ERIC BASSO

DISTANT VOICES

French Poetry
in Translation

OBSCURE PUBLICATIONS
Distant Voices
Also by Eric Basso
from Asylum Arts

**Fiction**

The Beak Doctor
Bartholomew Fair

**Poetry**

Accidental Monsters
The Catwalk Watch
The Smoking Mirror
Catafalques
Ghost Light

**Drama**

Enigmas
The Golem Triptych
The Sabattier Effect
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My dear boy, there are two stumbling blocks in translation. The first stumbling block is to translate word for word; you give the rough meaning and not the exact one. Thus, you have, in Shakespeare: “a green girl.” Une fille verte — such is the phrase rendered word for word, but this phrase is incomprehensible in French. You’ll find things like that in Shakespeare every step of the way. Now, there’s the other danger: not to translate exactly and, by that, to corrupt the very thought of the poet.

— Victor Hugo to his son, François-Victor
April 20, 1854, Le Journal d’Adèle Hugo
On the Death of Marie

In the gloom of slumbering night, I dreamt
A sepulcher stood open before me.
Death lay within it, turned pale by horror;
Written above was: The Tomb of Marie.

Frightened, I awoke with a start, and cried:
"So, love is subject to our human law!
Its best part gone, it has lost dominion,
Since its power is destroyed by one death."

Scarcely had I finished but, at daybreak,
There came a grief-stricken man to my door,
Who told me the news of her sorry death.

Courage, my soul, soon I must end as she;
I hear her calling to us from heaven,
Even now, as I walk in her footsteps.
Sonnet X

Whether the radiant light of the sun
Shines on us, or whether the somber night
Blots daylight up and redarkens the dome
Of the starry vault with its sullen gloom,

Though slumber streams into these eyes of mine,
And my sorrows be beyond reckoning,
I cannot shuffle off this mortal coil,
Nor stem my vexing torment from its course.

Ill-starred by destiny, a cruel fate
Marks me out and ceaselessly pursues me,
Every day renewing my misfortunes.

But if these tortures, which shackle my soul,
Do not unbind my wretched life a bit,
Come, Death, and make an end of my labors.
They hollowed out a trench below a wall. Stoop-shouldered, the laborers came and went, Burrowing with bare arms in the dark breach; Like iron hammered in a forge, the rock Rang under the crow’s-beak of the pickaxe. Hard work. Round that fortress, that castle keep — A royal palace and a vulture’s nest Where he lived, at the brink of the tempest, With the screech of the eagles overhead — Duke Gaiffer-Jorge hounded his toilers on As they dug for him a vast, sunken moat, Gutting the surrounding hills and meadows. “Dig! Dig!” he shouted to his tunnelers, Who chipped away from morning till sundown. “I want to make, round my tower, a moat So terrifying that the man who peers Into its depths will reel with dizziness.” They dug, and all the labor that they made
At the base of those precipitous walls
Gouged a tortuous crater from the rock;
Each day took it deeper into the earth.
Sometimes, when a digger would stop to ask,
"My lord, is it deep enough for you now?"
Gaïffer-Jorge would answer, "Keep digging, Dig.
I want to know what my house is built on."

Who was Gaïffer? The brutal dynasty
Installed by General Constantius
Under a canopy of oxen pelts
In 419 received in fief from Rome
The great kingdom of Aquitania.
Now Gaïffer-Jorge ruled over this domain;
From Bayonne to Cahors, his word was law.
The eight territories east of Albi,
The fourteen lying 'twixt Loire and Garonne,
Were set like jewels in his haughty crown.
Auch paid him a tribute, and each peasant
From Tursan to Marsan owed him one sheep;
The Ferrat Rock, that mount strewn with opals,
The diocese of Aire and Saint-Sever
On the Adour, all this belonged to him.
His vast estate bordered on two oceans;
Far away in Orléans, the French king
Heard the clang of his sharp, resplendent sword
Ring out across the mountains of Irun
And Fontarabie. Gaïffer's court was full
Of barons; round him, this crowd fell silent.
The bugles blared their sinister fanfare
Of pomp and triumph. At the break of day —
Black below, bright red above, where the dawn
Tinged its summit — the Duke’s high tower seemed
A firebrand that some mysterious arm
Raised on the horizon. Prince and archer,
A hunter of men, Gaiffer-Jorge was held
In high esteem by all his overseers;
His bailiffs sang praises to his glory,
His marshals were more devoted to him
Than to God Himself. To increase his lands,
Gaiffer robbed the children of Oloron
Of their inheritance by laying claim
To the city of Béarn; but these children
Were so young and frail of health that, in truth,
They scarcely noticed how their crown was changed
To a tonsure. Moreover, his friendship
Could not always be relied on; he sold
His master Aymon for a hundred francs
In gold to black Emir El Moumenin.
Aymon, that knight once so acclaimed by all,
Had schooled Duke Gaiffer in the art of war,
And was a just and upright man-at-arms;
But Gaiffer found himself without a sou,
And there, in Persia, a hundred gold francs
Were well worth a hundred thousand tomans —
His depleted treasury had required
Such a dire political masterstroke.
A year before the digging of the moat,
The sale of Aymon earned Gaiffer enough
To allow him a life of luxury;
He played host to a festive tournament,  
And lavishly squandered his new-found wealth.  
Mere grandeur means little without power,  
And Gaiffer was not content at being  
Both sumptuous duke and uneasy prince.  
Finally, one evening, this sly huntsman  
Led his brother, laughing, into a glade  
And stabbed him in the back with a poniard.  
They were twins. One day Astolphe might have claimed  
The ducal rank Jorge had set his heart on,  
And a man is permitted to murder  
His brother for the general welfare.

To wall the embankment, shoring the sand,  
Breaking up the hardened clay, prizing out  
The flint and jagged rock, was rugged work.  
The first eight days gone, the master mason,  
An old, white-haired man, spoke up: “Sire, this moat,  
At half its present depth, exceeds all those  
In vast Guyenne and Catalonia.”

“Dig!” cried the Duke, “I’ve already told you,  
I want to see what’s hidden far below  
My tower, in the bowels of the earth.”  
For eight days more they dug, probed, mined, fathomed;  
Suddenly, one of them pried loose a stone,  
And, lower still, a cadaver — the name  
Was chiseled into the rock: Barabbas.

“Dig,” said Jorge. And they dug. One week later,  
Another stone; another human form  
Broke through the darkness, a gruesome specter
At the bottom of a hideous hole,
But this corpse was gloomier than the first.
A noose hung round its neck; thirty pieces
Of silver spilled out of its fleshless hand —
On the stone, they read: Judas. "Keep digging!
Go on, dig!" the Duke cried from the tower.
The call went down from mason to digger,
And the noise began again; pickaxe, hod
And trowel plunged them deeper in the earth
Than any man had ever gone before.
After eight more days of work, suddenly,
In the pale night, where all things lose their shape,
They unearthed a terrible skeleton —
And on its enormous skull four letters
Formed a single word, written in fire: Cain.
The wan gravediggers shuddered, and their tools
Fell from their hands, rolling into the void.
The Duke loomed, black against the livid sky:
"Go on," he said, leaning over the edge,
"Continue!" They obeyed, and one of them
Was lowered; the poor wretch took up his pick
And struck hard at the rock, which echoed back
Like a hunter's snare. At the second blow,
The earth resounded. And a light streamed forth
From the breach plowed by the heavy pickaxe,
Striking the face of the lofty tower
As the blades of grass on the embankment
Flared up like a swarm of blazing vipers;
They knew it rose from some horrible place.
The whole fortress appeared, covered in blood,
Like a mystery. "Keep going!" cried Jorge. Far below, an ominous voice was heard: "Gaïffer, dig no lower, you will find Hell."

December 23-25, 1858
Everything vanished. Wave mounted on wave.
God read in his book, and all was destroyed.
At times, the sound made by someone turning
The pages of a register was heard
In the heavens. In its sinister fog,
Only the abyss knew what had become
Of men, voices and mountains. Cedar trees
Intertwined with seaweed underwater;
Waves engorged the dens where the beasts wallowed.
Wearied birds fell, one after the other.
On all horizons, 'neath this rolling sea,
Houses and cities, déformed palaces,
Mere phantoms of temple domes whimmering
In the torrent's depths could sometimes be glimpsed;
Later, the angle of the pediments
Warped into the columns' paleness, coiling
Confusedly in the lower fathoms,
And everything was obliterated
In the horror of the gloomy water.
The drizzling gulf swelled under a dark vault;
At times, far in the distance, one might see
A black coffer passing through the hailstorm
On the ghastly horizon, and take it
For a coffin floating within this tomb.
Shrieking whirlwinds furled foam into maelstroms.
Lights shimmered off the fullness of the waves.
There was neither day nor night. Only sobs
And murk. Not a glimmer broke in the east.
It seemed the abyss had devoured the dawn.
Transformed into alienate gulfs, the sun
And moon vanished from the face of the skies;
The terrible immensity became
No more than a black maw exhaling rain
With a brutal roar. The clouds passed over,
Writhing on the wind. At the dead center
Of this groaning gulf, one might almost hear
The very screams of eternal horror.

Suddenly, the roar fell silent. The wind
Folded up its wings. The enormous tide
Crashed in upon the highest mountain peak
And was stilled, for the element heeded
Its mystery and its law. The last wave
Had drowned the last eagle. Only water
Was to be seen now in that leveled space,
Quelled at last, having done its dreadful work.
Silence filled the lugubrious expanse.
A sphere of water hanging in the sky,
Noiseless, moveless, voiceless, lightless, the Earth
Was just a mammoth teardrop in the night.

April 1854
Friend, poet, spirit, you flee our vile night;
You leave our bedlam to enter glory,
And, from this hour, your name shall radiate
At the purest summits. I, who knew you
When you were young and fair; I, who loved you;
I, who, more than once in our lordly flights,
Fell distraught, and leaned on your faithful soul
For support; I, blanched by the snows of years
Upon my head, remember that lost time;
And, thinking of the all-too-recent past
Which saw the dawning of our youthful days —
The clamorous arenas, the struggle,
The storm, and the bringing of a new art
To people who cried out for its coming —
I hear a mighty wind that has vanished.

Son of ancient Greece and modern France,
Hopeful was your proud respect for the dead;
You never closed your eyes to the future.
A magus in Thebes, a druid standing
At the foot of a shadowy menhir,
A flamen on the shores of the Tiber,
A Brahmin on the banks of the Ganges,
Putting the arrow of the archangel
Into the god’s bow, haunting the bedsides
Of Roland and Achilles, a potent
And mysterious inventor, you could
Twist all of the sun’s rays into one flame.
Sunset conjoined with the dawn in your soul;
Yesteryear commingled with tomorrow
In your teeming brain. You consecrated
The art of old, ancestor to the new;
You knew well that, when an unknown spirit
Speaks to the people as it soars away,
Streaked by bolts of lightning, into the clouds,
We must heed its words, accept it, love it,
And, above all, open our hearts to it.
Calmly, you scorned the vile works of mockers
Who pillaged the methods of Æschylus
As they spewed out their disdain for Shakespeare;
You knew this age has its own air to breathe,
And that, since art can only be driven
Forward by its self-transfiguration,
To combine the grand with the beautiful
Embellishes the beautiful still more.
And you were seen to utter cries of joy
When the Drama seized Paris like a prey,
When antique winter was expulsed by spring,
When, without warning, the unforeseen star
Of the modern ideal came to shine
High in the heavens it had set aflame,
And when the griffin displaced Pegasus.

From the tomb’s grim threshold, I salute you.
You, who knew so well how to find beauty,
Go in search of truth. Climb the cragged stair.
From the top of those dark steps, the arches
Of the black bridge that crosses the abyss
Are dimly glimpsed. Go! Die! In the last step
Lies the final hour. Eagle, fly away.
The gulfs you’ll see will be to your liking;
You will see the absolute, the real,
The sublime, and feel the sinister wind
Of the summit and the bedazzlement
Of eternal wonder. You’ll look upon
Your Olympus from the height of heaven,
And gaze down at the human chimera
From the high realms of truth, even unto
The imaginings of Job and Homer;
And, great soul, from the pinnacle of God,
You will see Jehovah. Rise, then, spirit!
Hover, soar! Unfurl your wings, and go forth!

Whenever a living being leaves us,
It moves me; I ruminate upon it
Because to enter death is to enter
Into the temple, and when a man dies
I clearly see the advent of my death
In his passing. Dear friend, within myself
I sense the gloomy plenitude of fate;
I have begun a death by solitude,
And see the stars which vaguely constellate
My own late evening. Now the hour has come
For my departure, too. Now, tremoring,
My long-spun thread almost grazes the sword;
The wind that bore you off lifts me gently,
And I go to follow those who loved me
In my years of exile. Their steady gaze
Lures me to the depths of the infinite.
I fly. Do not shut the funeral door.

Let us pass. It's the law no one escapes.
Everything declines. And this great epoch,
With all of its luminaries, enters
Into that immense darkness wherein we
Palely vanish. Oh! what a brutal roar
The oaks make in the twilight as they're felled
For the funeral pyre of Hercules!
The horses of Death have begun to neigh,
Joyfully, because this dazzling era
Approaches its end. This proud century,
Which could overwhelm the opposing wind,
Is dying . . . Oh, Gautier — you, their equal,
Their brother — you depart after Dumas,
Lamartine and Musset. The antique wave,
Where we all grew young again, has dried up;
As the river Styx is gone forever,
So, too, the Fountain of Youth is no more.
Brooding, step by step, his great scythe in hand,
The pitiless reaper advances on
The rest of the stalks. It is my turn now,
And night fills my fearful eye which, alas,
Able to foresee the future of doves,
Weeps over cradles and smiles upon tombs.

November 2, 1872
Not every man knows how to wield the axe,
And many a king makes a rude woodsman,
Letting the blade come down on his own feet!
God's hand heaps countless cares upon one head
And roots them to the florets of a crown!
Why must this painful weight still plague my mind;
Tormented as it is with such sad thoughts
That long since were enough to bend it low?
I, who, if the choosing had been my own,
Would have much preferred to live out my days
In obscurity and without desires:
A calm life; a small hut, in some lost wood,
Covered with moss, jasmin and creeping vines;
Flowers to tend, and a fisherman's boat
On the water, from which, by night, I might
Inhale the unsullied scent of their bloom;
I'd pray in the hills, follow my daydreams
Through vast meadows and shadowy forests,
Then descend the grassy slopes at twilight,
My face tinged warm by the glimmering sun.
When a fragrant wind carries, in a groan,
Some feeble strains of an ancient lament —
Oh! those ruddy, wayward fires of sunset
Rise, like a splendid road, into the sky —
I seem to hear God say to my racked soul:
"Leave the unclean world and the heartless crowd;
Follow this blazing path with a sure step.
Come to Me, my son. Don't wait for the NIGHT!!!
Christ in Gethsemane

God is dead, the sky is empty!
Weep, children, your Father is no more!

JEAN-PAUL RICHTER

When, under sacred trees, as poets do,
The Lord lifted his gaunt arms to heaven,
He’d been a long time lost in his mute grief,
And felt betrayed by his ungrateful friends;

He turned to those waiting for him below,
Who dreamed of being sages, prophets, kings,
But were now benumbed, lost in bestial sleep,
And he cried out: “No, God does not exist!”

They slept on. “Friends, have you heard the tidings?
I’ve struck my head on the eternal vault;
I’m broken, bleeding, ill these many days!”
Brethren, I deceived you: Abyss, abyss!
The god has fled the altar I lie on.
There is no God! He’s gone!” But still they slept.

II

Yet again: “All is dead! In my lost flight
Amid their milky ways, I’ve scoured the worlds
As far as life itself, whose fertile veins
Pour out the golden sands and silver waves:

Deserts everywhere, bordered by great seas,
By the whirling eddies of wild oceans;
An unsure breath moves the wandering spheres,
But no spirit lives in those vast reaches.

Seeking the eye of God, I saw only
A huge, black, soundless orbit where night dwelled
And deepened as it shone upon the world;

A strange rainbow encircled this dark pit,
Brink of the old chaos whose shade is Void,
A spiral devouring the Worlds and Days!

III

Immobile Destiny, mute sentinel,
Cold Necessity! Blind Chance, advancing
Among dead worlds under eternal snow, That slowly chills the fading universe,

Do you know what you do, primal power, With your extinguished suns in collision? Are you sure your immortal breath shall pass From a dying world to a world reborn?

Father! is it you I sense within me? Have you the strength to live and vanquish death, Or are you bowed by the final effort

Of that angel of night your curse struck down? For, in my tears and pain, I feel alone, Alas, and if I die, all things will die!"

IV

No one heard the eternal victim's groans; In vain, they poured forth from his bursting heart. But now, ready to faint, weak and reeling, He called the lone one, awake in Solym:

"Judas! you know what price they put on me; Hurry, sell me now, and close this bargain. I'm so sick, my friend, lying on the ground; Come, you who at least have the strength of crime!"

But Judas left, brooding and discontent,
Feeling badly paid, so full of remorse
He read his baseness scrawled on every wall.

At last, Pilate alone, Caesar's watchman,
Felt some pity; he casually turned
To his tribunes: "Go, seek out this madman."

v

It was he, this madman, this sublime fool:
This lone Icarus who took flight again,
A lost Phaëton torn by the gods' thunder,
Fair Attis snatched from death by Cybele!

The soothsayer consulted the entrails,
The earth became drunk with this precious blood,
The dazed cosmos teetered on its axes,
And Olympus reeled toward the abyss.

"Speak!" Caesar cried to Jupiter Ammon,
"Who is this new god forced upon the world?
For, if it's no god, then it's a demon!"

The oracle was silenced forever.
One alone could explain this mystery:
He who gave souls to the children of clay.
Gérard de Nerval

El Desdichado

I am the Darkling One, the Widower,
The Unconsolled, the Prince of Aquitaine
In his demolished Tower: my lone Star
Is dead, and on my constellated lute
Lies the Black Sun of Melancholia.

You who consoled me in the Tombal night,
Return to me all that I most long for:
Posilipo and the Italian sea,
The arbor where the Vine and Rose entwine,
The flower which so charmed my stricken heart.

Am I Phoebus or Amor? Lusignan
Or Biron? My forehead is still reddened
By the kiss of the Queen, and I have dreamed
Within the Grotto where the Siren swims.

Twice triumphant I've crossed the Acheron,
Intoning, by turns, on Orpheus' lyre
The sighs of the Saint, the cries of the Fay.

1853
Jules Supervielle (1884–1960)

Flame Point

Throughout his life
He loved to read
By candlelight
And often he would hold
His hand over the flame
To persuade himself
He was alive,
He was alive.
Since the day he died
He has kept
A lighted candle beside him
But his hands hidden.
Prophecy

One day the earth shall be
Nothing but a blind space turning,
Commingling night with day.
There will be no more mountains
Under the boundless sky of the Andes,
Not even a small ravine.

From all the houses in the world
Only one balcony shall remain,
And from human geography
A measureless sadness,
From the defunct Atlantic
A hint of salt in the air,
A magic flying fish
Knowing nothing of the sea.

In a 1905 coupé
(Four wheels, no road!)
Three young girls of the period,
Linger ing there as a mist,
Will peer through the window
Thinking Paris not far off,
Smelling only the odor of sky
That sticks in the craw.

In lieu of the forest
A bird’s song shall rise
That no one can place
Or prefer, or even hear,
Except God, who will listen,
Saying: “It’s a goldfinch.”
Pierre Jean Jouve (1887–1976)

Stain

I saw a thick stain of green oil
Drained from an engine and on
The hot sidewalk in that sleazy district
I thought long, long of my mother’s blood
Pierre Jean Jouve

Untitled

For white skin is an expression of the night
And what deserts have its feet not crossed in daylight?
A shadow — which it is — is no more frightening
Nor more obscene, nor more terribly wicked.

The man without sin
Is he who should not die, is therefore he
To whom nothing would be forbidden, therefore he
Whom no one else would resemble, and who should not live.
Pierre Jean Jouve

Untitled

By the current flowing from our mother's breast
We are carried toward immutable death.
Death which made this warm breast round
And hung it not far from this dark armpit.
The package wrapped in coarse brown paper: from the slit in the paper of this package oozes a drop of blood, it is red, round and shiny, transparent too it rolls down, down the package it seeps; it seeps, without losing its form; in the slit appears the bloody groove which is thin and runs the length of the package and which grows evermore intense but bleeds only at the surface.
Pierre Reverdy (1889–1960)

Two Stars

A picture with no background
A minute outside time
The Star comes down from the ceiling
Shuts your eyes
A shutter replaces the other Star
I put my hand on yours
Could see the sky through the upper window
Blazing
The vertical blinds a grille
And going down to the street
The same words you always hear
Someone comes
No time to say goodbye
In the shadow the light of your eyes
still there
Pierre Reverdy

Departure

The horizon bends
The days are getting longer
Journey
A heart leaps in a cage
A bird sings
About to die
Another door about to open
At the end of the corridor lit by
A star
A dark woman

The lantern on a departing train

1917
Pierre Reverdy

Night

Hidden behind the door
The night long in coming

I watch the sky from a garret
Through this diamond window

Midnight
All the aeroplanes are gone
I was scared
Had a gun in my pocket
And somebody laughed behind the curtain
I watch the sky through this diamond eye
A cloud passes up above

1917
Notes

On the Death of Marie

Pierre de Ronsard was the leading poet of his generation, the acknowledged head of the literary circle known as the Pléiade. This prolific author perfected the sonnet form in France, and brought a new inventiveness to the language and rhythms of French verse.

Sonnet X

Étienne Jodelle died destitute, cursing God and Fate for the bad luck which dogged his later years. One thinks ahead to Baudelaire, but the complainte, or "lament," as a form, goes back at least to the 13th-century poet Rutebeuf.

Jodelle had begun as one of the brightest stars of the Pléiade, becoming, at twenty-one, the father of French Classical drama with his tragedy, Cléopâtre captive. His early dramatic successes brought him to the court, where, like Ben Jonson and Molière in later times, he devised the royal entertainments, only to fall from favor after a particularly disastrous fête — and there his troubles began. It appears he was once condemned to death; for what crime, we do not know, nor can we say how he managed to escape the hangman.

The first edition of Jodelle’s Œuvres was published a year after his demise. Well over half his works are lost.

Gaiffer-Jorge, Duke of Aquitaine

Also Gaiffer, or Gaifer, the “hero” of the poem ruled Aquitaine in the eighth century. From 758 to 768, Pépin the Short (the father of Charlemagne), waged war on him. The poem is from La Légende des Siècles.
From Satan's Death

This is but a minuscule fragment of Victor Hugo's Promethean epic of evil and redemption, La Fin de Satan, written between 1854 and 1860, and over two hundred pages in length. This huge, visionary work was never completed. Following the dubious advice of his publisher, Hetzel (who has a great deal to answer for), Hugo abandoned both it and its even longer companion piece, Dieu, in order to bring his novel, Les Misérables, to a long-awaited completion.

To Théophile Gautier

The death of Théophile Gautier (1811–1872) left Victor Hugo, at seventy, the lone survivor of the "men of 1830." Gautier had worn the famous pink waistcoat — it was pink, not red — at the "battle of Hernani," the première of Hugo's play, generally conceded to have launched the Romantic movement in France. This oraison funèbre, in which Victor Hugo buries an age — the great era of French Romanticism — is dated, "All Souls' Day" 1872. In October of the following year, the poem was published at the head of a small collection entitled, Tombeau de Théophile Gautier, containing hommages by Leconte de Lisle and Mallarmé, among others. Paul Valéry, always a hard man to please, called the final stanza, with its shattering central image of the falling oaks, "surely the finest verses [Victor Hugo] ever wrote and perhaps the finest ever written."

Charles VI's Soliloquy

Charles VI, King of France (1380–1422). One hot afternoon in August 1392, Froissart tells us, "a strange influence from the heavens descended . . . upon the King of France." Riding out at the head of a punitive expedition, Charles went suddenly mad, drew his sword, and attempted to slay the Duke d'Orléans. He recognized no one. Almost immediately, his "knights, squires and men-at-arms" drew
their horses into a circle around him. Charles came at them wildly; many were struck down, for none would raise his hand against the King. One or more were killed. After years of madness, relieved only by a few brief spells of sanity, Charles, defeated in war, was compelled to surrender his daughter, and the French succession, to Henry V of England.

Long a prey to intermittent spells of madness, Nerval clearly saw his own destiny as linked with that of the Mad King. The poem was written not long after the death of Jenny Colon, who would become the principal model for Nerval's prose masterpiece, Aurélia.

**Christ in Gethsemane**

"Le Christ aux Oliviers," Gérard de Nerval's greatest poem — and one of the greatest in the language — appeared for the first time in the March 31, 1844 issue of L'Artiste, and was to become part of the collection, Les Chimères. Here the poet crosses the line between the orthodox and the sacrilegious; yet, his orientation is not that of Christian theology but of the idea of myth itself, and how one set of beliefs may come to supplant another through an act of blind fatality. The Christ of myth and worship is not the man weeping tears of blood in the Garden; he is the second Icarus, the reincarnation of Phaëton and Atys. An interesting comparison might be drawn from "Le Christ aux Oliviers" and Alfred de Vigny's fine "Le Mont des Oliviers," a poem on the same subject written five years earlier, but published in 1844, a few months after Nerval's.

**El Desdichado**

Whereas the poem "Epitaph" may be taken as Nerval's corporeal testament, the sonnet "El Desdichado" is his spiritual valedictory. The Spanish title translates as "The Disinherited," but a manuscript of the poem also bears the title, Le Destin: "Fate" or "Destiny."

Nerval portrays himself as a man engulfed by shadows, an uncor-
soled, and inconsolable, widower since the death of his unrequited love, the actress Jenny Colon, his "lone Star," eleven years before.

The Prince of Aquitaine refers to one Gaston Phœbus, from whom Nerval, in his periods of mental crisis, claimed descent, sometimes signing his letters: Gaston Phœbus. The "demolished tower" is The House of God, the sixteenth of the so-called "Major Arcana" of the Tarot pack. This card shows a tower struck by fire and lightning, and is traditionally interpreted as an omen of catastrophe, a sign of excess and, most significantly, mental aberration — the head blasted from the body.

Albrecht Dürer's Melancholia depicts a sullen angel whose room, cluttered with symbolic objects, gives on a view of a bayside city lighted by what could well be construed as a black sun, a dead or dying star. In Aurélia, Nerval would see "a being of immeasurable grandeur" who resembled this angel.

The one who "consoled" Nerval during his dark night of the soul could refer to Marie Pleyel, whom he also loved, and who joins Jenny Colon as a model for Aurélia.

The Posilipo is a promontory overlooking the bay of Naples.

The Vine and the Rose refer to pagan and Christian ideals intertwined, perhaps to Isis and the Virgin. In effect, Aurélia, Sylvie and the other women Nerval idealized in his works.

The flower, Nerval says in his own manuscript note, is the ancolia, which not only symbolizes folly but has mystical and alchemical connotations of purity and fluidity.

Phœbus is Apollo, the god of light and reason; Amor is Eros.

Comte Raymond de Lusignan was, according to legend, reputed to have won the love of the fairy Melusine, who promised to marry him only if he swore that on every Saturday he would avert his eyes from her. He complied; but, one Saturday, he came in on her by accident as she was bathing, and saw that the lower half of her body had the form of a snake. Melusine escaped through a window. From that time on, she only returned to Lusignan's castle to warn him of some impending misfortune, appearing on one of the high towers.

The Duc de Biron, a man of war, fell in love with the pious Sylvie; later, he was beheaded.

There are various theories about who the Queen is: the alchemical Queen (purity), the Queen of Sheba (a dramatic part Nerval had written for Jenny Colon).

Who is the Siren? Is she Circe, who cast a love spell on Odysseus,
and turned his men into swine? Womb and uterine symbols have been read into the Grotto by some commentators.

The Acheron leads to Hades. Across this river Orpheus passed on his dark voyage to Eurydice. Most commentators view this as an allusion to Nerval's two great mental crises, of 1841 and 1853.

The Saint and the Fay recall again the Virgin and the Siren, and echo the two dichotomous types of the Eternal Feminine mirrored in Nerval's work: Sylvie and Aurélia, Adrienne and Pandora, Marie Pleyel and Jenny Colon.
ERIC BASSO was born in Baltimore in 1947. His fiction, poetry, drama and essays have appeared in the Chicago Review, Fiction International, Central Park, Collages & Bricolages, Exquisite Corpse and many other publications. His five collections of poems are published by Asylum Arts. His chapbook, A New Shade of Gray, is available from Obscure Publications.
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