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MARIE MACLEAN

Many Hearts Will Understand Me: Ross Chambers, Nerval and Rhizomatic Criticism

There is a certain tradition which regards criticism as a battle-ground on which victories are won and struggles lost, while the victor becomes the authority in the field. There is another tradition which sees criticism as a communion of minds and a dialogue between a family of friends. Ross Chambers has espoused the latter view of his critical task ever since his early work on Gérard de Nerval. One feels that Chambers came to Nerval as a postgraduate student in search of a research topic and found himself one of the "many hearts,"¹ those who begin as readers and end as converts. And it is a long conversion. Putting aside one's prejudices to understand Nerval's worlds of madness, of dreams, of radical alterity is not easy. Yet nothing is imposed. As readers slip into the narratee position, they find they have become the champions of a cause. Nerval's construction of his narratees as a network of friends, of his writing as a speaking in many tongues, and of his texts as part of a vast intercultural enterprise, is so germane to Chambers's own mindset that we may read the evolution of his criticism in that light (Chambers 1987, 1991, 1995).

The result seems to me, particularly in Chambers's three latest books, to correspond so exactly to the model of the rhizome, to use the term favoured by Deleuze and Guattari,² that I want to explore the parallels. The ideal in this model is work which, like Chambers's, is original and yet contributes to a constantly shifting configuration of linked equals. Rhizomatic criticism works on "Principes de connexion et d'hétérogénéité: n'importe quel point d'un rhizome peut-être connecté avec n'importe quel autre, et doit l'être" ("Principles of connection and heterogeneity: any point of a rhizome may be connected with any other and should be"; Deleuze and Guattari 13). It is to be contrasted with "genealogical" criticism,³ one which stresses strict lines of descent, hierarchies

- 1 "Bien des coeurs me comprendront" is from *Sylvie* (Nerval 624). All translations from Nerval are my own.
- 2 I am using the chapter "Rhizome" in Deleuze and Guattari. All translations are my own.
- 3 Cf. Irigaray's analysis of the patriarchal model.

and, of course, the "Oedipal" conflict for supremacy as each generation overcomes its predecessor. "Le rhizome est une antigénéalogie" ("The rhizome is an antigenealogy"; 18). Against the taxonomic rigidity of the father's line we may set, in Chambers's case, the model of the veritable "family" of friendship which stresses shifting lines of flight rather than authority and hierarchy. Such a family becomes not just the pattern of a critical community, but, more importantly, a theoretical model for the construction of criticism itself.

I see such a relationship between critics as rhizomatic, but Deleuze would agree with Chambers that it is also dialogical in the widest sense of the word, and it is because of their inherent dialogism that the Nerval texts are given pride of place.⁴ Unusual in the French writer, as in the Anglo-Saxon critic, is a heteroglossia, to use the Bakhtinian term, which is not just "un concours de dialectes, de patois, d'argots, de langues spéciales" ("a concours of dialects, of patois, of slang, of special languages"; Deleuze and Guattari 14) within a "dominant tongue," but also between languages. In a period where few French writers knew any other language than Latin, Nerval was the pioneering translator of Goethe, Heine, Schiller, and the German Romantic poets. His texts were interlarded with snatches of Arabic, Sanskrit, Latin, Spanish, and Italian. Within his own tongue he used not only the registers of different classes, peasant dialect and working class argot infiltrating the highbrow codes of the *connoisseur* and *littérateur*, but also the registers of different historical eras in a syncretic view of a France where past and present coexisted. A similar dialogism is found in the extraordinary diversity of texts on which Ross Chambers bases his readings, taken not only from France, Great Britain, and the United States, but also from Canada, South America, Germany, Spain, and Australia.

The immense breadth of erudition and evocative play of sound and meaning, as one language works against another to send us off on new lines of flight, are of great value. But even more important is the role of the translator. Here I refer not only to the actual translation of one language to another, but to the wider role of the translator as the mediator of culture and, of course, the mediator of theory. As a culture is transferred and brought to life in another tongue, it is transmuted. The fact that translation is also an act of creation is perhaps more apparent in the free and easy appropriations of one hundred and fifty years ago. No one could ever accuse Nerval of a literal translation of *Faust*, and yet the acculturated text he produced played an essential role in the Europeanisation of French culture. It is not a carbon-copy, but what Deleuze and Guattari call a "map": "La carte est ouverte, elle est connectable dans toutes ses dimensions, démontable, réversible, susceptible de recevoir constamment des modifications" ("The map is open, it is connectable in all its dimensions, dismountable, reversible, constantly open to modifications"; 20).

While translation today is a more careful art, and few are as scrupulous as Chambers in reading in the original the texts from the many languages and cultures in which he works, the openness of translation persists. One of the results of this openness is a many-layered theory which can as readily bring English-based theory to bear on French texts as French theory to bear on a range of texts in which English is either the original language or the translated and transcultural medium. This brings a new dimension to rhizomatic criticism, as the rhizome functions not only at the intratextual but also the intertextual, interlinguistic, and intercultural levels. Nevertheless, a translated text is not a comfortable text. It is always striving towards the impossible, always fighting the lack of cultural and linguistic "fit."

Yet, just as any communication proves its viability by its adaptation to "noise," so a text, which demonstrates the noise or inevitable lack of fit between the original text and its translated equivalent, produces new readings of both. It is no accident that Chambers refers so often to Michel Serres and particularly to *The Parasite* and its meditation on noise. Paradigmatic of the productive use of noise which both espouse is the exploration of the meeting between translated French philosophy and a translated Australian aboriginal text. The result, itself rhizomatic (Chambers 1991, 19-26), is then incorporated in *Room for Maneuver* into a family of friendly texts where it links with and feeds on other translations and transmutations.

This higher level of translation is linked with the awareness of the indirectly discursive nature of language itself.⁵ As well as the horizontal translation between cultures, there is the vertical translation working by means of direct or indirect quotation, which moves not so much by direct descent as in a kind of hypertextual (or Talmudic) mode. There is a key passage in Nerval which finds resonance in much modern theory and which repeatedly prompts new lines of flight in Chambers's work.

"Et puis..." (C'est ainsi que Diderot commençait un conte, me dira-t-on.)

- Allez toujours!
- Vous avez imité Diderot lui-même.
- Qui avait imité Sterne...
- Lequel avait imité Swift.
- Qui avait imité Rabelais.
- Lequel avait imité Merlin Coccate...
- Qui avait imité Petrone...
- Lequel avait imité Lucien. Et Lucien en avait imité bien d'autres... Quand ce ne serait que l'auteur de l'*Odyssée*, qui fait promener son héros pendant dix ans autour de la

4 See especially Bakhtin 1973, 1981.

5 Bakhtin's arguments for language as indirect discourse are summed up and form part of Deleuze and Guattari's "Postulats de la linguistique" (95-139).

Méditerranée, pour l'amener enfin à cette fabuleuse Ithaque, dont la reine, entourée d'une cinquantaine de prétendants, défaisait chaque nuit ce qu'elle avait tissé le jour.

— Mais Ulysse a fini par retrouver Ithaque.

— Et j'ai retrouvé l'abbé de Buequoy.⁶ (Nerval 587)

What the author is describing, as he makes clear, is not a hierarchy but a round trip. He is subverting a genealogy into a rhizome. This is a trip through literature, through life, through discourse, in which arrival is indefinitely deferred and in which gratification arises, as Chambers puts it, not from the narrative function but from the textual function (1991, 35-47). Whether the journey is geographical, historical or cultural, we are encouraged to linger, to digress, to enjoy the texture which "undoes every night what has been woven during the day." Immense erudition is just one of the ways of ensuring that there can be no final control of the text. There is always one more knot in the rhizome.

"And then..." is a symptomatic opening which can lead one sideways into the networks of intertextuality, forwards into the ongoing interpretability of texts and backwards into the ever expanding web of indirect discourse. The "And then..." passage first served in *Gérard de Nerval et la poétique du voyage* to mark the relation between textual digression and deferral and the thematics of the journey which never arrives. Twenty years later the "drift and uncertainty, the always possible episodic 'Et puis...' " serve

to remind us of the oppositional truth that [*Aurélia's*] very success is always a form of failure, or at least is subject to the possibility of failure, dependent as it is on forms of power that, in the last analysis, must by definition be intractably hostile to any attempt to convert them to ends other than their own. (130)

Yet within this oppositional message another discourse is already apparent as the original text once again begins to reinterpret itself. In *Room for Maneuver* the Nerval quotation has a new shape. It is now truncated, begins with "And

6 "And then..." (That's how Diderot used to begin a story, you'll tell me.)

— Anyway, go on!

— You imitated Diderot himself.

— Who imitated Sterne...

— And he imitated Swift.

— Who imitated Rabelais.

— And he imitated Merlin Coccaius...

— Who imitated Petronius...

— And he imitated Lucian. And Lucian imitated many others... To take one example, the author of the *Odyssey*, who trots his hero around the Mediterranean for ten years, only to bring him back in the end to mythical Ithaca, whose queen, surrounded by fifty or so suitors, undid every night what she had woven during the day.

— But Ulysses ended up getting back to Ithaca.

— And I got back to the Abbé de Buequoy."

then..." and ends: "Who imitated Rabelais. (Etc....)." Thus, in an extraordinary *mise en abyme*, it looks back to Chambers's first textual voyages and forward to the new development in his thought of the "etcetera principle." In his latest work, a study of what he felicitously calls "loiterature," a digressive textual economy prevails. It is a literature which functions according to the relaxed "etcetera principle," allowing constellations and clusters of incidents and events, and indulging in the free play of textual *jouissance*:

In short, the openness of seemingly closed structures is what the etcetera principle affirms. And it is this openness of apparently closed structures that is illustrated by the phenomenon ... whereby the closed, or syntagmatic, structure of narrative proves to be openable to a disordering, paradigmatic, or listing principle that *changes the context* and turns it into a limitlessly openable encyclopedia or inventory, a description of the endless diversity of the world. (Chambers 1995, 5)

In Chambers's latest quotation of the Nerval passage, the opening "And then..." and the closing "Etc..." mark both an infinite regression and an infinite progression, which, being infinite, lead both everywhere and nowhere. The marks of ellipsis, which both complete each syntagm and leave it open, may be seen as characteristic of the syntactic devices which disrupt the orderly sequence of the text. Deleuze and Guattari see the "normal" orderly sequence as a tree structure and contrast it with the rhizome: "L'arbre est filiation, mais le rhizome est alliance, uniquement d'alliance. L'arbre impose le verbe 'être,' mais le rhizome a pour tissu la conjonction 'et...' etc...." Il y a dans cette conjonction assez de force pour secouer et déraciner le verbe être" ("The tree is filiation, but the rhizome is alliance, uniquely made of alliance. [*Alliance* is also a wedding ring.] The tree imposes the verb 'to be,' but the rhizome is woven from the conjunction 'and...' and...' There is enough strength in this conjunction to shake and uproot the verb to be"; 36)

Nerval is a master of the paratactical construction. Gaps, elisions, shifts in syntax and register mark the deliberate fragmentation of the text. This fragmentation is not just a reflection of the world of dreams (or the world of madness, which was the same for Nerval), but, as Chambers has shown (1991, 132-35), a more basic choice of *énonciation*, enlisting the reader by the use of ellipsis and deferral. But the deferral may also be a sort of marking time, a use of what we have seen Chambers define as the listing principle (*loiterature*) to savour the diversity of the instant. Nerval's insistence on the collection of *bric-à-brac*, in art, in discourse and in daily living, shows the same joy in detail for its own sake, "the rhythm of enumeration" (Chambers 1969, 31), which can be found in all those who loiter intently.

At one stage Chambers joined Benjamin in defining this intent loitering as the art of the *flâneur*. Yet, if we go back to the early work on Nerval, we will see that his loitering is something more. The Baudelairean *flâneur* described by

Benjamin is essentially an urban phenomenon, dependent on being both at one with and apart from the life of the big city (Chambers 1987, 132-86).⁷ Nerval practises such an urban *flâneur*, but it is merely the reflection of his peculiar form of nomadism (Deleuze and Guattari 434-527). It is a form of travelling while remaining stationary: "Inutile d'ajouter que ce voyage fait d'itinéraires indirects, d'hésitations et de changements d'idées, d'égarements et de retards, ... aura été une initiation à la lenteur" ("One need scarcely add that this journey, made of indirect routes, of hesitations and changed ideas, of straying and delays, ... will have been an initiation to slowness"; Chambers 1969, 174). An obsessive journeyer, Nerval travelled yet never strayed, compulsively returning to his orbit of security. And nomadism within the circle of security is surely the best definition of loitering. But Nerval's obsessive perambulation of the woods, domains, roads and villages of the Valois, preferring the slow and devious coaches to the direct line of the railway (165), is a form of loitering very different from the Baudelairean stroll. It is more a nestling, like turning over in bed to find the most comfortable spot. Indeed it contrasts most strongly with the frenetic Paris by night of his urban experience. But, and this is the aspect which stays with Chambers and which he reworks in his latest book, no matter where he wanders along his digressive path, Nerval loiters intently. He observes, he lists, he collects, he savours, he defers for the sheer pleasure of deferral. And in this, too, as Chambers shows, he is part of a rhizome of like-minded writers (165) who narrate by digression, depict by accumulation and refuse the reader the satisfaction of closure.

It would seem that nothing could be less political than loitering, yet, as Chambers demonstrates in one of the most convincing passages of *Mélancoïe et opposition*, Nerval succeeds in using it for a political purpose. Faced with a law, remarkable even for those censorious days, that heavily fined newspapers which used fiction in their *feuilletons*, Nerval loitered his way through column after column, successfully entertaining the reader and incorporating fiction by the ostentatious denial of this incorporation (the old "far be it from me to mention" trick). It was a classic display of tactics, as opposed to strategy, apparently innocuous, and yet: "L'écriture épouse une machine de guerre et des lignes de fuite, elle abandonne les strates, les segmentarités, la sédentarité, l'appareil d'Etat" ("The writing is married to a war machine and lines of flight, it abandons strata, segmentations, sedentariness, State apparatus"; Chambers 1987, 35). While Nerval played these political games, in a parallel text he drew a nice distinction: "Je ne voudrais pas ici faire de la politique. Je n'ai jamais voulu faire que de l'opposition" ("I do not wish to play at politics here. I have only ever wished to play an oppositional part"; Chambers 1969, 188).

Now this, of course, is precisely the device which may serve as epigraph to many of Chambers's publications over the last ten years. He has shown us the power of opposition, a power often stronger than that of politics. Because it produces a shift within lived experience, its effects can be longer lasting than those of revolution. The acknowledgement, in 1989, of his debt to Michel de Certeau and to de Certeau's masterly theorising of oppositional tactics, possibly obscures the fact that Chambers was already showing how Nerval made use of oppositionality as early as 1969. An ideal starting-point for a study of the "art of the weak" may be found in the work of a writer literally excluded and "alienated" from society by the stigma of madness.

Opposition works from within, recognising accepted ideologies without affirming them. Thus, in Nerval's last writings: "The values of madness are *not denied*, while the interest, sympathy, understanding, and indeed 'pardon' of a 'sane' readership ... are nevertheless obtained" (Chambers 1991, 126). The oppositional move of persuading readers to change their values is achieved by the textual construction of the I-you relationship of the *énonciation*. Constantly shifting between the language of the sane, waking world and the "insane" dreaming world, the text of *Aurélia*, for instance, may be seen as a model for other dialogisms which make us rethink our personal universe. Opposition recognises authority while subverting it and bringing into question the very concept of centrality which supports it. Oppositional art is an art of the ex-centric, which prefers the exception to the rule. The rhizomatic is oppositional by its very choice of model, which privileges no centre and no norm. Rhizomatic writing is linked by Deleuze and Guattari to minority-becomings. Thus, the rhizomatic model of the ex-centric creates links between the writings of madness, of depression, of the exclusion of race and class, of foreignness, of homosexuality. I have, I hope, added to the rhizome by examining the writings of illegitimacy, and many more branchings, such as studies of female exclusion, are possible, since minority-becoming is linked to the inscription of alterity. It is that inscription in the works of Nerval which provided the first and most lasting model for Chambers's critical exploration of the relation between alterity and the oppositional.

Nerval's statement: "I am the other," predated Rimbaud's more famous: "I is the other," by some thirty years. It represents more than the splitting, the capacity to stand outside oneself, which is a basic characteristic of literary endeavour. "La loi du livre, c'est celle de la réflexion, le Un qui devient deux" ("The law of the book is that of reflection, the One which becomes two"; 11), say Deleuze and Guattari, who also read the unity of identity as a takeover of power by a process of subjectification (15). On the other hand, the questioning of identity itself, inherent in "I am the other," problematises the "normal" unified identity and the use of "the other" to define and delimit selfhood. If I am the other, then the other is I; there is no longer the unmarked and the marked, an unmarked sane and a

7 See the very revealing map in Pichois and Avicé (184-85).

marked insane, or for that matter an unmarked male and a marked female. We can no longer define ourselves by what we are not. As Nerval put it: "Le géolier est une autre sorte de captif" ("The jailer is also a prisoner"; 866). This radical assumption of otherness is also a multiplicity within the self. The self is no longer singular and does not need define itself alone. It belongs to the rhizome: "Non pas en arriver au point où l'on ne dit plus je, mais au point où ça n'a plus aucune importance de dire ou de ne pas dire je. Nous ne sommes plus nous-mêmes.... Nous avons été aidés, aspirés, multipliés" ("It is not a matter of arriving at the point where one no longer says I, but at the point where saying or not saying I no longer has any importance. We are no longer ourselves.... We have been helped, aspired, multiplied"; Deleuze and Guattari 9).

Chambers devotes considerable space to the question of how Nerval, from his position of weakness, of social alienation, and with only the power of language at his disposal, could communicate to his audience this assumption of otherness and the shift in the nature of experience. Particularly in his writings of madness, which radically question our preconceptions, a remarkable use is made of heteroglossia. The text is transmuted by the oppositional insertion of a chorus of other voices, and particularly the voices of dream, of hallucination, of madness, into the rational, sane, "scientific" language presumed to be that of everyday life. This heteroglossia gradually changes the construction of the narratee. The narratees of Nerval's *Aurélia* are not the alienated but the normal: his father, his doctor, as well as his faithful friends. Yet, by the end of the text, they too will have experienced otherness. Hopefully, this experience will be shared by future audiences of the book.

Now, I would maintain that a similar process is present behind the sophisticated critical theory of *Room for Maneuver* and the forthcoming *Loiterature*. The emphasis in these texts has shifted from the more remote play of masks in *La Comédie au château* (1971) and *L'Ange et l'automate* (1971) and from the seduction of *Story and Situation* (1984). In the later works Chambers adopts a stratagem similar to that which he attributes to Nerval. He speaks the language of his narratees, literary critics and theorists of discourse, but, through the cool tones of the academy, one can hear the many voices of the radical assumption of otherness. We are confronted with readings of texts which deal with racial, gendered and linguistic exclusion, and with the refusal of social norms. Yet they are works which divert as well as diverge. In them, opposition takes its pleasure while pursuing its tactics, while loitering, apparently trivial, becomes a means of subversion. The end result, or rather the ongoing transformation, produces a textual shift in the narratee. Critical theory is gradually made to listen to alterity and to realise that, in the family of friends, the other is always myself. There is an incorporation into a network rather than an imposition of authority. Fulfilling the hope that Deleuze and Guattari expressed, when they sketched their oppositional model, not only is each critical work rhizomatic, but the evolving pattern

is then multiplied. The individual works are incorporated into further rhizomes, those of theory, of reading, and of friendship.

Monash University, Australia

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