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Nerval's "Antéros": towards an intertextual reading

The opening line of Nerval's sonnet *Antéros* (*Tu me demandes pourquoi j'ai tant de rage au cœur*) does not reveal the speaker's identity. Swayed by the presence elsewhere in *Les Chimères* of a voice that encourages identification with the poet himself, the reader is likely, at least initially, to entertain the notion that, here too, it is the poet who is speaking (especially given the reader's lack of a rival for the position of addressee), even if there is obvious interference from the presence of an emphatic proper name in the title of the poem. Such an identification is, arguably, enhanced by the apparent intimacy of the address and may well survive the intrusion of the hyperbolic *rage* and the introduction of the harsh rhymes *cœur* and *-queur*, which are, in fact, notably softened, at the level of sound if not semantics, by the coupling in the second quatrain of *Vengeur* and *rougeur*, albeit prior to a return to the harsher rhyme of *-gon* in the concluding line of each tercet. It may, in fact, likewise survive multiple re-readings of the poem, while nonetheless having to jostle for prominence amongst other, at least equally suggestive, identifications. Yet it is soon eclipsed, at least partially, by the evidence that, at the most immediate level of the representation, it is the eponymous Antéros who is speaking, even if there is much to suggest that the figure is, ultimately, to be seen as an authorial persona¹.

An inherently belligerent figure through the prefix contained in his name², Antéros's self-presentation distinguishes him from the poet (again at the basic level of the fictional characterization) by his stature as a giant. Although this is not made explicit until the figure's affirmation that he belongs to the «race d'Antée», the second line of the poem conveys an impression of him as the embodiment of the invincible («une tête indomptée») and as being in possession of an anatomy that is extra-human in nature («un col flexible»)³. That said, Nerval's 'gigantism', of which this self-port-

(1) «Il ne fait guère de doute que Nerval s'identifie à Antéros, comme à Horus [...] Kneph et Jéhova se présentent ainsi comme deux avatars de la même image persécutrice» (Charles MAURON, *Des métaphores obsédantes au mythe personnel*, Paris, Corti, 1963, pp. 75-76).

(2) It is often assumed that Nerval's Antéros is, in some form or other, an embodiment of anti-love. Max MILNER, however, questions his identification with «le dieu de l'amour dédaigné dont parle Pausanias» and refers us, suggestively, to Nerval's likely awareness of the opposition between Eros and Anteros in Greek sculpture, which in this same period Éliphas Lévi saw as an equivalent of the struggle between Satan and Saint Michael (see MILNER, *Le Diable dans la littérature française de Cazotte à Baudelaire 1771-1861*, 2 voll., Paris, Corti, 1960, II, pp. 299-300).

(3) The Pléiade editors note: «On imagine une tête serpentine» (*Œuvres complètes*, sous la direction de Jean GUILLAUME et Claude PICHOS, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 3 voll., Paris, Gallimard, 1984-1993, III, p. 1281, n. 3). In this connection, Yutaka TAKAGI draws attention to the repeated sibilants in line 3 of the poem, as well as to Nerval's description, in *Voyage en Orient*, of a «danse des hommes» he had seen in Constantinople: «Il n'y avait que des hommes. | Le premier [...] semblait la tête au col flexible d'un serpent, dont ses compagnons auraient formé les anneaux» (see TAKAGI, *Le sujet poétique et sa voix – remarque sur "Antéros" de 1841 in Mythes, symboles, littérature*, II, textes réunis par Shinoda CHIWAKI, Nagoya, Rakuro, 2002, pp. 99-108 (text consulted at <http://honuzim.free.fr/articles/Takagi.Anteros.doc>). For Nerval's full text, see *Œuvres complètes*, cit., II,

trait by Antéros, together with the evocation of the irascible Kneph in *Horus*, is the supreme example, seems not to have received the attention it merits. The reading of *Antéros* that follows will argue, in the wake of Nerval's known attraction to *La Vita nuova*, that the sonnet is, in part, a reworking of reminiscences of Dante's *Inferno*, the thirty-first canto of which is devoted to the giants who are stationed around the well that leads to the lowest circle of Hell, the circle that is inhabited by the various categories of traitor. It is an episode that would have retained Nerval's particular attention by virtue of being a preparation for the vision of Lucifer with which the *Inferno* concludes, and is dominated, significantly, by the figure of Antaeus, who, in a graphic scene, is coaxed by Virgil into lowering «Dante-personaggio» and himself into the depths of the well.

The evocation of Dante's Hell in the context of *Antéros*⁴ has the immediate effect of highlighting both the defeat by Jehovah of Baal and Dagon («mon aïeul Bélus ou mon père Dagon»), whose alleged cry «O tyrannie!» is said to come «du fond des Enfers»⁵, and «les eaux du Cocyte», the frozen lake of Cocytus constituting the very circle of Hell to which Dante and Virgil are lowered by Antaeus. Nerval's (none the less Byronian) allusion in the second quatrain to Cain and Abel, likewise, echoes the fact that the outermost region of the ninth circle, which Dante, who, strangely, chooses not to include the actual figure of Cain amongst the named denizens of hell, calls Caina. If *Antéros* represents an obvious example of religious syncretism, it behoves us to remember that Dante's Hell was inhabited by figures from pagan myth and Christian Europe alike, though the author of *La Divina Commedia* would, needless to say, never have sought to collapse the differences between them.

Given such a setting, albeit one that is only allusively present and is clearly not devoid of strands of other origin, the question of the context for Antéros's initial address necessarily poses itself. The poem's opening line, at one level at least, presupposes a question already directed at him by a previous speaker, even if we are in the presence of a rhetorical device and the reader is content with the reformulation of the question by the figure of Antéros and is unconcerned to know the identity of his interlocutor⁶. Be that as it may, the positing of an interlocutor, notwithstanding the latter's anonymity, may be considered to assume a new suggestiveness in the context of an intertextual recollection of the *Inferno*, in that Antéros can be seen to operate much as those figures in Dante's epic poem who not only reveal their moral character in the course of exchanges with «Dante-personaggio», but often do so in response to an expression by the latter of surprise or curiosity. We are clearly in many ways at a remove from *La Divina Commedia*: in this Romantic sonnet, we do not hear a formal echo of the way in which Dante's most prominent sinners express themselves, and the reader is left with a sense of the enigmatic rather than the precise and logical explanations provided by the earlier author, steeped, as he was, in the writings of medieval philosophers and theologians. Yet, in addition to the inclusion of a higher

pp. 620-621. Hélène CASSOU-YAGER has pointed out that «drakon, en grec, signifie serpent, et [...] le poète des *Chimères* se sert indifféremment des deux termes. Ainsi lisons-nous dans *Delfica*: "Ou du dragon vaincu dort l'antique semence" et dans *A-J Colonna*: "Où du serpent vaincu dort la vieille semence" [...] Ce sont [...] surtout les pouvoirs de régénération du serpent qui lui valent une place aussi prépondérante dans l'imaginaire nervalien» ("*Antéros*" et les dents de Nerval, «French Review», 65.3 (February 1992), 385-392, pp. 389-390).

(4) «Antéros [...] fait bien partie du monde sou-

terrain» (CASSOU-YAGER, p. 387).

(5) It is in the Eighth circle of Hell that the terms *tiranno* and *tirannia* make their principal appearances in the *Commedia*. (See Canto XXVII, lines 38 and 54; and Canto XXVIII, line 81).

(6) TAKAGI observes: «L'expérience intense de la voix semble se refléter dans les figures orales agencées aux premières trois [sic] strophes: réplique répétitive de l'interrogation de l'interlocuteur ("Tu demandes pourquoi..."), réplique confirmative de la compréhension de l'interlocuteur ("Oui"), apostrophe ("Jéhovah!")».

Latinized register («tête indomptée») that recalls Dante's reworking of his myriad classical sources⁷, the first line of the second tercet («Ils m'ont plongé trois fois dans les eaux du Cocyte»), which may be seen as a parody of Christian baptism, invariably recalls the Florentine poet's constant emphasis in his poem on the symbolic figure 'three'⁸. In his account of Ulysses's final journey in Canto XXVI of *Inferno*, for example, he had written: «Tre volte il fé girare con tutte l'acque», just as, in the canto of the giants, three of the figures encountered by the pilgrims are named and it is said that three Friesians standing on top of each other would not have been able to reach the hair on Nimrod's head. In the final canto of the first cantica, Lucifer's head is said to possess three faces.

Dante's giants are portrayed as angry, ferocious, proud and rebellious. Thus in the (third edition of the) much-read prose translation of *La Divina Commedia* by Artaud de Montor, first published in 1811-1813, Nimrod, in Canto XXXI, is «cet orgueilleux rebelle»⁹. Virgil addresses him thus: «exhale ainsi ta fureur, quand la colère ou une autre passion vient te dominer». Dante's guide refers, likewise, to Ephialtes as «ce superbe géant». Just as Antaeus is the offspring of Neptune and Gea (Earth), so the terrestrial status of Dante's giants is stressed, as well as their conflict with Jupiter. Thus reference is made to «les horribles géants, que Jupiter, du haut du ciel, menace encore lorsqu'il lance le tonnerre», while it is said that «Éphialte [...] voulut éprouver sa puissance contre celle du grand Jupiter». Ephialtes's shaking of his chains is, furthermore, compared to the uproar of an earthquake (in terms that recall the opening line of *Horus*¹⁰): «A ces mots Éphialte secoua ses chaînes: jamais un tremblement de terre, qui ébranle une tour énorme, ne fit entendre un bruit aussi terrible». An exception is made for Antaeus, who is told, flatteringly, by Virgil that he would have ensured victory for «[les] fils de la terre» had he joined them in their war against the gods, thereby eliciting the following gloss from Artaud de Montor: «Dante dit que ce géant est libre et parle intelligiblement, parce qu'il ne conspira pas contre les dieux».

Returning to the figure of Nerval's Antéros, it may be noted that Daniel Vouga has maintained that there is an over-readiness on the part of some readers to interpret the sonnet that bears his name in terms of such Byronic rebels as Manfred, Conrad and Cain¹¹. It is certainly the case that the giant's utterances place him in a direct line

(7) In his *Argonauticon* (Book IV, lines 682-685), Valerius Flaccus had written: «... hic [Iuno] praecipue ex aethere Pallas | insilunt pariter scopulos: hunc nata coerces | hunc coniunx Iovis, ut valido qui robore tauros | sub iuga et invito detorquet in alia cornu». In Nisard's 1850 translation of the work, «invito cornu» is rendered by «tête indomptée», though in the present context it is necessary to note that Nerval had already used this phrase in the 1841 version of *Antéros*. Caussin de Perceval's often republished 1826 translation of the poem incorporates the scarcely less Nervalian «front rebelle»: «...semblables toutes deux à un homme qui soumet au joug des taureaux indomptés et d'un bras vigoureux retient leur front rebelle». A year after the publication of *Les Chimères*, George Sand is to be found employing the phrase «cette tête indomptée» in *La Dernière Aldini*.

(8) The Pléiade editors observe: «Nerval invente un geste rituel proche de celui par lequel Thétis avait plongé son fils Achille dans les eaux du Styx, fleuve infernal, pour le rendre invulnérable» (*Œuvres complètes*, cit., III, p. 1281). There is, nonetheless, no record of her having done so thrice.

(9) All quotations are from the undated edition published by Garnier. As will be seen, Nerval, in 1849, is to be found quoting Auguste Brizeux's translation of the *Commedia*, first published in 1841. Artaud de Montor's version nonetheless employs phrases closer to the emphatic expressions of emotion that characterize *Les Chimères*. It is highly likely, moreover, that Nerval first knew Dante's poem through this version and that its effect remained with him.

(10) «Le dieu Kneph en tremblant ébranlait l'univers». Jeanine MOULIN notes that Nerval may here have been recalling a popular representation of Amoun Ra (a persona he adopted explicitly on occasion), whereby «Ra était devenu tellement vieux qu'en tremblant il ébranlait l'Univers, les frimas (vers 2 de la strophe 2) ainsi que les pluies seraient la bave qui sortait de sa bouche» (NERVAL, *Les Chimères*, Textes littéraires français, Geneva, Droz, Paris, Minard, 1966, p. 35). See also below, Nerval's reference to Lucifer's earthquake-inducing movements in Canto XXXIV of *Inferno*.

(11) Daniel VOUGA, *Nerval et ses chimères*, Paris, Corti, 1981, p. 37. Vouga nonetheless indicates the

with Dante's giants, by virtue of his anger¹², pride and rebelliousness¹³. Nerval also retains the context of the struggle between the giants and the gods, but, in contradistinction to Dante, reallocates the destructive force of Jove to Jehovah, who is railed against by Antéros-Nerval for having usurped the powers of «les anciens dieux», replacing them by a tyrannical monotheism.

That Nerval had Dante in mind in his evocation of Antéros («qu'inspire le Vengeur»¹⁴) and «la race d'Antée» is further suggested by his demonstrable fascination with the figure of Lucifer in *Inferno* and with Dante's depiction of him as a giant in Canto XXXIV. In Chapter 10 of *Les Nuits d'octobre*, for example, he evokes «ce puits sombre où Lucifer est enchaîné jusqu'au jour du dernier jugement»¹⁵. Although he refers, fleetingly, in his prose writings to other episodes in the *Commedia*, it is to the vision of Lucifer that he invariably returns, and, on occasion, at length¹⁶. This is the case as early as his *Observations sur le premier Faust* of 1826¹⁷ and is echoed in his review of *Le Diable amoureux* at the Théâtre de l'Opéra in October 1840 (where he mistakenly – and cabbalistically? – states that Dante's Hell consists of seven circles)¹⁸. It is, however, in *Le Diable rouge, Almanach cabbalistique* (1849) that he sets out the content of Canto XXXIV of *Inferno* in most detail, while retaining his assumption that the circles of hell were seven in number. Included are three direct quotations, in the 1841 prose translation by the poet Auguste Brizeux, which has the particular interest of respecting the original division into *terzine*. The position of «le diable rouge» is said to be «fort triste, – si l'on en croit la *Divine comédie* du Dante – à la suite de la victoire de l'Éternel», the reference being to Lucifer's «doloroso regno» (the line in question is here quoted by Nerval), to his being the source of all suffering («ogni lutto»), and to his abundant tears. It is, however, his gigantic stature that attracts Nerval's emphasis:

... nous ne devons pas nous étonner de la taille que le grand poète Dante donne à Lucifer dans le vingt-quatrième [sic] livre de son poème. Il prétend que son corps traverse entièrement le globe, de telle sorte que sa tête se trouve immédiatement au-dessous du royaume des Deux-Siciles et que ses pieds forment deux îles dans la mer de l'Océanie, aux antipodes de notre Europe. L'une de ses cornes correspond au Vésuve, l'autre à l'Étna. Quand il se meut, il y a des tremblements de terre, quand il éternue, il y a des éruptions¹⁹.

existence of a reference to Eros and Anteros in Act II, scene ii of *Manfred* (p. 26).

(12) It will be recalled that in the earlier version of Nerval's poem, the title-figure speaks of 'haine' rather than 'rage'. Words connoting anger (e.g. *ira*, *rabbia* and their cognates), while present at various points in *Inferno*, are especially prominent in Dante's depiction of the lowest circles of Hell.

(13) The Dantesque connection makes it difficult to see Nerval's Antée in the light of VOUGA's statement that: «dans la légende grecque Antée n'est tout au plus qu'un brigand, et non pas un révolté; vaincu par Hercule, il disparaît, sans plus» (*op. cit.*, p. 27).

(14) As CASSOU-YAGER emphasizes (*art. cit.*, p. 386), the 'Vengeur' of line 5 must surely refer to Satan (and certainly cannot refer logically to Jehovah, as some critics have claimed).

(15) Nerval, *Œuvres complètes*, cit., III, p. 326.

(16) On Nerval and Dante, see Michael PITWOOD, *Dante and the French Romantics*, Geneva, Droz, 1985, chapter 12; Maria-Luisa BELLELI, *L'Italie de Nerval*, «Revue de littérature comparée», 34 (1960), pp. 378-408 (pp. 389-97); and André SEMPOUX, *Nerval et Dante: à propos d'un article récent*, «Revue de littérature comparée», 35 (1961), pp. 254-58.

(17) «Milton a fait Satan plus grand que l'homme; Michel-Ange et le Dante lui ont donné les traits hideux de l'animal, combinés avec la figure humaine» (*Œuvres complètes*, cit., I, p. 245), though, as PITWOOD has shown (p. 228), this is an unacknowledged borrowing from chapter 23 of Mme de Staël's *De l'Allemagne*.

(18) Nerval, *Œuvres complètes*, cit., I, p. 674.

(19) Nerval, *Œuvres complètes*, cit., I, p. 1268.

Michael Pitwood observes that Nerval here «seems to conceive of Satan as being much larger than Dante in fact makes him»²⁰. The fact remains that Dante's Lucifer is a giant. Dorothy Sayers reminds us that he measured «somewhere about 1000 or 1500 ft. at a rough calculation»²¹. As Artaud de Montor had put it in his translation of lines 30-33: «J'atteindrais plutôt à la grandeur d'un géant, qu'il ne serait permis à des géants eux-mêmes d'atteindre à la hauteur des bras de *Dité*: que ne devait donc pas être le corps du monstre armé de bras si redoutables?». For all Nerval's exaggeration of the already hyperbolic, the references to Vesuvius and Etna (as well as to earthquakes) allow the mythical landscape of *Les Chimères* to assume further suggestiveness of a Dantesque hue.

In chapter 10 of Nerval's *Les Nuits d'octobre*, already recalled, there appears a rare quotation from Dante's original Italian:

...mais mon ami me dit comme Virgile à Dante:
 ...Or sie forte ed ardito
 Omai si scende per sì fatte scale²².

The quotation comes from Canto XVII of *Inferno* (lines 81-82), where it is part of the poet's evocation of the monster Geryon, whose body will perform for the two pilgrims the function of a ladder, just as Lucifer's hairy body will in Canto XXXIV. Dante makes Geryon (the representation of Fraud) a serpent with a human face. His initial description of the beast, who, like Antaeus, was finally vanquished by Hercules, emphasizes his size and physical strength: «monstre à la queue acérée, qui perce les montagnes, qui rompt les murailles, et qui brise les armes les plus dures [...] le monstre qui pourrit le monde entier» (*Inf.*, XVII, lines 1-3). Yet, as Artaud de Montor had pointed out in a note to this canto: «On sait que Géryon, dans la mythologie, était un roi d'Érythie qui avait trois corps». In some versions of the myth, he indeed had three conjoined bodies, while in others he simply had three heads. That Nerval should have relished this particular episode is consistent with the especial attention he affords to Dante's depiction of Lucifer (and, indeed, with our attribution to him of an implicit concern with the Canto of the giants). This is all the more significant when it is realized that Dante in fact transfers to Lucifer the depiction of Geryon as three-headed. As «Dante-personaggio» recalls in Canto XXXIV:

De quelle stupeur fus-je frappé en voyant trois visages
 à sa tête! le visage qui se présentait devant moi était
 d'une couleur de sang; les deux autres qui naissaient
 également des deux épaules, se réunissaient vers les
 tempes: la face, qui était tournée vers la droite,
 paraissait d'un blanc jaunissant; l'autre avait la couleur
 des habitants de ces bords où le Nil laisse errer ses eaux.
 Sous chacun de ces visages paraissaient des ailes
 proportionnées à la taille démesurée d'un oiseau si
 formidable: je ne vis jamais voile de vaisseau d'une
 telle grandeur. [...] il pleurait de ses six yeux, et ses trois
 mentons étaient inondés de larmes et d'une bave

(20) PITWOOD, p. 228 (the same scholar is led to point out further inaccuracies in Nerval's references to Dante's poem). Dorothy L. SAYERS explains: «At the centre of the Earth is a little sphere [...] and Satan's body is run through this, like a knitting-needle

through an orange» (DANTE, *The Divine Comedy*, I: *Hell*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1973, p. 291).

(21) *Hell*, cit., p. 290.

(22) Nerval, *Œuvres complètes*, cit., III, p. 328.

sanguinolente: dans chacune de ces bouches, ses dents
resserraient un pécheur; il torturerait ainsi trois âmes à
la fois.

Such explicit interweaving in Nerval's other writings of Dante's representation of giants and monsters, as well as of Lucifer himself, would appear, therefore, to justify enrolment of the first cantica of the *Commedia* as an intertext for a poem in which Nerval gives voice to an infernal being of his own creation, «issu de la race d'Antée». This inevitably raises the question of the complexio assumed by the poem once a connection with Dante has been established. It is nevertheless necessary to begin any attempt to pinpoint the singular status of that connection by enumerating dimensions it may be said to lack.

What the 'Dante connection' cannot be regarded as providing, most obviously, is anything so precise as a key to *Antéros*, since that would destroy much of the haunting quality that stems from the elusiveness that is fused, paradoxically and indissolubly, with the assertive tone adopted by the speaker. Nor does it provide anything resembling a distinct context for the utterances pronounced by the eponymous giant. Not only is there, in *Antéros*, no unambiguous allusion to the Florentine poet or his poem, Dante's landscape is in no way recoverable pictorially. It is, likewise, difficult to regard Nerval's poem as even providing its author with a more purely private pleasure deriving from a specific and conscious recollection of the *Inferno*. Still more importantly, unlike the meetings Dante and Virgil have with the denizens of the underworld, any hint of a face-to-face encounter with the giant Antéros is soon dispelled by the fact that his self-presentation is localized in neither time nor space. We are no longer in Dante's world, for the simple reason that we are not in any single, discernible universe. More specifically, Antéros's rebelliousness appears to be subject to none of the constraints imposed upon Dante's sinners, constraints which inevitably cause their impulsion towards self-assertion or self-justification to be experienced by us as futile. The self that speaks is neither the poet in temporary disguise nor any single, identifiable figure, any more than the giant's utterances constitute merely a personalized form of a familiar Byronian revolt. The *Je* in its complex totality has been shorn of all such defining characteristics. It is created entirely by the poem itself and corresponds to no identity outside of it, a fact which allows it to combine such contradictory features as immediacy and intangibility, intimacy and distance, individuality and multiplicity (or universality).

Within such a purely immanent form of expression, any experience of recognition, including that of the apparent presence of an intertext such as Dante's *Commedia*, can only be fleeting, a chimera that disappears as soon as the reader attempts to isolate it in his consciousness. For in the re-working of cultural, mythological and religious inheritance that takes place in the Nervalian creative imagination, images and references are divested of all solidity and specificity, with their origins being abandoned in a realm the existence of which is connoted only through a (highly generalized) tone of nostalgia. In a way that, curiously, looks forward to the process whereby Samuel Beckett reshapes intensely personal memories to the point at which they acquire the impersonality of art and thereby become largely inaccessible as forms of *self-expression*, the reminiscences of Dante in *Antéros* are present, at most, through a telling transmutation that consigns Dante's ordered creation, in which each dramatic figure occupies a defined place within an emphatically comprehensible whole, to a past that has been lost for ever, save through the imaginative distortions of memory. In short, if the example of Dante momentarily surfaces in the poet's mind, it is in unavoidable demonstration of the ironic, not to say tragic, contrast it presents with the fractured and disordered nature of the Romantic self, and thus, by implication,

the impossibility, for the modern poet, of incorporating elements of the *Commedia* unchanged in a vision of the relationship between the self and the universe of which it is part. In other words, like all other components of the poems that compose *Les Chimères*, Dante's *Inferno* can only be present in the form of fragments of (none the less suggestive) cultural debris.

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