideological backdrop, Nerval provides a literary portrayal of the inherently problematic concepts of religious madness and religious eccentricity. Focusing on borderline states of hallucination and dream, phenomena that were increasingly analysed from the perspective of medical science by the emergent psychiatric profession, whilst continuing to elicit religious and mystical interpretations, Nerval's writings capture the inherently ambiguous nature of religious madness.

The study of the cultural history of madness and its representation in works of literature has become increasingly prominent in recent years. What emerges from any such study is the impossibility of providing an absolute definition of madness. Lillian Feder, in her 1980 *Madness in Literature*, underlines the necessary contingency of madness, posing the question: "how is one to define a concept charged with centuries of political, social, religious, medical, and personal assumptions?"<sup>2</sup> Feder's work, which looks at literary representations of madness from ancient Greece to the twentieth century, highlights the complexity of the relationship between madness and society, revealing "the nature of madness itself as an incorporation of the very values and prohibitions it challenges".<sup>3</sup> Roy Porter, who has dedicated numerous works to the social history of madness, examines various case studies of individuals identified as mad across the ages, revealing the extent to which the understanding of insanity at any given time is dependent upon dominant social and ideological institutions. Accordingly, in *A Social History of Madness* (1987), Porter argues that: "the history of madness is the history of power".<sup>4</sup> This recalls Michel Foucault's famous argument in *Folie et déraison: Histoire de la folie à l'âge classique* (1981), according to which mental illness is a cultural construct rather than a natural fact. The questioning of the authority of the dominant discourses and social institutions that define madness in any given cultural context is

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<sup>2</sup> Lillian Feder, *Madness in Literature* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1980), p. 5.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>4</sup> Roy Porter, *A Social History of Madness: Stories of the Insane* (London: Phoenix-Orion, 1987), p. 39.

fundamental to literary depictions of madness, and Nerval's writings on this theme are no exception.

In *Lire le délire* (2001), Juan Rigoli reveals the full complexity of the relationship between madness and literature between 1800 and 1860. Besides looking at the literary devices employed by psychiatrists in order to "read" and articulate madness, Rigoli examines the ways in which fictional writings both mirror and compete with contemporaneous psychiatric discourse. Gwenhaël Ponnau, in *La Folie dans la littérature fantastique* (1997) highlights the overlapping preoccupations of psychiatric and fictional literature in nineteenth-century France, arguing: "Entre la littérature psychiatrique et la littérature fantastique s'est produit un authentique échange".<sup>5</sup> Allen Thiher's *Revels in Madness* (1999) considers how literary texts dealing with the theme of madness engage with prevalent ideas and assumptions. He traces the evolving understanding of madness across the ages, from ancient Greek medical writings, tragedies, and comedies to twentieth-century psychoanalysis and its expression in literary texts. In relation to nineteenth-century France, Thiher engages with both psychiatric and literary texts, dedicating a chapter of his study to Nerval's *Aurélia*. Another work that looks closely at the understanding of madness in the context of nineteenth-century France is Jan Goldstein's *Console and Classify* (1987). Goldstein traces the emergence of psychiatry as a distinct scientific discipline and highlights the significant role played by early French psychiatrists, especially Philippe Pinel and Etienne Esquirol, in the establishment of modern psychiatry as an independent discipline. Although Goldstein's text does not deal specifically with the nineteenth-century medical category of religious madness, it does consider the complex relationship between religious and scientific perspectives in early psychiatric thought, especially in relation to Pinel's *traitement moral*, which, she argues, was derived from Catholic pastoral care, but stripped of its explicitly religious connotations.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Gwenhaël Ponnau, *La Folie dans la littérature fantastique* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1997), p. 25.

<sup>6</sup> Jan Goldstein, *Console and Classify: The French Psychiatric Profession in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), p. 5.

There are few historical or literary studies dedicated to the early French cultural and psychiatric category of religious madness. Ann Goldberg devotes a chapter of *Sex, Religion, and the Making of Modern Madness* (1999) to the rise of the concept of religious madness in nineteenth-century Germany. Goldberg alludes to an “epidemic of religious madness that physicians, asylum alienists, and others were convinced plagued their society” following the birth of the asylum.<sup>7</sup> Goldberg argues that although the idea of religious madness had been in circulation in educated German culture since the late seventeenth century: “What was new in the nineteenth century was the extent to which medicine had taken over the discourse and harnessed it to a new institutional response: the insane asylum”.<sup>8</sup> I identify concurrent developments in nineteenth-century France, showing how, as well as identifying religion as a major cause of mental alienation, early psychiatrists considered that pathological religiosity was symptomatic of madness. In “Une Lecture politique de la folie religieuse ou «théomanie»” (1979) and “La Marginalité en religion” (1988), Frank Paul Bowman examines the spread of *excentricité religieuse* and *folie religieuse* in France in the decades following the 1789 Revolution. He argues that these phenomena represented a form of social and political revolt in early nineteenth-century France, suggesting that religious madness was the form of madness “qui mettait le plus en question le *statu quo* de la société”.<sup>9</sup> He highlights the role of the psychiatric profession in controlling this potentially subversive phenomenon: “le discours médical essaie de réduire non seulement le contenu religieux, mais aussi le côté politique des manifestations extrêmes de l’enthousiasme religieux, pour n’y voir qu’une maladie physio-psychologique”.<sup>10</sup> A key aspect of religious madness in nineteenth-century France was the concept of hallucination, the study of which was appropriated by medical science. The pathologisation of hallucination at this time was bound up with the idea that madness and dream constitute analogous states. In *Dream, Creativity, and Madness in Nineteenth-Century France* (1995), Tony James examines psychiatric and literary discourse regarding the phenomenon of dream. As

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<sup>7</sup> Ann Goldberg, *Sex, Religion, and the Making of Modern Madness: The Eberbach Asylum and German Society 1815-1849* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 36.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 36.

<sup>9</sup> Frank Paul Bowman, “La Marginalité en Religion”, in *Romantisme*, vol. 18, no. 59 (1988), 31-40, (p. 37).

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

well as analysing the literary representation of dream in the writings of Balzac, Baudelaire, Hugo, and Rimbaud, considering in particular the perceived link between dream and creativity, James looks at this theme in Nerval's *Aurélia*.

In nineteenth-century France, the newly emergent concept of eccentricity became bound up with ideas relating to madness in both popular and psychiatric discourse. In *Le Récit excentrique* (1987) and "Vous avez dit excentrique?" (1988), Daniel Sangsue explores the emergence of the concept of eccentricity in nineteenth-century popular and literary culture. Sangsue identifies a "surgissement de la notion d'excentricité" in early nineteenth-century French literature following the appearance of the word *excentricité* in the French language.<sup>11</sup> More recently, Peter Schulman's *The Sunday of Fiction: The Modern French Eccentric* (2002) focuses primarily upon fictional eccentrics in twentieth-century French literature, but also considers the way in which the literary eccentric evolves between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Schulman describes the nineteenth-century eccentric as "an aristocratic half-mad individual of considerable anecdotal value".<sup>12</sup> He characterises the evolution of this figure in twentieth-century literature as "a class shift from the aristocratic nineteenth-century eccentric to one who is bourgeois or even poor".<sup>13</sup> Schulman indicates that from the middle of the nineteenth century eccentrics were often linked to extreme forms of religious or political convictions.<sup>14</sup> Miranda Gill's 2009 *Eccentricity and the Cultural Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Paris* adopts an interdisciplinary approach to look at Parisian figures of modernity, including Bohemians, female dandies, courtesans, and circus freaks. Gill highlights in particular the role of gender in determining ideas surrounding this concept. She identifies Nerval as a Bohemian, existing outside all social circles, and engaging in a "sustained questioning of Bourgeois norms".<sup>15</sup> Gill looks closely at the perceived connection between eccentricity and physical "monstrosity", considering that the exhibition of the *femme mérinos*, as described in Nerval's *Les Nuits d'octobre*, is

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<sup>11</sup> Daniel Sangsue "Vous avez dit excentrique?", in *Romantisme*, vol. 18. no. 59 (1988), 41-58 (p. 44).

<sup>12</sup> Peter Schulman, *The Sunday of Fiction: The Modern French Eccentric* (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 2002), p. 5.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*



exemplary of this phenomenon. A key aspect of all of these studies is the emphasis on the potentially political dimension of eccentricity and its perceived association with revolutionary activity in nineteenth-century French culture. Sangsue argues that, in the context of nineteenth-century France, eccentricity constitutes “une réponse à la désillusion politique”, identifying “les deux moments qui s’imposent comme des moments de l’excentricité” as the periods from 1830 to 1835 and from 1850 to 1855, both of which, he observes, “correspondent à des lendemains de révolution”.<sup>16</sup> Similarly, Schulman describes nineteenth-century eccentrics as “engines of revolt against the stifling societal conditions they found themselves in”.<sup>17</sup> In Part Two of this thesis, I apply these ideas to Nerval’s *Les Illuminés*, showing how this boundary-defying concept becomes a form of resistance against the authoritarian nature of society.

There have been multiple studies of the theme of madness in Nerval’s writings, especially in relation to *Aurélia*. Many such works highlight the autobiographical dimension of Nerval’s literary depictions of madness. Whilst, owing to his well-documented mental breakdowns, culminating in his suicide in 1855, Nerval’s own experiences inevitably exerted a marked influence on his writings on madness, it is important to distinguish between Nerval’s literary persona and his real life experiences. Indeed, even in his correspondence, Nerval alludes to his illness in a distinctly literary manner. A number of critics consider the specifically nineteenth-century connotations of madness, and of the relationship between madness and dream, in relation to *Aurélia*. George MacLennan’s *Lucid Interval* (1992), a work that focuses on a number of authors who express their own experiences of madness in their writings, includes an analysis of Nerval’s *Aurélia*. MacLennan says of Nerval: “Of the major literary madmen of the Romantic era, Höderlin, Clare and Nerval, it is Nerval who best exemplifies the ironies and ambiguities of the encounter

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<sup>15</sup> Miranda Gill, *Eccentricity and the Cultural Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Paris* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 212.

<sup>16</sup> Daniel Sangsue, *Le Récit excentrique – Gautier – De Maistre – Nerval – Nodier* (Paris: Corti, 1987), p. 33.

<sup>17</sup> Schulman, p. 4.

between Romanticism and madness”.<sup>18</sup> MacLennan highlights the symbolic significance of the dream visions recounted in *Aurélia*, and points to the influence of the “dream literature of the German Romantics”.<sup>19</sup> Tony James’s reading of *Aurélia* also focuses on the problematic status of dream in this work. James highlights Nerval’s unique literary treatment of the phenomenon of dream: “nowhere before Nerval in nineteenth-century France [...] does dream hold such promise and yet such danger”.<sup>20</sup>

*Les Illuminés* has been largely neglected by critics, as compared with Nerval’s other publications. Any study of this work as a whole must necessarily deal with the problematic question of its unity. The first book devoted entirely to Nerval’s *Les Illuminés* was Meryl Tyers’s *Critical Fictions: Nerval’s Les Illuminés* (1998). Tyers’s study, which is more factual than analytical, outlines the publication history of the text and the history of its critical reception. Perhaps the lack of critical literature dedicated to *Les Illuminés* can be explained by the apparent absence of coherence and continuity in this text. However, Tyers quite rightly argues that the constituent portraits of *Les Illuminés* along with Nerval’s 1852 preface to the collection are “not purely fragmentary”, highlighting the importance of reading and interpreting the work as a whole.<sup>21</sup> More recently, Keiko Tsujikawa’s *Nerval et les limbes de l’histoire* (2009), uses *Les Illuminés* as the starting point from which to explore a number of wider themes central to Nerval’s literature in general and to the age in which he was writing. She says of Nerval’s text: “Il s’agit pour Nerval de repenser le possible lien entre le religieux, le politique et le littéraire, en se retournant vers le passé, surtout vers des aspects oubliés de l’histoire”.<sup>22</sup> Tsujikawa’s central thesis is concerned with Nerval’s unique relationship to history and historical time. She argues that Nerval’s vision of history is derived from the margins and exists in opposition to official narratives. Tsujikawa identifies the *limbes* of history as

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<sup>18</sup> George MacLennan, *Lucid Interval: Subjective Writing and Madness in History* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1992), p. 153.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, p. 158.

<sup>20</sup> Tony James, *Dream, Creativity, and Madness in Nineteenth-Century France* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), p.132.

<sup>21</sup> Meryl Tyers, *Critical Fictions: Nerval’s Les Illuminés* (Oxford: Legenda, 1998), xii.

<sup>22</sup> Keiko Tsujikawa, *Nerval et les limbes de l’histoire: lecture des Illuminés* (Geneva: Droz, 2008), p. 4.

existing outside conventional historical time, arguing that, for Nerval: “les limbes conservent aux choses du passé une force de résistance face au présent et une sorte d’efficacité pour l’avenir”.<sup>23</sup> My thesis explores how Nerval’s revaluation of marginalia, as highlighted by Tsujikawa, is bound up with the nineteenth-century concepts of religious madness and eccentricity.

The question of the genre of biography in *Les Illuminés* is the subject of Michel Brix’s “Récit biographique et création littéraire: le cas des *Illuminés* de Nerval” (2000), as well as a chapter of Ann Jefferson’s *Biography and the Question of Literature in France* (2007). The former underlines the extent to which this series of apparently biographical portraits departs significantly from genuine historical reality. The latter focuses on “Le Roi de Bicêtre”, “L’Histoire de l’abbé de Bucquoy”, and “Les Confidences de Nicolas”, examining the way in which these portraits of *Les Illuminés* subvert the assumptions and conventions of biographical writing. In his 1999 article, “Enjeux et significations de l’ésotérisme nervalien”, Brix, focusing primarily on *Les Illuminés*, reveals the ambivalence of Nerval’s presentation of esoteric and occultist beliefs. This article begins with the assertion: “La critique a longtemps confondu l’œuvre de Nerval avec un plaidoyer en faveur de l’ésotérisme et des sciences occultes”; to which he adds: “Nerval n’a jamais été le héraut des sciences occultes que certains ont vu en lui”.<sup>24</sup> In accordance with such argument, Part Two of this thesis considers how, in *Les Illuminés*, Nerval’s portrayal of marginal and esoteric belief systems is bound up with an exploration of the concept of madness. Unlike the works of other critics, my analysis of *Les Illuminés* focuses specifically on the theme of madness, and especially religious madness. It highlights the way in which Nerval’s narratives appropriate characteristically nineteenth-century ideas about madness derived from both popular and medical culture. These include theories of partial madness, monomania, and eccentricity; the perceived associations between madness and dream and between madness and genius; and the pathologisation of hallucination and unconventional religiosity.

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<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*, p. 7.

<sup>24</sup> Michel Brix, “Enjeux et signification de l’ésotérisme nervalienne”, in *Critica*, vol. 1, no. 2 (1999), 178-187 (p. 178).

This thesis is divided into two Parts. Part One traces the evolution of madness in early nineteenth-century France, highlighting the way in which ideas surrounding the concept were bound up with the broad ideological tension between religion and science that came to the fore over the course of the eighteenth century, a process accentuated by the 1789 Revolution. It looks at new theories of partial madness, monomania, and eccentricity, as well as examining the controversial psychiatric categories of religious madness, religious monomania, and the related concept of hallucination. Part Two provides a fresh reading of Nerval's *Les Illuminés* in light of the ideas discussed in Part One. It considers the extent to which Nerval's literary portrayal of his series of *illuminés* assimilates distinctly nineteenth-century ideas regarding madness, revealing an ambivalent response to both mystical and scientific interpretations of this phenomenon.

Part One of the thesis begins by tracing the generalised shift from religious and supernatural to scientific models of madness across the ages before turning to the specificities of early nineteenth-century thought. The first chapter looks at the ideas that emerged following the establishment of the psychiatric profession in France at the end of the eighteenth century. This chapter examines in particular the thought of Philippe Pinel, widely considered the founding father of modern psychiatry, and his disciple, Etienne Esquirol. Considering the way in which nineteenth-century medicine eliminated the perceived dualism between the normal and the pathological, it shows the emergence of a new model of madness as a state continuous with rather than opposed to reason. It also looks at Pinel's and Esquirol's belief that pathological mental states were caused by the exaggeration of ordinary passions, a notion that led to anxiety regarding the perceived prevalence of madness and the lack of distinction between the healthy and the pathological mind. The second chapter focuses on the specifically nineteenth-century notion of monomania, which was first introduced by Esquirol and which became the main model of partial madness in the early nineteenth century before declining in the latter half of the century owing to the rise of physiological theories of mental alienation. The third chapter looks at the emergence of eccentricity in nineteenth-century popular and psychiatric culture, showing how from the middle of the nineteenth century eccentricity replaced

monomania as the dominant model of partial madness. This is followed by a chapter considering the perceived association between madness, or eccentricity, and enhanced intellectual and creative capacities. This chapter highlights the way in which the age-old association of madness and genius was assimilated by nineteenth-century Romantic authors and psychiatrists. It examines Jacques-Joseph Moreau de Tours's pathologisation of genius, especially in relation to the newly conceived psychiatric category of eccentricity. The fifth chapter turns to the controversial concept of religious madness, showing how, in keeping with the ideas of Pinel and Esquirol, nineteenth-century psychiatrists considered that extreme religious sentiment and marginal belief systems constituted a major source of mental pathology. It proceeds to look at *monomanie religieuse*, which was identified as a major subcategory of monomania and was in turn subdivided into *théomanie* and *démonomanie*. The theme of religious madness is also central to the following chapter, which analyses the psychiatric appropriation of hallucination. It highlights the controversy of this development, which led to the highly divisive practice of "retrospective medicine". This involved the application of contemporaneous medical theories to a number of influential historical and religious figures. It shows how the visionary experience of such figures, which had previously been interpreted in mystical and religious terms, was at this time reduced by psychiatrists to the level of mental pathology. Part One of the thesis concludes with a consideration of how the ideas that emerge from the previous chapters are assimilated into the general writings of Nerval, and especially *Aurélia* (1855).

The subject of Part Two of the thesis is Nerval's *Les Illuminés* (1852). That work is primarily composed of a series of six portraits of historical visionaries and madmen who, in its introductory chapter, are twice identified as *excentriques*. With the exception of the preface, all of the texts that constitute *Les Illuminés* had already been published, whether as articles or as parts of other texts. By bringing these portraits together into a single volume, Nerval indicates his belief in a certain unity between this otherwise diverse collection of individuals. I dedicate chapters of Part Two of the thesis to Nerval's portrayal of each of these historical figures in turn. Part Two opens with a chapter dedicated to the connotations of the term *illuminé*,

looking specifically at the way in which the term was employed at the time at which Nerval was writing. It also considers the significance of the subtitle to *Les Illuminés*, “Les Précurseurs du socialisme”. The next chapter examines Nerval’s preface to the collection, “La Bibliothèque de mon oncle”, calling attention to the themes of madness and eccentricity that are introduced in this brief introductory chapter. The first portrait of *Les Illuminés*, “Le Roi de Bicêtre”, is dedicated to Raoul Spifame, a sixteenth-century figure who composed a collection of proposed laws under the name of Henri II. My analysis of this portrait brings out Nerval’s literary appropriation of the nineteenth-century notions of partial madness and monomania, especially the subcategory *monomanie orgueilleuse*, as well as the perceived affinity between madness and dream. The following chapter studies Nerval’s version of the story of the abbé de Bucquoy’s series of successful escapes from prisons including the Bastille. This chapter underlines the perceived connection between eccentricity and social or political resistance in nineteenth-century culture, showing how Nerval’s portrait exploits the potentially subversive nature of the concept of eccentricity. Next, I look at “Les Confidences de Nicolas”, Nerval’s portrait of Restif de la Bretonne, an eighteenth-century writer. In this chapter, I consider how Nerval’s narrative engages with the perceived link between madness and creativity, and with the idea that emerged in France from the middle of the nineteenth century that there exists a connection between madness, or eccentricity, and moral decline. This chapter also considers the psychiatrist Moreau de Tours’s allusions to Nerval’s “Les Confidences de Nicolas” in *La Psychologie morbide* (1859). My analysis of “Jacques Cazotte” highlights the characteristic ambivalence of Nerval’s portrayal of visionary experience. In relation to “Cagliostro”, I consider the nineteenth-century anxiety regarding the link between eccentricity and revolutionary activity. Finally, my discussion of “Quintus Aucler” is concerned with the quest for new forms of belief in the context of religious decline, showing how what emerges from this narrative is the idea that the pursuit of illusion is preferable to the acceptance of materialism and the demise of faith. Underpinning my analysis of all these portraits is the idea that all of Nerval’s subjects adhere to a definition of the term *illuminé* that first appeared in French dictionaries from the middle of the nineteenth century and that has connotations of religious madness and the attachment to illusion.

## **PART ONE**

# **THE CHANGING STATUS OF MADNESS IN POST-REVOLUTIONARY FRANCE**

# INTRODUCTION

The early decades of nineteenth-century France saw revolutionary transformations in the understanding and treatment of madness, reflecting the broad cultural and ideological changes wrought by the eighteenth-century Enlightenment and the 1789 Revolution. By the end of the eighteenth century, the dominant interpretation of insanity had largely shifted from a religious to a scientific perspective. Whereas madness had previously been understood to have supernatural or religious origins, its study and treatment being considered the prerogative of the Church, it was at this time reconceived as a pathological mental state, requiring medical as opposed to spiritual attention. The establishment of madness as a diagnostic medical category corresponded with the birth of the psychiatric profession in France at the time of the Revolution, which coincided with concurrent developments in a number of other countries, notably the United Kingdom, Germany, and the US. In France, the study and treatment of madness was henceforth ascribed to “alienists”, a new class of doctor born of Enlightenment philosophy and specialising in mental abnormalities. Nineteenth-century alienists, such as Philippe Pinel and Etienne Esquirol, thus claimed for the domain of medical science an area of experience that had previously been subject to the authority of the Church.

Supernatural and religious interpretations of madness have persisted throughout history and before the birth of modern psychiatry in the late eighteenth century such ideas held widespread authority. In ancient mythical and religious texts, madness generally occurs when an evil spirit takes hold of a person’s body or soul. In various different historical and cultural contexts madness has been believed to be the result of demonic possession or punishment from the gods or God. In the Old Testament, numerous individuals are punished with madness by God and possessed by devils; in Deuteronomy, for example, it is written: “The Lord shall smite thee with madness” (Deuteronomy 28:28). A further notable example is the case of Saul, whose madness is caused by an evil spirit sent from God to punish him for his disobedience: “But the spirit of the Lord departed from Saul, and an evil spirit from the Lord troubled him” (1 Samuel 16:14). Similarly, Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, is reduced to



bestial madness as a punishment from God (Daniel 4:28-33). Allen Thiher highlights the influence of this biblical story on the medieval understanding of madness, arguing that the tale “gave the Middle Ages its key emblem of mental pathology”, since bestial behaviour “symbolized for the Christian mind the fall from logos”.<sup>1</sup> Early Greek attitudes towards madness were also supernatural in nature, as emerges from mythology and from Homer’s epics. Here, human beings are shown to be nothing more than the playthings of powerful supernatural forces beyond their control and are devoid of the capacities of introspection and deliberation.<sup>2</sup> Madness is inflicted on the protagonists by malevolent gods and demons. As is the case in the Old Testament, madness is conceived of as a form of divine punishment. For example, Hera inflicts a sudden fit of madness upon Hercules, which leads him to slaughter his own wife and children.<sup>3</sup> However, while supernatural interpretations of madness held widespread authority until the late eighteenth century, there were a number of early attempts to naturalise madness, and to seek its origins in the functioning of the human body.

Over the course of the fifth and fourth centuries BC, a more modern conception of the human psyche emerged, setting the stage for the modern Western understanding of human consciousness and of the recognition of the concept of madness. This more natural view of the mind was reflected in Greek drama, which, whilst preserving a supernatural understanding of the human condition, presented characters capable of conscious reflection and thus, to some extent, responsible for their own destinies.<sup>4</sup> Such figures populate the plays of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides.<sup>5</sup> The idea that madness was a purely supernatural phenomenon was challenged by Hippocratic medicine and for the first time a scientific as opposed to religious model of madness came to the fore. In his famous treatise, *On the Sacred Disease*, the Greek physician Hippocrates (460-377 BC), writing about epilepsy, which had long been understood in terms of demonic possession, revolutionises Western medical

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<sup>1</sup> Allen Thiher, *Revels in Madness: Insanity in Medicine and Literature* (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1999), p. 47.

<sup>2</sup> Roy Porter, *A Brief History of Madness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 13-14.

<sup>3</sup> Thiher, pp. 25-26.

<sup>4</sup> Porter, p. 14.

<sup>5</sup> Thiher, pp. 21-30.

thought, laying the foundations for an understanding of madness as a physical disease rather than as a curse from the heavens. In this work, Hippocrates famously denies the divine origins of the so-called “sacred disease”, declaring: “the sacred disease appears to me to be no more divine nor more sacred than other diseases, but has a natural cause from which it originates like other afflictions”.<sup>6</sup> Having rejected supernatural causes, Hippocrates also extracts the influence of the gods from mental conditions, including mania, melancholia, and paranoia, replacing traditional mystical interpretations of such conditions with the framework of humoral pathology.<sup>7</sup> According to Hippocratic medicine, madness, like all forms of illness, arose from imbalances in the four bodily humours and was thus purely physical in nature: mental derangement was for the first time clearly located in the human body. Evidently, such a theory marked a significant departure from the age-old belief that madness constituted demonic possession or divine punishment. Hippocrates’s ideas became the dominant medical model in Europe, largely owing to the subsequent work of Galen (129-216 AD).<sup>8</sup> However, Hippocratic medicine by no means marked the straightforward transition from a religious to a scientific understanding of mental phenomena: mystical and supernatural beliefs about madness continued to hold a powerful influence alongside the emergent medical perspective. Indeed, even Plato, a contemporary of Hippocrates, divided madness into four mythological categories: divine healing, prophecy, love, and poetic madness.<sup>9</sup> Hippocrates’s humoral understanding of madness was rejected in ancient Rome by Asclepiades and Cicero, and was replaced by the notion that madness was linked to intense or conflicting emotions, such as rage, fear, and grief,<sup>10</sup> a concept that has much in common with theories of madness elaborated by the original French alienists in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. However, with the fall of the Roman Empire in the fifth century, and with the rise of Christianity, scientific models of madness were

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<sup>6</sup> Hippocrates, “The Sacred Disease”, trans. by John Chadwick, in *Hippocratic Writings*, ed. by Geoffrey Lloyd (London: Penguin, 1983), pp. 237-251 (p. 237).

<sup>7</sup> Dale Kemp, *A Mad People’s History of Madness* (Pittsburgh: Pittsburgh University Press, 1982), p. 3.

<sup>8</sup> Bennett Simon, “Mind and Madness in Classical Antiquity”, in *History of Psychiatry and Medical Psychology*, ed. by Edwin Wallace and John Gach (New York: Springer, 2008), pp. 175-198, (p. 181).

<sup>9</sup> M. A. Screech “Good Madness in Christendom”, in *The Anatomy of Madness: Essays in the History of Psychiatry, Volume 1: People and Ideas*, ed. by William Bynam, Roy Porter, and Michael Shepherd (London: Tavistock, 1985), pp. 25-39 (p. 28).

marginalised while religious interpretations of madness were reinstated. The idea that God inflicted madness on certain individuals as a form of punishment once again rose to prominence.

As Christianity gained influence during the Middle Ages, so too did religious and supernatural interpretations of madness. The Church became the dominant authority in the study and treatment of this apparently divine affliction, with a number of monasteries being transformed into places of treatment for the insane. Supernatural explanations of madness were sanctioned by the early Church, which assimilated popular superstition regarding possession by evil spirits and demons. Throughout the Middle Ages the Church dominated thought regarding insanity. The Church promoted the belief that madness was demonic, attributing it to the will of Satan and claiming that it was spread on Earth by witches and heretics. Those ideas reached their climax in Europe in the sixteenth century, a period marked by the burning of vast numbers of individuals thought to be possessed by the Devil. It was believed that the Devil targeted the minds of the weak and sick, afflicting such individuals with madness and forcing them to carry out his duties. As indicated by Roy Porter, as accusations of heresy, diabolic activity, and witchcraft became commonplace at the time of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation, “false doctrine and delusion formed two sides of the same coin: the mad were judged to be possessed, and religious adversaries were deemed out of their mind”.<sup>11</sup>

Besides the belief that madness constituted a curse from God or possession by the Devil, more positive conceptions of madness have also featured in Christianity. Notably, the Church has interpreted the ecstatic visions of prophets, ascetics, and visionaries as desirable manifestations of madness. The belief that there existed a worthy form of madness became a major feature of Eastern Orthodoxy in the Byzantine tradition of the “holy fool” or the “fool for Christ’s sake”, the origins of which are derived from the writings of Saint Paul (1 Corinthians 4:10). The “holy fool” was believed to be an individual who feigned madness in order to imitate

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<sup>10</sup> Theodore Millon, *Masters of the Mind: Exploring the history of Mental Illness from Ancient Times to the New Millennium* (New Jersey: Wiley, 2004), pp. 26-27.

<sup>11</sup> Porter, p. 21.

Christ and to achieve a deeper form of spiritual wisdom. The tradition was endorsed in hagiographical texts, reaching its peak in Byzantium in the fifth century and in Russia in the fourteenth century. Hagiographic depictions of holy fools established a connection between madness and clairvoyance, prophetic vision, and the performance of miracles.

The rise of empiricism in France over the course of the eighteenth century triggered a radical reconsideration of the phenomenon of madness. The eighteenth and nineteenth centuries saw the widespread rejection of religious interpretations of madness, reflecting the generalised process of naturalisation of the human mind and mental phenomena at that time. The image of madness that emerges from the *Encyclopédie* is ambiguous, reflecting the conflicting ideological framework of the age. As indicated by Philippe Huneman: “In this work, multiple approaches to madness coexisted, without any attempts to synthesize them”.<sup>12</sup> The *Encyclopédie* contains separate entries for *folie*, *démence*, *délire*, *fureur*, *manie*, *mélancolie*, and *phrénésie*, which together provide a conflicting view of mental phenomena. Arnulphe d’Aulmont divides the entry for *folie* into *folie (morale)* and *folie (médecine)*,<sup>13</sup> and Huneman highlights the equivocal nature of this duality, which, he argues: “peut signifier aussi bien une dualité de points de vue possibles sur la folie, qu’une dualité de types de folie”.<sup>14</sup> Although the articles in the *Encyclopédie* lay the foundations for the medical appropriation of madness, especially Jean-Joseph Ménéuret’s articles on *manie* and *mélancolie*,<sup>15</sup> it was not until the end of the eighteenth century that the dominant interpretation of madness passed from the perspective of religion to that of medical science.

In the late eighteenth century, the psychiatric profession emerged almost simultaneously in France, Great Britain, the US, and Germany, each developing a

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<sup>12</sup> Philippe Huneman, “Animal Economy: Anthropology and the Rise of Psychiatry from the *Encyclopédie* to the Alienists”, in *The Anthropology of the Enlightenment*, ed. by Larry Wolff, Marco Cipolloni (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), pp. 262-276 (p. 267).

<sup>13</sup> Arnulphe d’Aulmont, “Folie (morale)” and “Folie (médecine)”, in *Encyclopédie, ou Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers*, ed. by Denis Diderot and Jean le Rond d’Alembert, 17 vols. (Paris: Briasson, 1751-1772), VII (1765), 56-58.

<sup>14</sup> Philippe Huneman, “De la conception religieuse de la folie à la manie religieuse: l’*Encyclopédie*, Pinel, Esquirol”, in *PSN* (2013), no. 1, vol. 11, 69-106 (p. 73).

distinct national tradition; yet it was perhaps the early French alienists<sup>16</sup> who played the single most important role in legitimising the profession of psychiatric science.<sup>17</sup> The emergence of psychiatry in France was inextricably bound up with the wider process of secularisation, which arose in response to Enlightenment philosophy and the ideological upheaval of the decades surrounding the 1789 French Revolution. Early alienists stripped madness of its religious and supernatural connotations, replacing popular superstitions and Christian beliefs about madness with scientific methodology. The appropriation of madness by the emergent psychiatric profession gave rise to “boundary disputes” between medical science and the Church,<sup>18</sup> with early alienists seeking to establish clear demarcation between psychiatry and religion. Philippe Pinel’s landmark *Traité médico-philosophique*, originally published in 1801, revolutionised thinking about madness, clearly affirming the pathological nature of abnormal mental conditions and rejecting the supernatural connotations of such states. Indeed, by the beginning of the nineteenth century, religion, far from constituting the dominant authoritative perspective from which madness was to be considered, was identified as one of the major causes of mental derangement. Over the course of the century, religious phenomena were increasingly interpreted as pathology and religious madness became a major psychiatric category.

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<sup>15</sup> Huneman, “De la conception religieuse de la folie”, pp. 78-85.

<sup>16</sup> The term *psychiatrie*, which was coined in Germany in 1808, first entered the French language in the 1840s, but, throughout the nineteenth century, the term appeared only sporadically and usually in writings that engaged with German medical literature: Jan Goldstein, *Console and Classify: The French Psychiatric Profession in the Nineteenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), p.6.

<sup>17</sup> Goldstein, p. 1.

<sup>18</sup> Ann Goldberg, *Sex, Religion, and the Making of Modern Madness: The Eberbach Asylum and German Society 1815-1849* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 47.



# CHAPTER ONE

## REDEFINING MADNESS

### The Normal and the Pathological

Over the course of the nineteenth century, French alienists elaborated new theories of madness, rejecting long-held assumptions regarding the phenomenon. Breaking with past notions of madness as an absolute category diametrically opposed to reason, early alienists promoted a new model of madness as a complex, fluid phenomenon that could not be characterised in terms of the absence of rational thought. Rejecting the previously held view that madness and reason constitute irreconcilable opposites, Philippe Pinel and his contemporaries became preoccupied with the seemingly paradoxical coexistence of madness and reason in the same individual. Such developments were highly significant as they gave rise to the unsettling implication that madness was omnipresent and that under the right circumstances it could emerge in any individual.

Nineteenth-century medicine involved the rejection of the dualism upon which medical thought had previously been founded, eliminating the opposition between normal and abnormal states, a process described by Allen Thiher as an “anti-Cartesian revolution”.<sup>1</sup> Just as physical illness was now considered to operate along a continuum, so too was mental illness. The normal and the pathological were no longer conceived as fundamentally opposed and incompatible states, but were now understood as relative positions along a spectrum of possible values. Writing in the latter half of the nineteenth century, the positivist Claude Bernard denies the existence of the abnormal in nature, since, he argues, everything takes place

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<sup>1</sup> Allen Thiher, *Revels in Madness: Insanity in Medicine and Literature* (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1999), p. 195.

according to natural, and therefore normal, laws.<sup>2</sup> According to this principle, the pathological is merely an extension of the normal, defined in terms of relative variation from the norm rather than as an absolute state. In *Leçons sur la chaleur animale*, Bernard explores the way in which, over the course of the nineteenth century, the understanding of illness, both physical and mental, shifted from a traditional dualistic approach to an appreciation of the continuity and lack of fundamental distinction between normal and pathological mental states:

La santé et la maladie ne sont pas deux modes différant essentiellement, comme ont pu le croire les anciens médecins et comme le croient encore quelques praticiens: il ne faut pas en faire des principes distincts, des entités qui se disputent l'organisme vivant et qui en font le théâtre de leur lutte. Ce sont là des vieilleries médicales. Dans la réalité, il n'y a entre ces deux manières d'être que des différences de degré: l'exagération, la disproportion, la désharmonie des phénomènes normaux constituent l'état maladif.<sup>3</sup>

Similarly, in *Les Frontières de la folie*, a text that was conceived with the aim of rendering the ideas of nineteenth-century psychiatric science accessible to the population at large, Alexandre Cullerre describes the ways in which ideas relating to the concept of madness evolved over the course of the century, recounting a growing awareness of the complexity of the relationship between normal and pathological mental states. He describes how nineteenth-century alienists rejected the arbitrary boundary between the normal and the pathological, reconceiving madness as a state continuous with reason. Like Bernard, Cullerre reveals the elimination of dualism in nineteenth-century medical thought. He highlights the relativity of normal and pathological conditions, whether physical or mental:

ce qu'on est convenu d'appeler la *santé* est une chose toute relative. Il n'en existe aucune forme absolue, qu'on la considère au point de vue mental aussi bien qu'au point de vue physique, et un type normal de l'esprit humain ne saurait être qu'une abstraction idéale.<sup>4</sup>

In accordance with these ideas, nineteenth-century alienists elaborated a vast spectrum of mental conditions between the theoretical extremes of absolute madness and absolute reason. The consequences of the new model of madness were widespread, ultimately leading to the pathologisation of various forms of minor

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<sup>2</sup> George Canguilhem, *Le Normal et le pathologique*, (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1961), p. 62.

<sup>3</sup> Claude Bernard, *Leçons sur la chaleur animale, sur les effets de la chaleur et sur la fièvre* (Paris: Baillière, 1876), p. 391.

<sup>4</sup> Alexandre Cullerre, *Les Frontières de la folie* (Paris: Baillière, 1888), p. 24.



social and cultural deviance. Jan Goldstein explores the significant impact of this new understanding of madness in early nineteenth-century France, citing high profile judicial proceedings in which alienists increasingly argued for diminished responsibility on the basis of various new pathological mental states in which madness and reason could coexist in varying configurations.<sup>5</sup>

### **Madness and the Passions**

Early members of the French psychiatric profession, notably Pinel and Etienne Esquirol, promoted the idea that the passions played a key role in the development of madness. Rather than seeking physical origins for mental disorders, Pinel and his followers linked the onset of insanity to disturbances and imbalances in ordinary passions. Far from being conceived as a clearly defined category, madness was now understood as the exaggeration of commonplace sentiments taken to pathological extremes. Evidently, such a view of madness was highly unsettling, since it implied that madness, rather than being a self-contained category, was present in varying degrees in all individuals. The association between madness and the passions dominated early psychiatric debate, and this notion, originally proposed by Pinel, was extensively explored and developed by alienists throughout the nineteenth century. Over the course of the century, alienists identified multiple forms of mental alienation, each defined in terms of the specific passion from which it was derived and the various different ways in which the exaggeration of this passion could affect an individual's thought and behaviour. In particular, political, religious, and intellectual obsession were identified as major sources of madness in nineteenth-century France, since these incited powerful emotional reactions that psychiatrists believed could eclipse reason and lead to pathological mental states.

As suggested by Jan Goldstein, since early alienists attributed madness to the exaggeration of ordinary passions, the study of this phenomenon was now bound up

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<sup>5</sup> Jan Goldstein, *Console and Classify: The French Psychiatric Profession in the Nineteenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), pp. 166-169.

with that of moral philosophy,<sup>6</sup> and the manner in which abnormal mental conditions were to be interpreted and treated underwent radical transformation. This new understanding of madness posed a challenge to John Locke's ideas about madness, which had remained influential until the latter half of the eighteenth century.<sup>7</sup> As outlined in his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690), Locke conceived of madness as false reasoning, derived from delusion. This is clear from his distinction between idiots and madmen:

In short, herein seems to lie the difference between idiots and madmen: that madmen put wrong ideas together, and so make wrong propositions, but argue and reason right from them; but idiots make very few or no propositions, and reason scarce at all.<sup>8</sup>

Moving away from the view of madness as delusion, Pinel links the phenomenon to imbalanced passions and an unbridled imagination. In his 1798 *Nosographie philosophique*, Pinel calls for a union between medicine and moral philosophy, merging scientific and philosophical ideas relating to the human mind:

L'histoire des passions humaines étant étroitement liée à celle des vésanies, de la mélancolie, de la manie, les moyens préservatifs de ces maladies mentales peuvent-ils être puisés dans d'autres sources que dans une étude profonde de la philosophie morale? peut-on décrire les symptômes, si on n'a analysé avec Locke et Condillac les fonctions de l'entendement humain?<sup>9</sup>

Pinel's belief that the development of mental alienation was linked to ordinary passions formed the basis of his *traitement moral*, a practice derived from moral philosophy that replaced the more brutal attempts to cure madness that had previously been widespread in France and across Europe. It was the emergence of this new method of treating madness that gave Pinel his reputation of liberating asylum patients from their chains, an image that persists to this day. The alienist Louis-Victor Marcé, in his *Traité pratique des maladies mentales*, highlights the groundbreaking nature of Pinel's *traitement moral*. Marcé declares that Pinel "inaugura une ère toute nouvelle dans l'histoire de la médecine mentale" and that

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<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 241-242.

<sup>7</sup> German Berrios, *The History of Mental Symptoms: Descriptive Psychopathology Since the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 93.

<sup>8</sup> John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (London: Tegg, 1836), p. 94.

<sup>9</sup> Philippe Pinel, *Nosographie philosophique, ou la méthode de l'analyse appliquée à la médecine*, 3 vols. (Paris: Brosson, 1807), I, cxviii.

Pinel must be perceived “et comme médecin et comme réformateur”.<sup>10</sup> He says of Pinel’s revolutionary new treatment methods:

Comme réformateur, il protesta d’une manière éclatante contre les traitements odieux dont les aliénés étaient victimes, il eut le courage de faire tomber leurs chaînes (1792) et au milieu du mouvement social qui se prononçait de toutes parts, il invoqua en leur faveur les lois de l’humanité. Aux mauvais traitements, aux violences brutales, il substitua des moyens de répression sagement combinés, vanta les effets de la fermeté unie à la douceur et à la patience, et posa ainsi les premières bases du véritable traitement moral.<sup>11</sup>

A number of writers have called into question the authenticity of the persistent image of Pinel as the liberator of the insane.<sup>12</sup> Most famously, Michel Foucault, in his 1961 *Folie et déraison*, argues that Pinel’s legendary liberation of the insane represents merely the transition from physical to mental forms of oppression.

In his 1801 *Traité médico-philosophique sur l’aliénation mentale*, the very title of which highlights the fusion of scientific and philosophical perspectives, Pinel outlines the theory and method of his moral treatment. Pinel states: “C’est souvent bien moins par des médicamens que par des moyens moraux, et surtout par une occupation active, qu’on peut faire une heureuse diversion aux idées tristes des mélancoliques, ou même changer leur enchaînement vicieux”.<sup>13</sup> Pinel’s moral treatment adopted many of the techniques traditionally employed by religious healers,<sup>14</sup> incorporating a secularised form of the pastoral care of the Church into the domain of medical science and excluding religious groups from the treatment of the mentally ill.<sup>15</sup> For example, as pointed out by Jan Goldstein, the technique of

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<sup>10</sup> Louis-Victor Marcé, *Traité pratique des maladies mentales* (Paris: Baillière, 1862), p. 29.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> Gladys Swain seeks to unravel the myth of Pinel as the “chainbreaker”, arguing that this notion has its origins in a paper published by Pinel  *fils* in 1823: Gladys Swain, *Le Sujet de la folie: Naissance de la psychiatrie* (Toulouse: Privat, 1977), pp. 41-47. Similarly, Dora Wiener looks at the historical construction of such a view of Pinel, which she describes as a “crudely manufactured myth”: Dora Wiener, “Le geste de Pinel: The History of a Psychiatric Myth”, in *Discovering the History of Psychiatry*, ed. by Mark Micale and Roy Porter (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), pp. 232-247 (p. 242).

<sup>13</sup> Philippe Pinel, *Traité médico-philosophique sur l’aliénation mentale, ou la manie* (Paris: Brosson, 1809), p. 348.

<sup>14</sup> Before developing his *traitement moral*, Pinel refers to The Retreat, a Quaker institution founded in 1796 by William Tuke: Philippe Huneman, “De la conception religieuse de la folie à la manie religieuse: l’*Encyclopédie*, Pinel, Esquirol”, in *PSN* (2013), no. 1, vol. 11, 69-106 (p. 87).

<sup>15</sup> Ann Goldberg, *Sex, Religion, and the Making of Modern Madness: The Eberbach Asylum and German Society 1815-1849* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 48.

“consolation” was derived directly from Catholic pastoral care.<sup>16</sup> Whilst Pinel’s moral treatment merged medical, philosophical, and religious principles, it nevertheless marked a clear break with religious theories of madness, representing the generalised shift from a religious to a scientific perspective of mental illness.

In his 1805, *Des Passions considérées comme causes, symptômes, et moyens curatifs de l’aliénation mentale*, Esquirol, developing Pinel’s ideas, introduces the concept of the *passion dominante* as the cause of each specific form of mental alienation.<sup>17</sup> In his highly influential *Des Maladies mentales* of 1838, he attributes mental disturbances to the conflict between emotion and reason: “Les passions modifient les idées, les croyances, les déterminations de l’homme le plus raisonnable”.<sup>18</sup> Esquirol argues that extreme religious or political sentiment and various forms of intellectual obsession are frequently responsible for the onset of mental alienation, since these evoke powerful emotional responses:

La fureur exprime le plus haut degré d’exaltation des passions véhémentes. On aime ou l’on hait avec fureur. On appelle fureur un violent accès de colère. Le fanatisme religieux, politique et l’enthousiasme se convertissent quelquefois en véritable fureur. Cet état extrême des passions, qui prive l’homme de la raison, qui le porte aux déterminations les plus funestes, conduit assez souvent à l’aliénation mentale.<sup>19</sup>

Building on the theories of Pinel and Esquirol, the alienist Jean-Baptiste Descuret divides the passions into three distinct categories: “*passions animales*”, “*passions sociales*”, and “*passions intellectuelles*”,<sup>20</sup> identifying different forms of mental alienation associated with each. He says of the latter category: “Parmi les passions intellectuelles viennent se classer les *manies* de l’étude, de la musique, de l’ordre, des collections, ainsi que les *fanatismes artistique, politique et religieux*”.<sup>21</sup> In keeping with the ideas of his predecessors, he highlights “l’exaltation des opinions politiques et des croyances religieuses” as major sources of madness.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Goldstein, p. 5.

<sup>17</sup> Etienne Esquirol, *Des Passions considérées comme causes, symptômes, et moyens curatifs de l’aliénation mentale* (Paris: Didot, 1805), p. 14.

<sup>18</sup> Etienne Esquirol, *Des Maladies mentales considérées sous les rapports médical, hygiénique et médico-légal*, 2 vols. (Paris: Baillière, 1838), I, 415.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, p. 225.

<sup>20</sup> Jean-Baptiste Félix Descuret, *La Médecine des passions, ou Les Passions considérées dans leurs rapports avec les maladies, les lois et la religion* (Paris: Béchét, 1844), p. 770.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid*, p. 758.

Since insanity was increasingly understood to be the result of imbalances in the passions, alienists considered that there was a greater incidence of mental alienation at times of social and political unrest. In a speech of 1824, reprinted in *Des Maladies mentales*, Esquirol argues that the political turmoil of the age had provoked an outbreak of madness, posing the question: “Existe-t-il de nos jours un plus grand nombre de fous qu’il n’en existait il y a quarante ans?”<sup>23</sup> Elsewhere, Esquirol establishes a connection between the specific forms of madness that he encounters and the precise historical context in which they emerged:

L’influence de nos malheurs politiques a été si constante, que je pourrais donner l’histoire de notre révolution, depuis la prise de la Bastille jusqu’à la dernière apparition de Bonaparte, par celle de quelques aliénés dont la folie se rattache aux événemens qui ont signalé cette longue période de notre histoire.<sup>24</sup>

Similarly, in an article of 1839, entitled “De l’Influence de la civilisation sur le développement de la folie”, Alexandre Brierre de Boismont asserts: “c’est avec justesse qu’on a dit que l’histoire pourrait s’écrire par les désordres de la raison”.<sup>25</sup> The perceived link between extreme political sentiment and pathological madness emerges from Brierre de Boismont’s case study of an artist in *Des Hallucinations*. The artist in question is described as being “atteint d’un délire maniaque qui a passé à la démence”, and this madness is explicitly linked to the exaggeration of the passions at times of political unrest: “l’agitation devient très prononcée et même dangereuse, dès qu’il survient quelque événement politique”.<sup>26</sup> In particular, alienists linked madness to revolution, identifying peaks in mental alienation, not only in the wake of 1789 but also following the uprisings of 1830 and 1848.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Esquirol, *Des Maladies mentales*, II, 723.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid*, I, 54.

<sup>25</sup> Alexandre Brierre de Boismont, “De l’Influence de la civilisation sur le développement de la folie”, in *Annales d’hygiène publique et de médecine légale*, vol. 21 (1839), 241-295 (p. 262).

<sup>26</sup> Alexandre Brierre de Boismont, *Des Hallucinations, ou Histoire raisonnée des apparitions, des visions, des songes, de l’extase, des rêves, du magnétisme et du somnambulisme* (Paris: Baillière, 1852), p. 188.

<sup>27</sup> Françoise Jacob, “Madness and Politics: French Nineteenth-Century Alienists’ Response to Revolution”, in *History of Psychiatry*, vol. 6, no. 24 (1995), 421-429 (pp. 424-425).

## Organic Theories of Madness

Allen Thiher identifies the 1822 thesis of Antoine Bayle, which linked general paresis with chronic meningitis, as the first example of the medical determination of a relationship between a pathological physical condition and an abnormal mental state.<sup>28</sup> Bayle's observations implied that alienists should seek organic, rather than moral, origins for mental alienation. The idea that mental illness could be accounted for by anatomical abnormalities came to the fore in France from the middle of the nineteenth century, marking the beginning of a new phase in the history of the understanding of madness. In keeping with Bayle's conclusions, physiological interpretations of abnormal mental states became the dominant medical model of madness in the latter half of the nineteenth century, gradually gaining precedence over Pinel and Esquirol's moral theories of madness. Alienists such as Jacques-Joseph Moreau de Tours and Louis-François Lélut argued that pathological mental states were inextricably bound up with physiological disturbances in the nervous system. The therapeutic moral treatments of early alienists, including Pinel's *traitement moral*, were gradually rejected as insanity was increasingly linked to incurable physiological deformations.

Despite the generalised transition from moral to biological interpretations of madness, alienists continued to identify religion, politics, and intellectual pursuits as major causes of mental alienation. In keeping with the ideas of his predecessors, Moreau de Tours links madness to intense emotion or obsession; however, unlike Pinel and Esquirol, he perceives a connection between mental and physical disequilibrium. Moreau de Tours identifies "la suractivité du dynamisme mental", which, he claims, could be derived from extreme passion or obsession, as responsible for the onset of madness: "Au point de vue affectif comme au point de vue intellectuel, la suractivité du dynamisme mental ne saurait dépasser certaines bornes sans devenir un délire réel".<sup>29</sup> Like Esquirol, he suggests that, owing to the intense

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<sup>28</sup> Thiher, p. 195.

<sup>29</sup> Jacques-Joseph Moreau de Tours, *La Psychologie morbide dans ses rapports avec la philosophie de l'histoire, ou De l'influence des névropathies sur le dynamisme intellectuel* (Paris: Masson, 1859), p. 400.

emotion with which they are associated, both religious and political fervour constitute major causes of madness:

L'enthousiasme, politique ou religieux, ce dernier surtout, ne surexcite pas seulement les facultés de l'intellect, il agit avec non moins d'énergie sur les sentiments affectifs dont l'exaltation extrême peut également se convertir en un véritable état pathologique.<sup>30</sup>

### **Partial Madness**

Since early alienists widely considered that madness arose from imbalances in ordinary passions, they believed that the pathological mind could be differentiated from the healthy mind only in terms of degree and not in any absolute sense. In keeping with this notion, alienists introduced multiple subcategories of madness that were characterised by unbalanced or exaggerated passions, but that allowed for the continued presence of lucid, rational thought. The concept of partial madness dominated nineteenth-century psychiatric thought, leading to the identification of new forms of madness that could be defined both in terms of the source of mental instability and of the extent to which the faculty of reason remained intact. This new understanding of madness was problematic, creating a number of borderline cases, and leading to fears regarding the omnipresence of madness in nineteenth-century French society. Over the course of the nineteenth century, theories of partial madness evolved in a number of different ways. In the early decades of the nineteenth century, Esquirol's medical category of monomania came to the fore; and from the middle of the century monomania was largely replaced by new models of partial madness, including the concept of pathological eccentricity. This development mirrored the general transition from moral to organic models of mental illness.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, Pinel introduced the category of *manie sans délire* to designate a form of partial madness in which patients, although afflicted with uncontrollable passion relating to a specific area of consciousness,

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<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

nevertheless retained the faculties of reason and rational judgment. Speaking of his observations of a number of female patients suffering from the condition, Pinel remarks: “ces aliénées, dans le moment où elles raisonnent avec justesse, donnent d’autres marques d’égarement dans leurs actions et offrent d’autres caractères propres aux maniaques”.<sup>31</sup> He later replaced the category of *manie sans délire* with that of *folie raisonnante*, both concepts revealing his adherence to the notion that madness and reason could coexist in varying configurations. Esquirol illustrates his belief in the lack of basic distinction between the healthy and the pathological mind by his description of an individual who enters “une maison d’aliénés”:

Il y retrouve les mêmes idées, les mêmes erreurs, les mêmes passions, les mêmes infortunes: c’est le même monde; mais dans une semblable maison, les traits sont plus forts, les nuances plus marquées, les couleurs plus vives, les effets plus heurtés, parce que l’homme s’y montre dans toute sa nudité, parce qu’il ne dissimule pas sa pensée, parce qu’il ne cache pas ses défauts, parce qu’il ne prête point à ses passions le charme qui séduit, ni à ses vices les apparences qui trompent.<sup>32</sup>

The implications here are that those diagnosed with madness live in a more natural state of humanity, and that their insanity consists essentially of their failure or inability to conform to social or cultural norms rather than arising from the absence of reason in any absolute sense.

In the first half of the nineteenth century, the concept of partial madness became embodied in Esquirol’s controversial category of monomania (discussed in the following chapter). Monomania was bound up with the early psychiatric idea that madness constituted a moral phenomenon arising from imbalances in the passions. According to Esquirol’s theory, madness could be limited to a specific aspect of human consciousness, allowing for the continued presence of reason in all other areas of the mind. However, the influence of monomania declined with the increasing authority of organic models of madness, and, from the middle of the nineteenth century, alienists elaborated new theories of partial madness to replace the problematic concept of monomania. Esquirol’s successors, gradually breaking away from his theory of monomania, sought to identify new varieties of partial or

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<sup>31</sup> Pinel, *Traité médico-philosophique*, p. 138, n. 1.

<sup>32</sup> Esquirol, *Des Maladies mentales*, I, 1.



intermediate madness, a tendency referred to by Goldstein as the “appropriation of the *demi-fou*”.<sup>33</sup>

In an article of 1836, entitled “Recherche des analogies de la folie et de la raison”, Lélut, subscribing to organic interpretations of mental illness, argues for the omnipresence of madness, claiming that madness and reason, far from being fundamentally opposing states, coexist in varying configurations in all individuals. He asserts that “la folie n’est pas une chose à part”, a statement for which he provides a physiological explanation: “A son point de départ, et dans les dispositions mentales qui en sont la cause prédisposante, organique et constitutionnelle, la folie est encore de la raison, comme la raison est déjà de la folie”.<sup>34</sup> Lélut proceeds to identify a spectrum of pathological mental conditions that are characterised by varying degrees of deviation from the theoretical extremes of madness and reason, declaring: “de la raison complète ou philosophique au délire véritablement maniaque, il y a d’innombrables degrés”.<sup>35</sup> Also subscribing to organic interpretations of mental illness, Moreau de Tours insists on the continued presence of reason in the pathological mind, asserting: “ce que l’on appelle folie n’est point l’anéantissement de la raison”.<sup>36</sup> Moreau de Tours articulates the view that madness can be incomplete and compatible with reason, and he highlights the perceived fluidity between healthy and pathological mental states:

Il est une foule de points chez l’aliéné le plus digne de ce nom sur lesquels cette raison s’exerce avec toute l’énergie, toute la lucidité possible. Il suffit de porter son attention d’une idée vers une autre idée, brusquement, sans transition aucune, pour entendre le plus fou d’entre les fous parler comme un sage.<sup>37</sup>

However, in contrast to the ideas of earlier alienists, in particular Esquirol’s category of monomania, Moreau de Tours considered that, owing to its organic origins, madness could not be localised and when present affected the mind in its entirety, albeit in a partial rather than absolute form.

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<sup>33</sup> Goldstein, pp. 332-333.

<sup>34</sup> Louis-Francois Lélut, “Recherche des analogies de la folie et de la raison” (1834), in *Gazette médicale de Paris*, no. 22, vol. 2 (1834) 337-342 (p. 337).

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> Jacques-Joseph Moreau de Tours, “De l’Identité de l’état de rêve et de la folie” in *Annales médico-psychologiques*, vol. 1 (1855), 361-408 (p. 406).

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

Moreau de Tours famously experimented with hashish to observe the effects of madness, since he considered drug-induced delirium and pathological hallucination to constitute analogous states. He argues: “Il n’est aucun fait élémentaire ou constitutif de la folie qui ne se rencontre dans les modifications intellectuelles développées par le haschisch”.<sup>38</sup> Evidently, with such an analogy, Moreau de Tours undermines the opposition between healthy and pathological mental states whilst affirming the necessary overlap between mental and physical functions. During his experiments, Moreau de Tours would himself become intoxicated with hashish, since he considered that he was consciously inducing an artificial state of madness from which he could obtain authentic insight about pathological madness based on his own experiences: “m’étant volontairement plongé dans un état de folie *artificielle* (folie identique à la folie *spontanée*, du moins au point de vue des phénomènes psychologiques), j’ai pu me prendre moi-même comme sujet de mes observations”.<sup>39</sup> The very fact that Moreau de Tours sought to derive conclusions about mental illness from self-observation, while experiencing drug-induced states of delirium, reveals the assumption that madness allowed for the continued presence of lucidity and reason.

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<sup>38</sup> Jacques-Joseph Moreau de Tours, *Du Haschisch et de l’aliénation mentale: Etudes psychologiques* (Paris: Fortin-Masson, 1845), p. 35.

<sup>39</sup> Moreau de Tours, *La Psychologie morbide*, p. 430, n. 1. These lines appear in the context of Moreau de Tours’s comments regarding Nerval’s literary depiction of madness in *Aurélia*. Moreau de Tours confirms the validity of Nerval’s descriptions by comparing them to his own observations while in a state of “artificial”, drug-induced madness. See below: Part One, Chapter Seven.

## CHAPTER TWO

### MONOMANIA

The early psychiatric model of partial madness as arising from unbalanced and exaggerated passions led to the identification of the category of monomania. This was a controversial concept that rose to prominence in French psychiatric thought in the early decades of the nineteenth century. It reached its peak during the years of the July Monarchy, becoming the subject of much debate in both psychiatric and popular spheres of activity, before declining in popularity as suddenly as it had emerged in the latter half of the century. With the concept of monomania, alienists introduced the problematic notion that a single, isolated aspect of the mind could be subject to mental alienation while all other mental faculties remained entirely unaffected. The term *monomanie* was first introduced by Esquirol and the concept was initially propagated in the writings of Esquirol and Etienne-Jean Georget in the first two decades of the nineteenth century, rapidly becoming the focal point of early nineteenth-century psychiatric discussion and debate.

At a time when the psychiatric profession was establishing itself as an authentic branch of medical science and seeking to adopt a specialised technical vocabulary distinct from that of everyday popular discourse,<sup>1</sup> Esquirol introduced the term *monomanie* to designate a range of conditions that fell into the vague category of partial madness. He conceived of monomania as a vast pathological category that would encompass the multiple different forms of partial madness identified by alienists:

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<sup>1</sup> For example, *aliénation* replaced the more general term, *folie*, while *lypémanie* was introduced to replace *mélancolie* in psychiatric discourse: Laure Murat, *La Maison du docteur Blanche: Histoire d'un asile et de ses pensionnaires* (Paris: Lattès, 2001), p. 34.

j'ai proposé d'imposer à la folie partielle le nom de *monomanie*, ce mot, exprimant le signe le plus remarquable de ce genre de folie, convient à tous les délires partiels, gais ou tristes, calmes ou furieux, et est devenu un terme générique.<sup>2</sup>

Indeed, monomania rapidly became an extremely common diagnosis, since this far-reaching category could be applied to a wide variety of forms of unconventional or extreme thought and conduct. In *De la Folie* (1820), Georget highlights the perceived prevalence of this newly conceived form of partial madness: "C'est sans contredit le genre de délire le plus fréquent".<sup>3</sup>

Expanding on the early psychiatric principle that madness and reason constituted overlapping rather than opposing states, the theory of monomania proposed that pathological delirium could affect a single aspect of the mind, allowing for the continued presence of reason in all other areas. Esquirol describes the problematic notion of *délire partiel*, which constitutes the basis for this new psychiatric category, as follows:

Le délire partiel est un phénomène si remarquable, que plus on l'observe, plus on s'étonne qu'un homme qui sent, raisonne et agit comme tout le monde, ne sente plus, ne raisonne plus, n'agisse plus comme les autres hommes, sur un point unique.<sup>4</sup>

In *Des Maladies mentales*, Esquirol defines monomania as: "une lésion partielle de l'intelligence, des affections ou de la volonté".<sup>5</sup> Such a description highlights the status of monomania as a purely mental as opposed to physiological phenomenon. According to Esquirol, the delirium of the monomaniac is necessarily incomplete, limited to a single object or idea:

Tantôt le désordre intellectuel est concentré sur un seul objet ou sur une série d'objets circonscrits; les malades partent d'un principe faux, dont ils suivent sans dévier les raisonnemens logiques, et dont ils tirent des conséquences légitimes qui modifient leurs affections et les actes de leur volonté; hors de ce délire partiel, ils sentent, raisonnent, agissent comme tout le monde.<sup>6</sup>

In keeping with Pinel's earlier ideas, monomania was derived from a model of madness as the exaggeration of ordinary passions and preoccupations: "Il semble que

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<sup>2</sup> Etienne Esquirol, *Des Maladies mentales considérées sous les rapports médical, hygiénique et médico-légal*, 2 vols. (Paris: Baillière, 1838), II, 792.

<sup>3</sup> Etienne-Jean Georget, *De la Folie: Considérations sur cette maladie* (Paris: Crevot, 1820), p. 108.

<sup>4</sup> Esquirol, II, 5.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1.

la monomanie ne soit que l'exagération des idées, des désirs, des illusions d'avenir dont se berçaient ces malheureux avant leur maladie".<sup>7</sup> Esquirol highlights the fact that in the case of monomania there exists a "lien de continuité entre la source et l'effet, la passion normale et son excès morbide".<sup>8</sup>

Since monomania was ascribed to imbalances in ordinary emotions, it was perceived as an omnipresent phenomenon, especially in the context of post-Revolutionary instability. Esquirol identifies a number of *causes excitantes* responsible for the onset of monomania. These could include any idea or activity capable of inspiring an intense emotional response:

Les causes excitantes sont: les écarts de régime, les passions vives, et surtout les revers de fortune ou les mécomptes de l'amour-propre et de l'ambition. Souvent aussi l'exaltation religieuse, les méditations ascétiques, la lecture des romans jettent dans cette maladie les individus essentiellement dominés par l'orgueil et la vanité.<sup>9</sup>

Accordingly, the broad category of monomania was subdivided into a number of new, highly specific forms of mental alienation, each of which was characterised in terms of the *cause excitante* from which it was thought to originate. In each case, delirium was thought to be limited to an isolated aspect of the patient's thought or conduct, generally revolving around a specific *idée fixe*,<sup>10</sup> a distortion or misconception from which the monomaniac could derive perfectly logical conclusions. Following Esquirol's definition, alienists described a range of different types of monomania linked to different preoccupations and obsessions. As explained by Esquirol:

Les espèces de monomanies prennent leur nom de l'objet du délire. Ainsi nous disons monomanie hypocondriaque, lorsque le délire a pour objet la santé du malade; monomanie religieuse, lorsque le délire roule sur des sujets religieux; monomanie érotique, lorsque les passions amoureuses sont l'objet du délire; monomanie-suicide, lorsque le désir de se tuer domine l'intelligence; monomanie-homicide, lorsque le monomaniac est porté au meurtre.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 30.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> The expression *idée fixe*, which became common in both medical and literary portrayals of monomania, was probably coined by the German phrenologists Franz Joseph Gall and Johann Spurzheim in relation to Esquirol's new psychiatric category: Jan Goldstein, *Console and Classify: The French Psychiatric Profession in the Nineteenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), p. 155.

<sup>11</sup> Esquirol, II, 336.

Alienists frequently cited religious and political fanaticism as major sources of monomania. Forms of monomania derived from such origins were thought to be widespread at the time owing to the social, political, and ideological turmoil that characterised French society in the wake of 1789. Esquirol suggests that different forms of monomania emerge in different social contexts, affirming that, “l’état de la société exerce une grande influence sur la production et le caractère de la monomanie”.<sup>12</sup> In both medical and popular discourse, monomania was often linked to exaggerated or obsessive intellectual pursuits, especially the practice of collecting and the related category of *bibliomanie*.<sup>13</sup> In the first half of the nineteenth century, multiple types of monomania were identified, the names of which vary in the writings of different alienists. In each of these subcategories, madness is linked to a clearly defined object and does not entail the loss of reason in any absolute sense, revealing the way in which nineteenth-century alienists diagnosed pathological mental states based on minor deviations from prescribed norms of thought and behaviour. The alienist Charles-Chrétien-Henri Marc, who devotes an extensive study to the legal implications of monomania, identifies numerous subcategories of the condition, including *monomanie d’orgueil*, *monomanie homicide*, *monomanie suicide*, *monomanie érotique*, *monomanie religieuse*, *monomanie du vol*, *monomanie incendiaire*, and *monomanie transmise par imitation*.<sup>14</sup>

In particular, the subcategory of monomania that Esquirol refers to as *monomanie raisonnante* reflects the way in which early psychiatry dictated the bounds of social acceptability. This form of monomania involves unconventional ideas or activities of an individual who is fully conscious of his deviance and who retains the faculty of reason:

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<sup>12</sup> Esquirol, I, 402.

<sup>13</sup> Charles Nodier’s concept of *bibliomanie*, which was considered from the perspective of medical psychiatry in Jean-Baptiste Descuret’s *La Médecine des passions* (1841), will be looked at in Part Two of this thesis in relation to “La Bibliothèque de mon oncle”. The alienist Bénédic-Auguste Morel also establishes an explicit connection between collecting and mental alienation, claiming that “La plupart des collectionneurs [...] sont des déments”: Bénédic-Auguste Morel, *Etudes cliniques: Traité théorique et pratique des maladies mentales considérées dans leur nature, leur traitement, et dans leur rapport avec la médecine légale des aliénés*, 2 vols. (Paris: Masson, 1852), I, 435.

<sup>14</sup> Charles-Chrétien-Henri-Marc, *De la Folie considérée dans ses rapports avec les questions médico-judiciaires*, 2 vols. (Paris: Baillière, 1840).

Dans la monomanie raisonnante [...] l'intelligence n'est pas essentiellement lésée, puisqu'elle assiste aux actes de l'aliéné, puisque le malade est toujours prêt à justifier ses sentiments et ses actions [...] les malades atteints de cette variété de folie ont vraiment un délire partiel; ils font des actions, ils tiennent des propos bizarres, singuliers, absurdes qu'ils reconnaissent pour tels et qu'ils blâment.<sup>15</sup>

This subcategory of monomania was especially problematic, since it allowed for the pathologisation of socially or culturally deviant behaviour in an individual whose intellectual capacities remain entirely intact. Esquirol refers to individuals afflicted with *monomanie raisonnante* as “malades”, even though, in such cases, mental alienation is not associated with the loss of lucidity or reason:

il est des monomaniaques qui ne déraisonnent point, dont les idées conservent leurs liaisons naturelles, dont les raisonnements sont logiques, dont les discours sont suivis, souvent vifs et spirituels. Mais les actions de ces malades sont contraires à leurs affections, à leurs intérêts et aux usages sociaux, elles sont déraisonnables dans ce sens qu'elles sont en opposition avec leurs habitudes et avec celles des personnes avec lesquelles ils vivent.<sup>16</sup>

This form of monomania represents an extreme example of the way in which nineteenth-century French psychiatry dictated and controlled social norms.

As alienists increasingly applied the broad psychiatric category of monomania to wide-ranging forms of unconventional or obsessive thought and conduct, it simultaneously became a major cultural phenomenon, permeating literary and journalistic texts in the first half of the nineteenth century.<sup>17</sup> The all-pervasiveness of monomania in early nineteenth-century French culture is illustrated by Marina van Zuylen, who writes: “Every extremist was soon branded as a monomaniac, and even lawyers, jumping on the bandwagon, rescued the most unlikely delinquents by invoking the homicidal monomania that had possessed them.”<sup>18</sup> Monomania thus “turned culprits into victims, eccentricities into pathologies”.<sup>19</sup> The popularisation of monomania increased the sphere of activity not only of alienists but also of *médecins*

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<sup>15</sup> Esquirol, II, 71.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 49-50.

<sup>17</sup> Goldstein argues that monomania was readily assimilated into popular discourse “because of its special relevance at that historical moment”, linking the rise of monomania to post-Revolutionary social fluidity: Goldstein, p. 161.

<sup>18</sup> Marina van Zuylen, *Monomania: the Flight from Everyday Life in Literature and Art* (Cornell: Cornell University Press, 2005), p. 3.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

*légistes*. Goldstein examines the role of the latter, showing how Georget embarked on a “campaign to “medicalize” the insanity defence”.<sup>20</sup> Owing to its increasingly prominent social status, this psychiatric concept captured the popular imagination, becoming a major cultural category especially during the years of the July Monarchy. The popularity of monomania in nineteenth-century French culture is reflected by its recurrent appearance in literary texts. Writers such as Balzac, Flaubert, and Stendhal repeatedly incorporated the psychiatric theories of Esquirol and Georget into their fictions.<sup>21</sup> This is the case in many of the works contained in Balzac’s *La Comédie Humaine* in which literary realism is interspersed with contemporaneous medical discourse. Both word and concept pervade Balzac’s novels, the terms *monomanie* and *monomaniaque* frequently appearing to characterise obsessive or fanatical figures. Monomania is described by the narrator of *Le Père Goriot* in his description of “ce que nous nommons *des hommes à passions*”, individuals who “chaussent une idée et n’en démordent pas. Ils n’ont soif que d’une certaine eau prise à une certaine fontaine”.<sup>22</sup> The concept of monomania is directly evoked in *Eugénie Grandet* in relation to avarice:

Depuis deux ans principalement, son avarice s’était accrue comme s’accroissent toutes les passions persistantes de l’homme. Suivant une observation faite sur les avarés, sur les ambitieux, sur tous les gens dont la vie a été consacrée à une idée dominante, son sentiment avait affectionnée plus particulièrement un symbole de sa passion. La vue d’or, la possession de l’or était devenue sa monomanie.<sup>23</sup>

The concept of monomania is central to Balzac’s descriptions of the protagonists of *Louis Lambert* and *La Recherche de l’absolu*, in both cases bound up with intellectual obsession. Lawrence Rothfield describes Lambert and Balthazar Cläes (the hero of *La Recherche de l’absolu*) as “classic monomaniacs, but monomaniacs whose passions are directed toward an ideal (in Lambert’s case intellectual, in Cläes’s case aesthetic)”.<sup>24</sup> In both novels, the protagonist’s monomania is bound up with genius, but is also destructive and all-consuming. Despite closely adhering to alienists’

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<sup>20</sup> Goldstein, pp. 166-169.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid*, p. 3.

<sup>22</sup> Honoré de Balzac, *Le Père Goriot* (Paris: Charpentier, 1839), p. 59.

<sup>23</sup> Honoré de Balzac, *Eugénie Grandet* (Paris: Charpentier, 1839), p. 273.

<sup>24</sup> Lawrence Rothfield, *Vital Signs: Medical Realism in Nineteenth-Century Fiction* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), p. 62.



discourse regarding this psychiatric category, Balzac's depictions reveal the fundamental ambiguity of the concept.

During its heyday at the time of the July Monarchy, the concept of monomania was a subject of intense debate and was at the centre of much controversy. Despite its escalating influence in nineteenth-century medicine, as well as in popular, journalistic, and literary culture, the pathological category of monomania was not universally accepted, meeting much resistance from inside the psychiatric profession and beyond, as many rejected the notion that madness could be circumscribed to a single aspect of the mind. The idea that insanity could be localised and affect an otherwise entirely healthy individual was controversial, since it challenged ancient assumptions, both scientific and religious, about the human condition in general: by implying that different parts of the human mind could function in isolation, such a theory called into question the fundamental unity of the self.<sup>25</sup> The idea that individual mental faculties could function independently gave rise to widespread disagreement amongst prominent alienists, several of whom openly denied the existence of monomania.<sup>26</sup> Ultimately, it was the rise of organic models of madness from the middle of the nineteenth century that led to the irreversible demise of this concept. Jean-Pierre Falret published a comprehensive attack on monomania in his 1854 article, "De la Non-existence de la monomanie", included in his 1864 *Des Maladies mentales et des asiles d'aliénés*. In this text, Falret, embracing newly conceived physiological theories of mental alienation, attacks the perceived vagueness and fluidity of the classification system of Pinel and Esquirol. He considers the model of mental alienation established by earlier alienists to be arbitrary and lacking precision, since, he claims, it is based merely on external symptoms and overlooks the organic functioning of the body:

En effet, la manie, la mélancolie, la monomanie et la démence, que dans la classification régnante on considère comme des formes distinctes, ne représentent que des états symptomatiques provisoires et ne réunissent aucune des conditions nécessaires pour constituer des espèces vraiment naturelles. Les caractères qui leur servent de base sont si

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<sup>25</sup> Miranda Gill, *Eccentricity and the Cultural Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Paris* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 243.

<sup>26</sup> Alienists that attacked the concept of monomania included Jean-Pierre Falret, Benedict-Augustin Morel, and Jean-Auguste Bariod. See: Paul Bercherie, *Histoire et structure du savoir psychiatrique* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2004), pp. 64-65.

secondaires et si peu nombreux que chaque jour on rencontre des aliénés qui peuvent à volonté figurer dans l'une ou dans l'autre de ces quatre catégories.<sup>27</sup>

Falret's work represented a turning point in nineteenth-century psychiatric thought. It reflected the generalised move towards an understanding of mental illness according to which the mental state of an individual could not be considered independently of the physical body. The increasing prominence of organic theories of madness led to the rejection of monomania in favour of new theories of partial madness. From the middle of the nineteenth century, eccentricity, which had become prominent in French popular and literary culture at the beginning of the century, was appropriated by alienists and identified as a pathological condition.

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<sup>27</sup> Jean-Pierre Falret, *Des Maladies mentales et des asiles des aliénés: Leçons cliniques et considérations générales* (Paris: Baillière, 1864), xxxiii-xxxiv.

## CHAPTER THREE

### ECCENTRICITY

In the early decades of the nineteenth century, during which monomania reached its peak in psychiatric discourse and debate, the concept of eccentricity came to the fore in popular and literary culture. There was a marked overlap between the two concepts, as both were bound up with marginality, deviance, and the problematic notion of individualism.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, both represented the overlap between medical science and popular spheres of activity. Despite the conspicuous overlap between monomania and eccentricity, the two concepts were initially distinguished in popular culture on the basis of national differences. Monomania was considered inseparable from the precise social and political climate of post-Revolutionary France, while eccentricity was commonly associated with Englishness, in particular the idea that partial insanity was a widespread social phenomenon in England but was not interpreted as a potentially dangerous pathological condition. With the decline of monomania in the latter half of nineteenth-century France, eccentricity, which had already become established as an important cultural concept, was assimilated into psychiatric discourse.

#### Defining Eccentricity

In the current edition of the Larousse dictionary, the term *excentricité* is defined as “manière d’être, d’agir en dehors des habitudes reçues”, while the entry for *excentrique* states that the term “se dit de quelqu’un dont le comportement, la

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<sup>1</sup> Gill considers the complex status of individualism in French culture: Miranda Gill, *Eccentricity and the Cultural Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Paris* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 31-35.

manière de s'habiller s'écartent de ce qui est habituel dans un milieu, une société".<sup>2</sup> The figurative usage of these words first entered the French language at the beginning of the nineteenth century derived from the equivalent terms in English.<sup>3</sup> The terms have their origins in the Greek word *ekkentros*, meaning "out of the centre", and were originally used to designate the elliptical orbits of the planets and other celestial bodies. Prior to the 1830s, the terms were employed exclusively in their geometric sense in the French language. Indeed, the 1835 edition of the *Dictionnaire de l'Académie Française* defines *excentricité* and *excentrique* purely in their mathematical sense.<sup>4</sup> The figurative connotations of eccentricity, designating unconventional, socially deviant behaviour, emerged in England a century earlier, becoming prevalent in eighteenth-century English culture. In eighteenth-century France, notions of social deviance, originality, and individualism, central to the concept of eccentricity, were widely associated with English culture.<sup>5</sup> Before the figurative connotations of eccentricity had appeared in the French language, the ideas associated with the concept provoked fear in France, perceived as a threat to the order of what was perceived to be a conformist, united society.<sup>6</sup> Peter Schulman looks at the figure of the *Anglomane*, a precursor to the eccentric that was thought to represent a danger to the stability of French society.<sup>7</sup> In the late eighteenth century Jean-Louis Fougeret de Montbrun published a pamphlet entitled *Préservatif contre l'anglomanie* as a counterbalance.<sup>8</sup> When the words *excentricité* and *excentrique* first appeared in French in their figurative sense in the 1830s, they originally retained these connotations of Englishness.

During the early decades of the nineteenth century, the concept of eccentricity rapidly gained influence in France. The figurative dimension of eccentricity was gradually assimilated into French popular and literary culture from the 1830s,

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.larousse.fr/dictionnaires/francais/excentricite%C3%A9/31972?q=excentricite#31898>; <http://www.larousse.fr/dictionnaires/francais/excentrique/31976?q=excentrique#31902>. Last consulted: 11/04/2014.

<sup>3</sup> Peter Schulman, *The Sunday of Fiction: The Modern French Eccentric* (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 2003), p. 11.

<sup>4</sup> *Dictionnaire de l'Académie Française*, 2 vols. (Paris: Firmin-Didot, 1835), I, 702.

<sup>5</sup> Schulman, p. 12.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 12-14.

<sup>8</sup> Jean-Louis Fougeret de Montbrun, *Préservatif contre l'anglomanie* (Paris: Minorque, 1757).

becoming bound up with the historical and cultural specificities of the age. Daniel Sangsue identifies Théophile Gautier's "Le Père Pierre", published in *Les Grottesques* (1834), and *Fortunio*, published in serial form in 1837, as being "déterminant dans la «promotion» de la notion d'excentricité".<sup>9</sup> Whereas, the concept was initially associated with England, eccentricity was increasingly discussed in relation to the specificities of nineteenth-century French society, being linked to the intellectual, religious, and political fanaticism that had become prevalent at the time. As indicated by Victoria Carroll, at a time when scientific and medical professionals were especially concerned with establishing boundaries, a tendency that is especially evident in nineteenth-century psychiatry, eccentricity emerged to designate individuals associated with the transgression of boundaries.<sup>10</sup> The difficulty of defining eccentricity, owing to its necessarily socially and culturally contingent nature, is apparent from the definition of the term in Larousse's *Grand Dictionnaire Universel du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle*. Here, *excentricité* is bound up with *originalité*, the term that preceded it in the French language:

la ligne de démarcation reste difficile à tracer entre *l'originalité* et *l'excentricité*, l'une n'étant que l'autre poussée à l'excès, et l'on trouvera autant de profils d'excentriques que d'originaux dans la série d'anecdotes que suivent, le bon sens du lecteur fera aisément la différence des uns et des autres.<sup>11</sup>

The authors of the *Grand Dictionnaire*, rather than providing a concrete definition of eccentricity, describe it through its association with the similar concept of *originalité* by providing multiple examples of the figures of the *original* and the *excentrique* without clearly distinguishing between these social types. While the eccentric necessarily resists straightforward definition, the figure is characterised by his unconventional, deviant behaviour and by his departure from established social and cultural norms. The difficulty of defining the eccentric is articulated by Jules Champfleury in the introduction to *Les Excentriques* (1852), a work that made a significant contribution to the spread of the concept of eccentricity in nineteenth-century French popular and literary culture:

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<sup>9</sup> Daniel Sangsue, *Le Récit excentrique – Gautier – De Maistre – Nerval – Nodier* (Paris: Corti, 1987), p. 40.

<sup>10</sup> Victoria Carroll, *Science and Eccentricity: Collecting, Writing and Performing Science for Nineteenth-Century Audiences* (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2008), p. 2.

<sup>11</sup> Pierre Larousse, *Grand dictionnaire universel du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle*, 17 vols. (Paris: Administration du Grand Dictionnaire Universel, 1866-1876), VII (1870), 849.

Pour vous et pour quelques-uns qui trouvent que chaque jour est une mine de curiosités, la rencontre d'un être semblable est une représentation à votre bénéfice qui dure toute la journée. Sans avoir jamais étudié les travaux de Le Brun, de Porta, de Lavater sur la physiognomonie, vous en savez plus que ces auteurs; vous vous dites que l'inconnu n'est ni un tailleur, ni un droguiste, ni un avoué, ni un poète, ni un marchand, ni un danseur, ni un employé, ni un charcutier, ni un peintre, ni un maçon, ni un avocat, ni un cordonnier, ni un filou, ni un notaire.

Qu'est-ce?

Ce *qu'est-ce* devient alors une question bien plus ardue à résoudre qu'un problème.<sup>12</sup>

As suggested by Champfleury, the eccentric can be defined only by the fact that he is indefinable.

### **Eccentricity and Literature**

In an article of 1835, entitled "Biographie des fous: de quelques livres excentriques", Charles Nodier coins the expression *fou littéraire* to describe the eccentric writer. Nodier suggests that the study of eccentric authors would be "susceptible de fournir un chapitre amusant et curieux à l'histoire critique des productions de l'esprit", claiming that the forgotten works of such writers would occupy "une place essentielle et vide encore dans les annales de l'intelligence humaine".<sup>13</sup> Nodier's text was followed by a proliferation of anecdotal literature conceived with the purpose of rehabilitating eccentric writers who had been neglected from mainstream literary culture. The publication of literary portraits of eccentrics became a prominent nineteenth-century tradition, leading to the creation of the monthly publication, *La Revue Anecdotique des Excentricités Contemporaines* (1856-1863).<sup>14</sup> Notable examples of this popular literary phenomenon, besides Nerval's *Les Illuminés*, include Champfleury's *Les Excentriques*, Lorédan Larchey's *Gens singuliers* (1852), and Charles Monselet's *Les Oubliés et les dédaignés* (1857).

There were frequent allusions to eccentricity in the fashionable literary genre of the *physiologie*, a series of texts, aimed primarily at the bourgeoisie, that flourished during the years of the July Monarchy. These texts depicted specific Parisian social

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<sup>12</sup> Jules Champfleury, *Les Excentriques* (Paris: Lévy, 1852), pp. 2-3.

<sup>13</sup> Charles Nodier, "Bibliographie des fous: De quelques livres excentriques", in *Bulletin du bibliophile*, supplement to nos. 21 and 23 (Paris: Techener, 1835), 19-40 (p. 20).

<sup>14</sup> Schulman, p.11.

types, assimilating recent scientific theories and popular assumptions, and thereby capturing the dialogue between nineteenth-century literary and medical thought. As pointed out by Miranda Gill, “the very term ‘physiology’ testifies to the prestige of the medical profession in nineteenth-century French culture”.<sup>15</sup> Daniel Sangsue describes the literary tradition of the *physiologie* as “une vaste entreprise de neutralisation des différences” in which “les disparités sociales se retrouvent aplanies”.<sup>16</sup> Evidently, the boundary-defying figure of the eccentric could not, by definition, be readily circumscribed and classified in such texts. The problematic status of the eccentric in relation to the *physiologie* is articulated by Sangsue:

L’excentrique représente la limite des pouvoirs de la typisation. Il ne peut y avoir de *Physiologie de l’excentrique*: singularité irréductible, l’excentricité ne saurait faire l’objet d’une généralisation, sauf à perdre son essence. Pour lui rendre justice, il faudrait autant de *Physiologies* que d’excentriques!<sup>17</sup>

However, although eccentricity, by its very nature, defied the generalising classification systems underpinning the genre of the *physiologie*, the concept was frequently evoked in such texts in relation to other themes.<sup>18</sup>

Nodier’s article, by describing the eccentric writer as a *fou littéraire*, established, for the first time, a connection between the concepts of madness and eccentricity.<sup>19</sup> Before being incorporated into the domain of medical science and becoming a major aspect of nineteenth-century psychiatric thought, the potentially pathological connotations of eccentricity were already being widely suggested in literary and journalistic discourse as writers, following Nodier’s example, advocated an implicit connection between eccentricity and madness, the latter concept now understood in primarily scientific terms as mental illness. From the middle of the nineteenth century, literary portraits of eccentrics became semi-clinical in nature, with authors documenting the characteristics of their subjects in an encyclopaedic, quasi-scientific

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<sup>15</sup> Gill, p. 73.

<sup>16</sup> Daniel Sangsue, “Vous avez dit excentrique?”, in *Romantisme*, vol. 18, no. 59 (1988), 41-58 (p. 54).

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> There are chapters on eccentricity in several nineteenth-century *Physiologies*, including James Rousseau’s *La Physiologie du viveur* (1842), Taxile Delord’s *La Physiologie de la Parisienne* (1842), Louis Huart’s *La Physiologie du Bal Musard* (1850), and Maurice Alhoy’s *La Physiologie de la Lorette* (1841); Sangsue, “Vous avez dit excentrique?”, p. 57, n. 42.

manner.<sup>20</sup> Accordingly, Champfleury, in the preface to *Les Excentriques*, describes his task in terms of a “leçon d’anatomie”, and claims that his study “profitera à la science”.<sup>21</sup> He compares his subjects to anatomical specimens in a scientific study:

Quand on a bien vu ces drôles qui semblent des pièces artificielles d’anatomie artistement construites, ils remettent leurs veines, leur sang, leur chair, leur épiderme, leurs habits. Ils sont charmants. On les quitte, la tête pleine de *notes* précieuses, on les rencontre dans la rue, et on ne les salue pas.<sup>22</sup>

In nineteenth-century French literature, eccentricity continued to be associated with English culture from which the concept was originally derived. Jules Barbey d’Aurevilly claims that in England “l’excentricité est la fleur du pays”, and that it represents for the English “l’originalité jusqu’à la maladie, mais nonobstant sans y entrer!”.<sup>23</sup> The idea that eccentricity constitutes a specifically English phenomenon emerges from Germaine de Staël’s comparison of the societies of England and France in her 1818 *Considérations sur les principaux événements de la Révolution Française*. Staël presents eccentricity as a widespread cultural phenomenon in English society:

Chez un peuple où tout est prononcé, comme en Angleterre, les contrastes sont d’autant plus frappants. La mode a un singulier empire sur les habitudes de la vie, et cependant il n’est point de nation où l’on trouve autant d’exemples de ce qu’on appelle *l’excentricité*, c’est-à-dire, une manière d’être tout à fait originale, et qui ne compte pour rien l’opinion d’autrui.<sup>24</sup>

Daniel Sangsue points out that: “Chaque fois que Balzac [...] parle de l’excentricité, il la met en rapport avec la folie et l’Angleterre”.<sup>25</sup> This can be seen in *La Cousine Bette*, in which the narrator says of Bette: “La jalousie formait la base de ce caractère plein d’excentricités, mot trouvé par les Anglais pour les folies non pas des petites, mais des grandes maisons”.<sup>26</sup> Balzac fuses the concepts of monomania and

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<sup>19</sup> Juan Rigoli, *Lire le délire: Aliénisme, rhétorique et littérature en France au XIXe siècle* (Paris: Fayard, 2001), p. 199.

<sup>20</sup> Schulman, p. 22.

<sup>21</sup> Champfleury, *Les Excentriques*, p.7

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> Jules Barbey d’Aurevilly, “Contes excentriques par Charles Newill”, in *Le Pays*, 29<sup>th</sup> January 1859.

<sup>24</sup> Germaine de Staël, *Considérations sur les principaux événements de la Révolution Française*, 3 vols. (Paris: Masson, 1818), III, 278.

<sup>25</sup> Sangsue, “Vous avez dit excentrique?”, p. 51.

<sup>26</sup> Honoré de Balzac, *La Cousine Bette*, in *Œuvres Complètes de Honoré de Balzac: La Comédie Humaine*, ed. by Alexandre Houssiaux (Paris: Houssiaux-Furne, 1855), XVII, 27.



eccentricity in this novel. Indeed, the title character is very much the archetypal monomaniac, exemplifying the obsessive single-mindedness fundamental to early nineteenth-century medical definitions of the concept. Miranda Gill cites Balzac's *Le Cousin Pons* as an example of the way in which Balzac uses the terms *original*, *excentrique*, and *monomaniaque* almost interchangeably, whilst preserving some national differences, such as "the contrast between French sociability and looser erotic codes, in the one instance, and English spleen and misanthropy, in the other":<sup>27</sup>

Paris est la ville du monde qui recèle le plus d'originaux en ce genre, ayant une religion au cœur. Les *excentriques* de Londres finissent toujours par se dégoûter de leurs adorations comme ils se dégoûtent de vivre; tandis qu'à Paris les monomanes vivent avec leur fantaisie dans un heureux concubinage d'esprit.<sup>28</sup>

Here the category of eccentricity retains its connotations of Englishness, while monomania is described as a specifically Parisian phenomenon.

### **Eccentricity and Alienism**

Having already been established as an important social and cultural phenomenon, from the middle of the nineteenth century the study of eccentricity was appropriated by the psychiatric profession. Whereas, the potentially pathological dimension of eccentricity had already been proposed in fiction, alienists now studied it from the perspective of clinical psychiatry. In the early decades of the nineteenth century, the terms *excentrique* and *excentricité* were employed in psychiatric discourse in a general sense, and did not hold any specifically clinical connotations. Alienists initially referred to eccentricity as a symptom of other categories of mental alienation, especially monomania. However, from the middle of the century, it was established as a distinct diagnostic category, replacing monomania in psychiatric discussion of partial madness. Moreau de Tours and Bénédict-Auguste Morel were responsible for elaborating theories of eccentricity as a medical category with organic origins. The study of eccentricity as a pathological phenomenon was problematic, since it implied that any form of deviation from prescribed social and

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<sup>27</sup> Gill, p. 244.

cultural norms could be subject to clinical diagnosis. Accordingly marginal intellectual, political, and religious practices were increasingly interpreted as pathological conditions. Over the course of the nineteenth century, the significance of eccentricity for French alienists evolved considerably as it became bound up with a range of different issues central to psychiatric discussion and debate, including questions of pathological taxonomy, heredity, genius, and degeneracy.<sup>29</sup>

In *Un Chapitre oublié de la pathologie mentale* (1850), Moreau de Tours elaborates a new theory of partial madness. Departing from the theories of madness proposed by his predecessors, Moreau de Tours promotes organic as opposed to moral or social interpretations of mental abnormalities. Rejecting Esquirol's category of monomania, he proposes an alternative model in which madness and reason, rather than occupying separate areas of the mind, coexist and overlap to create intermediate mental states:

Folie et raison: deux termes extrêmes du dynamisme mental, qui, dans certains cas, se rapprochent et se confondent pour donner naissance à un état intellectuel à part, qui participe de la raison et de la folie tout à la fois.<sup>30</sup>

In place of monomania, Moreau de Tours introduces the category of the *état mixte*. In contrast to Esquirol's category of monomania, which was founded on the notion that madness could affect an isolated aspect of the human mind, Moreau de Tours's *état mixte* involves the inextricable fusion of madness and reason, which he describes as "le croisement des races, transporté dans l'ordre moral".<sup>31</sup> He highlights the status of the *état mixte* as a hereditary condition that has its origins in deformations in the nervous system. Moreau de Tours mentions eccentricity a number of times in this text, and characterises it as a form of partial or nascent madness: "l'excentricité n'est qu'une demi-aliénation mentale, une folie véritable, pour ainsi dire à l'état embryonnaire".<sup>32</sup> For Moreau de Tours, eccentricity is an intermediate state, distinct from, yet frequently leading to more extreme forms of mental alienation. He claims

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<sup>28</sup> Honoré de Balzac, *Le Cousin Pons*, in *Œuvres Complètes de Honoré de Balzac: La Comédie Humaine*, ed. by Alexandre Houssiaux, 20 vols. (Paris: Houssiaux-Furne, 1855), XVII, 488.

<sup>29</sup> Gill, p. 240.

<sup>30</sup> Jacques-Joseph Moreau de Tours, *Un Chapitre oublié de la pathologie mentale* (Paris: Masson, 1850), p. 3.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid*, p. 7.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid*, p. 5.

that although the *état mixte* “s’accompagne, quelquefois, d’excentricité” and that it “provient de la même source”, these conditions are differentiated by their symptoms.<sup>33</sup> Moreau de Tours argues that whereas in the *état mixte* the intellectual faculties are affected, “dans l’excentricité, la lésion mentale porte spécialement sur les facultés affectives et se traduit par des habitudes, des goûts, des penchans qui diffèrent plus ou moins des goûts, des penchans, des habitudes des autres hommes”.<sup>34</sup> By describing eccentricity in relation to prevalent norms, Moreau de Tours reveals the inherent contingency and fluidity of this pathological category.

In *La Psychologie morbide*, Moreau de Tours develops further his theory of intermediate forms of madness, revealing the existence of mental states between the extremes of madness and reason: “on remarque chez certains individus une disposition d’esprit fort singulière, qui n’est assurément pas une preuve de folie, mais qui, par sa nature, se classe en dehors des actes parfaitement raisonnés et logiques de l’organisme intellectuel”.<sup>35</sup> He elaborates his theory of eccentricity as a distinct pathological category, separate from, yet derived from the same roots as, madness: “Folie, excentricité sont deux états pathologiques (je me sers à dessein de cette expression), ayant une commune origine”.<sup>36</sup> Moreau de Tours suggests that, like madness in general, eccentricity arises from physiological abnormalities and he explores the shared hereditary origins of these diagnostic categories. He argues that, “un état de folie réelle peut ne se reproduire que sous forme d’excentricité”, and that in the same way, “un état de simple excentricité chez les parents, état qui ne va pas au delà de certaines bizarreries de caractère, de certaines singularités d’esprit, peut devenir, pour les enfants, l’origine d’un véritable délire”.<sup>37</sup> For Moreau de Tours, despite constituting distinct diagnostic categories, madness and eccentricity can be differentiated only in terms of degree: “l’excentricité doit être considérée comme une

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<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> Jacques-Joseph Moreau de Tours, *La Psychologie morbide dans ses rapports avec la philosophie de l’histoire, ou De l’influence des névropathies sur le dynamisme intellectuel* (Paris: Masson, 1859), p. 242.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 188.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 187.

folie incomplète; elle reconnaît les mêmes conditions pathogéniques, héréditaires ou idiosyncratiques, que la folie confirmée”.<sup>38</sup>

The terms *excentricité* and *excentrique* pervade the psychiatric writings of the alienist, Bénédict-Auguste Morel. Juan Rigoli even suggests that Morel “les applique en règle générale à tous les aliénés”.<sup>39</sup> However, like Moreau de Tours, Morel does distinguish between the diagnostic categories of madness and eccentricity, perceiving the latter as “un état intermédiaire entre la raison et la folie”.<sup>40</sup> Morel shares Moreau de Tours’s view of mental alienation as arising from physiological malformations of the nervous system and having its origins in heredity. For Morel, eccentricity is indicative of subsequent mental decline and the onset of more serious forms of insanity:

quelle que soit l’exagération de certains jugements et de certaines appréciations, il n’en résulte pas moins que les personnes les plus étrangères à la science, forment involontairement cette vérité incontestable, que l’aliénation est une maladie qui n’éclate pas instantanément, qu’elle a une période d’incubation quelquefois fort longue, et qu’une foule d’actes excentriques ou bizarres doivent déjà être considérés comme le prélude ou le symptôme le plus saisissant de la maladie principale.<sup>41</sup>

In Morel’s descriptions of individuals afflicted with eccentricity, the condition is often linked to obsessive intellectual pursuits, including the elaboration of mystical systems and bibliomania, behaviours that had previously been associated with monomania. He claims that individuals predisposed to pathological madness reveal not only “une grande excentricité des idées”, but also “une aptitude excessive à délirer, par suite de la fausseté du jugement, de l’amour du paradoxe poussé jusqu’à la systématisation des théories les plus fausses et les plus absurdes”.<sup>42</sup>

Morel’s ideas on mental alienation marked a clear rupture with the theories of earlier alienists such as Pinel and Esquirol. Whereas monomania was conceived as a form of partial madness derived from imbalances in the passions and limited to a single

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<sup>38</sup> *Ibid*, p. 542.

<sup>39</sup> Rigoli, p. 199.

<sup>40</sup> Bénédict-Auguste Morel, *Etudes cliniques: Traité théorique et pratique des maladies mentales considérées dans leur nature, leur traitement, et dans leur rapport avec la médecine légale des aliénés*, 2 vols. (Paris: Masson, 1852), II, 406.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid*, p. 407.

<sup>42</sup> Bénédict-Auguste Morel, *Traité des maladies mentales* (Paris: Masson, 1860), p. 573.

aspect of the mind, Morel presents eccentricity as a potentially dangerous condition that, owing to its organic and hereditary origins, cannot be controlled or contained. From the middle of the nineteenth century, eccentricity became bound up with the perceived association between mental alienation and moral decline. This notion, which became prominent in psychiatric, popular, and literary discourse, is articulated by Alphonse Esquiros in the first of his articles in the series “Les Maisons de fous”, published in the *Revue de Paris* in November 1843:

On ne saurait trop l'affirmer: la rectitude mentale est solidaire du juste et de l'honnête; tout ce qui tend à relâcher les mœurs tend à délier la raison, et comme un vaisseau détaché de son ancre, celle-ci va se briser contre les écueils.<sup>43</sup>

Morel's view of eccentricity as an uncontrollable, latent phenomenon became central to the theory of *dégénérescence*, which came to the fore in the latter half of the nineteenth century,<sup>44</sup> embracing the increasingly popular idea that mental alienation was linked to immorality. As indicated by Miranda Gill, the rise of the concept of degeneration reveals how, “borderline insanity and moral perversity were increasingly conflated”.<sup>45</sup>

### **The Ambiguous Status of Eccentricity**

As a form of mental alienation in which the individual's capacity for reason remained intact, eccentricity was shrouded in ambiguity. Both in the popular imagination and in psychological discourse, the concept gained a positive dimension beside its negative connotations of pathological madness. Through its association with intellectual and ideological pursuits, eccentricity, whilst retaining its pathological dimension as a form of partial insanity, acquired distinctly positive connotations. Even in the psychiatric writings of Moreau de Tours, eccentricity became closely bound up with the popular Romantic notion that madness evidenced enhanced intellectual and creative capacities. The ancient belief in a fundamental

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<sup>43</sup> Alphonse Esquiros, “Les Maisons de fous: Causes de l'aliénation”, in *Revue de Paris*, vol. 13, 5<sup>th</sup> November 1843, 5-24.

<sup>44</sup> Morel first elaborates his theory of *dégénérescence* in: Bénédict-Augustin Morel, *Traité des dégénérescences physiques, intellectuels et morales de l'espèce humaine* (Paris: Baillière, 1857).

<sup>45</sup> Gill, p. 260.

connection between madness and genius took on renewed vigour with the pathologisation of eccentricity, since this newly conceived psychiatric category allowed for the fusion of madness and reason and denied that there existed any essential distinction between them. Moreau de Tours declares: “personne n’ignore que l’excentricité s’observe fréquemment chez les individus doués d’une intelligence élevée”,<sup>46</sup> a notion for which he provides an extensive physiological explanation.

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<sup>46</sup> Moreau de Tours, *La Psychologie morbide*, p. 188.



## CHAPTER FOUR

### ECCENTRICITY, GENIUS, AND PATHOLOGY: MOREAU DE TOURS AND THE *GÉNIE-NÉVROSE*

The *Grand Dictionnaire Universel du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle* states that “le génie est littéralement de la folie”,<sup>1</sup> a highly controversial assertion that was widely debated in nineteenth-century France. Speculation into the perceived association between madness and genius has existed since ancient times, with some of the earliest articulations of the theme appearing in the writings of Aristotle, Plato, and Socrates. Notably, Aristotle famously declared that: “No great genius has existed without some touch of madness”. The idea that there exists some fundamental connection between madness and genius has persisted throughout the ages, frequently linked to questions of poetic inspiration, originality, and artistic creativity. In nineteenth-century France, this age-old debate was strongly grounded in the specificities of the age: the theme rose to prominence in popular, literary, and medical discussion, becoming bound up with prevalent ideas relating to partial madness, eccentricity, and hallucination. From the late eighteenth century, the apparent link between madness and genius became central to the emergent German and English Romantic movements; perhaps the most notable literary example of the principle being that of Werther in Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s highly influential Romantic novel, *Die Leiden des jungen Werthers* (*The Sorrows of Young Werther*), first published in 1774. By the early nineteenth century, the idea that genius was necessarily linked to madness had also become a characteristic feature of French Romantic literature. Writers increasingly depicted madness as a prerequisite to artistic inspiration and creativity, thus presenting mental derangement as a positive and even desirable condition. Towards the middle of the nineteenth century, the concept of genius was assimilated by the French psychiatric profession and studied from the perspective of medical science.

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<sup>1</sup> Pierre Larousse, *Grand dictionnaire universel du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle*, 17 vols. (Paris: Administration du Grand Dictionnaire Universel, 1866-1876), VIII (1872), 1152.



Although the nineteenth-century tradition of the mad genius was largely derived from European Romanticism, it took on a specific colour in France in relation to the growing cultural and medical concept of eccentricity. The idea that the genius exhibited bizarre or eccentric behaviour became central to Parisian Bohemia: writers and artists “self-consciously embraced eccentric lifestyles in order to proclaim their superiority to the rest of society”, a tendency that declined in the latter half of the nineteenth century as eccentricity was increasingly pathologised by alienists.<sup>2</sup> The Bohemian concept of the eccentric genius was an extension of the mad genius of European Romanticism. This figure embodies the popular cultural concept of the “artist against society”: “He or she embodies dissidence, opposition, criticism of the status quo; these may be expressed politically, aesthetically or in the artist’s behaviour and lifestyle”.<sup>3</sup> The concept of the eccentric genius was not a new one. Indeed, in the eighteenth century, Denis Diderot’s *Neveu de Rameau* anticipated the nineteenth-century association of eccentricity and genius, suggesting that: “Les hommes de génie sont communément singuliers”.<sup>4</sup> Diderot’s ambiguous Rameau is a composer of genius, described as an *original*, and characterised by his unconventional ideas and socially deviant conduct. Champfleury alludes to Diderot’s Rameau in the preface to his *Les Excentriques*, saying of his study: “Tout le neveu de Rameau est là-dedans”.<sup>5</sup> In relation to Diderot’s text, he implies a link between eccentricity and genius: “Combien de neveux de Rameau marchent aujourd’hui sur les trottoirs? Et que manque-t-il à ces génies ignorés? Un homme de génie qui sache sténographier”.<sup>6</sup> Over the course of the nineteenth century, both eccentricity and genius were increasingly pathologised and the figure of the eccentric genius consequently passed from Romantic to medical literature. Whereas, for Romantic and Bohemian writers, the eccentric genius was depicted in positive terms as a figure capable of exceeding the mediocrity of his society, for alienists such individuals were afflicted with mental alienation.

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<sup>2</sup> Miranda Gill, *Eccentricity and the Cultural Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Paris* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 266.

<sup>3</sup> Elizabeth Wilson, *Bohemians: The Glamorous Outcasts* (London: Parke, 2000), p. 3.

<sup>4</sup> Denis Diderot, *Le Neveu de Rameau* (Paris: Poulet-Malassis, 1862), p. 11.

<sup>5</sup> Jules Champfleury, *Les Excentriques* (Paris: Lévy, 1852), p. 7.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

From the middle of the nineteenth century, the question of the nature of the relationship between madness and genius was appropriated by French alienists and investigated in combination with prevalent psychiatric thought. In particular, the concept of genius became bound up with alienists' ideas regarding partial madness, as alienists studied genius in relation to the theory that mental alienation allowed for the continued presence of reason and rational thought. The first alienist to equate genius with mental alienation was Louis-François Lélut, who famously diagnosed a number of influential historical figures with mental illness. In *Du Démon de Socrate* of 1836,<sup>7</sup> Lélut argues that Socrates was subject to pathological hallucination, reducing the apparent genius of this highly respected figure to a pathological mental state. This text was followed by *L'Amulette de Pascal* in 1846, in which the perceived genius of another important historical figure, in this case Pascal, is reinterpreted as a form of mental illness. Lélut describes Pascal as “un esprit supérieur prenant ses propres idées pour les choses elles-mêmes, et acceptant comme des sensations des images en quelque sorte matérialisées par l'action spontanée du cerveau”.<sup>8</sup> Lélut's controversial conclusions, which inevitably inspired much debate amongst his contemporaries, placed the nineteenth-century psychiatric concept of hallucination at the heart of the ancient debate regarding the connection between madness and genius. The ideas proposed by Lélut reached their culmination in Moreau de Tours's *La Psychologie morbide*. This text ends with an extensive heterogeneous list of celebrated historical figures who, according to Moreau de Tours, were subject to pathological hallucination or whose eccentricities were indicative of mental illness. Moreau de Tours explicitly relates his theory of the link between genius and mental alienation to Nerval, attributing Nerval's literary achievements to his pathological mental state:

Jamais [...] Gérard de Nerval ne se montrait plus inspiré que dans les moments où, suivant l'expression d'Alex. Dumas, la mélancolie devenait sa muse. Impossible alors de retenir ses larmes, car «jamais Werther – c'est M. Dumas qui parle – jamais René, jamais Anthony,

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<sup>7</sup> Significantly, this book was reprinted with the title: *Le Génie, la raison et la folie: Le démon de Socrate* (Paris: Baillière, 1886).

<sup>8</sup> Louis-François Lélut, *L'Amulette de Pascal: pour servir à l'histoire des hallucinations* (Paris: Baillière, 1846), vi.

n'ont eu plaintes plus poignantes, sanglots plus douloureux, paroles plus tendres, cris plus poétiques.»<sup>9</sup>

In *La Psychologie morbide*, Moreau de Tours elaborates an extensive psychiatric theory of genius, taking as his starting point a physiological model of madness according to which abnormal mental states are the result of physical disturbances to the nervous system. Moreau de Tours repeatedly highlights the fundamental principle upon which his theory of genius is founded: “qui dit folie, dit suractivité mentale”.<sup>10</sup> He outlines his basic thesis, the equation of pathology, genius, and eccentricity, as follows:

Les dispositions d'esprit qui font qu'un homme se distingue des autres hommes par l'originalité de ses pensées et de ses conceptions, par son excentricité ou l'énergie de ses facultés affectives, par la transcendance de ses facultés intellectuelles, prennent leur source dans les mêmes conditions organiques que les divers troubles moraux dont la *folie* et l'*idiotie* sont l'expression la plus complète.<sup>11</sup>

Moreau de Tours considers that all forms of mental alienation are the result of a “surexcitation des facultés psycho-cérébrales”, which in turn provokes a “surexcitation intellectuelle”.<sup>12</sup> According to Moreau de Tours, this causes a rapid flux of thoughts and ideas which may become incoherent and confused, or, in the case of genius, may constitute a source of intellectual and creative inspiration by revealing previously overlooked connections. He defines genius as a *névrose*, which, in accordance with his general model of madness, is perceived as a physiological phenomenon: “en qualifiant le génie de *névrose*, nous ne faisons qu'exprimer un fait de pure physiologie”.<sup>13</sup> In keeping with this principle, genius is described in terms of excessive cerebral activity:

Le *génie*, c'est-à-dire la plus haute expression, le *nec plus ultra* de l'activité intellectuelle, qu'une *névrose*? Pourquoi non? On peut très-bien, ce nous semble, accepter cette définition, en n'attachant pas au mot *névrose* un sens aussi absolu que lorsqu'il s'agit de modalités

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<sup>9</sup> Jacques-Joseph Moreau de Tours, *La Psychologie morbide dans ses rapports avec la philosophie de l'histoire, ou De l'influence des névropathies sur le dynamisme intellectuel* (Paris: Masson, 1859), p. 431. Moreau de Tours here quotes from Dumas's article about Nerval, published in *Le Mousquetaire* on 10th December 1853 following Nerval's second mental crisis. See below: Part One, Chapter Seven.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*, p. 386.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, v.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, p. 203.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, p. 467.

différentes des organes nerveux, en en faisant simplement le synonyme d'exaltation [...] des facultés intellectuelles.<sup>14</sup>

According to such a theory, genius is merely a symptom of overexcited nerve centres, an organic condition that could give rise to various different forms of mental alienation, including idiocy and criminality.

The *Grand Dictionnaire Universel du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle* defines the term *folie* from the perspective of medical science as the “dérangement des fonctions de l'intelligence”,<sup>15</sup> a description that applies to the extremes of idiocy and genius, since both states are associated with cerebral activity operating beyond the bounds of normality. This principle emerges clearly from Moreau de Tours's discussion of abnormal mental states. Embracing a physiological understanding of mental alienation, Moreau de Tours asserts: “toutes les erreurs des hommes relativement aux facultés intellectuelles, à leur jeu, à leur mécanisme, à leurs défaillances comme à leur exaltation, sont des erreurs de physiologie, d'organisation”.<sup>16</sup> Such a view dissolves the boundaries between seemingly incompatible mental states. Moreau de Tours underlines the physiological analogies between superior and inferior mental capacities: “A une foule d'égards, tracer l'histoire physiologique des idiots, serait tracer celle de la plupart des hommes de génie, *et vice versa*”.<sup>17</sup> Genius, like idiocy, is reduced to abnormal organic organisation, and the boundary between them is rendered imperceptible: “quelques vibrations de plus ou de moins dans les fibres cérébrales pouvaient d'une femme de génie faire une idiote ou d'une idiote une femme de génie”.<sup>18</sup>

Moreau de Tours's equation of genius and pathology was widely criticised by his contemporaries, and *La Psychologie morbide* was not reprinted. In *De la Raison, du génie, et de la folie* of 1861, Pierre Flourens contests Moreau de Tours's unsettling equation of genius, idiocy, and madness: “Du jour où il serait établi que le génie n'est qu'un cas donné de l'*idiotie*, de la *folie*, tout, en fait de dignité humaine, serait

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<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, p. 464.

<sup>15</sup> *Grand dictionnaire universel du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle*, VIII (1872), 139.

<sup>16</sup> Moreau de Tours, *La Psychologie morbide*, x.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, p. 479.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*, p. 427.

perdu”.<sup>19</sup> Flourens argues that genius, far from constituting a form of mental alienation, is actually the manifestation of a superior state of reason:

je définis le *génie* une raison supérieure, et [Moreau de Tours] le définit une *névrose*. Les définitions sont libres. Mais quel est le fait distinct, quel est le fait caractéristique du *génie*? C’est qu’il se voit, qu’il se juge, qu’il s’approuve, qu’il se blâme, qu’il se corrige: ceci est la marque certaine qu’il est la raison.<sup>20</sup>

In 1864, Emile Deschanel, criticising the controversial conclusions of Moreau de Tours, provides a more nuanced interpretation of the relationship between madness and genius: “un homme de génie est un fou: seulement sa folie ne dépasse pas le premier degré, *l’excitation*”.<sup>21</sup>

As indicated by George Becker, a significant implication of Moreau de Tours’s thesis, in particular its affirmation of the organic origins of all unconventional mental states, is that it denies the free will of the genius: “matter having conquered the mind, the individual from then on acts only by a kind of automation, without liberty, without conscience”.<sup>22</sup> This can be clearly seen in Moreau de Tours’s psychiatric description of “inspiration”, here conveyed as a pathological state rather than as a conscious process of reflection: “l’état d’*inspiration*, soit poétique, soit prophétique, est précisément celui qui offre le plus d’analogie avec la folie réelle. Ici, en effet, folie et génie sont presque synonymes à force de se rapprocher et de se confondre”.<sup>23</sup> He portrays inspiration as an unconscious process over which the individual has no active control:

Chose remarquable! il arrive que les pensées ne sont jamais plus hardies, plus énergiques, les combinaisons intellectuelles plus rapides et plus vastes que lorsque les facultés sont plus indépendantes du *moi*, qu’elles tendent davantage à se soustraire à la conscience intime.<sup>24</sup>

The notion that inspiration is an unconscious process, derived from physiological origins, is further explored by the alienist, François Leuret. Unlike Moreau de Tours, Leuret makes the distinction between “l’inspiration active” and “l’inspiration passive”, the former being associated with the “homme de génie” and the latter with

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<sup>19</sup> Pierre Flourens, *De la Raison, du génie, et de la folie* (Paris: Garnier, 1861), p. 6.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid*, p. 116.

<sup>21</sup> Emile Deschanel, *Physiologie des écrivains et des artistes* (Paris: Hachette, 1864), p. 147.

<sup>22</sup> George Becker, *The Mad Genius Controversy: A Study in the Sociology of Deviance* (New York: SAGE, 1978), p. 128.

<sup>23</sup> Moreau de Tours, *La Psychologie morbide*, pp. 386-387.

the “aliéné”.<sup>25</sup> Although Leuret considers that the visions of the genius and the madman arise from similar origins, he argues that the involuntary nature of “l’inspiration passive” casts it as a form of insanity:

Je distingue les inspirations en actives et en passives. Dans les premières, l’homme jouissant de toute sa personnalité connaît l’activité de son intelligence et en dirige l’emploi; il est élevé au-dessus de lui-même, mais il y a continuité dans son être; son moi d’aujourd’hui est encore son moi d’hier, son moi de toujours; il a conscience de ses pensées et il sait que ses pensées sont à lui; il veut ses actions et il en prend la responsabilité. Dans les secondes, l’homme a perdu son unité; il connaît encore, mais en lui-même, quelque chose différent de son moi connaît aussi; il veut encore, mais le quelque chose qui est en lui-même a aussi une volonté; il parle, il agit, mais rarement d’après sa connaissance, d’après sa volonté; il est dominé, il est esclave, son corps est une machine obéissant à une puissance qui n’est pas la sienne. L’inspiration active appartient à l’homme de génie, l’inspiration passive est un genre d’aliénation.<sup>26</sup>

For Leuret, “l’inspiration passive” represents a fracturing of the self. In relation to this principle, Adrianna Paliyenko argues: “Leuret’s comments on the creative Other anticipate Rimbaud’s poetics of alterity and demonstrate the intersection of psychiatric and literary discourses”.<sup>27</sup>

Despite its numerous critics, Moreau de Tours’s theory of genius remained the dominant medical model of the phenomenon for decades to come, and was subsequently developed by a number of other alienists and thinkers.<sup>28</sup> Most notably, Moreau de Tours influenced Cesare Lombroso’s famous work of 1864, *Genio et follia*,<sup>29</sup> a revised version of which was subsequently translated into French as *L’Homme de génie*. Lombroso’s text affirms the equation of madness and genius, arguing that the onset of mental illness could stimulate genius. Lombroso lists a number of famous figures that, he argues, exemplify the figure of the mad genius,

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<sup>24</sup> *Ibid*, p. 390.

<sup>25</sup> François Leuret, *Fragmens psychologiques sur la folie* (Paris: Crochard, 1834), pp. 269-304.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 269-270.

<sup>27</sup> Adrianna Paliyenko, “Margins of Madness and Creativity: Nineteenth-Century French Psychiatric and Literary Discourses on Dream”, in *Dreams in French Literature: The Persistent Voice*, ed. by Tom Connor (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1995), pp. 173-198 (p. 195).

<sup>28</sup> Françoise Grauby considers how Moreau de Tours’s model of pathological genius was assimilated into the late nineteenth-century psychiatric theory of *dégénérescence*: Françoise Grauby, *Le Corps de l’artiste: Discours médical et représentations littéraires de l’artiste au XIXe siècle* (Lyon: Presses Universitaires de Lyon, 2001), p. 28. Patricia Townley Mathews argues that Moreau de Tours’s connection of madness and genius became central to the Symbolist movement: Patricia Townley-Mathews, *Passionate Discontent: Creativity, Gender, and French Symbolist Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), p. 55.

<sup>29</sup> Tony James, *Dream, Creativity and Madness in Nineteenth-Century France* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 217.

including Edgar Allan Poe, Jonathan Swift, Auguste Comte, Robert Schumann, Charles Baudelaire, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and Arthur Schopenhauer,<sup>30</sup> as well as Nerval himself. In the second half of the nineteenth century, theories of genius were bound up with medical ideas about partial madness and eccentricity. Alexandre Cullerre, taking Moreau de Tours's ideas as his starting point, argues that genius is frequently coupled with intermediate forms of madness, and that madness, far from representing the absence of rational thought, "peut se trouver mêlée à la sagesse d'un Socrate ou au génie d'un Pascal".<sup>31</sup> Embracing Aristotle's famous maxim, Cullerre claims that "un petit grain de folie" is a characteristic feature of genius:

La folie confirmée est le plus grand des malheurs; et c'est bien assez. Quant aux formes plus légères de la déséquilibration mentale, elles ont, dans bien des cas, une signification toute différente, à ce point qu'un petit grain de folie équivaut, pour certains esprits, aux meilleurs quartiers de noblesse et que l'on peut dire sans hyperbole que le jour où il n'y aura plus de demi-fous, le monde civilisé périra – non par excès de sagesse, mais par excès de médiocrité.<sup>32</sup>

The alienist Benjamin Ball also assimilates Moreau de Tours's arguments about genius into his extensive exploration of the concept of partial madness. Ball discusses the category of *demi-aliénés*, a group of individuals whose minds occupy "la zone frontière qui s'étend entre la raison et la folie",<sup>33</sup> affirming the significant role played by such figures across the ages: "Non seulement ces demi-aliénés arrivent souvent à de hautes positions, mais encore ils exercent parfois une influence incontestable sur leur entourage, sur leur pays, sur le siècle où ils vivent".<sup>34</sup> In keeping with the thesis of Moreau de Tours, Ball attributes enhanced intellectual capacities and originality to the increased cerebral activity of the pathological mind, considering that some of the most influential figures of all time fall into the problematic medical category of *demi-aliénés*:

parmi les hommes célèbres qui ont remué de fond en comble leur époque, il en est plusieurs, qui, s'ils n'étaient pas absolument fous, étaient au moins des demi-aliénés. C'est qu'en effet ces esprits placés sur la limite extrême de la raison et de la folie sont souvent plus intelligents

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<sup>30</sup> Schopenhauer himself wrote on the association between madness and genius: Gretchen Besser, *Balzac's Concept of Genius: The Theme of Superiority in the "Comédie Humaine"* (Geneva: Droz, 1969), p. 248.

<sup>31</sup> Alexandre Cullerre, *Les Frontières de la folie* (Paris: Baillière, 1888), p. 7.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 9-10.

<sup>33</sup> Benjamin Ball, *La Morphinomanie; Les Frontières de la folie; Le Dualisme cérébral; Les Rêves prolongés* (Paris: Asselin, 1885), p. 72.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid*, p. 95.

que les autres; ils sont surtout d'une activité dévorante, précisément parce qu'ils sont *agités*; enfin, ils possèdent une puissante originalité, car leur cerveau fourmille d'idées absolument inédites.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*



## CHAPTER FIVE

### RELIGIOUS MADNESS

A highly controversial aspect of mental alienation widely discussed by nineteenth-century French alienists was the problematic pathological concept of religious madness. Whereas until the end of the eighteenth century the Church had been responsible for the interpretation and treatment of madness in France, religion itself now became the subject of investigation. Prominent French alienists increasingly interpreted various forms of marginal religiosity, excessive religious sentiment, and mystical visionary experiences in pathological terms. Religious madness was established as a distinct form of mental alienation that was studied from a scientific perspective and was thought to require medical attention. The early psychiatric concept of religious madness was two-fold: either excessive religious sentiment was perceived as the cause of mental alienation; or pathological religiosity was understood as being symptomatic of madness. On the one hand, the early psychiatric notion that mental alienation arose from imbalanced and exaggerated passions implied that the emotive dimension of religious experience was a major source of madness. On the other hand, what had previously been considered to constitute visionary and mystical experience was increasingly interpreted as pathological hallucination and was therefore considered symptomatic of mental illness.

#### **Religious Madness in Nineteenth-Century France**

As already observed, early French alienists, following the lead of Pinel and Esquirol, believed that mental alienation was the result of imbalances in the passions. Alienists frequently identified extreme religious sentiment as the *passion dominante* responsible for the onset of mental illness. Accordingly, Esquirol argues that religious fervour constitutes a common source of exaggerated passion responsible for the onset of madness, describing it as an “état extrême des passions, qui prive

l'homme de la raison".<sup>1</sup> Over the course of the nineteenth century, alienists commonly identified extreme or unconventional religious beliefs as major sources of madness. Owing to the multiplicity of belief systems prevalent at the time, alienists considered that religious madness could be manifest in various different forms. Accordingly, Jean-Marie Dupin, in his psychiatric study of religious madness, states: "on est frappé de la multiplicité et de la diversité des modes du délire religieux".<sup>2</sup>

In his *Leçons sur les maladies mentales*, the alienist Benjamin Ball claims that one of the key characteristics of religious madness is the fact that it is "essentiellement épidémique et contagieuse",<sup>3</sup> and therefore spreads rapidly in certain social climates. He suggests that religious fervour becomes widespread during periods of social and political instability, resulting in a significant rise in cases of mental alienation linked to religious phenomena at such times:

les idées religieuses acquièrent une prédominance marquée aux époques d'agitation, de lutte et de réforme. C'est surtout au moment où les religions se fondent et s'écroulent, que s'exaltent certains esprits, qui sont en assez grand nombre pour fournir un affluent considérable au fleuve de l'aliénation mentale. – Nous sommes en présence d'un de ces moments, et sans vouloir me livrer à des énumérations stériles, je dirai que la pratique de tous les jours nous amène des fous, dont les uns sont des religieux exaltés, les autres au contraire des victimes des terreurs mystiques.<sup>4</sup>

In keeping with these ideas, nineteenth-century alienists considered that there was a particularly high incidence of cases of mental alienation linked to extreme religious passion in the decades succeeding the 1789 Revolution. The political and ideological turmoil of early nineteenth-century French society was thought to be responsible for a veritable epidemic of religious madness at that time. Frank Paul Bowman shows how alienists were faced with "l'efflorescence dans la première moitié du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle en France de nouveaux cultes, nouveaux prophètes et messies, greffes marginales sur la tradition religieuse qui sont toutes plus ou moins politisées".<sup>5</sup> Alienists increasingly interpreted deviant and unconventional

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<sup>1</sup> Etienne Esquirol, *Des Maladies mentales considérées sous les rapports médical, hygiénique et médico-légal*, 2 vols. (Paris: Baillière, 1838), I, 225.

<sup>2</sup> Jean-Marie Dupin, *Etude Clinique sur le délire religieux* (Paris: Imprimeries Réunies, 1888), p. 3.

<sup>3</sup> Benjamin Ball, "De la folie religieuse", in *Leçons sur les maladies mentales* (Paris: Asselin, 1880), pp. 460-484 (p. 472).

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 462-463.

<sup>5</sup> Frank Paul Bowman, "La Marginalité en religion", in *Romantisme*, vol. 18, no. 59 (1988), 31-40 (p. 31).

manifestations of religiosity in pathological terms, identifying new forms of mental alienation that fell into the broad category of religious madness. Ann Goldberg describes the period following the birth of the asylum in Western Europe as the “heyday of religious madness”,<sup>6</sup> a period in which alienists diagnosed multiple cases of mental illness linked to religious and mystical phenomena. The psychiatric category of religious madness exemplified the way in which nineteenth-century alienists increasingly interpreted social and cultural deviance as pathology, and thereby dictated the bounds of normality and social acceptability. In nineteenth-century France, alienists perceived religious madness not only as one of the most common forms of mental alienation, but also as one of the most difficult to cure; as expressed by Esquirol: “Les folies entretenues par des idées religieuses [...] guérissent rarement”.<sup>7</sup>

### **Religious Monomania: *Théomanie* and *Démonomanie***

As already observed, the nineteenth-century psychiatric category of monomania, which rose to prominence in France during the first half of the nineteenth century, was divided into a number of distinct pathological conditions, each defined in terms of the specific *cause excitante* from which the mental alienation was derived. Owing to the intense passion associated with religious sentiment, alienists considered that *monomanie religieuse* constituted an important subcategory of monomania. During the early decades of the nineteenth century, as Esquirol’s concept of monomania gained in popularity, the psychiatric category of *monomanie religieuse* as a means of pathologising unconventional religiosity gradually took precedence over the vaguer concept of *folie religieuse*.

In *Des Maladies mentales*, Esquirol identifies religious monomania as an important subcategory of monomania that appears “lorsque le délire roule sur des sujets religieux”.<sup>8</sup> In keeping with the concept of monomania in general, religious

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<sup>6</sup> Ann Goldberg, *Sex, Religion, and the Making of Modern Madness: The Eberbach Asylum and German Society 1815-1849* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 36.

<sup>7</sup> Esquirol, I, 115.

<sup>8</sup> Esquirol, II, 792.

monomania was perceived as the exaggeration to the point of pathology of an ordinary passion or preoccupation, in this case religious sentiment, besides which the monomaniac retained their capacity for reason. In his *Traité élémentaire et pratique des maladies mentales*, Henri Dagonet says of this subcategory of monomania:

Les monomaniaques religieux montrent la même exagération du sentiment de la personnalité qui est le caractère distinctif de la monomanie. Seulement, l'exaltation religieuse forme le point de départ et, en quelque sorte, l'élément générateur des manifestations délirantes.<sup>9</sup>

Similarly, Ball characterises religious monomania as the *hypertrophie* of commonplace religious sentiment. He states that “chez les aliénés religieux”, as is the case “dans un grand nombre de monomanies”: “La folie du malade n'est que l'hypertrophie de son caractère normal”.<sup>10</sup>

The category of religious monomania was itself subdivided as alienists sought to pathologise the multiple forms of marginal religiosity that emerged in early nineteenth-century France. As is articulated in the *Compendium de Médecine pratique* of 1844, alienists considered that religious monomania could be manifest in various different ways: “Les malades atteints de monomanie religieuse ont des idées délirantes qui varient selon le dogme que chacun d'eux professe, les interprétations qu'il leur donne, les conséquences qu'il en tire”.<sup>11</sup> The explanation of religious monomania contained in this volume reveals the way in which this psychiatric category was used to pathologise a wide range of unconventional beliefs and behaviours linked to religious or mystical phenomena:

Les idées délirantes peuvent être innombrables; le plus grand nombre de ces malades se croient prophètes; ils sont le Messie envoyé pour sauver le monde, ils ont reçu la mission de prêcher dans l'univers entier, ils prédisent les événements futurs et emploient, lorsqu'ils parlent, le style biblique.<sup>12</sup>

Alienists introduced the terms *théomanie* and *démonomanie* to designate what they perceived to be the two major subcategories of religious monomania. The former

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<sup>9</sup> Henri Dagonet, *Traité élémentaire et pratique des maladies mentales: suivi de considérations pratiques de l'administration des asiles d'aliénés* (Paris: Baillière, 1862), p. 392.

<sup>10</sup> Ball, p. 468.

<sup>11</sup> Louis de la Berge, Ed Monneret, *Compendium de médecine pratique, ou Exposé analytique et raisonné des travaux contenus dans les principaux traités de pathologie interne*, 8 vols. (Paris: Béchét, 1836-1846), IV (1841), 493.

<sup>12</sup> Dagonet, p. 393.

term was associated with the belief in divine possession and feelings of elation, while the latter term was linked to demonic possession and melancholia.<sup>13</sup> Writing in 1840, the alienist, Charles-Chrétien-Henri Marc claims that the categories are bound up with Protestantism and Catholicism respectively: “le catholique devient fou, parce qu’il se croit damné; le protestant, parce qu’il se croit prophète; l’un se regarde comme réprouvé, l’autre comme envoyé du ciel”.<sup>14</sup> Esquirol dedicates a chapter of *Des Maladies mentales* to an extensive discussion of the category of demonomania, which he describes as “une variété de la mélancolie religieuse” which “ne s’observe presque plus et n’attaque que quelques esprits faibles, crédules”.<sup>15</sup> For Esquirol, demonomania is born of ignorance and a lack of culture, and is therefore largely confined to an unenlightened past. By contrast, he considers that theomania remains a prevalent condition in nineteenth-century France. Esquirol describes those afflicted with this form of religious monomania in the following manner: “Parmi les monomaniaques, les uns se croient des dieux, prétendant être en communication avec le ciel, assurant qu’ils ont une mission céleste; ils se donnent pour prophètes, pour devins: on les a appelés *théomanes*”.<sup>16</sup>

The concept of theomania is explored extensively in the writings of the alienist Louis-Florentin Calmeil. In an article for the 1839 *Dictionnaire de médecine*, Calmeil presents the diagnostic category of theomania in the following manner:

La théomanie est remarquable par l’exaltation excessive de l’enthousiasme religieux. Le théomane, rempli de la conviction qu’il représente Dieu sur la terre, se persuade que son omnipotence lui permet de gouverner la nature et les éléments, qu’il est appelé à régénérer l’espèce humaine, à peupler de bienheureux le séjour céleste; comme il croit pouvoir lancer le tonnerre, faire tomber la pluie, il peut aussi, dit-il, immoler des milliers d’hommes, pour les ressusciter ensuite à son gré.<sup>17</sup>

In *De la Folie* (1845), Calmeil provides multiple case studies of theomania from different historical and cultural contexts. The examples that he provides relate to individuals holding diverse religious beliefs and practices, giving a sense of the

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<sup>13</sup> Amédée Dechambre, *Dictionnaire encyclopédique des sciences médicales* (Paris: Asselin, 1876), p. 108.

<sup>14</sup> Charles-Chrétien-Henri Marc, *De la Folie considérée dans ses rapports avec les questions médico-judiciaires*, 2 vols. (Paris: Ballière, 1840), II, 305.

<sup>15</sup> Esquirol, I, 238-258.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, p. 334.

open-endedness of this psychiatric category. This impression is accentuated by the fact that patients said to be suffering from this condition are characterised by their opposition to mainstream religious ideas rather than by their adherence to specific beliefs or practices:

Les théomanes sont souvent en opposition avec les croyances religieuses de leurs pays, et c'est surtout aux ministres du sacerdoce que s'adresse leur haine, la fureur de leurs vengeances. Comment souffrir les prétentions d'un clergé qui feint de ne pas vouloir croire aux lumières d'un nouveau Christ, d'un nouvel apôtre saint Jean, d'un nouvel Elie, quand on lui répète depuis le matin jusqu'au soir que le temps de purger l'hérésie est arrivé; que c'est Dieu lui-même qui parle, qui ordonne par sa bouche!<sup>18</sup>

Alienists' descriptions of religious monomania, and especially the subcategory of theomania, reveal a significant overlap with another form of monomania identified in nineteenth-century psychiatric writings, namely that of *monomanie orgueilleuse*, also referred to as *monomanie ambitieuse*. *Monomanie orgueilleuse* was one of the many varieties of monomania that early French alienists believed to have reached epidemic proportions in France in the early decades of the nineteenth century. This form of monomania is "celle qui est caractérisée par un désir exagéré de la puissance et de la domination",<sup>19</sup> and involves the excessive identification with great and powerful figures, often derived from literature or history, such as leaders, kings, and, as in the case of theomania, even gods.<sup>20</sup> It was thought that such tendencies were especially common in artists and writers who over-estimated the value and significance of their own contributions and status:

A la monomanie orgueilleuse sont prédestinés les hommes qui, dans leurs discours, dans leur attitude, sur leur physionomie, portent l'empreinte d'une satisfaction que rien n'explique. Tels sont les écrivains et les artistes, qui, sur le témoignage d'un petit cercle d'amis, s'imaginent avoir fatigué les cent voies de la renommée. Tels sont encore ceux qui, ayant

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<sup>17</sup> Louis-Florentin Calmeil, "Monomanie", *Dictionnaire de médecine ou Répertoire général des sciences médicales considérées sous les rapports théorique et pratique*, ed. by Nicolas-Philibert. Adelon, 30 vols. (Paris: Béchét, 1832-1846), XX (1839), 142.

<sup>18</sup> Louis-Florentin Calmeil, *De la Folie considérée sous le point de vue pathologique, philosophique, historique et judiciaire, depuis la renaissance des sciences en Europe jusqu'au dix-neuvième siècle; description des grandes épidémies de délire, simple ou compliqué, qui ont atteint les populations d'autrefois et régné dans les monastères. Exposé des condamnations auxquelles la folie méconnue a souvent donné lieu*, 2 vols. (Paris: Baillière, 1845), I, 82-83.

<sup>19</sup> Emile Littré, *Dictionnaire de la langue française*, 4 vols. (Paris: L. Hachette, 1872-1877), III (1874), 858-859.

<sup>20</sup> The psychiatric category of *monomanie orgueilleuse* will be further discussed in relation to Nerval's descriptions of Raoul Spifame in "Le Roi de Bicêtre", the first of the portraits included in *Les Illuminés*.

fait une œuvre médiocre, se persuadent, sur la foi d'un compliment banal, qu'ils ont produit une œuvre admirée du monde entier.<sup>21</sup>

Calmeil's description of theomania reveals its overlap with *monomanie orgueilleuse*:

La théomanie s'exerce principalement sur les idées qui se rapportent à l'Être suprême, aux saints anges, à la mysticité, aux miracles, à la prédiction des événemens futurs. Les individus qui ont, comme ils disent, reçu des inspirations divines, qui se croient appelés à réformer les religions des peuples, à établir une religion universelle, à donner des leçons de civilisation aux divers souverains de l'univers, qui se disent les envoyés de Dieu, de grands prophètes, qui ont la prétention d'être invulnérables, immortels, d'être assez puissans pour ressusciter les morts, pour lancer l'ire de Dieu sur la terre, pour hâter la fin du monde, se classent parmi les théomanes.<sup>22</sup>

Alienists considered that such forms of monomania were especially prevalent in post-Revolutionary France owing to the historical specificities of the age. Esquirol argues that *monomanie orgueilleuse* was inextricably bound up with the social and political backdrop against which it emerged:

A l'époque où l'empereur peuplait l'Europe de nouveaux rois, il y eut en France beaucoup de monomaniaques qui se croyaient empereurs ou rois, impératrices ou reines. La guerre d'Espagne, la conscription, nos conquêtes, nos revers, produisirent aussi leurs maladies mentales. Combien d'individus frappés de terreur, lors des deux invasions, sont restés monomaniaques! Enfin, on trouve dans les maisons d'aliénés plusieurs individus qui se croient dauphins de France, et destinés au trône.<sup>23</sup>

Laure Murat describes *monomanie orgueilleuse* as a "maladie d'époque" in the context of post-Revolutionary France, linking it to the *mal du siècle*, and claiming that it was the product of an age in which ordinary individuals aspired to the sense of grandeur associated with the recent past, in particular the perceived glory of the Napoleonic era.<sup>24</sup>

The inherently controversial nature of religious monomania emerges strongly from alienists' writings. Calmeil's wide-reaching definition of theomania, which encompassed those who claimed to have first-hand experience of religious and mystical phenomena, implied that a number of major religious figures, including various prophets and saints, were afflicted with mental alienation. This is evident from his descriptions of those afflicted with the condition in *De la Folie*:

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<sup>21</sup> Laurent Cérise, "Déterminer l'influence de l'éducation physique et morale sur le production de la sur-excitation du système nerveux et des maladies qui sont en effet consécutif de cette sur-excitation", in *Mémoires de l'Académie Royale de Médecine*, IX (1841) 276-445 (p. 376).

<sup>22</sup> Calmeil, *De la Folie*, I, 81-82.

<sup>23</sup> Esquirol, I, 402.

Ces malades entendent la voix de Dieu dans les nuages, ils aperçoivent dans la lune, dans le soleil des signes, des taches, des emblèmes, dont ils s'évertuent à donner l'explication; ils se trouvent face à face avec des anges resplendissants de clarté; ils écrivent des codes de morale, des évangiles sous la dictée du Saint-Esprit ou du fils de Dieu; s'enivrent de l'harmonie céleste, de senteurs qui n'ont rien de commun avec les odeurs terrestres; quelquefois le firmament s'ouvre devant leurs yeux ébahis, et ils contemplent à loisir le trône du Créateur et la splendeur des chérubins et du paradis.<sup>25</sup>

Calmeil proceeds to identify hallucination as a common symptom of theomania. Similarly, Ball states that “la période d'état de la théomanie est le règne de l'hallucination”.<sup>26</sup> In keeping with such ideas, alienists increasingly interpreted all forms of mystical and religious experience as symptomatic of mental alienation. The controversy surrounding the concept of religious madness was accentuated by the psychiatric appropriation of hallucination. This involved the study of apparently supernatural visions, including those of famous religious visionaries, saints, and prophets, from the perspective of medical science. Such diagnoses became a major topic of debate in French psychiatry towards the middle of the nineteenth century, provoking fierce debate amongst prominent alienists, some of whom rejected the problematic implications of these new pathological categories.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Laure Murat, *L'Homme qui se prenait pour Napoléon* (Paris: Gallimard, 2011), p. 172.

<sup>25</sup> Calmeil, *De la Folie*, I, 82.

<sup>26</sup> Ball, p. 473.

<sup>27</sup> Frank Paul Bowman, “Du Romantisme au positivisme: Alfred Maury”, in *Romantisme*, vol. 8, no. 21 (1978), 35-73 (p. 38).



## CHAPTER SIX

# REINTERPRETING RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE: PATHOLOGICAL HALLUCINATION AND MYSTICAL VISION

### Redefining Hallucination

Besides identifying excessive religious sentiment as a major cause of madness, nineteenth-century alienists interpreted religious phenomena, especially visionary experience, as being symptomatic of mental alienation. From the early decades of the nineteenth century, the concept of hallucination became increasingly prominent in psychiatric discussion and debate with multiple articles and books appearing in relation to the theme. For the first time, hallucination was perceived in pathological terms and stripped of its long-held religious connotations. Whereas hallucination had traditionally fallen under the authority of the Church and been interpreted as a supernatural phenomenon, it was at this time reconceived as a form of mental pathology. The psychiatric appropriation of hallucination coincided with the appearance of a number of works exploring the perceived affinities between the states of madness and dream. The significant role played by the nineteenth-century psychiatric profession with regard to the study of the connection between dream, hallucination, and madness is articulated by Henri Ey:

Aucune école, aucune génération de psychiatres n'ont égalé l'école française de 1845 à 1860 dans l'approfondissement des rapports de la folie, du rêve, du délire et des hallucinations qui constituent le problème centrale de la psychopathologie, telle du moins que nous la concevons.<sup>1</sup>

In an article of 1817 for the *Dictionnaire des sciences médicales*, Esquirol provides the first precise medical definition of hallucination. Breaking with traditional

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<sup>1</sup> Henri Ey, *Traité des hallucinations*, 2 vols. (Paris: Masson, 1973), I, 1233.

interpretations of the phenomenon as representing privileged mystical vision, Esquirol reduces hallucination to “un des éléments de la folie”, stating: “Un homme qui a la conviction intime d’une sensation actuellement perçue, alors que nul objet extérieur propre à exciter cette sensation n’est à portée de ses sens, est dans un état d’hallucination: c’est un visionnaire”.<sup>2</sup> Esquirol subsequently elaborates on this description of hallucination, providing a more thorough exploration of the concept and linking it to ideas regarding the apparent overlap of madness and dream. This is evident in his 1832 *Aliénation mentale*, in which he adds to his original definition: “Dans les hallucinations, tout se passe dans le cerveau: les visionnaires, les extatiques sont des hallucinés, ce sont des rêveurs tout éveillés”.<sup>3</sup> Towards the middle of the nineteenth century, Esquirol’s medical definition of hallucination became the dominant understanding of the phenomenon, eclipsing the mystical and religious interpretations of visionary experience that had previously dominated. Esquirol’s suggestion that hallucination was pathological, as opposed to supernatural or mystical, in nature became the basis for wider discussions of the concept in medical, journalistic, and literary writings over the course of the nineteenth century. Following the publication of Esquirol’s medical description of the concept, the term *hallucination* gradually appeared in dictionaries. The term was first included in the *Dictionnaire de l’Académie Française* in 1835 and defined as: “Erreur, illusion d’une personne qui croit avoir des perceptions qu’elle n’a pas réellement”.<sup>4</sup> The entry in Pierre Larousse’s *Grand dictionnaire universel du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle* alludes to the work of Esquirol, as well as that of several other alienists, describing hallucination in pathological terms as “un état particulier dans lequel le malade a conscience d’une sensation perçue sans aucune excitation prochaine ou éloignée des sens”.<sup>5</sup>

Towards the middle of the nineteenth century, a wealth of articles and books dealing with the theme of hallucination appeared and the concept was widely debated by French alienists. Indeed, the first edition of the *Annales médico-psychologiques*,

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<sup>2</sup> Etienne Esquirol, “Hallucinations”, in *Dictionnaire des sciences médicales*, 60 vols. (Paris: Panckouke, 1812-1822), XX (1817), 64-71 (p. 64).

<sup>3</sup> Etienne Esquirol, *Aliénation mentale: Des illusions des aliénés: Question médico-légale sur l’isolement des aliénés* (Paris: Crochard, 1832), p. 2.

<sup>4</sup> *Dictionnaire de l’Académie Française*, 2 vols. (Paris: Firmin-Didot, 1835), I, 875.

published in 1843, contained a number of articles on this subject, whilst several prominent alienists, notably Lélut, Leuret, Moreau de Tours, and Brière de Boismont, published works on the theme. The question of whether hallucination could be coupled with reason or whether it constituted a manifestation of madness from which reason was absent was central to much nineteenth-century debate surrounding the concept.<sup>6</sup> While some alienists considered that all hallucination was necessarily indicative of madness, others sought to preserve the supernatural connotations previously associated with the phenomenon, asserting the difference between genuine religious or mystical vision and pathological delirium. In the nineteenth century, the concept of hallucination also became central to the debate regarding the relationship between madness and genius,<sup>7</sup> contributing to the unique flavour of this age-old debate in nineteenth-century French culture.

At the same time as the theme of hallucination came to the fore in psychiatric writings, it also rose to prominence in popular and literary culture. As indicated by Tony James, whereas at the beginning of the nineteenth century the term *hallucination* was absent from literary texts, from 1830, as well as becoming the subject of extensive psychiatric debate, it was incorporated into many literary writings, including works by Nodier, Balzac, Hugo, and Sand.<sup>8</sup>

### **Madness and Dream**

Esquirol's description of those subject to hallucinations as "des rêveurs tout éveillés" (cited above), reveals a marked overlap with the discourse of a number of other alienists, who argued that there existed a fundamental connection between the mental states of madness and dream. This idea was not new to the nineteenth century. In his 1764 *Dictionnaire philosophique*, Voltaire had already suggested that madness

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<sup>5</sup> Pierre Larousse, *Grand dictionnaire universel du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle*, 17 vols. (Paris: Administration du Grand Dictionnaire Universel, 1866-1876), IX (1873), 39.

<sup>6</sup> Tony James, *Dream, Creativity and Madness in Nineteenth-Century France* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 72; Ivan Leudar, Philip Thomas, *Voices of Reason, Voices of Insanity: Studies of Verbal Hallucinations* (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 8.

<sup>7</sup> Mirko Grmek, "Histoire des recherches sur les relations entre le génie et la maladie", in *Revue d'histoire des sciences et de leurs applications*, vol. 15 (1962), 51-68 (pp. 61-62).

and dream are comparable mental states: “Le plus sage des hommes veut-il connaître la folie, qu’il réfléchisse sur la marche de ses idées pendant ses rêves”.<sup>9</sup> The eighteenth-century philosopher and physiologist, Pierre-Jean-Georges Cabanis, had also argued that madness and dream were essentially the same.<sup>10</sup> Towards the middle of the nineteenth century, the question of the relationship between pathological madness and commonplace dream became a major preoccupation of the French psychiatric profession. Such an analogy further obscured the already fragile boundary between the healthy and the pathological mind, implying that some form of madness was present in all individuals.

The idea that there exists a fundamental overlap between the mental states of madness and dream first entered nineteenth-century psychiatric thought in Esquirol’s medical descriptions of hallucination. In *Des Maladies mentales*, Esquirol characterises hallucination in terms of the lack of distinction between dream and wakefulness: “Les prétendues sensations des hallucinés sont des images, des idées, reproduites par la mémoire, associées par l’imagination, et personnifiées par l’habitude. L’homme donne alors un corps aux produits de son entendement; il rêve tout éveillé”.<sup>11</sup> For Esquirol, pathological hallucination is a form of dream that occurs when awake. The implication is that madness entails the elimination of the boundary between sleep and wakefulness, such that images and illusions afforded by dream are interpreted as reality.

Alfred Maury develops the idea of the analogy between clinical delirium and ordinary dream, examining the physiological origins of these mental states. He elaborates his theory in his 1853 article, “Nouvelles observations sur les analogies des phénomènes du rêve et de l’aliénation mentale” and develops it further in his 1865 *Le Sommeil et les rêves*.<sup>12</sup> Maury states that: “les rêves sont de véritables

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<sup>8</sup> James, p. 69.

<sup>9</sup> Voltaire, *Dictionnaire philosophique – Tome III*, in *Œuvres complètes de Voltaire*, 60 vols. (Paris: Carez, Thomine et Fortic, 1820-1822), XXXV (1821), 383.

<sup>10</sup> Ian Dowbiggin, *Inheriting Madness: Professionalization and Psychiatric Knowledge in Nineteenth-Century France* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), p. 66.

<sup>11</sup> Esquirol, *Des Maladies mentales*, I, 192.

<sup>12</sup> Alfred Maury, “Nouvelles observations sur les analogies des phénomènes de rêve et de l’aliénation mentale”, in *Annales médico-psychologiques*, vol. 5 (1853), pp. 404-421; Alfred Maury, *Le Sommeil*

hallucinations”,<sup>13</sup> arguing that dream constitutes a form of hallucination that is identical to the delusions experienced by the pathologically deranged mind. Reflecting the early psychiatric tendency to perceive madness as a broad spectrum of conditions and to identify multiple degrees of mental alienation that can be defined in terms of deviation from established norms, Maury distinguishes different levels of dream. He defines these categories of dream by the degree to which the faculty of reason remains present. He argues that the extent to which reason persists in the dream state depends on the same physiological factors that give rise to varying degrees of madness:

On peut admettre que dans le rêve, ainsi que dans la folie, l'ensemble de certaines fibres cérébrales conserve son jeu régulier; dans le premier état, parce que l'engourdissement ne les a pas gagnées; dans le second, parce qu'elles ne sont pas atteintes du trouble qui affecte les autres. L'esprit est alors apte à raisonner juste dans la limite des conceptions et des jugements à la production desquels ces fibres concurrent.<sup>14</sup>

For Maury, both madness and dream can be classified according to the presence of varying degrees of reason. He illustrates this by comparing dream with Esquirol's concept of monomania, both of which, he argues, are characterised by the coexistence of madness and reason: “La monomanie et le rêve lucide nous offrent des exemples de ces deux modes d'exercice partiel de la raison”.<sup>15</sup>

Like Maury, Moreau de Tours considered that madness and dream represented psychologically and physiologically analogous states. In “De l'identité de l'état de rêve et de la folie” (1855), he alludes to the “*identité absolue*, au point de vue psychologique, de *l'état de rêve* et de la folie”; and proceeds to add: “j'ai dû admettre, pour le délire en général, une nature psychologique, non pas seulement analogue, mais *absolument identique* avec celle de l'état de rêve”.<sup>16</sup> In *La Psychologie morbide*, Moreau de Tours explicitly characterises madness as the continuation of dream in the state of wakefulness in a manner that clearly recalls

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*et les rêves: études psychologiques sur ces phénomènes et les divers états qui s'y rattachent: suivies de recherches sur le développement de l'instinct et de l'intelligence: dans leurs rapports avec le phénomène du sommeil* (Paris: Didier, 1861).

<sup>13</sup> Maury, *Le Sommeil et les rêves*, p. 138.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, p. 143.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, p. 143.

<sup>16</sup> Moreau de Tours, “De l'Identité de l'état de rêve et de la folie” in *Annales médico-psychologiques*, vol. 1 (1855), 361-408 (p. 362).

Esquirol's psychiatric description of hallucination. In accordance with the ideas of Maury, he identifies different levels of dream that coincide with different degrees of madness. He argues: "l'état de rêve complet, c'est-à-dire celui dans lequel l'individu est privé de toute conscience de son état réel, celui-là seul explique l'état de folie complète, franche, c'est-à-dire avec aliénation du *moi*".<sup>17</sup> By establishing a connection between ordinary dream experience and the pathological state of madness, Moreau de Tours undermines the distinction between normal and pathological mental states, suggesting that, just as those afflicted with madness retain some degree of lucidity and reason, healthy individuals also experience some form of madness.

### **Hallucination and Mystical Vision: The Practice of "Retrospective Medicine"**

As already observed, Esquirol's medical definition of hallucination was extremely controversial, since it represented the claiming by medical science of a phenomenon that had previously been subject to the authority of the Church. The contentious nature of the psychiatric appropriation of hallucination is especially apparent in the rise of the practice of "retrospective medicine" in nineteenth-century France.<sup>18</sup> Retrospective medicine involved the study of historical mystical and religious visions through the lens of nineteenth-century psychiatric thought. The visionary experience of major historical figures, traditionally interpreted as privileged spiritual insight, was now reinterpreted by alienists and reclassified as pathological hallucination. Towards the middle of the nineteenth century, the practice of retrospective medicine flourished alongside the psychiatric study of hallucination. Practitioners of retrospective medicine, most notably François Leuret and Louis-François Lélut, reconsidered accounts of a number of famous historical visionaries, arguing that their apparently mystical experiences represented nothing more than symptoms of mental alienation. Both Leuret and Lélut conceived of

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<sup>17</sup> Moreau de Tours, *La Psychologie morbide*, p. 431.

<sup>18</sup> The term *médecine rétrospective* to refer to the use of modern medical theories to diagnose individuals from history was coined by Emile Littré in 1869: Tiago Pires-Marques, "Mystique, politique et maladie mentale: Historicités croisées", in *Revue des Sciences Humaines*, no. 23 (2010), 37-74 (p. 39).

hallucination in physiological terms, attributing it to physical abnormalities of the nervous system and wholly stripping it of its mystical and religious connotations.

In *Du Démon de Socrate* of 1836, Lélut reinterprets the visions of Socrates as symptomatic of mental illness. Lélut argues that this influential historical figure “présenta pendant quarante ans le caractère irréfutable de l’aliénation mentale”.<sup>19</sup> Lélut’s study eliminates the distinction between the experiences of well-known historical visionaries and those of mentally ill patients of his own generation, suggesting that both groups exhibit virtually identical symptoms, which are indisputable signs of madness. He says of Socrates: “Socrate était un *Théosophe*, un *visionnaire*, et, pour dire le mot, un fou”.<sup>20</sup> Throughout *Du Démon de Socrate*, Lélut seeks to undermine mystical interpretations of Socrates’s visions; and he diagnoses this historical figure, posthumously, as a madman:

Voilà Socrate qui, non seulement s’imagine recevoir des influences, des inspirations divines, entendre une voix divine, mais qui, à raison de ce privilège, croit posséder, à distance, une influence semblable sur ses amis, sur ses disciples, et presque sur les étrangers; influence indépendante même de la parole et du regard, et qui s’exerce à travers les murailles et dans un rayon plus ou moins étendu. On ne peut, en vérité, rien voir, rien entendre de plus extravagant, de plus caractéristique de la folie; et les hallucinés, qui, sous mes yeux, prétendent envoyer ou recevoir à distance des influences *physiques, magnétiques, franc-maçonniques*, ne s’expriment pas autrement que Socrate, et ne sont, sous ce rapport, pas plus fous qu’il ne l’était.<sup>21</sup>

Lélut suggests that theological interpretations of Socrates’s visions reflected the belief system of his society; but says that, had Socrates lived in nineteenth-century France, he would have been hospitalised alongside other mentally ill patients displaying comparable symptoms. Lélut relates Socrates’s visionary experience to the precise historical context in which he was living: “les hallucinations de Socrate lui étaient expliquées par les croyances superstitieuses de son pays ou de son époque, ou plutôt que ces hallucinations et ces croyances s’expliquaient les unes par les autres”.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Louis-François Lélut, *Du Démon de Socrate: Spécimen d’une application de la science psychologique à celle de l’histoire* (Paris: Trinquart, 1836), p. 179.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid*, p. 13.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid*, p. 122.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 142-143.

Like Lélut, Leuret refuses to distinguish between the visions of influential historical and religious figures and those of nineteenth-century psychiatric patients, declaring: “comme il n’y a pas de différence essentielle entre les visionnaires d’autrefois et ceux d’aujourd’hui, les uns et les autres doivent être mis au rang des aliénés”.<sup>23</sup> Leuret further develops this argument to suggest that both historical religious visionaries and the mentally ill of his own age exhibit the same symptoms, even in terms of the specific content of their visions: “Les hallucinations ont entre elles une si grande analogie, que les êtres créés par elles diffèrent seulement dans les accessoires; les descriptions qu’en donnent actuellement nos aliénés ressemblent aux descriptions que donnaient autrefois les saints et les possédés”.<sup>24</sup> For Leuret, as for Lélut, all visionary and hallucinatory experience is derived from the same psychological and physiological origins and is necessarily pathological in nature. Accordingly, both alienists refuse to attach privileged status to the visions of any specific individual.

By reclassifying the visions of historical saints and prophets as pathological hallucination, these alienists implicitly cast doubt upon the very foundations of religious faith. Such ideas gave rise to much opposition, even from inside the psychiatric profession. The Catholic alienist Alexandre Brierre de Boismont strongly opposed the notion that all visionary experience, including that of major religious figures, should be reclassified as pathological hallucination. Brierre de Boismont sought to reconcile nineteenth-century medical science with his Catholic faith, attempting to reinstate the distinction between mental delirium and genuine religious vision. In *Des Hallucinations* (1845), Brierre de Boismont articulates his fear that scientific progress endangers the very foundations of religious faith:

Si toutes les hallucinations devaient être rangées parmi les produits d’une imagination en délire, les livres saints ne seraient plus qu’une erreur; le christianisme, ce puissant mobile du perfectionnement social et individuel, une erreur; les croyances de nos pères, les nôtres, celles de nos enfants, des erreurs.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Leuret, p. 255.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid*, p. 257-258.

<sup>25</sup> Alexandre Brierre de Boismont, *Des Hallucinations, ou Histoire raisonnée des apparitions, des visions, des songes, de l’extase, des rêves, du magnétisme et du somnambulisme* (Paris: Baillière, 1852), iv-v.



Unlike Lélut and Leuret, Brierre de Boismont maintains a clear distinction between genuine visionary experience and the hallucinatory experiences of the mentally ill:

Nulle comparaison sérieuse à établir entre les hallucinations de ces hommes fameux et celles des hallucinés de nos jours. Là, des entreprises conçues, suivies, exécutées avec toute la force du raisonnement, l'enchaînement des faits, la puissance du génie, et dont l'hallucination n'était que l'auxiliaire; ici, des projets sans suite, sans but, sans actualité, et toujours frappés au coin de la folie.<sup>26</sup>

Writing in 1845, Alfred Maury attacks what he perceives as the illogical and unscientific nature of Brierre de Bosimont's attempts to distinguish between genuine mystical vision and pathological hallucination.<sup>27</sup> Embracing the theories proposed by Lélut and Leuret, according to which all hallucination results from physical disturbances in the nervous system, Maury argues that Catholic saints and religious visionaries cannot be distinguished from nineteenth-century *aliénés*.

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<sup>26</sup> *Ibid*, xiv.

<sup>27</sup> Alfred Maury, *De l'Hallucination envisagée au point de vue historique et philosophique, ou Examen critique de l'opinion émise par M. Brierre de Boismont, touchant les caractères auxquels on doit reconnaître l'hallucination chez certains personnages célèbres de l'histoire* (Paris: Martinet, 1845).



## CHAPTER SEVEN

### RELIGIOUS MADNESS AND ECCENTRICITY IN THE WRITINGS OF GÉRARD DE Nerval

The way in which specifically nineteenth-century ideas regarding madness and eccentricity, especially in relation to religious and visionary phenomena, are assimilated into the narrative of Nerval's *Les Illuminés* is explored in Part Two of this thesis. This chapter considers how Nerval deals with these concepts elsewhere in his writings.

#### Articulating Madness

Madness is an all-pervasive theme in Nerval's writings, and the concept is dealt with extensively in his fictional, historical, and autobiographical narratives, in each case reflecting the specificities of the precise ideological context in which his works were conceived. Nerval repeatedly depicts figures, whether imaginary or historical, that are characterised by their deviant ideas and experiences. His literary exploration of madness has strong autobiographical resonance, since Nerval himself suffered from recurrent bouts of mental illness for which he was repeatedly hospitalised, culminating in his dramatic suicide on 26<sup>th</sup> January 1855. Nerval's first mental crisis occurred in February 1841. His doctor, Esprit Blanche, who was an adherent of the moral understanding of madness promoted by Pinel and Esquirol,<sup>1</sup> described Nerval's condition as a "manie aiguë".<sup>2</sup> This condition is defined by Esquirol as: "une affection cérébrale, chronique, ordinairement sans fièvre, caractérisée par la

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<sup>1</sup> Laura Murat, *La Maison du docteur Blanche: Histoire d'un asile et de ses pensionnaires* (Paris: Lattès, 2001), p. 13.

<sup>2</sup> The details of Nerval's diagnosis are discussed in Corinne Hubner-Bayle, *Gérard de Nerval: L'inconsolé: Biographie* (Croissy-Beaubourg: Aden, 2008), pp. 176-178.

perturbation et l'exaltation de la sensibilité de l'intelligence et de la volonté".<sup>3</sup> The extent to which Nerval's discourse on madness can be read as being essentially autobiographical in nature is problematic. Although Nerval's writings are clearly informed and inspired by his own experience of madness and of psychiatric medicine, the connection between fiction and autobiography is in no way straightforward. Nerval's narrators, even in his apparently autobiographical texts, are fictional persona; and the image of madness that arises from his writings, although bound up with his own experiences and engaging with distinctly nineteenth-century concepts, is essentially literary in nature.

Throughout his writings, Nerval exploits his own experiences of mental illness, creating what Allen Thiher describes as a "personal myth for his madness" in reaction to the medical diagnosis of his condition as a pathological mental state.<sup>4</sup> As pointed out by Thiher, this "personal myth", which is "directed largely against medicine", is derived from a number of different sources: "In his work madness weaves intertextual constructs that relate themes taken from classical literature, the German romantics, and science and medicine".<sup>5</sup> Through writing, Nerval thus attempts to attach new layers of significance to his madness and to protect it from the reductionist discourse of medical science. In his writings, whether directly or indirectly autobiographical, Nerval seeks to reveal the limitations of straightforwardly pathological interpretations of his condition, fusing scientific and medical discourse with allusions to literature, mythology, and religion, and thereby depriving the reader of a stable ideological perspective.

On 1<sup>st</sup> March 1841, a few days after Nerval's first mental crisis, the literary critic, Jules Janin, published a biographical account of Nerval in the *Journal des Débats*. In a letter to Janin, written on 24<sup>th</sup> August 1841, Nerval refers to this as "votre article nécrologique" (I, 1380), and, in the preface to *Lorély: Souvenirs d'Allemagne*, entitled "A Jules Janin", he describes Janin's text as a "biographie anticipée" (III, 4).

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<sup>3</sup> Etienne Esquirol, *Des Maladies mentales considérées sous les rapports médical, hygiénique et médico-légal*, 2 vols. (Paris: Baillière, 1838), II, 132.

<sup>4</sup> Allen Thiher, *Revels in Madness: Insanity in Medicine and Literature* (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1999), p. 206.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

Janin's article, which is indeed characterised by a "strong necrological bias",<sup>6</sup> recounts Nerval's first psychotic episode, praising his creative capacities and his "imagination éveillée",<sup>7</sup> yet implying that the onset of Nerval's madness represents a form of intellectual demise. Following a subsequent episode of mental illness in 1853, a similar article was printed, this time by the writer Alexandre Dumas.<sup>8</sup> Like that of Janin, Dumas's article takes the form of a premature obituary. Dumas suggests that Nerval's madness represents the end of his reason and therefore the death of his literary career. Accordingly, Shoshana Felman describes Dumas's text as "a sort of funeral oration for Nerval's mind".<sup>9</sup> Referring to the articles of Janin and Dumas, Ann Jefferson states: "Nerval had the unusual experience within his own lifetime of being the subject of biographies that were virtually obituaries, their authors having assumed that his madness had taken him outside the realms of normal existence".<sup>10</sup> Nerval composes responses to the articles of both Janin and Dumas, which appear as the prefaces to *Lorély: Souvenirs d'Allemagne* (1852) and to *Les Filles du Feu* (1854) respectively. In his responses to these writers, Nerval attempts to resist the reduction of his mental state to a pathological condition. Refusing the straightforward dichotomy between madness and reason implied in the accounts of Janin and Dumas, Nerval seeks to give voice to his madness, claiming in his response to Dumas's text that his mental state "n'a pas été entièrement dépourvue de raisonnement si elle a toujours manqué de raison" (III, 458). He eschews medical discourse to describe his illness in allegorical terms as a "descente aux enfers" (III, 458).

Shoshana Felman argues that, "Nerval's poetic enterprise resembles to an astonishing degree the philosophic enterprise of Foucault".<sup>11</sup> Indeed, Nerval's attempts to give authentic voice to his madness and to resist the clinical language of

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<sup>6</sup> Ann Jefferson, *Biography and the Question of Literature in France* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 187.

<sup>7</sup> Jules Janin, "Gérard de Nerval", in *Journal des Débats politiques et littéraires*, 1st March 1841.

<sup>8</sup> Alexandre Dumas, *Le Mousquetaire: Journal de M. Alexandre Dumas*, 10<sup>th</sup> December 1853. Dumas's article appears alongside Nerval's poem, "El Desdichado". Dumas considered that this poem was confirmation of Nerval's mental demise: George MacLennan, *Lucid Interval: Subjective Writing and Madness in History* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1992), p. 165.

<sup>9</sup> Shoshana Felman, *Writing and Madness (Literature/Philosophy/Psychoanalysis)* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), p. 62.

<sup>10</sup> Jefferson, p. 187.

psychiatry anticipate Michel Foucault's desire to articulate madness in a way that would overcome its separation from reason. Both writers perceive the language of psychiatry as a "monologue de la raison *sur* la folie".<sup>12</sup> In his highly influential *Folie et déraison*, Foucault directly alludes to Nerval as one of a number of writers who express the silence of madness.<sup>13</sup> As articulated by Jonathan Strauss, Foucault "has situated Nerval at a turning point in the history of madness's ability to speak in a voice that is authentically and essentially its own".<sup>14</sup> Felman points out that, just as Foucault claimed to be undertaking a "tâche doublement impossible", Nerval's *Aurélia*, in which he attempts to give expression to his madness, was also perceived by its author as a "livre infaisable".<sup>15</sup>

Nerval articulates his experiences of madness in a fragmented, often indirect manner, referencing multiple other sources, recounting anecdotes, inserting extensive citations (such as those from the articles of Janin and Dumas), and focusing on isolated episodes rather than producing a coherent narrative. His exploration of madness is derived from a number of different sources and he assimilates references to mythical, religious, historical, literary, scientific, and medical ideas into his texts. Hisashi Mizuno suggests that Nerval employs his characteristic technique of "copier – coller", which involves the insertion and modification of the words of others into his own writings, specifically "lorsqu'il est question de la folie".<sup>16</sup> Indeed, as will be seen in Part Two of this thesis, this is the case not only in Nerval's exploration of his own madness but also when he relates the lives of his six historical "*excentriques de la philosophie*" (II, 885) in *Les Illuminés*. In the prefaces to *Lorély* and *Les Filles du feu*, Nerval quotes Janin and Dumas's articles about his madness at length, adapting the words of these writers to suit his purpose. In his response to Dumas, Nerval, besides inserting extensive sections of Dumas's original text, also includes the first

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<sup>11</sup> Felman, p. 65.

<sup>12</sup> Michel Foucault, *Folie et déraison: Histoire de la folie à l'âge classique* (Paris: Plon, 1961), v.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 554-555.

<sup>14</sup> Jonathan Strauss, *Subjects of Terror: Nerval, Hegel, and the Modern Self* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), p. 75.

<sup>15</sup> This expression is employed by Dumas in his article on Nerval, and is quoted by Nerval in his response to Dumas in the preface to *Les Filles du feu*. Shoshana Felman, "«Aurélia» ou «le livre infaisable»: de Foucault à Nerval", in *Romantisme*, vol. 1, no. 3 (1971), 43-55 (p. 45).

<sup>16</sup> Hisashi Mizuno, "L'Écriture dialogique de la folie dans les écrits autobiographiques de Gérard de Nerval avant *Aurélia*", in *Romantisme*, no. 149, vol. 3 (2010), 111-123 (p. 111).

chapter of an unfinished novel, *Le Roman tragique*. Accordingly, the preface to *Les Filles du feu* is characterised by Gabrielle Chamarat as “an original text woven out of strands of personal, paratextual and fictional discourse”,<sup>17</sup> a description that could equally apply to the six portraits that constitute *Les Illuminés*. Nerval thereby produces what is referred to by Mizuno as “une écriture dialogique [...] pour dire sa folie”.<sup>18</sup> The extracts selected by Nerval for inclusion in his own texts become part of his literary image of his madness. In his literary responses to Janin and Dumas, he chooses to quote extracts of their articles that depict his madness in a poetic manner, linking his pathological mental state to his activity as a writer. Nerval thereby uses Janin and Dumas’s articles as a starting point from which to explore the question of the relationship between madness, creative inspiration, and the act of writing.

### **Madness and Creativity**

Marcel Proust describes Nerval’s madness as “qu’une sorte de subjectivisme excessif”, a state that he claims is “au fond de la disposition artistique”.<sup>19</sup> Proust thereby establishes a connection between Nerval’s madness and his literary activity, proceeding to claim that, for Nerval, the onset of madness represented “le développement de son originalité littéraire”, to which he adds that it was “dans cette période de la vie qu’il a écrit ces admirables poèmes où il y a peut-être les plus beaux vers de la langue française”.<sup>20</sup> The idea that madness represents a state of excessive subjectivity and is therefore bound up with creativity and poetic inspiration, a notion that, as seen in Part One, was considered from the perspective of medical science by nineteenth-century alienists, also emerges from the writings of Nerval himself.

Nerval frequently aligns himself with the Romantic model of madness, portraying madness as a source of creative inspiration in an attempt to resist the increasingly

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<sup>17</sup> Gabrielle Chamarat, “Identity and Identification in the Preface to Nerval’s *Les Filles du Feu*”, in *Subject Matters: Subject and Self in French Literature from Descartes to the Present*, ed. by Paul Gifford and Johnnie Gratton (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1994), pp. 75-84 (p. 75).

<sup>18</sup> Mizuno, p. 111.

<sup>19</sup> Marcel Proust, “Gérard de Nerval”, in *Contre Saint-Beuve, suivi de Nouveaux mélanges* (Paris: Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade 1954), 181-196 (p. 185).

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

influential pathologising discourse of nineteenth-century psychiatry. This emerges from Nerval's discussion of his own madness in his correspondence as well as in his literary texts. In a letter of 27<sup>th</sup> April 1841, addressed to Mme. Emile de Girardin, Nerval describes his madness in poetic terms as "l'exaltation d'un esprit beaucoup trop *romanesque*", and proceeds to question the authority of reductive medical discourse by adding: "J'ai peur d'être dans une maison de sages et que les fous soient au dehors" (II, 1379). Similarly, in a letter of 11<sup>th</sup> June 1854, addressed to his doctor, Emile Blanche,<sup>21</sup> he subscribes to the Romantic view of madness and suggests that his mental condition is a prerequisite of literary activity: "Si l'on me trouve toujours un peu fou que ce soit de la façon qui convient à un poète" (III, 862).

The idea that madness and creativity are inextricably entwined is central to Nerval's preface to *Les Filles du feu*, "A Alexandre Dumas", which, as seen above, was written in response to Dumas's article affirming Nerval's mental demise. Here Nerval revealingly focuses on the extracts of Dumas's article that deal with the relationship between madness and literary creation. Just as Proust perceives an indissoluble association between these two aspects of Nerval's existence, so too does Dumas. Dumas links Nerval's madness to his status as a writer, underlining the power of Nerval's imagination, yet linking this to dreams and hallucinations, which are here perceived as symptomatic of mental alienation:

de temps en temps, lorsqu'un travail quelconque l'a fort préoccupé, l'imagination, cette folle du logis, en chasse momentanément la raison, qui n'en est que la maîtresse; alors la première reste seule, toute puissante, dans ce cerveau nourri de rêves et d'hallucinations, ni plus ni moins qu'un fumeur d'opium du Caire, ou qu'un mangeur de hachisch d'Algers, et alors, la vagabonde qu'elle est, le jette dans les théories impossibles, dans les livres infaisables. (III, 449-450)<sup>22</sup>

Dumas's comparison of Nerval's pathological mental state to that of drug-induced delirium recalls the observations of the alienist Moreau de Tours with regard to the analogy between madness and intoxication with hashish. Dumas proceeds to

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<sup>21</sup> Emile Blanche was the son of Nerval's previous doctor, Esprit Blanche. He transferred his father's psychiatric clinic from Montmartre to Passy, and was charged with the care of Nerval following the latter's second mental crisis of 1853.

<sup>22</sup> In Dumas's original text this sentence continues: "[infaisables]; – alors notre pauvre Gérard, pour les hommes de science, est malade et a besoin de traitement, tandis que, pour nous, il est tout simplement plus conteur, plus rêveur, plus spirituel, plus gai ou plus triste que jamais".



explicitly link Nerval's madness to his writing, presenting Nerval's literary creativity as the result of his powerful hallucinatory imagination:

Tantôt il est le roi d'Orient Salomon, il a retrouvé le sceau qui évoque les esprits, il attend la reine de Saba; et alors, croyez-le bien, il n'est conte de fée, ou des *Mille et une Nuits*, qui vaille ce qu'il raconte à ses amis, qui ne savent s'ils doivent le plaindre ou l'envier, de l'agilité et de la puissance de ces esprits, de la beauté et de la richesse de cette reine; tantôt il est sultan de Crimée, comte d'Abyssinie, duc d'Égypte, baron de Smyrne. Un autre jour il se croit fou, et il raconte comment il l'est devenu, et avec un si joyeux entrain, en passant par des péripéties si amusantes, que chacun désire le devenir pour suivre ce guide entraînant dans le pays des chimères et des hallucinations, plein d'oasis plus fraîches et plus ombreuses que celles qui s'élèvent sur la route brûlée d'Alexandrie à Ammon; tantôt, enfin, c'est la mélancolie qui devient sa muse, et alors retenez vos larmes si vous pouvez, car jamais Werther, jamais René, jamais Antony, n'ont eu plaintes plus poignantes, sanglots plus douloureux, paroles plus tendres, cris plus poétiques!... (III, 450)<sup>23</sup>

Despite Dumas's implication that Nerval's madness is necessarily linked to his poetic activity, his descriptions nevertheless indicate Nerval's loss of reason and affirm the pathological dimension of his condition. As stated by Jonathan Strauss: "If Dumas seems to credit the authentic voice of madness in Nervalian discourse as the essence of the literary, he sees it as totally disconnected from reason, for it is only when madness has chased the latter from the poet's mind that these episodes can occur".<sup>24</sup> In his response to Dumas's account, Nerval strives to destabilise the monologue of reason and to resist suggestions that his mental state can be classified and reduced to a pathological condition.

As seen in the above quotation, Dumas presents Nerval's madness as the hallucinatory identification with a series of powerful figures. Reacting to these comments, Nerval depicts literary activity as a form of madness to the extent that it involves identification with fictional or historical characters:

Je vais essayer de vous expliquer, mon cher Dumas, le phénomène dont vous avez parlé plus haut. Il est, vous le savez, certains conteurs qui ne peuvent inventer sans s'identifier aux personnages de leur imagination. Vous savez avec quelle conviction notre vieil ami Nodier racontait comment il avait eu le malheur d'être guillotiné à l'époque de la Révolution; on en devenait tellement persuadé que l'on se demandait comment il était parvenu à se faire recoller la tête... (III, 450)

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<sup>23</sup> The final words of this extract from Dumas's article are quoted by Moreau de Tours in his psychiatric discussion of the connection between madness and genius. See above: Part One, Chapter Four.

<sup>24</sup> Strauss, p. 86.

Nerval portrays madness as a state of excess subjectivity that for a writer takes the form of identification with the subjects of his literary creations and therefore represents the blurring of the boundaries of individual identity. Nerval thus suggests that his madness is integral to his literary activity:

comprenez-vous que l'entraînement d'un récit puisse produire un effet semblable; que l'on arrive pour ainsi dire à s'incarner dans le héros de son imagination, si bien que sa vie devienne la vôtre et qu'on brûle des flammes factices de ses ambitions et de ses amours! (III, 450)

The implication is that all literature involves some degree of madness since it requires the identification with imaginary figures. This idea is developed through an extensive quotation from his unfinished *Roman Tragique*, a work that recounts the story of Brisacier, an actor whose own existence becomes intimately bound up with the lives of the characters he is portraying in the theatre to such an extent that his own identity dissolves altogether. This takes on cosmic proportions as Brisacier identifies with the whole of creation, such that the distinction between self and other disappears entirely in an excess of subjectivity, eliminating the distinction between reality and fiction. Michel Jeanneret identifies “la ressemblance” as a principal characteristic of Nerval’s madness, resulting in “divers degrés de la fusion et de la confusion, jusqu’à l’abolition de toute différence”.<sup>25</sup> Indeed, the Nervalian experience of madness consists of the dissolution of boundaries, not only between individuals, but as regards the whole of creation. The notion of the blurring of identity, which is central to the model of madness depicted by Nerval in “A Alexandre Dumas”, is a characteristic feature of Nerval’s writings. Notably the loss of distinction between different subjectivities is integrated into the narrative of “Sylvie” (*Les Filles du feu*). This text is characterised by a marked lack of objectivity and of stable identity. Different subjectivities merge into one as the text fuses the identities of individuals to produce a hallucinatory narrative in which even the boundaries of time and space are rendered indistinct. The fluidity of individual identity also characterises the perpetually elusive title figure of *Aurélia*. This enigmatic character, composed of a range of figures from religion, myth, and commonplace reality, remains constantly beyond the grasp of the narrative, and

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<sup>25</sup> Michel Jeanneret, *La Lettre perdue: Ecriture et folie dans l'œuvre de Nerval* (Paris: Flammarion, 1978), p. 8.

presents herself to the narrator with the words: “Je suis la même que Marie, la même que ta mère, la même aussi que sous toutes les formes tu as toujours aimée” (III, 716).

François Leuret’s concept of “l’inspiration passive”, a subconscious, hallucinatory experience involving a lack of voluntary control, closely resembles Nerval’s depiction of his own poetic activity as described in his preface to *Les Filles du feu*. A similar image is conveyed by Nerval with regard to German Romantic poetry in his “Introduction aux «Poésies Allemandes»”. Nerval here differentiates between the creative activity of French and German poets, establishing a distinction between these national traditions that closely reflects Leuret’s psychiatric distinction between “l’inspiration active” and “l’inspiration passive”: “chez nous c’est l’homme qui gouverne son imagination [...] chez les Allemands c’est l’imagination qui gouverne l’homme, contre sa volonté, contre ses habitudes, et presque à son insu” (I, 264).<sup>26</sup> In keeping with Leuret’s notion of involuntary mental activity, Nerval describes the creative process of the German Romantic poets as a form of unconscious inspiration or hallucinatory experience:

Quel contraste en effet entre leur vie et leurs pensées! Plus l’Allemand a été froid et correct dans ses occupations journalières, plus son imagination devient fantastique et vagabonde lorsqu’il la laisse aller, ou qu’il se laisse aller à elle; et il est alors merveilleux de la voir, au milieu d’une atmosphère de brouillards et de fumée de tabac, lui créer un univers magique tout plein de figures légères et gracieuses. Voyez le poète allemand, dès qu’il a pu échapper à la vie commune, se jeter dans un fauteuil, et s’abandonner à l’enchanteresse dont la main divine se pose sur les yeux et les ouvre à des aspects nouveaux: c’est alors qu’il aperçoit tantôt comme une échelle de Jacob jetée de la terre au ciel, tantôt comme une vaste roue, un zodiaque céleste qui tourne avec ses signes bizarres et éclatants. (I, 264)

Whereas Leuret attributes a pathological dimension to his concept of passive inspiration, Nerval presents this phenomenon in more positive terms as a form of evasion from everyday reality. The idea that madness is a desirable alternative to basic material existence underpins the narrative of “Sylvie”. Here the narrator pursues an illusion, rejecting the parameters of reality in favour of an imaginary ideal: “C’est une image que je poursuis, rien de plus” (III, 539).

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<sup>26</sup> Norma Rinsler suggests that Nerval’s distinction between French and German poetry “recalls his comparison between Goethe the theorist and Heine the poet of imagination”: Norma Rinsler, *Gérard de Nerval* (London, Athlone, 1973), p. 48.

In stark contrast to alienists' scientific ideas regarding madness, hallucination, and creativity, Nerval's descriptions of poetic madness acquire a mystical dimension. In his discussions of madness and the state of dream, the alienist Alfred Maury emphasises the role of memory in the production of hallucinatory images both in clinical delirium and the ordinary dream state. Nerval also presents hallucinatory experience as a form of memory. Whereas Maury perceives the confused resurgence of past memories as a form of clinical delirium, Nerval seeks to explain it in supernatural terms. He suggests that the images evoked in the mind of the creative artist are derived from memory, often that of previous existences rather than arising from the conscious process of invention. In "A Alexandre Dumas", for example, Nerval conveys this idea in relation to his discussion of the association between madness and writing: "Inventer au fond c'est se ressouvenir [...] ne pouvant trouver les preuves de l'existence matérielle de mon héros, j'ai cru tout à coup à la transmigration des âmes" (III, 451). Similarly, in "L'Histoire du Calife Hakem", a text included in Nerval's *Voyage en Orient* (1851), it is suggested that a drug-induced state of delirium awakens memories from past existences:

Je n'avais pas rêvé [...] le haschisch n'avait fait que développer un souvenir enfoui au plus profond de mon âme, car ce visage divin m'était connu. Par exemple, où l'avais-je vu déjà? dans quel monde nous étions-nous rencontrés? quelle existence antérieure nous avait mis en rapport? (II, 529-530)

A mystical model of the poetic imagination is also proposed by the narrator of *Aurélia*, again attaching a supernatural dimension to the idea that visionary experience is derived from memory: "Quoi qu'il en soit, je crois que l'imagination humaine n'a rien inventé qui ne soit vrai, dans ce monde ou dans les autres, et je ne pouvais douter de ce que j'avais vu si distinctement" (III, 717).

### **Madness and Dream**

As seen above, towards the middle of the nineteenth century, French alienists, notably Alfred Maury and Jacques-Joseph Moreau de Tours, wrote extensively on the perceived affinities between the mental states of madness and dream. As pointed out by Michel Jeanneret, besides the medical studies of nineteenth-century French

alienists, there also existed a number of “modèles littéraires” of the analogy between madness and dream: “c’est une intuition fréquente chez les philosophes et les illuminés du XVIIIème siècle, un thème privilégié de Nodier, une idée reçue chez Hoffmann et les romantiques allemands que la contamination du songe et de la folie”.<sup>27</sup> The idea that there exists a fundamental connection between these states is central to Nerval’s writings on the theme of madness, both in relation to his own experiences and to those of fictional and historical figures, and is bound up with notions of religious madness and hallucination. Nerval’s literary explorations of the affinity between madness and dream, the most obvious example of which is *Aurélia*, coincided with psychiatric debate regarding this phenomenon. Despite their opposing conclusions, there is much overlap in Nerval’s literary portrayal of the theme and the ideas that emerge from alienists’ writings.

The idea that madness and ordinary dream are analogous states also emerges strongly from Nerval’s correspondence. In a letter of 1841, addressed to Victor Loubens, Nerval describes the state of madness from which he has recently emerged as “un rêve de plusieurs semaines aussi bizarre qu’inattendu” (III, 1487). He eschews the pathological nature of his condition, criticising the use of “ce triste mot: folie!”, and depicting his mental state as a positive dream experience:

cela n’a été qu’une sorte de transfiguration de mes pensées habituelles, un rêve éveillé, une série d’illusions grotesques ou sublimes, qui avaient tant de charmes que je ne cherchais qu’à m’y replonger sans cesse, car je n’ai pas souffert physiquement un seul instant, hormis du traitement qu’on a cru devoir m’infliger. (III, 1487)

Although, as is clear from the above quotation, Nerval resists medical interpretations of his condition, his suggestion of the equivalence between madness and dream has much in common with Moreau de Tours’s clinical model of madness. Both Nerval and Moreau de Tours consider that madness involves the fusion of dream and wakefulness. Just as Nerval, in the letter quoted above, refers to his madness as “un rêve éveillé” (III, 1487), Moreau de Tours, from the perspective of medical science, defines madness in an almost identical manner: “*La folie est le rêve de l’homme*

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<sup>27</sup> Michel Jeanneret, “La Folie est un rêve: Nerval et le docteur Moreau de Tours”, in *Romantisme*, vol. 10, no. 27 (1980), 59-75 (p. 59).

*éveillé*. J'ai déjà dit que je ne connaissais pas de meilleure définition".<sup>28</sup> These descriptions of madness recall Esquirol's earlier description of those subject to hallucinations as "des rêveurs tout éveillés".<sup>29</sup>

The manner in which Nerval presents his experience of madness in his letter to Victor Loubens (cited above), in particular the implicit analogy between madness and dream, anticipates his literary account of mental alienation in *Aurélia*. This work, which was first published posthumously in 1855, fuses autobiography and fiction in an extensive exploration of the concept of madness. The idea that madness represents the blurring of the boundaries between dream and wakefulness is captured in the subtitle of *Aurélia*, "Le Rêve et la Vie". The significant overlap between the image of madness that emerges from this text and the medical model of mental alienation contained in the medical writings of nineteenth-century alienists is especially evident from the fact that in *La Psychologie morbide* Moreau de Tours directly quotes Nerval's narrator's description of his madness as "l'épanchement du songe dans la vie réelle" (III, 699).<sup>30</sup> Moreau de Tours claims that his own observations of mental alienation, having attempted to induce an artificial state of madness by intoxicating himself with hashish, confirm the scientific validity of Nerval's literary description of madness in *Aurélia*:

m'étant volontairement plongé dans un état de folie *artificielle* (folie identique à la folie *spontanée*, du moins au point de vue des phénomènes psychologiques), j'ai pu me prendre moi-même comme sujet de mes observations [...] Il me fut démontré, dès lors, et ma conviction est la même aujourd'hui, que la folie n'était, en effet, comme Gérard en eut la pensée «que l'épanchement du songe dans la vie réelle», c'est précisément ce que j'avais dit presque dans les mêmes termes.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Jacques-Joseph Moreau de Tours, "De l'Identité de l'Etat de Rêve et de la Folie", in *Annales médico-psychologiques*, vol. 1 (1855), 361-408 (p. 402).

<sup>29</sup> Etienne Esquirol, *Aliénation mentale. Des illusions des aliénés. Question médico-légale sur l'isolement des aliénés* (Paris: Crochard, 1832), p. 2.

<sup>30</sup> Jacques-Joseph Moreau de Tours, *La Psychologie morbide dans ses rapports avec la philosophie de l'histoire, ou de l'influence des névropathes sur le dynamisme intellectuel* (Paris: Masson, 1859), p. 430. Moreau de Tours says of Nerval's *Aurélia*: "Nous recommandons la lecture de ce livre. Il abonde en documents de psychologie morbide d'un grand intérêt et de l'exactitude desquels la position particulière de celui qui les fournit est un sûr garant": p. 429, n. 2.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid*, p. 430.

In his article, “De l’identité de l’état de Rêve et de la Folie”, Moreau de Tours describes the transition into the state of madness or dream in terms of a shift from one form of existence to another:

Le songe commence là où cesse la liberté de diriger nos pensées. La liberté, c’est la conscience intime, la pensée se possédant elle-même, réfléchie, en communion avec les pensées d’autrui. L’esprit ne peut agir en dehors de cette liberté sans revêtir, en quelque sorte, une existence toute nouvelle, indépendante, sans rapport aucun avec la précédente. Une nouvelle vie succède à l’autre et la remplace.<sup>32</sup>

This description bears a marked resemblance to the literary depiction of the dream state in the opening lines of Nerval’s *Aurélia*. Just as Moreau de Tours refers to this new form of consciousness as “une nouvelle vie”, *Aurélia* opens with the words: “Le Rêve est une seconde vie” (III, 695). Nerval’s narrator depicts this in terms of a shift from one form of existence to another, in which “le moi, sous une autre forme, continue l’œuvre de l’existence” (III, 695). In both cases, dream, like madness, is associated with the transformation of identity: for Moreau de Tours these states represent “une existence toute nouvelle”. However, despite their overlapping discourse, the writers derive different conclusions from their ideas. While Moreau de Tours explains his observations from the perspective of medical physiology, the narrator of *Aurélia* attaches a mystical dimension to his experiences. If for psychiatrists hallucinatory mental states entail a fragmentation of consciousness, Nerval’s narrator describes the onset of madness or dream in terms of the expansion of individual identity, a privileged, mystical experience that liberates the individual from the constraints of the material world.

Both Nerval and Moreau de Tours conceive of madness in terms of the loss of distinction between dream and wakefulness, characterising madness as the infiltration of dream images into ordinary conscious experience. The narrator of *Aurélia* affirms that: “La seule différence pour moi de la veille au sommeil était que, dans la première, tout se transfigurait à mes yeux” (III, 701). Throughout the narrative, he uses the terms *rêve*, *vision*, and *délire* interchangeably, making no obvious distinction between them.<sup>33</sup> The narrative of the text shifts imperceptibly

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<sup>32</sup> Moreau de Tours, “De l’Identité de l’Etat de Rêve et de la Folie”, p. 387.

<sup>33</sup> Jacques Bony highlights Nerval’s avoidance of the term *visionnaire*, which, in the first half of the nineteenth century, had negative connotations, generally used in the sense of *rêveur chimérique* and

between states of dream and madness, sliding between alternative connotations of the word *rêve* identified by Jeanneret as “phénomène nocturne au sens propre” and “modèle de toute descente en soi, à la recherche d’une autre vérité”.<sup>34</sup> The ambiguous dream-like condition that pervades the entire narrative of *Aurélia* is described by Jeanneret as “une zone indéfinie où tout peut appartenir, indifféremment, à la fantasmagorie du songe ou à l’évidence du réel”.<sup>35</sup> Whilst alienists, such as Moreau de Tours, studied dream in order to gain a better understanding of the physiological and psychical origins of madness, Nerval’s analogy is primarily between the visionary experiences afforded both by dream and by hallucinations arising from madness. According to Nerval, both states provide enhanced understanding and access to a realm of existence beyond material reality.

### Religious Madness

The problematic concept of religious madness is a recurrent theme of Nerval’s writings, whether fictional, historical, or autobiographical. Nerval’s literary portrayal of the theme of madness is often bound up with unconventional religious or mystical experiences and beliefs. He repeatedly deals with themes of dream, hallucination, and prophetic or visionary experience, exploiting the ambiguous statuses of such phenomena in nineteenth-century French culture. As will be seen in Part Two, such themes pervade *Les Illuminés*.

Nerval was himself diagnosed with the pathological conditions of *théomanie* and *démonomanie*,<sup>36</sup> both of which were identified by nineteenth-century alienists as specific forms of *monomanie religieuse*. In a letter of November 1841, addressed to Madame Dumas, Nerval alludes explicitly to these diagnoses:

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associated with madness. By contrast, the term *vision* tended to be employed in a positive manner at that time: Jacques Bony, *Aspects de Nerval: Histoire – Esthétique – Fantaisie* (Paris: Eurédit, 2006), pp. 327-328.

<sup>34</sup>Michel Jeanneret, “La folie est un rêve”, p. 59.

<sup>35</sup>*Ibid*, p. 68.

<sup>36</sup>Laure Murat argues that Nerval’s diagnosis with theomania is likely to have been more accurate than his diagnosis with demonomania: Murat, p. 74.



je suis convenu de me laisser classer dans une *affection* définie par les docteurs et appelée indifféremment Théomanie ou Démonomanie dans le dictionnaire médical. A l'aide des définitions incluses dans ces deux articles, la science a le droit d'escamoter ou réduire au silence tous les prophètes et voyants prédits par l'Apocalypse, dont je me flattais d'être l'un! Mais je me résigne à mon sort, et si je manque à ma prédestination, j'accuserai le docteur Blanche d'avoir subtilisé l'Esprit divin. (I, 1383)

Here Nerval attacks the reductive discourse of nineteenth-century psychiatric science, criticising the way in which the diagnostic categories of alienists reduce mystical and visionary experience to scientifically explicable pathological phenomena.

The theme of religious madness is central to *Aurélia*. From the outset, the work captures the inherent ambiguity of religious madness, as the narrative hovers uncertainly between medical and mystical perspectives without attaching authority to either. At times the narrator appears to identify with alienists' interpretations of his condition, assimilating scientific and medical discourse into his account. However, elsewhere he rejects this view, affirming the authenticity and mystical significance of his hallucinatory visions. In a letter of 1853, addressed to his father, Nerval explains his motivation for writing *Aurélia*, asserting the scientific nature of his proposed text and even suggesting its potential value for the medical profession: "J'entreprends d'écrire et de constater toutes les impressions que m'a laissées ma maladie. Ce ne sera pas une étude inutile pour l'observation et la science. Jamais je ne me suis reconnu plus de faculté d'analyse et de description" (III, 832). The narrative of *Aurélia* abounds with pretensions to impartial observation and scientific objectivity with the recurrent use of terms associated with scientific method, such as *observer* and *analyser*. The inherently problematic status of the concept of religious madness is established in the opening lines of the narrative and persists throughout. At the very beginning of *Aurélia*, the narrator alludes to his "longue maladie" (III, 695), appearing to confirm the pathological nature of his condition. However, this medical viewpoint is instantly called into question as the narrator proceeds to attach a distinctly positive dimension to his experiences, even presenting his condition as a desirable state:

je ne sais pourquoi je me sers de ce terme maladie, car jamais, quant à ce qui est de moi-même, je ne me suis senti mieux portant. Parfois, je croyais ma force et mon activité doublées; il me semblait tout savoir, tout comprendre; l'imagination m'apportait des délices

infinies. En recouvrant ce que les hommes appellent la raison, faudra-t-il regretter de les avoir perdues? (III, 695)

Throughout the remainder of the text, the narrator oscillates between the medical and the mystical, straddling the boundary between these seemingly incompatible interpretations of his condition. At times the narrator explicitly undermines the mystical significance of his experiences with comments such as: “Je compris, en me voyant parmi les aliénés, que tout n’avait été pour moi qu’illusions jusque-là” (III, 738). However, on other occasions the narrator relates his visions and apparently mystical experiences directly to the reader with no attempt at a rational or scientific explanation. In the opening lines of *Aurélia*, the narrator cites Dante, Apuleius, and Emmanuel Swedenborg as his “modèles poétiques” (III, 696), appearing to confirm the authenticity of religious or mystical interpretations of his subject matter. These figures are associated with the religious movements of Catholicism, paganism, and Illuminism respectively, and ideas or images relating to each of these movements are present in *Aurélia*, conferring a distinctly mystical dimension upon the work.<sup>37</sup> Michel Jeanneret suggests that “l’analogie du Dieu et du soleil” in *Aurélia* has associations with pagan beliefs.<sup>38</sup> Jeanneret argues that the narrator’s repeated insistence upon the absence of the sun in dream represents his rejection of divine transcendence associated with monotheistic religions.<sup>39</sup> There are multiple references to ancient gods and goddesses in *Aurélia*, notably Isis, Venus, Adonis, and Eurydice, revealing a distinct pagan dimension to the text. In the second part of *Aurélia*, the narrator appears to embrace Catholicism, and this section of the text is replete with biblical imagery. However, Catholicism is here inseparable from paganism, as can be seen from the fusion of the pagan goddess Isis and the virgin Mary. References to Illuminism also abound in the narrative. The importance accorded to dream and visionary experience reflects a fundamental aspect of the

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<sup>37</sup> Jean-Luc Steinmetz considers how these three literary models are also bound up with the theme of dream: “Quelles sont ces références? Les visions de Swedenborg, le roman *L’Ane d’or* d’Apulée et *La Divine Comédie*, ou plutôt la *Vita nova*, de Dante. Dans ces deux dernières œuvres se trace un parcours initiatique annoncé par un rêve. Quant aux *Mémorables* de Swedenborg, ils relatent plutôt des visions, que Nerval apparente à des «rêveries» au sens fort de ce terme”: Jean-Luc Steinmetz, “Les rêves dans *Aurélia* de Gérard de Nerval”, in *Littérature*, vol. 2, no. 158 (2010), 105-116 (p. 106).

<sup>38</sup> Michel Jeanneret, “Dieu en morceaux: avatars de la figure divine dans *Aurélia*”, in *Nerval, Actes du colloque de la Sorbonne, 15 novembre 1997*, ed. by André Guyaux (Paris: Presses de l’Université Paris-Sorbonne, 1997), pp. 177-190 (p. 177).

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid*, p.178.

Illuminist movement, while the narrator's references to "correspondances" and "harmonie universelle" also evoke key Illuminist principles. Allusions to all three religious movements are assimilated into the narrative alongside numerous references to literature, history, and modern science. Therefore, the text as a whole continually vacillates between different ideological perspectives and different frameworks of reference, resulting in a lack of stable narrative viewpoint.

*Aurélia* concludes with the direct transcription of a series of hallucinatory images and religious allusions. The closing episode is entirely devoid of commentary, depriving the reader of any explanation or interpretation of the material presented. Here Nerval's narrator makes no distinction between pathological delirium and authentic visionary experience. This section of the text is entitled "Mémorables" in an apparent reference to the famous work of Swedenborg,<sup>40</sup> a highly influential eighteenth-century visionary whose writings resist the distinction between materialist and occultist science. In the early nineteenth century, Swedenborg was a controversial figure whose writings elicited opposing responses. Whilst admired by some as a genuine mystic, others rejected the authenticity of his visionary experience and dismissed him as a madman. Therefore, by referring to the writings of this well-known physicist and esoteric thinker, Nerval merely adds to the overall ambiguity surrounding the status of visionary experience in his own text.<sup>41</sup>

Although Nerval's observations regarding madness sometimes seem to reflect the ideas articulated by the medical profession, especially in relation to the analogies between madness, hallucination, and dream, Nerval derives very different conclusions from those of nineteenth-century alienists.<sup>42</sup> Like Louis-François Lélut and François Leuret, Nerval perceives analogies between the hallucinatory experiences of different individuals. However, whereas the psychiatrists interpreted this as evidence for the physiological origins of mental disorders, Nerval provides a

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<sup>40</sup> MacLennan, p. 167.

<sup>41</sup> There are a number of obscure and ambiguous references to Swedenborg elsewhere in Nerval's writings, including in *Les Illuminés*: Lynn Wilkinson, *The Dream of an Absolute Language: Emmanuel Swedenborg and French Literary Culture* (New York: SUNY, 1996), pp. 139-141.

<sup>42</sup> Jeanneret, "La folie est un rêve", p. 60.

mystical explanation for these shared visions, seeking to undermine the pathological connotations of hallucination:

On voit des esprits qui vous parlent en plein jour, des fantômes bien formés, bien exacts pendant la nuit, on croit se souvenir d'avoir vécu sous d'autres formes, on s'imagine grandir démesurément et porter la tête dans les étoiles, l'horizon de Saturne ou de Jupiter se développe devant vos yeux, des êtres bizarres se produisent à vous avec tous les caractères de la réalité, mais ce qu'il y a d'effrayant c'est que d'autres les voient comme vous! Si c'est l'imagination qui crée avec une telle réalité, si c'est une sorte d'accord magnétique qui place plusieurs esprits sous l'empire d'une même vision, cela est-il moins étrange que la supposition d'êtres immatériels agissant autour de nous? S'il faut que l'esprit se déränge absolument pour nous mettre en communication avec un autre monde, il est clair que jamais les *fous* ne pourront prouver aux *sages* qu'ils sont au moins des aveugles! (III, 1488)

Nerval here implies that the fact that different individuals share the same visions renders problematic the division between *fou* and *sage* and calls into question the notion that hallucination is necessarily a pathological phenomenon.

### **Eccentricity**

As already seen, at the time at which Nerval was writing the concept of eccentricity had become an important cultural phenomenon, gaining prominence in both literary and medical circles. Although associated with pathological mental states, especially from the middle of the nineteenth century, eccentricity was simultaneously bound up with more positive notions of originality, enhanced creativity, and genius. Assimilating both word and concept into his writings, Nerval exploits its fundamental ambiguity and instability. The words *excentricité* and *excentrique* appear in Nerval's narratives on a number of occasions, enabling him to capture the ambiguous nature of his subject matter and to avoid the more obviously pathological connotations of the terms *folie* and *fou*. As will be seen in Part Two, in the preface to *Les Illuminés*, the narrator twice characterises his subjects as *excentriques*, and the subsequent narratives embrace the inherent uncertainty of this newly emergent nineteenth-century concept. The theme of eccentricity also appears elsewhere in Nerval's writings, often bound up with the closely related theme of madness.

Miranda Gill describes Nerval as "an outsider even within a movement of self-proclaimed outsiders": he was an eccentric within the eccentric group of Romantic writers to which he belonged, a group that "institutionalized certain forms of

eccentricity”.<sup>43</sup> Nerval was frequently characterised as an eccentric by his contemporaries and Gill suggests that the use of the term in relation to Nerval tended to hold connotations of “borderline madness, whimsical imagination, and social isolation”.<sup>44</sup> Théophile Gautier and Jules Champfleury both published portraits of Nerval that repeatedly employ the terms *excentrique* and *excentricité* to describe his marginal, socially deviant activities. In keeping with the ambiguous status of eccentricity in nineteenth-century French culture, both authors fuse suggestions of madness with notions of poetic inspiration and creativity, attaching both a positive and negative dimension to the term. Gautier alludes to Nerval’s “vie excentrique, en dehors de presque toutes les conditions humaines”, linking this to madness, creativity, and “l’exaltation mystique”.<sup>45</sup> Champfleury presents Nerval’s eccentricity in a largely positive manner, linking it to his status as a distinguished literary figure:

Il y avait dans la physionomie de Gérard quelque chose de bienveillant qui faisait que la jeunesse s’attachait volontiers à lui, sans ombre de critique. Peut-être plaisait-il aux jeunes gens par le manque absolu de contrainte dans son extérieur et ses habitudes! L’excentricité de sa vie poussait chacun à une amicale curiosité: sa vie errante, les aventures singulières qu’on racontait de lui dans Paris, l’avaient transformé de son vivant en personnage légendaire!<sup>46</sup>

Embracing the positive connotations of eccentricity as understood in nineteenth-century popular and literary culture, Champfleury establishes an explicit connection between Nerval’s social marginality, his affliction with madness, and his capacities as a writer:

Comme homme, Gérard est un *excentrique*.  
Comme littérateur, Gérard est un *essayiste*.  
Par excentricité, j’entends la vie d’un écrivain qui aime la tranquillité, la liberté, qui ne sacrifie pas aux niaiseries de la société, qui a de douces manies, et qui ne veut pas être chagriné.<sup>47</sup>

Keiko Tsujikawa argues that Nerval’s allusions to eccentricity in the preface to *Les Illuminés*, “La Bibliothèque de mon oncle”, constitute a literary response to

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<sup>43</sup> Miranda Gill, *Eccentricity and the Cultural Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Paris* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 212.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid*, p. 212.

<sup>45</sup> Théophile Gautier, “Gérard de Nerval”, in *Histoire du romantisme* (Paris: Charpentier, 1874), 134-151 (p. 149).

<sup>46</sup> Jules Champfleury, “Gérard de Nerval”, *Grandes figures d’hier et d’aujourd’hui: Balzac, Gérard de Nerval, Wagner, Courbet* (Paris: Poulet-Malassis et de Broise, 1861), pp. 163-228 (pp. 163-164).

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid*, p. 172.

Champfleury's use of the term *excentrique* to characterise Nerval.<sup>48</sup> In particular, Champfleury's reference to "quelques types de poètes" in the preface to *Les Excentriques*, recalls his descriptions of Nerval elsewhere:

Quelques types de poètes auraient dû figurer dans ma galerie. Les poètes ne vivent pas selon les lois de la société: ils marchent dans la vie les pieds en l'air, la tête en bas; gros de manies et de caprices, ils sont l'effroi des gens rangés qui ont construit leur existence suivant les lois de l'arithmétique; mais les poètes reçoivent déjà assez de coups de pieds des ânes qui les entourent, sans les exposer publiquement en compagnie des presque fous, aux risées d'une foule ignorante.<sup>49</sup>

Tsujikawa suggests that, in "La Bibliothèque de mon oncle", Nerval is reacting to Champfleury's description of his "excentriques", a group of "presque fous", in a manner that closely resembles his portrayal of Nerval elsewhere in his writings.<sup>50</sup>

When referring to his own experiences, Nerval repeatedly seeks to undermine the authority of pathological interpretations of his mental state by resisting the word *folie* as a description of his condition. Speaking of a day passed in the company of Nerval, Champfleury comments on Nerval's avoidance of the term:

Toute cette journée passée avec lui me confirma dans la certitude de l'opinion avancée par Gall que, «le cerveau étant double dans tous ses organes, un homme peut être aliéné d'un côté et sain de l'autre, et observer sa folie». Gérard, même quand il commettait les plus grandes excentricités, gardait toujours au dedans de lui un observateur curieux, qui notait les faits bizarres et les lui rappelait plus tard. Il me raconta ainsi, sans prononcer le mot de *folie*, les singuliers événements qui l'avaient conduit chez le docteur Blanche.<sup>51</sup>

In the letter to Victor Loubens cited above, Nerval attacks the use of the terms *fou* and *folie* to describe his condition, which, he claims, entailed neither the loss of memory nor that of his faculty of reason: "J'avais été fou, cela est certain, si toutefois la conservation complète de la mémoire et d'une certaine logique raisonnée qui ne m'a pas quitté un seul instant ne peut donner à mon mal d'autre caractère que ce triste mot: folie!" (III, 1487). In the ensuing lines, Nerval proceeds to depict his illness in positive and even desirable terms. He thereby calls attention to the perceived inadequacies of the pathological category of madness as a means of classifying a mind subject to hallucinatory visions. Similarly, writing to his doctor,

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<sup>48</sup> Keiko Tsujikawa, *Nerval et les limbes de l'histoire: Lecture des Illuminés* (Geneva: Droz, 2008), pp. 18-19.

<sup>49</sup> Jules Champfleury, *Les Excentriques* (Paris: Michel Lévy 1852), pp. 19-20.

<sup>50</sup> Tsujikawa, p. 19.

<sup>51</sup> Champfleury, "Gérard de Nerval", p. 494.

Emile Blanche, in 1853, Nerval conspicuously avoids the term *folie* to describe his mental state, alluding instead to his “excentricité prolongée” and thereby rendering problematic the pathological dimension of his condition: “Je vous prie de m’excuser auprès de ces dames de l’excentricité prolongée qui m’a fait prendre trop au sérieux la prétention des poètes à la descendance de Jupiter et Apollon” (III, 836).

Images of the boundary-defying concept of eccentricity pervade Nerval’s literary narratives, reflecting his prolonged questioning of dominant social institutions and discourses. As discussed above, prior to the beginning of the nineteenth century, the word *excentricité* featured in the French language only in its original geometric sense to designate the elliptical orbits of the planets. An image of eccentricity in its literal sense, denoting non-circular planetary motion, appears in *Aurélia*: “Je pensai que la terre était sortie de son orbite et qu’elle errait dans le firmament comme un vaisseau démâté, se rapprochant ou s’éloignant des étoiles qui grandissaient ou diminuaient tour à tour” (III, 734). The concept of eccentricity is fundamental to *Aurélia*, throughout which the narrator seeks to undermine absolute conceptions of madness and to attach a positive dimension to abnormal mental experience. The narrator of *Aurélia* repeatedly calls attention to the necessarily relative nature of madness, insisting on the association of mental alienation with apparent spiritual enlightenment and with an increased sensitivity to transcendental aspects of human experience. *Les Nuits d’octobre*, which was published in 1852, the same year as *Les Illuminés*, opens with an image of eccentricity that mediates between the literal and figurative connotations of the concept. In the opening paragraphs of *Les Nuits d’octobre*, the image of the planets revolving around the sun is employed as a metaphor for the small towns outside Paris:

Avec le temps, la passion des grands voyages s’éteint, à moins qu’on n’ait voyagé assez longtemps pour devenir étranger à sa patrie. Le cercle se rétrécit de plus en plus, se rapprochant peu à peu du foyer. – Ne pouvant m’éloigner beaucoup cet automne, j’avais formé le projet d’un simple voyage à Meaux.  
[...] J’aime assez ces petites villes qui s’écartent d’une dizaine de lieues du centre rayonnant de Paris, planètes modestes. Dix lieues, c’est assez loin pour qu’on ne soit pas tenté de revenir le soir, - pour qu’on soit sûr que la même sonnette ne vous réveillera pas le lendemain, pour qu’on trouve entre deux jours affairés une matinée de calme. (III, 313)

These opening lines constitute a visual representation of eccentricity, evoking a concrete image of varying degrees of deviation from a pre-conceived centre or point

of reference. Having evoked this physical image of eccentricity, the concept becomes a central theme of the ensuing narrative.

Gill looks at the way in which eccentricity is bound up with the concept of physical “monstrosity” in *Les Nuits d’octobre*,<sup>52</sup> pointing out Nerval’s familiarity with the “teratological research of Étienne Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire”.<sup>53</sup> She argues that the “interlocking concepts of social marginality, eccentricity, and physical monstrosity” are central to the narrative,<sup>54</sup> focusing on images of physical deformity in the text, especially regarding the exhibition of the *femme mérinos*.<sup>55</sup> The narrator of *Les Nuits d’octobre* directly evokes the concept of eccentricity in relation to Saint-Cricq, a notorious Parisian madman whose socially deviant conduct led to him eventually being hospitalised for mental alienation.<sup>56</sup> The narrator’s allusions to this figure reflect the ambivalent status of eccentricity in nineteenth-century French culture, simultaneously embracing its positive and negative connotations. Whilst emphasising Saint-Cricq’s peculiarities, the anecdote also highlights the essentially harmless nature of his eccentric behaviour which “n’offensait personne” (III, 317). Indeed, despite his socially deviant conduct, Saint-Cricq is depicted in an essentially positive manner in relation to those around him who reject him because of his failure to adhere to their rigid system of values:

les viveurs sérieux, les gens ruinés qui voulaient se refaire avec des places, les diplomates en herbe, les sous-préfets en expectative, les directeurs de théâtre ou de n’importe quoi- futurs – avaient mis ce pauvre Saint-Cricq en interdit. Mis au ban, – comme nous disions jadis, – Saint-Cricq s’en vengea d’une manière bien spirituelle. (III, 317)

This individual, known for his affliction with mental illness, is shown to be not so different from those around him and, even though his behaviour sometimes departs from accepted norms, it is also suggested that he is able to adhere to established social convention when required to do so: “Il redevient posé, précis, parfait

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<sup>52</sup> The concept of “monstrosity”, which had connotations of physical deformity, came to the fore in France in the latter half of the nineteenth century. The new scientific discipline of teratology, founded by Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire, was concerned with the study of physical malformations and increasingly considered the connections between physical abnormality, mental illness, and criminality: Gill, pp. 224-230.

<sup>53</sup> Gill, p. 213

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 214-217.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 214.



gentilhomme” (III, 318). Nerval avoids the word *folie* in the story of Saint-Cricq, instead referring to his subject’s *excentricités*. Nerval is therefore able to defer categorical judgement and to retain a sense of ambiguity with regard to this figure: “Le monde ne pouvait supporter de telles excentricités. – Soyons gais, mais convenables. Ceci est la parole du sage” (III, 318). By indicating that deviation from established social and cultural norms is acceptable within certain parameters, Nerval suggests that unconventional ideas and actions are not necessarily indicative of pathological madness. Here, the use of the term *excentricité* would appear to imply the originality of thought far more than the absence of reason.

## **Conclusions**

This chapter has illustrated how Nerval’s extensive literary exploration of madness brings to the fore specific aspects of this theme that were at the heart of early psychiatric thought. It has shown the extent to which the ideas and preoccupations that emerge from Nerval’s depictions of madness overlap with the those articulated by prominent nineteenth-century alienists as outlined in earlier chapters of this thesis. As seen, Nerval’s depictions of madness are very much the product of the precise context in which he was writing, exemplifying the broad ideological tension between scientific and religious perspectives that was characteristic of post-Revolutionary French society. Part Two of this thesis will show how the same tensions and ambiguities that pervade Nerval’s general writings on madness are fundamental to *Les Illuminés*. It will highlight in particular the central role played by the problematic nineteenth-century concepts of religious madness and eccentricity in the work.

## **PART 2**

### **NERVAL'S ILLUMINÉS:**

### **MYSTICISM, MARGINALITY, AND MADNESS**

## INTRODUCTION TO PART TWO:

### ILLUMINISM AND ILLUMINÉS

In “Isis”, a text published in the collection *Les Filles du feu*, Nerval underlines the historical specificity of his age, which he characterises as a period of ideological instability hovering uncertainly between Enlightenment and counter-Enlightenment thought. The narrative voice is situated within the overarching debate of post-Revolutionary France, hesitating between philosophical scepticism and traditional Catholicism, which are posited as incompatible opposites:

Enfant d’un siècle sceptique plutôt qu’incrédule, flottant entre deux éducations contraires, celle de la révolution, qui niait tout, et celle de la réaction sociale, qui prétend ramener l’ensemble des croyances chrétiennes, me verrais-je entraîné à tout croire, comme nos pères les philosophes l’avaient été à tout nier? (III, 619)

The narrator thus defines himself in terms of the contradictory ideological framework of early nineteenth-century France, evoking the deep-rooted tension between the rational scepticism of Enlightenment philosophy and age-old religious beliefs, a tension that permeates Nerval’s writings. Resisting the seemingly binary nature of the debate, Nerval refuses to identify fully either with the philosophical scepticism of the Enlightenment *idéologues* or with the “réaction sociale” that sought to reinstate traditional Catholicism. Throughout his writings, Nerval explores “toute une gamme de spiritualités [...] dosant diversement le doute et la ferveur”.<sup>1</sup> He seeks alternative systems of belief that would embrace the contradictions of his age, fusing both metaphysical and materialist conceptions of the human condition.<sup>2</sup> Nerval’s writings are haunted by the fear of “la mort des religions” (“Quintus Aucler”, II, 1135) in post-Enlightenment French society; and the desire to overcome the void left by the dwindling authority of the Catholic Church underpins his narratives. Despite focusing on the lives and beliefs of individuals from different

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<sup>1</sup> Jean-Nicolas Illouz, “Les religions de Nerval”, in *Savoirs en récits II: Eclats de savoirs: Balzac, Nerval, Flaubert, Verne, les Goncourt*, ed. by Jacques Neefs (Saint-Denis: Presses universitaires de Vincennes, 2010), pp. 49-69 (p. 51).

<sup>2</sup> Donald Charlton, “Religious and Political Thought”, in *The French Romantics*, ed. by Donald Charlton, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), I, 33-58 (p. 34).

historical backdrops, *Les Illuminés* is strongly grounded in the specificities of Nerval's age and constitutes a heartfelt reaction to the ideological instability of the post-Revolutionary era, exemplifying Nerval's desire to mediate between ancient metaphysical assumptions and the growing prestige of modern science and materialism.

The title of *Les Illuminés* is instantly problematic, since the term *illuminé* defies straightforward definition and does not confer any obvious unity upon the disparate subject matter of Nerval's collection of portraits. When *Les Illuminés* was first published in 1852, the term *illuminé* was generally employed in relation to members of eighteenth-century mystical societies, and could be used either in a broad or in a narrow sense.<sup>3</sup> Most commonly, it was used in the former manner to designate individuals associated with any of the esoteric movements that emerged in Western Europe in the decades preceding the 1789 Revolution and that together constituted the Illuminist movement. In the latter sense, the word *illuminé* referred to members of certain societies, most commonly the eighteenth-century Bavarian sect of *Illuminaten*. This was a secret society founded by Adam Weishaupt in 1776. Weishaupt's short-lived sect sought to replace Christianity with a religion of reason, exerting a marked influence on subsequent manifestations of Western esotericism.<sup>4</sup> Meryl Tyers looks at other mystical societies from different cultural and historical contexts whose members have been described as *illuminés*. These include the *Alumbrados*, a sixteenth-century Spanish group persecuted by the Inquisition, and the secret international brotherhood of Rosicrucians, a Protestant following closely resembling Freemasonry that was founded by the Swiss alchemist Paracelsus.<sup>5</sup> Whether in relation to members of specific organisations or in its wider application, the term has connotations of inner illumination or spiritual enlightenment. In the context of early nineteenth-century France when Nerval was writing, it referred to followers of any of the multiple forms of marginal religiosity that posed themselves as alternatives to traditional Catholicism at a time of growing religious scepticism.

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<sup>3</sup> Peter Dayan, *Nerval et ses pères: Portrait en trois volets avec deux gonds et un cadenas* (Geneva: Droz, 1992), p. 59

<sup>4</sup> Meryl Tyers, *Critical Fictions: Nerval's Les Illuminés* (Oxford: Legenda, 1998), p. 12.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 12-13.

In his writings, Nerval employs the word *illuminé* both in relation to Weishaupt's secret society and also to followers of the eighteenth-century Illuminist movement in general. The narrator of "Cagliostro" speaks of "les illuminés, dont la doctrine, fondée d'abord en Allemagne par Weishaupt, se répandit bientôt en France où elle se fondit dans l'institution maçonnique" (II, 1124),<sup>6</sup> referring to the Bavarian *Illuminaten* as *illuminés*, but also indicating a wider application of the term to describe members of other mystical organisations founded on similar esoteric principles. The same is true in the eleventh letter of "Angélique" (*Les Filles du feu*). The narrator uses the term with reference to Weishaupt's historical sect, while also revealing its potentially broader connotations:

Les Illuminés français et allemands s'entendaient par des rapports d'affiliation. Les doctrines de Weishaupt et de Jakob Böhme avaient pénétré, chez nous, dans les anciens pays franks et bourguignons, par l'antique sympathie et les relations séculaires des races de même origine. (III, 522-523)

In both cases, Nerval suggests that the Bavarian *Illuminaten* constitute a specific example of a broader historical movement. He implies that the ideas on which Weishaupt's society was based laid the foundations for the emergence of a number of other esoteric organisations. The subjects of *Les Illuminés* do not adhere to the historical connotations of the title in any straightforward manner. Indeed, both Raoul Spifame and the abbé de Bucquoy lived before the emergence of the Illuminist movement in the eighteenth century, and Nerval's remaining *illuminés* are not obvious representatives of this historical following. The mystical beliefs and practices associated with the subjects of Nerval's *Les Illuminés* cannot be readily ascribed to any coherent religious or esoteric society.

In *De l'Allemagne*, an extensive study of German customs, literature, philosophy, and religion published at the beginning of the nineteenth century,<sup>7</sup> Germaine de Staël suggests that there exist three distinct varieties of *illuminé*: "Il y a trois classes d'illuminés; les illuminés mystiques, les illuminés visionnaires et les illuminés

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<sup>6</sup> Weishaupt is most commonly spelt with only one "s", but both spellings appear in writings dedicated to this historical figure.

<sup>7</sup> Nerval was familiar with Germaine de Staël's *De l'Allemagne*. In the Introduction to his *Poésies allemandes* (1830), he quotes from it at length (I, 263-277).

politiques”.<sup>8</sup> She identifies the distinguishing characteristics of each of these subcategories and classifies individuals and groups associated with the term *illuminé* accordingly. Adherents of the first of these groups, to which she ascribes Jacob Boehme, Joachim Martinez de Pasqually, and Louis-Claude de Saint-Martin, “s’occupent uniquement de la religion et de la nature interprétée par les dogmes de la religion”.<sup>9</sup> The second category, with which she associates the Swedish mystic Emmanuel Swedenborg, represents a group of individuals who “croient que par la puissance de la volonté ils peuvent faire apparaître des morts et opérer des miracles”.<sup>10</sup> The final class of *illuminés*, in which is included the founder of the Bavarian *Illuminaten*, Adam Weishaupt, “n’avoient pris des autres illuminés que quelques signes pour se reconnaître”.<sup>11</sup> Staël says of this group that “les intérêts et non les opinions leur servaient de point de ralliement”, and identifies its members as “des hommes qui n’avoient pour but que de s’emparer de l’autorité dans tous les états, et de se faire donner des places”.<sup>12</sup> Accordingly, Weishaupt is described as “homme d’esprit supérieur [...] qui avait très-bien senti la puissance qu’on pouvait acquérir en réunissant les forces éparses d’individus et en les dirigeant toutes vers un même but”.<sup>13</sup> Despite the differences between these classes of *illuminés*, Staël nevertheless argues that the members of each have something in common, in that all such groups of *illuminés* “avoient pour but de se fortifier mutuellement dans la croyance à la spiritualité de l’âme”.<sup>14</sup> She adds that “leur principe est presque toujours un sentiment d’enthousiasme comprimé par la société”.<sup>15</sup> Although the six individuals portrayed by Nerval in *Les Illuminés* cannot readily be classified in terms of any specific dogma or ideology, the underlying motivation that Staël suggests is shared by her three subdivisions of *illuminés* is also characteristic of each of the *illuminés* in Nerval’s collection.

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<sup>8</sup> Germaine de Staël, *De l’Allemagne*, 3 vols. (Paris: Paschoud, 1814), III, 335.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 335.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 336.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 335.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 336.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 334.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

Writing in 1796, the Swiss author Nicolaus Anton Kirchberger, an influential figure in eighteenth-century Western esotericism known primarily for his theosophical correspondence with Louis-Claude de Saint-Martin, lists various connotations of the term *illuminé*. Kirchberger identifies “les visionnaires, les charlatans, les disciples de Weishaupt – ou *Illuminés de Bavière* – et les illuminés véritables”.<sup>16</sup> He proceeds to a general definition for the latter category of “illuminés véritables”, a group that, for Kirchberger, is not bound up with any specific esoteric organisation or associated with any precise historical era:

Le mot «illuminé» signifiait ordinairement un homme dont la raison et les connaissances naturelles étaient rectifiées, soutenues, éclairées par l’Esprit-Saint; tels étaient les apôtres, tels étaient tous les véritables saints de l’Eglise chrétienne, tels ont été et tels sont encore tous les hommes effectivement religieux, qui sont éclairés d’en haut, à proportion de la pureté de leur cœur et du sentiment profond de l’insuffisance et des bornes de leur propre raison.<sup>17</sup>

Kirchberger thus provides an ahistorical meaning of *illuminé* rather than identifying it with any specific movement or belief system.

Besides defining *illuminés* as members of various mystical organisations, nineteenth-century dictionaries also state that the term can be applied to religious visionaries. The 1835 *Dictionnaire universel de la langue française* includes the definition: “en matière de religion, personne qui prétend avoir des visions, et être inspirée immédiatement par la divinité”;<sup>18</sup> while the 1878 *Dictionnaire de l’Académie Française* states that the term can apply to “un visionnaire en matière de religion”.<sup>19</sup> In the nineteenth century, the term entered popular usage to refer to any individual thought to have achieved some kind of privileged spiritual illumination. However, its primary connotations at that time related to members of the Illuminist movement, a complex, multifaceted movement that emerged in Western Europe from the mid-eighteenth century to the early nineteenth century and that is defined as a precise period in the history of Western esotericism. Peter Dayan characterises the use of the word *illuminé*, “au sens large”, as an amalgamation of the various mystical

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<sup>16</sup> Antoine Faivre, *Kirchberger et l’Illuminisme du XVIIIe siècle* (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1966), *xiii*.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, *xiii-xiv*.

<sup>18</sup> Charles Nodier, Victor Verger, *Dictionnaire universel de la langue française*, 2 vols. (Paris: Belin-Mandar, 1835), I, 52.

<sup>19</sup> *Dictionnaire de l’Académie Française: dans laquelle on a reproduit pour la première fois les préfaces des six éditions précédentes*, 2 vols. (Paris: Firmin-Didot, 1878), II, 5.

societies that together constituted the Illuminist movement: “on peut appeler «illuminé» tout adepte d’une secte à doctrine ésotérique, qu’on peut rattacher à la Tradition cabalistique; ce qui englobe aussi bien les martinistes, les Rose-Croix, les francs-maçons, que les Illuminés au sens restreint”.<sup>20</sup> At the time when Nerval was writing, this was primary usage of the term.

Antoine Faivre characterises the Illuminist movement in terms of context rather than content, describing it as an offshoot of Western esotericism that emerged during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. According to Faivre, the Illuminist movement cannot be characterised in terms of specific beliefs and practices, but must be considered instead as a given moment in the overall progression of Western esoteric thought. He describes *Illuminisme* as “le terme qui sert à désigner une orientation générale de pensée qui fleurit dans les années 1760 jusqu’au début du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle”,<sup>21</sup> a definition that calls attention to the status of the Illuminist movement as a broad historical phenomenon as opposed to a coherent, unified movement. That view is also articulated by Elme-Marie Caro, who, writing during the same period as Nerval, employs the term *illuminé* in its wider sense to designate followers of any of the marginal religious groups that arose in response to the dwindling authority of the Catholic Church and the rise of philosophical scepticism during the eighteenth-century Enlightenment: “Entre la religion discréditée et la société sceptique, se place, au dix-huitième siècle, une foule innombrable de sectes d’*illuminés*”.<sup>22</sup> Caro’s statement illustrates the extent to which the Illuminist movement was grounded in the specificities of the historical backdrop against which it appeared. Indeed, the unique character of this particular era accounts for the major characteristics of Illuminism and distinguishes it from Western esotericism in general. Major Illuminist thinkers and leaders tended to be mystical Christian theosophists whose beliefs were heavily influenced by the thought of Jakob Boehme. Faivre identifies the distinguishing traits of eighteenth and nineteenth-century Illuminist thought as “l’absence de médiation, la quête initiatique, l’idée de chute et

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<sup>20</sup> Dayan, p. 59.

<sup>21</sup> Antoine Faivre, *L’Esotérisme* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2007), p. 63.

<sup>22</sup> Elme-Marie Caro, *Du Mysticisme au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle: Essai sur la vie et la doctrine de Saint-Martin, le philosophe inconnu* (Paris: Hachette, 1852), p. 11.



de réintégration, [...] l'attention extrême portée à la nature".<sup>23</sup> In particular, the revalorisation of nature was a characteristic feature of mainstream eighteenth-century thought. Interestingly, the ideas associated with the major current of the Illuminist movement marked a striking contrast with the materialist radicalism of Weishaupt's society of *Illuminaten*.

The connection between mainstream Enlightenment philosophy and its esoteric undercurrent is accentuated by the fact that both exploit the metaphor of light to evoke superior insight and privileged understanding of the cosmos. Jean Fabre explores the fundamental overlap between *Lumières* and *Illuminisme*:

l'illuminisme était inclus dans l'héritage des Lumières et non pas seulement par une parenté de mots: dans la maçonnerie et ailleurs, philosophes et mystiques, frères souvent ennemis, ennemis encore plus souvent solidaires, avaient tenté chacun à leur manière d'éclairer l'homme sur sa destinée en faisant entrer le surnaturel dans la nature ou en élargissant sa volonté de connaissance au delà de cette «lumière naturelle» que devait rester pour lui en tout état de cause, sa raison.<sup>24</sup>

If the Illuminist movement gained momentum in the latter half of the eighteenth century in response to the growing influence of the Enlightenment philosophy, it did not constitute a form of opposition to the scientific foundations of Enlightenment thought so much as a means of combining this philosophy with ancient metaphysical assumptions. This aspect of the Illuminist movement is highlighted by Arthur McCalla who describes it as “a synthetic response to the dialectic of orthodox Christianity and the Enlightenment”.<sup>25</sup> McCalla's discussion of the Illuminist movement underlines the way in which this broad esoteric following adopted both current and long-established systems of thought, and he characterises it as “a synthesis of intellectual curiosity and mystical religiosity”.<sup>26</sup> Faced with the declining authority of the Catholic Church and with the inadequacies of scientific materialism, the Illuminist movement sought to provide an alternative system of belief, assimilating competing ideological perspectives into an all-embracing vision. In the context of nineteenth-century France, the concept of ideological synthesis is

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<sup>23</sup> Faivre, *Kirchberger*, xiii-xiv.

<sup>24</sup> Jean Fabre, *Lumières et Romantisme: Energie et nostalgie, de Rousseau à Mickiewicz* (Paris: Klincksieck, 1980), p. 230.

<sup>25</sup> Arthur McCalla, *A Romantic Historiography: the Philosophy of History of Pierre-Simon Ballanche* (Leiden: Brill, 1998), p. 216.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid*, p. 216.

especially evident in Martinism, a movement with which Nerval himself was personally familiar and which is depicted in *Les Illuminés* in the portrait of Jacques Cazotte.<sup>27</sup> Just as McCalla characterises Illuminism in terms of the fusion of competing ideologies, David Harvey describes Martinism as “a unique synthesis of Enlightenment and counter-Enlightenment thought”.<sup>28</sup> Rejecting both the philosophical scepticism born of the Enlightenment and the rigid dogmatism of traditional Catholicism, Martinists sought to merge the beliefs of a number of different religions and to fuse these into the ever-expanding knowledge of natural science. In accordance with contemporaneous esoteric currents, Martinism was founded on the desire to transcend the apparent rift between religious dogmatism and scientific materialism. It was thereby an exemplar of the multiple nineteenth-century attempts to create a spiritual movement that would fulfil the conflicting demands of post-Enlightenment French society. John Monroe argues that such movements appeared in an attempt to resolve the “crisis of factuality in religious life” in an age characterised by the growing prestige of empirical science.<sup>29</sup> Nerval’s fascination with unconventional spiritual movements, as emerges from his writings, is founded upon this desire to synthesise seemingly incompatible perspectives and to overcome the perceived ideological divisions of his age.

Despite the primary connotations of the title, the subjects of *Les Illuminés* are not typical representatives of the Illuminist movement. Indeed, the figures portrayed in the work either exist at the margins of the movement or have no tangible connection with it. Far from being bound up with the rise of the Illuminist movement over the course of the eighteenth century, Nerval’s chosen *illuminés* are a disparate array of individuals from different historical backdrops, spanning the period from the sixteenth century (Raoul Spifame) to the First Republic during the Revolutionary era (Quintus Aucler). Jean Richer identifies only two “véritables illuminés” among Nerval’s subjects, namely Jacques Cazotte and Cagliostro, although conceding that

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<sup>27</sup> Jean Richer, *Gérard de Nerval et les Doctrines ésotériques* (Paris: Griffon d’or, 1947), p. 125.

<sup>28</sup> David Harvey, *Beyond Enlightenment: Occultism and Politics in Modern France* (Illinois: Northern Illinois University Press, 2005), p. 4.

<sup>29</sup> John Monroe, *Laboratories of Faith: Mesmerism, Spiritism, and Occultism in Modern France* (Cornell: Cornell University Press, 2008), p. 3.

the neo-pagan Quintus Aucler could arguably also be classified as an *illuminé*.<sup>30</sup> Richer asserts that the remaining figures are merely eccentrics with no true link to the historical Illuminist movement, and suggests that the title of Nerval's collection would more appropriately have been *Les Excentriques*.<sup>31</sup> Whilst the title of *Les Illuminés* implies that Nerval is to deal with figures central to the development of the Illuminist movement, such figures are conspicuously absent from the text, or, as is the case for individuals such as Emmanuel Swedenborg, Joachim Martinez de Pasqually, Dom Antoine-Joseph Pernety, and Louis-Claude de Saint-Martin, are marginalised, being mentioned only in passing rather than constituting its primary subject matter. It is therefore evident that, in spite of the major implications of its title, the central focus of Nerval's text is not the Illuminist movement itself.

The apparent incongruence between the title and the subject matter of *Les Illuminés*, and Nerval's decision to group together this particular assortment of seemingly unrelated individuals, have been the subject of much commentary. From the time of its initial publication, the work has inspired much criticism, owing to the fact that it eschews the expectations raised by its title through its failure to provide a valid historical representation of the Illuminist movement. Writing in *L'Athénium français* in August 1852, Charles Asselineau argues that Nerval's subjects are madmen rather than *illuminés*: "Comment expliquer, par exemple, dans une galerie d'*illuminés*, la présence de Raoul Spifame, le fou du XVI<sup>e</sup> siècle, qui s'imaginait être le roi Henri II? L'auteur serait-il d'avis que ces fous sont des illuminés?"<sup>32</sup> The perceived lack of genuine *illuminés* in *Les Illuminés* is also central to Jules Barbey d'Aureville's review, published in *Le Pays* in March 1853:

Mais que dirait-on si on montrait que dans ce livre intitulé *Les Illuminés*, il n'y a pas plus d'*illuminés* que d'*illuminisme*, et qu'excepté le récit d'une véritable «parade» chez Cagliostro et quelques mots sans aperçu et sans critique sur des hommes qu'il aurait fallu étudier, il n'y a dans le titre du livre de M. de Nerval rien de plus qu'une spéculation sur la curiosité publique en ce moment fort excitée par tout ce qui pourrait amener un changement dans la philosophie.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Jean Richer, *Gérard de Nerval: Expérience vécue et création ésotérique* (Paris: Trédaniel, 1987), pp. 125-126.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 125.

<sup>32</sup> Charles Asselineau, *L'Athénium français*, 28 August 1852: quoted in Michel Brix, "Nerval, «Les Illuminés» et le scepticisme", in *Romanische Forschungen*, no. 106 (1994), 243-253 (p. 243).

<sup>33</sup> Jules Barbey d'Aureville, "Bibliographie", *Le Pays*, 21 March 1853, p. 3: quoted in *Gérard de Nerval*, ed. by Jean-Luc Steinmetz (Paris: Presses de l'Université de Paris-Sorbonne, 1997), p. 47.

Barbey d'Aurevilly proceeds to list a number of well-known individuals whose ideas were highly influential to major currents of Illuminist thought in the latter half of the eighteenth century. The figures he mentions include Saint-Martin, Boehme, Swedenborg, Roger Bacon, and Albert the Great. He points to the conspicuous absence of such individuals in a work carrying the title *Les Illuminés*. Auguste Viatte, in *Les Sources occultes du Romantisme*, points to the unreliability of Nerval's source material and the essentially fictional nature of his narratives:

On n'écouterait pas sans preuve un romancier tel que Gérard de Nerval: il emprunte une partie de sa documentation à Nodier, on sait ce que vaut la source: à peu près autant que Nerval lui-même; cela n'empêche pas des historiens d'ajouter foi à ses fictions et d'en assimiler la valeur à celle des manuscrits originaux.<sup>34</sup>

Evidently, despite the comments of critics such as Charles Asselineau and Barbey d'Aurevilly, Nerval's intention was not to provide an accurate historical presentation of the Illuminist movement, and the title of *Les Illuminés* cannot be interpreted in that way.

As indicated by Max Milner (II, 1719), *Les Illuminés* was originally published with the subtitle "Les Précurseurs du socialisme" on the title page. As is the case for the title of this collection, the relevance of the subtitle to the subjects of Nerval's text is far from straightforward. With the exception of Restif de la Bretonne, none of these *illuminés* is directly associated with the development of Socialism, and such figures do not appear in conventional historical accounts of the emergence of this political movement. Socialism first emerged as a distinct, self-conscious movement in France in the early decades of the nineteenth century. The term *socialisme* was first employed by Pierre Leroux in his 1834 *Revue encyclopédique* and the concept was initially conceived in contrast to *individualisme*, which was thought to have become a dominant feature of post-Revolutionary French society.<sup>35</sup> George Sand subsequently popularised the term in her writings.<sup>36</sup> Whereas the modern understanding of Socialism tends to be concerned with its economic connotations, in

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<sup>34</sup> Auguste Viatte, *Les Sources occultes du Romantisme: Illuminisme – Théosophie, 1770-1820*, 2 vols. (Paris: Champion, 1928), I, 11.

<sup>35</sup> Jonathan Beecher, *Victor Considérant and the Rise and Fall of French Romantic Socialism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), p. 1.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

its early usage the concept incorporated a distinct theological component. Early Romantic Socialism emerged in response to the perceived social and moral disintegration linked to the increasingly fragmented, individualistic, and materialist nature of society. Socialist thinkers of the early nineteenth century rejected the atheism and materialism born of the Enlightenment, and sought to merge modern scientific principles with metaphysical beliefs.<sup>37</sup> Indeed, major writers of early nineteenth-century texts associated with Romantic Socialism, in particular Pierre Leroux, Pierre-Simon Ballanche, Jean Reynaud, and Henri de Saint-Simon, adopted a distinctly prophetic mode of discourse with marked religious overtones in order to convey their utopian visions.<sup>38</sup> The connection between early Socialism and theology is evident from the inclusion of a number of the key advocates of the movement in Alexandre Erdan's 1855 study of nineteenth-century religious eccentrics.<sup>39</sup>

The perceived incongruity of the subtitle and the subjects of *Les Illuminés* constitutes the focus of Paulin Limayrac's review of this work, published in *La Presse* in July 1853. Much like Barbey d'Aurevilly (quoted above), Limayrac stresses the marginal and seemingly inconsequential nature of the individuals selected by Nerval, dismissing them as "véritables fous", and questioning their status both as *illuminés* and as *précurseurs du socialisme*:

pourquoi ceux-là et non pas d'autres? Et pourquoi appeler ces illuminés, si illuminés il y a, les précurseurs du socialisme? M. Gérard de Nerval dit: «N'y a-t-il pas quelque chose de raisonnable à tirer même des folies? ne fût-ce que pour se préserver de croire nouveau ce qui est ancien?» Sans doute il y a une leçon à tirer de la folie, il y a à prendre son contraire, qui est la raison. Mais alors vos fous sont de véritables fous; ils ne sont pas des précurseurs.<sup>40</sup>

In a letter of 31<sup>st</sup> July 1853 addressed to Limayrac, Nerval responds to these comments with the ambiguous statement: "Le titre *Précurseurs du socialisme* est un *faux titre* très réel" (III, 807). Clearly, Nerval's aim in writing *Les Illuminés* was not to provide the reader with an accurate historical account of major Illuminist and

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<sup>37</sup> Frank Paul Bowman, "Illuminism, Utopia, Mythology", in *The French Romantics*, ed. by Donald Charlton, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), I, 76-112 (p. 90).

<sup>38</sup> Lynn Sharp, *Secular Spirituality: Reincarnation and Spiritism in Nineteenth-Century France* (Lanham: Lexington, 2006), pp. 34-36.

<sup>39</sup> Alexandre Erdan, *La France mystique. Tableau des excentricités religieuses de ce temps*, 2 vols. (Paris: Coulon-Pineau, 1855).

<sup>40</sup> Paulin Limayrac, "Feuilleton de *La Presse*: Livres: Gérard de Nerval", *La Presse*, 31 July 1853.

Socialist thinkers. Indeed, defying the expectations raised by its title and subtitle, Nerval's collection of portraits eschews major figures whose ideas influenced the Illuminist movement and early manifestations of Socialism, instead relating the lives and beliefs of a collection of individuals that cannot be readily associated with either group.

Nerval's problematic subtitle attaches a political dimension to the term *illuminé*, indicating another potential interpretative framework for this work. The fusion of the mystical and the political indicated by Nerval's title and subtitle, as well as being central to early forms of Socialism, was a characteristic feature of the eighteenth-century Illuminist movement. Besides the fact that Weishaupt's Bavarian sect was largely politically motivated,<sup>41</sup> French manifestations of the wider eighteenth-century Illuminist movement also had distinctly political undertones; and, as indicated by McCalla, it was this that distinguished French Illuminism from the various esoteric followings that emerged in other national contexts at this time.<sup>42</sup>

While Nerval's *Les Illuminés* does not include figures generally associated with the development of Socialism, the broader implications of this concept, implying the fusion of political and religious thought, does feature heavily in these portraits. The synthesis of mystical beliefs and political ideology, fundamental to early Socialist discourse, underpins many of Nerval's writings. *Les Illuminés* in particular exemplifies the way in which Nerval's political vision has distinctly religious foundations. Although Nerval's chosen *illuminés* are not recognised as Socialist thinkers, their lives and beliefs do represent the fusion of politics and theology characteristic to this emergent political movement. Karri Lokke highlights the political dimension of *Les Illuminés*, arguing that Nerval's fascination for religious plurality and syncretism that emerges from this work is a reaction against the rigid

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<sup>41</sup> Jonathan Israel, *Democratic Enlightenment: Philosophy, Revolution, and Human Rights 1750-1790* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 837.

<sup>42</sup> Arthur McCalla, "Illuminism and French Romantic Philosophies of History" in *Western Esotericism and the Science of Religion*, ed. by Antoine Faivre and Wouter Hanegraaff (Leuven: Peeters, 1998), pp. 253-268 (p. 254).

hierarchy and intolerance of a society that Nerval considers to be embodied in the repressive monotheism of traditional Christianity.<sup>43</sup>

The politico-theosophical vision that is implied by the subtitle of *Les Illuminés* and that underlies the thought of his chosen subjects is also fundamental to Nerval's "Les Prophètes rouges", an article published as part of *Le Diable rouge. Almanach cabalistique pour 1850*. "Les Prophètes rouges" consists of a collection of portraits dealing with the themes of Illuminism and Romantic Socialism, and thereby highlighting the overlap between metaphysical beliefs and political ideology in major currents of eighteenth-century esoteric thought. Indeed, the individuals depicted in "Les Prophètes rouges" readily correspond to both the title and the subtitle of *Les Illuminés*. The subjects of this article are well-documented, influential figures whose ideas were fundamental to the eighteenth-century Illuminist movement and to the development of Romantic Socialism in the early decades of the nineteenth century. They include Philippe Buchez, Hughes Felicité Robert de Lamennais, Adam Mickiewicz, Victor Prosper Considérant, and Pierre Leroux. The parallels between *Les Illuminés* and "Les Prophètes rouges" are striking, the subjects of both works having much in common in terms of the esoteric belief systems and Socialist or revolutionary ideals with which they are associated. Keiko Tsujikawa discusses the overlapping ideas of Nerval's *illuminés* and his *prophètes rouges*. In particular, Tsujikawa considers the use of the word *panthéisme* by Lamennais and Leroux, both of whom feature in "Les Prophètes rouges", and by Restif de la Bretonne, who appears in *Les Illuminés*. The use of this term, which, according to Tsujikawa, represents for all of these thinkers "cette pensée à la fois politique et religieuse", constituting "une façon de souligner le caractère oppositionnel de ces penseurs",<sup>44</sup> reveals a connection between the thought of these three individuals. However, despite such points of contact, more significant are the fundamental differences between the two texts. Whereas "Les Prophètes rouges" constitutes an essentially historical study of major esoteric and Socialist thinkers closely linked to the

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<sup>43</sup> Kari Lokke, *Nerval: The Poet as Social Visionary* (Lexington: French Forum Publishers, 1987), pp. 18-19.

<sup>44</sup> Keiko Tsujikawa, *Nerval et les limbes de l'histoire: Lecture des Illuminés* (Geneva: Droz, 2008), p. 200.

eighteenth-century Illuminist Movement, *Les Illuminés* is primarily literary in nature, merging fictional and biographical discourse and portraying eccentric, marginal figures who have no place in mainstream historical narratives. Whilst “Les Prophètes rouges” deals with major representatives of the movements evoked by both the title and the subtitle of *Les Illuminés*, such figures are confined to the margins of Nerval’s 1852 work. Instead obscure, forgotten individuals with dubious connections to the text’s proclaimed subject matter take centre stage. If “Les Prophètes rouges” is concerned with providing an accurate historical overview of important Illuminist and Romantic Socialist thinkers, the significance of *Les Illuminés* lies elsewhere.

Besides designating religious visionaries or adherents of a particular historical current of Western esotericism, from the middle of the nineteenth century an alternative definition of the term *illuminé* emerged. Whereas in the first half of the century, dictionaries defined *illuminé* either in relation to members of mystical societies, often citing the example of Weishaupt’s Bavarian sect, or in its ahistorical sense with reference to religious visionaries, in the latter half of the century, the term acquired connotations of delusion, fanaticism, and religious madness. In the 1857 *Dictionnaire universel de la langue française*, the word gains the additional meaning of “fou religieux et fanatique”.<sup>45</sup> This sense of the term as designating a form of madness is absent from dictionaries published earlier in the century. The *Trésor de la langue française* looks at nineteenth-century usage of *illuminé*. The concept of religious madness emerges from the use of this term to describe an individual “qui est complètement soumis à une idée ou à une influence sans faire preuve de sens critique à son égard” or “qui témoigne d’une influence échappant au rationnel”.<sup>46</sup> The dictionary entry proceeds to cite the example of Nerval himself, as characterised by Albert Thibaudet, to illustrate the application of the term *illuminé* as denoting a certain form of madness in which an individual becomes infatuated with a specific idea or illusion: “Nerval devient fou, d’une folie illuminée, mystique et tendre”.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Pierre-Claude-Victor Boiste, *Dictionnaire universel de la langue française, avec le latin et l’étymologie* (Paris: Firmin-Didot, 1857), p. 382.

<sup>46</sup> *Trésor de la langue française: Dictionnaire de la langue du XIXe et du XXe siècle (1789-1960)*, 16 vols. (Paris: Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, 1971-1994), IX (1981) p. 1133.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid*, p. 1133.



The updated online edition of the Larousse dictionary describes an *illuminé* as a “personne dénuée d’esprit critique, qui soutient une doctrine avec une foi aveugle; un zèle fanatique”.<sup>48</sup> Such definitions link the term to notions of madness and delusion rather than associating it with any specific set of spiritual beliefs or practices. It denotes a manner of believing rather than designating a specific belief system. This sense of *illuminé* suggests notions of irrationality, fantasy, delusion, and madness, raising the question of the extent to which they relate to certain forms of religious faith. It evokes the early psychiatric tendency to pathologise deviant or excessive beliefs and mystical experiences.

It seems likely that Nerval’s *Les Illuminés* contributed to the introduction and popularisation of these additional connotations of the word *illuminé*. As observed above, Nerval’s subjects do not adhere to the historical connotations of *illuminé*, as they are not typical representatives of the eighteenth-century Illuminist movement. Neither do they correspond readily to the ahistorical definition of the term that was also in use when Nerval was writing, since they cannot be considered religious visionaries in any straightforward sense. However, the definition of *illuminé* that appeared in dictionaries from the middle of the nineteenth century is fundamental to Nerval’s *Les Illuminés* and can readily be applied to all of the figures selected for inclusion in the text. Common to all of Nerval’s *illuminés* is the rejection of the limitations of commonplace material existence coupled with the impassioned pursuit of mystical and illusory phenomena. Having classified his subjects as *illuminés* in the title of his work, Nerval proceeds to identify eccentricity as their unifying characteristic in “La Bibliothèque de mon oncle”, the preface to the collection. Far from being united by any specific set of esoteric beliefs, it is this newly emergent nineteenth-century concept that borders on the pathological and that is characterised by the defiance of boundaries and the resistance to prevalent ideological norms, that is established as the defining feature of Nerval’s *illuminés*.

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<sup>48</sup> <<http://www.larousse.fr/encyclopedie/nom-commun-nom/illumin%C3%A9/59861>>. Last consulted: 11/04/2014.

## **“LA BIBLIOTHEQUE DE MON ONCLE”: NERVAL’S RELIGIOUS ECCENTRICS**

“La Bibliothèque de mon oncle”, which functions as a prologue to *Les Illuminés*, is the only chapter that was written in 1852 specifically for inclusion in this particular work. The six biographical portraits that follow had already appeared in various forms, either as stand-alone texts or as part of other works, from 1839 (“Le Roi de Bicêtre”) to 1851 (“Quintus Aucler”). This opening chapter therefore serves as an introduction to the succeeding series of texts, and it is here that the reader seeks to gain a sense of the overall motivation of *Les Illuminés* and of the author’s justification for combining such a diverse assortment of portraits in a single volume. Despite the seeming disparity of the constituent portraits of *Les Illuminés*, the subjects of which are derived from different cultural and historical contexts, the narrator of “La Bibliothèque de mon oncle” insists on the underlying coherence of this eclectic collection: “Ces analyses, ces biographies furent écrites à diverses époques, bien qu’elles dussent se rattacher à la même série” (II, 885). The question of the overall unity of *Les Illuminés*, which, as suggested above, is not conveyed by its overall title or subtitle in any satisfactory manner, is simultaneously resolved and rendered ever more problematic by Nerval’s introduction to his subject matter and his pretensions to autobiography in the prologue to the text.

“La Bibliothèque de mon oncle”, and therefore *Les Illuminés* as a whole, opens with the words: “Il n’est pas donné à tout le monde d’écrire l’*Éloge de la Folie*” (II, 885), an affirmation that immediately introduces the question of madness, an all-pervasive theme in the six biographical portraits that follow. The reader is instantly alerted to the necessarily problematic nature of the concept of madness in Nerval’s text. As seen in Part One of this thesis, by the early decades of the nineteenth century, the study of madness had been appropriated by the newly established psychiatric profession, and the dominant model of this phenomenon had become that of a pathological condition requiring medical treatment. However, by alluding to

Desiderius Erasmus's famous and highly controversial work of 1511, *Nerval* evokes a conception of madness far removed from that promoted by nineteenth-century alienists. Indeed, in his provocative exploration of madness, Erasmus famously seeks to undermine the notion that madness necessarily constitutes a negative phenomenon, even suggesting that in a certain sense madness represents the highest form of reason, enabling man to overcome the misery and mediocrity of commonplace human experience.<sup>1</sup> The first sentence of "La Bibliothèque de mon oncle" proceeds: "mais sans être Érasme, – ou Saint-Évremond, on peut prendre plaisir à tirer du fouillis des siècles quelque figure singulière qu'on s'efforcera de rhabiller ingénieusement" (II, 885). In an earlier manuscript of the text, reproduced by Max Milner in his "Notice" to the text (II, 1711-1712), Saint-Évremond's name is absent from this sentence, which instead lists Fontenelle and Voltaire after Erasmus. It is not clear what associations regarding the theme of madness Nerval expects his reader to derive from the names cited either in the final or in the earlier version of this text. Although Saint-Évremond, Fontenelle, and Voltaire all deal with the question of madness in their writings, none are obviously associated with the theme, and their depictions of madness have little in common with that of Erasmus. Indeed, as indicated by Michel Brix: "Aucun de ces trois écrivains ne semble avoir laissé d'ouvrage analogue du traité érasmien".<sup>2</sup> Keiko Tsujikawa points out the way in which Nerval's references to Erasmus and Saint-Évremond obfuscate his purpose: "Deux modèles lointains, – l'un ancien, l'autre obscure –, rendent difficile de situer le projet de Nerval dans le temps".<sup>3</sup> The literary models cited by the narrator, both in the final version of "La Bibliothèque de mon oncle" and in the earlier manuscript, therefore do little to clarify the vision of madness to be adopted, and serve only to highlight the complex and multifarious nature of the concept in *Les Illuminés*.

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<sup>1</sup> Michel Brix, *Les Déesses absentes: Vérité et simulacre dans l'œuvre de Gérard de Nerval* (Paris: Klincksieck, 1997), pp. 107-108.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 108. Brix proceeds: "Saint-Évremond, Fontenelle et Voltaire figurent cependant parmi les rares écrivains des XVII<sup>e</sup> et XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècles qui trouvent droit de cité dans l'*Histoire de la folie à l'âge classique* de Michel Foucault. Et non point pour s'être moqué des fous, ou pour avoir réclamé leur internement": p. 108.

<sup>3</sup> Keiko Tsujikawa, *Nerval et les Limbes de l'Histoire: Lecture des Illuminés* (Geneva: Droz, 2008), p. 28.

As seen in Part One, the notion that madness, far from constituting a purely negative, pathological phenomenon, was linked to exalted mental states, allowing for enhanced intellectual capacities, poetic inspiration, spiritual insight, and even genius, was a central characteristic of the late eighteenth-century German Romantic movement. That approach was subsequently embraced by a number of French Romantic authors of the early nineteenth century and constitutes a recurrent preoccupation in Nerval's writings on madness. The Romantic image of madness as an essentially desirable state that permits enhanced creative and intellectual capacities as well as privileged access to spiritual truths underpins all six of the portraits in *Les Illuminés* and is evoked by the allusion to Erasmus in the very first sentence of "La Bibliothèque de mon oncle". Throughout *Les Illuminés*, the terms *folie* and *fou* are repeatedly employed by the narrator to refer to the deviant, irrational, and potentially pathological aspects of his subjects' thought and activity, but also in a more positive manner to assert their superior creativity and insight, and the original and innovative nature of their ideas. As is already apparent from this introductory chapter, the status and connotations of the words *folie* and *fou* in Nerval's text remain vague and uncertain. The role of these terms as a means of characterising Nerval's *illuminés* and of conferring unity upon this seemingly incongruent collection of individuals is never clearly articulated. Much like the categories introduced by the title and subtitle of the work, namely *illuminés* and *précurseurs du socialisme*, the concept defies straightforward definition and fails to classify in a satisfactory manner the diverse range of individuals to be portrayed. Tsujikawa highlights Nerval's indeterminate and unconventional usage of such terms, suggesting that Nerval here seeks to destabilise and to call into question prevalent definitions of the words he employs to categorise and define his subjects:

L'«éloge de la Folie» – tel serait donc le programme que l'auteur se propose avec sa galerie de portraits d'«*excentriques* de la philosophie». Mais cette phrase ne nous indique pas d'emblée le sens du mot «folie», comme on a du mal à déterminer ce que signifient les «illuminés» ou les «précurseurs du socialisme». [...] la singularité de Nerval ne réside-t-elle pas dans sa façon de détourner et de mettre en doute le sens, largement reçu à l'époque de ces termes: «folie», «illuminés», «socialisme»?<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.

As suggested by Tsujikawa, the narrator's attempts to classify this particular assortment of individuals serve only to accentuate their fundamental ambiguity and elusiveness.

Having indicated in the opening sentence of "La Bibliothèque de mon oncle" that madness is to constitute a central theme of the portraits of his collection, Nerval rapidly replaces the concept with another: eccentricity. The narrator of "La Bibliothèque de mon oncle" twice identifies his subjects as *excentriques*, referring to them as "certains *excentriques* de la philosophie" (II, 885) and as "mes *excentriques*" (II, 886). Paradoxically, it is this boundary-defying notion that becomes the unifying feature of Nerval's diverse array of individuals. By embracing the newly emergent nineteenth-century concept of eccentricity to describe his subjects, Nerval is able to capture both the negative, pathological and the more positive, Romantic connotations of madness that are already evident in the introductory chapter to *Les Illuminés*, and to mediate between medical and popular perspectives of the theme. The concept of eccentricity, introduced by the narrator in the prologue, pervades, whether directly or indirectly, both the subject matter and the narrative of *Les Illuminés* as a whole. At times the terms *excentricité* and *excentrique* are employed directly by the narrator to define his subject matter, most notably in "Les Confidences de Nicolas", in which they appear repeatedly; whilst at other times this nineteenth-century concept emerges indirectly from the narrator's descriptions.

In *Les Illuminés*, the omnipresent themes of madness and eccentricity are linked to the study of a number of unconventional mystical beliefs and practices. The work therefore deals with the nineteenth-century popular and psychiatric categories of *folie religieuse*, *monomanie religieuse*, and *excentricité religieuse*. The narrative of the constituent chapters of *Les Illuminés* assimilates nineteenth-century popular and medical thought regarding these categories, fusing ideas and concepts specific to early nineteenth-century French culture with a study of the thought and experiences of this collection of historical figures. The six subjects of *Les Illuminés* can be described as religious eccentrics, as the narrator discovers these historical "*excentriques* de la philosophie", who are associated, to varying degrees, with

unconventional forms of religiosity and systems of belief, in his uncle's mystical library, and explicitly links them to his uncle's quest for an alternative system of belief in a society in which "la religion officielle n'existait plus" (II, 885). For the uncle, as well as for the narrator, the lives and writings of these individuals represent the search for new ideas and belief systems in societies devoid of a stable religious or ideological authority. As seen in the previous chapter, the concept of religious madness or religious eccentricity is also captured by the overall title to this collection, *Les Illuminés*, which evokes the major strand of Western esotericism in the eighteenth century, and deviant or unconventional religious practices in general, as well as designating a form of religious madness or delusion.

The association between the marginal forms of religiosity that emerged in France in the early decades of the nineteenth century and the popular and psychiatric concept of eccentricity is central to Alexandre Erdan's *La France mystique* of 1855. In this work, Erdan investigates the appearance of the various systems of belief that appeared in response to the rise of philosophical scepticism and materialist culture in the wake of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment and the 1789 Revolution. Erdan presents religious eccentricity in a distinctly negative manner, associating the phenomenon with the absence of reason, as is illustrated by the fact that his work is dedicated to Voltaire.<sup>5</sup> By contrast, Nerval's exploration of the theme of religious eccentricity is ambiguous. The religious eccentrics of *Les Illuminés* are at once presented in both positive and negative terms, and Nerval's narrative adopts the discourse of opposing ideological perspectives, characterising his subjects both as madmen and as religious visionaries. Throughout *Les Illuminés*, Nerval embraces the ideological uncertainty inherent to the category of religious eccentricity, adopting both medical and mystical discourse to characterise his six *excentriques*.

Despite the fact that it deals with the lives of individuals from different historical contexts, *Les Illuminés*, like all of Nerval's historical and biographical writings, remains very much grounded in the precise context of nineteenth-century France. Nerval establishes a number of parallels between the plight of his own post-

Revolutionary generation and the societies in which the ideas and writings of his various subjects were conceived. In particular, the perceived spiritual void associated with the declining authority of the Catholic Church in the early decades of the nineteenth century underlies this collection of portraits, as emerges from “La Bibliothèque de mon oncle”. In this introductory chapter, the narrator explicitly attributes his uncle’s predilection for marginal belief systems and his fascination for the eccentric doctrines of a diverse array of esoteric writers and thinkers to the lack of dominant religious framework in post-Enlightenment French society: “Une certaine tendance au mysticisme, à un moment où la religion officielle n’existait plus, avait sans doute guidé mon parent dans le choix de ces sortes d’écrits” (II, 885). The sense of the spiritual vacuity of post-Revolutionary society to which the narrator attributes his uncle’s mystical leanings thus explains the narrator’s subsequent discovery of and shared interest in this particular assortment of historical writers and thinkers and the ideas with which they are associated. The narrator of *Aurélia* speaks of this same uncle (whose identity is discussed below), again referring to his apparent attachment to mysticism. Here, the emphasis is placed on the plurality of influences underlying the spiritual beliefs of the uncle. The narrator’s allusions to his uncle’s faith reveal the multiplicity of competing ideas with which he is surrounded, including Christianity, paganism, mysticism, and Enlightenment deism:

je demandai un jour à mon oncle ce que c’était que Dieu. «Dieu, c’est le soleil», me dit-il. C’était la pensée intime d’un honnête homme qui avait vécu en chrétien toute sa vie, mais qui avait traversé la révolution, et qui était d’une contrée où plusieurs avaient la même idée de la Divinité. (III, 731)

Nerval establishes an implicit connection between the social and cultural framework of his own generation, that of his uncle, and the various ideological contexts with which the subjects of *Les Illuminés* are associated. He suggests that in each case the exploration of alternative forms of religiosity and the fascination for mystical and esoteric belief systems arise from the failure of their societies to provide an adequate spiritual foundation. The narrator of *Les Illuminés* frequently alludes to the lack of an authoritative religious framework in the societies of his various subjects. This is the case, for example, in “Les Confidences de Nicolas”, in which the narrator implies

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<sup>5</sup> Alexandre Erdan, *La France mystique: Tableau d’excentricités religieuses de ce tems*, 2 vols., (Paris: Coulon-Pinceau, 1855).

that the “tendances mystiques” of Restif de la Bretonne represent a reaction to “l’aridité du naturalisme primitif” (II, 1049) that characterises his period. Similarly, the mystical writings of Jacques Cazotte are attributed to the religious vacuity of his age, which is portrayed as “ce siècle d’incrédulité où le clergé lui-même a si peu défendu ses croyances” (II, 1083). The narrator proceeds to suggest that the rise of philosophical scepticism and the loss of stable religious foundation fuelled a penchant for a diverse array of unconventional spiritual phenomena amongst the public of Cazotte’s society. The same is true not only for the uncle presented to the reader in “La Bibliothèque de mon oncle”, but also for the narrator himself, who embodies the plight of Nerval’s post-Enlightenment and post-Revolutionary generation, living in the wake of the religious scepticism of eighteenth-century Enlightenment philosophy and of the declining status of the Catholic Church in the aftermath of the 1789 Revolution.

Descriptions of the spiritually vacuous societies of the narrator’s uncle and of his six *illuminés* bear a marked resemblance to Nerval’s literary portrayal of his own era elsewhere in his writings. This is one of the ways in which *Les Illuminés* gains an underlying autobiographical dimension (a notion that is further discussed below), implying an association between the experiences and preoccupations of this series of biographical subjects and those of the author’s literary persona. Indeed, just as the narrator of *Les Illuminés* both in this opening chapter and in the six subsequent portraits portrays his subjects against a backdrop of epistemological uncertainty and religious decline, so too does he evoke a similar social and ideological climate in a number of his other writings, repeatedly articulating the predicament of the Romantic generation faced with the rise of scepticism and the waning of religious faith. A number of Nerval’s works lament the decline of the sacred in the early decades of nineteenth-century France, a theme that in *Les Illuminés* is dealt with most explicitly in the opening pages of “Quintus Aucler”. Notably, the narrator of Nerval’s *Voyage en Orient* (1851) refers to himself as the “fils d’un siècle douteur” (II, 255) and the “fils d’un siècle déshérité d’illusions, qui a besoin de toucher pour croire” (II, 237); while the narrator of “Isis” describes himself as the “Enfant d’un siècle sceptique plutôt qu’incrédule” (III, 619). Like the *illuminés* that he depicts, Nerval’s



attachment to mystical phenomena and alternative belief systems constitutes a reaction to the perceived spiritual inadequacies of official ideology. In “La Bibliothèque de mon oncle”, the narrator and the partly autobiographical, partly fictional, figure of the uncle are inserted into an underground tradition of writers and thinkers in search of new systems of belief capable of overcoming the shortcomings of their respective societies.

The evident overlap between the semi-fictionalised uncle and the subjects of the biographical portraits that follow establishes the uncle as the first of the “*excentriques de la philosophie*” (II, 885) to be depicted in this collection. Much like Nerval’s six *illuminés*, the narrator’s uncle is characterised by his marginality and by the unconventional nature of the ideas with which he is associated. Philippe Destruel points out that, like the subjects of the subsequent biographical portraits, the narrator’s uncle, owing to his marginal status, can also be defined as an eccentric and it is this figure that establishes a link between the narrator (or indeed the author) and the six eccentrics that he describes:

L’oncle maternel était aussi un *excentrique*; en marge de son Temps, puisqu’il amassait des ouvrages mystiques. Il apparaît bien comme la figure programmatique d’ «excentriques» qui a fait entrer Nerval dans une généalogie littéraire.<sup>6</sup>

As is the case in the six portraits that follow, the eccentricity of the narrator’s uncle borders on the pathological. As seen in Part One, in nineteenth-century France alienists linked obsessive intellectual pursuits, in particular that of collecting, to pathological mental states. In the first half of the nineteenth century, such practices were linked to monomania before subsequently becoming bound up with pathological eccentricity, especially in the writings of Bénédict-Augustin Morel. The narrator of “La Bibliothèque de mon oncle” describes the uncle’s library itself in almost pathological terms, as “la masse énorme de livres entassés et oubliés au grenier, – la plupart attaqués par les rats, pourris ou mouillés par les eaux pluviales passant dans les intervalles des tuiles” (II, 886). The image here reflects nineteenth-century medical writings on the themes of bibliomania and pathological collecting, as well as recalling Charles Nodier’s depictions of the figure of the *bibliomane*. In

“L’Amateur de Livres”, published in the *Bulletin du bibliophile*, Nodier distinguishes between the *bibliophile* and the *bibliomane*, presenting the latter as a pathological phenomenon: “Le bibliophile sait choisir les livres; le bibliomane les entasse [...] L’innocente et délicieuse fièvre du bibliophile est, dans le bibliomane, une maladie aiguë poussée jusqu’au délire”.<sup>7</sup> Nodier’s comments on bibliophilia and bibliomania are cited by the alienist Jean-Baptiste Descuret in his 1841 *La Médecine des passions*, to which he adds: “je dirais que le bibliophile possède des livres, et que le bibliomane en est possédé”.<sup>8</sup> Such descriptions resonate strongly with the portrayal of the uncle and his abandoned library in Nerval’s text. The narrator’s uncle is very much the archetypal nineteenth-century eccentric: his library of “livres entassés et oubliés” indicates a pathological dimension to his character, yet his fascination for such books and his attempts to overcome the religious void of his age suggest originality and insight. It is through this elusive figure that the theme of eccentricity, in particular religious eccentricity, is first evoked in *Les Illuminés*. As indicated by Destruel (cited above), through the influence of his uncle, the narrator enters into a “généalogie littéraire” of marginal writers and thinkers and thus becomes one of the *excentriques* of *Les Illuminés*. Indeed, the young narrator, like his uncle and the six *illuminés* depicted in the ensuing chapters, engages with socially and ideologically deviant thought and calls into question the accepted norms and values of his society. Just as his uncle creates a library of the writings of eccentric, mystical, figures, the narrator of “La Bibliothèque de mon oncle” compiles a collection of stories and ideas relating to individuals characterised by their marginality and the socially deviant nature of their activities and their writings.

The first-person narration of “La Bibliothèque de mon oncle” invites an autobiographical reading, apparently recounting the way in which the author first encountered the biographical subjects to whom this work is dedicated. Indeed, a number of critics, notably Albert Béguin and Jean Richer, who were the editors of

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<sup>6</sup> Philippe Destruel, “«Une histoire généalogique du temps»: «La Bibliothèque de mon oncle» et *Les Illuminés*”, in *Cahiers Gérard de Nerval*, no. 16 (1993), 68-75 (p. 70).

<sup>7</sup> Charles Nodier, “L’Amateur de Livres”, in *Bulletin du bibliophile*, no. 12 (Paris: Techener, 1842), 243-354 (p. 249).

<sup>8</sup> Jean-Baptiste Descuret, *La Médecine des passions considérées dans leurs rapports avec les maladies, les lois et la religion* (Paris: Béchét, 1844), p. 754.

the first *Pléiade* edition, interpret the opening pages of *Les Illuminés* in a literal manner, identifying both the uncle and his library of mystical works as genuine features of Nerval's childhood. Having asserted the historical veracity of the library, Béguin and Richer even attempt to list the philosophical and esoteric works that the young Nerval would be likely to have encountered there.<sup>9</sup> In Max Milner's "Notes et variantes", the "vieil oncle qui possédait une bibliothèque" (II, 885) described in this chapter is identified as "Antoine Boucher, frère de la grand-mère maternelle de Gérard, Marguerite-Victoire Boucher, épouse de Pierre-Charles Laurent" (II, 1712). The identification of the figure to whom Nerval dedicates his introduction to *Les Illuminés* as the author's great uncle on the side of his mother is widely accepted by critics. The idea that the uncle indeed represents a genuine figure from Nerval's childhood is supported by the fact that this same uncle is also evoked in two of Nerval's other works, namely *Aurélia* (cited above) and "Sylvie". Whilst critics such as Béguin and Richer affirm the accuracy of "La Bibliothèque de mon oncle" as a depiction of Nerval's childhood, others perceive this chapter as a more indirect form of autobiography. Monique Streiff-Moretti states that "le mince avant-propos intitulé «La Bibliothèque de mon oncle» peut en dehors de toute vérification biographique, être considéré comme fragment d'une autobiographie en construction".<sup>10</sup> Corinne Bayle admits the potentially autobiographical nature of Nerval's preface, noting that the same uncle also appears in "Sylvie", and yet she considers that the importance of this chapter resides not so much in providing historically verifiable autobiographical facts, but rather in the way in which it reveals the influences and preoccupations of the author of *Les Illuminés*: "Il est certain que plus que des éléments biographiques authentiques, ce texte nous donne des renseignements sur les lectures de Gérard Labrunie, sur sa formation, son attachement au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle".<sup>11</sup> Indeed, while elements of this first chapter may be derived from the real-life experiences of the author, the authenticity of the material here depicted is of secondary importance to the ideas conveyed in this chapter and the way in which these ideas relate to and confer unity on the six texts that follow.

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<sup>9</sup> Gérard de Nerval, *Œuvres*, 2 vols., ed. by Albert Béguin and Jean Richer (Paris: Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1952), II, 1493.

<sup>10</sup> Monique Streiff-Moretti, "Portraits dans une bibliothèque: Nerval, Töpffer et quelques autres", in *Cahiers Gérard de Nerval*, no. 5 (1982), 23-36 (p. 23).

<sup>11</sup> Corinne Bayle, *Gérard de Nerval: La Marche à l'étoile* (Seysssel: Champ Vallon, 2001), p. 59.

Whilst it is highly probable that Nerval does draw upon genuine aspects of his childhood in these opening pages of *Les Illuminés*, to interpret “La Bibliothèque de mon oncle” in a purely autobiographical manner is to overlook its role within the specific context of *Les Illuminés* and its precise relation to the six portraits that follow. Rather than seeing the lives of his *illuminés* as straightforward reflections of his own life, Nerval, through his semi-fictionalised presence in the opening chapter, inscribes himself into a series of authors whose writings are fundamentally connected, but who exhibit distinct differences as well as similarities. By introducing aspects of his own past, albeit fused with fiction, into this collection of eccentric lives, Nerval himself becomes one of the subjects of his gallery of *illuminés*.

Apparent references to Nerval’s own childhood in “La Bibliothèque de mon oncle”, besides allowing for an autobiographical reading of this opening chapter, indicate a potentially autobiographical dimension to *Les Illuminés* as a whole, implying that, despite its apparent status as a collection of biographical portraits, this work can be read as a form of indirect autobiography. Indeed, as seen above, in relation to the theme of religious decline, each of the six individuals depicted in *Les Illuminés* embodies aspects of Nerval’s own thought and experience, and this collection of texts encompasses a number of ideas and preoccupations that recur in his other writings. In particular, the author’s first-hand experience of madness, and especially religious madness, is reflected in the portraits of these historical figures. There is much overlap between the way in which the concept of madness is dealt with in *Les Illuminés* and presentations of this theme elsewhere in Nerval’s writings, most notably in *Aurélia*. Furthermore, the central theme of madness in *Les Illuminés* reflects strongly the precise cultural context in which Nerval was writing: he here explores a number of aspects of madness specific to nineteenth-century popular culture and psychiatric science, including theories of partial madness, monomania, eccentricity, the perceived associations between madness and dream and between madness and genius, religious madness, and hallucination. Besides the fact that the subjects of *Les Illuminés* share elements of Nerval’s own experience of madness, as portrayed in his writings, each of the figures also embodies the specific

preoccupations and ideas of the author, especially in terms of the marginal mystical and religious ideas that they substitute for mainstream religious belief. In addition, like Nerval, these *illuminés* are writers. The validity of interpreting *Les Illuminés* in autobiographical terms is implied in “Les Confidences de Nicolas”, in which the narrator claims that writings about the lives and experiences of others represent “un miroir où chacun peut s’étudier” (II, 1038). Such an assertion indicates that the portraits of Nerval’s *illuminés*, rather than constituting historically valid biographical accounts, represent a form of autobiography in disguise, the six individuals depicted constituting a series of masks adopted by the narrator in order to explore his own experiences and ideas in a detached and objective manner. The idea that the constituent portraits of *Les Illuminés* are linked primarily by their underlying autobiographical nature is articulated by Corinne Bayle who claims that Nerval here relates elements of his own life “en se cachant derrière différents personnages”, to which she adds:

La conquête de soi passe par l’appropriation nécessaire de la vie d’autrui; tous ceux qui constituent la galerie de portraits des *Illuminés* ont une ressemblance avec le poète; cela rétablit bien l’unité de ce recueil, à l’origine hétérogène.<sup>12</sup>

Jean Guillaume argues that the opening pages of *Les Illuminés* constitute an imitation of a journalistic article relating to Nerval himself.<sup>13</sup> The article in question was written by Hippolyte Babou and was published in *La Patrie* on 20<sup>th</sup> October 1850. It consists of a biographical account of Nerval’s childhood, which considers, in particular, Nerval’s discovery of the various works that were later to inspire his own writings. Babou’s article depicts Nerval as a curious child surrounded by conflicting literary and philosophical influences. He situates the origins of Nerval’s literary career in the eclectic volumes contained within his uncle’s library:

En remontant sa carrière littéraire, je le trouve d’abord dans la bibliothèque de son oncle, aux prises avec toutes les séductions du dix-huitième siècle.  
[...] Où ira-t-il se cacher pour lire à son aise ces auteurs réprouvés, Crébillon, Louvet, Mercier, Laclos, Rétif, Cazotte et tant d’autres célébrités du moment, qui ne sont aujourd’hui qu’un objet de curiosité historique?

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, p. 59.

<sup>13</sup> Jean Guillaume, “La Rencontre de Nerval et de Babou: nouvelles perspectives critiques”, in *Études Nervaliennes et Romanesques*, ed. by Jean Guillaume and Claude Pichois (Namur: Presses Universitaires de Namur, 1979), pp. 45-50.

[...] il ne faut pas oublier que les souvenirs de la bibliothèque de son oncle accompagnent en route le spirituel touriste. M. Gérard de Nerval a puisé dans le dix-huitième siècle le premier aliment de sa pensée. Nous le retrouvons, après bien des années, fidèle au même goût, friand des mêmes secrets, rechercher aux mêmes sources les *Confidences de Nicolas*.<sup>14</sup>

Babou thus depicts Nerval in his childhood as surrounded by a vast array of conflicting ideological influences, a portrayal that closely resembles the narrator's account of his early experiences as related in "La Bibliothèque de mon oncle". Guillaume affirms that these opening pages of *Les Illuminés* "s'inspirent, jusque dans leur titre, du feuilleton de 1850",<sup>15</sup> a statement that he supports with extensive quotation both from Babou's article and from Nerval's "La Bibliothèque de mon oncle". Indeed, by placing selected passages of these two texts side by side, the overlap between them becomes evident, and it does seem feasible that the preface to Nerval's 1852 collection is, to some extent at least, modelled on Babou's article. Hisashi Mizuno also considers Babou's article to be at the origins of "La Bibliothèque de mon oncle", arguing that Nerval's preface "se calque discrètement sur un passage de son portrait littéraire fait par Hippolyte Babou".<sup>16</sup> However, Streiff-Moretti derives different conclusions from the similarities between Babou's portrait of Nerval and the opening chapter of *Les Illuminés*, considering that Nerval's text constitutes not an imitation of but rather a reaction to that of Babou:

Nous pensons que l'avant-propos des *Illuminés* ne s'est pas, à proprement parler, «inspiré» de l'article de Babou mais qu'il a été *provoqué* par ce dernier. Il constitue plutôt une *mise au point* de la part de l'écrivain menacé d'enterrement littéraire parce que soupçonné de vouloir se soustraire au contrôle de la raison.<sup>17</sup>

As discussed in Part One of this thesis, Jules Janin and Alexandre Dumas had both published articles paying homage to Nerval as a gifted author whose literary career had been cut short by his descent into madness, and Babou's biographical account of Nerval could be interpreted in the same manner. Having responded directly both to Dumas and to Janin,<sup>18</sup> it seems likely that Nerval would have wished to voice his reaction to Babou's article. As indicated by Guillaume, Babou attributes to the young Nerval "une doctrine élastique et flottante, qui ne consiste à ne rien nier et à

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<sup>14</sup> Hippolyte Babou, "Profils Littéraires: Gérard de Nerval", in *La Patrie*, 20<sup>th</sup> October 1850.

<sup>15</sup> Guillaume, p. 47.

<sup>16</sup> Hisashi Mizuno, "L'écriture dialogique de la folie dans les écrits autobiographiques de Gérard de Nerval", in *Romantisme*, no. 149, vol. 3 (2010), 111-123 (p. 111).

<sup>17</sup> Streiff-Moretti, p. 33.

ne rien affirmer”.<sup>19</sup> The image of Nerval struggling to reconcile conflicting ideological perspectives emerges strongly from *Les Illuminés* as a whole in which the ideological stance of the narrator, and therefore of the author, remains elusive and shrouded in ambiguity: as will be seen in relation to the subsequent chapters of *Les Illuminés*, Nerval’s narrator simultaneously attaches value to and distances himself from the eccentric belief systems of his subjects. This all-pervasive ambivalence is already apparent in “La Bibliothèque de mon oncle”.

Whilst, as seen above, a number of critics interpret the library of “La Bibliothèque de mon oncle” as a genuine place frequented by Nerval in his childhood, others perceive the eccentric uncle’s library as a purely literary construction. Gérald Schaeffer, for example, refutes autobiographical readings of *Les Illuminés*, highlighting its status as a poetic work as opposed to a historical account. He argues that the library depicted in the opening pages is merely a “fragment d’un univers poétique” which has no significance outside the context of Nerval’s text.<sup>20</sup> Streiff-Moretti, despite affirming the autobiographical undertones of this chapter (see above), perceives the library primarily as a literary motif, claiming that it represents a reflection of *Les Illuminés* as a whole, itself a collection of writings: “le livre intitulé *Les Illuminés* constitue par lui-même une bibliothèque, dans le sens premier de «collection de livres»”.<sup>21</sup> A number of potential literary influences have been proposed as possible sources of inspiration for the uncle’s mystical library that constitutes the starting point for *Les Illuminés*. Keiko Tsujukawa suggests that the fictional library described in Miguel de Cervantes’s *Don Quichotte* (1605-1615) could have influenced Nerval’s “La Bibliothèque de mon oncle”.<sup>22</sup> Another possible literary source is that depicted in Balzac’s *Louis Lambert* (1832), a library in which the title character, much like the narrator of *Les Illuminés*, obtains knowledge of a mystical nature. Just as the narrator of Nerval’s text identifies his uncle’s library as a major source of influence and inspiration, claiming “j’ai tout jeune absorbé beaucoup de cette nourriture

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<sup>18</sup> “A Jules Janin” (preface to *Lorely*): II, 3-12; “A Alexandre Dumas” (preface to *Les Filles du feu*): II, 449-458.

<sup>19</sup> Guillaume, p. 88.

<sup>20</sup> Gérald Schaeffer, *Une Double lecture de Gérard de Nerval: Les Illuminés et Les Filles du Feu* (Neuchâtel: Baconnière-Payot, 1977), p. 21.

<sup>21</sup> Streiff-Moretti, p. 23.

indigeste ou malsaine pour l'âme" (II, 886), the young Lambert also devours the material presented in his uncle's library:

En trois ans, Louis Lambert s'était assimilé la substance des livres qui, dans la bibliothèque de son oncle, méritaient d'être lus. L'absorption des idées par la lecture était devenue chez lui un phénomène curieux; son œil embrassait sept à huit lignes d'un coup, et son esprit en appréciait le sens avec une vélocité pareille à celle de son regard; souvent même un mot dans la phrase suffisait pour lui en faire saisir le suc.<sup>23</sup>

It is worth noting that, besides the motif of the uncle's library, there is much overlap between Nerval's *Les Illuminés* and Balzac's *Louis Lambert*. Both works assimilate nineteenth-century psychiatric ideas, and both deal with the theme of religious madness and with the question of the relationship between madness and genius: Lambert's genius acquires a distinctly pathological dimension, and his voracious appetite for mystical knowledge provokes a descent into madness. Streiff-Moretti compares Nerval's "La Bibliothèque de mon oncle" to an 1832 work of the same title by the Swiss author, Rodolphe Töpffer. Töpffer's "La Bibliothèque de mon oncle" was well known in France at the time at which Nerval was writing. Streiff-Moretti argues that Nerval takes Töpffer's text as a model for the preface to *Les Illuminés*, borrowing the motif of the uncle's library, but reversing its significance.<sup>24</sup> Martin Zimmermann reaches a similar conclusion, claiming that the title of Nerval's prologue is a "citation ironique" of Töpffer's text.<sup>25</sup> Meanwhile, Norma Rinsler identifies Heinrich Heine as Nerval's primary influence for this chapter. Dismissing autobiographical readings of "La Bibliothèque de mon oncle", she casts doubt on the genuine historical existence of the libraries described by both of these authors, considering that the eclectic library of the eccentric uncle is a fictional construction, created by Heine and borrowed by Nerval.<sup>26</sup> Zimmermann cites Goethe's *Dichtung und Wahrheit* of 1811 as a literary precursor to Nerval's library.<sup>27</sup> This work also contains a library belonging to an eccentric uncle, a figure characterised by his solidarity and unconventional ideas. Since the uncle in this work is a pasteur, the

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<sup>22</sup> Tsujikawa, p. 29.

<sup>23</sup> Honoré de Balzac, *Louis Lambert* (Paris: Gallimard, 1980), p. 30.

<sup>24</sup> Streiff-Moretti, p. 24.

<sup>25</sup> Martin Zimmermann, "La Bibliothèque de mon oncle: un motif et des significations", in *Cahiers Gérard de Nerval*, no. 14 (1991), 55-62 (p. 56).

<sup>26</sup> Norma Rinsler, "Gérard de Nerval et Heinrich Heine", in *Revue de la littérature comparée*, no. 33 (1959), 94-102 (p. 100).

<sup>27</sup> Zimmermann, p. 59.



theme of religious eccentricity is also fundamental to Goethe's text. Regardless of its historical veracity or literary influences, the uncle's library in *Les Illuminés* plays a specific role in the context of this particular text. Nerval's library symbolises the eccentric subject matter of *Les Illuminés*, representing a place of refuge for all that has been marginalised and forgotten by mainstream culture. It thereby reflects *Les Illuminés* as a whole, a place in which fresh value and significance is attached to eccentric ideas and neglected elements of human experience.

The theme of eccentricity, introduced by the narrator of "La Bibliothèque de mon oncle" to characterise his six chosen subjects, pervades the discourse of this opening chapter. Here, the lack of stable ideological perspective, which is characteristic of *Les Illuminés* as a whole, is already apparent as the narrator introduces his subject matter in a distinctly ambivalent manner, avoiding any straightforward interpretation or judgement of the material he is to present. As the narrator seeks to describe and define his task, he casts himself in a number of roles, thereby obscuring ever further the status of his already elusive subjects. In the opening paragraph, the narrator characterises himself as an amateur historian deriving pleasure from the study of forgotten fragments of history. He proceeds to adopt the metaphor of the restoration of neglected artworks to illustrate his task of reviving abandoned, seemingly inconsequential, debris of the past: "on peut prendre plaisir à tirer du fouillis des siècles quelque figure singulière qu'on s'efforcera de rhabiller ingénieusement, - à restaurer de vieilles toiles, dont la composition bizarre et la peinture éraillée font sourire l'amateur vulgaire" (II, p 885). He later alludes to the "côté amusant et peut-être instructif que pouvaient présenter la vie et le caractère de mes *excentriques*"; and goes on to assert the apparently scientific nature of his study:

Analyser les bigarrures de l'âme humaine, c'est de la physiologie morale, - cela vaut bien un travail de naturaliste, de paléographe, ou d'archéologue; je ne regretterais, puisque je l'ai entrepris, que de le laisser incomplet. (II, 886)

The presence of quasi-scientific discourse in Nerval's narrative recalls the clinical nature of Champfleury's prologue to *Les Excentriques*. In "La Bibliothèque de mon oncle", Nerval's narrator, like that of Champfleury, asserts the scientific validity of his study. However, the scientific is only one of a number of competing discourses in this chapter. The shifting perspectives from which the narrator introduces his

material contributes to the all-pervasive ambiguity with which his subject matter is surrounded.

In “La Bibliothèque de mon oncle”, the status of Nerval’s *illuminés* is shrouded in uncertainty as the subject matter of the work is introduced to the reader in both a positive and in a negative manner. The narrator attributes an intrinsic value to his six eccentrics and to their unconventional ideas and actions, declaring: “n’y a-t-il pas quelque chose de raisonnable à tirer même des folies!” (II, 886). The narrator first encounters his subject matter within “la masse énorme de livres entassés et oubliés au grenier, - la plupart attaqués par les rats, pourris ou mouillés par les eaux pluviales passant dans les intervalles des tuiles” (II, 886), a description that calls attention to the years of historical neglect surrounding the material under investigation. He suggests that the lives of these marginalised and forgotten individuals hold a potential significance that has thus far been overlooked and neglected by conventional historical narratives: “L’histoire du XVIIIe siècle pouvait sans doute se passer de cette annotation; mais elle y peut gagner quelque détail imprévu que l’historien scrupuleux ne doit pas négliger. Cette époque a déteint sur nous plus qu’on ne le devait prévoir” (II, 886). Indeed, the very fact of devoting a work to this series of neglected thinkers and writers necessarily attaches to these figures new layers of significance and value. The narrator establishes an implicit connection between his own status as a writer and those of his six *illuminés*, revealing the necessarily eccentric nature of his own work, which defies the accepted boundaries of conventional historical research and focuses upon marginal figures and ideas. Therefore, the narrator, like his elusive subjects, becomes one of the “*excentriques de la philosophie*” presented in this work. Implications of the inherent value of these obscure individuals and their writings are coupled with allusions to the potentially pathological and even dangerous nature of their ideas and beliefs. The negative dimension of the eccentric subjects of *Les Illuminés* is indicated by the narrator’s allusion to them as “cette nourriture indigeste ou malsaine pour l’âme” and as “ce qui charge et qui embarrasse l’esprit” (II, 886), and the physically degraded nature of the books becomes a direct reflection of their insalubrious content. By defining his subjects as eccentrics, the narrator of “La Bibliothèque de mon oncle” resists any

categorical judgement of this collection of individuals. Having alluded to the potentially lasting influence of this “annotation” to mainstream history, the narrator responds in a characteristically ambivalent manner: “Est-ce un bien, est-ce un mal, – qui le sait?” (II, 886).

The theme of eccentricity, introduced by the narrator of “La Bibliothèque de mon oncle” as the unifying characteristic of his six biographical subjects, underlies *Les Illuminés* as a whole. This is a work that by its very nature defies boundaries and calls into question pre-existing categories and systems of reference. By combining an assortment of apparently unconnected writers and thinkers to create his series of *illuminés*, the text transcends social, cultural, and historical boundaries. *Les Illuminés* is heterogeneous in nature, fusing historical narrative with fiction, and alternating between direct narrative commentary and extensive citation from a range of different sources. At first glance, *Les Illuminés* adheres to the contemporaneous trend for collections of biographical portraits, and the narrator of “La Bibliothèque de mon oncle” explicitly situates his work within this popular early nineteenth-century literary tradition, referring to “ce temps-ci, où les portraits littéraires ont quelque succès” (II, 885). However, Nerval’s portraits explode the boundaries of biographical discourse, even calling into question the validity of biography as a distinct literary genre. As pointed out by Ann Jefferson, the individuals selected by Nerval for inclusion in this collection of portraits are not obvious biographical subjects, since they render problematic the usual basic assumptions of biography, such as stable identity, temporal linearity, and historical objectivity.<sup>28</sup> Indeed, *Les Illuminés* is generically eccentric, resisting the distinction between history and fiction, whilst also dissolving the boundary between biographical and autobiographical writing. As seen above, despite its apparent status as a series of biographies, *Les Illuminés* passes into the domain of autobiography, since through the fictionalised narrator of the prologue Nerval inscribes himself into the text as a whole, becoming one of the *illuminés* of his collection. Far from elucidating the purpose of the work and clarifying the authorial perspective with regard to the material to be presented, “La Bibliothèque de mon oncle” obscures further the

already elusive subject matter introduced by the title and sub-title of *Les Illuminés*. The perpetually uncertain status of the narrator's subject matter is captured fully in the final statement of "La Bibliothèque de mon oncle": "Mon pauvre oncle disait souvent: «Il faut toujours tourner sa langue sept fois dans sa bouche avant de parler.» Que devrait-on faire avant d'écrire?" (II, 886).

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<sup>28</sup> Ann Jefferson, *Biography and the Question of Literature in France* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 191.

## CHAPTER ONE

### “LE ROI DE BICETRE”: MADNESS AND MONOMANIA IN THE SIXTEENTH CENTURY

#### Introduction

The first of Nerval's *illuminés* is the obscure sixteenth-century figure, Raoul Spifame, the portrait of whom is entitled “Le Roi de Bicêtre”. This opening portrait explores further the themes and preoccupations that have already been introduced to the reader in “La Bibliothèque de mon oncle” and that pervade all six of the biographical portraits included in *Les Illuminés*. Central to “Le Roi de Bicêtre” is the question of clinical madness, a theme that is apparent in the title by the reference to the hospital of Bicêtre. At the time when Nerval was writing, Bicêtre had become a hospital for the treatment of the mentally ill under the guidance of Philippe Pinel and was therefore specifically associated with the medicalisation of madness.<sup>1</sup> Accordingly, the pathological status of madness is fundamental to this portrait and Nerval here transposes distinctly nineteenth-century ideas to a sixteenth-century context. Indeed, despite its apparent status as a historical account, the image of madness that emerges from “Le Roi de Bicêtre” is grounded in the cultural and historical context in which Nerval was writing. Mediating between pathological and Romantic models of madness derived from nineteenth-century medical and popular culture, Nerval attaches both positive and negative connotations to the concept. From the central theme of madness, Nerval's narrative evokes a number of ideas and preoccupations specific to the context of nineteenth-century France. Major themes under investigation in “Le Roi de Bicêtre” include early psychiatric interpretations of madness as a pathological condition; the concept of partial madness and the related nineteenth-century category of monomania; the perceived link between madness and

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<sup>1</sup> It was Pinel's role at Bicêtre that gave rise to his legendary status as the liberator of the insane from their chains. Owing to its association with Pinel, Bicêtre has become symbolic of the medical appropriation of madness in France from the late eighteenth century.

dream; the association of madness with superior mental capacities; and the mystical concept of the Double.

The very first sentence of “Le Roi de Bicêtre” establishes madness as its dominant theme, while simultaneously alerting the reader to the necessarily problematic nature of the concept in the ensuing narrative: “Nous allons raconter la folie d’un personnage fort singulier, qui vécut vers le milieu du XVI<sup>e</sup> siècle” (II, 887). These opening words recall the first sentence of “La Bibliothèque de mon oncle”, in which the narrator from the outset raises the question of madness with his reference to Erasmus’s *Eloge de la folie*. As in the previous chapter, the intrinsic complexity of the concept of madness is immediately apparent to the reader, since both positive and negative dimensions of the phenomenon are implied. Just as the narrator’s allusion to Erasmus in the preface reveals the potential for a positive, non-pathological interpretation of madness, here the description of Spifame as “fort singulier” carries implications of originality and uniqueness that exceed the pathological dimension of madness and its predominantly clinical status in nineteenth-century France. Furthermore, the mere fact of dedicating a biographical portrait to Spifame necessarily attaches certain significance and value to the unconventional thought and activity of an individual introduced by the word *folie* and repeatedly characterised as *un fou*. It is therefore evident to the reader that the first in Nerval’s series of *illuminés* exemplifies the ambivalence surrounding the theme of madness that was introduced in “La Bibliothèque de mon oncle” and that underpins *Les Illuminés* as a whole.

Prior to its inclusion in *Les Illuminés* in 1852, under the title “Le Roi de Bicêtre”, Nerval’s semi-fictionalised account of the life of Raoul Spifame had already been published twice, on both occasions with a different title. Nerval’s portrait of Spifame first appeared in *La Presse* in September 1839, entitled “Biographie singulière de Raoul Spifame, seigneur Des Granges”, before being published as “Le Meilleur Roi de France” in *La Revue Pittoresque* in December 1844. The three different titles carried by the text reveal slight changes in emphasis on the part of Nerval and in each case the significance of the historical figure of Spifame

undergoes minor transformation. As indicated by Ora Avni, the sequence of titles chosen by Nerval for his portrayal of the life of Raoul Spifame exemplifies the inherent contradictions embodied in Nerval's depiction of this individual:

Trois titres; trois points de vue descriptifs qui renvoient au même personnage trois descriptions logiquement et référentiellement incompatibles: on n'est pas roi quand on est un simple particulier comme l'indique le premier titre. On n'est pas le meilleur roi de France ou même roi de France tout court quand on se réclame de Bicêtre, c'est-à-dire fou, et l'on ne loge pas à Bicêtre quand on est roi de France.<sup>2</sup>

The fusion of the figures of madman and king, captured in the final title of the portrait, "Le Roi de Bicêtre", represents the dissolution of boundaries that is a central feature of *Les Illuminés* as a whole and that is fundamental to the theme of eccentricity introduced to the reader in the prologue. The inclusion of this portrait in *Les Illuminés* attaches a new level of significance to the figure of Spifame: by inserting Spifame into his series of *illuminés*, Nerval creates an implicit connection between this individual and the subjects of the subsequent portraits. Spifame's status as an *illuminé* attaches a new dimension to the story of his life, a new framework from which the events of Spifame's life as previously related by Nerval can be interpreted.

### **Other Writings on Raoul Spifame**

Raoul Spifame is known primarily as the author of a single work, which has the Latin title, *Dicaearchiae Henrici, regis christianissimi, Progymnasmata*, and which was first published in 1556.<sup>3</sup> Spifame's text constitutes an extensive collection of imagined political reforms and edicts that are written under the name of the sixteenth-century French king, Henri II. Despite its Latin title, the work is written in French, yet the discourse is often obscure and the style convoluted. Whilst many of the reforms suggested by Spifame are highly extravagant in nature, including those created with the design of personal vengeance, over the centuries a number of writers

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<sup>2</sup> Ora Avni, "A Bicêtre: Austin, Searle, Nerval", in *MLN*, vol. 98, no. 4 (1983), 624-638 (pp. 625-626).

<sup>3</sup> [Raoul Spifame], *Dicaearchiae Henrici, regis christianissimi, Progymnasmata* (Paris, 1556). An editor's note identifies the author as Jean Spifame, who is described as a "homme d'un grand savoir et

have mistaken Spifame's text for a genuine work of Henri II. Louis-Sébastien Mercier who was writing in the late eighteenth century discusses this strange fact:

Ce qui est assez plaisant, c'est que Brillon, auteur du Dictionnaire des arrêts, l'abbé Abel de Sainte-Marthe & plusieurs autres écrivains ont pris pour un recueil de véritables ordonnances de Henri II, ce qui n'était que l'ouvrage d'un particulier sans caractère et sans autorité: tant il avoit imité parfaitement le style et le ton de ces édits royaux.<sup>4</sup>

Ernest Nys provides an extensive list of writers, including a number of important political figures, who have believed Spifame's imaginary laws to be genuine.<sup>5</sup> Dupin, writing in the early nineteenth century, suggests that it was the desire to implement numerous aspects of these laws that caused such writers to consciously overlook the questions of the true authorship and authenticity of this obscure text: "Peut-être ces auteurs savaient-ils que ces arrêts étaient *supposés*, mais ils étaient bien aises de s'en autoriser pour appuyer le désir qu'ils avaient de voir mettre à exécution plusieurs des choses ordonnées par ces arrêts".<sup>6</sup>

Although a number of writers refer to Spifame's *Dicaearchiae*, several of whom present it as a genuine work of King Henri II, very few historical studies deal with the details of the life of this figure. Therefore, very little authoritative biographical information about Spifame is available. However, at the time at which Nerval was writing, this sixteenth-century figure was not entirely unknown, and Nerval was not the first to bring Spifame's life and his 1556 collection of imagined political reforms to public attention. The most notable works dedicated to Spifame before Nerval's "Le Roi de Bicêtre" are those of Nicolas Catherinot, published in the seventeenth century, and of Denis-François Secousse in the eighteenth century, the latter author in particular sparking widespread interest with regard to his mysterious subject.<sup>7</sup> As will be seen, fundamental to the portraits is Spifame's apparent affliction with madness and the way in which this relates to his impressive intellectual output. In

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qui fut néanmoins accusé de perturbation des sens". Max Milner points out that the mistake in Spifame's first name is because his father's name is incorrectly used in place of his (II, 1715).

<sup>4</sup> Louis-Sébastien Mercier, "De Raoul Spifame", in *Tableau de Paris*, 8 vols. (1782-1788), VII (1783), 116-123 (p. 117).

<sup>5</sup> Ernst Nys, *Raoul Spifame. Avocat au parlement de Paris* (Paris: Durand, 1890) p. 6.

<sup>6</sup> André-Marie-Jean-Jacques Dupin, *Bibliothèque choisie des livres de droit pour faire suite aux lettres sur la profession d'avocat*, (Paris: Fain, 1832) p. 305.

<sup>7</sup> Jean Céard, "Raoul Spifame, Roi de Bicêtre: Recherches sur un récit de Nerval", in *Etudes nervaliennes et romantiques*, no. 3 (1981), 25-50 (p. 26).



both cases Spifame's *Dicaearchiae* is presented as a vast collection of innovative and progressive political ideas, a notion that is repeated in subsequent portraits of this figure, including that of Nerval. Accounts of Spifame's life are littered with the terms *folie* and *fou*, and, from the nineteenth century, the words *monomanie*, *monomaniaque*, *excentricité*, and *excentrique* are also recurrent features of such texts.

Catherinot expresses an admiration for the political ideas of Spifame and characterises him as a *Sage fou*, a concept derived from *Das Narrenschiff* (translated into French as *La Nef des Fous*), a satirical work by the German writer Sebastian Brandt that was first published in the late fifteenth century.<sup>8</sup> Embracing Brandt's concept, Catherinot presents Spifame as a madman whose innovative ideas are of great value to his society. In this context, Catherinot compares Spifame to Desiderius Erasmus, Thomas More, and François Rabelais, the writings of whom, he claims, exemplify Brandt's concept of the *Sage fou*:

Sébastien Brant, cet ingénieux Allemand, n'a pas oublié dans sa nef les emprunteurs d'un côté, et les usuriers de l'autre [...]. Cet ouvrage a excité Erasme à composer l'éloge de la folie, Thomas More à bâtir son Utopie, Maître François Rabelais à fabriquer son Pantagruelisme, et M<sup>e</sup> Raoul Spifame Avocat de Paris sous Henri II envisageoit ce Sage fou quand il méditoit sa Dicearchie composée de 500 Arrests.<sup>9</sup>

As pointed out by Jean Céard, Catherinot's comparison of Spifame to Erasmus is reflected in *Les Illuminés* by the fact that Nerval's portrait of Spifame follows his direct allusion to Erasmus in "La Bibliothèque de mon oncle"; however, Céard argues that Nerval was unlikely to have been familiar with Catherinot's analysis.<sup>10</sup>

It was not until the eighteenth century that Spifame, albeit briefly, became a widely known figure and the subject of significant public interest. This was the result of the publication of the text "Notice d'un livre singulier & rare, intitulé *Dicaearchiae Henrici Regis Christianissimi Progymnasmata*", which drew attention to Spifame's obscure 1556 publication. This text, which appeared in *L'Histoire de l'Académie*

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<sup>8</sup> This text was first translated into French as *La Nef des fols du monde* at the end of the fifteenth century: Sebastian Brant, *La Nef des fols du monde*, trans. By Jakob Locher (Lyon: Balsarin, 1498). It consists of an extensive poem in which Brant satirises the various follies and vices of his age.

<sup>9</sup> Nicolas Catherinot, *Le Prest gratuit* (Bourges: Cristo, 1679), pp. 82-83.

*royale des inscriptions et belles-lettres* in 1756, was written by Secousse, the editor of *Ordonnances des rois de France*. Secousse, who was working for King Louis XV, sought out Spifame's work, initially believing it to be a genuine collection of laws written by King Henri II. In his "Notice", Secousse describes his discovery of this obscure yet impressive document:

M. Secousse, chargé par ordre du Roi de travailler au recueil des ordonnances de nos Souverains, ne pouvoit manquer de rechercher avec empressement un livre dont le titre annonce, quoi qu'assez obscurément, un essai de législation du roi Henri II. Il l'a trouvé, malgré son extrême rareté; & après une lecture attentive, il a été fort étonné de reconnaître que ce n'est que l'ouvrage bizarre, d'un particulier, sans caractère & sans autorité, qui entreprend de faire des loix sous le nom, mais sans l'ordre de son Souverain; & qui établit dans son cabinet une manufacture d'arrêts, dans lesquels il embrasse presque toutes les matières qui font l'objet de la législation.<sup>11</sup>

In his presentation, Secousse characterises Spifame's work both as the ramblings of a madman and as an inspired collection of ideas that demonstrates remarkable foresight. Secousse depicts Spifame's text as a work that oscillates uncertainly between madness and reason. He portrays Spifame as a man with an overactive imagination, which accounts at once for the extravagant, eccentric nature of his thought and for the inspired, insightful nature of his ideas. Despite revealing the far-fetched, incoherent nature of many of the ideas proposed by Spifame, Secousse points out the relevance and utility of others, and states that "l'esprit égaré de Spifame, en courant après des chimères, a quelquefois rencontré le germe de plusieurs loix & de plusieurs établissemens utiles à la société".<sup>12</sup> As is true of Nerval's account of Spifame, Secousse speaks of Spifame in a manner that undermines the notion of a clear-cut distinction between madness and reason, evoking an apparent connection between his deranged mind and his exaggerated intellectual and creative capacities:

On ne peut disconvenir que Raoul Spifame n'eût de l'esprit & des connoissances assez étendues; mais l'imagination, qui dominoit en lui, l'a souvent égaré. Ses vûes sont pour l'ordinaire trop hardies, & même extravagantes; elles décèlent une altération d'esprit qui donna lieu à la sentence d'interdiction que les Juges prononcèrent contre lui. De ce cahos

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<sup>10</sup> Céard, p. 26.

<sup>11</sup> Denis-François Secousse, "Notice d'un livre singulier & rare, intitulé *Dicaearchiae Henrici Regis Christianissimi Progymnasmata*", in *Histoire de l'Académie royale des inscriptions et belles-lettres, avec les Mémoires de Littérature tirés des Registres de cette Académie, depuis l'année M.DCCXLIX, jusques & compris l'année M.DCCCLI*, (Paris: Imprimerie Royale, 1749-1751) XXIII (1756), 271-277 (p. 271).

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, p. 275.

[sic] informe s'échappent cependant des traits de lumière. Entre les différens projets qu'il a proposés & même réalisés, autant qu'il étoit en lui, par des arrêts imaginaires; il y en a qui ont été exécutés dans la suite. L'utilité qu'on peut retirer de cet ouvrage, n'est pas entièrement épuisée, & les personnes en place pourroient encore le lire avec quelque fruit; & c'est en cette occasion qu'on peut dire à la lettre qu'*un fou avise quelquefois un sage*.<sup>13</sup>

Secousse's "Notice" sparked the interest of a number of other writers, leading to the publication of a number of texts, spanning the decades from the late eighteenth century to the early nineteenth century, dealing with Spifame and his *Dicaearchiae*. Much like that of Secousse, subsequent presentations of this sixteenth-century figure and his obscure publication are preoccupied with the seemingly contradictory nature of their subject matter, highlighting the way in which Spifame's text represents the fusion of the extravagances of a madman with striking lucidity and foresight. These writers repeat Secousse's dubious affirmation of the usefulness and value of a number of Spifame's imaginary reforms, as well as his claim that several have subsequently been put into practice.<sup>14</sup> One such work is Jean Auffray's *Vues d'un politique du XVI<sup>e</sup> siècle sur la législation de son tems*, published in the late eighteenth century. Introducing the *Dicaearchiae*, Auffray states that "Tout est singulier dans cet Ouvrage",<sup>15</sup> and he calls attention to the obscure, rambling nature of the discourse. However, he proceeds to point out what he perceives to be the undeniable political significance of this collection of imagined laws and edicts, even declaring: "Spifame fut pour son siècle ce que l'Abbé de Saint-Pierre a été dans le nôtre, & malgré les disparités de ces deux Politiques, les hommes d'Etat qui négligeraient de les consulter, ne connoitroient point leurs intérêts".<sup>16</sup> Although Auffray frequently alludes to Spifame's convoluted mode of expression, claiming that the author, "n'est pas toujours aisé à entendre",<sup>17</sup> he also highlights the perceived significance of Spifame's political ideas. He suggests that Spifame's publication may have exerted a genuine influence on subsequent political thought: "les idées de Spifame sembleroient, par leur rapport, avoir servi de modèles aux

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<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 272-273.

<sup>14</sup> It is not clear which of Spifame's proposed laws Secousse is referring to when he makes such assertions. It seems that a number of writers have simply repeated Secousse's claims regarding the lasting value of some of the ideas contained in Spifame's *Dicaearchiae*.

<sup>15</sup> Jean Auffray, *Vues d'un politique du XVI<sup>e</sup> siècle sur la législation de son tems, également propre à réformer celle de nos jours* (Paris: Durand, 1775), viij.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, aiiij.

Princes qui se distinguent, aujourd’hui, par la profondeur & la sagesse de leurs Loix”.<sup>18</sup> Another late eighteenth-century study, inspired by Secousse’s publication, is that of Louis-Sébastien Mercier. Mercier’s study of Spifame constitutes a chapter of his 1783 *Tableau de Paris*. Max Milner suggests that it is likely to have been Mercier’s chapter about Spifame that first introduced Nerval to this largely unknown sixteenth-century figure (II, 1715). Much of Mercier’s text is identical to that of Secousse, revealing the extent to which the latter’s presentation of Spifame and his legacy influenced subsequent accounts. Like Secousse, Mercier indicates the value of certain ideas contained in Spifame’s *Dicaearchiae*: “On voit que les idées de Spifame se rapprochent de celles des souverains de l’Europe qui se distinguent le plus aujourd’hui par la prévoyante sagesse de leurs loix”.<sup>19</sup> Jean-Michel-Constant Leber, also writing in the early nineteenth century, alludes to the “bouffonneries” and the “déclamations satiriques” contained in this volume, but equally observes “des vues prophétiques” and a “haute sagesse” in Spifame’s writing: “On trouve beaucoup de bouffonneries et de déclamations satiriques dans cette singulière composition; mais on y remarque aussi des vues prophétiques, des conseils d’une haute sagesse, dont la civilisation plus avancée a fait son profit”.<sup>20</sup>

Written in the late nineteenth century, Henri Moulin’s biographical account of the life of Spifame appears to be heavily influenced by Nerval’s “Le Roi de Bicêtre”, bringing to the fore the same aspects of Spifame’s life that are prominent in Nerval’s text and adopting a semi-clinical discourse that reflects its nineteenth-century context. Although Moulin’s portrait is presented as a straightforwardly historical account, it nevertheless reveals a marked overlap with Nerval’s highly fictionalised portrayal of the same figure. Much like that of Nerval, Moulin’s presentation of Spifame’s life is centred around the “ressemblance frappante” between Spifame and King Henri II of France, which, according to both Nerval and Moulin’s accounts, led Spifame’s contemporaries to address him as *Sire* and *Majesté*, titles that he is said to

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<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, viij.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*, vj.

<sup>19</sup> Mercier, p. 119.

<sup>20</sup> Jean-Michel-Constant Leber, *De l’Etat réel de la presse et des pamphlets depuis François I jusqu’à Louis XIV* (Paris: Techener, 1834), pp. 34-35.

have gradually embraced and to have taken literally.<sup>21</sup> Moulin, like Nerval, identifies Spifame's physical resemblance to the king as the starting point of his mental degradation, a detail that, as discussed below, appears to have little basis in historical reality. The words *excentricité* and *excentrique* appear recurrently in this biography. Moulin identifies eccentricity as a defining characteristic of his subject with comments such as: "Les bizarreries de son caractère, les étrangetés de sa conduite en firent un personnage excentrique".<sup>22</sup> Spifame's *excentricités* are identified as the origin of his descent into madness: "Ses excentricités lui font interdire l'exercice de sa profession, et sa raison l'abandonne".<sup>23</sup> In keeping with nineteenth-century popular and psychiatric culture, the concept of eccentricity here gains a pathological dimension as well as being used in a more positive manner to refer to Spifame's originality and genius. Moulin states that Spifame's impressive collection of imaginary laws, composed during his incarceration at Bicêtre, prove that Spifame was afflicted with a form of *folie lucide*, a concept that is also central to Nerval's portrayal of this figure. Just as Nerval's "Le Roi de Bicêtre", in spite of its sixteenth-century subject, adopts a discourse that is specific to the period in which the author was writing, Moulin's biographical narrative also assimilates the language and the ideas of his age. Besides his multiple allusions to partial madness and eccentricity, Moulin evokes Esquirol's category of monomania to designate Spifame's pathological mental state; he describes his subject as "un monomane et non un fou furieux".<sup>24</sup> As will be seen, the idea that Spifame was afflicted with monomania, a characteristically nineteenth-century concept, is also central to Nerval's account.

Much like the other authors that examine Spifame's *Dicaearchiae*, Moulin underlines the incongruous character of Spifame's text, which, he claims, reveals an unsettling combination of madness and reason. He highlights the contradictory nature of a work that has both been both dismissed as "rêveries bouffonnes" and

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<sup>21</sup> Henri Moulin, *Jacques et Raoul Spifame 1495-1566* (Paris: Charavay, 1884), p. 9.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid*, p. 9.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*, p. 5.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid*, p. 10.

recognised as a valuable collection of ideas, describing Spifame's extravagant collection of laws as:

une œuvre mêlée de folie et de la raison, dont le siècle de l'auteur a attribué les rêveries bouffonnes au maniaque, mais dont le siècle suivant, en en faisant son profit, a reporté les vues saines et les visées philanthropiques à l'économiste-philosophe.<sup>25</sup>

Moulin claims that Spifame's volume of proposed laws reveals the fusion of the "excentricités d'un esprit malade" and the ideas of "l'esprit le plus sain": "A côté de ces excentricités d'un esprit malade, le *Progymnasmata* nous offre une série de dispositions édictées par l'esprit le plus sain, et auxquelles de véritables ordonnances royales ont donné plus tard force et autorité".<sup>26</sup>

The inherently contradictory nature of the life and work of Raoul Spifame discussed at length by these various authors is at the heart of Nerval's portrait. Unlike the portraits of Spifame discussed above, which are concerned with the historical significance this figure and his single publication, "Le Roi de Bicêtre" is largely fictional and it rapidly becomes apparent to the reader that Nerval's motivation in composing this text does not lie in providing biographically accurate information. Adopting a distinctly nineteenth-century perspective, Nerval's account of Spifame's life is founded on an exploration of the theme of madness, dealing with themes and preoccupations that are central to his literary explorations of madness elsewhere in his writings and that are specific to nineteenth-century France. In particular, there is a striking overlap between Nerval's portrayal of Spifame's madness and the way in which Nerval later gives voice to his own pathological mental state in *Aurélia*. As indicated by Meryl Tyers, despite the fact that this text was first published in 1839, prior to the author's first interment for mental disturbance, "the interest this piece demonstrates in mental illness and privileged vision provides an uncanny prefiguration of Nerval's subsequent literary treatment of his own madness".<sup>27</sup>

### **"Le Roi de Bicêtre" as a Literary Text**

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<sup>25</sup> *Ibid*, p. 12.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid*, p. 14.

The narrator of “Le Roi de Bicêtre” alludes to the scientific relevance of his study, implying that his text is founded on rigorous research. Pretensions to scientific validity are a recurrent feature of Nerval’s literary explorations of madness, as already observed in relation to *Aurélia*. In “Le Roi de Bicêtre”, the narrator claims that his study of Spifame’s life could be of interest to “cette science des phénomènes de l’âme”, stating:

Nous avons révélé [*sic*] avec intérêt tous les singuliers périodes [*sic*] de cette folie, qui ne peuvent être indifférents pour cette science des phénomènes de l’âme, si creusée par les philosophes, et qui ne peut encore, hélas! réunir que des effets et des résultats, en raisonnant à vide sur les causes que Dieu nous cache! (II, 891)

This assertion recalls the claims made by the narrator of “La Bibliothèque de mon oncle”, who also indicates the scientific value of his writing, claiming to engage in “la physiologie morale” (II, 886). The apparently scientific nature of Nerval’s portrait of Spifame is also evoked by the narrator’s reference to specific scientific theories, as is the case when he alludes to the “fascinations magnétiques”, to which, he claims, Spifame’s malady can be attributed: “On a toujours pensé depuis, en recueillant les détails de cette existence singulière, que l’infortuné était victime d’une de ces fascinations magnétiques dont la science se rend mieux compte aujourd’hui” (II, 890). However, reference to contemporaneous scientific thought does little to attach scientific validity to Nerval’s account. This allusion is to a highly controversial aspect of nineteenth-century science, which at the time at which Nerval was writing was the subject of much debate.<sup>28</sup> Indeed, the theory here evoked was associated with both physical and occultist science, and therefore serves only to obscure the status of Spifame’s condition as portrayed in “Le Roi de Bicêtre”.

Allusions to science and suggestions of historical neutrality and objectivity are undermined by the literary, romanticised nature of the portrait. Much of the ambiguity of Nerval’s subject matter arises from the oscillation of the narrative between a detached, objective tone and a highly stylised literary prose, making no clear distinction between straightforward historical fact and romanticised fiction.

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<sup>27</sup> Tyers, pp. 16-17.

<sup>28</sup> Franz-Anton Mesmer’s 1773 theory of *magnétisme animal*, although elaborated in the context of medical science, was widely rejected by the nineteenth-century medical profession. It tended to be associated with the occult sciences and was often dismissed as charlatanism.

Apparently objective historical fact is intermingled with fictional prose with the result that the status of the narrative as a whole remains shrouded in ambiguity. The shifting status of the narrative voice is especially apparent in the final lines of the portrait. Here, in the space of a few lines, the narrative passes from stylised fictional prose to clear-cut statement of fact, leaving the reader with the ultimate impression that “Le Roi de Bicêtre” constitutes a historically valid account of the events of Spifame’s life. The apparent precision with which the narrator reveals the details of Spifame’s volume of imaginary laws and edicts, points to the narrator’s careful research and the historical accuracy of this portrait:

Le recueil des arrêts et ordonnances rendus par ce fou célèbre fut entièrement imprimé sous le règne suivant avec ce titre: *Dicaearchiae Henrici regis progymnasmata*. Il en existe un exemplaire à la bibliothèque royale sous les numéros VII, 6, 412. On peut voir aussi les Mémoires de la Société des inscriptions et belles-lettres, tome XXIII. (II, 902)

Such precise referencing and pretensions to rigorous historical research recall the task of the narrator of “Angélique”, which involves searching for a specific book in order to produce an accurate historical account as opposed to a novel. However, despite the apparent attention to detail in the closing words of “Le Roi de Bicêtre”, Jean Céard points out that the references to Spifame’s edicts provided by Nerval are not grounded in reality:

Cette précision même ne doit pas faire illusion: cet exemplaire ne porte pas et ne semble pas avoir jamais porté cette cote; coté successivement F.2630, F.4588, F.1976 (cote actuelle), il a toujours appartenu à la série F; d’autre part, la B. N. n’a aucune série VII.<sup>29</sup>

Céard’s comments reveal that, even though at times the narrator adopts a dry, neutral tone and appears to convey straightforward factual information, Nerval’s portrait of Spifame remains an essentially fictional work. As is the case elsewhere in Nerval’s writings, suggestions of objectivity and neutrality should not be taken at face value. The very title of “Le Roi de Bicêtre” reveals to the reader the way in which Nerval’s portrayal of Spifame exceeds its apparent status as a straightforward historical account. As pointed out by Corinne Bayle, the hospital of Bicêtre, an establishment for the mentally deranged, was constructed only in 1634, while Spifame’s death was in 1563.<sup>30</sup> This deliberate anachronism reveals how Nerval uses his study of

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<sup>29</sup> Céard, p. 27.

<sup>30</sup> Corinne Bayle, *Gérard de Nerval: La Marche à l’étoile* (Seysssel: Champ Vallon, 2001), p. 62.



Spifame as the starting point from which to reflect on his own century rather than to convey a historically valid account.

Despite the apparently biographical status of “Le Roi de Bicêtre” and its pretensions to scientific validity, Nerval’s narrative is first and foremost a fictional creation. Indeed, of all the texts that constitute *Les Illuminés*, this is the only one that has a consistent narrative voice and coherent literary structure, relating a story in a straightforward, linear manner. As will be seen in the following chapters, in contrast to “Le Roi de Bicêtre”, the subsequent portraits in this collection incorporate extensive citation from various different sources, and therefore lack a stable perspective and a coherent sequence of events. Although Nerval’s narrator asserts the historical and scientific accuracy of his study, the distinctly literary nature of this text and its highly stylised form are instantly apparent to the reader.<sup>31</sup>

As already observed, Nerval’s portrait of Raoul Spifame takes as its starting point the striking resemblance between Spifame, a lawyer at the parliament of Paris, and King Henri II of France. The entire narrative of “Le Roi de Bicêtre” arises from this single fact, and it is from this assumption that the events recounted by Nerval unfold, including Spifame’s descent into madness, his incarceration at Bicêtre, and his formulation of his collection of laws and edicts. However, the historical authenticity of this central assertion is far from certain. No document published prior to Nerval’s portrait of Spifame mentions the apparently overwhelming physical similarity between Spifame and the King, which if true would surely be worthy of note. Indeed, authors, such as Moulin (cited above), who evoke this as a genuine aspect of Spifame’s life, published their works after the appearance of “Le Roi de Bicêtre” and appear to have derived this apparent historical truth from Nerval’s fictionalised narrative. This appears to be the case for Théophile Lhuillier, who, in his discussion of Spifame’s *Dicaearchiae*, describes Spifame’s resemblance to the King in an

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<sup>31</sup> Despite the clearly fictional nature of Nerval’s portrait of Spifame, a number of writers cite it as an authoritative biographical account. For example, Yves Jeanclos, in his historical study of Spifame, repeatedly refers to “Le Roi de Bicêtre” as a source of information regarding the life of his subject: Yves Jeanclos, *Les Projets de réforme judiciaire de Raoul Spifame au XVI<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Geneva: Droz, 1977).

almost identical manner to Nerval in “Le Roi de Bicêtre”.<sup>32</sup> By contrast, Ernest Nys casts doubt on the historical veracity of this aspect of Spifame’s life, questioning the origins of this frequently cited truth. Nys notes that a number of authors base their accounts on this fact; in particular, he cites Nerval’s portrait of Spifame, which he describes as an “étude fantaisiste”

Quelques auteurs rapportent que Raoul Spifame ressemblaient au roi Henri II à un tel point, que ses confrères l’appelaient *Sire* et ne l’approchaient qu’en le qualifiant de Majesté. Il se serait fait que Spifame aurait pris son rôle au sérieux, aurait morigéné jusqu’aux présidents et aurait si bien agi qu’il se serait vu enfermé à Bicêtre, puis, par ordre du roi, traité avec bienveillance et retenu, mais sans bonne garde, dans un château. C’est sur cette donnée que Gérard de Nerval a écrit son étude fantaisiste.<sup>33</sup>

Nys questions the authenticity of the proclaimed physical resemblance between these figures, pointing out the nineteen-year age gap between them, a fact that renders Nerval’s version of events entirely inconceivable.<sup>34</sup> Similarly, Max Milner says: “Aucun document historique ne signale cette ressemblance, qui aurait certainement frappé les contemporains. Spifame avait d’ailleurs une vingtaine d’années de plus que Henri II” (II, 1716). The fact that Nerval takes as his starting point for “Le Roi de Bicêtre” a notion that seems to have no basis in historical reality, reveals that the first of the biographical portraits in *Les Illuminés* is not concerned with conveying factually authentic biographical information.

Besides the clear lack of historical accuracy in Nerval’s text, the fictional nature of his portrait of Spifame is evident from the romanticised nature of the narrative and its dependence on a number of literary motifs, elements that undermine its status as a reliable historical account. The highly stylised literary nature of this account is pointed out by Meryl Tyers, who says of this work:

Both as a  *récit*  and as an unorthodox species of biography, “Le Roi de Bicêtre” is among the most suggestively patterned, in literary as well as psychoanalytic terms, of any of Nerval’s writings. This quality is due to the impression of a simple and satisfying structure, and to the device of character-doubling.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Théophile Lhuillier, “Un Seigneur des Granges, près Melun, au XVI<sup>e</sup> siècle”, in *Bulletin de la société d’archéologie, sciences, lettres et arts du département de Seine-et-Marne*, VIII (Meaux: Destouches, 1878), 203-209 (p. 206).

<sup>33</sup> Nys, p. 11.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 11-12.

<sup>35</sup> Meryl Tyers, *Critical Fictions: Nerval’s Les Illuminés* (Oxford: Legenda, 1998), p. 17.

Tyers proceeds to evoke “the metaphorical possibilities afforded [...] by the thematized presence of rich cloth, clothing, forms of decoration and of ornament”,<sup>36</sup> elements that reveal the essentially literary character of “Le Roi de Bicêtre”. Spifame’s alleged physical likeness to Henri II takes on a distinctly literary and even mystical dimension, becoming bound up with the Romantic theme of the Double, and linked to superstitious beliefs.

### **The Theme of the Double in “Le Roi de Bicêtre”**

The theme of the Double or *Doppelgänger*, central to Nerval’s portrait of Spifame, is a literary motif that was exploited by a number of French authors in the early decades of the nineteenth century. The motif of the Double played a major role in the German Romantic movement from the late eighteenth century. The theme appears in the tales of Ernst Hoffmann, as well as in Goethe’s *Faust*, a work that was translated into French by Nerval. Nerval’s usage of the motif could also have been inspired by his interest in oriental stories and legends, which he speaks of in *Voyage en Orient*. Besides its central role in “Le Roi de Bicêtre”, this literary device is also present elsewhere in Nerval’s writings, notably in “Histoire du Calife Hakem” and in *Aurélia*. In each of these three texts, Nerval exploits the literary motif of the Double in combination with an exploration of the theme of pathological madness. In particular, in each of these works, the technique of character doubling is bound up with the concept of hallucination and with the association between madness and the dream state. Each time Nerval adopts the theme, besides linking it to the question of madness, it also acquires mystical connotations, evoking the belief that seeing one’s Double represents a premonition of imminent death.

Kari Lokke perceives a political dimension in the specific way in which Nerval employs this literary motif, claiming that in each case it reflects the “elusive intermingling of mysticism and utopianism”<sup>37</sup> that is a key characteristic of Nerval’s writings in general. Lokke suggests that Nerval’s distinctive usage of this

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<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> Kari Lokke, *Gérard de Nerval: the Poet as Social Visionary* (Lexington: French Forum Publishers, 1987), p. 13.

commonplace literary device “merges a mystical conception of the self with the political vision of the eradication of hierarchy and class distinction”.<sup>38</sup> Such an interpretation can be readily applied to “Le Roi de Bicêtre”, in which Spifame’s striking resemblance to the King creates an indissoluble bond between these two figures, undermining the substantial differences between them in terms of class and social standing.

In “Le Roi de Bicêtre”, the affinity between Spifame and Henri II transcends the physical as Spifame’s identification with the King invades all aspects of his being, simultaneously constituting both the cause and the symptom of his madness. The implied unity between these individuals takes on a quasi-mystical dimension, resisting straightforward physical explanations and surpassing the association with pathological madness. Nerval evokes the potentially mystical dimension of the theme through the superstitious reaction of the King, who on seeing himself reflected in Spifame fears that this represents a premonition of his own death:

Il semblait au roi Henri II qu’un portrait fût placé en face de lui, qui reproduisait toute sa personne, en transformant seulement en noir ses vêtements splendides. Chacun fit de même cette remarque, que le jeune avocat ressemblait prodigieusement au roi,<sup>39</sup> et, d’après la superstition qui fait croire que quelque temps avant de mourir on voit apparaître sa propre image sous un costume de deuil, le prince parut soucieux tout le reste de la séance. En sortant, il fit prendre des informations sur Raoul Spifame, et ne se rassura qu’en apprenant le nom, la position et l’origine avérés de son fantôme. Toutefois, il ne manifesta aucun désir de le connaître. (II, 888)

Owing to his superstitions, the King maintains a distance between himself and Spifame throughout. Nerval’s narrator provides no commentary or interpretation on the King’s superstitious reaction to seeing his Double. Therefore, the status of such beliefs in the narrative remains uncertain. Superstitious interpretations of the Double are also central to Nerval’s “Histoire du Calife Hakem”. In the chapter entitled “Les deux califes”, Hakem discovers that he has been replaced by an imposter, and the narrator, describing his protagonist’s reaction, attaches distinctly mystical connotations to the motif of the Double:

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<sup>38</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 15-16.

<sup>39</sup> Here the narrative visibly departs from historical fact, as the narrator describes Spifame as a “jeune avocat” even though, as already observed, he was twenty years older than the king.

On conçoit la stupeur de Hakem à ce spectacle inouï: il chercha son poignard à sa ceinture pour s'élancer sur cet usurpateur; mais une force irrésistible le paralysait. Cette vision lui semblait un avertissement céleste, et son trouble augmenta encore lorsqu'il reconnut ou crut reconnaître ses propres traits dans ceux de l'homme assis près de sa sœur. Il crut que c'était son *ferouer*,<sup>40</sup> ou son double, et, pour les Orientaux, voir son propre spectre est un signe du plus mauvais augure. L'ombre force le corps à la suivre dans le délai d'un jour. (II, 557)

There is much overlap in the way in which Nerval deals with this theme in “Le Roi de Bicêtre” and in “Histoire du Calife Hakem”. In both cases, the apparition of the Double marks the starting point for the doubling of the personality of the protagonist and, in particular, the confusion between reality and dream. In the case of Hakem, character-doubling, as well as the loss of distinction between reality and dream vision, is the result of his use of hashish. As seen in Part One, the overlap between madness and ordinary dream was studied, from the perspective of medical science, by the alienist, Moreau de Tours, who considered that drug-induced delirium was analogous to pathological madness.

The theme of the Double in “Le Roi de Bicêtre” is not limited to the obvious physical resemblance between Spifame and Henri II. Indeed, in many ways, Spifame's true Double is his companion, Claude Vignet, these two individuals being linked by their complementary pathological conditions and the fact that they both populate the same delirious fantasy. They are placed together owing to the striking similarities between them and the overlapping nature of their madness: “On trouva plaisant d'accoupler ces deux folies originales et de voir le résultat d'une pareille entrevue” (II, 893). Vignet's madness closely mirrors that of Spifame. The two characters share the same vision and are able to operate together in a world that is the product of their illnesses and exaggerated imaginations. Both Spifame and Vignet are painted by Nerval as victims of monomania, and more specifically of *monomanie orgueilleuse* (see below), both aspiring to positions of grandeur and attributing to themselves elevated statuses and significance. Just as Spifame believes himself to be the King of France, Claude Vignet sees himself as “le roi des poètes” (II, 893). Spifame and Vignet are able to communicate and understand each other in a manner that exceeds the comprehension of others who do not share their pathological vision:

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<sup>40</sup> For an explanation of the oriental concept of the *ferouer* see Gérard Schaeffer, *Le Voyage en Orient de Nerval: Etude de structures* (Neuchâtel: Baconnière, 1967), p. 71.

Au bout de peu de jours les deux fous étaient devenus inséparables, chacun comprenant et caressant la pensée de l'autre, et sans jamais se contrarier dans leurs mutuelles attributions. Pour l'un, ce poète était la louange qui se multiplie sous toutes les formes à l'entour des rois et les confirme dans leur opinion de supériorité; pour l'autre, cette ressemblance incroyable était la certitude de la présence du roi lui-même. Il n'y avait plus de prison, mais un palais; plus de haillons, mais des parures étincelantes; l'ordinaire des repas se transformait en banquets splendides où, parmi les concerts de violes et de buccines, montait l'encens harmonieux des vers. (II, 894)

### **Partial Madness and Monomania in “Le Roi de Bicêtre”**

In “Le Roi de Bicêtre”, the mystical theme of the Double is bound up with an exploration of the theme of pathological madness. Nerval's depiction of Spifame's madness reveals a marked indebtedness to nineteenth-century popular and psychiatric discourse, assimilating nineteenth-century ideas regarding partial madness, the perceived association between madness and enhanced creative or intellectual capacities, and the distinctly nineteenth-century concept of monomania.

A key feature of Spifame's madness, as related by Nerval, is the emphasis on the partial nature of his condition. The narrator repeatedly calls attention to the fact that Spifame's madness is limited to a specific aspect of his existence, besides which he remains capable of functioning fully and efficiently. Although Spifame's condition deteriorates, there is constant emphasis on the fact that he remains rational and productive within the bounds of his illness. Vacillating between pathologising and romanticising discourse, the narrative deals with the idea that there exists a connection between madness and superior mental capacities. This emerges from the way in which, fuelled by their delirious visions, Spifame and Vignet work together to devise and print a vast collection of proposed edicts and to plan their ultimately successful escape from Bicêtre. Although the narrator shows that these self-imposed tasks are derived from their pathological mental states, he nevertheless highlights the impressive nature of their accomplishments. The narrator describes how Spifame, aided by his companion, creates multiple laws and reforms relating to a wide range of different domains. This remarkable productivity is presented as being bound up with, and aided by, their madness. Besides the more extravagant reforms proposed by Spifame, the reader is informed that: “Ses autres édits, arrêts et ordonnances, conservés jusqu'à nous, comme rendus au nom d'Henri II, traitent de la justice, des

finances, de la guerre, et surtout de la police intérieure de Paris” (II, 896). “Le Roi de Bicêtre” closes with an affirmation of the continued relevance and value of the ideas devised by an individual repeatedly characterised as a “véritable fou”, as the narrator states: “Il est remarquable que les réformes indiquées par Raoul Spifame ont été la plupart exécutées depuis” (II, 902).

The pathological category of monomania as described in nineteenth-century psychiatric writings is fundamental to Nerval’s depiction of Spifame’s pathological mental condition. Whilst the terms *monomanie* or *monomaniaque* do not appear in “Le Roi de Bicêtre”, the descriptions of Spifame’s madness reveal a marked indebtedness to this prominent psychiatric theory. In many ways, the Spifame of Nerval’s text is the perfect incarnation of the nineteenth-century monomaniac as defined by Esquirol, reflecting the multiple case studies of individuals afflicted with this condition in the psychiatric publications of Esquirol and his contemporaries. The idea, promoted by prominent nineteenth-century alienists, that madness can be limited to a single aspect of an individual’s thought and behaviour is clearly embodied by Nerval’s Spifame. Spifame’s madness is here shown to arise from the single fact of his resemblance to the King, an idea that becomes exaggerated to the point of pathological obsession. However, beyond the madness associated with his overwhelming physical similarity to the King, Spifame retains the capacity for lucidity and rational thought. Besides the pathological madness that affects this specific aspect of his existence Spifame is able to function efficiently, even demonstrating superior creative and intellectual abilities.

In his clinical writings, besides providing multiple case studies from his patients, Esquirol turns to literature and history for examples of individuals afflicted with the pathological conditions that he defines. Esquirol cites Miguel de Cervantes’s famous character, Don Quixote, as a literary incarnation of the archetypal monomaniac:

L’on trouve dans don Quichotte une description admirable de la monomanie qui régna presque dans toute l’Europe, à la suite des croisades: mélange d’extravagance amoureuse et de bravoure chevaleresque, & qui, chez plusieurs individus, était une véritable folie.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Etienne Esquirol, *Des Maladies mentales considérées sous les rapports médical, hygiénique et médico-légal*, 2 vols. (Paris: Baillière, 1838), II, 28-29.

The fact that Nerval also cites the example of Don Quixote to characterise the condition of his protagonist, reveals the extent to which Nerval's depiction of madness overlaps with nineteenth-century psychiatric thought. Even though Nerval's narrative does not explicitly evoke the psychiatric condition of monomania, the language employed bears a marked resemblance to alienists' discourse regarding this common nineteenth-century diagnosis:

Rien ne saurait prouver mieux que l'histoire de Spifame combien est vraie la peinture de ce caractère, si fameux en Espagne, d'un homme fou par un seul endroit du cerveau, et fort sensé quant au reste de sa logique; on voit bien qu'il avait conscience de lui-même, contrairement aux insensés vulgaires qui s'oublent et demeurent constamment certains d'être les personnages de leur invention. (II, 892)

Nerval's narrative relates the decline of Spifame's mental state as his identification with the King becomes an infatuation exaggerated to the point of pathological delirium. The manner in which Nerval depicts the onset of Spifame's madness closely reflects Esquirol's descriptions of the development of monomania from a simple passion or idea to a serious pathological condition. This psychiatric concept is clearly appropriated by Nerval in "Le Roi de Bicêtre", as Spifame's pathological condition arises from the simple idea of his resemblance to the King. What originally constitutes a simple preoccupation that is even referred to as "qu'une espèce de bon sens et de logique" (II, 889), becomes the starting point for an irreversible decline into clinical madness. Nerval's narrative describes how this *idée fixe*, aggravated by the actions of his companions, provokes the "dérangement d'esprit" that is eventually to become a fully-fledged pathological condition:

Quant à Raoul, depuis ce jour, il ne fut plus appelé par ses compagnons du barreau que *Sire* et *Votre Majesté*. Cette plaisanterie se prolongea tellement sous toutes sortes de formes, comme il arrive souvent parmi ces jeunes gens d'étude, qui saisissent toute occasion de se distraire et de s'égayer, que l'on a vu depuis dans cette obsession une des causes premières du dérangement d'esprit qui porta Raoul Spifame à diverses actions bizarres. (II, 888)

When he appears before the tribunal, Spifame's obsession, which had previously consisted merely of an "aberration [...] dans ses imprudences" becomes a veritable malady:

Cela produisit une grave révolution dans toute sa personne, car sa folie n'était jusque-là qu'une espèce de bon sens et de logique; il n'y avait eu d'aberration que dans ses imprudences. Mais s'il ne fut cité devant le tribunal qu'un visionnaire nommé Raoul



Spifame, le Spifame qui sortit de l'audience était un véritable fou, un des plus élastiques cerveaux que réclamassent les cabanons de l'hôpital. (II, 889)

This episode marks a turning point in “Le Roi de Bicêtre”. Spifame is called before the tribunal owing to his increasingly erratic behaviour, and, surrounded by cries of “C’est le roi! voici le roi! place au roi !”, he fully assumes the identity of the king. The narrative suggests that this is the precise moment at which Spifame’s madness is transformed into a serious pathological affliction.

### ***Monomanie Orgueilleuse* in “Le Roi de Bicêtre”**

As well as embodying the concept of monomania in general, Nerval’s Spifame reflects in particular the subcategory of monomania referred to by alienists as *monomanie orgueilleuse*. This form of monomania, which alienists associated with the specific cultural and ideological climate of post-Revolutionary French society,<sup>42</sup> involved excessive identification with powerful figures, including great leaders, kings, and even deities (*théomanie*). Nerval’s literary depiction of his sixteenth-century subject closely reflects nineteenth-century clinical studies relating to this concept. The starting point of Spifame’s *monomanie orgueilleuse* is his identification with the King. The manner in which Nerval’s narrator recounts the onset and development of Spifame’s madness mirrors alienists’ clinical descriptions of this particular subcategory of monomania. It is in relation to this psychiatric condition that “Le Roi de Bicêtre” most clearly reveals its status as a distinctly nineteenth-century narrative.

When the character of Spifame is first introduced to the reader, the narrator underlines the mediocrity of his status in the court, establishing a clear sense of hierarchy between this individual and others more powerful in the courtroom, including the King himself. King Henri II and Spifame are described in terms of their relation to each other, the narrator calling attention to the latter’s inferior status:

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<sup>42</sup> Laure Murat, *L’Homme qui se prenait pour Napoléon* (Paris: Gallimard, 2011), p. 172.

Raoul Spifame tenait une modeste place aux derniers rangs de l'assemblée mêlé à la tourbe des légistes inférieurs, et portant pour toute décoration sa brassière de docteur en droit. Le roi était assis plus haut que le premier président, dans sa robe d'azur semée de France, et chacun admirait la noblesse et l'agrément de sa figure. (II, 887)

The fact that the narrator highlights the hierarchy dividing these figures reveals the extent to which Spifame's madness is derived from excessive aspiration to power and elevated social standing. The clear evocation of the hierarchy between these individuals reveals the fact that Spifame's monomania does indeed belong to the subcategory of *monomanie orgueilleuse*, since it involves the identification with a figure of superior standing, and reveals his exaggerated aspirations to grandeur. Spifame's illness is manifest in his increasing tendency to assume a position of authority far exceeding his individual status:

il osa, dans ses plaidoyers, attaquer les lois du royaume, ou les opinions judiciaires les plus respectées, et souvent même il sortait entièrement du sujet de ses plaidoiries pour exprimer des remarques très hardies sur le gouvernement, sans respecter toujours l'autorité royale. Cela fut poussé si loin, que les magistrats supérieurs crurent user d'indulgence en ne faisant que lui défendre entièrement l'exercice de sa profession. (II, 888)

What initially constitutes a heightened sense of his striking physical similarity to the King, a fact confirmed by the reactions of all those around him, becomes an all-embracing infatuation, a pathological condition, as Spifame's sense of identification with Henri II invades all aspects of his existence:

Tout semblable d'apparence au roi, reflet de cet autre lui-même et confondu par cette similitude dont chacun fut émerveillé, Spifame, en plongeant son regard dans celui du prince, y puisa tout à coup la conscience d'une seconde personnalité; c'est pourquoi, après s'être assimilé par le regard, il s'identifia au roi dans la pensée, et se figura désormais être celui qui, le seizième jour de juin 1549, était entré dans la ville de Paris, par la porte Saint-Denis. (II, 890-891)

Spifame is not the only character in "Le Roi de Bicêtre" presented in a manner that reflects the nineteenth-century psychiatric category of *monomanie orgueilleuse*. The madness of Spifame's companion and fellow inmate at Bicêtre, the poet Claude Vignet, closely resembles that of Spifame, as he too attributes to himself a privileged social status and function. Just as Spifame's madness is circumscribed to a single aspect of his existence, beyond which his intellectual and creative capacities remain entirely intact and potentially even augmented, Vignet's madness also allows for the continued presence of reason, lucidity, and creative inspiration. The narrator characterises Vignet as someone:

qui se croyait, lui, le roi des poètes, et dont la folie était surtout de déchirer tout papier ou parchemin non écrit de sa main, parce qu'il croyait y voir les productions rivales des mauvais poètes du temps qui lui avaient volé les bonnes grâces du roi Henri et de la cour. (II, 893)

Vignet's conviction of his own elevated status and his superiority as a poet has much in common with Spifame's pretensions to royalty, both individuals adopting these imagined positions of authority. As is the case for his companion, Vignet's madness, which arises from an overactive imagination, does not preclude the capacity for reason, and he is capable of lucidity and rational thought within the bounds of the fantasy that arises from his monomania:

Vignet avait des moments lucides, pendant lesquels il distinguait fort clairement le bruit des barreaux de fer entrechoqués, des cadenas et des verrous. Cela le conduisit à penser qu'on enfermait Sa Majesté de temps en temps, et il communiqua cette observation judicieuse à Spifame, qui répondit mystérieusement que ses ministres jouaient gros jeu, qu'il devinait tous leurs complots, et qu'au retour du chancelier Spifame les choses changeraient d'allure; qu'avec l'aide de Raoul Spifame et de Claude Vignet, ses seuls amis, le roi de France sortirait d'esclavage et renouvellerait l'âge d'or chanté par les poètes. (II, 894-895)

### **Madness and Dream**

Central to the depiction of Spifame's mental alienation in "Le Roi de Bicêtre" is the notion that there exists a fundamental overlap between the mental states of madness and dream. As such, "Le Roi de Bicêtre" anticipates Nerval's later literary portrayal of his own pathological condition in *Aurélia*. As observed above, another of Nerval's texts that explores the idea that madness and dream constitute analogous states is "Histoire du Calife Hakem", and in each case the concept is bound up with the potentially mystical connotations of the motif of the Double.

*Aurélia* opens with the words, "Le Rêve est une seconde vie" (III, 695), articulating an image of madness as the doubling of identity; and a similar vision is conveyed by the descriptions of Spifame's condition in "Le Roi de Bicêtre". Spifame's madness takes the form of his excessive identification with the King, which becomes so intense in his dream visions that this "seconde vie" eclipses his genuine identity:

S'il demeurait assis dans sa chaise, le jour, à se rendre compte de sa triste identité, s'il parvenait à se reconnaître, à se comprendre, à se saisir, la nuit son existence réelle lui était

enlevée par des songes extraordinaires, et il en subissait une tout autre, entièrement absurde et hyperbolique; pareil à ce paysan bourguignon qui, pendant son sommeil, fut transporté dans le palais de son duc, et s'y réveilla entouré de soins et d'honneurs, comme s'il fût le prince lui-même. Toutes les nuits, Spifame était le véritable roi Henri II; il siégeait au Louvre, il chevauchait devant les armées, tenait de grands conseils, ou présidait à des banquets splendides. (II, 890)

Nerval's famous description of madness as "l'épanchement du songe dans la vie réelle" (III, 699) in *Aurélia*, which, as seen in Part One, is cited by the alienist Moreau de Tours as a valid psychiatric definition of the concept, is fundamental to the portrayal of madness in "Le Roi de Bicêtre". As is the case for the narrator of *Aurélia*, for Spifame, the states of dream and wakefulness become ever more indistinguishable. The narrator relates how Spifame's genuine and imaginary identities are reversed in the confusion between his real existence and that of his dreams: "Spifame avait la conviction que ses rêves étaient sa vie et que sa prison n'était qu'un rêve; car on sait qu'il répétait souvent le soir: «Nous avons bien mal dormi cette nuit; oh! les fâcheux songes!»" (II, 890). The extent to which Spifame's madness is shown to be analogous with his dreams is evident from the way in which his proposed reforms are devised in his dream state. Spifame's proposal, as the King, to pardon the real Spifame, whom he understands to be a different individual, reveals the way in which, for Nerval, the apparent affinity between madness and dream takes the form of the doubling of individual identity:

La nuit suivante, ordre fut donné par le pauvre fou, dans son rêve, d'élargir aussitôt Spifame, injustement détenu, et fausement accusé d'avoir voulu, comme favori, empiéter sur les droits et attributions du roi, son maître et son ami: création d'un haut office de *directeur du sceau royal* en faveur dudit Spifame, chargé désormais de conduire à bien les choses périlicantes du royaume. (II, 892)

Spifame clearly embodies Nerval's definition of madness as "l'épanchement du songe dans la vie réelle", and the extent to which this is bound up with the theme of the Double is illustrated most explicitly when Spifame contemplates his own image in the mirror: "Spifame, devant un miroir ou dans le sommeil, se retrouvait et se jugeait à part, changeant de rôle et d'individualité [*sic*] tour à tour, être double et distinct pourtant, comme il arrive souvent qu'on se sent exister en rêve" (II, 892). The mirror takes on a symbolic dimension, becoming a physical incarnation of Spifame's madness and calling into question the very notion of individual identity. The overlap between the image of madness that emerges from this episode and

Nerval's account of his own madness in *Aurélia* is striking. Just as Spifame's madness takes the form of a doubling of his existence, the narrator of *Aurélia*, whose madness is also manifest in the lack of distinction between dream and reality, says of his condition: "A dater de ce moment, tout prenait parfois un aspect double, – et cela, sans que le raisonnement manquât jamais de logique, sans que la mémoire perdît les plus légers détails de ce qui m'arrivait" (III, 699).

Although Nerval's exploration of the overlap between madness and dream, here as elsewhere in his writings, clearly overlaps with the ideas promoted by nineteenth-century alienists, it is nevertheless important to note that Nerval derives very different conclusions from his analysis. Whereas alienists, especially Moreau de Tours, interpreted this phenomenon in terms of the physiological functioning of the body, Nerval's writings on the theme remain ambiguous, embracing the principles and the discourse of contemporaneous medical science, yet simultaneously revealing the limitations of such a perspective. In "Le Roi de Bicêtre", as would later be the case in *Aurélia*, the fusion of this idea with the symbolic literary motif of the Double attaches a potentially mystical dimension to the theme. In both texts, the notion that there exists a fundamental connection between the states of madness and dream is bound up with an exploration of broad metaphysical questions regarding individual identity and the unity of the self, as well as the implication that the states of madness and dream, far from being straightforwardly pathological, permit access to elevated mental states, allowing for privileged vision, creative inspiration, and intellectual or spiritual insight. In the case of Spifame, it is in the dream state, in which he wholly assumes the identity of the king, that this individual devises his imaginary collection of edicts. Underlying the narrative of *Aurélia* is the suggestion that the narrator's dream visions, arising from his madness, are in some way prophetic and reveal hidden mystical connections and truths.

### **Spifame as an Eccentric**

The concept of eccentricity introduced by the narrator of "La Bibliothèque de mon oncle" as the unifying characteristic of his six *illuminés* plays a central role in the

portrait of Spifame. In many ways, Spifame is the archetypal nineteenth-century eccentric, a figure afflicted with a form of benign madness, whose bizarre, socially inappropriate thought and conduct relegates him to the margins of society. Furthermore, Spifame embodies the popular nineteenth-century image of eccentricity as a symbol of the dissolution of rigid social hierarchy, since Spifame's identification with the King of France undermines the clear class distinction between them. However, Spifame's status as an eccentric is also problematic. Although Nerval's narrative underlines Spifame's madness and marginality, this figure takes centre stage, even eclipsing the veritable King of France. Indeed, the elevated status of this marginal individual is symbolised by the ray of sunlight that illuminates him and attracts the attention of all those around him:

Les yeux distraits du prince, las de compter les fronts penchés de l'assemblée et les solives sculptées du plafond, s'arrêtèrent enfin longtemps sur un seul assistant placé tout à l'extrémité de la salle, et dont un rayon de soleil illuminait en plein la figure originale; si bien que peu à peu tous les regards se dirigèrent aussi vers le point qui semblait exciter l'attention du prince. C'était Raoul Spifame qu'on examinait ainsi. (II, 887-888)

The ray of light follows him as he takes on the role and status of the King: "sous un rayon de soleil qui baignait son front à la hauteur où il s'était placé, il devenait impossible de méconnaître la vraie image du roi Henri deuxième, qu'on voyait de temps en temps parcourir la ville à cheval" (II, 899). Indeed, Spifame, the eccentric, actually takes the place of the King within the narrative, becoming the centre of his imaginary world, and relegating the real King to the margins.

## **Conclusion**

Despite the fact that in "Le Roi de Bicêtre" Nerval takes as his subject the life of an individual from the sixteenth century, it soon becomes evident that this text is in no way a conventional biographical portrait and that, far from constituting a historical account, it is concerned with the exploration of themes specific to the context of nineteenth-century France in which Nerval was writing. In particular, the portrayal of Spifame's pathological mental state is strongly grounded in nineteenth-century popular and psychiatric French culture. Nerval's narrative oscillates between clinical and Romantic conceptions of madness, attaching both positive and negative

connotations to the concept. However, despite assimilating a number of distinctly nineteenth-century ideas, Nerval's portrayal of Spifame's madness also acquires a clearly pre-Revolutionary dimension, bound up with notions of absolute unquestioned monarchy and absolute mystical authority. Nerval's narrator presents Spifame from the other side of the historical rift of the French Revolution. The form of madness embodied by Spifame, which involves the aspiration to absolute, divine power, clearly predates the events of 1789 and cannot be categorised or defined by nineteenth-century discourse.

Evidently, Spifame cannot be defined as an *illuminé* in any obvious sense of the term, as he has no connection to the eighteenth-century Illuminist movement and is not associated with any coherent mystical or esoteric following. However, he does embody the later connotations of the term owing to his absolute devotion to his illusory ideas. Spifame is first and foremost one of the "*excentriques de la philosophie*" referred to by the narrator of "La Bibliothèque de mon oncle": he is a marginal figure, neglected by conventional historical narratives, to whom Nerval attaches fresh layers of significance by casting him as one in a series of *illuminés* whose very existence destabilises the dominant discourses of power and reason.

## **“L’HISTOIRE DE L’ ABBÉ DE BUCQUOY”: ECCENTRICITY AND OPPOSITION**

### **Introduction**

The second portrait of *Les Illuminés* deals with the mysterious Jean Albert d’Archambaud abbé de Bucquoy, a seventeenth-century figure about whom very little authoritative historical information is available. As is the case in the preceding portrait, the life of this individual as recounted by Nerval straddles the boundary between history and fiction, rendering problematic the very nature of historical and biographical narrative. Although “L’Histoire de l’abbé de Bucquoy” lacks the coherence of “Le Roi de Bicêtre”, instead consisting of a more disjointed, episodic account, it is nevertheless highly literary in nature and, like the portrait that precedes it, clearly defies the conventions and expectations of biographical writing, passing ostensibly into the realm of fiction. Nerval presents the life of his subject as a repeated cycle of incarceration and evasion, culminating in his successful escape from the notorious Bastille prison, events that, in this account, lack credibility and call into question the status not only of the enigmatic subject of the portrait but also of the narrative itself.

Prior to its inclusion in *Les Illuminés*, this text had previously been published in serial form in *Le National* in late 1850 as part of a longer work with the title *Les Faux Saulniers, Histoire de l’abbé de Bucquoy*. Fragments of *Les Faux Saulniers* also appear in a number of Nerval’s other works, including *Lorély*, *La Bohème Galante* and “Angélique”. At first sight, “L’Histoire de l’Abbé de Bucquoy” is, even more than the other portraits, a surprising choice for inclusion in *Les Illuminés*, owing to its clear departure from the apparent connotations of the overall title and subtitle of the collection. Indeed, as is the case for “Le Roi de Bicêtre”, Nerval’s account of Bucquoy’s quixotic adventures is not concerned with the theme of eighteenth-century esoteric thought and the subject of this portrait, despite dabbling in various forms of mysticism, has no obvious connection to the Illuminist



movement evoked by the title of *Les Illuminés*. Furthermore, neither can Bucquoy be readily identified with the subtitle of this work, “Les Précurseurs du socialisme”. Accordingly, Jean Richer expresses surprise at Nerval’s decision to include in *Les Illuminés* the portrait of a figure that holds only dubious connections to the proclaimed subject matter of the work, and he explains this in purely practical terms:

Il est permis de s’étonner que Nerval ait mis dans *Les Illuminés* les pages des *Faux Saulniers* qui racontent l’histoire de l’abbé de Bucquoy. Les quelques pages placées à la fin du récit, où il est question des écrits de l’abbé, n’établissent qu’un lien bien ténu avec le sujet principal du livre. Mais dans un ouvrage hâtivement composé, il était commode de pouvoir utiliser des pages déjà écrites...<sup>1</sup>

Ann Marguerite du Noyer also questions the adherence of Bucquoy to the title and subtitle of this collection of portraits:

Malgré le titre du volume où cette étude a été recueillie: *les Illuminés, ou les Précurseurs du socialisme*, l’abbé de Bucquoy n’est pas un illuminé, et un précurseur du socialisme encore moins. Tout au plus serait-il ce qu’on appellerait de notre temps un *utopiste du passé*, quelque chose comme un Boulainvilliers dans de petites proportions, considérant la féodalité, décorée du nom de république, comme d’institution quasi divine.<sup>2</sup>

However, as already seen, despite the primary connotations of its title, *Les Illuminés* was not conceived as a historical representation of the Illuminist movement, and the inclusion of “L’Histoire de l’abbé de Bucquoy” is highly revealing with regard to the motivation behind the work as a whole.

Despite its obvious departure from the subject matter expressed by both the title and the subtitle of this work, “L’Histoire de l’abbé de Bucquoy” nevertheless deals with a number of themes that permeate the portraits contained in the collection. In particular, the concept of eccentricity, introduced in the preface to *Les Illuminés*, is central to this portrait. More specifically, the potentially subversive nature of this concept in nineteenth-century popular and psychiatric thought and its connotations, especially towards the middle of the nineteenth century, of social, political, religious, and ideological rebellion, emerge strongly from this text. In “L’Histoire de l’abbé de Bucquoy”, as it appears in *Les Illuminés*, as well as in *Les Faux Saulniers*, from which it is derived, Nerval focuses on different individuals and groups, including

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<sup>1</sup> Jean Richer, *Nerval et les doctrines ésotériques* (Paris: Trédaniel, 1987), p. 127.

Bucquoy himself, the *faux saulniers*, the protestants, Angélique de Longueval, and even the narrator, that have been marginalised and rejected by society, and whose deviant ideas and activities isolate them from the historical and ideological contexts in which they are living. In both *Les Faux Saulniers* and *Les Illuminés*, Nerval's story of the unconventional thought and activity of his subject is set within a wider exploration of the power and significance of eccentric and marginal ideas, a theme that, as already seen, is clearly evoked by the narrator of "La Bibliothèque de mon oncle". In the context of *Les Illuminés*, Bucquoy's status as an *illuminé* is linked, not to the precise nature of his ideas, but to his eccentricity and to his role as a voice of opposition to the social and ideological values of his age.

### **Bucquoy and Other Eccentrics**

The concepts of marginality and eccentricity are central to Nerval's portrait of Bucquoy, both in relation to the title character and to the various groups and individuals that he encounters. The importance of these themes to "L'Histoire de l'abbé de Bucquoy" is especially apparent from the context in which the text appears in *Les Faux Saulniers*. As is the case in *Les Illuminés* as a whole, here Bucquoy is inscribed into a series of figures whose ideas and activities have excluded them from their societies.

Although Bucquoy cannot be identified as an *illuminé* in any obvious sense of the term, the image that emerges from Nerval's account clearly casts him as one of the *excentriques* identified by the narrator of "La Bibliothèque de mon oncle". Indeed, by this portrait, Bucquoy's status is that of a perpetual outsider and he is repeatedly characterised in terms of his marginality and his exclusion from society. The image of Bucquoy as an outsider is already apparent from his very first appearance in "L'Histoire de l'abbé de Bucquoy". He is introduced to the reader as a figure of unknown origins passing through the village of Morchandgy. The narrator's subsequent comments, rather than conveying any specific details about the identity

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<sup>2</sup> Ann Marguerite du Noyer, *L'Histoire du Sieur Abbé-Comte de Bucquoy, singulièrement son évasion du For-L'Évêque et de la Bastille* (Paris: Pincebourde, 1886), vi-vii. This work contains a reprint of

of his subject, merely defer any explanation or clarification regarding his origins and activities:

D'où venait-il?... On ne le sait pas trop...  
Où allait-il? Nous le verrons plus tard... (II, 904)

On meeting the group of *faux saulniers*, Bucquoy's status as an outsider is highlighted by the narrator's designation of him as "l'inconnu" (II, 905). This impression is accentuated when he defines himself to the group in terms of his nonconformity and his resistance to classification:

Je suis un de ces fils de grandes familles militaires qui ont lutté contre les rois, et qui sont toujours soupçonnés de rébellion. Je n'appartiens pas aux protestants, mais je suis pour ceux qui protestent contre la monarchie absolue et contre les abus qu'elle entraîne... Ma famille avait fait de moi un prêtre; j'ai jeté le froc aux orties et je me suis rendu libre. (II, 906)

Much of Bucquoy's significance, by Nerval's account, resides in his marginal status in relation to the various groups that he encounters. This is true regarding the *faux saulniers*, since the nature of his association with this group is never explicitly clarified. Bucquoy's singularity is reflected by his constant exclusion from society, owing to the fact that he remains either a prisoner or a fugitive and is ultimately exiled from France. The way in which Bucquoy introduces himself to the *faux saulniers*, besides underlining his isolation from certain social and ideological groups, also raises the question of resistance to authority, a theme that is central to this portrait, as well as to *Les Illuminés* as a whole.

Another eccentric introduced to the reader of *Les Faux Saulniers*, prior to the pages that constitute "L'Histoire de l'abbé de Bucquoy", is Jean-Jacques Rousseau, a figure to whom Nerval alludes a number of times in his writings. In the context of *Les Faux Saulniers*, Rousseau becomes a symbolic figurehead for the various other individuals that are marginalised and rejected by society, exemplifying the central theme of resistance to authority. Much like Bucquoy and the other eccentrics of this work, Rousseau is an eternal outcast and fugitive, seeking to resist the perceived constraints of his society. However, Rousseau is simultaneously a highly influential figure in mainstream culture and, in the context of this narrative, he represents the potential value of the voice of the outsider. The account of the narrator's search for

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the source text on which Nerval bases "L'Histoire de l'abbé de Bucquoy" with an added introduction.

Rousseau is embedded within the broader presentation of his search for Bucquoy and the narrative thus invites a comparison between these two marginal figures, both of whom are revealed to be highly evasive, even in death, and beyond the grasp of the narrator's perpetual quest for objective historical truth. The narrator of *Les Faux Saullniers*, accompanied by his childhood friend, Sylvain, visits the tomb of this highly influential eighteenth-century *philosophe* in Ermenonville, or, more precisely, they visit "la tombe où manquent les cendres de Rousseau" (II, 92). Much like Bucquoy, the existence of whom becomes ever more mysterious over the course of the narrator's research, Rousseau also proves to be difficult to locate. This is reflected by his absence from his own tomb, his ashes having been transferred to the Pantheon. The fact that Rousseau's ashes turn out to be in the Pantheon reflects the posthumous significance of this figure's ideas, a principle that can implicitly be applied to Bucquoy and the other *illuminés* of Nerval's collection. The implicit comparison between Rousseau and Bucquoy attaches fresh significance to the ideas and activities of the latter, as presented by Nerval.

Besides his connection to Bucquoy in Nerval's account, Rousseau also becomes linked to the other eccentrics of *Les Faux Saullniers*. The narrative even indicates a potential comparison between Rousseau and the narrator himself. Indeed, the section of the text that recounts the visit to Rousseau's tomb is entitled "Les Promenades", recalling Rousseau's account of his wanderings in *Les Rêveries du promeneur solitaire* (1776-1778). Moreover, both figures are associated with the Valois, a region that is here conceived, in stark opposition to Paris, as a place characterised by freedom and timelessness. The *chansons populaires* of the Valois, cited by the narrator, reflect the wider themes of freedom and resistance to authority.<sup>3</sup> The implied comparison between Paris and the Valois marks the latter as a place of eccentricity in the literal sense of the term with regard to its physical deviation from the centre, and it is here that the narrator encounters the various figures of resistance evoked in the text. The narrator refers to the inhabitants of the Valois as

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<sup>3</sup> Brix considers the significance, in this narrative, of the specific folksongs quoted by Nerval: Michel Brix, "Nerval et la réflexion politique. Une lecture des *Faux Saullniers*", in *Etudes romanes de Brno*, no. 21 (2000), 23-47 (p. 17). See also Bruno Tritsmans, *Textualités de l'instable: L'écriture du Valois de Nerval* (Berne: Lang, 1989), p. 74.

“républicains sans le savoir” (II, 73), casting these people as another unheard voice of protest against repressive power. Another figure linked to the Valois is Angélique de Longueval, the great-aunt of Bucquoy, who also takes on the role of an outsider and fugitive, in this case seeking to escape the control of her family.

Significantly, the narrator also claims that the Valois, specifically the castle at Ermenonville, became the meeting place for a group of *illuminés*, naming a number of eighteenth-century mystical thinkers and writers, including Saint-Germain, Mesmer, Cagliostro, Cazotte, and Saint-Martin. In the context of this work, these *illuminés* are also defined by their marginality and eccentricity, as well as by their opposition to mainstream ideology. These *illuminés*, like Rousseau, are associated with Ermenonville, a place that in *Les Faux Saulniers*, in contrast to Parisian society, represents resistance and freedom:<sup>4</sup>

Quelques années avant la Révolution, le château d’Ermenonville était le rendez-vous des Illuminés qui préparaient silencieusement l’avenir. Dans les *soupers* célèbres d’Ermenonville, on a vu successivement le conte de Saint-Germain, Mesmer et Cagliostro, développant, dans des causeries inspirées, des idées et des paradoxes, dont l’école dite de Genève hérita plus tard. (II, 100)

Here, the term *illuminé* is employed in its broad historical sense to designate individuals associated with the eighteenth-century Illuminist movement in general. The narrator proceeds to employ the term in its more precise sense to refer to Weishaupt’s secret society of *illuminés*, which he links to the wider Illuminist movement in eighteenth-century France:

Les Illuminés français et allemands s’entendaient par des rapports d’affiliation. Les doctrines de Weishaupt et de Jacob Boehm avaient pénétré, chez nous, dans les anciens pays francs et bourguignons, – par l’antique sympathie et les relations séculaires des races de même origine. Le premier ministre du neveu de Frédéric II était lui-même un Illuminé. (II, 101)

Evidently, despite being cast as one of the subjects of *Les Illuminés*, Bucquoy does not adhere to the definition of the term *illuminé* as employed by the narrator of *Les Faux Saulniers*. The group of *illuminés* that meet at Ermenonville joins the various outsiders and eccentrics that take centre stage in this work, constituting part of the

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<sup>4</sup> The narrator of “Sylvie” describes Ermenonville as the “pays où fleurissait encore l’idylle antique” (III, 567).

estranged network of individuals that destabilise accepted social, political, and religious boundaries.

### **Repression and Resistance: “L’Histoire de l’abbé de Bucquoy” and *Les Faux Saulniers***

The opening pages of “L’Histoire de l’abbé de Bucquoy” instantly establish the context of repression and of the abuse of power that underpins the portrait as a whole. The narrator states that “La France s’était épuisée à servir les ambitions familiales et le système obstiné du vieux roi” (II, 903) and conveys an image of all-pervasive political and religious authoritarianism. He then introduces the theme of resistance to authority: “Toutefois, il existait des provinces moins sujettes à l’admiration, et qui protestèrent toujours sous diverses formes, soit sous le voile des idées religieuses, soit sous la forme évidente des jacqueries, des ligues et des frondes” (II, 903). The narrator proceeds to allude to the 1685 revocation of the Edict of Nantes, which is here described as “le grand coup frappé contre les dernières résistances” (II, 903). There is an indirect reference to this in *Les Faux Saulniers*, which also appears in relation to the questions of repression and resistance. In his description of the “drame effrayant” concerning Le Pilleur, the narrator says of this individual: “Voici un noble reste des mœurs féodales qui traîne comme une queue dans les dernières années du grand siècle, sous le règne de Mme de Maintenon” (II, 17). As indicated by Michel Brix, Madame de Maintenon, who married Louis XIV, was thought to be largely responsible for the widespread persecution of the Protestants brought about by the revocation of the Edict of Nantes.<sup>5</sup> Brix argues that, in the context of *Les Faux Saulniers*, Nerval’s reference to this individual “rappelle que l’Église n’a jamais défendu le peuple contre l’arbitraire du pouvoir des riches et des violents”.<sup>6</sup> The plight of the Protestants underpins the entire narrative of “L’Histoire de l’abbé de Bucquoy” and the text repeatedly alludes to the exclusion of this group from seventeenth-century French society, casting the Protestants as a

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<sup>5</sup> Brix, p. 41.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

symbol of resistance to the authoritarian nature of the age. The theme of religious oppression evoked in the opening lines of the text becomes bound up with various other forms of authoritarianism, and the narrator speaks of “*cette France dispersée à l'étranger par les persécutions de toutes sortes*” (II, 167). Throughout “*L'Histoire de l'abbé de Bucquoy*”, Nerval presents Bucquoy, the *faux saulniers*, and the Protestants, amongst others, as being engaged in a perpetual struggle to affirm their freedom and independence, whether it be political, religious, or even physical, against external forces of repression. Tsujikawa looks at the way in which the various figures of opposition in the text become linked through Bucquoy himself:

c'est principalement l'abbé de Bucquoy qui relie entre elles toutes les figures d'opposition. Il se lie, selon Nerval, avec les protestants des Cévennes, les «Faux Saulniers», les «modernes *épicuriens*» du Marais, les néo-frondeurs et, après son exil, avec «*cette France dispersée à l'étranger par les persécutions de toutes sortes, et qui se composait de catholiques hardis aussi bien que de protestants*».<sup>7</sup>

Tsujikawa proceeds to argue that that Nerval's originality in this portrait resides in “cette insistance sur la continuité qui relie entre elles une multitude d'oppositions éparses”.<sup>8</sup> Brix expresses a similar idea, underlining the way in which Nerval's narrative creates an implicit connection between these diverse individuals and groups:

L'abbé et le comte de Bucquoy, Angélique de Longueval, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, le narrateur, les faux saulniers et les protestants forment, avec les personnages des chansons populaires du Valois, une famille d'esprits, unis par le refus de se soumettre à l'arbitraire. Leurs destinées se trouvent étroitement apparentées.<sup>9</sup>

This observation also applies to *Les Illuminés* as a whole, in which Nerval's six “*excentriques de la philosophie*”, despite having little in common in terms of their ideas and activities, become linked by their marginality and their status as figures of opposition that destabilise conventional historical narratives.

It is against the backdrop of religious and political repression that Bucquoy is first introduced to the reader and over the course of the narrative he becomes a symbol of opposition. Indeed, Bucquoy's story is one of resistance to various forms of

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<sup>7</sup> Keiko Tsujikawa, “Nerval, le temps à l'œuvre: politique et résistance dans *L'Histoire de l'abbé de Bucquoy*”, in *Revue d'histoire littéraire de la France*, no. 3, vol. 108 (2008), 581-592 (p. 588).

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> Brix, p. 28.

authority, as is reflected by his refusal to accept his incarcerations with the result that he becomes a perpetual outcast from his society. In Nerval's account, the story of Bucquoy's repeated escapes from prison becomes bound up with various forms of social and political opposition. Bucquoy is defined in terms of his resistance to authority, and the narrator situates him within a wider movement of opposition, even describing him as "un des précurseurs de la première révolution française" (II, 942). The narrator of *Les Faux Saulniers* quotes Bucquoy as declaring to Holland, at war with the France of Louis XIV, his "projet pour faire de la France une république, et y détruire... le pouvoir arbitraire" (II, 95). In the final pages of "L'Histoire de l'abbé de Bucquoy", which consist of a brief presentation of the writings and ideas of this historical figure, the narrator highlights Bucquoy's link to the revolutionaries stating that:

L'abbé de Bucquoy avait tracé déjà tout un plan de république applicable à la France, qui donnait les moyens de supprimer la monarchie! Il avait intitulé cela: «*Anti-Machiavélisme, ou Réflexions métaphysiques sur l'autorité en général et sur le pouvoir arbitraire en particulier.*» (II, 941)<sup>10</sup>

Although Bucquoy cannot be considered a *précurseur du socialisme* in any obvious sense, in terms of his political vision, the metaphysical dimension of his political convictions, as seen in the title to the work cited above, is in keeping with the fusion of religion and politics that was fundamental to early Socialist thought. It is through his opposition to the monarchy and to the established social order, which classify him as a precursor of the revolutionaries, that Bucquoy can to some extent be considered to adhere to the thought of the Illuminist movement evoked by the title of *Les Illuminés*, since the ideas and activities of this group were linked to the 1789 Revolution. If Bucquoy cannot be defined as an *illuminé* in terms of any coherent religious or metaphysical ideology, it is his marginality and his status as a voice of opposition that links him to the other figures portrayed in Nerval's collection. Just as in the preceding portrait Nerval casts his subject as an individual whose political vision is in advance of his age, here Bucquoy becomes one of the first to conceive of the abolition of the monarchy, and he is thus portrayed as a figure whose deviant thought isolates him from his contemporaries.

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<sup>10</sup> Max Milner points out that Bucquoy's text "n'est pas, à proprement parler, un plan de république applicable à la France, mais une théorie de gouvernements" (II, 1367).



The concept of resistance to authority, which is central to “L’Histoire de l’abbé de Bucquoy”, is also a major theme of *Les Faux Sauniers* as a whole. Here, Nerval brings to the fore the loss of political, religious, and creative freedom, both in the society of his seventeenth-century subject and in the post-Revolutionary era in which he was writing. Throughout the work, Bucquoy, the various individuals and groups with which he associates, and the narrator himself, are all engaged in a struggle against this perceived repression. Parisian society, both in the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries, is depicted as a culture of tyranny in which writers find themselves “dans un état de terreur inexprimable” (II, 5). In striking contrast is the city of Frankfurt, which is described by the narrator as a “ville libre, [qui] a servi longtemps de refuge aux protestants” (II, 4), and it is here that the narrator first discovers the elusive biography of his seventeenth-century subject, which proves impossible to locate in Paris.

### **History and Fiction: *Les Faux Sauniers* and “l’amendement Riancey”**

One of the main themes of *Les Faux Sauniers* is that of the loss of creative and artistic freedom. In particular, the work explores the consequences of “l’amendement Riancey”, a French law passed in July 1850 that sought to deter newspapers from publishing anything that could be classified as a *roman feuilleton*.<sup>11</sup> The reasons for this law were essentially political, and it was conceived with the intention of preventing the spread of subversive ideas, motivated by the publication of Eugène Sue’s controversial *Mystères de Paris* (1842-1843), which was considered to have contributed to the insurgencies of 1848.<sup>12</sup> In the pages of *Les Faux Sauniers* that precede the story of the life of Bucquoy, as published in *Les Illuminés*, Nerval provides an ironic depiction of the effects of this law, which is shown to restrict authors’ creative freedom, forcing them to stick to historically valid factual

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<sup>11</sup> This law is quoted in Gabrielle Malandain-Chamarat, *Nerval ou l’incendie du théâtre: Identité et littérature dans l’œuvre en prose de Gérard de Nerval* (Paris: Corti, 1986), p. 59.

<sup>12</sup> Maria Adamovicz-Hariasz, “From Opinion to Information. The *Roman-Feuilleton* and the Transformation of the Nineteenth-Century French Press”, in *Making the New: Modernity and the Mass Press in Nineteenth-Century France*, ed. by Dean de la Motte and Jeannene Przyblyski (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999), pp. 160-184 (pp. 176-178).

information in their writings. Nerval's narrator describes his role as a writer operating in accordance with the new law, and he repeatedly calls attention to the rigorous scientific methodology that he is forced to employ to avoid departing from objective fact. The ideas explored in this episode of *Les Faux Sauniers* have much in common with those that emerge from the pages dedicated to the life of Bucquoy (the section that is included within *Les Illuminés*). The narrator establishes an implicit parallel between his own plight as an author in nineteenth-century France and that of his seventeenth-century subject, both of whom are shown to be struggling against external restrictions, and both of whom destabilise fundamental assumptions regarding the distinction between fiction and reality.

In order to adhere to the demands of the new law, the narrator reveals that to compose his envisaged portrait of Bucquoy he must locate "les documents nécessaires pour parler de ce personnage d'une façon historique et non romanesque" (II, 5), and the narrator's search for his source material constitutes the focus of the ensuing pages, eclipsing the proclaimed subject matter of his study. The search for the document in question, a biography of Bucquoy, the full title of which is given, "Événement des plus rares, ou histoire du *sieur abbé comte de Bucquoy*, singulièrement son évasion du fort l'Evêque et de la Bastille, avec plusieurs ouvrages vers et prose, et particulièrement la *game des femmes, se vend chez Jean de la France*, rue de la Réforme, à l'Espérance, à Bonnefoy. – 1719" (II, 4),<sup>13</sup> proves comically problematic, and, paradoxically, distances the narrator ever further from the objective reality of Bucquoy's life. As the narrator persists in his quest for authentic historical truth, his subject becomes ever more elusive.

The narrator repeatedly makes ironic assertions regarding the apparently scientific nature of his research, which he claims will have a "double intérêt scientifique et littéraire" (II, 5). He affirms his status as a historical author, as opposed to a

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<sup>13</sup> The title page, as cited by Nerval, is almost accurate, but actually reads: "Événement des plus rares, ou l'histoire du *sieur abbé Comte de Bucquoy*, singulièrement [sic] son évasion du Fort l'Evêque et de la Bastille, l'allemand à côté, revue & augmentée, deuxième Edition avec plusieurs de ses ouvrages vers et prose; & particulièrement [sic] la *game des femmes*, & *se vend chez Jean de la Franchise*, rue de la Réforme, à l'Espérance, à Bonnefoy. – 1719". The presumed author is Anne-Marguerite du Noyer (see Note 2 above), although this is not indicated on the original document.

novelist, making comments such as “je ne suis pas un romancier” (II, 5) and “je n’invente rien” (II, 97), and declaring of his text: “Ce n’est pas un roman” (II, 22). The full irony of such comments becomes apparent when it transpires that the document that constitutes the object of the narrator’s prolonged search may, in fact, have been catalogued amongst the novels rather than amongst the historical texts in the Bibliothèque Nationale (II, 7). As articulated by Phyllis Zuckerman, this reveals the necessarily arbitrary and contingent nature of the distinction between history and fiction, since “the nature of the book is determined by its classification at any given point in history”.<sup>14</sup> In the lengthy account of his quest to provide a historically valid account of his subject, the narrator repeatedly alludes to his rigorous scientific methodology, placing ironic emphasis on his strict adherence to “la méthode scientifique” and revealing his meticulous attention to detail: “Sans avoir droit au beau nom du savant, tout écrivain est forcé parfois d’employer la méthode scientifique, je me mis donc à examiner curieusement l’écriture jaunie, sur papier de Hollande, du rapport signé d’Argenson” (II, 12). Ironically identifying with the ideology behind the “amendement Riancey”, the narrator indicates the perceived superiority of such rigorous methods of research, as opposed to the whimsical, disordered activity of the novelist:

Un bibliographe, un homme appartenant à la science régulière savent juste ce qu’ils ont à demander. Mais l’écrivain fantaisiste, exposé à perpétrer un *roman-feuilleton*, fait tout déranger, et dérange tout le monde pour une idée biscornue qui lui passe par la tête. (II, 10)

As the narrator proceeds with his quest to locate the historical reality of his elusive subject, it becomes increasingly evident that his proclaimed scientific objectivity is not in keeping with the inherently fantastical nature of this mysterious individual. Indeed, despite the narrator’s assertion that “Ce personnage excentrique et éternellement fugitif ne peut échapper toujours à une investigation rigoureuse” (II, 10), exactly the opposite impression emerges from the narrative. The narrator’s description of Bucquoy as a “personnage excentrique” captures the destabilising, boundary-defying dimension of the concept of eccentricity in nineteenth-century French culture. As emerges from the narrator’s account of his search for this figure, Bucquoy exemplifies the inherently subversive character of eccentricity, owing to his

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<sup>14</sup> Phyllis Zuckerman, “History, Fiction, and Legend in Nerval’s *Angélique*”, in *Substance*, vol. 6/7,

resistance to classification or definition according to the clearly defined social and linguistic categories of society. The story of Bucquoy's life defies straightforward classification systems and destabilises the linguistic distinction between history and fiction.

With each step of the narrator's research, new layers of uncertainty and mystery conceal the true nature of this historical figure. That apart, the prolonged search for irrefutable historical truth becomes a digression that prevents the narrator from advancing with the task at hand. The narrative itself contradicts its proclaimed adherence to scientific methodology and historical objectivity, as it is composed primarily of a series of digressions that undermines the basic principles of linearity and chronological development fundamental to conventional biographical discourse. The narrator's affirmation that he is to produce a historical rather than a fictionalised account is undermined by the very nature of the narrative. In his documented struggle to adhere to the strict role of the writer, as dictated by the new law, the narrator becomes one of the figures marginalised by the repressive nature of society, and the distinctly heterogeneous narrative that he produces marks him as one of the multiple figures of opposition that constitute the subject matter of *Les Faux Saulniers*. Much like the other individuals and groups that have been marginalised by society but refuse to sacrifice their freedom and independence, the narrator, despite his numerous claims to the contrary, resists the constraints of the "amendement Riancey", and refuses to renounce his status as a writer of fiction.

What emerges from the narrator's long and digressive presentation of his search for the biography that will enable him to adhere to the demands of the new law is a deep-rooted questioning of the very notion of truth and of the distinction between historical and fictional writing. As the narrative unfolds, the "exactitude toute militaire" (II, 3) that the narrator guarantees the editor of *Le National* is revealed to be not only impossible, but also largely irrelevant to biographical and historical writing. The narrator's attempts to depict his subject with scientific precision are thwarted by the underlying uncertainty regarding the true identity of this figure, as

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no. 20 (1978), 79-90 (p. 80).

even the basic fact of his existence is called into question. The historical and material certainties that are essential to the genre of biography are gradually undermined, as the narrator's persistent quest for truth casts doubt upon the genuine identity of his subject, raising a number of different possibilities as to who this individual actually was. The book that recounts the life of Bucquoy becomes more important than Bucquoy himself, as the narrative reveals the necessarily problematic nature of the relationship between writing and reality. As the book becomes ever more elusive, its very existence becomes subject to doubt, and the narrator's search becomes a form of madness involving the pursuit of illusion. Philippe Destruel argues: "Par delà cette inquiétude que fait naître l'impossibilité de trouver le livre, va apparaître une autre voie vers la folie: la perte du référent. Car dans un premier temps se pose la question: ce livre existe-t-il vraiment?"<sup>15</sup>

When a librarian at the Bibliothèque Nationale believes that he has found a Dutch translation of the elusive biography, having located a book by an author of the same name, it transpires that the title of this work begins *Événements remarquables*, rather than *Événements des plus rares*, and recounts "un voyage de seize années fait aux Indes" (II, 10). The discovery of this book contributes to the uncertainty surrounding the life of the narrator's historical subject, further destabilising the historical authenticity of his projected account, and he is forced to conclude that this work was written by a relative and namesake of Bucquoy. Another librarian casts doubt on the identity of this historical figure by suggesting that his name could have been du Bucquoy or Dubuquoy rather than Bucquoy. As the possible identities of this individual continue to multiply,<sup>16</sup> even the name of this figure becoming subject to doubt, as variations, including Bucquoy, Debucquoy, Dubucquoy, Bucquoi, and Busquoy, are proposed, the mere fact of his existence becomes shrouded in uncertainty. The narrator's quest for absolute historical truth is progressively undermined, as his enigmatic subject reveals the fragility of the distinction between history and fiction, and between language and reality. As pointed out by Jefferson, it

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<sup>15</sup> Philippe Destruel, "Angélique et la bibliothèque de Babel", in *Romantisme*, vol. 15, no. 48 (1985), 21-32 (p. 23).

<sup>16</sup> Surprisingly, and unusually for Nerval, the various references that appear in this part of the text are genuine: Ann Jefferson, *Biography and the Question of Literature in France* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 195.

is the very certainty upon which biography is founded that Nerval takes as his starting point for “undoing the documented certainties conventionally associated with biographical writing”.<sup>17</sup>

In the opening episode of *Les Faux Sauniers*, Nerval exposes the arbitrary nature of the distinction between history and fiction, suggesting that the assumption that there exists an absolute discourse of history constitutes a form of political repression. This closely reflects the way in which *Les Illuminés* as a whole reveals that the apparent opposition between madness and reason, and the notion that there exists an absolute form of reason, is necessarily bound up with questions of power. The idea, fundamental to *Les Illuminés*, that the arbitrary distinction between madness and reason is inseparable from notions of power and political repression is articulated by Zuckerman: “Nerval shows that a literal interpretation of the distinction between reason and madness is closely related to the arbitrary authority of the state and the violent desires of those in power”.<sup>18</sup> In both *Les Faux Sauniers* and *Les Illuminés*, “L’Histoire de l’abbé de Bucquoy” represents an alternative history that exists in opposition to conventional historical narratives that are founded on assumptions of absolute reason and absolute truth. As such, Nerval’s portrait of Bucquoy constitutes a form of opposition to power and repression, and to “the arbitrary nature of the world that considers itself to be based on reason”.<sup>19</sup> Just as the fusion of fiction and history, embodied by the life of Nerval’s enigmatic subject, represents a form of opposition, the concept of eccentricity, which undermines the distinction between madness and reason, here becomes a form of revolt.

### **Nerval’s Eccentric Narrative**

Both *Les Faux Sauniers* as a whole and the pages of this work that constitute “L’Histoire de l’abbé de Bucquoy” are disjointed in nature and are characterised by multiple digressions, depriving these texts of a coherent narrative and rendering problematic the question of genre. Tsujikawa describes *Les Faux Sauniers* as “une

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<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> Zuckerman, p. 81.

«déconstruction» de tous les genres et de tous les formes de l'écriture», pointing out the “modernité de l'écriture” of this work.<sup>20</sup> Indeed, the fragmented, digressive style, as well as the multiple reminders of its own status as a work of literature, attaches to *Les Faux Saulniers* a distinctly modern feel. The way in which this narrative reveals its own inadequacies and its potentially unreliable nature to the reader mark it, at least to some extent, as a precursor of the twentieth-century novel. Raymond Jean argues that this work represents “une mise en œuvre de la nature même de l'œuvre littéraire”.<sup>21</sup> Daniel Sangsue looks at the unconventional style of *Les Faux Saulniers*, considering the way in which it deviates from the conventions of the *roman-feuilleton*. He conceives of this text as a “récit excentrique”, which he defines according to Nodier's description of the “livre excentrique” as “un livre qui est fait hors de toutes les règles communes de la composition et du style, et dont il est impossible ou très difficile de deviner le but”;<sup>22</sup> and Sangsue casts it in the same tradition as works by Diderot, Sterne, and Nodier, amongst others.<sup>23</sup> Meanwhile, Ann Jefferson looks at how this work renders problematic the genre of biography by undermining the assumptions and certainties fundamental to this genre.<sup>24</sup> Ross Chambers argues that *Les Faux Saulniers* constitutes a form of “écriture oppositionnelle”,<sup>25</sup> and looks specifically at the episode of *Les Faux Saulniers* that was subsequently published as “Angélique”, illustrating how this text embodies the typically digressive style of Nerval's travel narratives.<sup>26</sup> Nerval's subversive narrative style exceeds the defiance of generic conventions, as the narrative of this work embodies the concept of eccentricity and is inextricably bound up with the ambiguity of its subject matter. The boundary-defying concept of eccentricity, with its nineteenth-century connotations of subversion and resistance to prevalent norms

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<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> Keiko Tsujikawa, *Nerval et les limbes de l'histoire: Lecture des Illuminés* (Geneva: Droz, 2008), p. 67.

<sup>21</sup> Raymond Jean, *La Poétique du désir: Nerval – Lautréamont – Apollinaire – Éluard* (Paris: Seuil, 1974), p. 88.

<sup>22</sup> Charles Nodier, “Bibliographie des fous: De quelques livres excentriques”, in *Bulletin du bibliophile*, supplement to nos. 21 and 23 (Paris: Techener, 1835), 19-40 (pp. 19-20), quoted in: Daniel Sangsue, *Le Récit excentrique. Gautier – De Maistre – Nerval – Nodier* (Paris: Corti, 1987), p. 41.

<sup>23</sup> Sangsue, pp. 349-406.

<sup>24</sup> Jefferson, pp. 193-196.

<sup>25</sup> Ross Chambers *Mélancolie et opposition* (Paris: Corti, 1987), pp. 30-47.

<sup>26</sup> Ross Chambers, *Gérard de Nerval et la poétique du voyage* (Paris: Corti, 1969).

and values, besides constituting the central theme of this text, is written into the very fabric of Nerval's narrative.

At the heart of "L'Histoire de l'Abbé de Bucquoy", as well as *Les Faux Saulniers* as a whole, is a prolonged questioning of the distinction between history and novel, and even of the very existence of a history that is independent of the words with which it is transcribed. This aspect of the text is explored by Jean-Nicolas Illouz, who speaks of "l'ambiguïté des signes" in relation to the narrator's search for his subject, and suggests that in *Les Faux Saulniers* the role of the historian consists "non pas à atteindre une réalité insaisissable", but rather "à mettre ces signes en ordre de fonctionnement".<sup>27</sup> Even when, following the extensive digression regarding the search for the biography that will enable him to produce a historically accurate portrait, the narrator does finally present his account of "L'Histoire de l'Abbé de Bucquoy", the question of the relationship between history and fiction continues to pervade the narrative, the boundary between these seemingly incompatible categories becoming ever more indistinct. "L'Histoire de l'Abbé de Bucquoy", like the pages that precede it in *Les Faux Saulniers*, and like *Les Illuminés* as a whole, continually calls attention to the apparently arbitrary distinction between reality and fiction, and between history and novel, unsettling the reader by repeatedly exceeding the bounds of credibility and thus rendering problematic the very nature of historical truth. Bucquoy emerges from Nerval's account as a figure whose life necessarily passes into the domain of fiction. The question of the true identity of this historical figure, which, as revealed by the narrator's search for his sources in the pages that precede this portrait in *Les Faux Saulniers*, is far from straightforward, persists in the account of the life of this individual. Indeed, at the very beginning of "L'Histoire de l'Abbé de Bucquoy", the title figure is arrested because he is believed to be the Abbé de Bourlie, and it is on the basis of this initial case of mistaken identity that the entire series of events recounted in this portrait unfolds in a state of uncertainty and confusion.

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<sup>27</sup> Jean-Nicolas Illouz, *Nerval: le «Rêveur en prose»: Imaginaire et écriture* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1997), p. 32.



Despite its apparent status as a biographical study, both in *Les Faux Saulniers* and in *Les Illuminés*, the story of Bucquoy's life as recounted by Nerval is steeped in fiction, and the presentation of events, many of which are highly implausible, is often incomplete and lacking in satisfactory detail. Furthermore, a large proportion of the narrative consists of dialogue, and the caricatured nature of the interlocutors in such scenes contributes to the problematic status of the text as a historical account. The narrator recounts his subject's increasingly far-fetched escapades, yet fails to provide precise details about how exactly such events unfolded. This is the case with regard to Bucquoy's various escapes from prison, which become integral to the repetitive, cyclical structure of the narrative, and are therefore related with a certain sense of inevitability, revealing the extent to which Bucquoy's story is inseparable from the language with which it is depicted. The narrator says of Bucquoy's planned escape from the Bastille:

Ne voyant pas son affaire prendre une meilleure tournure, il songeait même franchement à une évasion. Lorsqu'il eut assez médité son plan, il sonda ses voisins qui, dès l'abord, jugèrent la chose impossible; mais l'esprit ingénieux de l'abbé résolvait peu à peu toutes les difficultés. (II, 930)

The narrator proceeds to elaborate on Bucquoy's intentions, yet his account lacks essential details and he does not comment on the inadequacy and implausibility of his version of events. The narrator informs the reader that Bucquoy realises he needs money to carry out his plan, and immediately continues: "l'abbé de Bucquoy tira, on ne sait d'où, de l'or et des pierreries" (II, 930). When Bucquoy finally succeeds in escaping from the Bastille, the narrator, having described this incredible occurrence, simply states: "Nous avons montré l'abbé de Bucquoy s'échappant de la Bastille, ce qui n'était pas chose facile" (II, 940). Besides the issue of the plausibility of Bucquoy's remarkable escapades, a number of questions remain unanswered throughout this account. One such question is the precise nature of Bucquoy's association with the group of *faux saulniers* with which he becomes associated. Indeed, it is not clear from Nerval's narrative whether he is truly conspiring with these individuals or whether such accusations are unfounded, and at no point does the narrator attempt to deal with this question. Bucquoy is arrested for a series of apparently trivial crimes, and his cycle of incarceration and evasion appears

comically disproportionate, such that the reader is left questioning the status and genre of this apparently biographical account.

The status of “L’Histoire de l’abbé de Bucquoy” as biography is problematic, since this text clearly departs from the norms of the genre and undermines the fundamental principles of biographical writing. It calls into question the notion of identity, the perceived distinction between history and fiction, and the relation between reality and the very words with which it is transcribed, as well as rendering problematic questions of basic chronology and linearity. With the exception of the final pages, which break with the highly romanticised discourse of the rest of the text to provide a brief overview of the writings and ideas of this seventeenth-century figure and of his life following his exile, this text reads more like a quixotic adventure story than a historical study, and its narrative repeatedly thwarts the bounds of credibility. The closing section of the text exposes the perceived inadequacy, and impossibility, of purely historical discourse in biographical writing. The narrator reveals the lack of information regarding the details of his subject’s existence with comments such as: “Nous ne savons comment l’abbé de Bucquoy se rendit de Suisse en Hollande” (II, 941), and expressions of doubt, including “probablement” and “on peut croire que”, before stating: “Nous n’avons pas d’autres renseignements touchant les dernières années de l’abbé comte de Bucquoy” (II, 945). The closing words of “L’Histoire de l’abbé de Bucquoy” underline the ambiguity that pervades it throughout, and reveal the irrelevance of genuine historical fact to the narrator’s account: “Le comte de Bucquoy, après son évacion, resta soit en Hollande, soit en Allemagne, et n’alla pas aux Indes. Un de ses parents peut-être y fit une excursion vers cette époque” (II, 945). The sense of uncertainty here conveyed reflects the problematic status both of the narrative itself and of its inherently elusive subject matter. The deliberate vagueness expressed in these final lines marks a striking contrast with the apparent historical certainty, albeit invented, that marks the end of “Le Roi de Bicêtre”, as well as undermining the extensive account of the narrator’s quest for absolute historical truth in the pages that precede this portrait in *Les Faux Saulniers*. As indicated by Ann Jefferson, Nerval is, in his supposedly biographical portrait of Bucquoy, “making a question out of the distinction between fiction and history by

which the government authorities set such store”.<sup>28</sup> The generic eccentricity of his text thus becomes a form of protest, subverting preconceived categories and norms.

Sangsue argues that eccentricity in literature, which he identifies as a distinct literary genre that came to the fore in France in the early decades of the nineteenth century, represents “une réponse à la désillusion politique”,<sup>29</sup> and this is especially evident in Nerval’s “L’Histoire de l’Abbé de Bucquoy”, as well as in the two works in which this portrait is contained, *Les Faux Sauniers* and *Les Illuminés*. The “récit excentrique” of these texts is inseparable from their eccentric subject matter. Both in *Les Faux Sauniers* and in *Les Illuminés*, Nerval seeks to destabilise the official narrative of history, and to give voice to those that have been marginalised by their societies and neglected by conventional history. The generic uncertainty of “L’Histoire de l’Abbé de Bucquoy” and its unsettling fusion of fiction and history become a form of revolt against various forms of repression, as reflected by the themes of imprisonment and evasion. For Nerval, the very act of writing becomes a form of rebellion. This is seen in *Les Faux Sauniers* in which the narrator’s proclaimed rejection of fictional writing is undermined by the narrative, and again in *Les Illuminés*, in which the uncle’s library, as described in “La Bibliothèque de mon oncle”, becomes a place of refuge for marginality and madness. In the context of *Les Illuminés*, the way in which the narrative of “L’Histoire de l’Abbé de Bucquoy” undermines the apparent opposition between history and fiction becomes bound up with the question of the distinction between reason and madness. The eccentricity that constitutes both the theme and the subject matter of Nerval’s narrative deprives the reader of a voice of absolute historical truth and of absolute reason, revealing the necessarily arbitrary nature, as well as the irrelevance, of both concepts.

## Conclusion

Besides describing various forms of social and political repression, the opening pages of “L’Histoire de l’abbé de Bucquoy” also lament the perceived loss of

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<sup>28</sup> Jefferson, p. 196.

<sup>29</sup> Sangsue, p. 33.

grandeur in French society. This portrait opens with a bleak image of disenchantment that recalls Nerval's descriptions of post-Revolutionary French society elsewhere in his writings:

Le grand siècle n'était plus: – il s'était en allé où vont les vieilles lunes et les vieux soleils. Louis XIV avait usé l'ère brillante des victoires. On lui reprenait ce qu'il avait gagné en Flandre, en Franche-Comté, aux bords du Rhin, en Italie. Le prince Eugène triomphait en Allemagne, Marlborough dans le Nord... Le peuple français, ne pouvant mieux faire, se vengeait par une chanson. (II, 903)

Bucquoy's role in Nerval's narrative, as a perpetual outsider and eccentric, constitutes a form of resistance, not only to social and political authoritarianism, but also to the sense of all-pervasive disillusion here conveyed. The story of Bucquoy's life, as related by Nerval, explodes the bounds of historical reality, and represents the "chanson" to which the narrator alludes as a voice of freedom and resistance. Bucquoy's eccentricity, in the context of Nerval's narrative, becomes a form of opposition to an age of disenchantment, as his remarkable adventures undermine the sense of despair articulated in the opening lines, introducing mystery and fiction into the fabric of reality.

Both in *Les Illuminés* and in *Les Faux Sauniers*, from which this portrait is derived, "L'Histoire de l'abbé de Bucquoy" appears within a wider exploration of the themes of eccentricity and marginality, and the title figure of this text emerges first and foremost as a "personnage excentrique" (II, 10), defined by his resistance not only to social and ideological norms, but also to the perceived constraints of historical reality. Many of the themes and preoccupations at the heart of *Les Faux Sauniers* are also central to *Les Illuminés*, both works constituting an "annotation" ("La Bibliothèque de mon oncle": II, 886) to conventional historical narratives by bringing to the fore marginal and forgotten individuals; and both works present the concept of eccentricity as a form of social, political, religious, and ideological revolt. The narrator of "L'Histoire de l'Abbé de Bucquoy" repeatedly calls attention to Bucquoy's status as an outsider, an individual excluded not only from his society, but also from mainstream historical narratives. Nerval's portrait of Bucquoy, in the context of both *Les Illuminés* and *Les Faux Sauniers*, emerges as a text that champions marginality, focusing on figures whose ideas and activities destabilise

established social and ideological boundaries, and who are defined by their failure to adhere to the norms and values of their respective societies. In both works, Nerval's Bucquoy is cast as one of a wider group of eccentrics that Nerval seeks to rehabilitate and to rescue from the neglect of conventional history. Both in *Les Faux Sauniers* and in *Les Illuminés*, the title character of Nerval's "L'Histoire de l'abbé de Bucquoy" is presented to the reader as belonging to a series of eccentric and marginal figures whose ideas and activities isolate them from their societies, and to whom Nerval attaches fresh layers of significance and value.

# “LES CONFIDENCES DE NICOLAS”: MADNESS, CREATIVITY, AND THE PUSUIT OF ILLUSION

## Introduction

In “Les Confidences de Nicolas”, by far the longest of the portraits contained in *Les Illuminés*, Nerval deals with the life and work of Nicolas Edme Restif de la Bretonne, an eighteenth-century writer known as much for his unconventional ideas and activities as for his extensive literary output. “Les Confidences de Nicolas” was first published as a series of articles in the *Revue des Deux Mondes* in 1850 with the title “Les Confidences de Nicolas – Histoire d’une vie littéraire” before being included in *Les Illuminés* two years later. Its subject, Restif de la Bretonne, was the author of a vast range of texts published in the latter half of the eighteenth century. His numerous works, which, as pointed out by Nerval, represent “plus de deux cents volumes” (II, 1073), span a number of different literary genres, and include autobiography, novels, plays, and various political and philosophical essays. Unlike the other subjects of Nerval’s collection, with the exception of Cagliostro, Restif was relatively well known during his own lifetime and his works were widely read in France and across Europe during the latter half of the eighteenth century. However, by the nineteenth century, the popularity of Restif’s writings was dwindling. Keiko Tsujikawa points out that, following its initial success, “cette œuvre démesurée a été oubliée et reléguée dans les rayons des cabinets de lecture ou chez des bouquinistes”,<sup>1</sup> suggesting that, by the time Nerval was composing “Les Confidences de Nicolas”, this once popular author tended to be dismissed as a marginal writer whose ideas had little lasting impact. Therefore, Restif adheres to the image of marginality and historical neglect that emerges from “La Bibliothèque de mon oncle” and, like the other subjects of *Les Illuminés*, is inscribed into a series of figures that Nerval seeks to reinstate and to rescue from obscurity. However, at the time at which Nerval was writing, a number of other authors were also turning their

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<sup>1</sup> Keiko Tsujikawa, *Nerval et les limbes de l’histoire: Lecture des Illuminés* (Geneva: Droz, 2008), p. 107.

attentions to Restif, and the publication of “Les Confidences de Nicolas” corresponded with a minor revival of interest in this neglected eighteenth-century author.<sup>2</sup> As indicated by Max Milner, this renewed prominence of Restif in French literary culture can perhaps be attributed to the failed revolutionary activity of 1848 (II, 1722). Beside “Jacques Cazotte”, “Les Confidences de Nicolas” is perhaps the most read portrait of *Les Illuminés*, and, despite the inherently unreliable nature of Nerval’s narrative, it is cited in a number of biographical portraits of Restif and in critical studies of his writings.<sup>3</sup>

Restif’s pantheist system identifies him, to some extent at least, with the Illuminist movement evoked by the title of *Les Illuminés*. However, Restif was, at best, a minor, marginal figure in this historical esoteric movement. As pointed out by Anne-Marie Jaton: “on le connaît plus pour son réalisme sentimental et social, et sa tendance à l’erotisme, que pour son panthéisme matérialiste et ses utopies vaguement illuminées”.<sup>4</sup> However, if the designation of Restif as an *illuminé* in the primary sense of the term is dubious, this eighteenth-century figure clearly adheres to the later definition of the term with its connotations of irrationality, delusion, and madness. Indeed, Restif’s life, as presented by Nerval, is characterised by the impassioned pursuit of illusion and the narrator of this portrait repeatedly calls attention to the fantastical nature of Restif’s ideas. In this text, Restif’s status as an *illuminé* becomes bound up with characteristically nineteenth-century ideas regarding the concept of madness.

The theme of madness is central to “Les Confidences de Nicolas”, and Nerval’s narrator highlights the delusory, irrational nature of his subject’s activities, ideas, and beliefs. Throughout the portrait, this eighteenth-century figure is presented to the reader through the lens of nineteenth-century medical and popular culture surrounding the concept of madness. The narrative assimilates distinctly nineteenth-

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<sup>2</sup> Lille Lewis, *Restif de la Bretonne: His Social Perspectives and Narrative Techniques* (Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1976), p. 5.

<sup>3</sup> For example: Rainer Lanselle, “Rétif de la Bretonne, ou la folie sous presse”, in *Essaim*, vol. 1, no. 16 (2006), 65-87; Pierre Testud, *Rétif de la Bretonne et la création littéraire* (Geneva: Droz, 1977).

<sup>4</sup> Anne-Marie Jaton, “Nerval «Historien» des *Illuminés*”, in *Actes du Colloque International Lumières et Illuminisme*, ed. by Marie Matucci (Pisa: Pacini, 1984), pp. 29-40 (p. 32).

century ideas regarding the notion of partial madness, and especially the popular and psychiatric categories of monomania and eccentricity. The question of the relationship between madness and genius, central to nineteenth-century psychiatric and Romantic literature, is also dealt with in this text, as is the perceived overlap, from the middle of the nineteenth century, between madness and moral decay. Nerval's allusions to Restif's madness are highly ambivalent in nature. Although the narrative assimilates contemporaneous psychiatric ideas, and repeatedly indicates the potentially dangerous, pathological nature of Restif's condition, it also undermines straightforwardly negative interpretations, attaching a positive dimension to Restif's madness and linking it to his powerful imagination and extensive literary activity.

### **“Les Confidences de Nicolas” as Biography**

Despite the fact that Restif is historically one of the best known of the *illuminés* selected by Nerval, the narrative of “Les Confidences de Nicolas” is nevertheless coloured by the same instability and ambiguity as those of the other portraits contained in this collection. From the outset, this portrait renders problematic its status as biography, departing clearly from the conventions of the genre. This text takes as its subject an individual whose life is far from exemplary, and the narrator does not seek to conceal the more unsavoury aspects of this figure's existence, presenting Restif's controversial activities and experiences to the reader with a detachment and ambivalence that is almost comical in nature.

Although biographical writing generally depicts admirable or remarkable individuals, the narrative of “Les Confidences de Nicolas” calls attention to Restif's deviant, often irrational, and delusory thought and conduct. Rather than seeking to justify or conceal the faults and weaknesses of its subject, Nerval often presents him in a markedly negative manner. Terms including *singulier*, *fou*, *excentrique*, *étrange*, and *bizarre* pervade the narrative; while the narrator alludes to Restif's *bizarrerries*, his *excentricités*, his *délire*, his *illusions*, and his *désordre d'esprit*. Such expressions, especially in the context in which Nerval was writing, hold potentially



pathological connotations. Even when referring to Restif's accomplishments, the narrator does not present his subject in a wholly positive light. Having evoked Restif's vast literary output, the narrator comments: "N'allez pas croire toutefois qu'il fût ambitieux; l'amour seul occupait ses pensées, et il lui eût sacrifié même la gloire, dont il était digne peut-être, et qu'il n'obtint jamais" (II, 946). Descriptions of Restif's unbridled imagination and obsessive love consistently border on the pathological, as the narrator claims that Restif falls in love "avec dévouement, avec enthousiasme, avec folie" (II, 1058). However, if the narrator repeatedly highlights Restif's self-delusion and the morally dubious nature of his actions, refusing to condone or justify the activities of this figure, he does not attack or dismiss his subject directly. In this narrative, Restif's delusions, which cast him as one of Nerval's *illuminés*, are compelling and, much like the delirious visions of the narrator of *Aurélia*, are valuable in their own right despite their potentially pathological nature.

The narrative of "Les Confidences de Nicolas" is composed of a heterogeneous mixture of material, including historical fact, literary analysis, and fictional creation, and the reader is deprived of a stable authorial perspective. Nerval here fuses extensive extracts from other sources, in particular the autobiographical writings of Restif himself, with elements of his own invention, thereby obscuring the boundary between history and fiction, as well as rendering problematic the distinction between biographical and autobiographical discourse. The combination of autobiography and biography in Nerval's portrait is also apparent from the clear overlap between the aspects of Restif's life and thought highlighted in this portrait and Nerval's own experiences and preoccupations as articulated elsewhere in his writings.

In "Les Confidences de Nicolas", Nerval borrows heavily from Restif's own autobiographical writings. Besides *Monsieur Nicolas, ou le Cœur humain dévoilé* (1794-1797), from which Nerval extracts the majority of his material, he also inserts, into his apparently biographical narrative, episodes from a number of his subject's other autobiographical texts, including *Le Drame de la vie* (1793), *Les Contemporaines* (1780), and *Lettres du tombeau, ou les Posthumes* (1802). While

Nerval is clearly not concerned with the veracity of his biographical portrait, the general difficulty of composing a historically accurate biography of Restif that does not rely primarily on his autobiographical literature is highlighted by Max Milner, who states: “il est encore très difficile d’écrire une vie de Restif en s’appuyant sur des documents extérieurs à son œuvre” (II, 1722-1723). As pointed out by Ann Jefferson, although the title of Nerval’s text is more indicative of autobiography than that of Restif’s *Monsieur Nicolas*, Nerval, in “Les Confidences de Nicolas”, “firmly recasts autobiography as biography”.<sup>5</sup> The historical validity of the text is therefore extremely dubious, and its unreliability as an accurate biographical account is further accentuated by the fact that Nerval, despite inserting extensive extracts from Restif’s writings directly into this text, makes a number of minor, but important, changes to his source material, transforming the overall emphasis and significance of the episodes of Restif’s life that he chooses to highlight. This is especially true with regard to Restif’s libertine exploits, which are here transformed into a more cerebral, or even mystical, form of love. As pointed out by Michel Brix, Restif’s sexual references are “systématiquement atténués, voire éliminés”;<sup>6</sup> they are replaced by suggestions of platonic love and of the worship of women as goddesses, and bound up with the mystical theory of resemblances, notions that are more in keeping with the ideas conveyed in Nerval’s other writings. Nerval thus transforms his source material to convey a specific image of his subject, enabling him to explore a number of questions and themes specific to his own experiences and preoccupations.

Whereas the question of autobiography underpins the whole of *Les Illuminés*, it is especially apparent in “Les Confidences de Nicolas”, as Nerval’s portrayal of Restif reveals a number of striking affinities in the experiences and preoccupations of the author and his subject. The precise episodes of Restif’s autobiographical writings selected for inclusion in this text bring to the fore themes and ideas evoked elsewhere in Nerval’s writings. The potentially autobiographical dimension of “Les

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<sup>5</sup> Ann Jefferson, *Biography and the Question of Literature in France* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 196.

<sup>6</sup> Michel Brix, “Récit biographique et création littéraire. Le cas des *Illuminés*”, in *Cahier de l’association des études françaises*, vol. 52, no. 52 (2000), 183-199 (p. 187).

Confidences de Nicolas” has been the subject of critical commentary, and such a reading is supported by the narrator’s reflections on autobiographical literature:

L’intérêt des mémoires, des confessions, des autobiographies, des voyages même, tient à ce que la vie de chaque homme devient ainsi un miroir où chacun peut s’étudier, dans une partie du moins de ses qualités ou de ses défauts. C’est pourquoi, dans ce cas, la personnalité n’a rien de choquant, pourvu que l’écrivain ne se drape pas plus qu’il ne convient dans le manteau de la gloire ou dans les haillons du vice. (II, 1038)

Norma Rinsler describes this text as “a self-portrait more than a study of Restif de la Bretonne”.<sup>7</sup> Gabrielle Malandain argues that the act of biographical writing in “Les Confidences de Nicolas”, as in “Jacques Cazotte”, “devient instrument de la construction d’une poétique personnelle”.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, the extent to which Nerval exploits the biographical facts of Restif’s life to evoke a number of questions specific to his own thought and experience is indicated by Henry Bouillier, who suggests that: “Nerval attribue à Rétif un état d’esprit qui est d’abord le sien”.<sup>9</sup> Bouillier argues that many of the narrator’s comments about Restif could equally be applied to Nerval himself, and that this text is therefore concerned with “les confidences de Gérard” as much as “les confidences de Nicolas”.<sup>10</sup> Jean Richer also points out the autobiographical nature of “Les Confidences de Nicolas”, but argues that, far from being a reflection of historical reality, this aspect of the text arises from Nerval’s transformation of the life and thought of his subject, such that it adheres to his own ideas and preoccupations. He claims that this portrait “repose sur une assez paradoxale identification de Rétif avec Nerval”, to which he adds that “le narrateur prête à l’auteur de *Monsieur Nicolas* ses goûts, ses préoccupations, ses théories, ce qui conduit à s’écarter beaucoup de la vérité historique et biographique”.<sup>11</sup> He proceeds to state that Nerval’s study of Restif “ne présente qu’un assez faible intérêt historique”.<sup>12</sup> As is the case throughout *Les Illuminés*, here Nerval is not concerned with conveying “la vérité historique et biographique” in any conventional sense, and his presentation of his subject matter is bound up with the exploration of a number of broader themes and ideas.

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<sup>7</sup> Norma Rinsler, *Gérard de Nerval: Les Chimères* (London: Athlone, 1973), p. 20.

<sup>8</sup> Gabrielle Malandain, *Nerval ou l’incendie du théâtre* (Paris: Corti, 1986), p. 211.

<sup>9</sup> Henry Bouillier, “Gérard et Nicolas”, in *Cahiers Gérard de Nerval*, no. 12 (1989), pp. 29-32 (p. 30).

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*, p. 31.

<sup>11</sup> Jean Richer, *Gérard de Nerval et les doctrines ésotériques* (Paris: Griffon d’or, 1947), p. 394.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, p. 396.

As indicated by the critics cited above, there are multiple points of overlap between Nerval and Restif. In particular, Restif's imaginary genealogy, his illusory love for an actress, his tendency to attribute to all of the women with whom he falls in love a single identity,<sup>13</sup> and his experiences of various forms of monomania and religious madness mirror episodes related by Nerval elsewhere in his writings. Furthermore, reflections on realist writing, which Nerval incorporates into his portrait of Restif, recall Nerval's exploration of this theme in *Les Nuits d'octobre*, a work that overlaps significantly with Restif's *Les Nuits de Paris*.<sup>14</sup> The connection between the author and his subject arises primarily from their impassioned pursuit of illusion and the belief in fantastical phenomena, including the products of their own imaginations. In both cases, this is shown to be explicitly associated with the act of literary creation, and here, as elsewhere in Nerval's writings, is linked to the theme of madness.

### **The Pursuit of Illusion: “Les Confidences de Nicolas” and “Sylvie”**

One of the most obvious connections between Nerval's literary persona and his eighteenth-century subject as presented in this portrait is the attachment to illusory and irrational phenomena. This theme, which is fundamental to all of the portraits in *Les Illuminés*, is at the heart of the image of Restif that emerges from “Les Confidences de Nicolas” and adheres to the definition of the term *illuminé* that appeared in French dictionaries from the middle of the nineteenth century and that is bound up with questions of madness.

The theme of attachment to illusion is evoked in the very first lines of this portrait, as the text opens with an image of Restif at the Comédie-Française, and the narrator describes his subject “consacrant presque tous les soirs au plaisir de la scène” (II,

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<sup>13</sup> Sarah Kofman suggests that in the same way as the narratives of several of Restif de la Bretonne's novels are constructed upon the notion of “*la ressemblance des femmes aimées*”, so too is the narrative of Nerval's “Sylvie”: Sarah Kofman, *Nerval: le Charme de la répétition: Lecture de Sylvie* (Lausanne: Age d'Homme, 1979), pp. 49-50.

<sup>14</sup> Keiko Tsujikawa studies at length the question of literary Realism in this text: Keiko Tsujikawa, “Nerval et le réalisme: des *Confidences de Nicolas* aux *Nuits d'octobre*”, in *Etude de langue et littérature françaises*, no. 39 (2008), 23-36.

946). The image of the theatre introduces notions of fantasy, chimera, and delusion, which pervade the ensuing narrative and it is in this context that Restif is first presented to the reader. The opening episode deals with Restif's fanciful love, or rather obsession, for an actress, Mlle Guéant, and it reflects Nerval's well-documented infatuation with the actress Jenny Colon, as well as marking a striking parallel with the opening scene of "Sylvie", which deals with the same theme. For Restif, as for Nerval, the love for an actress is part of a literary persona. In "Les Confidences de Nicolas", this scene is exemplary of the way in which Restif's life is bound up with his writings and consists of the inextricable fusion of fantasy and reality.

In "Les Confidences de Nicolas", the potentially pathological dimension of Restif's attachment to an actress, a figure representing fantasy and detachment from reality, emerges strongly from Nerval's narrative. Restif's love for Mlle Guéant takes on a distinctly pathological dimension, as the narrator describes it as "dangereux", and employs the terms "malade" and "fou" to refer to such illusory sentiment (II, 947). In *Aurélia*, fantastical, illusory love is also presented as a form of madness:

Quelle folie, me disais-je, d'aimer ainsi d'un amour platonique une femme qui ne vous aime plus. Ceci est la faute de mes lectures; j'ai pris au sérieux les inventions des poètes, et je me suis fait une Laure ou une Béatrix d'une personne ordinaire de notre siècle... (III, 696)

Here, the narrator's idealised love is bound up with the tendency to take seriously "les inventions des poètes" and therefore recalls Nerval's description of the connection between madness and literary activity in the preface to *Les Filles du feu*. For Restif, as for the narrator of *Aurélia*, the excessive identification with imaginary figures is associated both with madness and creativity. In both cases, the pathological nature of this delusory love is also bound up with the perceived analogy between madness and dream. Accordingly, Restif's infatuation for Mlle Guéant is described as "le rêve d'un malade":

Rien n'est plus dangereux pour un homme d'un naturel rêveur qu'un amour sérieux pour une personne de théâtre; c'est un mensonge perpétuel, c'est le rêve d'un malade, c'est l'illusion d'un fou. La vie s'attache tout entière à une chimère irréalisable qu'on serait heureux de conserver à l'état de désir et d'aspiration, mais qui s'évanouit dès que l'on veut toucher l'idole. (II, 947)

Nerval's narrative highlights the illusory nature of Restif's love and the fact that it is the product of a heightened imagination and a potentially pathological mind rather than being grounded in reality. For Restif, Mlle Guéant is an image, idealised and elevated to the point of delusion. The narrator says "c'est une femme idéale qu'il aimait", adding that "il n'avait jamais songé d'ailleurs à se rapprocher d'elle" (II, 948), and thus revealing the extent to which Restif's life becomes infused with illusion and dream.

The parallels between the opening of "Les Confidences de Nicolas" and that of "Sylvie" are striking, both being concerned with the chimerical love for an actress, and both revealing the illusory nature of such an infatuation. "Sylvie" also begins with a romanticised image of a visit to a theatre. The sense of enchantment inspired by the actress is conveyed in fantastical terms, as the narrator's description of this figure represents a clear departure from reality:

Je me sentais vivre en elle, et elle vivait pour moi seul. Son sourire me remplissait d'une béatitude infinie; la vibration de sa voix si douce et cependant fortement timbrée me faisait tressaillir de joie et d'amour. Elle avait pour moi toutes les perfections, elle répondait à tous mes enthousiasmes, à tous mes caprices, – belle comme le jour aux feux de la rampe qui l'éclairait d'en bas, pâle comme la nuit, quand la rampe baissée la laissait éclairée d'en haut sous les rayons du lustre et la montrait plus naturelle, brillant dans l'ombre de sa seule beauté, comme les Heures divines qui se découpent, avec une étoile au front, sur les fonds bruns des fresques d'Herculanum! (III, 537)

Whereas Restif's infatuation, as recounted by Nerval, has pathological undertones, in "Sylvie" delusion, or even madness, becomes a desirable alternative to commonplace reality. The narrator of "Sylvie" consciously rejects the parameters of reality in favour of an imaginary ideal, the narrative becoming infused by the narrator's illusory vision, and this text lacks the overtly pathologising discourse of "Les Confidences de Nicolas". The narrator's illusion is here presented as the conscious decision of a lucid mind, rather than as the product of pathological delusion, and the narrator highlights his attachment to an image or an idea rather than to a real person: "je n'avais pas encore songé à m'informer de ce qu'elle pouvait être d'ailleurs; je craignais de troubler le miroir magique qui me renvoyait son image" (III, 538), to which he adds: "C'est une image que je poursuis, rien de plus" (III, 539). The pursuit of chimera and illusion in place of reality is fundamental to "Sylvie" as a whole, and the narrator ultimately prefers "un mirage de la gloire et de la beauté" and

an “idéal sublime”, represented by Adrienne, to “la douce réalité” of Sylvie (II, 542, 567).

Following this opening scene, the theme of the pursuit of illusion continues to pervade the narrative of “Les Confidences de Nicolas” and is at the heart of the precise nature of Restif’s madness, as portrayed by Nerval. The way in which Nerval depicts Restif’s madness as a form of delusion and reverie anticipates the literary exploration of his own madness in *Aurélia*.

### **Madness and Writing: Nerval and Restif**

The confusion of illusion and reality, and the image of madness as “l’épanchement du songe dans la vie réelle”, which underpin the entire narrative of “Les Confidences de Nicolas”, are inextricably bound up with questions of creativity and literary activity. As seen in Part One of this thesis, Nerval, in his preface to *Les Filles du feu*, asserts that there exists a necessary connection between madness and literary creation, and he presents writing as a form of illusion that necessarily involves some degree of identification with fictional figures. In “Les Confidences de Nicolas”, Nerval presents Restif as an author whose life and writings are inextricably intertwined: according to Nerval’s account, Restif’s works, whether autobiographical or fictional, are intimately connected to his own experiences. Restif’s life is infused with illusion, and his status as a writer is founded upon a fusion of fiction and reality that pervades all aspects of his existence.

Nerval’s narrative undermines the distinction between the historical facts of Restif’s existence and his fictional creations. The coexistence of reality and illusion that characterises Restif’s life, as depicted by Nerval, is exemplified by his writings. Just as Nerval’s semi-autobiographical narrator of *Promenades et souvenirs* (1854) says of his literary activity: “Je suis du nombre des écrivains dont la vie tient intimement aux ouvrages qui les ont fait connaître” (III, 685-686), in “Les Confidences de Nicolas”, the narrator says of his subject: “On s’assurera sans peine que tous les romans que Restif a écrits ne sont, avec quelques modifications et les noms changés,

que des versions diverses des aventures de sa vie” (II, 1040). The fundamental connection between Restif’s literary inventions and his real life experience is further highlighted when the narrator says that Restif admits “qu’il n’a jamais pu rien imaginer, que ses romans n’ont jamais été, selon lui, que la mise en œuvre d’événements qui lui étaient arrivés personnellement, ou qu’il avait entendu raconter” (II, 1041). He then adds: “Lorsqu’il manquait de sujets, ou qu’il se trouvait embarrassé pour quelque épisode, il se créait à lui-même une aventure romanesque, dont les diverses péripéties, amenées par les circonstances, lui fournissaient ensuite des ressorts plus ou moins heureux” (II, 1041). Directly following this, the narrator ironically states: “On ne peut pousser plus loin le *réalisme* littéraire” (II, 1041). Nerval’s descriptions of Restif’s role as a writer involve a deep-rooted questioning of the boundary between life and writing, between reality and fiction. This notion is reflected in Restif’s ideas on the theatre. Referring to Restif’s *Le Mimographe ou le Théâtre réformé*, the narrator, insisting on “la vérité absolue au théâtre” and “l’excès de réalité qu’il voulait introduire”, explains Restif’s idea “de faire jouer les scènes d’amour par de véritables amants la veille de leur mariage” (II, 1046).

The lack of distinction between the real and the imaginary that pervades every aspect of Restif’s life is exemplified by Nerval’s text. The narrative of “Les Confidences de Nicolas” undermines the distinctions between reality and illusion, and between history and fiction, calling into question the very notion of historical truth. In this portrait the blurring of the boundary between reality and fantasy is inseparable from the problematic relationship between reason and madness, anticipating the inherently unstable, hallucinatory narrative of *Aurélia*.

### **Partial Madness and Eccentricity: Nerval and Moreau de Tours**

The way in which Nerval deals with the theme of madness in “Les Confidences de Nicolas” is grounded in the precise cultural and historical context in which he was writing. Nerval’s Restif embodies the various forms of partial madness identified by



alienists in the early and mid-nineteenth century, and, in this narrative, allusions to his bizarre, socially deviant thought and conduct acquire a marked pathological dimension. Nerval's text assimilates distinctly nineteenth-century ideas on madness, reflecting contemporaneous medical discourse, as well as a more Romantic view of madness as being bound up with creativity and even genius. Whilst Nerval's writings on the theme of madness, especially *Aurélia*, seek to undermine the pathologising discourse of psychiatric science, here the potentially negative dimension of Restif's condition emerges from Nerval's account. However, suggestions of pathology are counterbalanced by the fact that, in "Les Confidences de Nicolas", Restif's madness is shown to be inseparable from his powerful imagination, his originality, and his extensive literary activity.

The distinctly nineteenth-century concepts of monomania and eccentricity are both central to Nerval's depiction of Restif. The narrator says of the "préoccupation constante du pied et de la chaussure des femmes qu'on remarque dans tous les écrits de l'auteur": "Cette monomanie ne l'a pas abandonné un seul jour" (II, 1044). This potentially pathologising discourse is instantly followed by an assertion of the originality of Restif's literary style. The narrator later refers to Restif's "monomanie paternelle", which is linked to his mental deterioration, as it is directly preceded by the affirmation: "Ses chagrins affaiblissaient parfois son esprit" (II, 1068). Restif, as portrayed by Nerval, is very much the archetypal nineteenth-century eccentric, embodying an intermediate form of madness that is implicitly pathological in nature and also linked to his intellectual and creative capacities. The narrator explicitly alludes to Restif's eccentricities five times in this portrait and in each case the concept of eccentricity is evoked in relation to Restif's literary activity. He refers to "les excentricités calculées" in Restif's discourse, subsequently adding that "aucune de ces excentricités ne rebutait les innombrables lecteurs du *Paysan perversi*, des *Contemporaines* ou des *Nuits de Paris*" (II, 954). Nerval indicates the perceived link between eccentricity and nineteenth-century French culture, as he says that the "vie littéraire" of this eighteenth-century figure, "dans ses écarts et ses bizarreries, reflète le cynisme du XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle et présage les excentricités du XIX<sup>e</sup>" (II, 1040). As seen in Part One, when the terms *excentrique* and *excentricité* first gained their figurative

connotations in the French language, they had connotations of Englishness associated with the reluctance of the English to pathologise bizarre and deviant behaviour. This aspect of the term appears in Nerval's text, as the narrator classes his subject "parmi ces écrivains que les Anglais appellent *excentriques*" (II, 1056). Alluding to Restif's pantheism, the narrator claims that this individual "développa une foule de systèmes excentriques" (II, 1057).

The extent to which Nerval's account of Restif's partial madness overlaps with nineteenth-century psychiatric discourse is apparent from the fact that Moreau de Tours quotes Nerval's "Les Confidences de Nicolas" in the section of *La Psychologie morbide* entitled "Etat mixte au point de vue intellectuel",<sup>15</sup> in which he explores the association between partial madness and elevated intellectual capacities. Although he clearly distinguishes the *état mixte* from earlier ideas relating to the category of monomania, he shows it to be exemplified by the figure of the eccentric. In the lines that precede his citation from Nerval's portrait of Restif, Moreau de Tours explores the perceived connection between this intermediate form of madness and the elaboration of theosophical systems. Having characterised this pathological category as "une sorte de mélange, un composé réel [...] de folie et de raison, d'idées fausses, délirantes, et de pensées vraies, marquées même de l'empreinte de génie",<sup>16</sup> Moreau de Tours proceeds to link it with the tendency to elaborate intricate philosophical or religious systems:

C'est principalement parmi les hommes adonnés aux études théologiques et de philosophie morale, aux sciences qui traitent de Dieu et de l'humanité, de leurs rapports, qui ont pour but direct, immédiat, les destinées de l'homme ici-bas, ses droits, ses devoirs, ses espérances, le moyen d'améliorer le sort de ceux qui souffrent; études qui, d'ailleurs, s'alimentent au foyer d'une profonde sensibilité d'ardentes émotions; c'est, disons-nous, principalement parmi les hommes qui concentrent toute l'activité de leur esprit sur ces matières que s'observe le phénomène psychologique dont nous parlons.<sup>17</sup>

As is the case for Nerval, not only in his study of Restif, but in *Les Illuminés* as a whole, Moreau de Tours fuses the nineteenth-century psychiatric concepts of eccentricity and religious madness. It is in this context that Moreau de Tours cites

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<sup>15</sup> Jacques-Joseph Moreau de Tours, *La Psychologie morbide dans ses rapports avec la philosophie de l'histoire, ou De l'influence des névropathies sur le dynamisme intellectuel* (Paris: Masson, 1859), pp. 210-247.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 212.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 218.

“Les Confidences de Nicolas”, and he here indicates an overlap between the “intelligences malades” that Nerval depicts in his writings and the pathological mental state of Nerval himself:

Citons encore de belles et sages paroles de Gérard de Nerval, à propos de ces intelligences malades avec lesquelles, hélas! la sienne propre avait une si triste analogie. «Les grands bouleversements de la nature font monter à la surface du sol des matières inconnues, des résidus obscurs, des combinaisons monstrueuses ou avortées. La raison s'en étonne, la curiosité s'en repaît avidement, l'hypothèse audacieuse y trouve les germes d'un monde. Il serait insensé d'établir sur ce qui n'est que décomposition efflorescente et malade, ou mélange stérile de substances hétérogènes, une base trompeuse, où les générations croiraient pouvoir poser un pied ferme. L'intelligence serait alors pareille à ces lumières qui voltigent sur les marécages et semblent éclairer la surface verte d'une immense prairie, qui ne recouvre cependant qu'une bourbe infecte et stagnante.»<sup>18</sup>

For Moreau de Tours, Restif, like Nerval, represents one of a number of theosophists whose elaborate mystical systems reveal both superior intellect and pathological reverie. According to Moreau de Tours, examples of theosophists afflicted with this intermediate pathological condition include Fourier, Swedenborg, and Saint-Martin.

The extract of “Les Confidences de Nicolas” quoted by Moreau de Tours portrays Restif’s madness in distinctly negative terms, comparing it to unstable and threatening natural phenomena, and thereby implicitly identifying it as a potentially dangerous pathological condition. These lines are preceded in Nerval’s text by the narrator’s claim that the significance of the study of Restif’s life resides in “l’appréciation des causes morales qui ont amené nos révolutions” (II, 1073-1074). Such a statement is in keeping with the nineteenth-century theory that emerged in both popular and psychiatric writings in the aftermath of the failed insurrections of 1848, according to which eccentricity was inherently subversive in nature and was bound up with revolutionary activity. Miranda Gill argues that this passage illustrates the ideas associated with the newly conceived scientific discipline of teratology, which dealt with the study of monstrosity, linking physical deformation to eccentric or subversive behaviour.<sup>19</sup> Just as eccentricity was associated with the departure from social customs and values, monstrosity was associated with the

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<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 224.

<sup>19</sup> Miranda Gill, *Eccentricity and the Cultural Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Paris* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 222-223.

departure from the norms of nature,<sup>20</sup> and both concepts are evoked by Nerval's use of the image of "les grands bouleversements de la nature" as a reflection of his subject's pathological mental state. This metaphor, besides its connotations of danger and instability, is also captivating and alluring, embracing the inherently ambiguous nature of the phenomena that it represents. The potentially subversive nature of eccentricity is central to "Les Confidences de Nicolas", as the theme of madness is here bound up with the question of immorality.

Moreau de Tours alludes to Nerval's portrait of Restif a second time in *La Psychologie morbide*, again in the context of the perceived association between pathological mental states and enhanced intellectual capacities. Moreau de Tours explicitly identifies Restif as an eccentric according to nineteenth-century psychiatric definitions of this term. As seen in Part One, whilst identifying eccentricity as a pathological category derived from physiological malformations within the nervous system, Moreau de Tours wrote extensively on the perceived association between eccentricity and superior intellectual or creative capacities. *La Psychologie morbide* concludes with an extensive list of famous and influential historical figures that Moreau de Tours diagnoses as having been afflicted with mental illness, and he here includes Restif under the heading, "Faits biographiques se rapportant à l'état d'excentricité", a list that also includes well-known figures such as Balzac and Lamennais.<sup>21</sup> Moreau de Tours introduces his list of pathological eccentrics with the comment: "l'excentricité s'observe fréquemment chez les individus doués d'une intelligence élevée".<sup>22</sup> He refers specifically to "Les Confidences de Nicolas", quoting Nerval's description of Restif as an eccentric who "avait des singularités qui ne ressemblaient guère aux singularités en manchette de HAYDEN et de BUFFON".<sup>23</sup> Establishing an implicit connection between Restif's pathological eccentricity and his extensive literary output, Moreau de Tours says of this figure:

Entre autres excentricités de Rétif de la Bretonne, nous citerons les suivantes. Tantôt il se condamnait au silence, faisant vœu de ne parler à personne, tantôt il laissait croître sa barbe et disait à quelqu'un qui le plaisantait: «Elle ne tombera que lorsque j'aurai achevé mon

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<sup>20</sup> *Ibid*, p. 208.

<sup>21</sup> Moreau de Tours, pp. 542-544.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid*, p. 542.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*.

premier roman. – Et s’il a plusieurs volumes? – Il en aura quinze. – Vous ne raserez donc que dans quinze ans? – Rassurez-vous, jeune homme, j’écris un volume par jour.»<sup>24</sup>

## Madness and Genius

The question of the connection between madness and genius, which is central to Moreau de Tours’s allusions to this eighteenth-century figure, is problematic in Nerval’s depiction.

Despite repeatedly highlighting the illusory, irrational nature of Restif’s ideas, and alluding to the potentially pathological dimension of his condition, the narrator nevertheless reveals the value and originality of his subject’s literary, philosophical, and political output, calling attention to the continued legacy of his writings. The narrator establishes a connection between Restif and a number of well-known writers and *philosophes*, thereby implicitly elevating the status and significance of his subject. In particular, the names of Diderot and Rousseau appear several times in this portrait. The reader is reminded that *Le Paysan pervers* had initially been attributed to Diderot (II, 1047), while, in relation to the theatre, Restif’s ideas are compared to those of Diderot and Beaumarchais: “On croirait lire les préfaces de Diderot et de Beaumarchais, — qui, plus heureux ou plus habiles, parvinrent à réaliser leurs théories, — tandis que le théâtre de Restif fut toujours repoussé de la scène” (II, 1046). The narrator also refers to Restif’s impressive legacy in the development of Socialism. This is the only portrait of *Les Illuminés* in which the narrator deals explicitly with the subtitle of this work, “Les Précurseurs du socialisme”. Despite the fact that Restif is identified as a Communist, the narrator highlights his impact upon the early Socialist movement. In particular, Nerval suggests that Charles Fourier was strongly influenced by Restif’s ideas:

*La Philosophie de M. Nicolas* contient tout un système panthéiste, où il tente, à la manière des philosophes de cette époque, d’expliquer l’existence du monde et des hommes par une

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<sup>24</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 542-543.

série de créations ou plutôt d'éclosions successives et spontanées; son système a du rapport avec la cosmogonie de Fourier, lequel a pu lui faire de nombreux emprunts. (II, 955)<sup>25</sup>

Although the word *génie* appears multiple times in this portrait, the narrator falls short of ever identifying Restif as a genius in any straightforward manner, and suggestions of Restif's genius are counterbalanced by indications of the negative, pathological dimension of his condition. Restif's potential genius is repeatedly undermined by the excessiveness and extravagance that pervade all aspects of his existence, and the narrator says: "Ce qui manqua toujours à Restif de la Bretonne, ce fut le sens moral dans sa conduite, l'ordre et le goût dans son imagination" (II, 996). The narrator highlights Restif's exceptionally powerful imagination, yet claims that this in itself does not make for a good writer:

Jamais écrivain ne posséda peut-être à un aussi haut degré que Restif les qualités précieuses de l'imagination. Cependant sa vie ne fut qu'un long duel contre l'indifférence. Un cœur chaud, une plume pittoresque, une volonté de fer, tout cela fut insuffisant à former un bon écrivain. (II, 1071)

If Restif has the "empreinte de génie" that Moreau de Tours associates with the pathological *état mixte*,<sup>26</sup> it is undercut by the chaotic, disordered nature of his thought. This is reflected in the image of disproportion and lack of control that emerges from the narrator's description of Restif's literary style:

C'était ce même procédé de récit haletant, coupé de dialogues à prétentions dramatiques, cet enchevêtrement d'épisodes, cette multitude de types dessinés à grands traits, de situations forcées, mais énergiques, cette recherche continuelle des mœurs les plus dépravées, des tableaux les plus licencieux que puisse offrir une grande capitale dans une époque corrompue, le tout relevé abondamment par des maximes humanitaires et philosophiques et des plans de réforme où brillait une sorte de génie désordonné, mais incontestable, qui fit qu'on appela cet auteur étrange le *Jean-Jacques des halles*. (II, 955)

The narrator compares his subject to Rousseau a number of times, especially in relation to the writing of confessions. He describes "le goût des autobiographies, des mémoires et des confessions ou confidences" as "une maladie périodique" and as

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<sup>25</sup> At the time at which Nerval was writing, essays by Pierre Leroux, Charles Monselet, and Xavier de Montépin had recently appeared linking Restif's thought to that of prominent nineteenth-century Socialists, including Fourier: Tsujikawa, *Limbes de l'histoire*, p. 137; Mark Foster, *The Utopian Thought of Restif de la Bretonne* (New York: New York University Press, 1971), pp. 134-137. Pierre Leroux's article describes Restif's pantheist system as "une sorte de résumé et de quintessence de toute la philosophie matérialiste du dix-huitième siècle": quoted in Gérard Schaeffer, *Une Double lecture de Gérard de Nerval: Les Illuminés et Les Filles du Feu* (Neuchâtel: Baconnière-Payot, 1977), p. 40.

“une fureur” (II, 995), thus casting this tradition in a negative light, and presenting it as a form of monomania. Comparing Restif’s autobiographical writings to those of Rousseau, the narrator states that “L’exemple de Rousseau n’eut pas toutefois d’imitateur plus hardi que Restif” (II, 995), but rather than using such an analogy to elevate the status of Restif’s writings, the narrator refers to him as Rousseau’s “concurrent rustique et vulgaire” (II, 1039). The disproportion and lack of order that characterises Restif’s writings is also shown to be fundamental to his pantheist system, and the narrator refers to him as “un écrivain auquel il n’a manqué que le génie pour élucider des inspirations où se trouvent tous les éléments de la doctrine hégélienne” (II, 1035). Whilst Restif’s imagination and creativity are implicitly linked to his madness, the status of this figure ultimately remains ambiguous, as the narrator indicates that Restif lacks the refinement and control of the true genius. Immediately after the passage cited by Moreau de Tours in *La Psychologie morbide* (quoted above), the narrator says:

Le génie véritable aime à s’appuyer sur un terrain plus solide, et ne contemple pas un instant les vagues images de la brume que pour les éclairer de sa lueur et les dissiper peu à peu des vifs rayons de son éclat. (II, 1074)

He subsequently adds: “L’exemple de la vie privée et de la carrière littéraire de Restif démontrerait au besoin que le génie n’existe pas plus sans le goût que le caractère sans la moralité” (II, 1074).

### **Madness and Immorality: Nerval’s Ambivalent Narrator**

As seen in Part One, from the middle of the nineteenth century, especially in the light of the insurrectionary activity of 1848, madness was increasingly associated with moral decay, and eccentricity was perceived as an inherently subversive phenomenon bound up with the loss of a stable moral framework. In psychiatric writings, the association of eccentricity with immorality was central to the theory of degeneration, which rose to prominence in the latter half of the nineteenth century. This idea is problematic in Nerval’s writings, perhaps owing to his own diagnosis

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<sup>26</sup> Moreau de Tours, p. 212.

with mental illness. If Nerval's writings on madness are often concerned with attaching fresh value and significance to unconventional and potentially pathological minds, his portrait of Restif nevertheless assimilates the nineteenth-century notion that madness and immorality are connected.

Throughout "Les Confidences de Nicolas", the exploration of the complex relationship between madness and reason is underpinned by a consideration of the equally problematic relationship between morality and immorality. In Nerval's narrative, both pairs of opposites become shrouded in uncertainty by the instability of the narrative voice and the lack of fixed authorial perspective. Nerval assimilates into his narrative the perceived connection, from the middle of the nineteenth century, between the apparent rise in pathological mental states and the notion of moral decline. The inherently problematic nature of the categories of madness and immorality is exploited in this text, which reveals the necessary instability of such concepts. The narrator of "Les Confidences de Nicolas" highlights the fragility of the notion of morality, quoting Restif's aphorism: "Les mœurs sont un collier de perles; ôtez le nœud, tout défile" (II, 1071). This could also be applied to the concept of reason, which, throughout this portrait, is destabilised and shown to be indistinguishable from the concept of madness.

As already seen, in "Les Confidences de Nicolas", Nerval transforms autobiography into biography, such that the voice of the narrator merges with that of his subject. This has the effect of depriving the reader of a clear framework from which to interpret the material presented, as is articulated by Ann Jefferson: "By introducing an external biographical perspective into the self-narration of Restif's autobiography, Nerval undermines his subject's self-justification, but fails to replace it with an alternative moral position".<sup>27</sup> Indeed, the narrator recounts Restif's inappropriate, morally dubious activities, yet neither condones nor condemns the ideas and actions that he describes. The narrative tone is characterised by ambivalence and neutrality, and the narrator relates his subject's deviant and often self-deceptive ideas and

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<sup>27</sup> Jefferson, p. 197.



describes the chaos wrought by this figure, but does not take any clear moral stance with regard to his controversial subject matter.

Restif is not the only character of dubious morality in this portrait. By destabilising the entire moral framework of the narrative Nerval prevents the reader from casting any straightforward judgement on Restif's ideas and activities. Since the activities of the other characters in the text are also called into question, the narrative casts doubt on the reader's preconceived ideas and moral certainty. Gaudet d'Arras, who Restif meets in Auxerre, embodies the contradictions that pervade this narrative, as he is said to have "ni vertu, ni vice, ni lâcheté, ni faiblesse" (II, 1047). The narrator says in relation to this incongruous figure:

Tout ce que fait l'homme est bien, en tant qu'il agit selon son intérêt ou son plaisir, et ne s'expose ni à la vengeance des lois ni à celle des hommes. Si le mal se produit ensuite, c'est la faute de la société qui ne l'a pas prévu. Cependant Gaudet d'Arras n'est pas cruel, il est même affectueux pour ceux qu'il aime, parce qu'il a besoin de compagnie; sensible aux maux d'autrui par suite d'une espèce de crispation nerveuse que lui fait éprouver le spectacle de la souffrance; mais il pourrait être dur, égoïste, insensible, qu'il ne s'en estimerait pas moins, et n'y verrait qu'un hasard de son organisation, ou plutôt qu'un but mystérieux de cette immortelle nature qui a fait le vautour et la colombe, le loup et la brebis, la mouche et l'araignée. Rien n'est bien, rien n'est mal, mais tout n'est pas indifférent. (II, 1047-1048)

The narrative of Nerval's text works to undermine categorical ideas and values, casting doubt on Restif himself as well as his society and all those that surround him. The reader is consequently deprived of a stable perspective from which to interpret Restif's socially deviant thought and conduct. The various episodes recounted by Nerval's narrator often cast Restif in a negative light, but fail to provide an alternative moral framework or any form of solution to the problems that they raise. This is the case in the episode relating to Septimanie. Here, the narrator exposes the immorality of Restif's and of Septimanie's actions, yet undercuts any straightforwardly negative interpretations of their conduct with the concluding remarks:

De telles aventures étaient fréquentes à cette époque, où elles eurent lieu quelquefois même du consentement des maris, soit dans l'idée de conserver des titres ou des privilèges dans une famille, soit pour empêcher de grands biens d'aller à des collatéraux par suite d'unions stériles. (II, 1001)

Just as Nerval's narrative calls into question any preconceived assumptions about the relationship between madness and reason, so too does it deny the reader any stable

viewpoint from which to judge the morality of the subject matter it conveys. “Les Confidences de Nicolas”, by challenging the norms and values, not only of its protagonist, but also of his society and of everyone with whom he is surrounded, destabilises rigid ideas and assumptions, highlighting the necessary relativity of the concepts of madness and immorality. The very notion of truth is called into question as the narrator, besides revealing Restif’s delusions and irrationality, undermines the stability of the framework from which his actions are interpreted.

## Conclusion

Michel Brix states that “*Les Illuminés* proposent un constant jeu de balancier”,<sup>28</sup> and nowhere is this more apparent than in “Les Confidences de Nicolas”. The image of Restif that emerges from this portrait is founded on contradiction. In Nerval’s narrative, Restif is cast as the embodiment of opposites. This is a figure that undermines the stability of basic categories of existence, resisting straightforward definition or classification. Béatrice Didier describes Restif, as he emerges from Nerval’s portrait, as an embodiment of the disorder of the age in which he was living, reflecting “ce premier temps de Révolution”, a period characterised by “sa richesse, ses paradoxes, son caractère inachevé, mal défini, impossible à cerner, à délimiter”.<sup>29</sup> As such, Nerval’s Restif exemplifies the nineteenth-century figure of the eccentric, eschewing boundaries and posing a threat to the stability of society. The life of Restif, as presented by Nerval, fuses the opposites of illusion and reality; morality and immorality; and madness and reason; while his theosophical system encompasses diverse religious and political movements, identified by Tsujikawa as “libéralisme, néo-catholicisme, socialisme utopique, et mouvement humanitaire”.<sup>30</sup>

The dissolution of boundaries, fundamental to the concept of eccentricity, is exemplified by Restif’s “théorie de ressemblances”, which is described as “une idée

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<sup>28</sup> Michel Brix, *Les Déesses absentes: vérité et simulacre dans l’œuvre de Gérard de Nerval* (Paris: Klincksieck, 1997), p. 115.

<sup>29</sup> Béatrice Didier, “Révolution et identité dans *Les Illuminés*”, in *Cahiers de la Société Gérard de Nerval*, no. 12 (1989), 2-10 (p. 4).

<sup>30</sup> Tsujikawa, *Limbes de l’histoire*, p. 145.

païenne”, and which renders problematic the very notion of stable identity, since Restif claims “qu’il n’a jamais aimé que la même femme... en trois personnes” (II, 1011-1012). The concept of eccentricity, besides constituting a major theme of this portrait, is also assimilated into its narrative, which is inherently unstable, vacillating between seemingly opposing categories and denying the reader any stable narrative position or perspective with regard to the material presented. The narrative of “Les Confidences de Nicolas” captures the eccentricity of its subject matter, undermining basic categories and assumptions. This text fuses history and fiction; reality and invention; biography and autobiography; and the voice of the narrator and that of his subject. If “Les Confidences de Nicolas” is to be read as a form of disguised autobiography, it represents a questioning of the categories and assumptions according to which Nerval himself was diagnosed with madness.

Nerval’s narrative is highly ambivalent in nature: at no point does he seek to conceal or to justify the irrationality and moral dubiousness of his subject; yet, neither does he dismiss Restif as a madman in any straightforward manner. Descriptions of Restif’s self-deception, illusory thought, irrationality, infatuation, and moral vacuity are consistently counterbalanced by the underlying affirmation of the inherent value and continued significance of this controversial eighteenth-century author.

# “JACQUES CAZOTTE”: PATHOLOGICAL HALLUCINATION AND PROPHETIC VISION

## Introduction

The fourth portrait in *Les Illuminés* deals with the life of the eighteenth-century author and mystical philosopher, Jacques Cazotte. Nerval's "Jacques Cazotte" was first published as the preface to an 1845 edition of Cazotte's 1772 novel, *Le Diable amoureux*.<sup>1</sup> Versions of the text also appeared in *L'Artiste* in April and May of 1845, in *La Sylphide* in June 1845, and in *L'Almanach prophétique, pittoresque et utile pour 1847* in November 1847, before finally being published in *Les Illuminés* in 1852. Since its initial publication, extracts of this portrait have been widely reproduced, and Nerval's depiction of Cazotte has frequently been cited as a reliable source of information regarding the life and writings of this mysterious eighteenth-century figure. Cazotte is one of the better known *illuminés* in Nerval's collection and a number of his books, especially *Le Diable amoureux*, continue to be widely read to this day. This eighteenth-century author readily adheres to the designation of *illuminé* both in its primary sense in relation to the eighteenth-century Illuminist movement and in the ahistorical sense of a religious visionary. Indeed, besides his extensive literary activity, Cazotte is best known for his famous prediction of the forthcoming 1789 Revolution and the numerous executions that the event entailed including his own.

Although Cazotte can be considered an *illuminé* in the broad historical sense of the term as an adherent of the major current of eighteenth-century Western esotericism, he nevertheless remains an outsider in relation to the already marginal Illuminist movement. Indeed, in Nerval's portrait he is defined much more in terms of his deviation from established systems of belief than as a true follower of any coherent

religious or mystical following. Furthermore, as will be seen, the status of Cazotte's visionary experience is far from straightforward in Nerval's portrait, becoming bound up with the nineteenth-century psychiatric concept of pathological hallucination as defined by Esquirol. In Nerval's narrative, the status of Cazotte's mystical experience hovers uncertainly between hallucination, as described from the perspective of medical science by nineteenth-century alienists, and genuine prophetic vision, a dichotomy that is never resolved in any satisfactory manner. The question of the authenticity of Cazotte's prophetic vision is central to "Jacques Cazotte", and, through this theme in particular, Nerval's narrative captures the all-pervasive tension between medical and mystical perspectives that is fundamental to *Les Illuminés* as a whole.

### **The Narrative of "Jacques Cazotte"**

"Jacques Cazotte" lacks a consistent narrative voice and deprives the reader of an authoritative interpretation or explanation of the material presented. The shifting perspective of the text, which results in an all-pervasive ambiguity surrounding its subject matter, arises largely from its citational structure. "Jacques Cazotte" is composed primarily of extensive quotations derived from a number of different sources that are inserted directly into the text with little introduction or clarification on the part of the narrator. Besides borrowing extensively from Cazotte's own writings, especially his correspondence, Nerval also inserts extracts from Charles Nodier's biographical "M. Cazotte" and Jean-François de La Harpe's account of Cazotte's prophecy published in his *Mémoires*, as well as adapting the scene of Cazotte's mysterious initiation from Madame de Hautefeuille's *La Famille Cazotte*, originally published in *Le Correspondant* in 1845. Max Milner points out that most of the factual information conveyed in Nerval's portrait is taken from the extensive notes of an edition of Cazotte's works published in 1817 (II, 1743).<sup>2</sup> Despite the lack of original narrative in "Jacques Cazotte", it nevertheless conveys a unique view

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<sup>1</sup> Jacques Cazotte, Gérard de Nerval, *Le Diable amoureux, roman fantastique par J. Cazotte. Précédé de sa vie, de son procès et de ses prophéties et révélations par Gérard de Nerval. Illustré de 200 dessins par Edouard de Beaumont* (Paris: Ganviet, 1845).

of its subject, bringing to the fore specific aspects of Cazotte's existence that resonate with Nerval's own preoccupations and with the specificities of nineteenth-century French society. As pointed out by Keiko Tsujikawa, because this text relies heavily on the writings of others, "le travail essentiel de Nerval réside dans le choix des textes et dans leur analyse littéraire".<sup>3</sup> However, as will be seen, the "analyse littéraire" that follows the various quotations in this text fails to convey a straightforward authorial vision.

The status of "Jacques Cazotte" as a biographical portrait is problematic. Its episodic structure and the lack of stable narrative voice undermine the conventional linearity of biographical writing. The episodes of Cazotte's life that Nerval highlights are not presented in a straightforward chronological manner, as is evident, for example, from the fact that the reader learns of Cazotte's death before being told of the mysterious prophecy in which he predicts it. Alternating extensive quotations from other sources, the status and authenticity of which are unclear, with the discourse of the narrator, the narrative vacillates between a historically plausible account and fantastical discourse. Meryl Tyers suggests that the narrative of this portrait reflects the literary style of Cazotte himself, as well as that of Hoffmann.<sup>4</sup>

A striking feature of "Jacques Cazotte" is the overlap between the image of Cazotte that emerges from the narrative and Nerval's literary persona. The potentially autobiographical dimension of this portrait is highlighted by Dagmer Wieser, who describes it as Nerval's "autobiographie spirituelle".<sup>5</sup> Wieser indicates the parallels between Cazotte's mystical ideas, as presented by Nerval, and Nerval's own quest for an authoritative spiritual or religious framework to counterbalance the rise of modern science and materialist culture in early nineteenth-century France. Jean Richer also points out the marked overlap in the ideas of the author and his eighteenth-century subject, arguing that there exist "profondes affinités entre Cazotte

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<sup>2</sup> The edition in question is: Jacques Cazotte, *Œuvres badines et morales, historiques et philosophiques*, 4 vols. (Paris: Bastien, 1817).

<sup>3</sup> Keiko Tsujikawa, *Nerval et les limbes de l'histoire: Lecture des Illuminés* (Geneva: Droz, 2008), p. 173.

<sup>4</sup> Meryl Tyers, *Critical Fictions: Nerval's Les Illuminés* (Oxford: Legenda, 1998), p. 26.

<sup>5</sup> Dagmer Wieser, *Nerval: Une poétique du deuil à l'âge romantique* (Geneva: Droz, 2004), p. 191.

and Nerval”, in terms of their esoteric affiliations, as well as in various other aspects of their thought and experiences.<sup>6</sup>

There are a number of ways in which Cazotte’s life as presented by Nerval marks a clear overlap with Nerval’s literary portrayal of his own experiences. Depictions of the period in which Cazotte was writing, characterised by the conflicting ideological influences of Enlightenment scepticism and traditional Catholicism, have much in common with Nerval’s portrayal of his own age elsewhere in his writings. Both Nerval and Cazotte turn to alternative systems of belief in response to the declining authority of Catholicism, and both articulate similar mystical beliefs: for example, an interest in Martinism and in the cult of Isis emerges from the writings of both authors. Cazotte’s problematic status as a mystical visionary, which in “Jacques Cazotte” is bound up with the question of madness, resembles Nerval’s ambiguous response to his own hallucinatory visions in *Aurélia* as well as in his correspondence. Moreover, Cazotte, like Nerval, is a writer and in both cases literary activity is presented as a form of madness, requiring self-delusion and excessive identification with the subjects of their writings. In the context of *Les Illuminés*, Cazotte, much like Nerval’s semi-autobiographical narrator in “La Bibliothèque de mon oncle”, becomes one in a series of writers seeking new systems of belief in an age of ideological uncertainty and spiritual decline.

### **Eighteenth-Century France: Enlightenment and Illuminism**

One of the ways in which Nerval establishes a connection between his own life and that of his eighteenth-century subject is by his portrayal of the respective contexts in which they were writing. As observed in relation to “La Bibliothèque de mon oncle”, Nerval presents the societies of his various subjects in a manner that bears a striking resemblance to his depiction of early nineteenth-century France in his other writings. In “Jacques Cazotte”, the backdrop against which Cazotte’s writings were conceived is characterised by the uneasy coexistence of competing ideologies and by

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<sup>6</sup> Jean Richer, *Gérard de Nerval: Expérience vécue et création ésotérique* (Paris: Trédaniel, 1987), pp. 129-130.

the increasingly uncertain status of religious faith in an era marked by growing scepticism, the rise of modern science, and the spread of materialist culture. Nerval's account reveals the other side of the Enlightenment, highlighting the underlying mystical dimension of the Age of Reason.

Nerval focuses on the rise of religious scepticism during the Enlightenment years, presenting his subject as a voice of resistance in the face of widespread religious decline:

Mais qui se serait attendu, dans ce siècle d'incrédulité où le clergé lui-même a si peu défendu ses croyances, à rencontrer un poète que l'amour du merveilleux purement allégorique entraîne peu à peu au mysticisme le plus sincère et le plus ardent? (II, 1083)

However, the narrative also points to the mystical and superstitious ideas that flourished beneath the façade of Enlightenment reason. By revealing the wealth of mystical beliefs that pervaded the so-called Age of Reason, Nerval situates his subject in a context of ideological contradiction:

Les livres traitant de la cabale et des sciences occultes inondaient alors les bibliothèques; les plus bizarres spéculations du Moyen Âge ressuscitaient sous une forme spirituelle et légère, propre à concilier à ces idées rajeunies la faveur d'un public frivole, à demi impie, à demi crédule, comme celui des derniers âges de la Grèce et de Rome. L'abbé de Villars, dom Pernetty, le marquis d'Argens, popularisaient les mystères de l'*Œdipe Égyptique* et les savantes rêveries des néoplatoniciens de Florence. Pic de La Mirandole et Marsile Ficin renaissaient tout empreints de l'esprit musqué du XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle, dans *Le Comte de Gabalis*, les *Lettres cabalistiques* et autres productions de philosophie transcendante à la portée des salons. Aussi ne parlait-on plus que d'esprits élémentaires, de sympathies occultes, de charmes, de possessions, de migration des âmes, d'alchimie et de magnétisme surtout. (II, 1083-1084)

Here, Nerval alludes in passing to major esoteric thinkers who would constitute obvious subjects for a work entitled *Les Illuminés*. Pre-Revolutionary France is portrayed as a society characterised by contradiction, which, as emerges from Nerval's various depictions of his own age, was only to become more pronounced with the outbreak of Revolution. Cazotte's society as presented by Nerval clearly resonates with the post-Revolutionary France, described by the narrator of "Sylvie": "un mélange d'activité, d'hésitation et de paresse, d'utopies brillantes, d'aspirations philosophiques ou religieuses, d'enthousiasmes vagues, mêlés de certains instincts de renaissance" (III, 538). The narrator of "Sylvie" proceeds to add: "Il ne nous restait pour asile que cette tour d'ivoire des poètes, où nous montions toujours plus haut



pour nous isoler de la foule” (III, 538), a statement that could readily be used to characterise the position of Nerval’s Cazotte in relation to eighteenth-century French society.

As pointed out by Kenneth Fleurant, a number of influential figures of Cazotte’s generation sought to undermine the apparent incompatibility between mainstream Enlightenment philosophy and its powerful esoteric undercurrent, attempting to establish a “positive relationship between the rational and the occult”.<sup>7</sup> A notable example is Emmanuel Swedenborg. Swedenborg was both scientist and mystic, and made no distinction between physical and occultist science, considering these ideological domains to be not merely compatible but necessarily intertwined. Similarly, Franz Mesmer embraced both scientific materialism and the occult, in that his mystical theory of animal magnetism was equated with the mineral magnet and was therefore of interest both to mainstream science and its esoteric equivalent. However, as illustrated by Fleurant, such attempts to combine the rational and the occult were fiercely opposed by Cazotte. This emerges strongly from Cazotte’s correspondence as well as his fictional writings, and isolates him from major strands of eighteenth-century esoteric thought that sought to retain ancient metaphysical assumptions whilst embracing the principles of modern empirical science. In his writings, Cazotte repeatedly attacks the new wave of philosophical and scientific thought that undermined the absolute values associated with the Catholic Church and the monarchy. This view is clearly expressed in one of his letters, in which he explicitly criticises eighteenth-century *philosophes*: “N’appelez pas vos adversaires démagogues, appelez-les philosophes, c’est la plus grande injure qu’on puisse dire à un homme”.<sup>8</sup> Fleurant describes Cazotte as “a staunch conservative, struggling with the powers of change”, to which he adds: “Ironically, it was through this struggle that he found new avenues for the imagination and became a minor hero of the early Romantic generation”.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, much like Nerval’s literary persona, Cazotte was a figure of contradiction, the product of an age lacking a straightforward ideological

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<sup>7</sup> Kenneth Fleurant, “Mysticism in the Age of Reason: Jacques Cazotte and the Demons”, in *The French Review*, vol. 49, no. 1, (1975), 68-75 (pp. 68-69).

<sup>8</sup> Jacques Cazotte, *Œuvres badines et morales, historiques et philosophiques*, 4 vols. (Paris: Bastien, 1817), I, lxxiii-lxxiv. Quoted in Fleurant, p. 69.

<sup>9</sup> Fleurant, p. 74.

backdrop and an authoritative system of belief. Cazotte's writings, like those of Nerval, are founded on the dynamic tension between positive science and the supernatural, a tension that pervaded French culture in the decades surrounding the 1789 Revolution. Like Nerval, Cazotte seeks, throughout his writings, to combat the sense of disenchantment resulting from the rise of scientific and materialist values and the dwindling authority of the Catholic Church.

### **Writing and Madness in "Jacques Cazotte"**

Perhaps the most obvious overlap between Nerval's literary persona and Cazotte, as he emerges from this portrait, concerns the literary activity of these two individuals. Indeed, Nerval's portrayal of Cazotte as a writer closely mirrors descriptions of his own literary experiences elsewhere in his writings. Both writers reveal a fascination for traditional folk songs and legends, and both use their writings to explore the significance of dream visions and mystical experience. "Jacques Cazotte" opens with an extensive discussion of the writings of its title character and, as is the case for Nerval himself, these literary creations are shown to be intimately bound up with the genuine autobiographical experiences of the author. The perceived association between madness and the act of literary creation that characterises Nerval's descriptions of his own activity as a writer is also central to his portrayal of the literary practice of Cazotte.

Nerval presents Cazotte's evolution as a writer in terms of a gradual descent into madness, such that the process of creativity becomes a form of delirium that eclipses everyday reality:

Ainsi cet homme, qui fut d'abord un poète gracieux de l'école de Marot et de La Fontaine, puis un conteur naïf, épris tantôt de la couleur des vieux fabliaux français, tantôt du vif chatoisement de la fable orientale mise à la mode par le succès des *Mille et Une Nuits*; suivant, après tout, les goûts de son siècle plus que sa propre fantaisie, le voilà qui s'est laissé aller au plus terrible danger de la vie littéraire, celui de prendre au sérieux ses propres inventions. Ce fut, il est vrai, le malheur et la gloire des plus grands auteurs de cette époque; ils écrivaient avec leur sang, avec leurs larmes; ils trahissaient sans pitié, au profit d'un public vulgaire les mystères de leur esprit et de leur cœur; ils jouaient leur rôle au sérieux, comme ces comédiens antiques qui tachaient la scène d'un sang véritable pour les plaisirs du peuple-roi. (II, 1083)

The portrayal of Cazotte as an author who falls prey to the “plus terrible danger de la vie littéraire”, namely “prendre au sérieux ses propres inventions”, reveals a striking overlap with Nerval’s exploration of his own literary madness, most notably in his preface to *Les Filles du feu*. As seen in Part One of this thesis, Nerval characterises his own creative enterprise in terms of the excessive identification with the fictional and historical characters that he depicts. Just as Cazotte is described as “le poète qui croit à sa fable, le narrateur qui croit à sa légende, l’inventeur qui prend au sérieux le rêve éclos de sa pensée” (II, 1075), Nerval ascribes his own capacities as a writer to his tendency to “s’incarner dans le héros de son imagination” (III, 451). In “A Alexandre Dumas”, the creative process, as described by Nerval, takes on a distinctly mystical dimension, as the narrator declares: “ne pouvant trouver les preuves de l’existence matérielle de mon héros, j’ai cru tout à coup à la transmigration des âmes” (III, 450). The same is true in the case of Cazotte’s literary activities, as depicted by Nerval. Indeed, in “Jacques Cazotte”, Cazotte’s literary creativity is shown to be inseparable from his visionary experience and his unconventional spiritual beliefs.

The implied association between writing and madness that emerges from Nerval’s writings, both in relation to his own status as a writer and to that of Cazotte, is closely reflected in Charles Nodier’s descriptions of Cazotte’s literary activities. Nodier, a contemporary of Nerval, who composed a literary portrait of Cazotte’s life, entitled “M. Cazotte”, as well as dedicating a chapter to this figure in the “Notes Historiques” that follow *Le Dernier Banquet des Girondins*, also conceives of Cazotte’s literary activity as a form of madness. Just as Nerval, writing about his own status as a writer in the preface to *Les Filles de feu*, describes the activity of the writer as entailing excessive identification with fictional and historical characters, Nodier presents the process of literary creation for Cazotte in terms of his intimate involvement with his subject matter and his identification with the figures that he depicts:

Son imagination étoit un conte oriental perpétuel dans lequel il s’attribuoit volontiers un rôle, soit qu’il eût réellement pris parti aux événements dont il parloit, soit qu’il ne pût s’empêcher de s’identifier en racontant avec un de ses personnages.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Charles Nodier, “Notes historiques”, in *Le Dernier banquet des Girondins; Etude historique suivie de recherches sur l’éloquence révolutionnaire* (Paris: Méline, 1833), pp. 143-185 (p. 165).

In the same way as Nerval describes the activity of the poet as necessarily involving a form of madness, Nodier, in his portrait of Cazotte, establishes a connection between the madman and the poet: “Pour faire illusion aux autres, il faut être capable de se faire illusion à soi-même, et c’est un privilège qui n’est donné qu’au fanatisme et au génie, aux fous et aux poètes”.<sup>11</sup> The capacity to “se faire illusion à soi-même” that Nodier identifies as being fundamental to Cazotte’s literary activity is a defining characteristic of all of the subjects of *Les Illuminés*.

### **Jacques Cazotte and the Illuminist Movement**

In “Jacques Cazotte”, the tendency of the protagonist to “prendre au sérieux ses propres inventions” is inextricably bound up with his mystical convictions and therefore with his status as an *illuminé*. Nerval’s narrator explicitly links Cazotte’s mystical beliefs to his literary activity: “La fin de sa vie a donné surtout le secret des idées mystérieuses qui présidèrent à l’invention de presque tous ses ouvrages, et qui leur ajoutent une valeur singulière que nous essayerons d’apprécier” (II, 1076). In Nerval’s portrait, Cazotte’s status as an *illuminé* is especially apparent with regard to *Le Diable amoureux*, a novel that is here presented as an esoteric treatise even if, as will be seen, this was unlikely to have been the intention of the author. The term *illuminé* is a recurrent feature of texts dedicated to Cazotte; however, the precise nature of Cazotte’s association with the Illuminist movement is far from straightforward.

Nerval explicitly links *Le Diable amoureux* to Cazotte’s identity as an *illuminé*, presenting the work as an exposition of Cazotte’s Illuminist beliefs, and using it as a starting point from which to explore his mystical convictions. The apparent overlap of Cazotte’s mystical ideas with those characteristic of the eighteenth-century Illuminist movement is illustrated through an anecdote relating to the novel. Nerval establishes a connection between the publication of *Le Diable amoureux* and

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<sup>11</sup> Charles Nodier, “M. Cazotte”, in *Contes de la veillée* (Paris: Charpentier, 1853), pp. 41-73 (pp. 41-42).

Cazotte's subsequent conversion to Martinism. According to Nerval's account, a member of the Illuminist movement came to speak to Cazotte in response to the material presented in his novel. Nerval's anecdote is derived from Madame de Hautefeuille's portrayal of Cazotte's life in *La Famille Cazotte*; however, as will be seen, Nerval makes minor adaptations to the original account of the episode to accord with the precise image of Cazotte that he wishes to convey. The narrator of "Jacques Cazotte" recounts how, having read Cazotte's novel, the mysterious figure comes to accuse its author of exposing a number of secrets of Illuminist thought and practice to his readers. However, on learning that Cazotte is in fact not a true member of the Illuminist movement and is therefore unaware of the extent to which his own ideas represent those specific to this esoteric following, the visiting *illuminé* decides to offer Cazotte an initiation:

«Je vous ai pris pour un frère infidèle qui trahissait nos secrets par un motif que j'étais curieux de connaître... Et, puisque vous n'êtes en effet qu'un profane ignorant de notre but suprême, je vous instruirai, je vous ferai pénétrer plus avant dans les mystères de ce monde des esprits qui nous presse de toutes parts, et qui par l'intuition seule s'est déjà révélé à vous.» (II, 1085)

The implication of this episode is that *Le Diable amoureux* consists primarily of a presentation of esoteric ideas, and that it reveals the secret traditions of occult societies. According to the anecdote, as related by Nerval, it was as a consequence of the publication of Cazotte's novel that he decided to become initiated as an *illuminé*, and, more specifically, as a Martinist.

Nerval's narrator compares *Le Diable amoureux* to Apuleius's hugely influential novel, *L'Âne d'or*, and describes the latter as a "livre également empreint de mysticisme et de poésie", adding that Apuleius's text "nous donne dans l'Antiquité le modèle de ces sortes de créations" (II, 1082). The comparison of Cazotte's novel to Apuleius's famous text attaches new significance to *Le Diable amoureux*, transforming a work that, according to Nerval's narrator, is dismissed by many as "qu'une sorte de conte bleu, pareil à beaucoup d'autres du même temps et digne de prendre place dans *le Cabinet des fées*" (II, 1083), into a powerful esoteric text:

*L'Âne d'or* servit longtemps de thème aux théories symboliques des philosophes alexandrins; les chrétiens eux-mêmes respectaient ce livre, et saint Augustin le cite avec déférence comme l'expression poétisée d'un symbole religieux: *Le Diable amoureux* aurait quelque droit aux

mêmes éloges, et marque un progrès singulier dans le talent et la manière de l'auteur. (II, 1083)

Nerval alludes to Apuleius a number of times in his writings: notably, the narrator of "Sylvie" evokes this historical figure in his description of post-Revolutionary France as a society devoid of a dominant ideological framework or an authoritative system of belief. This period of conflicting ideas and perspectives is described as "quelque chose comme l'époque de Pérégrinus et d'Apulée" (III, 538). In "Jacques Cazotte", Apuleius (and, by extension, Cazotte), much like the narrator of "Sylvie", is portrayed as an individual searching for a stable system of belief in an age of conflicting ideological influences. Comparing Cazotte's *Le Diable amoureux* to Apuleius's *L'Ane d'or*, the narrator says: "Le phénomène d'une telle œuvre littéraire n'est pas indépendant du milieu social où il se produit" (II, 1082). Apuleius is characterised as "l'illuminé païen, à moitié sceptique, à moitié crédule, cherchant sous les débris des mythologies qui s'écroulent les traces de superstitions antérieures ou persistantes" (II, 1082), a description that reflects the position of Cazotte seeking a new form of religiosity at a time of ideological upheaval, or even that of Nerval himself as he appears in "Sylvie" or in "La Bibliothèque de mon oncle".

As indicated by Michel Brix, the interpretation of Cazotte's novel promoted by Nerval, according to which the work constitutes an exposition of its author's esoteric convictions, is not in keeping with the author's intentions. Brix points to the inaccuracies in "Jacques Cazotte" with regard to the status of *Le Diable amoureux*. In particular, he describes Nerval's account of the *illuminé*'s visit as "hautement improbable",<sup>12</sup> a view with which Max Milner is in agreement, as he too describes Nerval's anecdote as "parfaitement invraisemblable, car *Le Diable amoureux* ne révélait rien qui ne fût connu depuis longtemps" (II, 1747). Brix suggests that, whilst Nerval presents Cazotte's novel as an authentic esoteric treatise, it is in fact much more of a parody than a didactic text. He adds: "Nerval a ainsi instauré, contre l'esprit de la nouvelle et contre la vérité historique, une tradition de lecture du *Diable*

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<sup>12</sup> Michel Brix, "Récit biographique et création littéraire: le cas des *Illuminés* de Nerval", in *Cahiers de l'Association internationale des études françaises*, vol. 52, no. 52 (2000), 183-199 (p. 188). However, Brix does not acknowledge that this anecdote originally appeared in Madame de Hautefeuille's *La Famille Cazotte*.

*amoureux* comme un traité d'occultisme".<sup>13</sup> Indeed, Nerval's interpretation of *Le Diable amoureux*, although not necessarily reflecting its true nature, influenced heavily the critical reception of Cazotte's novel. Over the course of the nineteenth century, and even in the early decades of the twentieth century, it was widely read as a work that revealed the secrets of occult societies and their practices.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, biographical studies, whilst not in agreement with the details of Cazotte's initiation, reveal that Cazotte's fascination with mystical and esoteric ideas developed some time after the publication of his 1772 novel. Although studies of Cazotte's life reveal a degree of discrepancy regarding the precise circumstances of his initiation into the Illuminist movement,<sup>15</sup> it is generally considered to have taken place in 1777 or 1778 from which point his writings became overtly concerned with occult beliefs and practices.

Although *Le Diable amoureux* cannot be considered to constitute an authoritative presentation of Illuminist ideas, Cazotte's later writings reveal a clear connection with major strands of esoteric thought specific to the Illuminist movement. Nerval's account of Cazotte's ideas also shows a distinct overlap in the mystical preoccupations of the author and his subject. Fundamental to Cazotte's beliefs, as presented by Nerval, is the principle of correspondence between the material and spiritual realms, which was characteristic of eighteenth-century esoteric thought. In "Jacques Cazotte", this concept is articulated through an extensive quotation from Cazotte:

«Nous vivons tous, disait-il, parmi les esprits de nos pères; le monde invisible nous presse de tous côtés... il y a là sans cesse des amis de notre pensée qui s'approchent familièrement de nous. Ma fille a ses anges gardiens; nous avons tous les nôtres. Chacune de nos idées, bonnes ou mauvaises, met en mouvement quelque esprit qui leur correspond, comme chacun des mouvements de notre corps ébranle la colonne d'air que nous supportons. Tout est plein, tout est vivant dans ce monde, où, depuis le péché, des voiles obscurcissent la matière... Et moi, par une initiation que je n'ai point cherchée et que souvent je déplore, je les ai soulevés comme le vent soulève d'épais brouillards. Je vois le bien, le mal, les bons et les mauvais; quelquefois la confusion des êtres est telle à mes regards, que je ne sais pas toujours distinguer au premier moment ceux qui vivent dans leur chair de ceux qui en ont dépouillé les apparences grossières...» (II, 1102-1103)

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<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> Dorothea von Mücke, *The Seduction of the Occult and the Rise of the Fantastic Tale* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), p. 18.

<sup>15</sup> Georges Décote, *L'itinéraire de Jacques Cazotte (1719-1792): De la fiction littéraire au mysticisme politique* (Geneva: Droz, 1984), p. 315.

Here Cazotte articulates the view that the world is full of spiritual beings with whom initiated beings are able to communicate, thereby implying a link between past, present, and future, as well as between the material and the immaterial realms. This theory of universal correspondence was fundamental to Illuminist thought, in particular revealing an overlap with the occult science of Swedenborg. As will be seen, Swedenborg's *science des correspondances* is central not only to Cazotte's esoteric convictions, but also to his dream visions.

As indicated by Nerval's narrator, many of Cazotte's spiritual beliefs were derived from the thought of Martinès de Pasqually, on which the esoteric movement of *martinèsisme* was founded (II, 1086-1087). This was an important sub-category of the Illuminist movement, and in "Jacques Cazotte" Nerval reveals a familiarity with this particular strand of esoteric thought. Jean Richer attributes Nerval's interest in Cazotte to the "communauté d'aspirations mystiques", pointing out that Nerval himself became interested in this particular subcategory of the Illuminist movement between the years of 1845 and 1848, a period during which he associated with the Martinist, Henri Delaage,<sup>16</sup> in collaboration with whom he produced the *Almanach cabalistique pour 1850*. Richer perceives, in Nerval's portrait of Cazotte, a detailed understanding of Martinism, pointing to "la justesse et la finesse de certains aperçus",<sup>17</sup> which he attributes to Nerval's association with Delaage. For example, Richer notes that Nerval's account clearly distinguishes between *martinèsisme* and *martinisme*, subcategories of the Illuminist movement based on the doctrines of Martinès de Pasqually and Saint-Martin respectively, despite the fact that these distinct esoteric followings are generally grouped together as Martinism.<sup>18</sup>

Despite Cazotte's connection to eighteenth-century esotericism, Nerval highlights the fact that he remains at the margins of the Illuminist movement. Indeed, with regard to his religious and mystical beliefs, Cazotte is repeatedly defined in terms of his rejection of dogma and of any absolute system of belief. As already observed,

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<sup>16</sup> Jean Richer, *Gérard de Nerval et les doctrines ésotériques* (Paris: Griffon d'or, 1947), p. 129.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*



Nerval's anecdote regarding the visit of the *illuminé*, which he takes from Hautefeuille's account, is adapted from the original, revealing a subtle change in emphasis. Throughout *La Famille Cazotte*, Hautefeuille seeks to affirm Cazotte's status as a genuine religious visionary capable of prophecy and gifted with a privileged understanding of the mysteries of the occult. This image of Cazotte emerges from Hautefeuille's account of the *illuminé*'s mysterious visit following the publication of *Le Diable amoureux*. Hautefeuille's version of the anecdote indicates Cazotte's ability to access esoteric truths without any study of such phenomena. Hautefeuille's Cazotte claims not to have read any esoteric text, declaring: "je n'ai pas trop coutume d'emprunter mes idées aux autres".<sup>19</sup> When asked by the visiting *illuminé* who it was that had revealed to him the esoteric ideas that he relates in his novel, Cazotte replies: "Elles me sont venues, comme bien d'autres, un beau matin en m'éveillant au chant de l'alouette, gai, frais et dispos comme elle".<sup>20</sup> However, Nerval's version is ambiguous. Nerval's narrator highlights Cazotte's refusal to identify with any established religious or spiritual movement, describing him as "plus superstitieux que croyant" and saying that he "se préoccupait fort peu d'orthodoxie" (II, 1079). Unlike Hautefeuille's Cazotte, Nerval's protagonist says to his mysterious visitor: "J'ai lu beaucoup, mais sans doctrine, sans méthode particulière", and when asked where he encountered the material for his esoteric subject matter, Cazotte's response to the visiting *illuminé* is simply "dans mon esprit" (II, 1085). The *illuminé* reacts with incredulity:

«Quoi! ces évocations dans les ruines, ces mystères de la cabale, ce pouvoir occulte d'un homme sur les esprits de l'air, ces théories si frappantes sur le pouvoir des nombres, sur la volonté, sur les fatalités de l'existence, vous auriez imaginé toutes ces choses?» (II, 1085)

Nerval's narrator proceeds to refer to Cazotte as an "adepte sans le savoir d'une doctrine dont il ignorait qu'il existât encore des représentants" (II, 1085), a description that leaves open the possibility that this figure is indeed in possession of some form of privileged spiritual vision; yet, unlike Hautefeuille's version, the narrative falls short of confirming Cazotte's visionary status. Whilst, in Nerval's account, the visionary capacities of Cazotte remain unclear, the narrator highlights

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<sup>19</sup> Anne-Albe-Cornélie de Beaurepaire de Hautefeuille, *La Famille Cazotte* (Paris: Waille, 1846), p. 33.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

his subject's status as an outsider who refuses to identify with any specific doctrine or belief system. Nerval's changes to Hautefeuille's text, from which he derives his own account of these events, convey the image of Cazotte as a product of his age, surrounded by a wealth of new ideas, yet resisting identification with any specific doctrine or belief system.

According to Nerval's account, Cazotte's unexpected encounter with an *illuminé* marks a turning point in his thought, after which he decides to turn his attention towards Martinism. However, even after the apparent transformation in his ideas, Cazotte is still cast as an outsider whose ideas diverge significantly from the main body of Martinist thought. The narrator highlights the unique nature of Cazotte's religious convictions, claiming that, in spite of his links to coherent mystical movements, especially Martinism, Cazotte's writings remain devoid of any dogmatic intention:

Il entrerait dans notre plan, du reste, d'apprécier tour à tour Cazotte comme littérateur et comme philosophe mystique; mais si la plupart de ses livres portent l'empreinte de ses préoccupations relatives à la science des cabalistes, il faut dire que l'intention dogmatique y manque généralement; Cazotte ne paraît pas avoir pris part aux travaux collectifs des illuminés martinistes, mais s'être fait seulement, d'après leurs idées, une règle de conduite particulière et personnelle. (II, 1100)

In the context of *Les Illuminés*, the significance of Cazotte arises primarily from his marginality rather than from his relation to any coherent religious or esoteric following. Cazotte's unique set of beliefs and his resistance to established dogma reveal a clear overlap with the religious tendencies of Nerval's literary persona.

### **Cazotte, the *illuminés*, and the Revolution**

Cazotte's status as an outsider in relation to the Illuminist movement was partly the result of his political affiliations, which were in stark contrast to those representative of the main currents of eighteenth-century esoteric thought. Clearly, Nerval's subtitle to *Les Illuminés*, "Les Précurseurs du socialisme", which attaches an implicit political dimension to the work, cannot be applied to Cazotte in any obvious sense. Indeed, throughout his life, Cazotte remained an ardent supporter of the monarchy and his writings reveal a pronounced resistance to social and political change.

Unlike the majority of Illuminist thinkers, Cazotte opposed the ideas and principles of the revolutionaries.

La Harpe's account, cited by Nerval, suggests that Cazotte, having predicted the Revolution, proceeded to speak of it in an entirely negative manner as setting the scene for "le règne fatal de l'*Antéchrist*" (II, 1105). By revealing Cazotte's objections to revolutionary activity, Nerval shows how Cazotte's political convictions isolated him from major strands of eighteenth-century esoteric thought. Cazotte's detachment from the Illuminist movement is attributed to the affiliation between the Martinists and the *philosophes* in the advent of the Revolution, which, according to Nerval, led to the political vision of these Illuminists eclipsing their spiritual concerns:

Les illusions de belles âmes sont respectables, sous quelque forme qu'elles se présentent; mais qui oserait déclarer qu'il y ait pure illusion dans cette pensée que le monde serait gouverné par des influences supérieures et mystérieuses sur lesquelles la foi de l'homme peut agir? La philosophie a le droit de dédaigner cette hypothèse, mais toute religion est forcée à l'admettre, et les sectes politiques en ont fait une arme de tous les partis. Ceci explique l'isolement de Cazotte de ses anciens frères les illuminés. On sait combien l'esprit républicain avait usé du mysticisme dans la révolution d'Angleterre; la tendance des martinistes était pareille; mais, entraînés dans le mouvement opéré par les philosophes, ils dissimulèrent avec soin le côté religieux de leur doctrine, qui, à cette époque, n'avait aucune chance de popularité. (II, 1104-1105)

Despite the fact that Cazotte cannot be perceived as one of the *précurseurs du socialisme* designated by the subtitle to *Les Illuminés* in a clear political sense, in keeping with early Socialism and with the tendencies of contemporaneous esoteric thought, Cazotte's political vision was strongly bound up with his spiritual convictions. Furthermore, as indicated by Meryl Tyers: "while not a socialist in a politically recognised sense, Jacques Cazotte may have been a 'precursor' of socialism in that there is a connection between Freemasonry, the Saint-Simonians and the socialists of 1848".<sup>21</sup> The fusion of the theological and the political was a major characteristic of nineteenth-century Romantic Socialism and the same was true of the eighteenth-century Illuminist movement. Accordingly, Fleurant points out that the counter-revolution envisaged by Cazotte, as described in his correspondence, is at once material and spiritual, entailing both "a forcible overthrow of the Jacobins"

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<sup>21</sup> Tyers, p. 25.

and “a bloodless spiritual restoration of monarchy and religion through the intervention of the intermediary spirits”.<sup>22</sup> Cazotte’s political vision was as much spiritual as it was social or material and it was in these terms that he perceived the French Revolution.

As already discussed, Nerval articulates his subject’s esoteric beliefs indirectly, largely through quotations from Cazotte himself or through the analysis of his writings. Nerval therefore resists any form of direct categorical judgment on the ideas that he conveys. In “Jacques Cazotte”, Nerval’s relation to such esoteric traditions emerges in its full complexity. Nowhere is Nerval’s ambivalence towards his subject matter more apparent than in relation to the connection between the Illuminist movement and the Revolution. Nerval’s narrator explicitly asserts the connection between esoteric beliefs and revolutionary activity whether in France or elsewhere:

Personne n’ignore l’importance que prirent les illuminés dans les mouvements révolutionnaires. Leurs sectes, organisées sous la loi du secret et se correspondant en France, en Allemagne et en Italie, influèrent particulièrement sur de grands personnages plus ou moins instruits de leur but réel. (II, 1105)

In his presentation of the events at the end of Cazotte’s life, namely his incarceration and death sentence at the hands of the revolutionaries, Nerval shows how the actions of both Cazotte and of those that condemn him are inspired by Illuminist, and especially Martinist, beliefs. Nerval’s narrative conveys the devastating impact of such convictions, as the *illuminés* of the text, despite sharing the same fundamental vision, are cast, in the context of the Revolution, either as victims or as assassins:

La correspondance de Cazotte nous montre tour à tour ses regrets de la marche qu’avaient suivie ses anciens frères, et le tableau de ses tentatives isolées contre une ère politique dans laquelle il croyait voir le règne fatal de l’*Antéchrist*, tandis que les illuminés saluaient l’arrivée du *Réparateur* invisible. Les démons de l’un étaient pour les autres des esprits divins et des vengeurs. En se rendant compte de cette situation, on comprendra mieux certains passages des lettres de Cazotte, et la singulière circonstance qui fit prononcer plus tard sa sentence par la bouche même d’un illuminé martiniste. (II, 1105)

In the concluding episode of “Jacques Cazotte”, Nerval highlights the way in which Cazotte’s “inébranlable foi dans ses convictions” (II, 1117) ultimately leads him to

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<sup>22</sup> Fleurant, p. 69.

the guillotine.<sup>23</sup> It is Cazotte's absolute devotion to his beliefs, rather than the precise nature of these beliefs, that establishes this figure as one of Nerval's *illuminés*. In keeping with the definition of the term *illuminé* that first emerged in the 1850s, Cazotte is a figure "qui soutient une doctrine avec une foi aveugle".<sup>24</sup>

### **Cazotte's Prophecy: Hallucination and Privileged Vision**

Besides his connections with eighteenth-century esotericism, Cazotte can also be defined as an *illuminé* in a broader, ahistorical sense of the term, as the result of his documented prophetic and visionary experience. This image of Cazotte, derived from Jean-François de La Harpe's highly influential account of Cazotte's prediction of the events of 1789, entered popular culture largely through the writings of Nerval and of Charles Nodier, and is also alluded to in Gustave Flaubert's *Bouvard et Pécuchet*.<sup>25</sup> As will be seen, whilst the authenticity of Cazotte's prophecy has been widely rejected, notably in Nodier's writings on this theme, Nerval's treatment of the phenomenon is characteristically ambiguous. As explored in Part One of this thesis, at the time at which Nerval was writing, dominant interpretations of the concept of hallucination had been radically transformed by its appropriation by the psychiatric profession. Nerval's "Jacques Cazotte" does not wholly identify either with medical or mystical explanations of prophetic and visionary experience, and his presentation of this aspect of Cazotte's existence is shrouded in the same ambiguity and uncertainty that is central to Nerval's exploration of the theme of madness elsewhere in his writings.

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<sup>23</sup> In July 1845, Scévole Cazotte, the son of Jacques Cazotte, wrote a letter to Nerval, protesting against the passage of Nerval's portrait in which Cazotte refuses to appeal against his sentence because of his unshakeable Illuminist beliefs. Nerval acknowledges this letter in a footnote to "Jacques Cazotte": "M. Scévole Cazotte nous écrit pour protester contre cette phrase, qui fait partie d'un récit du temps. Il affirme que son père n'a pu prononcer de telles paroles" (II, 1118). However, Nerval did not make any changes to his original account of this episode.

<sup>24</sup> This definition of *illuminé* is taken from the updated online edition of the Larousse dictionary. See above: Introduction to Part Two.

<sup>25</sup> "Beljambe avait rêvé, bien des fois, le nombre de voyageurs qu'il aurait le lendemain à son auberge. Et Petit conta le souper de Cazotte": Gustave Flaubert, *Bouvard et Pécuchet* (Paris: Gallimard, 1979), p. 288.

Cazotte's prophecy concerning the 1789 Revolution and the Reign of Terror is related to the reader indirectly in Nerval's text, through an extensive quotation from La Harpe's account.<sup>26</sup> By recounting this highly significant feature of Cazotte's history through the words of another, Nerval neither explicitly affirms nor denies the authenticity of the material that he presents, instead maintaining a certain detachment from his controversial subject matter. According to La Harpe's text, Cazotte's prophecy was made at a dinner in 1788, one year prior to the dramatic events that he predicts. La Harpe describes Cazotte as a "homme aimable et original, mais malheureusement infatué des rêveries et des *illuminés*" and states that this figure "est sujet à rêver tout éveillé" (II, 1094). La Harpe points to the scepticism of the other guests with regard to Cazotte's prophecy, recounting the way in which they mock his revelations and say to each other: "Vous voyez bien qu'*il est fou?*" (II, 1095). However, as pointed out by Georges Kliebenstein, La Harpe in his testimony plays the role of a "témoin converti",<sup>27</sup> revealing his incredulity at the time, yet retrospectively attributing to Cazotte's words the status of a genuine prophecy. Indeed, the implication of the text as a whole is that suggestions of madness are undermined by the realisation of Cazotte's predictions, which by the time of publication had already proved to be accurate. Over the course of the dinner, Cazotte is said to have predicted not only the major events of the following year, but also to have informed each of the guests at the dinner of the manner and circumstances in which he would meet his demise at the hands of the revolutionaries.

La Harpe's tale of Cazotte's prophecy has inspired a number of conflicting responses.<sup>28</sup> While its authority has often been called into question, it has also given rise to the popular image of Cazotte as a mystic or visionary. In his highly romanticised biography of Cazotte, René Trintzius presents his subject as a genuine prophet.<sup>29</sup> In "M. Cazotte", published in 1832, several years before Nerval's text

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<sup>26</sup> Jean-François de La Harpe, *Prédiction de Cazotte, faite en 1788, et rapportée par La Harpe, suivie de notes sur MM. Cazotte, La Harpe, Chamfort, Condorcet, Vicq-d'Azyr, de Nicolai, Bailly, de Malesherbes, défenseur de Louis XVI, et Madame la duchesse de Grammont; avec quelques réflexions générales* (Paris: Les Marchands de Nouveautés, 1817).

<sup>27</sup> Georges Kliebenstein, "Une mystification absolue – sur le «souper de Cazotte»", in *Romantisme*, vol. 32, no. 116 (2002), 19-34 (p. 20).

<sup>28</sup> Jean Richer, *La Passion de Jacques Cazotte*, (Paris: Trédaniel, 1988), pp. 70-75.

<sup>29</sup> René Trintzius, *Jacques Cazotte ou le XVIIIe siècle inconnu* (Paris: Athéna, 1944).

first appeared, Nodier, to whom Nerval refers directly following the extensive quotation from La Harpe (see below), suggests that La Harpe's description of Cazotte's mysterious prophecy constitutes an imaginary narrative rather than an accurate presentation of events. Nodier says of La Harpe's account: "Je pense, comme tout le monde, que cette scène est en grande partie d'invention, et je suis persuadé que La Harpe lui-même n'a jamais conçu l'espérance de lui donner l'autorité d'un fait véritable".<sup>30</sup> He proceeds to undermine the seemingly mystical nature of Cazotte's prophecy, stating "ce digne homme étoit presque toujours sur le trépied" and "la plupart des choses qu'il annonçoit se réalisoient dans leur temps de la manière la plus naturelle".<sup>31</sup> Nodier provides a rational explanation for the events depicted by La Harpe, arguing that Cazotte's reputation as a visionary is the result of his deep understanding of others and of human nature, rather than arising from any supernatural phenomenon:

Il n'y a aucun effort à faire pour comprendre ce résultat, tout extraordinaire qu'il paroisse au premier abord. La faculté de prévoir l'avenir, dans un certain ordre d'événements, est fort indépendante, en effet, de révélations, de visions et de magie. Elle appartient à quiconque est doué d'une profonde sensibilité, d'un jugement droit, et d'une longue aptitude à l'observation. La raison de ce phénomène saute aux yeux. C'est que l'avenir est un passé qui recommence.<sup>32</sup>

Whereas Nodier makes it clear that he does not consider Cazotte's prophecy to constitute a genuine mystical vision, the perspective that emerges from Nerval's presentation of this phenomenon is ambiguous.

Whilst Nerval's narrator never explicitly confirms the authenticity of La Harpe's version of events, neither does he deny its potentially mystical connotations. In the context of the narrative of Nerval's text as a whole, the status of the episode remains shrouded in ambiguity. Over the course of "Jacques Cazotte", Nerval's narrator makes a number of comments that would appear to affirm the status of his subject as a visionary. For example, the narrator says of Cazotte: "cet écrivain avait la triste destinée de pressentir tous les malheurs" (II, 1079), a statement that would appear to validate supernatural interpretations of Cazotte's prediction. The narrator twice alludes to Cassandra, a well-known figure from Greek mythology who held the

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<sup>30</sup> Nodier, "M. Cazotte", p. 41.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid*, p. 42.

power of prophecy yet whose predictions were never taken seriously by others and who was even considered to be afflicted with madness owing to her divine curse. The first reference to Cassandra is in the narrator's introduction to La Harpe's account of Cazotte's prophecy. The narrator states that, if La Harpe's version is to be taken seriously, Cazotte "aurait joué seulement le rôle fatal de Cassandre, et n'aurait pas eu tort, comme on le lui reprochait, *d'être toujours sur le trépied*" (II, 1092). As seen above, the image of Cazotte as being "toujours sur le trépied" is derived from Nodier's "M. Cazotte". Later on in "Jacques Cazotte", Nerval's narrator makes a further allusion to Cassandra when speaking of Cazotte's problematic status as a prophet. The reference is rendered ambiguous by the narrator's use of the hypothetical:

S'il est vrai qu'il ait été donné à quelques âmes de prévoir les événements sinistres, il faut y reconnaître plutôt une faculté malheureuse qu'un don céleste, puisque, pareilles à la Cassandre antique, elles ne peuvent ni persuader les autres ni se préserver elles-mêmes. (II, 1101)

By comparing Cazotte with this figure from Greek mythology, Nerval attaches a mystical status to his subject's prophetic visions, casting him as a tragic individual, misunderstood by his contemporaries. In a letter to his father, written in 1853, Nerval compares himself to this same mythological character, saying that he is becoming "un peu comme Cassandre", before citing two lines of verse, the sense of which is unclear, which he attributes to Joseph Lingay:<sup>33</sup>

*Près de chaque ministre où j'ai daigné descendre,  
J'étais une Cassandre, à côté d'un Cassandre.* (III, 817)

Implications of Cazotte's status as a visionary are further destabilised by the question of the authenticity of the material presented in this text. Having quoted directly from La Harpe's story of Cazotte's prophecy, the narrator points out the potential unreliability of this version of events to which he claims to attribute only a "confiance relative", apparently identifying with the "sage opinion" of Nodier, and thus implying a more rational explanation for the material presented. However, these rationalising comments are immediately followed by an extract from Cazotte's poem

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<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> For information about Joseph Lignay see Jean-Luc Steinmetz's "Notes et variantes" to Nerval's "Poésies, 1841-1846" (I, 1761-1762).



*Ollivier*, a work that also reveals a “préoccupation de têtes coupées”, and which Nerval introduces to the reader as a potential “hallucination prophétique”:

Tout en n'accordant à ce document qu'une confiance relative, et en nous rapportant à la sage opinion de Charles Nodier, qui dit qu'à l'époque où a eu lieu cette scène, il n'était peut-être pas difficile de prévoir que la révolution qui venait choisirait ses victimes dans la plus haute société d'alors, et dévorerait ensuite ceux-là mêmes qui l'auraient créée, nous allons rapporter un singulier passage qui se trouve dans le poème d'*Ollivier*, publié justement trente ans avant 93, et dans lequel on remarqua une préoccupation de têtes coupées qui peut bien passer, mais plus vaguement, pour une hallucination prophétique. (II, 1097)

As pointed out by Meryl Tyers, Nerval's apparent attempt to rationalise La Harpe's story is far from straightforward: “[Nerval] does so in a short paragraph after a seductive *mise en scène* of the entire episode related by La Harpe, and so its rationalizing effect is negligible”.<sup>34</sup> The combination of the alluring account of Cazotte's mystical prophecy, the ensuing rationalising discourse, and the hallucinatory extract from *Ollivier* confers an overall sense of uncertainty on the events portrayed. The ideological confusion of this episode is accentuated by the juxtaposition of different narrative voices. Ultimately, the status of Cazotte's prophecy remains ambiguous: the narrator leaves open potential interpretations of the episode either as the hallucination of a delirious mind or as a genuine prophetic vision, never explicitly identifying with either.

### **Madness and Dream**

As is the case elsewhere in Nerval's writings, the theme of madness in “Jacques Cazotte” is bound up with an exploration of the phenomenon of dream, and Nerval's narrative indicates that these mental states are fundamentally connected. In the case of Cazotte, the relationship between madness and dream is founded on the underlying hesitation between medical and mystical interpretations of visionary experience. Nerval's narrative is characterised by a marked ambiguity, as the boundaries between commonplace dream, pathological hallucination, and genuine mystical vision remain perpetually indistinct. In the context of “Jacques Cazotte”,

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<sup>34</sup> Tyers, p. 26.

the exploration of “le phénomène du sommeil” and of “les hallucinations du rêve” (II, 1112) is inseparable from the wider discussion of the concept of madness.

The themes of madness, ordinary dream, privileged vision, and clinical hallucination are central to the final pages of “Jacques Cazotte”, in which Nerval reproduces directly Cazotte’s transcription of a dream, entitled “Mon Songe de la nuit du samedi au dimanche de devant la Saint-Jean 1791” (II, 1110). Much like the preceding presentation of Cazotte’s mysterious prophecy, this episode is recounted to the reader indirectly, through extensive citation. Here too, the reader is deprived of any straightforward explanation or interpretation from the narrator. Therefore, the status and significance of the dream vision in Nerval’s portrait remain unclear. The inherent ambiguity surrounding the status of dream in “Jacques Cazotte”, and the broader relevance of this episode to the thought of Nerval, is summed up by Tsujikawa:

La transcription du rêve par Cazotte est significative, surtout parce qu’elle le situe au seuil des deux interprétations possibles du rêve: l’une mystique, l’autre psychique. Le rêve peut encore garder une valeur prémonitoire, comme dans la tradition antique et biblique, et être révélateur d’une vérité transcendante, comme c’est le cas avec le Swedenborg du *Livre des rêves*, qui voit dans les rêves une vérité divine à répandre sur le monde terrestre. Mais en même temps, pour les contemporains de Nerval, le rêve commence à être considéré comme un phénomène psychique spécifique, comme une «seconde vie», qui donne aussi accès au phénomène de la folie et de l’hallucination.<sup>35</sup>

Following the transcript of Cazotte’s hallucinatory dream, the comments of Nerval’s narrator serve only to obscure further its status within the text. He refers to this “Songe” as “cette série de visions bizarres”, apparently undermining its status as a mystical or religious vision, and proceeds to define this it as “cette trop fidèle peinture de certaines hallucinations du rêve” (II, 1112), a description that, in view of the context in which Nerval was writing when the study of hallucination had become the prerogative of medical science, has distinctly pathological undertones. However, despite appearing to dismiss Cazotte’s dream and even to indicate its potentially pathological status, the narrator also allows for mystical interpretations of the obscure vision recounted in these pages, claiming that it involves “quelque chose de terrible et de mystérieux” and saying of its author: “Rien dans la masse d’écrits

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<sup>35</sup> Tsujikawa, pp. 186-187.

qu'on a conservés de cette époque de la vie de Cazotte n'indique un affaiblissement quelconque dans ses facultés intellectuelles" (II, 1112). These assertions undermine the idea that Cazotte's dream vision can be simply dismissed as the delirious vision of a deranged mind. Overall, the narrator's comments do not allow for any straightforward interpretation or judgement of Cazotte's account:

Quelque jugement que puissent porter les esprits sérieux sur cette trop fidèle peinture de certaines hallucinations du rêve, si décousues que soient forcément les impressions d'un pareil récit, il y a, dans cette série de visions bizarres, quelque chose de terrible et de mystérieux. Il ne faut voir aussi, dans ce soin de recueillir un songe en partie dépourvu de sens, que les préoccupations d'un mystique qui lie à l'action du monde extérieur les phénomènes du sommeil. Rien dans la masse d'écrits qu'on a conservés de cette époque de la vie de Cazotte n'indique un affaiblissement quelconque dans ses facultés intellectuelles. Ses révélations, toujours empreintes de ses opinions monarchiques, tendent à présenter dans tout ce qui se passe alors des rapports avec les vagues prédictions de l'Apocalypse. C'est ce que l'école de Swedenborg appelle la science des correspondances. (II, 1112)

Here, the narrator compares his ambiguous subject to Swedenborg. As observed in Part One of this thesis, the narrator of Nerval's semi-autobiographical *Aurélia* also alludes to this influential eighteenth-century visionary with regard to his own hallucinatory visions. In both cases, references to a highly controversial physical and occultist scientist who elicited opposing responses at the time at which Nerval was writing, do little to clarify the status of the visions presented to the reader. Corinne Bayle points to the overlap between the hallucinatory images described by Cazotte and the visions that are related in the writings of Swedenborg, stating that the cosmological vision of the latter "mélange le religieux et le philosophique, en un système reposant sur les analogies entre monde spirituel et monde matériel", a principle that, as already seen, is also at the heart of Cazotte's mystical philosophy.<sup>36</sup>

## Conclusion

Cazotte's status as an *illuminé* in Nerval's portrait, whether in the historical sense or in the broader sense of a religious visionary, is highly problematic. Like the other individuals depicted in Nerval's collection, Cazotte is one of the "*excentriques* de la philosophie" described by the narrator of "La Bibliothèque de mon oncle". Indeed, Nerval's Cazotte is a perpetual outsider, who cannot be readily identified with any

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<sup>36</sup> Corinne Bayle, *Gérard de Nerval: La Marche à l'étoile* (Seysssel: Champ Vallon, 2001), p. 69.

coherent ideological following or belief system. The image that emerges from this portrait is very much that of the nineteenth-century eccentric, characterised by his borderline madness, his marginal status, and the unconventional nature of his ideas, in particular his mystical convictions and practices, whilst simultaneously revealing enhanced creativity, originality, insight, and even exhibiting potentially prophetic capacities. The concept of religious madness is central to Nerval's portrait, especially in relation to his subject's prophetic and visionary phenomena, the status of which remains shrouded in ambiguity. Nerval's Cazotte is at once a mystic and a madman, and the potentially pathological dimension of his hallucinatory visions is counterbalanced by suggestions of the authenticity of his prophetic and visionary experience. Ultimately, Nerval's "Jacques Cazotte" reveals a distinct lack of stable ideological perspective, and this uncertainty is captured by the instability of the narrative voice that is characteristic of *Les Illuminés* as a whole. If the narrator of "Jacques Cazotte" does not employ the explicitly pathologising discourse that is present in other chapters of *Les Illuminés*, the narrative of this portrait is coloured by the same hesitations and the same indecision between the scientific and the visionary, and between the objective and the imaginary, that are central features of Nerval's characteristic portrayal of madness.

# “CAGLIOSTRO”: RELIGIOUS ECCENTRICITY AND THE FRENCH REVOLUTION

## Introduction

The penultimate chapter of *Les Illuminés* is dedicated to the enigmatic eighteenth-century individual who went by the name Count Alessandro di Cagliostro, widely considered to be an alias for the Sicilian adventurer, Giuseppe Balsamo (usually referred to as Joseph Balsamo). Even more than the other *illuminés* depicted in Nerval's collection, Cagliostro is a highly elusive individual, whose historical existence is shrouded in mystery. As emerges from the wealth of literature dedicated to this figure, the story of his life necessarily straddles the boundary between history and fiction. Whilst, unlike Nerval's other *illuminés*, Cagliostro is a relatively well-known figure, numerous writings having been devoted to this mysterious individual from the eighteenth century to the present day, very little authoritative biographical information is available and the story of his life consists of the inextricable fusion of legend and reality. Indeed, even the true identity of this figure is open to debate, and the historical facts of his existence have been obscured by fiction, propaganda, and mysticism. Cagliostro's lack of stable identity and adoption of various different masks and guises reflect the inherently subversive nature of eccentricity, as portrayed in nineteenth-century popular and medical writings. In “Cagliostro”, Nerval captures the increasing anxiety surrounding the concept of eccentricity in France from the middle of the nineteenth century, presenting a figure that defies classification and whose very existence renders problematic preconceived social and ideological boundaries.

Cagliostro's mystical ideas and practices, like those of Jacques Cazotte and Quintus Aucler, emerged during the latter half of the eighteenth century, and this figure can be defined as an *illuminé* in the broad historical sense of the term, owing to his connection to the eighteenth-century Illuminist movement. However, Cagliostro nevertheless remains an outsider within this already marginal esoteric following, and,

much like the other protagonists of Nerval's collection, he is characterised by his status as a perpetual outsider as well as by the deviant nature of his ideas and activities.

Nerval's "Cagliostro" was first published in *Le Diable rouge. Almanach cabalistique pour 1850*, a work written in association with Henri Delaage, the author of numerous books on occultism. Unlike *Les Illuminés*, *Le Diable rouge* deals with figures linked to major currents of the eighteenth-century Illuminist movement, many of whom would appear to constitute more obvious subjects of a work entitled *Les Illuminés* than Cagliostro and the other subjects of this collection. Consequently, the extraction of this particular text for inclusion in *Les Illuminés* raises a number of questions regarding the intended purpose of Nerval's 1852 collection as a whole. Instead of selecting a more obvious biographical subject that could be readily classified as an *illuminé*, and even as a *précurseur du socialisme*, Nerval extracts from *Le Diable rouge* an individual whose life is shrouded in mystery and uncertainty and whose connection to both the title and the subtitle of this work is, at best, tenuous.

### **Count Cagliostro as a Historical and Literary Figure**

At the time when Nerval was writing, Cagliostro had become a household name. This individual appealed to the popular imagination through his mysterious nature and his legendary inexplicable exploits. Indeed, in contrast to most of the other figures depicted in *Les Illuminés*, Cagliostro, even in the present day, remains relatively well-known, and since the late eighteenth century a wealth of documents and books have been dedicated to this highly enigmatic individual. However, despite the mass of literature dealing with Cagliostro, the details of his life remain shrouded in obscurity.

The so-called Count Cagliostro first came to the attention of the general public owing to his apparent involvement in the extremely high profile case generally referred to as "l'Affaire du Collier de la Reine". This took place in the 1780s,

attracting widespread publicity and capturing the popular imagination. Marie Antoinette herself was implicated in the case and it contributed to the widespread disillusionment with the monarchy in the decades immediately preceding the French Revolution. Although Cagliostro was ultimately cleared of involvement, his trial and subsequent incarceration brought him into the public eye and established his reputation as a popular literary subject. Immediately following the events of this case, a number of extremely critical texts appeared in relation to this figure. Most significantly, pamphlets written by the marquis de Luchet (which, as will be seen, constituted Nerval's main source for "Cagliostro") and by Giacomo Casanova were published in 1785 and 1786 respectively,<sup>1</sup> while Cagliostro also inspired the hostility of, amongst others, Saint-Martin, Mirabeau, and Goethe.<sup>2</sup> Since the eighteenth century, Cagliostro and in particular his apparent connection with the famous case of the diamond necklace has captured the imagination of various writers. Notably, besides his inclusion in Nerval's *Les Illuminés*, this figure is also the subject of Schiller's serialised novel, *Der Geisterseher* (1786-1789), Goethe's play, *Großophtha* (1791), Tolstoy's supernatural story, *Count Cagliostro*, and Alexandre Dumas's novels, *Mémoires d'un médecin: Joseph Balsamo* (1846-1848), *Le Collier de la Reine* (1849-1850), and *La Comtesse de Charny* (1853-1855). The widespread portrayal of Cagliostro in works of fiction has contributed to the sense of mystery surrounding him. Works dedicated to Cagliostro, whether historical or literary, tend to be highly romanticised, such that information regarding his life and experiences consists of an indissoluble fusion of fact and fiction. Furthermore, both literary and biographical depictions are generally clouded by subjectivity, owing to the starkly opposing reactions inspired by Cagliostro's controversial existence. If Cagliostro's followers saw him as an enlightened spiritual leader and miracle worker, others attacked him as a charlatan and crook or dismissed him as a madman.

Despite the multitude of texts that have been devoted to Cagliostro over the years, very little reliable information about his existence is available and he therefore

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<sup>1</sup> Jean-Pierre-Louis de Luchet, *Mémoires authentiques pour servir à l'histoire du comte de Cagliostro* (Paris: 1785); Giacomo Casanova, *Soliloque d'un penseur* (Paris: Allia, 1998).

<sup>2</sup> Chantal Thomas, "Nerval et Cagliostro", in *L'Imaginaire nervalien: L'espace d'Italie*, ed. by Monique Streiff-Moretti (Napoli: Edizioni Scientifiche, 1988), pp. 297-305 (p. 302).

constitutes a problematic choice of biographical subject. William Trowbridge declares, in relation to Cagliostro: “there is, perhaps, no other equally celebrated figure in modern history whose character is so baffling to the biographer”;<sup>3</sup> while Lewis Spence states that “although documents and books relating to Cagliostro abound, they possess little or no value”.<sup>4</sup> The vast majority of texts dedicated to Cagliostro, including that of Nerval, are based on the assumption that he was the same person as Joseph Balsamo, a notorious Sicilian swindler, and biographical accounts generally fuse the identities of these figures without questioning the origins of what is widely accepted as historical fact. However, since the early twentieth century, writers have cast doubt on this long-held assumption, highlighting the potentially dubious nature of the sources from which it first emerged. In particular, Trowbridge, in his attempts to overturn the overwhelmingly negative reputation of this eighteenth-century figure, argues that the widely held notion that Cagliostro and Joseph Balsamo were the same person initially arose as an attempt to tarnish Cagliostro’s character and to undermine the authority of his unconventional beliefs, and he analyses at length the origins of this assumption.<sup>5</sup> Henry Evans also reveals the dubious origins of Cagliostro’s apparent identity, stating that the identification of Cagliostro with Joseph Balsamo came about largely as an attempt to discredit the Freemasons.<sup>6</sup>

From his lifetime until the present day, Cagliostro has remained a highly divisive figure, inspiring powerful judgements and opinions as a result of his controversial spiritual practices. Books dedicated to this figure tend to be coloured by strong views of his character and of his deviant mystical ideas, making it very difficult to extract objective historical fact. Authors and biographers of Cagliostro highlight his protean, even contradictory, nature, listing the numerous roles and activities with which he was apparently associated. Lionel Dumarcet describes Cagliostro as “un

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<sup>3</sup> William Trowbridge, *Cagliostro: The Splendour and Misery of a Master of Magic* (London: Chapman, 1910), p. 2.

<sup>4</sup> Lewis Spence, “Cagliostro”, in *An Encyclopedia of Occultism* (New York: Cosmio, 2006), pp. 85-92 (p. 85).

<sup>5</sup> Trowbridge, pp. 7-18.

<sup>6</sup> Henry Evans, *Cagliostro and his Egyptian Rite of Freemasonry* (Lafayette: Cornerstone, 2003), p. 2.



personnage multiforme et paradoxal”, proceeding to list the multiple, often incompatible aspects of his identity:

mage, prophète, médecin, vendeur d'élixirs, faussaire, peintre, alchimiste, charlatan, escroc, copiste, talentueux, génie du mal, sorcier mondain, bienfaiteur de l'humanité, aventurier, voyant, franc-maçon, Lumière du monde, Noble Voyageur, sage, idéaliste, proxénète....<sup>7</sup>

Accounts of Cagliostro's life and thought are frequently motivated by extreme bias regarding the nature of his deviant beliefs and practices. Thomas Carlyle, in his virulent attack upon Cagliostro, provides an extensive list of the various roles and guises adopted by him, all of which Carlyle perceives as charlatanism and manipulation:

the Count Alessandro di Cagliostro, Pupil of the Sage Althotas, Foster-child of the Scherif of Mecca, probable son of the last King of Trebisand; named also Acharat, and unfortunate child of Nature; by profession healer of diseases, abolisher of wrinkles, friend of the poor and impotent, grand-master of the Egyptian Mason-lodge of high Science, Spirit-summoner, Gold-cook, Grand Cophta, Prophet, Priest, and thaumaturgic moralist and swindler; really a Liar of the first magnitude, thoroughplaced in all provinces of lying, what one may call the King of Liars.<sup>8</sup>

The vast majority of works relating to this figure constitute extremely subjective accounts, eclipsing the genuine facts of his existence. As expressed by Trowbridge: “whether Cagliostro is depicted as an Apostle of Light by his friends, or a rank imposter by his enemies [...], the real man has been as effectually hidden from view by prejudice as by the mystery in which he wrapped himself”.<sup>9</sup>

As is the case for the other individuals portrayed in *Les Illuminés*, here Nerval selects a subject whose life is shrouded in uncertainty and about whom very little is known. However, it soon becomes evident that, even more than for the texts dedicated to his other *illuminés*, Nerval's “Cagliostro” is not conceived as an accurate biographical portrait, and the historical facts of this figure's colourful life are largely irrelevant to Nerval's purpose.

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<sup>7</sup> Lionel Dumarcet, *Joseph Balsamo, dit Comte de Cagliostro: Son histoire – sa personnalité – ses influences* (Paris: Vecchi, 2001), p. 5.

<sup>8</sup> Thomas Carlyle, “Count Cagliostro: In Two Flights”, in *Thomas Carlyle: Historical Essays*, ed. by Chris Vanden Bossche (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), pp. 23-84 (p. 27).

## The Narrative of “Cagliostro”

The most striking feature of Nerval’s “Cagliostro” is the conspicuous absence of the title figure himself, as this text involves a distinct lack of narrative relating to the events of Cagliostro’s life and provides little detail regarding the specificities of his mystical activities and beliefs. Despite its title, the text does not focus on the experiences and ideas of its proclaimed subject. Unlike the preceding chapters of *Les Illuminés*, it cannot be considered to constitute a biographical portrait, even in the loosest sense; and neither does it consist of a presentation of Cagliostro’s ideas and beliefs. Accordingly, Keiko Tsujikawa describes this text as “ni un portrait, ni un récit”.<sup>10</sup> Cagliostro makes only a fleeting appearance in Nerval’s study and even when he is introduced to the reader it is in combination with the more influential Count of Saint-Germain. The title figure is therefore immediately eclipsed within his own portrait. This is also true of the central narrative of this text, which recounts Madame Cagliostro’s initiation ceremony at which Cagliostro himself appears only in the context of his wife’s activities. The narrator provides minimal information or commentary regarding his proclaimed subject, and the text consists instead of anecdotes, as well as general historical observations relating to a number of broader themes and preoccupations of the author. The succinct character of Nerval’s presentation of Cagliostro, whose life is related to the reader in a few brief paragraphs that also deal with Saint-Germain, is surprising, given the extensive literature that this figure has inspired. Notably, Dumas’s *Joseph Balsamo*, dedicated to this same historical figure, consists of an extensive four-volume novel. It is revealing that, in the portrait of the figure portrayed in *Les Illuminés* that can most readily be defined as an *illuminé* in the historical sense of the term, Nerval deprives the reader of a coherent presentation of his subject’s mystical beliefs and activities.

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<sup>9</sup> Trowbridge, p. 6.

<sup>10</sup> Keiko Tsujikawa, *Nerval et les limbes de l’histoire: Lecture des Illuminés* (Geneva: Droz, 2008), p. 195.

As is the case for the other portraits of *Les Illuminés*, most notably “Les Confidences de Nicolas”, “Jacques Cazotte”, and “Quintus Aucler”, a large proportion of “Cagliostro” has been almost directly extracted from another source, enabling the author to distance himself from the material being presented. This is the case for the chapter entitled “Madame Cagliostro”, which constitutes the only section of extended narrative in the text. Nerval does not indicate this extensive borrowing to the reader, but inserts it directly into his account, such that the narrator’s voice merges with that of another, thereby contributing to the characteristic ambivalence of the image conveyed. There is no reference in “Cagliostro” to the original work that is transcribed into the narrative; however, Jean Richer identifies the source from which Nerval derives his material as the marquis de Luchet’s *Mémoires authentiques pour servir à l’histoire du comte de Cagliostro* (referenced above).<sup>11</sup> Richer points out that Nerval’s portrait of Cagliostro is therefore largely based on the work of an author who sought to discredit the ideas of Cagliostro and of the Illuminist movement in general. He accordingly attacks Nerval’s choice of source material on his subject, stating that: “l’étude sur Cagliostro est sortie d’une assez étonnante erreur dans le choix de documentation”, and that the author of the document in question “s’efforçait de jeter le discrédit sur les séances magiques de Cagliostro en le montrant dans un rôle de charlatan ridicule et odieux”.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, Luchet’s text paints both Cagliostro and his wife, Serafina Feliciano (or Madame Cagliostro), in an extremely negative light, seeking to bring into disrepute the ideas and activities of both individuals. Luchet was also the author of a work entitled *Essai sur la secte des illuminés*,<sup>13</sup> which constitutes a virulent critique of the Illuminist movement, and Cagliostro’s name appears a number of times in this work. Luchet’s aversion to the beliefs and activities of the Illuminist movement emerges strongly from the portrait of Cagliostro from which Nerval derives his material. However, despite the extremely biased nature of his source, Nerval’s narrative nevertheless conveys a much more ambiguous image of Cagliostro, such that the motivations and tone of the document on which he bases his study are perhaps less important than Richer

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<sup>11</sup> Jean Richer, *Gérard de Nerval et les doctrines ésotériques* (Paris: Griffon d’or, 1947), p. 195.

<sup>12</sup> Richer, *Expérience vécue et création ésotérique*, p. 128.

<sup>13</sup> Jean-Pierre-Louis de Luchet, *Essai sur la secte des illuminés* (Paris: 1789). No publisher is indicated on the manuscript.

implies. As will be seen, Nerval makes a number of minor, yet significant, alterations to Luchet's account, and these have the effect of transforming the tone and nature of the image conveyed in the original. Nerval's assimilation of Luchet's writing directly into his own narrative, without alerting the reader to the extracts that have been transcribed from this source text, contributes to the overall ambivalence of the narrative voice that is especially characteristic of this portrait. "Cagliostro" lacks a coherent narrative voice or perspective, and the position of the author in relation to his subject matter is therefore especially difficult to ascertain, forcing the reader to defer judgment on the material with which he is presented.

What is remarkable about Nerval's "Cagliostro" is the detachment and neutrality with which Nerval presents his subject, as the dispassionate nature of this narrative is in stark contrast to Cagliostro's extremely colourful and controversial existence. The distinctly ambivalent nature of the narrative voice is especially striking in view of the strong opinions and judgements typically inspired by this highly contentious individual and his unconventional mystical activities. Chantal Thomas describes "Cagliostro" as "un texte neutre, sec, sans sympathie", attributing the impassive nature of Nerval's text to the fact that this portrait is largely derived from Luchet's negative portrayal of this figure.<sup>14</sup> While this is largely true, the minor changes that Nerval makes to his source text are nevertheless revealing, and the ambiguous image of Cagliostro that emerges from Nerval's narrative is significant in itself. Despite the fact that the central narrative of the text consists essentially of the direct transcription of Luchet's account, the alterations that Nerval makes to his source generally involve the removal or substitution of the overtly negative and critical remarks of the original. Although Nerval's account borrows directly from that of Luchet, the image that emerges of Cagliostro from these two accounts is very different. Unlike, Luchet, Nerval does not dismiss his subject as an impostor or charlatan; however, neither does he affirm the validity of his subject's status as a mystic or visionary. In stark contrast to the overtly subjective discourse of Luchet's portrait, as well as that of the vast majority of other works that deal with Cagliostro's unusual life, Nerval's portrait resists any form of categorical judgement of its inherently controversial and

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<sup>14</sup> Thomas, p. 302.

divisive subject. At no point does Nerval attempt to tackle the highly significant question of whether this figure was a genuine visionary or a charlatan. Indeed, the striking ambivalence of the narrative reveals that this question is largely irrelevant to this account. As is the case with regard to Nerval's other *illuminés*, what matters is not the beliefs themselves, but the intensity and passion of these beliefs; in the case of Cagliostro, it is this figure's dedication to his mystical ideas and practices, regardless of their precise content, or even of their authenticity, that, for Nerval, casts him as a true *illuminé*.

### **Cagliostro and Other *Illuminés***

When Cagliostro does appear in the text, he is introduced in relation to the well-known occultist philosopher, the so-called Count of Saint-Germain, a central figure in the development of eighteenth-century esotericism. The narrator's very brief, dispassionate overview of Cagliostro's life appears in relation to the story of Saint-Germain; and the title character is thus immediately eclipsed in the narrative by a more influential Illuminist thinker. The narrator emphasises the connection between these two individuals, and presents them collectively as "les plus célèbres cabalistes de la fin du XVIIIe siècle" (II, 1124); however, Saint-Germain was more prominent within the Illuminist movement than Cagliostro and his influence was of greater significance and longer lasting. A number of critics of *Les Illuminés*, including Jules Barbey d'Aurevilly, have commented on the conspicuous absence of Saint-Germain as one of the subjects of this work, claiming that such an individual should have been included in a study of the Illuminist movement in preference to the obscure figures selected by Nerval.<sup>15</sup> Nerval's interest in Saint-Germain is evident from the fact that there are a number of minor allusions to this figure elsewhere in his writings: besides being evoked in "Jacques Cazotte" (II, 1092), also in combination with Cagliostro, Saint-Germain is the subject of Nerval's unfinished text, "Le Comte de Saint-Germain" (III, 771-775).

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<sup>15</sup> Jules Barbey d'Aurevilly, "Biographie", *Le Pays*, 21 March 1853, p. 3, in *Gérard de Nerval*, ed. by Jean-Luc Steinmetz (Paris: Presses de l'Université de Paris-Sorbonne, 1997), p. 47.

Despite the fact that Saint-Germain's relation to the Illuminist movement was much more straightforward than that of his disciple, Cagliostro,<sup>16</sup> Saint-Germain is nevertheless a highly enigmatic figure about whom very little authentic biographical information is available. As is the case for Cagliostro, the story of Saint-Germain's life is necessarily infused with mysticism, fiction, and legend. However, as is the case with regard to the title character, Nerval presents this remarkable figure in a brief, detached manner, depriving the reader of a clear authorial perspective with regard to the material that he presents. The narrator adopts a measured, impassive tone in his short overview of Saint-Germain's character and activities, providing no interpretation or reaction to his subject matter:

[Saint-Germain], qui parut à la cour de Louis XV et y jouit d'un certain crédit, grâce à la protection de Mme de Pompadour, n'avait, disent les mémoires du temps, ni l'impudence qui convient à un charlatan, ni l'éloquence nécessaire à un fanatique, ni la séduction qui entraîne les demi-savants. Il s'occupait surtout d'alchimie, mais ne négligeait pas les diverses parties de la science. Il montra à Louis XV le sort de ses enfants dans un miroir magique, et ce roi recula de terreur en voyant l'image du dauphin lui apparaître décapitée. (II, 1124-1125)

The fact that this information is attributed to "les mémoires du temps" adds to its ambiguity and further conceals the authorial position. Whilst the narrator here suggests that Saint-Germain cannot be dismissed as a charlatan, a fanatic, or a "demi-savant", he neither identifies with nor rejects this view and the status of Saint-Germain in Nerval's text, like that of Cagliostro, therefore remains unclear.

Besides Saint-Germain, the narrator of "Cagliostro" alludes to a number of other well-known esoteric thinkers, some of whom exerted a powerful influence on the major currents of the Illuminist movement, including Martinès de Pasqually, Dom Pernetty, Saint-Martin, Fabre d'Olivet, and the abbé de Villars. Whilst Jean Richer identifies Cagliostro as one of the "deux véritables illuminés" included in *Les*

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<sup>16</sup> It is widely reported that Saint-Germain was responsible for initiating Cagliostro into Egyptian Freemasonry, a fact that is reproduced in Nerval's account; however, the extent to which this is based in historical fact is unclear. The origins of this assumption seem to be the claims of Cagliostro himself; and Luchet's account of the initiation, which, besides being extremely biased, is clearly fantastical in nature, played a major role in establishing this as accepted historical fact. The confusion surrounding these two figures is evoked in Constantin Photiadès, *Count Cagliostro. An Authentic Story of a Mysterious Life* (New York: Routledge, 2011), p. 85. Trowbridge describes Luchet's account of Cagliostro's initiation by Saint-Germain as "devoid of all authenticity", even arguing that there is no evidence that Cagliostro and Saint-Germain ever actually met: Trowbridge, p. 201.

*Illuminés* (the other being Jacques Cazotte), he nevertheless proceeds to highlight Nerval's knowledge of a number of individuals better suited to a work carrying such a title. Richer points out that Nerval's vague references to major Illuminist thinkers in his study of Cagliostro show that he could have produced a work that would have fulfilled the expectations raised by the title of *Les Illuminés*:

Les listes de noms et les considérations générales, qui encadrent une longue citation – d'ailleurs arrangée par Nerval – de l'ouvrage de Luchet, montrent au moins que l'auteur des *Illuminés* connaissait bien les noms et les ouvrages des hommes dont il aurait dû raconter la vie et exposer les doctrines s'il avait vraiment écrit une histoire de l'illuminisme.<sup>17</sup>

However, as already seen, despite the primary connotations of its title, *Les Illuminés* was clearly not conceived as “une histoire de l'illuminisme”. Indeed, the fact that, in “Cagliostro”, as is the case in other chapters of *Les Illuminés*, Nerval mentions influential members of the Illuminist movement only in passing, whilst selecting as his subject an obscure, highly problematic, individual whose ideas had little lasting impact and whose association with the Illuminist movement was far from straightforward, is highly suggestive with regard to Nerval's motivation in compiling *Les Illuminés* in general. The problematic status of Cagliostro and of the other individuals in the collection as *illuminés* is further accentuated in “Cagliostro” by the fact that Nerval here employs this same term in its narrow historical sense to refer to the followers of Adam Weishaupt's secret society.<sup>18</sup>

### “Cagliostro” and *Le Diable rouge*

The unusual nature of this text, which stands out in *Les Illuminés* owing to the absence of the title character and to the distinct lack of narrative relating to the life and thought of this figure, can perhaps be explained by the fact that it was originally conceived for inclusion in Nerval's *Le Diable rouge. Almanach cabalistique pour 1850*. Far from constituting a biographical portrait, “Cagliostro” is almost encyclopaedic in nature, consisting of an amalgamation of anecdotes, facts, and observations that far exceed the scope of this specific individual. The broader

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<sup>17</sup> Richer, *Expérience vécue et création ésotérique*, pp. 128-129.

<sup>18</sup> Quoted above, pp. 105-106.

considerations about religion in eighteenth-century France and the rise of esoteric thought at that time are in keeping with the primary themes of Nerval's 1849 text, and the disjointed composition of "Cagliostro" reflects that of *Le Diable rouge* as a whole. As pointed out by Max Milner (II, 1754) "Cagliostro" appears in two separate parts in *Le Diable rouge*, the first of which is entitled "Doctrine des génies" and the second "Du Mysticisme révolutionnaire", and these are reproduced directly in *Les Illuminés*.

The fact that the constituent parts of "Cagliostro" were originally published alongside portraits of figures that would constitute much more obvious subjects for a collection carrying the title *Les Illuminés* and the subtitle "Les Précurseurs du socialisme", is highly revealing with regard to Nerval's motivation for compiling *Les Illuminés*. As observed above, the subjects of Nerval's "Les Prophètes rouges", a constituent text of *Le Diable rouge*, including, for example, Pierre Leroux, Considérant, Proudhon, Mickiewicz, and Lamennais, correspond readily to both the title and subtitle of Nerval's 1852 collection, whereas the *illuminés* selected for inclusion in *Les Illuminés* itself are not related in any straightforward manner to the eighteenth-century Illuminist movement nor to the rise of Romantic Socialism in France in the early decades of the nineteenth century. Jean Richer argues that the fact that Nerval extracts only the marginal, ambiguous Cagliostro from "Les Prophètes rouges", at the expense of the genuine *illuminés* and *précurseurs du socialisme* that are included in the text, arises from the fact that he had intended to publish a second volume of *Les Illuminés*.<sup>19</sup> This theory has been taken up by Claude Pichois and Michel Brix, who state that: "Nerval avait d'abord projeté d'inclure dans ce volume des portraits de Buchez, Lamennais, Mickiewicz, Towianski, Considérant, etc., esquissés par lui dans *Le Diable rouge. Almanach cabalistique pour 1850*" (III, 1414). Max Milner is more tentative about accepting Richer's theory, saying of the subtitle to *Les Illuminés*: "Mais pourquoi l'avoir conservé dès lors que ces portraits n'y figuraient pas?" (II, 1707). He responds with the following quotation from "La Bibliothèque de mon oncle": "Loin de moi la pensée d'attaquer ceux de leurs successeurs qui souffrent aujourd'hui d'avoir tenté

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<sup>19</sup> Jean Richer, *Nerval, Expérience et création* (Paris: Hachette, 1963), p. 400.



trop follement ou trop tôt la réalisation de leurs rêves”, to which he adds: “Le Nerval des dernières années ne semble pas avoir eu de sympathie particulière pour les socialistes, qui lui paraissaient faire trop peu de cas de l’ordre naturel et de la tradition” (II, 1708). Indeed, the subjects of *Le Diable rouge*, in particular “Les Prophètes rouges”, whose ideas are very much in keeping with the themes of the Illuminist movement and early Socialism evoked by the title and subtitle of *Les Illuminés*, do not adhere to the ideas that emerge from this text. In contrast to the series of eccentrics portrayed in *Les Illuminés*, who are characterised by their marginality, their devotion to unconventional and illusory ideas, and their spirit of opposition, the individuals widely believed, on the basis of little evidence, to have been the proposed subjects of a second volume of *illuminés* are associated with coherent dogma and belief systems, and appear in conventional historical narratives. Despite Richer’s widely accepted argument, there is no evidence that the individuals depicted in *Le Diable rouge* were to constitute the subjects of Nerval’s supposed sequel to *Les Illuminés*; and there is nothing to suggest that Nerval was not satisfied with this collection of portraits as it appeared. The appearance of Cagliostro in *Les Illuminés* is therefore especially revealing.

Beyond the idea of a potential second volume of *illuminés*, the decision to include Cagliostro in *Les Illuminés*, rather than the other, more obvious, subjects that Nerval could have extracted from *Le Diable rouge*, is significant in itself. Nerval, by selecting an obscure individual whose life is steeped in uncertainty and ambiguity and whose ideas lie beyond the scope of any coherent doctrine, despite the fact that he shows knowledge of much more obvious *illuminés* and *précurseurs du socialisme*, indicates the irrelevance of the precise ideas and belief systems that he describes. Indeed, the fact that Nerval selects Cagliostro at the expense of much more straightforward Illuminist and Socialist thinkers reveals that the role of this figure, in the context of *Les Illuminés*, lies beyond his specific religious and political convictions. Nerval inscribes Cagliostro into his series of “*excentriques de la philosophie*”, individuals that, in the context of *Les Illuminés*, are significant as the result of, rather than in spite of, their marginality and deviance. Cagliostro is an

outsider even in relation to Illuminist thinkers, who, themselves, are marked by their status as outsiders, and he thus becomes part of Nerval's alternative history.

### **Madame Cagliostro**

Having initially been introduced to the reader in relation to another, more influential, figure, Cagliostro next appears in the context of the initiation ceremony of Madame Cagliostro's sect. Yet again, the title character makes only a fleeting appearance, eclipsed by another, more powerful, figure. Madame Cagliostro's secret society was an echo of Cagliostro's own "loge égyptienne", both by being concerned with the regeneration of mankind, and by promoting the equality of the sexes.<sup>20</sup> Nerval dedicates a significant section of "Cagliostro" to the account of Madame Cagliostro's initiation ceremony, an episode prominent in the text as the only section of extended narrative. As indicated by Richer, Nerval's account of this event is extracted from Luchet's portrait of Cagliostro and consists of an almost exact transcription of the narrative of the original text.<sup>21</sup> However, the minor changes that Nerval does make to Luchet's account have the effect of transforming the very nature of this event as well as suppressing the extremely negative tone of the original narrative.

Luchet's virulent critique of Madame Cagliostro's ceremony, which reflects his hostility towards the Illuminist movement in general, denies the spiritual significance of the event, instead saying of its creator: "Elle saisit avec adresse ce nouveau moyen de célébrité".<sup>22</sup> He seeks to discredit both the secret society and its founder, characterising Madame Cagliostro as a "calculatrice sous les dehors de l'étourderie, incapable du moindre sentiment, bref un sujet précieux pour séduire, tromper, parler

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<sup>20</sup> Meryl Tyers, *Critical Fictions: Nerval's Les Illuminés* (Oxford: Legenda, 1998), p. 27.

<sup>21</sup> Richer compares Nerval's narrative with the original: Jean Richer, *Gérard de Nerval et les doctrines ésotériques* (Paris: Griffon d'or, 1947), pp. 195-207.

<sup>22</sup> Luchet, *Mémoires authentiques*, p. 7.

de la vertu, employer le vice, et en imposer à la multitude”.<sup>23</sup> Whilst Luchet’s account of the initiation underlines its essentially libertine nature, presenting it as a sexual, rather than as a spiritual, ceremony, Nerval’s narrative is devoid of all references to libertinage and completely dissimulates the sexual nature of this event. Describing Cagliostro’s entrance, for example, he changes Luchet’s description of this figure as being “nu comme Adam”, instead saying that he was “drapé en génie”. Nerval also eliminates from his account Cagliostro’s request for the members of his audience to remove their clothes, deleting any references that are overtly sexual in nature. Therefore, despite the fact that Nerval’s account consists essentially of direct quotation from Luchet, the image that emerges from his portrait is very different from that presented in the source. As indicated by Chantal Thomas, in marked contrast to the eroticism and libertinage of Madame Cagliostro’s ceremony, as revealed by Luchet, “le cérémonie que nous donne Nerval est chaste, légèrement galante, et le message délivré par Madame Cagliostro est d’un féminisme raisonnable”.<sup>24</sup> Nerval’s striking alteration of the character of the event he depicts is also pointed out by Michel Brix, who states that “Nerval recopie Luchet en voilant tout ce qui évoque précisément la nature exacte de la fête, qui finit en réalité par une orgie”.<sup>25</sup> In striking contrast to the excessive bias of Luchet’s account, Nerval’s narrative provides a much more balanced and even positive account of Cagliostro’s activities. In the closing comments to this episode, the narrator describes “l’enthousiasme pour le comte Cagliostro”, which he claims was “porté à une ivresse qui étonnait même à Paris” (II, 1131).

Nerval’s deliberate transformation of the nature of Madame Cagliostro’s initiation ceremony provides the reader with a partial and obscure view of the event. This recalls his presentation of the romantic exploits of Restif de la Bretonne in “Les Confidences de Nicolas”, in which Nerval replaces the libertine character of Restif’s liaisons with a more naïve, platonic, form of love. Clearly, Nerval does not seek to provide a historically valid account of the initiation, and adapts this episode to

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<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> Thomas, p. 303.

<sup>25</sup> Michel Brix, “Récit biographique et création littéraire. Le cas des *Illuminés*”, in *Cahier de l’association des études françaises*, vol. 52, no. 52 (2000), 183-199 (p. 187).

correspond to the image that he wishes to convey. Underlying Nerval's description of Madame Cagliostro is the evocation of the cult of Isis, a theme to which he returns repeatedly within his writings. Kari Lokke reveals the potentially political undertones of this secret society, showing how Nerval's account fuses a religious and political vision. Lokke states that "Nerval consistently depicts the worship of Isis as emancipatory",<sup>26</sup> and proceeds to consider the ways in which Madame Cagliostro's society, with its invocation to Isis, poses a threat to the established social order: "in the name of Isis, Mme Cagliostro reveals to women their potential as opponents of violence and injustice, creators of informed public opinion, defenders of the poor and oppressed".<sup>27</sup> However, whilst, as illustrated by Lokke, the liberating potential of Madame Cagliostro's sect is clearly apparent, Nerval's portrayal does not allow for a straightforward interpretation of the events here presented, and although he does not insert Luchet's most explicitly negative comments he nevertheless provides a highly ambivalent account of the activity of this secret society. Despite citing Madame Cagliostro's ideas regarding the equality of the sexes and the potential of women to liberate themselves from their undesirable social situation, the narrator comments on women's insatiable curiosity and thirst for power, observations that undermine the social importance of Madame Cagliostro's discourse. Having cited the speech with which Madame Cagliostro opens the initiation ceremony, during which she attacks the fact that women have become entirely dependent upon men and have been reduced to nothing more than slaves, the narrator refers to these words as "froides plaisanteries" (II, 1128), thereby undercutting the power and significance of her speech.

An important feature of Madame Cagliostro's initiation ceremony is the way in which it represents the fusion of political and religious thought, a characteristic aspect of the various mystical organisations that emerged beneath the façade of Enlightenment philosophy in eighteenth-century France. In the light of the comments that frame this narrative in "Cagliostro", it is the fusion of the political and the religious within this ceremony that is brought to the fore.

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<sup>26</sup> Kari Lokke, *Nerval: The Poet as Social Visionary* (Lexington: French Forum Publishers, 1987), p.116.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid*, p, 117.

## Religious Eccentricity and Opposition

Just as Cagliostro has a problematic relationship to the Illuminist movement evoked by the title of *Les Illuminés*, his status as a *précurseur du socialisme*, implied by the subtitle of this work, is also far from straightforward. However, if Cagliostro cannot be defined as a Socialist in any obvious political or economic sense of the term, he nevertheless has some connection to Nerval's obscure subtitle. In "Cagliostro", Nerval deals with the interconnections of religious and political preoccupations in eighteenth-century France, a theme that is central to the narrative regarding Madame Cagliostro's secret society, and one that also emerges from the wider consideration of the role played by mystical societies in paving the way for the forthcoming French Revolution. As already seen, the overlap between the domains of religion and politics, as well as being one of the major characteristics of the Illuminist movement, was fundamental to early manifestations of Socialism. Therefore, whilst Cagliostro's status as a *précurseur du socialisme* is problematic, he nevertheless embodies one of the characteristic features of early Socialist thought. Cagliostro is introduced to the reader in the context of a broader exploration of the link between mysticism and politics in the events of 1789. In Nerval's narrative, his mystical beliefs, like those of the other individuals and groups evoked in this portrait, represent a form of political resistance.

Much like "Jacques Cazotte" and "Quintus Aucler", Nerval's "Cagliostro" is strongly grounded in the unstable ideological context of the decades preceding the 1789 Revolution, and, in Nerval's account, the eccentric ideas and activities of the title character cannot be considered independently of the historical backdrop against which they emerged. The narrator's brief observations about Cagliostro, and the narrative relating to Madame Cagliostro's esoteric organisation are framed by broad historical observations regarding the nature and status of religious thought in France in the eighteenth century and across the ages, as well as an exploration of the

emergence of a range of marginal forms of religiosity. These pages of the text provide the broader context in which Cagliostro is presented to the reader.

The theme of religious eccentricity is evoked from the outset, as the opening pages of “Cagliostro” trace the existence of an underground current of deviant religiosity that persists beneath the façade of official ideology. Here, the narrator illustrates the cohabitation of paganism and Christianity across the centuries, despite the ostensible victory of the latter. Nerval’s narrative calls the reader’s attention to the inherent overlap and continuity between these seemingly incompatible religions, undermining the notion of historical rupture, and indicating the all-pervasive presence of an underlying tradition of resistance to mainstream culture. The narrator states: “le culte païen survécut longtemps aux conversions officielles opérées par le changement de religion des rois mérovingiens” (II, 1119), highlighting the resilience of certain beliefs and practices in the face of official religious conversion. He suggests that the apparent triumph of Christianity is underpinned by the persistence of pagan sentiment, which although pushed to the margins, cannot be eliminated by changes to official ideology:

Lorsque le catholicisme triompha décidément du paganisme dans toute l’Europe, et construisit dès lors l’édifice féodal qui subsista jusqu’au XV<sup>e</sup> siècle, - c’est-à-dire pendant l’espace de mille ans, - il ne put comprimer et détruire partout l’esprit des coutumes anciennes, ni les idées philosophiques qui avaient transformé le principe païen à l’époque de la réaction polythéiste opérée par l’empereur Julien. (II, 1119)

The narrator reveals the persistence of paganism despite its apparent defeat at the hands of Christianity, and thereby undermines the official narrative of history that casts these religions as incompatible systems of belief belonging to discrete historical eras. He refers to “les diverses superstitions qui ont pris mille formes, selon les temps”, revealing the continued presence of “l’esprit des coutumes anciennes” and “des superstitions antiques” (II, 1119-1120). The continuity of basic religious beliefs is illustrated by the way in which, although Isis is replaced by Saint-Geneviève, both figures have the same origins and represent different manifestations of the same idea.

Besides official Catholic and popular pagan beliefs and superstitions, Nerval’s narrator indicates the presence of “un certain esprit de mysticisme ou de

supernaturalisme nécessaire aux imaginations rêveuses et délicates” (II, 1122), a description that can implicitly be applied to the title character of this portrait, and that could also characterise all of the subjects of Nerval’s *Les Illuminés*. The narrator proceeds to expose the vast array of mystical beliefs that exist beneath the surface of official religion and popular superstition. He evokes the existence of “une école moitié religieuse et moitié philosophique” (II, 1122), and this is presented as a perpetual current of resistance to mainstream values and to the perceived ideological divisions of society. These eccentric religious and philosophical systems, in the context of eighteenth-century France, are the result of “un grand nombre d’esprits que ne satisfait pas le matérialisme pur, mais qui, sans repousser la tradition religieuse, aiment à maintenir à son égard une certaine liberté de discussion et d’interprétation” (II, 1123), and constitute the various mystical organisations that emerged in the decades preceding the 1789 Revolution, and which, much like their official counterparts, embraced variations of ancient beliefs. It is in the context of this backdrop of deep-rooted ideological instability that Cagliostro is first introduced to the reader. He thus appears as a religious eccentric and is implicitly associated with the all-pervasive current of opposition evoked in the opening pages. The subversive, potentially dangerous, nature of eccentricity here emerges from the way in which marginal religious groups are shown to represent a threat to social order and stability, and, in particular, from the exploration of the link between eighteenth-century mysticism and the Revolution.

The spectre of the French Revolution is omnipresent in “Cagliostro”, and Nerval reveals the paradoxical nature of this event, which although manifest as the triumph of rationalism and materialism and the break with obsolete systems of belief, is shown to be born of an underground current of mysticism, imagination, and reverie. As indicated by Tsujikawa, in the aftermath of the failure of the insurrectionary activity of 1848, a number of authors turned their attention to the origins of the 1789 Revolution, composing alternative narratives of this event,<sup>28</sup> and Nerval’s “Cagliostro” forms part of this tradition. This text explores the role of mystical

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<sup>28</sup> Tsujikawa (p. 201) cites Alphonse Esquiros, Louis Blanc, Michelet, and Lamartine as examples of such authors.

societies in paving the way for the Revolution, and Nerval refers specifically to a number of writers that deal with this theme:

Il faut lire *l'Histoire du jacobinisme* de l'abbé Barruel, les *Preuves de la conspiration des illuminés* de Robison, et aussi les observations de Mounier sur ces deux ouvrages, pour se former une idée du nombre de personnages célèbres de cette époque qui furent soupçonnés d'avoir fait partie des associations mystiques dont l'influence prépara la Révolution. (II, 1132)

Here the use of the verb *souçonner* maintains the underlying ambivalence of the narrative. In “Cagliostro”, the fusion of religious and political vision in the years prior to the Revolution is especially apparent in the description of Madame Cagliostro’s initiation ceremony. Nerval’s narrative implies a link between this Isis-worshipping society and Robespierre’s observance of the “Fête de l’Être Suprême”. In relation to both ceremonies, he explores the mystical nature of Revolutionary thought, highlighting the way in which eighteenth-century esotericism constituted part of a wider movement of resistance to established social order and values, and ultimately contributed to the 1789 Revolution.

In the context of the narrator’s comments prior to the introduction of his subject, Cagliostro, like the other *illuminés* of Nerval’s collection, represents a voice of opposition to the political and ideological authorities of his age. In this text, he is presented as one of a series of figures that sought to “établir une formule religieuse en dehors des idées catholiques”, and Nerval’s narrator proceeds to cast Quintus Aucler and Restif de la Bretonne in this same tradition (II, 1133). In *Les Illuminés*, Cagliostro’s significance as a figure of resistance resides in his status as an eccentric, and this portrait captures the subversive dimension of the concept in nineteenth-century popular and psychiatric thought. It is owing to Cagliostro’s eccentricity and his devotion to his deviant, even illusory, convictions, regardless of the precise content of such beliefs, that, for Nerval, he constitutes a threat to the established order. Cagliostro’s identity, in the context of Nerval’s *Les Illuminés*, as both an *illuminé* and a *précurseur du socialisme*, is inseparable from his status as an eccentric.

## **Conclusion**



As seen in Part One of this thesis, from the middle of the nineteenth century, and particularly in the light of the failed insurrection of 1848, the figure of the eccentric, in both popular and medical culture, was increasingly conceived of as a subversive figure that posed a threat to social order and established values. In literary, journalistic, and psychiatric discourse, eccentrics were increasingly conflated with revolutionaries. The ideological void left by the Revolution led to widespread anxiety regarding the stability of long-established norms, values, and beliefs, and this was reflected in psychiatric writings by the growing tendency to pathologise all forms of deviant thought and behaviour, thereby limiting the perceived bounds of normality. Within this climate of social, political, and ideological instability, the figure of the eccentric, associated with deviance and originality, became an incarnation of the fragile, arbitrary nature of social values. Writers increasingly highlighted “le caractère excessif et violent du phénomène”.<sup>29</sup> Barbey d’Aurevilly articulates this anxiety, describing eccentricity as “une révolution individuelle contre l’ordre établi, quelquefois contre la nature”.<sup>30</sup> Nerval’s “Cagliostro” is situated in this context of anxiety regarding the concept of eccentricity and its link to ideological uncertainty and revolutionary activity.

Despite revealing the potentially disruptive, even dangerous, nature of eccentricity in his portrayal of Cagliostro, who is here cast as a precursor to the Revolution, Nerval’s text is characterised by an all-pervasive ambivalence with regard to the material that he presents. Cagliostro’s eccentricity is introduced in relation to the forthcoming Revolution, and is therefore inherently subversive in nature. However, this concept also represents creativity, originality, reverie, and mystical vision, values that, in the context of *Les Illuminés*, are shrouded in ambiguity, evoking both privileged vision and pathology. The story of Cagliostro represents the implicitly pathological “nourriture indigeste ou malsaine pour l’âme”, referred to by the narrator of “La Bibliothèque de mon oncle”; yet this figure is also one of the voices

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<sup>29</sup> Daniel Sangsue, “Fantaisie, Excentricité et Réalisme chez Champfleury”, in *La Fantaisie post-romantique*, ed. by Jean-Louis Cabanès and Jean-Pierre Saïdah (Toulouse: Presses Universitaires de Mirail, 2003), pp. 191-206 (p. 199).

<sup>30</sup> Jules Barbey d’Aurevilly, *Du Dandyisme et de George Brummel* (Paris: Balland, 1986), p. 34.

silenced by conventional historical narratives to which Nerval's narrator attaches fresh value.

The significance of Cagliostro in Nerval's text resides primarily in his eccentricity, and this is reflected by the elusive nature of the title character. He is marginalised, even within his own text, appearing only fleetingly in the shadow of more influential Illuminist thinkers, and presented to the reader only in relation to the activities of others. Having introduced Cagliostro into the text, Nerval rapidly abandons this figure, never allowing him to take centre stage. Instead, the major section of narrative is dedicated to Madame Cagliostro and to the initiation ceremony of her cult of Isis, rather than the specificities of Cagliostro's own "loge égyptienne" upon which his wife's secret society was based. Even in relation to the multiple marginal figures that are evoked in the narrator's broad historical overview that frames the central narrative, Cagliostro emerges as an outsider. Since he is constantly forced away from the centre of this text, Cagliostro exemplifies the concept of eccentricity in its literal sense. Nerval here portrays an extremely controversial and divisive individual in a strikingly ambivalent manner, providing no interpretative framework for the material presented, and forcing the reader to indefinitely suspend judgment of this problematic eighteenth-century figure. The lack of authorial perspective upon such a controversial figure is unsettling: the narrator neither embraces nor attacks the deviant thought and activity of his subject. Therefore, whereas unlike other portraits within *Les Illuminés* "Cagliostro" does not contain any explicitly pathologising discourse, Nerval's narrative destabilises the perceived boundary between madness and reason, denying the reader a stable narrative voice and a clear authorial vision. The relative absence of the title character, alongside the distinct lack of commentary or interpretation regarding Cagliostro's unconventional ideas, reveals that the significance of this figure, within Nerval's portrait, resides not in the specificities of his mystical or political vision, but in his status as an eccentric.

# “QUINTUS AUCLER”: RELIGIOUS ECCENTRICITY AND “LA MORT DES RELIGIONS”

## Introduction

“Quintus Aucler”, the final portrait of *Les Illuminés*, was first published as an article in the *Revue de Paris* of November 1851 under the title “Les Païens de la République: Quintus Aucler”. This text deals with a little-known eighteenth-century individual, Gabriel-André Aucler, who went by the name Quintus Aucler. Aucler sought to reinstate paganism in France in the wake of the 1789 Revolution. Despite its apparent status as a biographical portrait, Nerval’s study of Aucler provides little factual information concerning the title character, instead consisting primarily of extensive quotations from Aucler’s own writings that convey his unconventional religious convictions. Aucler was the author of a single text, entitled *La Thrécie, ou la seule voie des sciences divines et humaines, du culte vrai et de la morale*,<sup>1</sup> which was published in 1799. This work is cited at length in Nerval’s portrait with very little commentary or explanation on the part of the narrator. The extracts of *La Thrécie* quoted by Nerval condemn the perceived moral bankruptcy of the Christian faith and attack the esoteric beliefs of Maximilien de Robespierre, while promoting the revival of paganism in post-Revolutionary French society. Since, with the exception of the opening chapter, Nerval here provides little in the way of original narrative, the image of Aucler that emerges from “Quintus Aucler” is primarily dictated by the extracts of *La Thrécie* selected for inclusion. Whereas, in previous chapters of *Les Illuminés*, Nerval adapts his source material and juxtaposes direct quotations with original narrative and episodes in which he paraphrases the words of others, here the main body of Nerval’s text, whether or not it is marked as quotation, is identical to Aucler’s original discourse.

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<sup>1</sup> Gabriel-André Aucler, *La Thrécie, ou la seule voie des sciences divines et humaines, du culte vrai et de la morale* (Paris: Moutardier, 1799). This work is inspired by the mysteries of Thrace, and the title is derived from Virgil, who referred to Orpheus as “Thrécius vates”: Corinne Bayle, *Gérard de Nerval: La marche à l’étoile* (Seysse: Champ Vallon, 2001), p. 70.

It is instantly apparent to the reader that “Quintus Aucler” does not consist of a conventional biographical text. Rather than concentrating on the historical details of Aucler’s existence, Nerval uses his eighteenth-century subject as a starting point from which to deal with broader themes and preoccupations. At the heart of the text is an investigation into the status of religious faith in post-Enlightenment and post-Revolutionary French society. The question of “la mort des religions” (II, 1135), powerfully evoked in the first chapter of “Quintus Aucler”, underpins the text as a whole, forming an interpretative framework from which to consider the subsequent presentation of Aucler’s ideas and beliefs. The way in which this theme is dealt with in the opening pages echoes the way in which the notion of religious decline is articulated elsewhere in Nerval’s writings. Through this all-pervasive theme, Nerval establishes a series of parallels between the experience of his eighteenth-century subject and the plight of his own post-Revolutionary generation.

### **The Basilica of Saint-Denis and “la mort des religions”**

The first chapter of “Quintus Aucler” is striking owing to the conspicuous absence of the title character. This chapter, which serves as a prelude to the material that follows, takes on a deeply personal dimension, as Nerval’s narrator recounts his individual experience of the phenomenon of religious decline in French society, evoking powerful sentiments of melancholy and nostalgia faced with the perceived disenchantment of French culture. This prelude to “Quintus Aucler” reflects the ideas expressed by the narrator of “La Bibliothèque de mon oncle”, in which the uncle’s interest in unconventional belief systems arises in response to the lack of official religion in his society. Although the narrator makes no explicit connection between this chapter and the remainder of the text, the subsequent presentation of Aucler’s desire to reinstate the worship of ancient pagan gods into French society appears in the light of this opening episode.

In these opening pages, the narrator describes a visit to the Basilica of Saint-Denis, a monument that, he claims, represents the gradual disappearance of religious faith from French society. For Nerval’s narrator, the Basilica of Saint-Denis, constructed

as a religious monument, paradoxically becomes the symbol of the progressive disappearance of religion across the ages. Contemplating this monument, the narrator evokes key moments in the unrelenting process of religious decline that he sees reflected in the basilica. The major sources of the perceived spiritual void of the modern age, as identified by Nerval's narrator, are: the Renaissance, a period during which art and philosophy eclipsed religious values; the eighteenth century, characterised by the rise of the religious scepticism associated with Enlightenment philosophy and by the ideological turmoil wrought by the Revolution; and the nineteenth century, here perceived as an age marked by materialism and scientific thought, during which the physical renovation of the basilica has stripped it of its spiritual significance and transformed it into a symbol of modern materialist culture. Faced with the crude material reality of what was once an incarnation of the sacred, the narrator expresses his fear of the alarming emptiness that has taken the place of divine presence:

Il y a, certes, quelque chose de plus effrayant dans l'histoire que la chute des empires, c'est la mort des religions. Volney, lui-même, éprouvait ce sentiment en visitant les ruines des édifices autrefois sacrés. Le croyant véritable peut échapper à cette impression, mais avec le scepticisme de notre époque, on frémit parfois de rencontrer tant de portes sombres ouvertes sur le néant. (II, 1135)

Here, the narrator alludes to Constantin-François Volney (1757-1820), an eighteenth-century *idéologue* who wrote about the phenomenon of religious decline from a rationalist perspective. In particular, the reference here is to Volney's *Les Ruines* (1791), a work that was well known at the time at which Nerval was writing. *Les Ruines* is a highly controversial text, since the author reduces all religious sentiment to collective illusion, claiming that religion is derived from ancient mythology and the personification of the natural world. In *Les Ruines*, Volney attributes all religious phenomena, irrespective of the cultural context in which they emerged, to the single origin of the natural world. He claims that divine beings are nothing more than "des faits simples et physiques", which have been "dénaturés par des causes accidentelles dépendantes de l'esprit humain": all divine entities are here reduced to personified natural occurrences:

ces Dieux [...] qui jouent des rôles si singuliers dans tous les systèmes, ne sont que les *puissances physiques* de la nature, les *éléments*, les *vents*, les *astres* et les *météores*, qui ont été *personnifiés* par le mécanisme nécessaire du langage et de l'entendement.<sup>2</sup>

Volney thereby embraces eighteenth-century religious scepticism, justifying the process of the disappearance of religions as an inevitable and necessary stage in the development of human knowledge. In “Isis”, Nerval’s narrator also refers to Volney in the context of the loss of religious belief and tradition:

Je songeais à ce magnifique préambule des *Ruines* de Volney, qui fait apparaître le Génie du passé sur les ruines de Palmyre, et qui n’emprunte à des inspirations si hautes que la puissance de détruire pièce à pièce tout l’ensemble des traditions religieuses du genre humain! Ainsi périssait, sous l’effort de la raison moderne, le Christ lui-même, ce dernier des révélateurs, qui, au nom d’une raison plus haute, avait autrefois dépeuplé les cieux. (III, 619)

Here, the narrator attacks eighteenth-century rationalism and the consequent decline of religious sentiment. The first chapter of “Quintus Aucler” constitutes a heartfelt response to the materialist atheism of Volney and of other Enlightenment *ideologues*, and the narrator also refers to “l’athéisme résolu de Lamettrie, de d’Holbach, d’Helvétius, de d’Alembert” (II, 1135). In contrast to the ideas of these eighteenth-century *philosophes*, all of whom attacked the Catholic Church and promoted human reason at the expense of age-old metaphysical beliefs, the narrator seeks to preserve religiosity against the intellectual climate of philosophical scepticism and materialist science.

The narrator’s account of his visit to Saint-Denis is coloured by sentiments of profound nostalgia and fear, which emerge from his encounter with this physical incarnation of “la mort des religions”, and he suggests that the presence of the divine within French society has been eliminated, leaving nothing to take its place. The narrator expresses a sense of loss faced with the devastation wrought by “un siècle mécréant” (II, 1136), describing how the basilica, once imbued with religious significance, has become nothing more than a historical monument, grounded in the materialism of the age and devoid of any underlying spiritual value:

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<sup>2</sup> Constantin-François Volney, *Les Ruines, ou Méditation sur les révolutions des Empires* (Paris: Desenne, 1791), p. 222.

Qu'importent les tombes brisées et les ossements outragés de Saint-Denis! La haine leur rendait hommage; - l'homme indifférent d'aujourd'hui les a remplacés par amour de l'art et de la symétrie, comme il eût rangé les momies d'un musée égyptien. (II, 1136)

The narrator is thus forced to contemplate the basilica in purely physical terms, as a monument of national history rather than as a place of encounter with the sacred. The fact that the basilica has been “fraîchement restaurée” (II, 1136) reflects the materialism that now characterises this monument and thus contributes to the narrator's sense of the irreversible loss of what this building once embodied. The Basilica of Saint-Denis becomes, for the narrator, the symbol of the progressive loss of religiosity in French culture, the original value of the basilica having been effaced by the ideological transformation of society. This is described in terms of a continual process in which all religions eventually reach their demise:

Oui, l'art de la Renaissance avait porté un coup mortel à l'ancien dogme et à la sainte austérité de l'Église avant que la Révolution française en balayât les débris. L'allégorie succédant au mythe primitif en a fait de même jadis des anciennes religions... Il finit toujours par se trouver un Lucien, qui écrit des dialogues des dieux, – et plus tard, un Voltaire, qui raille les dieux et Dieu lui-même. (II, 1137)<sup>3</sup>

The narrator of “Isis” also articulates this sense of the inevitable demise of Catholicism: “Ainsi périssait, sous l'effort de la raison moderne, le Christ lui-même, ce dernier des révélateurs, qui, au nom d'une raison plus haute, avait autrefois dépeuplé les cieux” (III, 619).

### **The Theme of Religious Decline in Nerval's Writings**

The painful awareness of “la mort des religions”, which Nerval expresses in his introductory chapter to “Quintus Aucler”, is a recurrent theme in his writings and is omnipresent in *Les Illuminés*. Most notably, the sentiments here conveyed recall Nerval's portrayal of the status of religion in *Voyage en Orient*, in the various narratives that constitute *Les Filles du feu*, and in the poems of *Les Chimères*, all of which deal with the dwindling status of religious faith in nineteenth-century society.

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<sup>3</sup> The polemical position adopted by the narrator here results in a biased presentation of Voltaire's views on religion.

The narrator's portrayal of his visit to the Basilica of Saint-Denis strongly reflects an episode recounted in Nerval's "Vers l'Orient", the introductory section to *Voyage en Orient*, which also deals with the themes of ideological transformation and the demise of religions. This account, in which the narrator contemplates a landscape from which sacred presence has apparently been eliminated, was first published as an article in *L'Artiste* entitled "Voyage à Cythère" in 1844. Here, the narrator visits "le berceau des religions" in search of alternative systems of belief.<sup>4</sup> He expresses profound disappointment upon observing that, just like Western religions, Eastern religions are being eliminated by widespread ideological change. The parallels between this episode and the introductory pages of "Quintus Aucler" are striking, both texts being concerned with the question of the disappearance of religion from society. The significant overlap between these two episodes is observed by André Héland, who says of the first chapter of "Quintus Aucler": "la symétrie avec *Le Voyage à Cythère* est si frappante qu'on est tenté de l'appeler *Le Voyage à Saint-Denis*".<sup>5</sup> Max Milner points out that in both cases, Nerval expresses "le regret qu'il éprouve d'être privé ainsi d'une source de consolation et de ferveur".<sup>6</sup> In both cases, Nerval's narrator casts himself as "le fils d'un siècle déshérité d'illusions qui a besoin de toucher pour croire", an individual seeking to preserve religious faith against a backdrop of rising religious scepticism, and in both texts the narrator embraces the opportunity to "rêver le passé... sur ses débris" (*Voyage en Orient*, II, 237), expressing sentiments of nostalgia when faced with the basic material reality of places of sacred significance. The narrator's reaction upon encountering a landscape from which sacred presence has been eliminated mirrors the sentiment expressed by the narrator of "Quintus Aucler" when faced with the Basilica of Saint-Denis:

devant nous, là-bas, à l'horizon, cette côte vermeille, ces collines empourprées qui semblent des nuages, c'est l'île même de Vénus, c'est l'antique Cythère aux rochers de porphyre [...]. Aujourd'hui cette île s'appelle Cérigo, et appartient aux Anglais. Voilà mon rêve...et voici mon réveil! Le ciel et la mer sont toujours là; [...] mais la terre est morte, morte sous la main de l'homme, et les dieux se sont envolés! (II, 234)

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<sup>4</sup> Michel Brix, "Gérard de Nerval et le scepticisme religieux: le cas du *Voyage en Orient*", in *Etudes Littéraires*, vol. 28, no. 1 (1995), 83-91 (p. 83).

<sup>5</sup> André Héland, "Le mythe des religions chez Gérard de Nerval", in *Mythes et Religions: Conférences 1993-1994*, ed. by *Cercle de Réflexion Universitaire du lycée Chateaubriand de Rennes* (Rennes: CRDP de Bretagne, 1994), pp. 65-83 (p. 67).

<sup>6</sup> Max Milner, "Religions et religion dans le *Voyage en Orient* de Gérard de Nerval", in *Romantisme* (1985), vol. 15, no. 50, pp. 41-52 (p. 42).



As is the case in “Quintus Aucler”, the narrator is haunted by the emptiness left by absence of deity, and he proceeds to claim that he is walking “dans un monde de fantômes” (II, 237). The narrator of “Quintus Aucler” describes a crude form of paganism lacking any sincere spiritual foundation and thus ultimately contributing to the process of religious decline. This takes the form of the “art païen qu’on décore du nom de Renaissance” (II, 1136). Contemplating the tomb of Catherine de Médicis, who is described as “belle comme Vénus, et fidèle comme Arthémise” (II, 1137), the narrator declares: “Mais elle frappait déjà la religion sans le vouloir, – comme plus tard, au jour de saint Barthélemy”, to which he adds that Renaissance art “avait porté un coup mortel à l’ancien dogme et à la sainte austérité de l’Église” (II, 1137). In *Voyage en Orient*, the “death” of Pan, eliminated by the spread of Catholicism, represents the extinction of paganism in general. The narrator portrays this in terms of a violent defeat at the hands of the Catholic Church. In *Les Illuminés*, this idea features in both “Cagliostro” and “Quintus Aucler”, and constitutes much of the basis for Aucler’s impassioned attack on Christianity in *La Thrécie*. While, in *Voyage en Orient*, the narrator describes the disappearance of the pagan gods, in the opening pages of “Quintus Aucler”, it is the Christian faith that is reaching its inevitable demise. Indeed, as stated by Héliard: “chez Nerval la mort de Dieu n’est jamais bien loin de la mort de Pan”.<sup>7</sup>

The bleak image of disenchantment, in which the narrator of “Quintus Aucler” finds himself faced with “tant de portes sombres ouvertes sur le néant” (II, 1135), recalls the lifeless universe portrayed in Nerval’s poem “Le Christ aux Oliviers”. This poem, which first appeared in 1844 (the same year as the publication of “Le Voyage à Cythère”), and which was later published in *Les Chimères* (1854), constitutes Nerval’s most explicit and striking articulation of the fear that, with the demise of religious faith, human life necessarily becomes meaningless and devoid of any fundamental sense of purpose. It opens with the dramatic announcement of the “nouvelle” that “Dieu n’existe pas!” (III, 648), and the poet proceeds to depict a cold, lifeless universe, reduced to the level of basic material reality, and entirely devoid of any form of sacred presence. The figure of Christ is here stripped of his divinity and

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<sup>7</sup> Héliard, p. 67.

is reduced to a mere corporeal being, while the universe itself is deprived of any underlying spiritual dimension and is portrayed in purely physical terms, reflecting the increasingly materialist nature of nineteenth-century culture. The bleakness and sterility of the universe as portrayed in this poem arise from the absence of religious faith, here conveyed as the life force of the cosmos without which human life loses all meaning beyond the level of crude material existence. This poem captures the sentiment of the entire Romantic generation to which Nerval belonged, a generation that lamented the loss of awe and wonder in the post-Enlightenment era. Indeed, the distinctly pessimistic tone of the poem and its central theme of the death of God resonate with other contemporaneous texts. In particular, Nerval's poem takes as its starting point the "Discours du Christ mort" from Jean Paul's 1789 novel, *Siebenkäs*. This was translated into French by Germaine de Staël as "Un Songe" and popularised in nineteenth-century French culture owing to its inclusion in *De l'Allemagne*.<sup>8</sup> It is quoted by Nerval in the form of an epigraph to "Le Christ aux Oliviers": "Dieu est mort! le ciel est vide... Pleurez! enfants, vous n'avez plus de père!" (III, 648). Jean-Nicolas Illouz points out that "Le Christ aux Oliviers" also has much in common with works by Alfred de Vigny, Théophile Gautier, and Alfred de Musset.<sup>9</sup> The extent to which such works were a product of the society in which they were composed is highlighted by Frank Paul Bowman, who suggests that these authors, as well as Victor Hugo, "wrote with a background of crises in political institutions and also in systems of belief – in Catholicism, in Lockean sensationalism or a Concorcet's confidence in a progress produced by reason and science".<sup>10</sup>

The portrayal of the loss of religious faith, both in Nerval's prelude to "Quintus Aucler" and in his poem "Le Christ aux Oliviers", is counterbalanced by a sense of

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<sup>8</sup> However, Madame de Staël makes a slight modification to the original, removing the note of hope regarding God's existence with which Jean Paul's poem concludes: Byron Libhart, "Madame de Staël, Charles de Villers and the Death of God in Jean Paul's *Songe*", in *Comparative Literature Studies*, vol. 9, no. 2, (1972), 141-151 (p. 142). Frederick Burwick suggests that Nerval's sonnet is inspired by Staël's interpretation of Jean Paul's poem more than the original text: Frederick Burwick, *Poetic Madness and the Romantic Imagination* (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992), p. 229.

<sup>9</sup> Jean-Nicolas Illouz, "Les religions de Nerval", in *Savoirs en récits II: Eclats de savoirs: Balzac, Nerval, Flaubert, Verne, les Goncourt*, ed. by Jacques Neefs (Saint-Denis: Presses universitaires de Vincennes, 2010), pp. 49-69 (p. 49).

<sup>10</sup> Frank Paul Bowman, "Illuminism, Utopia, Mythology", in *The French Romantics*, ed. by Donald Charlton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), pp. 76-112 (p. 76).

hope regarding the universal presence of the sacred. In the case of “Le Christ aux Oliviers”, this arises from the precise context of the poem in the collection *Les Chimères*. Paul Bénichou argues that the desolate imagery of Nerval’s poem is countered by the Pythagorean vision of universal sensibility in “Vers Dorés”, the poem that immediately follows “Le Christ aux Oliviers” in this series.<sup>11</sup> The overriding theme of “Vers Dorés” is captured in the epigraph of the poem, a quotation from Pythagoras: “Eh quoi! tout est sensible!” (III, 651). This affirmation directly contradicts the image of the cosmic void conveyed in the preceding poem, specifically the assertion that “Tout est mort!” (III, 649). The Pythagorean vision of all-encompassing animation was a prominent feature of the Illuminist movement and various manifestations of this notion appear within *Les Illuminés*. Besides featuring in Aucler’s *La Thrécie*, this vision is also central to Restif de la Bretonne’s pantheist concept of *synthèse universelle* and Jacques Cazotte’s belief that “Tout est plein, tout est vivant dans ce monde” (II, 1103). A similar image of universal harmony is conveyed by Aucler and directly quoted by Nerval:

«Le soleil est fait pour la Lune, il darde sur elle ses rayons, stimule par eux ce qu’il y a en elle de lumineux, et ainsi elle nous éclaire: la Lune est faite pour le Soleil, elle ouvre son sein pour recevoir ses rayons et ses influences qu’elle nous verse: tous les astres sont faits les uns pour les autres, tous reçoivent les uns des autres, et dans une contrariété de mouvements, formant une harmonie universelle, ils entretiennent partout le mouvement et la vie. Quand tout a un but dans la nature, n’est-il pas insensé de penser que le séjour de l’homme sur la terre est sans but?» (II, 1143)

Despite the deep-rooted pessimism underpinning the first chapter of “Quintus Aucler”, it nevertheless ends with a note of hope, as the narrator suggests that religious sentiment and traditions, even if relegated to the margins of society, cannot be wholly extinguished from human nature:

Ceux de nos pères qui s’étaient dévoués avec sincérité et courage à l’émancipation de la pensée humaine se virent contraints peut-être à confondre la religion elle-même avec les institutions dont elle paraît les ruines. On mit la hache au tronc de l’arbre, et le cœur pourri comme l’écorce vivace, comme les branchages touffus, refuge des oiseaux et des abeilles, comme la lambruche obstinée qui le couvrait de ses lianes, furent tranchés en même temps, – et le tout fut jeté aux ténèbres comme le figuier inutile; mais l’objet détruit, il reste la place, encore sacrée pour beaucoup d’hommes. C’est ce qu’avait compris jadis l’Église victorieuse, quand elle bâtissait ses basiliques et ses chapelles sur l’emplacement même des temples abolis. (II, 1138)

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<sup>11</sup> Paul Bénichou, *L’Ecole du désenchantement: Saint-Beuve, Nodier, Musset, Nerval, Gautier* (Paris: Gallimard, 1992), pp. 359-362.

The idea that religiosity pervades society despite the ideological changes of the eighteenth century, is central to Nerval's writings, counterbalancing recurrent images of universal disenchantment and religious demise. In an article published in *La Presse* in June 1845, entitled "Les dieux inconnus", Nerval provides a "nomenclature [...] de nos dieux inconnus – ou plutôt méconnus" (I, 929), revealing the wealth of spiritual movements that emerged in the context of modern materialism and the dwindling authority of Catholicism. Although he adopts a distinctly ironic tone, Nerval uses this article to highlight the continued presence of the divine in all aspects of nineteenth-century society in spite of the sceptical nature of post-Enlightenment culture: "Nous vivions, à ce que prétendent les gens bien informés, dans une époque d'incrédulité et de scepticisme. – Pourtant, ce ne sont pas les dieux qui manquent, ni les prophètes" (I, 927).

In "Quintus Aucler", Aucler's pagan beliefs are presented directly to the reader following the bleak image of the disenchantment of French society. Therefore, the pessimistic vision conveyed in the opening pages is immediately counterbalanced by the revelation of the persistence of religious faith. The mystical ideas that constitute the subject of the remaining chapters of this text appear in the context of the sense of fear and loss that permeates the opening chapter. Just as the image of darkness and lifelessness that emerges from "Le Christ aux Oliviers" is instantly undermined by the vision of universal animation in the ensuing poem, so too does Aucler's mystical ideology undercut the sense of desolation articulated in the opening chapter.

### **The Ambivalent Narrative Voice**

The theme of religious decline, so powerfully evoked in the first chapter of "Quintus Aucler", provides a point of reference from which to consider the material that follows. After the deeply personal nature of these opening pages, Nerval's narrator virtually disappears from the text, and his voice is present only in a few brief, detached comments relating to the material presented to the reader. In the remainder of "Quintus Aucler", the narrator's voice is largely replaced by that of Aucler

himself, whose ideas, expressed in *La Thrécie*, are conveyed to the reader in the form of direct quotation; nevertheless the transition from the narrator's voice to that of his subject is not always clearly indicated to the reader. Accordingly, Meryl Tyers describes "Quintus Aucler" as "less a narrative than a piece of generous quotation, interspersed with explanatory linking material".<sup>12</sup> In the absence of any clear interpretation or clarification on the part of the narrator with regard to the material that he presents, the reader must consider the words of Aucler in the context of Nerval's prelude to this portrait.

The account of the narrator's visit to the Basilica of Saint-Denis in the introductory chapter of "Quintus Aucler" implies a comparison between the figure of the narrator and the title character, both individuals seeking to reinstate the sacred into their respective societies. Whilst, in "Quintus Aucler", the autobiographical dimension of the text is less apparent than in other texts in *Les Illuminés*, the first-hand account of this episode implicitly establishes a parallel between the author and his subject, an impression that is accentuated by the fact that the ideas expressed in the opening pages also appear elsewhere in Nerval's writings. Much like Nerval's narrator in the first chapter, Aucler emerges as an individual engaged in the impassioned pursuit of religiosity in an age in which the authority of official religion has been irreversibly undermined. However, although the first-person account of the first chapter indicates a link between the narrator and his subject, the relative absence of the narrator in the ensuing chapters renders problematic the identification between the author, the narrator, and the title character. The narrator does not, at any point in this text, explicitly identify with Aucler's deviant religious beliefs, and does not seek to conceal their irrational, illusory, and controversial nature; yet, neither does his account allow for the straightforward rejection of such ideas.

Owing to the distinct lack of commentary between the lengthy transcriptions from Aucler's *La Thrécie*, the position of the narrator, and therefore of the author, in relation to the material presented in this text, remains obscure. At times, the narrator distances himself from the material presented. This is especially the case with regard

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<sup>12</sup> Meryl Tyers, *Critical Fictions: Nerval's Les Illuminés* (Oxford: Legenda, 1998), p. 28.

to Aucler's virulent critique of Robespierre's esoteric beliefs and his controversial attack on Christianity. Nerval's narrator here employs a number of expressions that indicate neutrality and objectivity, such as "aux yeux de Quintus Aucler" and "dans sa pensée intime", which have the effect of clearly distinguishing between the voice of the narrator and that of his subject:

l'Être Suprême, salué par Robespierre, et en faveur duquel Delille de Salle avait composé un mémoire, n'était encore qu'une vaine allégorie comme les autres aux yeux de Quintus Aucler. Il soupçonnait même Robespierre d'avoir gardé au fond du cœur un vieux levain de ce christianisme dans lequel il ne voyait, lui, qu'une mauvaise queue de la Bible. Dans sa pensée intime, les chrétiens n'étaient que les successeurs dégradés d'une secte juive expulsée, formée d'esclaves et de bandits. (II, 1139)

However, at other times, the voice of the narrator merges with that of his subject, assimilating Aucler's ideas directly into the narrative with no explanation or interpretative framework. This is the case in the final chapters of "Quintus Aucler", in which the narrative passes directly from the narrator's commentary to the transcription of extracts from *La Thrécie* without indicating this transition to the reader. The resultant fusion of the voice of the narrator with that of his subject contributes further to the ambivalent image of Aucler that emerges from this text.

### **Religious Madness and Christianity in *La Thrécie***

In one of the extracts from *La Thrécie* that Nerval incorporates into his text, Aucler embarks on an impassioned critique of Christian values, pointing to the perceived absurdity, irrationality, and even madness, at the heart of this religion, as well as arguing that it contradicts basic principles of morality. By selecting this extract of Aucler's work for inclusion in "Quintus Aucler", Nerval raises the question of the association between madness and religious faith.

As observed in Part One of this thesis, the Byzantine tradition of "holy foolishness" or "folly for Christ's sake", which was derived from the teachings of the Apostle Paul, as recounted in the Gospel of Corinthians (1 Corinthians 4:10), established the idea that there exists a connection between madness and spiritual wisdom in Christianity, thereby positing madness as a desirable phenomenon. The tradition of holy foolishness, central to Eastern Orthodoxy, encouraged followers to endure

humiliation and mockery, and to forsake material values. The principles upon which this practice was founded are at the centre of Aucler's attack on Christian values, and the perceived irrationality and immorality of certain aspects of Christianity are highlighted in the extensive section of *La Thrécie* cited by Nerval. Aucler describes Christian ideas as being "hors du sens commun", claiming that such apparently nonsensical phenomena "ne peuvent être goûtées que d'un petit nombre" (II, 1141). Criticising the alleged absurdity of the idea according to which: "Vous serez heureux, lorsqu'on vous persécutera, lorsqu'on vous maudira, lorsqu'on inventera des calomnies contre vous", Aucler says: "il n'y a qu'un fou qui puisse se réjouir et se trouver heureux qu'on le persécute, qu'on le maudisse, qu'on invente contre lui des calomnies; mais les chefs du christianisme avaient besoin de pareils hommes" (II, 1142). His attack on Christianity becomes ever more vehement as he illustrates not only the perceived madness, but also the moral depravity of certain ideas. This is especially evident in the following passage, cited by Nerval, in which Aucler alludes to the verses of the Bible according to which Christians must "turn the other cheek", an idea that appears in the gospels of Matthew and Luke (Matthew 5:38-5:42; Luke 6:27-6:31):

Quant au précepte de ne point résister au mal, de tendre la joue gauche pour recevoir un soufflet, quand on en a reçu un sur la droite, c'est un précepte fou, furieux, insensé, injuste, qui met le faible à la merci du violent et de l'injuste, qui soumet les bons à une servitude basse et indigne devant un brigand audacieux. C'est pervertir toutes les idées de morale et de justice. (II, 1143)

Nerval's narrator maintains a distance from the ideas articulated by his subject, conveying Aucler's views through an extended quotation from *La Thrécie*, which is clearly distinguished from the voice of the narrator, and never explicitly identifying with the views that he cites. Indeed, having quoted, at length, from Aucler's controversial attack of Christian values, the narrator detaches himself from what he describes as "cette démolition passionnée du catholicisme" (II, 1143), as well as from Aucler's subsequent presentation of his polytheistic beliefs. Here the voice of the narrator remains distinct from that of his subject, as he adopts an apparently objective stance to remind the reader of the unstable ideological context in which Aucler's controversial ideas were conceived:

On a besoin sans doute aujourd'hui, pour supporter de tels raisonnements, de songer toujours à l'époque où ils furent posés. Au temps où Quintus Aucler écrivait, il y avait table rase en fait de religion, et attaquer le christianisme était devenu un lieu commun. (II, 1151)

### **Religious Madness and *La Thrécie***

The question of religious madness that emerges from Aucler's portrayal of Christianity can in turn be applied to the beliefs of Aucler himself. Whilst Nerval's narrative identifies *La Thrécie* as the product of an age of ideological turmoil, the image of Aucler as an eccentric, and even as a madman, nevertheless emerges from this portrait.

Nerval's narrator directly evokes the theme of madness, remarking that Aucler's thought "semble aujourd'hui toucher à la folie" (II, 1160). However, this remark is instantly qualified, as the narrator proceeds to express a marked admiration for Aucler's *La Thrécie*, describing this text as "un livre qui impose le respect par l'honnêteté des intentions et par la sincérité des croyances" (II, 1160). The narrator also reveals respect for his subject by suggesting that Aucler's desire to reinstate paganism into a climate of philosophical scepticism involves "quelque courage" (II, 1158). He alludes to the "nouveau rétrospective de ces idées" (II, 1158), thereby attaching a positive dimension to Aucler's deviant thought and even indicating that his ideas were in advance of his age. In Nerval's account, Aucler's aberrant religious beliefs are implicitly justified by the context of religious decline that is introduced to the reader in the prelude to "Quintus Aucler" and that constitutes a framework for this text as a whole. The narrator attaches value to the unconventional ideas expressed in *La Thrécie*, suggesting that such a work was necessary "dans une époque où le matérialisme dominait les idées" (II, 1158). Furthermore, the narrator situates Aucler's text in a wider tradition of marginal mystical followings seeking new forms of religiosity in eighteenth-century France. Aucler is thus portrayed not as an isolated madman but as an eccentric within a broad movement of religious thinkers reacting to the dwindling authority of traditional Catholicism:



Il ne faut pas croire, du reste, que la doctrine de Quintus Aucler fût la manifestation isolée d'un esprit exalté qui cherchait sa foi à travers les ténèbres. Ceux qu'on appelait alors les théosophes n'étaient pas éloignés d'une semblable formule. – Les Martinistes, les Philalèthes, les Illuminés et beaucoup d'affiliés aux sociétés maçonniques professaient une philosophie analogue, dont les définitions et les pratiques ne variaient que par les noms. (II, 1160)

The narrator proceeds to refer to “le néo-paganisme d’Aucler” as “une des expressions de l’idée panthéiste, qui se développait d’autre part, grâce aux progrès des sciences naturelles” (II, 1160), highlighting the status of this figure as a product of his age. Implying a connection between the ideas of Aucler and those of various other unconventional religious and mystical movements, all of which seek to overcome the perceived disillusionment of their age, the narrator says of his subject: “Quintus Aucler ne fait donc, dans sa pensée, que compléter et régulariser un mouvement irrésistible” (II, 1159-1160). In this sense, Aucler can be considered an *illuminé* in the broad historical sense of the term, despite the marked divergence of his beliefs from those that were characteristic of the primary strands of the eighteenth-century Illuminist movement.

If Aucler’s unconventional religious ideas and practices, like those of the other *illuminés* portrayed by Nerval, represent a form of madness, this madness is shown to be, at least to some extent, desirable, since it constitutes a manifestation of resistance to the impending spiritual void that threatens eighteenth-century French society. In this respect, the plight of Aucler mirrors that of the narrator of *Aurélia* for whom the descent into madness is preferable to a world reduced to the level of basic material existence and wholly explicable by modern science. In light of the opening pages of “Quintus Aucler”, there is the underlying implication that the descent into a world of madness and illusion is preferable to embracing a rationality that necessarily eliminates mankind’s fundamental sense of meaning and purpose. This notion, which characterises *Les Illuminés*, is explicit in “Isis”. Rejecting the excess of human reason that has led to “la chute successive des croyances”, Nerval’s narrator asks: “ne serait-il pas plus consolant de tomber dans l’excès contraire et d’essayer de se reprendre aux illusions du passé?” (III, 619). This same question underpins the entire narrative of “Quintus Aucler”, as is expressed by the narrator of

the opening chapter as he evokes his ardent resistance to the perceived demise of the Christian faith:

S'il était vrai, selon l'expression d'un philosophe moderne, que la religion chrétienne n'eût guère plus d'un siècle à vivre encore, – ne faudrait-il pas s'attacher avec larmes et avec prières aux pieds sanglants de ce Christ détaché de l'arbre mystique, à la robe immaculée de cette Vierge mère, - expression suprême de l'alliance antique du ciel et de la terre, - dernier baiser de l'esprit divin qui pleure et qui s'envole! (II, 1137)

Keiko Tsujikawa suggests that, in the following extract from *Aurélia*, Nerval alludes to his projected account of his visit to the basilica of Saint-Denis: “Des circonstances fatales préparèrent longtemps après une rechute qui renoua la série interrompue de ces étranges rêveries. – Je me promenais dans la campagne préoccupé d'un travail qui se rattachait aux idées religieuses” (III, 715).<sup>13</sup> If this is the case, the narrator of *Aurélia* establishes an implicit connection between the experience of the basilica and his second episode of madness. The presence of this comment in *Aurélia* reveals underlying parallels between these texts, both of which fuse the theme of madness with the powerful desire for religiosity. Much like the narrator of *Aurélia*, Aucler's madness is imposed upon him by the ideological conflict of his age, and constitutes a source of hope against a bleak backdrop of disillusionment.

### **Quintus Aucler as an *illuminé***

Quintus Aucler's pagan convictions, although conceived against the same climate of ideological instability as the Illuminist movement, have little in common with the thought of this broad esoteric following. Aucler's status as an *illuminé* in the historical sense of the term is therefore dubious. Whilst, like the followers of the Illuminist movement, he forms part of a wider movement seeking alternative forms of faith to replace Christianity in the context of eighteenth-century religious scepticism, his attachment to paganism isolates him from major Illuminist thinkers. If the subjects of “Jacques Cazotte” and “Cagliostro” can be considered marginal figures in the Illuminist movement, Aucler's association with this group is far more problematic.

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<sup>13</sup> Keiko Tsujikawa, *Nerval et les limbes de l'histoire: Lecture des Illuminés* (Geneva: Droz, 2008), p. 219.

Nerval's account explicitly places Aucler against a backdrop characterised by religious decline and by the rise of materialist culture, indicating to the reader that the ideas and beliefs presented in this account cannot be interpreted independently of the instability of the ideological context in which they were conceived. "Quintus Aucler" thereby reflects the ideas articulated by the narrator of "La Bibliothèque de mon oncle". Just as the unconventional beliefs of the narrator's uncle are shown to arise from the lack of stable religious authority in his society, so too are those of Aucler. Like the figure of the uncle, who embraces mysticism in response to a climate of uncertainty in which "la religion officielle n'existait plus", Aucler composes *La Thrécie* in a quest for faith "à travers les ténèbres" (II, 1160) of eighteenth-century France. In the context of *Les Illuminés*, Aucler thus becomes one in a series of individuals seeking to preserve religious faith, even if this involves the abandonment of reason. Whilst Aucler's status as an *illuminé* in the historical sense is problematic, his attachment to unconventional religious beliefs cast him as an *illuminé* in the later sense of the term, as an individual whose devotion to an idea or belief system involves the impassioned pursuit of illusory and irrational phenomena. As one of Nerval's *illuminés*, Aucler's unconventional convictions situate him in a broader movement of writers and thinkers who strive to resist "la mort des religions", even at the cost of madness.

### **Marginality and Resistance: Quintus Aucler and Jean-Jacques Rousseau**

The marginal status of Aucler and the unconventional nature of his ideas for eighteenth-century society emerge clearly from Nerval's portrait. In the light of the opening chapter, Aucler is cast as a subversive voice of resistance in an age marked by philosophical scepticism and the glorification of reason. The emphasis upon the precise historical and ideological context in which Aucler's ideas were conceived highlights his status as an eccentric, since his ideas are characterised by social and ideological deviance, and, as already seen, suggestions of madness are implicitly qualified by the instability of the ideological backdrop against which he was writing. Aucler, as portrayed by Nerval, is very much one of the "*excentriques de la*

philosophie” referred to in the preface to *Les Illuminés*, whose deviant ideas hold connotations of both borderline madness and superior insight.

Aucler’s marginal status in his society is already established in the epigraph to this portrait, in which Nerval quotes from Voltaire’s *Candide* in a reflection of Aucler’s role as “le dernier païen”: “«*Je croyais, dit Candide, qu’il n’y avait plus de manichéens. – Il y a moi*», dit Martin” (II, 1135).<sup>14</sup> The themes of social marginality and eccentricity are pursued in the opening lines of “Quintus Aucler” through the narrator’s references to Jean-Jacques Rousseau, a figure characterised by his marginal status and by his isolation from the group of eighteenth-century *philosophes* with which he is associated:

Rousseau est le seul entre les maîtres de la philosophie du XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle qui se soit préoccupé sérieusement des grands mystères de l’âme humaine, et qui ait manifesté un sentiment religieux positif, qu’il entendait à sa manière, mais qui tranchait fortement avec l’athéisme résolu de Lamettrie, de d’Holbach, d’Helvétius, de d’Alembert, comme avec le déisme mitigé de Boulanger, de Diderot et de Voltaire. (II, 1135)

Despite the emphasis upon Rousseau’s status as an outsider, he is portrayed in distinctly positive terms in relation to the other *philosophes*, owing to his pursuit of spirituality in spite of the “athéisme résolu” of those around him. The fact that he is described as the only one of the eighteenth-century *philosophes* to have “manifesté un sentiment religieux positif” also casts him in a positive light, especially in view of the narrator’s later comment that “tout peuple a besoin d’une religion positive” (II, 1152). Rousseau is distinguished from the other *philosophes* by the fact that he falls into the category of individuals whose minds are “plus disposés que d’autres à l’exaltation et à la rêverie” (II, 1135), and it is this that explains his desire to preserve religious faith at all costs. Such a description casts Rousseau as an eccentric, indicating both benign madness and the potential for privileged inspiration, and linking him to the six *illuminés* contained in Nerval’s collection.

The reference to Rousseau in the first chapter of “Quintus Aucler” indicates a comparison between this eccentric *philosophe* and Aucler, whose ideas were also

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<sup>14</sup> The actual quotation is: “Vous vous moquez de moi, dit Candide; il n’y a plus de manichéens dans le monde. – Il y a moi, dit Martin”: Voltaire, “Candide”, in *Œuvres Complètes de Voltaire*, 52 vols. (Paris: Garnier, 1877-1885), XXI (1879), 137-218 (p. 184).

starkly opposed to those of the eighteenth-century intellectual elite. In Nerval's portrait, both figures emerge as voices of resistance to the rise of philosophical scepticism and materialist culture. Just as Rousseau is a marginal figure in the group of *philosophes* to which he belongs, Aucler is an outsider in relation to the Illuminist movement with which he is loosely associated. The narrator attaches an implicit value to Rousseau's eccentricity, and the image of this *philosophe* that emerges from this text is that of a necessary figure of opposition to the main current of Enlightenment philosophy. The same is true of Aucler, whose value in Nerval's presentation lies in his divergence from the intellectual culture of his age. Indeed, the narrator says of *La Thrécie*: "il fallait certainement qu'un tel livre parût pendant le cours de l'ancienne révolution", to which he adds:

on doit peut-être savoir gré à Quintus Aucler d'avoir, dans une époque où le matérialisme dominait les idées, ramené les esprits au sentiment religieux, et aussi à ces pratiques spéciales du culte qu'il croyait nécessaires à combattre les mauvais instincts ou à assouplir l'ignorante grossièreté de certaines natures.

Les jeûnes, les vigiles, l'abstinence de certains aliments, les mœurs de la famille et les actes générateurs soumis à des prescriptions pour lesquelles le paganisme n'a pas été moins prévoyant que la Bible, ce n'était certes pas de quoi plaire aux sceptiques et aux athées de l'époque, et il y avait quelque courage à proposer la restauration de ces pratiques. (II, 1158)

The implicit parallels between Rousseau and Aucler attaches elevated significance to the unconventional ideas of the latter. Nerval thus reveals the value of Aucler to the age in which he was writing, attributing to this figure an importance that is derived primarily from his status as a figure of resistance rather than from the precise nature of his beliefs.

## Conclusion

The fact that Aucler's significance according to Nerval arises primarily from his role as a voice of opposition is evident from the extracts of *La Thrécie* included in this text. Following the narrator's opposition to the rise of religious scepticism and materialism in the opening chapter, which establishes the theme of resistance to dominant values, the presentation of Aucler's ideas is concerned with his aversion to the esoteric belief system of Robespierre and the revolutionaries, as well as his

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detachment from the core values of the Christian faith. Aucler's role is thus that of an outsider, an individual who cannot be readily identified with any specific ideological movement or social group. In the context of *Les Illuminés*, Aucler's significance is directly related to his status as one of Nerval's "*excentriques*" and to his rejection of the norms and values of his society. While this study does nothing to conceal the irrational, illusory nature of Aucler's ideas, recognising the impossibility of his envisioned task and never suggesting that the mystical vision articulated in *La Thracie* represents a viable solution to the spiritual crisis of post-Enlightenment and post-Revolutionary France, Nerval's Aucler embodies the plight of his age. His impassioned pursuit of illusion casts him as an *illuminé*, both in the sense of a madman and a visionary.

The eccentric mystical convictions displayed by Nerval's series of *illuminés* exemplify the persistence of spiritual belief, even if it takes the form of superstition, illusion, or madness. For Nerval, the presence of religious faith itself, regardless of its precise nature, is essential to human existence. This notion is central to *Aurélia*, in which, although the narrator evokes ideas from different religious and mystical movements, ultimately, it is the intensity of his spiritual quest, regardless of the precise beliefs and traditions evoked, that emerges most strongly from the narrative. The same is true of "Quintus Aucler", and of *Les Illuminés* as a whole: here, the all-pervasive quest for the sacred and the desire to overcome the materialism of the modern world, even at the price of madness, is more powerful than any specific doctrine or set of beliefs. Indeed, in "Quintus Aucler", what matters is not the precise content of Aucler's ideas, which seem to "*toucher à la folie*" (II, 1160), but what these ideas represent in the context of the bleak image of "*la mort des religions*" evoked in the opening pages.

## CONCLUSION

This thesis has sought to show how interpretations of madness evolved in France during the early decades of the nineteenth century, reflecting the shifting epistemological climate of the age. It has traced the appropriation of the study and treatment of madness by the newly emergent psychiatric profession and has demonstrated how this exemplified the broad ideological shift born of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment and the 1789 Revolution. I have focused on two main aspects of the evolution of madness in post-Revolutionary France. The first is the rejection by the alienists of the then perceived duality between the normal and the pathological, by introducing a spectrum of new categories of mental alienation between the hypothetical extremes of madness and reason. This tendency was manifest in particular in the emergence of the concepts of monomania and eccentricity as models of partial madness established by the psychiatric profession but also widely evoked in popular and literary culture. The second is the pathologisation of religious phenomena. I have shown how, besides the fact that the study of madness passed from the domain of religion to that of science, nineteenth-century alienists introduced the controversial psychiatric category of religious madness, identifying religion as both a cause and a symptom of madness. A consideration of these distinctly nineteenth-century concepts has enabled me to provide a fresh reading of Nerval's *Les Illuminés*. Nerval's preface to that work introduces madness and eccentricity as major themes of the portraits that follow, placing these concepts in the context of an age in which "la religion officielle n'existait plus" (II, 885).

As I have argued, Nerval's literary portrayal of madness in *Les Illuminés* is very much a product of the context of early nineteenth-century French thought from which it was derived. His collection of portraits captures the broad ideological tension of post-Revolutionary culture, vacillating between scientific and supernatural interpretations of madness. Nerval's *illuminés* are at once mystics and madmen. The status of their mystical beliefs and visions, as well as that of their madness, remains perpetually uncertain. In *Les Illuminés*, Nerval simultaneously embraces

and rejects contemporaneous psychiatric discourse relating to religious madness, whilst demonstrating an equally ambivalent response to mystical interpretations of this theme. Focusing upon borderline states of hallucination and dream, phenomena that were increasingly analysed in physiological terms by nineteenth-century alienists, whilst also retaining supernatural connotations, Nerval embraces the problematic status of religious madness in nineteenth-century French culture. The constant oscillation between the medical and the mystical anticipates Nerval's later literary depiction of his own pathological mental state in *Aurélia*. The formulation of madness by the narrator of *Aurélia* as "l'épanchement du songe dans la vie réelle" (III, 699), which was also discussed by alienists from the perspective of medical science, already emerges from *Les Illuminés*.

At the heart of all of the portraits of *Les Illuminés* is a constant questioning of the relationship between madness and reason. With the very first sentence of the work, in which the narrator cites Erasmus's *Eloge de la folie* as his literary model, Nerval raises the question of the meaning of the term *folie*. Just as Erasmus's text unsettles the reader by reversing preconceived values and undermining assumptions, *Les Illuminés* questions the status not only of the concept of madness, but also of "ce que les hommes appellent la raison" (*Aurélia*, III, 695). The image of the neglected library that constitutes the starting point for *Les Illuminés* exemplifies the tension between madness and reason that permeates the work as a whole. It is a place in which the distinction between these seemingly analogous concepts dissolves. A similar image is conveyed in *Aurélia* when the narrator describes a library that houses a chaotic mass of ideas in which the categories of madness and reason are interchangeable:

Mes livres, amas bizarre de la science de tous les temps, histoire, voyages, religions, cabale, astrologie, à réjouir les ombres de Pic de La Mirandole, du sage Meursius et de Nicolas de Cusa, – la tour de Babel en deux cent volumes, – on m'avait laissé tout cela! Il y avait de quoi rendre fou un sage; tâchons qu'il y ait aussi de quoi rendre sage un fou. (III, 743)

These libraries embody the potentially subversive nature of eccentricity, destabilising preconceived boundaries and calling into question the dominant narratives of power and reason. The very existence of such libraries poses a threat to official narratives



of history by giving voice to all those who, according to dominant discourses, are classified as mad or eccentric and are confined to the margins. Throughout *Les Illuminés*, Nerval illustrates how definitions of madness and reason are necessarily bound up with discourses and systems of power. His work reveals the extent to which official history is founded upon the arbitrary and fluctuating concept of reason. *Les Illuminés* reveals the existence of an alternative history that exists in opposition to conventional narratives.

Underpinning *Les Illuminés* as a whole is a constant awareness of the French Revolution. The narrator is clearly separated from his subjects by the historical rift opened by the events of 1789. Although Nerval's portrayal of madness appropriates distinctly nineteenth-century ideas derived from contemporaneous psychiatric and popular culture, his subjects nevertheless embody a form of madness that has been eliminated by the Revolution. The illusions that these figures pursue are very much the product of pre-Revolutionary society and are bound up with notions of absolute royal and religious power. Nerval's *illuminés* tap into this mystical, non-democratic, non-philosophical authority, and their madness is characterised by this sense of the absolute and the divine. Nerval shows how all of these figures form part of underground resistance to dominant systems of power, casting them, each in their own way, as precursors of the Revolution. If the abbé de Bucquoy is identified as the first to have conceived of the abolition of the monarchy, the other *illuminés* also express ideas in advance of their age and they are all pushed to the margins and considered mad. These figures seek to replace the dominant discourses and systems of authority that they oppose, not with anarchy or freedom but with an alternative form of supreme power that is despite their efforts rendered impossible by the fractures of the Revolution. In *Les Illuminés*, Nerval captures the paradox of the 1789 Revolution. He shows how an event born of fantasy, imagination, illusion, mysticism, reverie, and madness, ushered in an age of materialism and incredulity. Nerval laments the demise of a form of madness that cannot be circumscribed and controlled by the reductive discourses of medicine and materialism.

By combining all of these individuals, Nerval exploits the full spectrum of possible connotations of the term *illuminé*. In its primary sense at the time at which Nerval was writing, the term refers to members of the eighteenth-century Illuminist movement, the hidden face of the Enlightenment. It thereby evokes the mysticism and illusion that persisted in an era that, according to official history, was marked by philosophical scepticism, religious decline, and the victory of reason. Although Nerval's subjects are not obvious representatives of the Illuminist movement, they nevertheless embody its spirit of defiance and opposition. Just as the existence of the Illuminist movement destabilises the official image of the eighteenth-century as the Age of Reason, Nerval's *illuminés* subvert the authority of the discourses of reason and power that dictate the monologue of history. The definition of the term *illuminé* as a religious visionary also emerges from these portraits. Providing ambivalent depictions of potentially mystical phenomena including dream, hallucination, prophecy, inspiration, and character-doubling, Nerval evokes this ahistorical sense of the term. Above all, the subjects of *Les Illuminés* are united by their absolute devotion to their unconventional ideas, obsessions, and delusions. Nerval expands the connotations of *illuminé*, linking the word to notions of madness and the attachment to illusion. In the context of *Les Illuminés*, what is important is not the status or the precise content of the beliefs and practices with which these figures are associated, but the intensity and passion with which they are expressed.

The ambiguous status of Nerval's *illuminés* is accentuated by the narrator's introduction of his subjects as "mes *excentriques*" in the preface to the work. By combining his depiction of religious madness with the equally problematic nineteenth-century concept of eccentricity, his narratives exploit fully the inherent ambiguity of his subject matter. Dealing with themes that resist straightforward definition and classification, whilst championing marginal and obscure aspects of human experience, Nerval's texts take on a subversive dimension, calling into question preconceived social, political, and ideological categories. Through his exploration of the concept of madness, Nerval captures the plight of his generation, resisting the sense of disenchantment wrought by the Enlightenment and the 1789

Revolution, and seeking to preserve a sense of mystery and wonder faced with the rise of modern science and materialist culture.

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