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## **Aurélia** Gérard de Nerval

*Aurelia* is French poet and novelist Gerard de Nerval's account of his descent into madness--a condition provoked in part by his unrequited passion for an actress named Jenny Colon. One of the original self-styled -bohemians, - Nerval was best known in his own day for parading a lobster on a pale blue ribbon through the gardens of the Palais-Royal, and was posthumously notorious for his suicide in 1855, hanging from an apron string he called the garter of the Queen of Sheba. This hallucinatory document of dreams, obsession and insanity has fascinated artists such as Joseph Cornell, who cited passages from it to explain his own work; Antonin Artaud, who saw his own madness mirrored by Nerval's; and Andre Breton, who placed Nerval in the highest echelon of Surrealist heroes. Geoffrey Wagner's translation of *Aurelia* was first published by Grove Press in 1959, but has remained out of print for nearly 20 years. Also included in this volume are previously untranslated stories by Marc Lowenthal, and poet Robert Duncan's version of the sonnet cycle *Chimeras*, making this the most complete collection of Nerval's influential oeuvre ever published in English.

## **Aurélia** Details

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## From Reader Review Aurélia for online ebook

### Eddie Watkins says

Aurelia is a non-fictional account of Nerval's "descent into hell", perhaps precipitated by the death of an actress he was obsessed/in love with. During this descent he is besieged with visions, both waking and sleeping, of universal love and unity and universal desolation. He is also besieged by his own Catholic guilt for seriously dabbling in the occult for the purposes of figuring out these very visions. These conflicts entangled him in a significant psychic bind and landed him in an asylum, from which this document seems to've been written.

It begins with the famous dictum - "Our dreams are a second life," and continues from there to elaborate in great detail the substance of this second life, giving much greater credence to this second life than waking life. Through his trials and his meetings and "conversations" (more like direct mind-to-mind transmissions) with deceased friends and relatives and purely spiritual beings Nerval is convinced of the immortality of the soul, and this assurance of immortality is what saves him from total despairing madness. And so Aurelia ends on a positive note, though Nerval was not to survive long after the writing of it, hanging himself from a window grating in 1855. Poor Nerval, what a troubled and beautiful soul. Thank you for descending to Hell for all of us!

There are other stories, poems, and documents in this fantastic collection that I'm not reviewing, all of which are great or at least well worth reading (esp. the short sonnet sequence, The Chimeras, translated by Robert Duncan), but none have the raw immediacy (yet still classical French structure and control) of Aurelia

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### Mariana Orantes says

Cada vez que le doy un rating a un libro en este lugar, me decepciono. ¿Cómo alguien puede darle menos de cinco estrellas a esta maravilla? lo mismo me pasó con El maestro y margarita de Bulgakov, de verdad que no los entiendo. Se me rompe el corazón cuando leo las malas reseñas que hacen sobre este libro tan hermoso. No lo entiendo. Nerval tenía una sensibilidad inmensa, una forma de narrar tan precisa y sencilla y no por eso menos compleja; tan sencillo y natural en contraste con las cosas tan terribles o maravillosas que cuenta. Tuve todas las emociones: pasé de estar triste a estar eufórica y a reír como loca, de tener el corazón hecho pasita a sentirme liberada. Me pareció hermoso en verdad. Tanto que puedo decir que Nerval se ha convertido en uno de mis autores preferidos. Ahora leo Los iluminados y busco con frenesí una buena edición de Las quimeras. Me encanta, me hace dudar de todo y sentir un piso firme al cual puedo aferrarme en los momentos desesperados, aunque suene contradictorio, así es. No sé ni qué decir, ojalá todo el mundo leyera este libro y ojalá les gustara. Ojalá tuvieran ese amor y esa emoción.

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### Branden William says

As a member of the eccentric Bouzingu group in France, in the 1830s, Gérard de Nerval was eventually praised by André Breton as a "prophet" of Surrealism for Nerval's pursuit of the significance of dreams, and for his "persistent vitality of an esoteric conception of the world." Nerval's 'Aurélia & Other Writings' is a beautiful collection of Nerval's most coveted short stories, including the novella 'Sylvie', which is often considered Nerval's prose masterpiece. These stories encapsulate a deep and passionate longing for idolized woman, esoteric deism, and autobiographical traveling. Breton placed Nerval in the highest echelon of

Surrealist heroes for a good reason. There is a particular reclusiveness that lies within Nerval's writing that identifies solely with a limited number of individuals. For this reason, Nerval will not be understood by everyone that attempts reading his dream-inspired writings. "Surrealism's official enthusiasm for Nerval seemed to take strongest hold with artists on the fringe of the group, those more alone rather than in the midst of Breton's collective campaigns." Nerval's insanity reached its conclusion when he hung himself from an apron string he called the garter of the Queen of Sheba, from a window grating in 1855. Left are these documents; short story accounts of an author's unnerving downfall.

Fictionally autobiographical in nature, Aurélia is Nerval's account of his descent into madness, spending his life in and out of a mental asylum. Aurélia is a hallucinatory diary-like journey through the perils of obsession and madness, and the despairing realization of the truths surrounding mundane existence. This realization, Nerval explains, "is enough to drive a wise man mad; let us ensure that there is enough to make a madman sane." Nerval simply uses escapism to battle insanity. "Dreams are a second life," he begins. Aurélia, Nerval's obsession and muse, is the object of his fixation, however it is through dreams that Nerval finds peace and understanding. "I do not think the human imagination has invented anything which is not true either in this world or in others." Nerval's belief in immortality provides him with a newly founded strength, and his complete descent into madness concludes his curious investigation into the abyss, for "Who knows if there is not some link between those two existences and if not possible for the soul to unite them now?"

'Sylvie' on the other hand, is an esoteric break with conventionalism, depicting a hero's love for three different woman, all of whom he either loses or fails to attain affection for. This is an incredibly imaginative journey through the Middle Ages and traditions of the past, antiquarian in nature. Nerval shifts back and forth from past to present, proving the reader with a phantasmic perspective in conjunction with heart-break and misery. Melancholy is Nerval's driving force in Sylvie, inevitably obtaining none of the objects of his affection, though painting a beautiful backdrop to this dreamlike account of loves lost and memories attained.

'Isis,' 'Les Chimères,' and 'Pandora' is esoteric poetry at its best. They blend that perfect conjunction of the conscious and unconscious that the Surrealists praised as 'Le merveilleux'. Also popular among the Surrealists was their excessive streetwalking through the boulevards and cafés of Paris. In 'Walks & Memories' Nerval depicts this very scenario, among the slopes of Montmartre, the Château de Saint-Germain, and throughout his travels to Germany and the east. This is a personal favorite of mine--as a traveler and freighthopper myself-- illuminating the reader with antiquarian delights, interesting anyone with a subtle appreciation for the architecture and landscapes of 1850s Europe. These are dream travelogues; inventing a new literary genre of "dream-memoirs". "As I retrace these details I have to ask myself if they were real or I dreamed them."

Gerard de Nerval, precursor to Dada and Surrealism, is a poetic genius-- and aside from being forever known for walking a pet lobster on a leash-- opened illuminating gateways to the beyond; "representing the idea of a descent into hell."

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## **Mitch says**

The ultimate poet's poet, Nerval merges his dream world with the world we all share in these prose pieces, bringing about a kind of romantic apocalypse. Gorgeous and harrowing at the same time, the delicate pubescent longing of Sylvie becomes the cosmic eschatological last one standing narrative of Aurelia. Way out there. Not for everybody, though. Some might find his romanticism a bit much. Not me. It is just right. Blinding.

## **Nate D says**

As recommended by Rene Daumal, various Surrealists, and others. The title story is actually less fully dream-like than expected, but actually more a personal account of ones own descent into and intermittent recovery from insanity. In that sense, it does fit in well with various Surrealist's accounts of their own periods of delusion (Unica Zurn's The Man of Jasmine and Leonora Carrington's Down Below are key examples of this genre), while looking ahead to some of the oneiric accounts in fictions of the mid-century (Anna Kavan's 1948 Sleep Has His House or Doris Lessing's somehow more dated 1970s Briefing for a Descent Into Hell). All of which company should suggest that I'd love this, but I didn't find myself totally enthralled by its largely diaristic realism. As a truthful record of its times, it is good, but for that, we have the other, sometimes even better stories, and essays here full of pastoral detail and historical sense of place. Even Nerval's interests tend to endear me to him, as he seems to wander about Paris and its environs in a proto-derive or flaneur fashion, dwells upon the losses of urban development, and obsesses about Isis and the customs surrounding her in antiquity.

My concurrent reading of The Second Sex tends to color my readings of much else around it through it's sheer force and monolithic density (as it will for a while, give its near-endless 800 dense pages. In fact, de Beauvoir cites Nerval as belonging to the Bretonian tradition of glorying Women as the gateway natural wonder and inspiration, as one of the failed literary approaches to women, falling quite short of any authentic relationship. I'd say that Nerval actually fares a little better: his Aurelia may serve as guide to his dreamworld, but in an account of his own mounting madness, which rather turns the tables on Breton's exalting of Nadja, for instance. He's even acutely aware of the inherently problematic tendency to fall in love not with actual people but with his own images thereof. It's clear, even amidst his more rhapsodic passages, that this is his loss and he knows it, not any failing of the women who move through his life and depart on to their own. So while Nerval may in some way illustrate the type of literary representation as de Beauvoir suggest, I was pleasantly surprised by the self-awareness by which he makes it rather more useful and interesting.

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## **tomasawyer says**

Trop de religiosité et de délires ésotériques malgré quelques passages plaisamment poétiques. Je sature de ces textes où Dieu est seul juge de nos vies. Je suis plutôt heureux de vivre dans une époque qui se débarrasse peu à peu de toutes ces conneries religieuses qui ralentissent l'humanité.

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## **Etienne says**

2,5/5. Grand délire mystique. La première partie est assez intéressante, car le délire est tellement élevé que l'on frôle le fantastique. La deuxième partie est plus religieuse qu'autre chose. Reste à savoir si tout est inventé ou si l'auteur a réellement vécu cette confusion entre rêve et réalité. Dans l'ensemble cela est tout de même que moyennement intéressant. Loin d'être un incontournable!

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tide of the battle (probably in NVA favor, seeing as it probably would have resulted in decimating his peeps due to friendly-fire when some myopic bombardier tried executing a strike with surgical precision on battling forces under a canopy of foliage) but they bravely fought on and eventually won they day. Nevermind the compelling sidenote that after botching the re-wiring of this primitive telecommunications device, his squad discovered they were somehow able to place calls to 976-JUGS, sending the platoon into a downward spiral of lethargy and preposterous beat-off sessions previously unknown to the annals of Asian history.

Think about those kinds of sacrifices; Cedric losing his life to unknowingly help galvanize the resolve of the wizarding community to purge the blight of Voldemort's resurrection and our going toe-to-toe with Viet Nam, which I can only assume thwarted the menacing spread of communism that would have made "1984" a certifiable reality. Anyway, whatever the reason, I strongly recommend staying clear of Nerval, especially this edition of Aurelia & Other Writings.

It comes as no surprise to me that this edition was published by Exact Change. If I've learned one thing over the past couple of years, it's that the cretins selecting works at Exact Change might possibly be the most dunderheaded morons currently working in concert. They claim to specialize in 'bizarre' and 'decadent' works which are vastly 'under-appreciated' and 'esoteric', mistakenly believing that the rest of the world is ignoring these writings for a reason other than that they suck and are usually preposterously asinine. It also seems like they select their authors more on the grounds of ridiculous shit they gained notoriety for, rather than any actual talent for telling a decent story, highlighted by their tendency to preface each weak edition with a cute little narrative on just how uncouth the author was instead of mentioning anything which might have something to do with the actual book or any justification for publishing it, other than to perpetuate the fallacy that because some well-heeled cretin acting like a goddam nimrod has something to say there might be something of worth buried amidst the ramblings. Come to think of it, I should probably be working at Exact Change myself, since I apparently can't review a book without digressing into god knows what, kind of like this review...

Anyhow, let this serve as a notice to any aspiring authors out there struggling to get published, you've probably got a good shot at getting an offer from Exact Change if you're willing to make a few minor compromises, including (but not limited to): 1) participating in sexual extravagances, anything from orgies, to incest, to incestuous orgies, 2) being committed to an asylum or tragically succumbing to some form of madness, 3) evidencing your deteriorating mental state by doing imbecilic shit like walking a lobster on a leash, unearthing corpses and toppling headstones, or diddling yourself in public, 4) killing yourself (this helps reduce the time spent uselessly quibbling with Exact Change regarding royalty checks, and besides, you're certainly not doing it for the money, right? you're all about artistic integrity). Such appear to be demanding criteria which Exact Change sets for the scribes of truly inspiring and timeless literature.

Gerard Nerval somehow managed to squeeze a little writing into his hectic schedule of naked poetry readings and eating ice cream from a skull while on leave from psychiatric care. It's unfortunate that he had this idle time, as eventually someone was going to come along and mistake his eccentricity as a sure sign that Nerval had something profound to say. His magnum opus, 'Aurelia', begins this collection of catshit, and it didn't take more than a few pages for me to realize that if this is accepted as the guy's best work, I was probably going to end up throwing this filth in Lake Tahoe before my four-day vacation was over. In consideration for the other nekkid freaks at the clothing-optional beach where we decided to catch a few rays, I realized it would be a travesty to befoul the lake in this manner. On the other hand, struggling through Nerval's inanity didn't help to make my manhood look any more impressive on this exhibitionistic stretch of shoreline; if anything, it seemed to have to opposite effect, so I abandoned any attempt to finish the book for the time being and admired the scenery while contemplating how best to tan nude without getting a sunburn on my crusty, old ballsac.

About the only way I can sum up my feelings for 'Aurelia' is to classify it as the male counterpart to The Bell Jar, an agonizing look at abject stupidity and self-perpetuated helplessness which caused me to beg for

the author to just...fucking...end...it...already; their story, their life, whichever they can summon up the grit to accomplish first. The story is pretty simple; a turgid tale of unrequited and senseless infatuation for a stage-actress (Aurelia) on behalf of a maladjusted loser (Nerval). Perhaps what I found most distressing was that I just couldn't give a rat's ass for the dilemma the narrator is entrenched in; I'd like to think that the allure of the whole 'love-in-vain' genre is that you need to come to sympathize to some degree with the embattled admirer, or to at least understand the basis for the undying love which they are professing. 'Aurelia' doesn't inspire anything of the sort. Worse yet, Aurelia has the nerve to get ill and die almost immediately, and from that point on (page 4) the story crawls along with the narrator taking every opportunity to exclaim 'woe is me' while scribbling a bunch of horseshit about how he'd been done wrong by fate while succumbing to the dread malady of insanity. Every sentence drags on indefinitely, convoluted with meandering nothingness concerning his 'eerie' dream sequences and choc full of nonsensical solipsistic ballyhoo and pagan symbolism, believe it or not, it may even be worse than what you're reading right now, if you can possibly fathom that.

The rest of the book isn't much better. The second story, 'Sylvie' is (not surprisingly) almost the very same story as 'Aurelia'. In this variant of the story, Nerval is a childhood friend/lover of Sylvie and manages to squander any chance of having a life with her through his own dumbass nature. A quote from 'Aurelia' actually sums up this story rather well: *"It is too presumptuous to pretend that my state of mind was brought about only by a memory of love. Let us say rather that I dressed up with this idea the keenest remorse at a life spent in foolish dissipation, a life in which evil had often triumphed, and whose errors I did not recognize until I felt the blows of misfortune."* I think Nerval's own words show why he's such a crappy lover, and hopefully illustrate why I couldn't give a damn about his problems, which stem from his wanton indulgences only for him to retrospectively shed tears in self-pity.

The second half of the book manages to decrease in quality. This travesty begins with 'Octavie', in which Nerval graciously shows us examples of the 'awesome' and soul-stirring love letters he often brags about creating, which only brought to mind the typically pathetic "if-I-can't-have-you-I-will-open-a-vein" rambling you expect to find scrawled in the journal of a recent high school suicide. In 'Isis', the reader is mesmerized by Nerval's trip to Herculaneum; allowing his pagan and occult bullshit to flourish. A complete waste of paper follows with 'The Chimeras', a collection of poems, in both English and French, presumably just to prove they rhymed in the native tongue, which might be their only saving grace. In 'Pandora', our man Nerval once again makes an ass out of himself, and the book finally concludes with 'Walks and Memories', which I actually found to be the pick of the litter and the only story to make me crack a smile. Of course, it might not be coincidental that I also realized the book was drawing to a close at this point.

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## Castor Luwian says

I thoroughly enjoyed most of this collection-- particularly Aurélia and Sylvie. Nerval is truly a Romantic; he expresses an often childlike sensitivity to life, a purity and naiveté of yearning, which is something I really appreciated: the absence of vanity in his writing; the ring of truth. He is always inebriated with wistful longing, and it's easy to get carried away with him.

There is a strong melancholic undercurrent to his observations on internal life, his romanticizations, and the external world. The obscure confusion, the pathos, and the spiritual hope that permeate these writings is very lucid and very pungent--I see why Breton considers Nerval's writings the measuring stick for the surreal; there is truly something both lucid and dreamlike about Nerval's writings. The dreamy pungency is what I most appreciated--and despite the obscurity and dreaminess of Nerval's spiritual experiences, there is something intimately human about these writings; and when it's all finished with, a kind of wilted sadness.



really *lived*, and he wrote a fascinating book into which he likely poured a lot of raw material from that life. Here's just a sample to whet the reading appetite:

*From the moment I became certain that I was subject to sacred initiatory rights, an invincible force entered my spirit. I considered myself a living hero in the eyes of gods. Everything in nature took on new aspects, and secret voices emanated from plants, trees, animals, and the smallest insects, in order to warn me and encourage me. The language of my companions held a mysterious refrain which only I was able to comprehend, objects without shape or life lent themselves to my mental calculations; – from combinations of pebbles, from the shape of corners, crevices or openings, from the patterns of leaves, from colors, odors, and sounds, I saw emerge harmonies which had hitherto remained unknown – how, I asked myself, have I been able to exist estranged from nature for so long, without identifying with her? All things live, act, and relate to one another; magnetic rays emanating from myself or from others cross, without obstacle, the infinite chasm of all creation; these form a transparent network that covers the globe, and each separate thread communicates, one by one, to the stars and planets. Momentarily captive upon the earth, I take part in the universal chorus, which shares in all my joys and sorrows!*

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### **Richard says**

As close as you can get to watching a person go insane, which means it's a wince-fest. Some amazing prose, like for instance the first paragraph. Last pages of this autobiographical novel were found in Nerval's pocket as he was dangling from the wooden beam he hanged himself from. Those surrealists...

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### **Stephen says**

Having repeatedly come across Nerval in *The Open Work* and other writings by Umberto Eco--at a time when I very much under the influence of the Italian--I was really pleased to find this handsome Damon & Naomi-published collection assigned in a seminar on fantastic literature in I believe 1997, and I offered to present on and write about it immediately. But it all seems like a dream now, and I can't remember much about the book, and I'm not sure what I would think of it now. I do remember that Nerval was known to taken a lobster for a walk in a park, employing a blue--it must have been a blue--ribbon as a lead.

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### **Joe Dwyer says**

"What is madness...to go on platonically loving a woman who will never love you."  
—Gérard de Nerval, *Aurélia* (1855)

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### **Kimley says**

I suspect that most of us have some kind of reality escape hatch that removes us from the inevitable difficulties both large and small of everyday existence. Whether it's religion, drugs/alcohol, reading too

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many books (!!!), there's another world outside the one we experience with our five senses that most of us look to in order to survive this one. The majority of us can delineate between the "real" world and the "other" world we imagine but there are those for whom the line between these worlds becomes less and less defined. Nerval is one of those people whose "other" world became his "real" world. And while it's clear it ultimately gave him much pain (he ended up taking his own life), it leaves us with this beautifully ethereal book that takes us into his self-created alternate universe.

Written while institutionalized or shortly thereafter (I'm not clear on this), we get a look into a strange amalgam of other worlds that his mind takes him to. Some are beautiful and reassuring where he is reconnected with departed loved ones and taken to beautiful landscapes. Other times, he goes to places dark and terrifying and it's clear he's having doubts about the existence of a Christian heaven. On a spiritual quest, he looks to not only the Christian God but Greek, Roman and Egyptian gods, as well as simply looking to the stars for some sign, any sign that there is something more. He'll take it wherever he can conjure it up.

Escaping to these other worlds becomes a kind of addiction for him and he loses all interest in the "real" world. The book begins with a seemingly realistic narrative about lost love and slowly bleeds into his imaginary world where it's difficult to tell if he is relating true events or imaginary dreams. Eventually it becomes irrelevant because you just feel privileged to have access to this mysterious man's mind.

Written in a dream-state, stream-of-consciousness style in the 1850's considerably ahead of his time, it's obvious why he was so influential to the surrealists and other writers of the early 20th century such as Proust.

*"My imagination gave me infinite delight. In recovering what men call reason, do I have to regret the loss of these joys?..."*

Indeed! Who needs reason when you can read this book!

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