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Lécuyer, Sylvie. *La Généalogie fantastique de Gérard de Nerval*. Namur: Presses Universitaires de Namur, 2011. *Études nervaliennes et romantiques XIV*. Pp. 124. ISBN: 978-2-87037-700-0

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In February and March of 1841, Gérard Labrunie was a thirty-two-year-old poet, interned at the clinic of Dr. Esprit Blanche. Possibly in the grips of psychotic illness, Gérard de Nerval created a detailed, mysterious diagram of his family origins, the “généalogie fantastique.” According to Sylvie Lécuyer, in this document Nerval sought to tie the disparate parts of his psyche together by finding meaning in the accidents of his origins (61). Nerval’s family tree contains elements of truth, including a detailed account of his paternal ancestors, the Labrunies, and his maternal ancestors, the Oliviers and the Bouchers. From meager factual beginnings Nerval extrapolated a fantastical origin story that consistently romanticized his family. Everywhere that he looked in the historical and genealogical record Nerval saw knights, great landowners, and German emperors. He misrepresented towns in which his family lived as personal estates. In short, Nerval created an origin story worthy of his literary achievements by poetic and fantastical means.

In this fascinating book, Lécuyer presents a highly original and persuasive reading of Nerval’s “généalogie fantastique,” sketched in tiny print on one folded sheet, now kept in the Fonds Spoelberch de Lovenjoul of the Institut de France. Lécuyer’s book is the first widely available facsimile of Nerval’s family tree; it also includes facsimiles of marriage documents, baptismal documents, and other invaluable archival materials for Nerval scholars. The real value of this work is, however, in Lécuyer’s careful interpretation of the “généalogie fantastique.” Lécuyer’s interpretation follows Nerval’s often tendentious elaborations on his family tree: “Dans le prolongement de ces branches,” she writes, “reliées à elles et cernées d’un mince trait, des extrapolations, qui ne correspondent plus, cette fois, à aucune réalité familiale, renvoient à différentes régions où se situeraient des propriétés familiales” (19). Lécuyer not only maps out Nerval’s actual family tree and compares it to his imagined one, but also provides documentation for sources that may have inspired Nerval in his poetic reverie.

A fundamental document of Nerval scholarship, the “généalogie fantastique” is roughly contemporaneous with *Aurélia* and contains many of his literary obsessions in an abbreviated form. The best known interpretation of the “généalogie fantastique” is Jean-Pierre Richard’s 1979 essay, “Le nom et l’écriture,” published in *Microlectures* (13-24). As Lécuyer points out, this interpretation is based on one side of the document, the one that contains Nerval’s genealogy. Richard’s essay, however, neglects the other side of the document: Nerval’s fantastical reconstruction of the Bonaparte family tree that includes rumored mistresses and other undocumented liaisons, as well as a timeline of Napoléon’s defeat and the Hundred Days. This historical reverie complements Nerval’s multi-ethnic and trans-historical self-reimagining. These more historical concerns testify to Nerval’s mixed motives for producing the “généalogie fantastique.” Nerval seems to have wanted—at the same time—to document real historical connections and to create poetic resonances.

At times, the purely poetical does dominate. For instance, Nerval appears to have created the names of some of his ancestors based on phonetic similarities and homonyms, even across languages and vast gaps in time: “À partir du

nom de son grand-oncle Maurat/Moura, Nerval semble se laisser enchanter par des sonorités associatives qui ressemblent à une comptine: ‘Maurat, Mawra, mawra-regina’, comme ailleurs ‘Turreyne, Turenne, Touraine’” (18).

Lécuyer’s most controversial assertion is that Nerval’s writing of the “généalogie fantastique” was a part of “un véritable travail thérapeutique sur soi” (61). This is not an easy claim to prove given how little we know about Nerval’s psychiatric treatments. We will probably never know Nerval’s state of mind at the time. Nor will we likely ever know to what extent the creation of the “généalogie fantastique” was a part of a therapeutic cure. Yet the best documentary evidence that we have is what Lécuyer has gathered. These documents are, therefore, of undeniable value for any critic interested in Nerval’s biography or the genesis of the “généalogie fantastique.” The text deserves to be studied in its original format from a range of approaches. It is astonishing that no one published this dossier earlier.