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"Déjà Vu" or Memory-Science between Gérard de Nerval and Marcel Proust

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Argument

Cultivated by a number of writers and studied by psychologists, the phenomenon of déjà vu is an invention of the nineteenth century and is part of a broader exploration of how the mind experiences memory and time. Thus this typically benign mental aberration provides an entry-point into the mechanisms that preside over the regulation of the flow of consciousness. The theories of the mind developed recently by neuroscientists help us understand, meanwhile, why investigations into this mental "event" necessarily invoke concepts of representation and narrative. In fact, our increasingly sophisticated models for processes of memory and perception depend on literary representations. This article relies on the paramnesiac writings of Gérard de Nerval, seen through the lens of Proust's analysis, to argue that a consideration of the aesthetic and representational features of déjà-vu can bring us closer to solving the epistemological challenges we face in studying this phenomenon.

For Gregory T. Polletta

When Marcel Proust studied *Sylvie*, he was struck by a style that presented a highly personal yet somehow warped blend of perception, memory, and dream: "With Gérard de Nerval, an emerging, not yet declared madness is nothing but a kind of excessive subjectivism, a subjectivism which gives more significance to what is attached to a dream, a memory, to the personal quality of a sensation, than to what this sensation holds commonly for all of us and is perceptible for all of us, namely to reality" (Proust 1954, 182–83).[1] Proust's commentary sketches out two promising avenues of investigation: one which conceives of *Sylvie* as a thought-experiment devoted to questions of perception and memory, and another which invites us to probe into the connection between the art of narrative and our anchoring in reality. His suggestion that a literary text offers insights into the phenomenal as well as psychological elements that define the modalities of consciousness seems well worth pursuing. So does his idea of a relation between literary representation and mental functioning. It is in the wake of this double postulation, then, that this study focuses on the phenomenon of déjà vu. A frequent occurrence in Nerval's *oeuvre*, déjà vu will be analyzed here both as an

[1] All translations from the French are my own, unless specified otherwise.

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aspect of the question of memory, perception, and dream and as a symptom that offers new insights into the connection between narrative and mind.

The analysis of states of consciousness Nerval undertook in his fiction raises the same momentous question as was articulated recently by the philosopher Marya Schechtman, but in the context of memory studies: "How much similarity must there be between two moments for the one to count as a memory of the other? How much content of the experience must be reproduced and how accurately?" (Schechtman 1994, 10). While Schechtman's question highlights the problems and limits of duplicative, mimetic models of memory, it also unwittingly unfurls the perceptual and cognitive map that defines an experience of déjà vu. Thus in its broadest definition, déjà vu (or paramnesia, as it is often called) evokes a moment of confusion around a mental representation of a moment: on very rare occasions, for an infinitesimal fraction of time, we cannot be sure whether an impression refers to the present or the past, making us wonder, as Nerval so often does, whether we have been there, seen that, or done this before.[2]

With Nerval however, this moment of uncanny confusion cannot be fully encompassed within a cognitive and philosophical framework. It is embedded in his writing as the source of deep bewilderment and psychological disturbance. All too often, it makes him wonder whether he is remembering or dreaming; it makes him want to escape from the confounding inner universe of imagination and hallucination to the safer ground of a straight biographical account. With its unmistakable inflections of anguish and pathos, Nerval's fiction narrates one man's repeated attempts to make sense of the chaos that looms in a paramnesiac mind. As an analyst and philosopher, Sarah Kofman offers a chillingly precise evocation of this plunge into a baffling whirlwind of images; it reveals a subject who risks losing his grounding in the phenomenal world:

> When a dream emerges into a reality, he flees away from it, but he goes back to reality only to find his dream. The reality in which he thinks he can anchor himself will always be seen through the magic mirror of memory, reflected in the ponds or lakes that his fantasy or dream have created and suffused with the vague mistiness of simulacra. (Kofman 1979, 90)

Sylvie thus succeeds in conveying both a real landscape (the *Valois* referred to in its subtitle *Souvenirs du Valois*) and the uncanny, anguishing impression that this topography, like a dream, might be made of nothing but fragmentary, hallucinated memories. While Kofman's description aptly summarizes the novella's overall mood, it also helps us identify the features of a narrative that provides an exceptional context for experiences

[2] Throughout this work, I will use the two words "déjà vu" and "paramnesia" indiscriminately. Common usage suggests indeed that they are interchangeable, thus for instance the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines déjà vu as "a form of paramnesia" (i.e. not a failure to remember a word, but "the illusion of remembering scenes and events experienced for the first time," Webster). Alan S. Brown provides a table listing "the English Terms Used to Describe the Déjà vu Experience" (thirty three in all), as well a table of definitions (three full pages in small print) in the second chapter of *The Déjà Vu Experience* (Brown 2004).

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of déjà vu. A number of scenes, in *Sylvie*, are so saturated with phenomenal traits, particularly visual, that they seem to exist on the double plane of a hallucinated perception and a mnemonic presentation. It is on the basis of this confusion, which is traceable throughout Nerval's *oeuvre*, that George Poulet came to the decisive conclusion that "All of Nerval's work is . . . bathed in a paramnesiac atmosphere" (Poulet 1966a, 172) anchoring his argument in a telling statement taken from Nerval's 1840 preface for his revised translation of Goethe's *Faust*: "Is it remembrance remaking itself here? Or the same events that have occurred, are they reproducing themselves a second time with the same details?" (Goethe [1840] 17; see below, note 35, for my translation of this passage).

Sylvie was published in 1854, but was composed slowly over a period of about ten years. Histories of déjà vu, meanwhile, suggest that 1844 saw the beginning of the exploration of this phenomenon with the publication of A. L. Wigan's book *The Duality of Mind* (Sno and Linzsen 1990, 1587; Berrios 1995, 123; Brown 2004, 10). One way of broaching the question of the interrelatedness of clinical/psychological investigations into déjà vu and their literary counterparts in Nerval is to focus on this striking historical convergence. One cannot but wonder why a new psychological condition called "sentiment of preexistence" and left without a label in Nerval's text – but now commonly known as *déjà vu* – came into being almost simultaneously in the two different domains of science and literature. While my inquiry keeps track of this converging history, it aims for a broader compass: it places Nerval's descriptions in a more recent neuroscientific context in order to enrich our overall comprehension of the phenomenon. It takes its premises from a contemporary definition coined in phenomenological terms, which "proposes that the sequential stages of sensation and perception usually overlap, but when they become separated (because of fatigue) so that a noticeable gap occurs between them, the mind is *unable to distinguish this fading sensation from a reproduced impression*" (Brown 2004, 132; emphasis mine).[3] The advantage of this model is that it anchors the phenomenon of déjà vu in the field of mental images or representations that is also the purview of fiction.

This case-study of a mind "unable to distinguish a fading sensation from a reproduced impression" would indeed be inconceivable without the hindsight that Proust's article provides into the phenomenological aspects of Nerval's writing. It also benefits from a comparison with Proust's own fashioning of representations of reality through the lens of perception and memory in *A la Recherche du temps perdu*. Indeed, throughout this article, Proust's conception of narrative and time, which famously gives pride of place to memory, will help us understand, by contrast, what happens in Nerval – where the issue is one of narrative, time, and false remembrance. I hope to show then that the connections between literary déjà vu and its existence as a symptom of a momentary, inconsequential failure of consciousness are deeper than a mere historical or conceptual

[3] The chain of transmission is worth highlighting: in 2004, Brown cites Burnham who, in a text published in 1889, is himself quoting Anjel's 1878 article in the *Archiv für Psychiatrie und Nervenkrankheiten*.

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approach would suggest. In the laboratory of Nerval's text, we see him work, as a writer, at making the necessary differences between present and past, memories and hallucinations, realities and dream – we see him forestall, as it were, a maddening mental condition of total paramnesia. In exploring the world of his imagination, Nerval shows us how little it takes to unbalance the carefully synchronized, rhythmical music of our natural consciousness and how intricate and complex our inner mental universe truly is in its timing.[4]

A study of déjà vu in Nerval raises – with all the pathos that accompanies a life threatened with madness – the haunting, insoluble question raised by subjectivism: what if our phenomenal world, the world as we see it and feel it, were ultimately a mere illusion? What if reality were no more than the most compelling of inner hallucinations: a screen onto which we project outward images that are either totally fantastical, or simply the remnants of forgotten, perhaps never registered memories? If the latter were true, then déjà vu would lose some of its pathological edge while telling us more about the human mind: as a slight anomaly or mistiming in mental processing of which we can become aware, it would offer confirmation not only of how deeply memories are intertwined with our consciousness but also of the subtle regulatory mechanisms that enable us to make the difference between an inner and an outer reality. Ultimately, the value of Nerval or Proust – of writers who are drawn inward, towards the representation of inner states of consciousness and memory – lies beyond the mere presentation of mental experiences. Because of their rich emotional and phenomenal texture, the accounts we discover in their fiction are bound to broaden our psychological and philosophical understanding of human experience. Thus, as Proust intuited, Nerval's descriptions of déjà vu help us comprehend what it means to live in time. In this way, they invite fruitful comparisons with current clinical and neurological models of consciousness that embrace the phenomenal aspects of their subject's mental experiences. Developed in recent years by such scientists as Oliver Sacks, Antonio Damasio, and the lesser known British neurologist William Gooddy, these theories rely on concepts germane to literary studies such as imagination and narrative. Cast in the phenomenal/perceptual framework that Proust gave them, Nerval's descriptions of paramnesia enable us to move beyond the nineteenth-century models of déjà vu into the contemporary domain of studies on the brain and the mind.

Epistemological challenges

In spite of successive waves of scientific interest and research on the subject since the middle of the nineteenth century, the mental phenomenon of déjà vu seems

[4] For a comparison between consciousness and music, see Damasio 1999, 172: "T.S. Eliot might as well have been thinking of the process I described [i.e. consciousness] when he wrote, in the *Four Quartets*, of 'music heard so deeply that it is not heard at all,' and when he said 'you are the music while the music lasts'."

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to elude elucidation. Indeed, as is revealed in Alan Brown's survey of the past and present science of paramnesia in his book *The Déjà Vu Experience*, the sheer variety of explanatory models opens more questions than it solves. Explanations drawn from brain science, memory studies, and psychoanalysis now replace older psychological, neurological, phenomenological, or social accounts, but none of them seems decisive enough to close the debate once and forever. There is no reason a literary account of déjà vu should be more compelling than any other. I hope to show, however, through the example of Nerval, how a literary/phenomenological investigation can help us grasp some deeper connection between the faculty of imagination and a mental phenomenon experienced as an anomaly of perception and memory.

The mere fact that literary descriptions of déjà vu are so often embedded in scientific accounts seems meaningful: their presence is a telltale sign of the epistemological challenges faced by anyone who researches this topic.[5] Déjà vu is a subjective phenomenon – as is hinted in the minimal, consensual definition provided by Neppe "any subjectively inappropriate impression of familiarity of a present experience with an undefined past" (Brown 2004, 12). Not only is it subjective, but it offers no obvious behavioral signature – as is suggested by Berrios, who writes in the *Journal of Comprehensive Psychiatry* that déjà vu amounts to "a symptom without a psychological function" (Berrios 1995, 123, 127–128). The unresolved contradictions implied in this definition are a reminder of the contradictory views that have long been held about déjà vu, views which consider it either as a natural (but relatively rare) aberration of memory or as a pathological phenomenon. Such a definition would seem, moreover, to go against current trends in brain sciences, which, under the influence of evolutionary theories, argue that the mind is organized towards adaptation and survival.[6] On both accounts then, the idea that déjà vu represents a seemingly gratuitous mental event is bound to create much perplexity.

This perplexity explains perhaps why some researchers have looked for parapsychological explanations, invoking such notions as telepathy, suggestion, or a collective unconscious. In other quarters, as part of psychological investigations, surveys were devised whose titles, such as in the "International Census on Waking Hallucinations in the Sane," captured the underlying paradox of this phenomenon.[7] Gérard de Nerval was driven to both types of explanation, investing at times in the "paranormal"

[5] "Literature can often provide unique insights into the subjective dimensions of psychological experiences, as viewed through the eyes of gifted and insightful writers," the cognitive psychologist Alan Brown writes (Brown 2004, 58).

[6] We owe this breakthrough above all to Gerald S. Edelman, who provides the foundational theories for this conception in *Bright Air, Brilliant Fire: On the Matter of the Mind*. Another strong proponent of this view is Antonio Damasio, as is shown in *The Feeling of What Happens: Body and Emotion in the Making of Consciousness* (Damasio 1999).

[7] Berrios notes how the late nineteenth century saw a shift from "single-case" studies to surveys that aim at gathering data from different subjects (Berrios 1995, 127). Bernard-Leroy's study (*L'Illusion de fausse reconnaissance*), founded on this new method, created the decisive breakthrough.

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interpretation and at others in a psychological model. In some instances, déjà vu is closely connected to the hope, or even the *belief* in a world of natural correspondences where trans-subjective experiences are made possible by metempsychosis or by some spiritual, perhaps even divine intervention.[8] Paramnesia offers then for Nerval the revelation, as it does for many parapsychologists, that the human mind can be in deep, invisible correspondence with a larger, transpersonal world.[9] The experience of "I have been here before" is taken as a sign of a prior existence, while the unexpected familiarity of a scene is accounted for in terms of a cosmic history in which events are bound to recur and to repeat themselves. As the signal feature of a world held together by some vast analogy, the mental phenomenon is heralded like an epiphany – as a revelatory, oftentimes mystical experience that renders manifest the deep spiritual correspondences that hold our world together.

However, from an experiential perspective, as the emanation of a literary mind inclined on sharing its dreams and fantasies, the significance of déjà vu appears to be different. Fearing the accusation of madness, Nerval seems particularly careful to offer, in his later works, descriptions devoid of metaphysical connections – descriptions that are psychological in essence. There, déjà vu is depicted as a fairly banal, albeit unsettling phenomenon, with the implication that such minor hallucinations are not only the purview of the mad, but pertain to normal experiences that can occur in dreamlike or emotional states.[10] This desire to make of déjà vu a natural, realistic psychological experience no doubt accounts for Nerval's careful positioning of his narrator at the beginning of *Sylvie*, his most intensely paramnesiac text. There, the narrator/hero undertakes his first journey into the Valois as a subject who is sleep deprived and prone to hypnagogic states.[11] In carefully establishing this context, Nerval tells us, in effect, that one does not have to be epileptic or psychotic to be faced with the uncanny duplications of déjà vu; as again his carefully devised first chapters suggest (and much of the literature on déjà vu has in fact argued), all it takes to create an experience of déjà vu is a bit of fatigue or some momentary depressive or "psychasthenic" state. In

[8] Thus for example, in *Le Voyage en Orient*, the narrator evokes a belief in reincarnation ("une existence antérieure"); in *Aurélia*, he writes of a world he visits in which the "ghost of objects accompanied that of bodies" in a formulation suggestive of a belief in *revenants*, he also casts a scene that seems to promise an "eternal return" (Nerval 1978, 362; idem 1993, 703–04 and 724).

[9] For a survey of parapsychological approaches see chapter 10 of Brown 2004. Interestingly, Lalande, who otherwise relies on well-recognized models of individual psychology, nevertheless introduces the notion of telepathy in the last section of his article, on the basis of evidence provided by "hypnotists, doctors, and psychologists" (Lalande 1893, 495–96).

[10] Bergson writes that déjà vu is close to "dream-like impressions" (Bergson 1908, 590). Havelock Ellis discusses déjà vu in an article entitled "Memory in Dreams" that he subsequently placed in his book *The World of Dreams*. He writes "I think we must search for the clue of the mechanism of illusion (i.e. of déjà vu) in those dreaming and hypnagogic states in which it most often occurs" (Ellis [1922] 1976, 257–58). Brown provides a brief survey of theories connecting dream and déjà vu (Brown 2004, 75–6).

[11] Poulet points out that this strategy relies on creating a space where dream prevails, and thus "the perception of reality can be lost" (Poulet 1966b, 17).

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short, the déjà vu moments of *Sylvie* seem designed in such a way as to be taken for the "waking hallucinations" of a sane writer.

Steering us away from a pathological model, the writer invests in a phenomenologically attuned picture, one that falls easily within the confines of the often quoted, consensual definition by Arnaud – a definition that has kept its currency among psychiatrists: "The true déjà vu has two central features: its *intensity*, which often borders on conviction, and the *feeling* of an *identity* between the subjective experience and that assumed to be recollected" (Arnaud 1896, 456; quoted in Berrios). The anguish felt by the narrator/hero around these different mnemonic confusions (an anguish which has been duly noted by a number of nineteenth-century investigators, particularly by Grasset, as being a defining feature of déjà vu) is mild enough to suggest that the narrator's experience is anything but clinical.[12] Clearly, the picture the reader is meant to draw from Nerval's account of paramnesiac moments is not that of a pathological dysfunction of memory and perception, but rather an overall impression that pertains to the act of remembering itself: a new awareness of the way in which nostalgia can lure us into seeing memories when there are none. This is why the precise identification and labeling of déjà vu experiences presents such a challenge in *Sylvie*: rather than focusing exclusively on well-defined accidental misperceptions and confusions, Nerval invests in a phenomenal universe consistently, obsessively defined by a problematic, disquieting feeling of identity between now and some elusive past context. In short, in *Sylvie* (as Proust was himself the first to remark), déjà vu blends in so seamlessly with reminiscence that the whole text gives off the impression of a waking hallucination in which perception and memory have become indistinguishable.

These very features, it could be argued, make of *Sylvie* a historical and possibly even clinical landmark in the presentation of memory, as is hinted by Raymond Jean's perceptive comment:

> Before Nerval the past, the world of recollections was only seized objectively, through the voluntary, quasi-mechanical exercise of memory (by the "great" romantics for example): with him, it became the object of immediate subjective knowledge, of a knowledge that cannot be separated from an anguish, a sense of the uncanny (*un trouble*), and which is born from a deep exploration into the depth of time. (Jean 1964, 133)

If Jean's argument and mine hold – if it is indeed true that Nerval captures in his text the disquieting, unsettling moments of misperception or misremembering that we call déjà vu – then we must assume that the exercise of literature, as he conceived of it, made him overcome what looks like an obvious and impossible challenge: the idea that one can enter into another's mind to share his or her "waking hallucinations."

[12] "Without anguish, there is no phenomenon of déjà vu," Grasset asserts and then proceeds to describe the complex of emotions (growing anguish and fear of madness) that characterize this mental condition (Grasset 1904, 17–18).

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In his recently published book, Peter Krapp very convincingly evokes and accounts for the skepticism that so naturally greets the idea that déjà vu could be studied empirically or scientifically: "The fact remains: déjà vu is not shared, and it cannot be remembered or repeated at will. It eludes recall, and at times it will produce false memories in turn. It will necessarily subvert a theory of collective memory, as it subverts ideas of rationality. Its unrepeatable repetition also poses a challenge to media technology" (Krapp 2004, xx). Nerval's fiction suggests, meanwhile, that it is the very nature of the challenges posed by déjà vu – as a phenomenal, cognitive and emotional state – that might account for its literary presence. A purely internal and volatile phenomenon buried deep in someone's mind or brain, it remains invisible to an outsider (even in our age of sophisticated brain-imagining technology) and cannot lend itself to empirical re-testing.[13] The only evidence we have of its existence occurs through language: we know it as an effect of verbal (re)presentations. This is precisely where literature comes into play; as the art of narrative and an act of representation and imagination, it succeeds precisely where science reaches its limits. Clinical observations appear to support these phenomenological considerations. Not only do we owe many descriptions of déjà vu to literary authors (Dickens, Paul Bourget, Proust, and Joseph Heller are often cited), but researchers have been quick to observe a correlation between accounts of such experiences and a segment of the population defined as "*les émotionnels et les artistes*" and "educated people, and notably people of more than average intellect, who use their brains much, especially in artistic and emotional work" (Grasset 1904, 25; Ellis [1922] 1976, 240).[14] It would seem then that this parallel is worth investigating in greater depth.

The cultural currency of déjà vu

The prevalence of déjà vu experiences in a literary and generally educated population warrants the introduction of a different kind of explanation, which we owe to Pierre Janet. While still in the early stages of his investigations into memory and allied phenomena, Janet is struck by the fact that his patients will only begin recounting déjà vu experiences once someone has told them about the existence of this phenomenon.[15] He thus concludes, in an article published in the *Journal of Psychology*, that like hysteria

[13] I show briefly, in the next section, how déjà vu has gained visibility and currency in recent years – as a topic represented or "talked about" in the scientific as well as popular literature, and in the media (see the film *Memento* for example, which plays on the confusions of memory).

[14] Sno and Linzsen give a rich list of mostly English texts in which examples of déjà vu are to be found. Meanwhile in France, the debates in the *Revue philosophique* and the *Journal de psychologie* relied heavily on the examples provided by Paul Bourget and Léon Daudet.

[15] Brown's recent account would seem to confirm this finding, as he writes that déjà vu represents "an artefact of the interview situation and measures only the willingness of an individual to admit to an experience that may be universal" (Brown 2004, 26).

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déjà vu must be of a pithiatic nature (Janet 1905, 296). Drawing on a line of thought that also defines his conception of remembrance, he places déjà vu in a context of social exchanges: it responds to suggestion and takes its shape, as a psychological "event," from previous narratives that have defined it.[16] Janet turns his clinical subjects into story-tellers, and their complaints or "cases" into instances of how mental conditions relate to the art of narration. One can see then why an intellectual type, an "émotionnel," or an "artiste" might be more inclined and adept than an ordinary mortal at producing stories of déjà vu. However, the significance of this new model goes beyond helping us elucidate the connection between an active, creative mental life and the frequency of déjà vu experiences. It highlights the natural, and perhaps deep link there exists between narration and this "symptom without a psychological justification." Déjà vu thrives in a climate where the teller of this "mind story," far for being chastised for talking about a temporary aberration in the flow of consciousness and for indulging in a narrative bearing on an insignificant mental "glitch," is encouraged to share his experience.

Janet's idea that déjà vu can be correlated to socio-psychological trends and that it proliferates as if by narrative contamination makes much sense when we consider current cultural approaches. I had myself already watched with bemusement how my word processor automatically readjusts the spelling of this term when I read about the same observation in *The Déjà Vu Experience* (Brown 2004, 7). Brown also points out that a simple "google search" (probably our best instrument when it comes to gauging the currency of a concept in our time) will produce thousands of occurrences of this word – even discarding the number of times the term is used metaphorically, as part of a vernacular where it expresses the idea of an obvious, all too banal familiarity. Put next to Janet's premises that déjà vu may owe more to some psychological trend or our general "suggestibility" than to pathology, these observations are not as superficial as they may seem. They give the measure of déjà vu's strong social inscription in contemporary culture, as a recognizable psychological phenomenon. "I've just had a déjà vu experience" is a phrase often heard these days, just as we read in the local paper about the promises of a freshly baked *madeleine* that will evoke "Proustian moments." In the history of memory, déjà vu defines a trend in the subject's positioning with regards to time of which Proustian involuntary memory may be just a later development.

Indeed, two cultural critics and historians, Walter Benjamin and Pierre Nora, help us see how déjà vu relates to a historical era that produces a new styling or fashioning of the self, an era in which the exchange of "insignificant" stories of paramnesia can be validated. That the subjective, personal aspects of remembrance may be a fairly recent "invention" is an argument that Walter Benjamin presented in his essays on Proust and Baudelaire. Pierre Nora has made the same case, within the framework of the new

[16] Janet developed however a new theory in his 1928 lectures on *L'Evolution de la mémoire et du temps* in which he now defines déjà vu as "a misconceived analogy between precise memories and present perception" (Janet 1928, 322). His well-known definition of memory states that it "is a social reaction in a condition of absence."

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historiography of *Les Lieux de mémoire*. In his introduction, Nora argues for "a coming into existence of memory amidst individual identities," and suggests, in the same breath, that the invention of personal memory is bound up with a fear of oblivion (Nora 1984, 33). Marcel Proust, the famed "inventor" of involuntary memory, epitomizes for Nora a revealing turn towards an inward looking, highly subjective version of memory and a new impulse towards sentimental pilgrimages that epitomize a culture that so insistently "speaks of memory because it is already lost" (ibid., 31). However, the very notion of a commemorative journey undertaken to repeat a meaningful, emotion-filled private experience suggests that Nerval, who repeatedly charted his life along such personal pilgrimages, should probably figure in Nora's invocation of writers who re-defined our understanding of the past.[17]

In Nerval's case, it is the feeling of déjà vu, rather than involuntary memory, that epitomizes the mood and temporal awareness of a nineteenth-century that felt increasingly dispossessed of its personal past because of the advent of a modern universe of increasingly mechanized, computed, and fast forward moving time.[18] These intense, often problematic experiences of remembrance rehearsed or re-imagined that we find in Nerval's fiction seem then to herald a new era of preoccupation with subjective time and personal memory. For both Nerval and Proust meanwhile, an artistic practice turned towards memory becomes a way of compensating, in the realm of aesthetics, for the losses in "subjecthood" incurred in a modern technological age.[19]

Janet's theory no more than hints at a dimension of déjà vu that Proust's invention of involuntary memory will help us see, namely its aesthetics underpinnings. Paraphrasing Bergson, one could say that it is indeed for the "pleasure of actualizing in the mental world the laws of memory" that both Nerval and Proust indulge in literary scenarios of remembrance. Reading these writers one can wonder at times whether there is any reason for their sharing of these elaborate descriptions beyond the sheer pleasure of imagination. In that sense, both phenomena seem to embody (bearing in mind the Kantian definition of aesthetics), a "gratuitous" function or *dysfunction* of personal remembrance.[20] Adding to the paradox that consists in expounding "uselessly" on

[17] Nerval repeatedly traveled back to places endowed with strong emotional associations, especially in the last years of his life, when finding inspiration for his work became an increasing challenge. For a discussion of the romantic connection between remembrance and places, see Tadié 1999, 177–84. Brown cites research that shows a correlation between frequency of travel and déjà vu experiences (Brown 2004, 73).

[18] Roth writes "Such public concerns with memory and with the investigation of it can be considered screens on which a culture projects anxieties about repetition, change, representation, authenticity and identity. By examining cultural imaginations of remembering and forgetting we can learn much about the cultural investments in questions about continuity and change" (Roth 1989, 49). See also "Been There, Done That," the introduction to Krapp's book, which "historicizes and theorizes déjà vu, from its sustained discussions in the late nineteenth century to its latest cultural effects at the end of the twentieth century" (Krapp 2004, ix).

[19] For an extended discussion of the aesthetic dimensions of personal remembrance, see my own book *Architexts of Memory: Literature, Science, and Autobiography* (Ender 2005).

[20] In his 1908 article, Bergson briefly entertains the idea that mnemonic processes are connected to free aesthetic play in reference to associationism: "Perception would then attract a similar memory without any concern for

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mental images is the fact that both phenomena are naturally rare: it takes an unusually powerful mnemonic cue to produce a Proustian memory just as, for most of us, impressions of déjà vu are rare occurrences.[21] However, as Proust is so adept at showing, the personal, emotional rewards that accrue when expounding on the sudden upsurge of an involuntary memory are significant enough for an artist to want to cultivate such moments. In a subtle way, the first intimations of a déjà vu experience provide similar pleasures, at least initially, until sometimes a vague anguish arises around the confusion caused by this falsified perceptual cue or a temporary "internal hallucination" (Ellis [1922] 1976, 259).

From the perspective of memory studies, déjà vu represents the obverse side or the failure of the experience of involuntary remembrance. It is the absence of a properly identified referent (the prior event) or context (the scene of that earlier perceptual occurrence cannot be reconstructed) that could explain the unease, the sense of error that is its hallmark. "I have been here before, I have seen this in the past; yet I cannot tell where and when, so I must have been dreaming or deluding myself," Nerval tells us a number of times as he takes us into a perceptual, phenomenal scene of his own devising. But why bother to share a relatively meaningless perceptual experience, especially when it appears to be erroneous, as is the case with déjà vu? One can adduce historical reasons, in the wake of Benjamin and Nora, to argue that in sharing stories of false remembrance, the modern paramnesiac subject shows a resistance to collective time and to modernization. However, one can also identify in these new stories of déjà vu the emergence, in the nineteenth-century, of a new conception of memory at the convergence between the clinical/psychological and the aesthetic domains. In fact, the history of déjà vu suggests that these two explanations are related. The constant recourse to literary examples shows that the science of memory cannot be separated from the pursuit, in literature, of new modes of introspection and remembrance, such as we find them in Nerval and Proust.[22]

In Nerval's case, in spite of its possible psychopathological underpinnings, déjà vu represents a way of writing about the self: a way of enriching the representation

usefulness, for nothing – for the pleasure of actualizing in the mental world the laws of attraction that exist among physical bodies" (Bergson 1908, 587). He dismisses it however in favor of a biological theory of perception and memory driven towards practical action: he thus writes "the past reappears in consciousness only to the extent that it helps understand the present and foresee the future" (ibid.). My argument is that neither involuntary memory nor déjà vu can be understood fully within such a conception: they are indeed "without psychological justification."

[21] Gooddy approaches the question of déjà vu through the bias of epilepsy (Gooddy 1988, 123–27), in the wake of Hughling Jackson, who began to study the possible link between epilepsy and déjà vu in 1876. Nevertheless, neither involuntary memories nor impressions of déjà vu can "be repeated at will" or re-created artificially. However epilepsy or electrical stimulation of the left lobe might in certain cases trigger such mental experiences. For a presentation as well as survey of the literature on this subject, see Brown 2004, 81–88.

[22] In his conceptual history, Berrios suggests that the exploration of déjà vu is connected to the development of cognitive sciences. I go further, however, in arguing that this new science could not have developed in the absence of representations, provided by writers, of mental phenomena that cannot be observed empirically.

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of an inner universe of representation and imagination. Thus, in his willingness to share with his readers glimpses of a phenomenal universe, he sets the foundation for a project in representation of consciousness, whose prime impulse is both aesthetic and psychological. Indeed, we cannot overlook Janet's idea that recollection is by nature a social act, a "social reaction" and thus corresponds to a need or desire, on the writer's part, to *share* the uncanny confusions of déjà vu experiences. To that extent, human psychology becomes, like writing, an intersubjective enterprise: it calls another person – a listener, a reader – to witness. The need for such sharing must have been very acute in Nerval for him to be willing to stake his reputation on the representation of waking hallucinations: in committing himself to evoking paramnesia he risked reinforcing the notion that he was mad. He must have convinced himself, however, that his accounts of paramnesiac experiences would seem to his readers both relevant and meaningful. Proust proved him right in being among the first to respond with enthusiasm and great analytical finesse to Nerval's presentation of a literary universe suffused by paramnesia.

Such indeed was Proust's attraction to Nerval that it inspired him to emulate the nineteenth-century writer in his own *Recherche*. In an article published in *Romantisme*, Anne Simon argues in detail and very compellingly for Nerval's direct influence on Proust's *grand oeuvre*. Considering Proust's commitment to exploring time, consciousness, and memory in his *Recherche*, it would only seem natural that he would reach back to Nerval to learn about mental states in-between dreaming and waking, with their characteristic proliferation of images, and that he would seize on Nerval's fascination with the phenomenal universe haunted by memories. Richard Sieburth has argued that Nerval's fictions reveal "the kind of ever-shifting palimpsest created by a memory engaged in the simultaneous pressures of recollection and repression, inscription and obliteration" (Nerval 1999, 63).[23] Both these fictions exhibit a subject living in time, a subject who experiences consciousness as a double-stranded narrative born from an incessant shuttling between perception and memory. In Nerval, the pervasive presence of paramnesia reveals how memory presses onto consciousness, while the moments of déjà vu, with their intensity and hallucinatory vividness, forcefully evoke a theme that lies at the heart of Proust's *oeuvre*, namely the question of how we live in time.[24] In this context, Proustian involuntary memory looks like an outgrowth of Nerval's project, a project that in its descriptions of symptomatic moments when memory and perception seem to be out of step teaches us about the time-related dimensions of the human mind.[25] Proust's strong reading of déjà vu – not as a mere aberration of memory, but as a symptom of how the mind lives in time – invites

[23] I am quoting from the "Introductory Note to 'Angélique' and 'Sylvie.'"

[24] How we live "in time" (*dans la durée*) is the central question for Bergson, and the one that determines his perspective on paramnesia. Maurice Blanchot's essay "L'expérience de Proust" in *Le Livre à Venir* explores this topic in *A la Recherche*.

[25] Paul Ricoeur reminds us that "time becomes human time to the extent that it is articulated through narrative" (Ricoeur 1983, 105).

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us to return to scientific accounts of memory and to focus, in this instance, on a phenomenological approach.

Between memory and perception

The broadest of surveys of the scientific literature on déjà vu shows two distinctive lines of explanation, one that speaks of the phenomenon in terms of a failed perception, the other that understands it as a failure of proper remembrance.[26] The phrase by Janet that déjà vu represents *une perception du présent qui est ratée* (a failed perception of the present) best sums up déjà vu as perception. As for déjà vu and memory, the link has been made in several ways, for example by Joseph Grasset (who thinks of the connection in terms of unconscious memories), by Sigmund Freud (who tries, without too much conviction, to consider it within a libidinal model of repressed memories), and more recently by cognitive or neuroscientists for whom it signals the floating, unacknowledged manifestation of implicit memories prompted by the presence of unidentified cues in the subject's perceptual, phenomenal experience.[27]

These are, it would seem, opposed or contradictory interpretations of the phenomenon. Yet they both depend on the same structural view of perception and memory – a view that conceives of consciousness (or of the mental processes that lead to consciousness) as a series of "stills" or fixed images that "represent" (or present to the mind) what is either a mangled image of the "here and now" present in front of the subject or an imperfectly formed memory. This stance can be illustrated by one of the most recent theories of déjà vu, defended by Sno and Linszen, a theory which relies on the analogy of a hologram. When faced with too many similarities between a present perception and an image stored in long term memory, they explain, the brain or mind hesitates for a short time – the time of a déjà vu experience. But while it seems to reconcile the two sides – the perceptual and the mnemonic explanation – this theory still suffers from the same structural flaw as earlier models: it freezes the process of continuous, cinema-like consciousness around one frame, in an isolated, monadic fashion, whereas there is clearly a temporal aspect to déjà vu experiences. More broadly, it has been suggested, from Henri Bergson onwards, that mental phenomena are part of a continuous flow or flux of impressions, and that human temporality (or *durée*, as Bergson labeled it) cannot be left out of our attempts to make sense of how the mind works – or rather *fails* to work properly.

[26] Berrios focuses on this debate, which unfolded around the turn of the twentieth century, especially in the circles of the *Société Médico-Psychologique* (Berrios 1995, 126–127).

[27] Brown gives an excellent survey of the "Memory Explanations of Déjà vu" (Brown 2004, 147–170). Gooddy integrates his views on déjà vu as a minor dysfunction of mental "time-keeping" into a discussion of memory (Gooddy 1988, 87–93), whose tenet reads as follows: "What is implied by continuous memory is a set or series of selected memories (mentally recallable) and partly amenable to description which is not interrupted by any known abnormal period of consciousness or unconsciousness" (ibid., 92).

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Recent neuroscientific accounts of human consciousness have indeed consistently argued that the mind is a dynamic structure which produces, during conscious, waking hours, a continuously unfolding reel of mnemonic, perceptual as well as proprioceptive images. All mental phenomena, including déjà vu, will then have to be understood as unfolding in time, and as part of a dynamic, carefully timed and rhythmical organization of images of the past, present, and future. This formulation borrows from the recent works of both Antonio Damasio and Oliver Sacks (see, for example, Damasio 1994 and Sacks 2004b). But it is in a study by William Gooddy entitled *Time and the Nervous System* that we might find the most compelling neurological case for a view of déjà vu in which memory and perception are not seen in opposition, but rather as interlaced components of consciousness whose careful articulation enables us to "function" in the world.[28] "What we perceive as present," Gooddy writes, "is the vivid fringe of memory tinged with anticipation," while, he further argues, the phenomenology of nervous activity constantly demands, during our waking hours, that we take on "our conscious responsibility in forming our own images of the universe" (Gooddy 1988, 11). Nerval seems to echo, or rather to anticipate, this view in acknowledging that his mandate in *Sylvie* consists in reordering his memories: *recomposons nos souvenirs*, he writes (Nerval 1993, 544) and his literary project provides a vivid illustration of Gooddy's theory that we must "develop a continuous time-sense" by organizing the "memory-items" that we ceaselessly gather into a narrative, that is into a "serial time-order" (ibid., 89).

This injunction to organize into a serial and well-ordered narrative a welter of images that correspond to multiple layerings of the past – while, moreover, paramnesia threatens to create further confusion – is no easy task. To that extent, the narrative of *Sylvie* represents a moving testimony to one man's heroic attempt to share with his readers what it means to take on "the conscious responsibility of forming" not merely the images, but the *ordered narrative* of a life – and this when the clarity of that narrative is most probably impaired by mental illness. This is not to say that a clinical explanation, with its focus on Nerval's madness, necessarily provides the most compelling and convincing account of his paramnesiac writing. In fact, because of the scarcity of materials and because of the way in which biographical and literary materials have inevitably become blended over time, a clinical account could rely on no solid evidence.[29] Pursuing the phenomenological aspects of déjà vu in Nerval will turn out to be both more profitable and less problematic in terms of methodology.

[28] "Physiological, neural normality reflects a balance between excitatory and inhibitory systems in the brain, a balance which, in the absence of drugs or damage, has remarkable latitude and resilience" writes Sacks in his article "Speed" (2004b, 69). Oliver Sacks' essay in *The New Yorker*, which examined neurological symptoms from the perspective of a sensory psychology and in their temporal phenomenology, is clearly written in the wake of Gooddy's theories.

[29] For studies that carefully sift through the issue of biography versus literature, see Poulet's essays as well as Shoshana Felman, *Writing and Madness*; Michel Jeanneret, *La Lettre perdue: Ecriture et folie dans l'oeuvre de Gérard de Nerval*; Laure Murat, *La maison du docteur Blanche: histoire d'un asile et de ses pensionnaires, de Nerval à Maupassant*, and the biography of Nerval by Claude Pichois and Michel Brix.

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Gooddy's theory of mental processes and of the time-bound aspects of human existence harks back, unwittingly perhaps, to the phenomenological conception of the human mind presented by the philosopher Henri Bergson. His explanation of déjà vu naturally overlaps with Bergson's conception of the articulation of perception and memory, which he discusses extensively in his 1908 article "Le souvenir du présent et la fausse reconnaissance." Returning to his earlier work *Matière et Mémoire*, Bergson establishes a model that has groundbreaking implications for déjà vu, one moreover that does not oppose the perceptual and the mnemonic accounts, but on the contrary, combines them:

> We claim that the formation of memory is never posterior to that of perception; it is necessarily contemporary with it. At the same time as perception is created, memories outline themselves, in the same way as a shadow is cast by a body. But, in normal conditions, consciousness ignores the shadow cast by memory, just as I cannot see my own shadow when I turn to look at it, because it is in the light. (Bergson 1908, 576)

Through his explanation of *fausse reconnaissance* as a temporary abnormality or aberration in the organization of memory and perception, Bergson comes to the same conclusions as Gooddy, albeit through a different figure. The image of a body and its shadow enables him to consider both the structure of doubling or "shadowing" that characterizes the relation between perception and memory, and the dominance, in ordinary mental circumstances, of the perception over the memory. The *fausse reconnaissance* – the misrecognition of déjà vu – represents a disturbance or exceptional event within the mind's temporal flow; it is the effect of an unusual syncopation that throws consciousness out of its natural, forward looking rhythm. Instead of focusing on the perception, the mind engages with the memory that lingers in its trail, and, in the case of paramnesia experiences a momentary confusion.[30] To summarize this process, Bergson relies on an evocative phrase – *lâcher la proie pour l'ombre*. The French idiom has no direct equivalent in English, and a paraphrase will have to do: in the mentally dysfunctional characteristic of paramnesia, the mind, as it were, drops its prey (a perception) to chase a shadow, namely the memory.

Gooddy relies on a different figure, which is central to his conception of a neurology founded on time, timing, and rhythms; he invites us to conceive of the physiological/neurological/mental universe that defines a conscious human being in terms of a clock and its escape system. "Man," he writes, "being equipped with a sense of space and a sense of time, may be considered as a clock system aware of itself" (Gooddy 1988, 64). The perfectly working, the well-oiled clock integrates in a seamless fashion the physiological and neurological regulatory process that happens naturally in the body and in so doing it helps man respond to the demands of action, with properly

[30] Bergson uses the word *attention*, which means "attending to" but also paves the way for the key phenomenological notion of intentionality.

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timed gestures, behaviors, ideas, and anticipation. At the outset of his article, "Temporal Perception, Aphasia, and Déjà Vu," the researcher in neurophysiology and biophysics Robert Efron usefully provides us with what could be, perhaps, the subtext behind Gooddy's analogy, as he writes:

> In order to deal appropriately with the events in its environment, an animal must perform at least two essential actions. It must be able to identify and characterize an event, and it must also be able to determine when the particular event occurred in relation to other events. Without the capacity to accurately identify both the nature as well as the time of occurrence of an event, effective action would be impossible. (Efron 1963, 403)

In the wake of this claim, Efron suggests that in order to function, a human being must be able to keep an internal time-log. Gooddy, however, takes this metaphor one step further in relating personal time-keeping to consciousness through the image of a clock. In this analogy, consciousness becomes an instrument for time-keeping, not only with regards to an external, cosmological frame, but *internally*, as "our consciousness of the flow of existence" (Gooddy 1988, 59). Yet, Gooddy argues, in spite of its pervasiveness (or perhaps because of it), "this time awareness" through which "we feel that we ourselves live" remains elusive and mysterious (ibid.). Knowing about one's personal time demands "introspection, analysis, and conscious exposition," which are absorbing and unusually private activities demanding that we "enter upon an exploration of our . . . inner selves" (ibid., 60).

All absorbing as they are, these are, on the other hand, precisely the kinds of activities that Nerval or Proust seem keen to undertaking: introspection is, for these writers, the very stuff of fiction. With Nerval, it must have been the occasional breaking down of his internal biological clock – with déjà vu as one of the symptoms – that led him to explore the theme of "time-awareness" through the instruments of "introspection, analysis, and conscious exposition." Jolted out of the natural, rhythmical flow of perception and memory, he found himself in paramnesiac states that alerted him to the necessity of "recomposing his memories." One could then argue that Nerval's momentary hallucinations of memories in the present became the foundation of a narrative project.[31]

But perhaps the relation between writing and paramnesia should be seen from the opposite perspective, starting with the idea that the practice of writing can, in itself, trigger paramnesia. Building on Lalande's notion that déjà vu impressions tend to occur in states of mental excitation (Lalande 1893, 492), Havelock Ellis writes: "Distraction, excited hyperaesthesia simulating increased power, and various chronic

[31] I am suggesting here that Nerval's writing highlights, through its very self-consciousness, the kind of "everyday praxis" described by Ricoeur in *Temps et récit* – a praxis that "orders and composes (*ordonne*) with respect to each other present and future, *present and past*, present and present" and "represents the most basic of inductors of narrative" (Ricoeur 1983, 119; emphasis mine).

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psychic states due to a highly-strung or over-strained nervous system may all tend in the same direction. . . . This is doubtless why it is that so many poets, novelists, and other men of strenuous intellectual aptitude are liable to this experience" (Ellis [1922] 1976, 249). We return to Nerval's writing, bearing this ambiguity in mind.

Fiction as case study

Sylvie reveals many moments of déjà vu – that is moments in which images or scenes are endowed with an uncanny intensity and hallucinatory qualities connected to the powerful presence of a memory.[32] The story is built around a sentimental, nostalgic journey to the Valois (the region of Nerval's childhood), but a state of confusion between past and present, memory and actuality, prevails from the outset. Caught in a world between dreaming and waking, the narrator/hero is soon wrapped up in a turmoil of impressions that cannot be easily located in time or in space – keeping an eye on the internal clock, writing the log-book of his inner experiences becomes even more difficult when it turns out that the hero has no watch: "*Je n'avais pas de montre*," he declares (Nerval 1993, 543).[33] It is tempting to see in this seemingly innocuous detail an indication that, in *Sylvie*, time gets out of kilter; and indeed, this observation about a missing watch introduces a succession of paramnesiac encounters. In the process of writing his text, Nerval seems to have intuited that this journey into a space haunted by memories had put him out of touch with the natural timing of his mind – would render him, as it were, "clock-less."[34]

The missing watch draws our attention to a general feature often remarked upon by Nerval's readers: the story's complex temporal layering. The blurring between perception, memory, and dream that characterizes the nervalian phenomenal universe seems to challenge our natural instinct towards a linear narrative in which present and past can easily be separated. The absent watch in *Sylvie* is merely the emblem for a more encompassing mental state – that of the writer's strained, abnormal relation to time. Indeed, problems with time or, as Sacks puts it, with the "human perceptual rate," are a hallmark of Nerval's writing throughout, and not only of *Sylvie* (Sacks 2004b, 60). A closer analysis of his writing reveals an unusual awareness of discrepancies, variations, and aberrations in "perceptual rate." A first example of this theme appears

[32] See for instance, chap. 4, "Adrienne"; chap. 6, "Othys"; and chap. 8, "Le Bal de Loisy." These chapters provide examples of "tableaux in an unreal color, that we do not see in reality, that words themselves cannot evoke, but that we sometimes see in our dreams," Proust writes (Proust 1954, 185).

[33] "The thought becomes a mad clock. All the hours, all times seem to wish to be everywhere present at the same time," Poulet writes in *The Metamorphoses of the Circle* (Poulet 1966a, 170).

[34] We know that *Sylvie* was written, in parts, after a trip that Nerval took to the Valois, after he begged to be released from the clinic of Dr. Blanche so that he could find "external matter" for his fiction in revisiting places connected to his earlier, happier years. His concern was indeed that his imagination was turning in circles – that is, as Ellis might have argued – that it was bent on "inner hallucinations."

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in his interpretation of Goethe's *Faust* (a text Nerval translated at the age of eighteen): "the eternal clock, held back by an invisible finger, and again arrested on a certain day long past is about to run amok like the movement of a clock in which the chain is broken" (Goethe [1840] 1962, 17). In the same text, Nerval writes about déjà vu in such forceful terms that one cannot help feeling that the author is writing from experience:

> Est-ce le souvenir qui se fait présent ici? Ou les mêmes faits qui se sont passés se produisent-ils une deuxième fois dans le même détail? C'est une de ces hallucinations effrayantes du rêve et même de certains instants de vie, où il semble qu'on refait une action déjà faite et qu'on redit des paroles déjà dites, prévoyant, à mesure, les choses qui vont se passer. (Ibid.)[35]

Nerval's description exhibits indeed all the features which, according to Lalande, are characteristic of déjà vu: "the appearance of an identical reproduction," "emotional power," as well as "an impression of foresight" (Lalande 1893, 490). The overall picture one gets of Nerval's disorders, particularly from reading *Sylvie* and *Aurélia* also fits Jean Delay's clinical description, in *Les Maladies de la mémoire*, of acute forms of paramnesia shown among his patients:

> Ceaselessly tossed between new representations that he takes for old ones, and old representations that are taken for new ones, he lives in a state of maddening uncertainty between the present and the past, between false memories that he believes are true and true memories whose reality does not seem compelling to him. He is caught amidst a chaos of irrealities he endorses and realities he denies. (Delay 1961, 117)[36]

The literary critic Jean Richer, who discusses Nerval's "irrealism" in the wake of Janet and on the basis of biographical as well as textual sources, concludes that "the feeling of déjà vu in Nerval is unquestionably related to the kind of psychasthenia that leads to acute anguish or delirium" (Richer [1963] 1970, 613). Commenting on *Aurélia*, Richer further validates this interpretation in suggesting that "as the son of a

[35] "Has memory become the present in this case? Or is it, rather, that the same facts which have already happened are taking place a second time, with the same detail? This is one of those frightening hallucinations of dreams or even of certain moments of life, where it seems that one repeats an action already accomplished and speaks again words already spoken, predicting all the while things that are yet to happen." In order to highlight the rich ambiguities of Nerval's description, I am citing the French in the text, for with the word "*présent*" meaning both "actual" and "of the present," and the pun on "se sont passés," the French version offers indeed a more interesting "take" on déjà vu than the English translation can suggest – one which encompasses both the temporal aspect and the perceptual dilemma at the heart of the experience.

[36] While Delay's description echoes the overall feeling of paramnesia of *Sylvie*, it applies even better to the more acute anguish and confusion of *Aurélia*, a narrative that documents the way dreaming "bleeds" into "real life" (*l'épanchement du songe dans la vie réelle*) and speaks of an existence in which everything "sometimes takes on a double aspect" (Nerval 1993, 699).

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doctor and himself a former medical student, Nerval sought to give his descriptions a quasi-scientific rigor" (ibid., 450).

Indeed, in his most closely autobiographical account of dream-like, hallucinatory states – in *Aurélia*, namely – Nerval writes extensively about those moments when the mind seems to undergo a sudden acceleration, and images flow one into another at an amazing, quasi-supernatural speed. While this seems to confirm Lalande's hypothesis that "in the first place perhaps paramnesia might be occasioned by this singular and yet indefinable acceleration that our thinking sometimes undergoes," it could be an indication as well, as Nerval himself dimly knew, of some clinical, psychiatric condition – a delirious, manic state (Lalande 1893, 492). But the interlacing, in *Aurélia*, of a literary account with a set of symptoms raises its own questions. Is paramnesia merely embedded in the text or is it produced in the very act of writing? To what extent can we separate Nerval's artistic practice as a writer intent on capturing or creating images from some initial medical condition in which mental processes are accelerated to an unusual degree leading to the confusion and the waking hallucinations that define déjà vu?[37] What is the nature of the connection between literary inspiration and paramnesia? We would probably need a richer phenomenological grasp of the activity of writing than is available to answer these questions conclusively. But we can still try to speculate, even if only succinctly, on the evidence at hand.

We saw with Janet that paramnesia responds to persuasion – that it is deeply connected, in fact, to a self that can be prompted to narrate and configure in a certain way his or her mental states. Nerval may have created déjà vu experiences through the very act of imagining and remembering demanded by literary creation. Bergson is helpful here: he argues that these types of experiences are deemed to occur in an unusual, artificial context where the mind is too exclusively fixated on representations at the expense of action. A proclivity to focus on "representations as if they were an end in itself," he writes is less than natural (Bergson 1908, 587). This observation throws a richer light onto Nerval's masterful descriptions of a feeling of déjà vu, a description that is coined in terms of competing representations. Reflecting on why he may have fallen in love so quickly with the actress Aurélie, the narrator of *Sylvie* concludes that the cause for this infatuation lies in an uncanny similarity: he had met her before, in another incarnation, in the guise of Adrienne. A comparison between a sketch and a painting is what enables Nerval to render, in words, the phenomenal nuances of the conjunction and confusion between memory and perception characteristic of a déjà vu experience:

[37] Oliver Sacks' description would apply here: "The speed of such neural interactions is normally regulated by a delicate balance of excitatory and inhibitory forces, but there are certain conditions in which inhibitions are relaxed. Dreams can take wing, move freely and swiftly because the activity of the cerebral cortex is not constrained by external perception or reality. Similar considerations, perhaps, apply to the trances induced by mescaline and hashish" (Sacks 2004b, 65). I am arguing here that perhaps the extreme concentration demanded by writing, when Nerval is in a "writing spell," creates effects similar to those that Sacks attributes to dreams.

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> This resemblance to a figure I had long forgotten was now taking shape with singular vividness; it was a pencil sketch smudged by time that was now turning into a painting, like those studies by the Old Masters that one has admired in some museums, only to discover their dazzling original somewhere else. (Nerval 1999, 151)

A significant page of Bergson's discussion of *fausse reconnaissance* reads like a commentary on the experience described by the writer. The philosopher writes:

> Our present existence, in its gradual unfolding over time, carries another layer (*se double*) whose existence is virtual, like a mirror image. Every moment of our existence thus offers two aspects: one present, the other virtual; perception on one side, memory on the other . . . . Imagine a mind that is conscious of this doubling or layering. Suppose that the reflection of our perception and our action were to come back to us not when the perception is complete and the action accomplished, but while we are perceiving and acting. (Bergson 1908, 581)

The mirroring effect described here provides a compelling explanation for the overlay of representations and the holographic interplay that Nerval attempts to describe. It defines a shift of perceptual intensity – as a matter of fact, a shift in which the memory ends up overriding, outshining the perceptual image. When the emphasis falls on the virtual rather than the actual dimensions of the representation, something happens in the carefully timed narrative of consciousness that breaks its natural rhythm: the mind falls "out of synch," lured by a mnemonic shadow rather than the object in front of it. But Nerval's description reveals even more, namely a fascination with, almost an addiction to representations. His texts again and again exhibit what is best described as the exhilarating "thrill" of an unbounded imagination.

Such passion for images is surely the mark of a writer and poet; it is also, Bergson remarks, an anomalous or unnatural preference. Indeed, Nerval is the very example of a man who, in the philosopher's words, likes to dwell in "representations as if they were an end in themselves," instead of directing his attention to the outer world (ibid., 587). We have his testimony, from his notebooks, that this is what he experienced (and desired, perhaps): "Superiority of the present over the past," he asserts. In another of his carnets, he writes, "La pensée est mieux prouvée que la matière, laquelle peut n'être qu'une illusion, comme dans un rêve" ("thought is easier to prove than matter, which is perhaps no more than an illusion that we have in a dream").[38] From a philosophical viewpoint, these aphorisms denounce materialism and implicitly endorse the subjectivism that is the mark of Nerval's most elaborate literary productions. The writer in him expresses here his resistance to a mundane form of realism too exclusively driven towards the depiction of a supposedly "objective" material world, while the paramnesiac confirms

[38] Richer cites these two passages (Richer [1963] 1970, 614–15). From the psychopathological perspective, these episodes could be related to a process of depersonalization or dissociation that are sometimes invoked in the framework of déjà vu, as discussed by Brown (2004, 100–02) and Sno and Linzsen (1990, 100).

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his allegiance to a mode of thought given to subverting "ideas of rationality" (Krapp 2004, xx).

However, in giving free rein to his imagination and privileging an inner universe, Nerval runs the risks of an "inattention to life" that, according to Bergson, "leads us to conceive of the present as if it were a repetition of the past" (Bergson 1908, 571). But perhaps this is too negative a view of his accomplishments. One might argue, to the contrary, that the literary author succeeds in turning the predicament denounced by the philosopher into a glorious privilege: the ability to transcend the present or to experience time differently. And here again, Nerval meets Proust: an existence lived in its virtual dimension and in the light of memory, thanks to literature, is both a life out of time and one that produces, in Proust's phrase, "un peu de temps a l'état pur."

Le Voyage en Orient is Nerval's most adventurous text, a text where, under the pretence of travel to a magical Orient, the narrator most clearly expresses his wish for an existence freed from time and from the ticking of a clock – for "minutes affranchies de l'ordre du temps."[39] What better solution indeed for someone who keeps experiencing the jolt of unexpected, uncanny memories than to desire mastery over cosmic time? In the *Voyage*, the narrator (or his double) experiences extremes of paramnesia leading to depersonalization (he sees himself as his double), he also feels déjà vu in its acutest, most irrational sense: "Where had I seen him before? In what universe had we previously met, what earlier existence?" (Nerval 1978, 362). Describing the influence of hashish, Nerval's narrator celebrates the mind's ability to "wander happy and free. Through one easy beating of the wings it traverses many atmospheres filled with unspeakable joy, and this in the space of a minute that seems eternal, because sensations follow each other so quickly" (ibid., 361). Next to such euphoric versions of an existence not bounded by clock time, one encounters darker scenarios as well, in which "human perceptual time" threatens to lose its coherence, in a drift suggestive of mania or depression. "There are times," the author writes, "when life multiplies its pulsations against the laws of time, like a mad clock whose chain is broken; others where everything stretches into sensations that are indifferent or hardly worth writing down" (ibid., 521). While this passage might support a benign interpretation (which would praise Nerval's ability to describe variations in our subjective experience of time), it also invites a clinically oriented reading, of the kind that William Gooddy or Oliver Sacks sketch out for us, when they recognize in the irregularities of time (in time "elastic, compressed or expanded") the symptoms of neurological disorders. In writing about a time out of kilter through the revealing image of a clock running wild, Nerval might unwittingly be talking about his own illness.

[39] Citing Proust again, these two formulations are taken from his description in *Le Temps retrouvé* of the philosophical revelations provided by involuntary memory. Poulet evokes Nerval's resistance to time (in *Sylvie,*he argues, "the dimension is eliminated as much as possible") and he also cites two key passages in which "time is considered as a hostile or foreign element" (Poulet 1966b, 17).

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The issue is still, however, *where* and *how* this all begins. Does the writer's ability to evoke the "internal hallucinations" characteristic of a paramnesiac universe help him overcome his episodes of delirium (as writing forces on him a re-ordering and reframing of his mental experiences)? Or does writing actually feed his paramnesia? These questions can profitably be raised within the framework of nineteenth-century etiology, with its neat distinctions between "causes prédisposantes" and "causes provocantes." A strong faculty of imagination might be the source (or "cause prédisposante") of a modification in the "human perceptual rate" to the point where this "indefinable acceleration" jolts the mind out of its natural rhythm – leading to missteps or loops in the flow of perceptions and memories. Or perhaps we must assume the existence of a psychological terrain conducive to paramnesia, in which case the activity of writing itself, with its exclusive focus on representations would act as a "cause provocante" in enhancing the mind's pathological tendency towards hallucination. This dilemma leads us back to our premises: the often remarked upon connection between paramnesia and the literary mind.

Pierre Janet envisages this connection from a different angle when he suggests that "it could even be argued that déjà vu presents the same feeling of mental duplication that exists in play and in the work of art, but without the freedom that ordinarily characterizes imagination" (Janet 1905, 306). While reminding us that re-presentation is at the heart of both experiences – aesthetic play as well as paramnesia –, Janet invites us, furthermore, to consider these activities in terms of a contrast between freedom and compulsion. In the art of fiction, imagination can roam freely or, in Nerval's words, can take its wing. This fact may have profound implications for Nerval's situation as a creator of fiction at the borders of madness. The art of writing might have represented, in this case, the saving gesture towards the overcoming of the compulsive, obsessive nature of certain images. Art, because it defines a space of free play, might have provided him, sometimes by no more than a hair-breadth, with a precious opportunity to overcome and transcend the moment of anguishing confusion that arises when a man's internal clock that helps him make sense of reality runs amok.

Jean-Paul Sartre closes his vast investigation into the phenomenology of imagination with a comparison between art and paramnesia, in which he declares: "The aesthetic contemplation of real objects is endowed with the same structure as paramnesia, in which a real object functions like an analogon of itself in the past. Paramnesia differs from an aesthetic attitude in the same way as memory differs from imagination" (Sartre 1940, 246). Sartre's commentary confirms what we have intuited all along, namely that paramnesia and aesthetic apprehension run along parallel lines, as a place where a "real object" (or a perception) are negated to make way for an image (or a memory) endowed with sensory, phenomenal intensities. But paramnesia and aesthetic practice are also opposed. As a spontaneous, involuntary phenomenon of the mind, paramnesia is a symptom of a certain kind of physiological, neurological event; a page of Nerval's writing, meanwhile, is the emanation of a mind – however haunted, affected or tormented it may be by physiological irregularities. And this page of literature remains

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his active creation, although the light might be dim, the hand weak, or the paper so scarce that every white space has to be covered with scribbles. It is thus that we owe to Nerval, and to Proust after him, a testimony of what it means to live as a human being in time: their fascination with memory and their corresponding literary and imaginative talent in producing sensation-ridden subjective images are part of an unfolding history of mind and memory. They let us see how we humans try to mark our time. Proust's *paperolles* falling from his bed are, in that respect, not much different from the scattered pieces of paper found in Nerval's pockets on his death. Physiologically, neurologically speaking, it may well be true that man (or woman) functions like "a clock system aware itself" but it is equally true that what makes the greatness of a Nerval or a Proust is precisely an ability to capture a time whose measure is unlike that of any clock, a time defined by its qualitative, phenomenal aspects and whose ultimate value lies in the freedom of aesthetic creation.

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