

Vienna, May 22, 2000, Gérard de Nerval's (Gérard Labrunie) 192nd birthday

Henceforth, all the *Nerval* articles will be available on the 'net' under www.karger.com/journals/drm/nerval.htm.

Nerval was a reporter and a writer, son of a doctor, erstwhile medical student, a romanticist who travelled all over Europe and stayed in Vienna in semi-official function from November 1839 to March 1840. He translated Goethe's *Faust One*, edited a selection of German poems of Klopstock, Goethe, Schiller, he wrote an opera, *La Reine de Saba*, he knew Franz Liszt, Alexandre Dumas, Victor Hugo, Eugène Delacroix, Honoré de Balzac and many other contemporary French and German writers and poets. From 1831 on he used the *nom de plume* 'de Nerval', related to an estate of his late mother. His travels to the Orient must be seen in the context of other famous French travellers, between Chateaubriand, Lamartine and Pierre Loti, but with a strong romantic touch – he wanted to depict the world in a poetic way where his dreams may come true, mixing reality with fantasy. 'J'aime à conduire ma vie comme un roman ...' he wrote. When passing the island of Cyprus en route to the Levante, he alluded to Poliphilus and Polia and their story of love and fancy (I may be permitted to state that there just appeared a new edition of the *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*, facsimile and commentary, 2 vols. Milan 1998/99, exactly 500 years after the original *edizione Aldina*, Venice 1499). One of the first woodcuts of this oeuvre displays Poliphilus lost in a wood, reading 'Poliphilo temendo el periculo del scuro bosco ...' alluding to the Canto I of the 'Commedia'. Such an allusion by Nerval strengthens the role dreams played in his life and in his writings, important to any writer, 'il sogno è un luogo oscillante fra terra e cielo, tra le affezioni corporee e sensibili, che obnubilano la visione, e le aspirazioni dell'anima dischiusa a conoscere e migrare, a vedere chiaramente l'intelligibile. Tra queste umane estremità si svolge il viaggio ...'

Nerval travelled to Egypt, to the Near East, to Turkey, throughout the year 1843, and later to other parts of Europe repeatedly. This shall not be detailed here. He spoke of himself as *voyageur enthousiaste*, and the *Voyages en Orient*, 2 vols, are the fruit of the above cruises.

He died in physical and mental misery, by his own hand, in the bitter cold night of January 25, 1855, in Paris, and was laid to rest in the Père Lachaise cemetery.

The present author chose Nerval's name as a *nom de plume* for his medico-journalistic columns appearing in this journal since May 18th, 1994, the 125th anniversary of the foundation of the world's first dermatological society, the New York Dermatological Society. Obviously, the love for poetry, for languages, for the classical world of the Mediterranean, for travels in general, the proximity to medicine, Nerval's sympathy for Vienna ('*les amours de Vienne*'), his (and my) stay in the Orient, masonic ideas, ideas as regards denominations (vide infra), forays into the world of dreams, empathy for a complicated and convoluted mind, these were the reasons for the choice of pseudonym.

In Malta, at the end of 1843, he wrote: '*Oui, je me suis senti païen en Grèce, musulman en Egypte, panthéiste au milieu des Druses et dévot sur les mers aux astres-dieux de la Chaldée; mais à Constantinople, j'ai compris la grandeur de cette tolérance universelle qu'exercent aujourd'hui les Turcs.*' Have we progressed since then? *Malheureusement*, no, we have not. On the contrary!

A la prochaine,

Karl Holubar, Vienna, Austria