

## Talley on Bayle (2016)

Bayle, Corinne. *Broderies nervaliennes*. Classiques Garnier, 2016, pp. 332, ISBN [978-2-406-05702-4](https://doi.org/10.1017/9782406057024)

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While reading Gérard de Nerval, one is faced with an apparent paradox: a body of work at once profoundly personal and relentlessly intertextual. Despite Nerval's inclination toward first-person narration and themes like memory, nostalgia, and melancholy, his texts refer constantly to the writing of others, leaving the reader at pains to decipher the far-flung allusions through which ostensibly personal meaning is produced. This interpretive challenge is the subject of Corinne Bayle's *Broderies nervaliennes*, which explores a number of the sources of Nerval's intertextual imaginary and their appearance in his writing. Bayle argues that the intertextuality of Nerval's work was both a symptom of the fragmentation of his self, caused by mental illness, and an attempt to overcome that fragmentation through a unique form of literary creation in which the work of others was recombined to create an expression of the self (the "broderie" of the book's title):

En étudiant quelques exemples significatifs de cette appropriation par Nerval du texte d'autrui, ses bouturages et ses repiquages, nous voudrions vérifier une hypothèse : la bibliothèque n'est pas seulement le lieu où chercher à lire le monde, le texte de l'autre est un détour pour tenter de lire en soi-même, en participant du dédoublement, de la fracture de la conscience et de sa tentative pour la réparer, que l'ironie met en œuvre. (20)

The studies in *Broderies nervaliennes* thus return to the literary and subjective fragmentation explored by Bayle in her two previous books on Nerval, *Gérard de Nerval: la marche à l'étoile* (2001) and *Gérard de Nerval: l'Inconsolé* (2008), bringing a new focus on the disparate types of material assembled and assimilated in the Nervalian imaginary. The first three parts center on discourses, tropes, and writers that Nerval took up in his writing: mysticism, mythology, and utopianism; Nicolas-Edme Restif de La Bretonne, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, and the Romantic trope of the garden; Théophile Gautier, Walter Scott, and Victor Hugo. It is in these first three parts that Bayle hews most closely to her stated purpose, bringing to light the culture that nourished Nerval's writing and demonstrating his metabolization of that impersonal culture to create something distinctly personal.

Moving into the fourth and fifth parts, Bayle recasts her dominant image, moving away from an analysis of "broderie" as a process of stitching together (14) or cutting and transplanting (97) the writing of others, toward a less concrete notion of intertextual "broderie" as affinity or resonance between different texts and œuvres. She first finds resonances with Nerval's writing in the work of three of his contemporaries (Charles Nodier, Alfred de Musset, and Alfred de Vigny), and then, moving forward beyond Nerval's own lifetime, in the work of Charles Baudelaire and Arthur Rimbaud and the late work of Nerval's friend, Gautier. Though these last two parts have little to say about the intertextual procedures of Nerval's writing, they do important work by demonstrating that his œuvre is more grounded in the shared culture of nineteenth-century French letters than is often assumed.

Bayle's willingness to think broadly about the links between Nerval's work and the culture in and from which it was created is certainly the book's principal strength. Her wide-ranging and erudite studies provide a frame of reference for reading Nerval beyond the conventional focus on personal memory. Particularly intriguing are Bayle's readings of many of Nerval's works as adaptations of a sort; for example, she reads *Les Filles du feu* as an echo of the autobiographical writing of both Restif and Nodier in turn, exploring in each case the tension between imitation and innovation. This last example also points, however, to one of the book's major shortcomings: its failure to read across its diverse material. While Bayle's readings make it clear that a text like *Les Filles du feu* is dense with references to the point of over-determination, she addresses each category of source material in isolation and eschews the question of how multiple sources contribute simultaneously to the production of meaning within a given text. *Broderies nervaliennes* thus falls short of the task it sets itself: of elucidating what made Nerval's use of intertextuality unique.

This anecdotal rather than interpretive approach to intertextuality is indicative of a more general tendency within the book toward neutralizing the challenge that intertextuality poses to Nerval studies. By treating intertextuality as a set of discrete allusions rather than a fundamental textual procedure, Bayle integrates it into the conventional psychological interpretation of Nerval's work (fragmentation and the futile attempt at a cure), without considering how it undercuts the Romantic ideals of self-identity and writing as self-expression on which that interpretation is based. Nevertheless, the studies in this book provide many compelling opportunities to observe Nerval engaging with the work of others. *Broderies nervaliennes* will be of interest not only to scholars of Nerval and French Romanticism, but also to anyone interested in questions of intertextuality, influence,

originality, and self-expression.

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