The *Roman tragique* and the Discourse of Nervalian Madness

CATHERINE LOWE

Perhaps the most stunning and certainly the most engaging aspect of Gérard de Nerval's writings is the ubiquity of the first person narrator. Although this narrative strategy has frequently been as much an excuse as a trap for those readers who would insist that "l'étude de l'œuvre sera constamment mariée à la connaissance approfondie de la biographie," it is no less symptomatic of Nerval's personal rhetoric. However, if the interdependence of "la vie" and "l'œuvre" is confirmed by certain incontrovertible biographical data, the force of any conclusions to be drawn should be directed less toward the assumption that the texts at hand are only thinly veiled attempts at autobiography than toward the establishment of a henceforth undeniable relationship between events in the life of Gérard Labrunie and the literary creations of Gérard de Nerval. Rather than a superposition of biography and autobiography, there is a causal relationship to be discerned between fact and fiction:

la crise de 1841 marque une étape importante de l'"organisation" de son œuvre. Toutes sortes de documents indiquent qu'à travers son expérience du rêve et du désordre mental de nombreux thèmes se fixent, de nombreuses pensées et réflexions se cristallisent, qui entreront dans ces écrits à venir.

Il entre désormais dans une période de sa vie où internements et hospitalisations se succéderont à un rythme serré, où le désordre de l'esprit, en dépit de nombreuses et longues rémissions, le submergera de plus en plus. Il est caractéristique que ce soit celle de ses chefs-d'œuvre.

En effet, les crises de 1851–1853 paraissent coïncider avec une étonnante recrudescence de l'inspiration et du travail de Nerval.

That an intimate relationship exists for Nerval between madness and literary creation cannot be contested. Yet the nature and degree of the coincidence itself is not of concern here, nor will there be offered any description of, or explanation for, the "mental disorder" itself, since, even if a reader were able to present some reasonable speculation, it would, at best, remain necessarily suspect. The factual lacuna is, however, compensated for by Nerval himself, who, on several occasions, makes explicit the exact dimensions of a textual coincidence of madness and artistic creation. Moreover, if he announces at the end of his
preface to Les Filles du feu his intention to recount the story of his madness—"Quelque jour j’écrirai l’histoire de cette ‘descente aux enfers’"—it is with the aim of its definition that he includes the Roman tragique in this same preface. It is, therefore, in terms of this textual definition that I shall speak of Nervalian madness and attempt to determine precisely of what it consists.

The preface to Les Filles du feu is a short dedicatory piece entitled "A Alexandre Dumas." It was written in reply to some rather injudicious remarks made by Dumas in his introduction of El Desdichado to the readers of Le Mousquetaire on the occasion of its original publication in 1853. In a sentence that Nerval omitted from his citation of this introduction in his own preface, Dumas insinuated that the extreme to which the poet’s imagination had taken him was that of madness: “Alors notre pauvre Gérard, pour les hommes de science, est malade et a besoin de traitement, tandis que pour nous, il est tout simplement plus conteur, plus rêveur, plus spirituel, plus gai ou plus triste que jamais” (p. 1264). Nerval countered vehemently with the assertion that, quite to the contrary, an author’s identification with a fictional character, the gesture upon which Dumas had founded his claim of madness, was a hazard of the profession to which some writers, more than others, occasionally fell prey:

"Je vais essayer de vous expliquer, mon cher Dumas, le phénomène dont vous avez parlé plus haut. Il est, vous le savez, certains conteurs qui ne peuvent inventer sans s’identifier aux personnages de leur imagination. . . .

Hé bien, comprenez-vous que l’entrainement d’un récit puisse produire un effet semblable; que l’on arrive pour ainsi dire à s’incarner dans le héros de son imagination, si bien que sa vie devienne la vôtre et qu’on brûle des flammes factices de ses ambitions et de ses amours! C’est pourtant ce qui m’est arrivé en entreprenant l’histoire d’un personnage qui a figuré, je crois bien, vers l’époque de Louis XV, sous le pseudonyme de Brisacier. . . . Ce qui n’eût été qu’un jeu pour vous, maître . . . était devenu pour moi une obsession, un vertige. [P. 150; italics mine.]

Thus the Roman tragique, which Nerval then offers Dumas and his readers, is both an example and a product of his obsession, a gesture of madness that takes its own definition as its object. Within this epistolary fragment, not only will the narrator, Brisacier, further repeat this significant gesture as he assumes the various roles he plays on the theatrical stage, but the entire narrative premise of the "livre infaisable" will be predicated upon his identification with Le Destin, the fictional hero of Scarron’s Roman comique. To the extent, then, that Brisacier incarnates what was for Dumas and “les hommes de science” the symptomatic gesture of this madness of identification, the Roman tragique formulates a mise en abyme of the gesture itself and, more than merely defining it, discloses, through its narrative of the consequences of Brisacier’s impersonations, exactly what the player’s stake is in this game of role-playing.

The Roman tragique posits an ostensibly rigorous opposition between daily existence in the world, epitomized by the innkeeper, and role-playing on the theatrical stage, exemplified by Brisacier. Each of these two worlds implicates
its own "signifying convention," a linguistic ethic to be observed for the purpose of effective communication within that world. Discourse in the non-theatrical world is founded upon the assumption of inherent truthfulness and thus presumes, without ever questioning this tenet, an absolute correspondence between words and their meaning. It can be said, therefore, that what would be valorized by this sort of discourse is denotation as it informs syntactical meaning. The theatrical world, on the other hand, exists only within the limits of the successful illusion of a representation, perceived not as a re-presentation but rather as an original presentation, the very precondition of which appears to require a willing suspension of precisely this referential constraint. Hence, in the instance of the theatrical metaphor, it would necessarily be according to the categories of connotation and paradigmatic meaning that its language is to be understood. Pursuing this analogy, the difference between the ethic of the innkeeper's world and that of the stage is like that between a grammatical logic of univocal meaning and a rhetorical logic that is not simply equivocal, but entirely other. Yet this is a difference that, nonetheless, does not preclude the coexistence of both discourses within the same circumscribed space; and difficulties will arise relative to the way in which the innkeepers and the actors are willing to abandon temporarily their respective linguistic convention in order to participate in that of their hosts. When the professional actor, for example, gives little evidence of distinguishing between being-in-the-world and being-on-stage, this delicate balance between nature and art is imminently imperiled, if not altogether destroyed. For the impersonator himself, whether the performance is voluntary or not, there are complications inhabiting the imbrication of these two worlds far more consequential than may be immediately evident from this simple questioning of territorial jurisdiction, since it is not so much their boundaries as the very distinctions they delimit that are ultimately blurred.

Like the metaphorical masks of the roles he assumes onstage, Brisacier has the misfortune of wearing a real mask offstage, in a world where masks and role-playing have no place in the linguistic convention: "Ma bonne mine défigurée d'un vaste emplâtre, n'a servi qu'à me perdre plus surement" (p. 152). Assuming that a face provides the authentic means by which to verify the identity of the person to whom it belongs, the person's name—considered as his identity—relates to this face in a way analogous to that in which proper meaning or a signified relates to its signifier. Thus, when truthfulness is a cognitive function of the adequate relationship between the word and the thing to which it refers, as it is in the offstage world, the fact that Brisacier's face has been obfuscated by a plaster mask makes utterly impossible the authentification of any adequation between the face and the proper name. Furthermore, insofar as the mask is a substitute for the original face, it is inauthentic, or improper. It then surreptitiously introduces into this linguistic ethic, founded on grammat-
ical logic, the possibility of that rhetorical dimension of fictionality proper to
the theatrical world. But if doing so implicitly calls into question the uncomplicated logic that is its premise and that appears to exclude fiction from participation in its convention, discourse itself is not perceptibly disrupted.

The mask indeed conceals the propriety of what is proper and allows the free substitution of what is improper in its place. It does so under the aegis of the assumed propriety of the relationship between the (masked) face and the name. In other words, the a priori correspondence between signifier and signified upon which the convention itself is predicated validates as authentic and adequate to each other any terms that may come to occupy the places of this correspondence. Although it can be supposed that Brisacier is perfectly cognizant of who he is, and though he would only need to identify himself as "Brisacier" in order to concretize the equation between this proper name and his masked face, it is rather La Rancune who (mis)names him: "L'hôte, séduit par les discours de La Rancune, a bien voulu se contenter de tenir en gage le propre fils du grand khan de Crimeè envoyé ici pour faire ses études, et avantageusement connu dans toute l'Europe chrétienne sous le pseudonyme de Brisacier" (p. 152). La Rancune has no difficulty whatever convincing the innkeeper that Brisacier is "le propre fils du grand khan de Crimeè" since, at that moment, he participates in a semiotic ethic whose established logical and semantic norm is what has been described as the absolute and unambiguous adequation between the signifier and its signified. In fact, the question of his putative identity is not even raised by the innkeeper precisely because he has no reason to believe this to be anything other than truthful discourse. The damage perpetrated by the mask is considerable indeed, for in the absence of a reliable mode of verification, the mask obscures any means of self-authentication and assures infinite possibilities of assumed or imposed identities, none of which would be proper, but any of which could be so construed. Only the other actors, presumably aware of Brisacier's proper identity, could, with some degree of reliability, adjudicate the problem of the face behind the mask. But they will abandon Brisacier, leaving him with the innkeeper for whom he is just another face (mask).

La Rancune's glibness and the ease with which he establishes as verifiably authentic the fiction of Brisacier's identity would be remarkably significant were it not for the fact that, because he wears a plaster mask, Brisacier has himself abetted this deliberate creation of an illusion. Precisely because the mask has radically severed the correspondence of his face and his proper name, the name is displaced—it is, in fact, misplaced—in such a way that La Rancune can assert unequivocally that Brisacier is "le propre fils du grand khan," while he at times only assumes the pseudonym of "Brisacier" in order to mask his authentic identity. The mask's elimination of even the possibility of ambiguity
colludes with and reinforces the implicit claim that the alleged identity is the proper one.

If from Brisacier’s perspective the situation is equally unambiguous, it is a result of the privileged knowledge he holds regarding the validity of La Rancune’s pronouncement. But because he is behind rather than in front of the mask, the consequences of his privilege are ultimately as effacing as the mask itself. Henceforth, he can only affirm his proper name—Brisacier—to state implicitly its impropriety, since it is recognized by the innkeeper only as a pseudonym; whereas assenting to the identity affirmed by La Rancune implies acknowledging the propriety of what is improper. Brisacier is unable to denounce La Rancune’s rhetoric as a verbal fiction by asserting what he knows to be his proper identity, since, even if Brisacier were speaking the language of truth, the innkeeper would not comprehend it as such, but as an obvious falsehood instead. Whatever linguistic strategy he might employ, Brisacier would remain powerless to realign the signifiers and signifieds of that discourse by which he has been “nominally” figured. Brisacier has been literally defaced by his face, by the mask that obscures his face; and he has been figuratively disfigured by the figure of himself, by the (fictive) “fils du grand khan” who sometimes seeks anonymity in the figure of “Brisacier.” While “Brisacier” may be both proper and improper, depending upon which side of the mask one is on, Brisacier himself exists only in that space between the proper and the improper wherein the criterion of truth, as a means of distinguishing between them, has been divested of its validity. The success of La Rancune’s deceit results from the fact that, on the one hand, the necessity of any means of authentification has been eliminated, since the truth value of his identification of Brisacier remains unquestioned, whereas on the other hand, the very possibility of proclaiming any distinction between proper and improper has been so complicated that it has become impossible.

In contrast to the offstage world where the play of illusion is not only unanticipated but also clearly illegal, it is only within the limits of the game of illusion that the theater manages to sustain itself as valid representation. Furthermore, the actor can only rightfully exercise his role as a professional deceiver once he is onstage. In the innkeeper’s world a rose is not a rose by any other name, but onstage anything can be a rose. The exigencies of the theater are such that, if the apparent nonfictionality of the illusion is to be assured, an actor must temporarily forfeit his personal identity and his proper name when he identifies himself with the characters he plays. However, the rules of the game likewise guarantee him the recovery of his proper identity once the play has ended. The possibility of illusion was introduced into a structure of adequate reference only through the mediation of the plaster mask. Yet onstage, where this play of illusion—which is founded upon a displacement of the
original terms of the correspondence between signifier and signified—is an integral part of the semiotic ethic, where it is, in fact, the fundamental premise of the linguistic convention, the role the actor plays, the character with which he identifies, simply functions as if it were a mask, rendering a real mask absolutely inessential.

It should be evident then that, contrary to the initial evaluation of a difference between the two linguistic ethics, role-playing on the theatrical stage involves exactly the same substitutive structure as role-playing in the innkeeper's world; they differ only with respect to the nature of the mask they require: one is implicit and the other explicit. But if the convention of the theater demands nothing less than the renunciation of that unwavering belief in adequate reference defining the world of innkeepers, the mode of reference postulated by the theatrical stage is no less dependent upon that referential constraint it pretends to ignore. It simply admits that the association between signifier and signified that it wishes to establish, instead of being authentic and adequate, is an illusion, and that it is purposefully deceitful as well. Furthermore, according to Brisacier, if the allegory that is being played out on the stage is to be comprehended by the audience, the fictionality of the play must be ignored so that it may be considered not as a play but rather as a literal signified, facilitating, as it were, the augmentation of the play's rhetorical coefficient:

Et quelle pitié c'était alors de voir un père aussi lâche qu'Agamemnon disputer au prêtre Calchas l'honneur de livrer plus vite au couteau la pauvre Iphigénie en larmes! J'entrais comme la foudre au milieu de cette action forcée et cruelle; je rendais l'espérance aux mères et le courage aux pauvres filles, sacrifiées toujours à un devoir, à un Dieu, à la vengeance d'un peuple, à l'honneur ou au profit d'une famille! . . . car on comprenait bien partout que c'était là l'histoire éternelle des mariages humains. Toujours le père livrera sa fille par ambition et toujours la mère la vendra avec avidité. [P. 153]

Reading the rhetoric of the play literally concomitantly guarantees that the staging of the event will not be taken for what it is—a representation—but for what it pretends to be—an original presentation. Theatrical representation is, therefore, predicated upon a willing and unquestioning belief in the authenticity of what is, in fact, a tropological deceit, a rhetorical mode that inexorably names and exhibits its own fictionality. Yet this is not the simple admission of an ambiguity that disrupts the referential correspondence; it is rather a matter of displaced reference quite similar to the free substitution of proper names facilitated by the plaster mask.

The fiction of the play can only come into being once it has apparently invalidated as authentic that correspondence between an original signifier and the signified upon which it is founded and according to which it is sustained. The validity of the adequation between the masked Brisacier and "le propre fils du grand khan" was never challenged by the innkeeper; nor is the question of
the absolute fictionality of theatrical representation ever entertained by the audience. Both on- and offstage, the rhetoric of the mask and the success of the illusion presuppose the same deletion of that term of reference likely to denounce the illusion for what it is: a pure verbal fiction. In each instance, if the discourse is to function as it has been intended, the actor must mystify and the audience must remain mystified. But if, here, mystification is accomplished through the willing and acknowledged complicity of the audience, there, in the innkeeper’s world, it is the apparent ignorance of unwitting complicity that creates and promulgates the mystification. From the point of view of the impersonator himself, the logic of the mask makes evident the fact that, without the support of an exterior context that clearly defines whether this mask of rhetoric is to be read literally or figuratively, it becomes impossible for the actor himself to impose his preference on the audience.

It might well seem that La Rancune bears allegiance only to the theatrical convention, regardless of its appropriateness. Brisacier, however, avows himself to be absolutely scrupulous in preserving the separation between the two domains, attesting to a sincere respect for the different modes of each linguistic convention. So fervently does he believe in the illusion as he plays his roles that he avers himself to be “un comédien qui a de la religion” (p. 152). The possibility of sustaining this separation and of remaining true to this religion without concurrently compromising his own self-identity should present no difficulty whatever, since Brisacier’s willingness to comply with the respective codes seems evident. That he may find himself in a situation of noncompliance with the offstage world is less his own fault than that of the mask and La Rancune’s seductive discourse. However, when the comédien is confronted with the task not of self-representation but of representing an act of violence, it is this religion itself that is finally to be compromised; for violence is simply that one event that can never be innocently represented. It derives from the nature of the event that either it accusesthe artifice of its representation and corrupts the theatrical metaphor of original presentation, if it is “represented”; or, if it is indeed the presentation of an act of “real” violence, it violates the fundamental theatrical convention of representation. Violence is the one event with respect to which it becomes impossible to fictionalize successfully, for the purposes of the theater, a figurative representation into a literal illusion.

If Brisacier’s initial confrontation with violence in the Roman tragique occurs within the confines of the offstage ethic, it necessarily engages a juxtaposition and comparison with onstage violence, since it is with the implicit intention of making clear the distinction between those two different worlds that Brisacier attempts to explain why “une épée de comédie” is ineffectual as an instrument of suicide:

l’aubergiste inquiet a soupconné une partie de la triste vérité, et m’est venu dire tout net que j’étais un prince de contrebande. A ces mots, j’ai voulu sauter sur mon épée,
Mais La Rancune l’avait enlevée, prétendant qu’il fallait m’empêcher de m’en percer le cœur sous les yeux de l’ingrate qui m’avait trahi! Cette dernière supposition était inutile, ô La Rancune! On ne se perce pas le cœur avec une épée de comédie, on n’imite pas le cuisinier Vatel, on n’essaie pas de parodier les héros de roman, quand on est un héros de tragédie: et je prends tous nos camarades à témoin qu’un tel trépas est impossible à mettre en scène un peu noblement. [P. 152; Nerval’s italics]

La Rancune, who does not respect the propriety or the impropriety of illusion within each separate convention, has removed Brisacier’s sword, fearing he will use it to commit suicide. But, as Brisacier attempts to explain, it is impossible to make use of the elements of the theater outside the limits of that theater: “on ne se perce pas le cœur avec une épée de comédie.” What derives from the onstage world cannot invade the offstage world and expect to enjoy the same status as signifier as it did previously. Like the actors themselves, what is proper to the theater cannot anticipate maintaining its onstage properties in a situation where it is out of place. Indeed the appropriate functioning of the sword, the property of which is to support or to sustain the illusion of the theatrical metaphor, inasmuch as it is a theatrical prop, is contingent upon the relevant propriety or impropriety of its use. “Une épée de comédie” is, therefore, highly improper in the innkeeper’s world, which does not admit even the illusion it is intended to sustain. In fact, its very impropriety divests it of its property as a prop: offstage it cannot even pretend to represent a sword. Current with the loss of its status as a signifier onstage is the loss of its metaphorical cutting edge; it is as if it were nothing more than an improper (s)word in an inappropriately rhetorical discourse.

In addition, Brisacier makes quite explicit the fact that even within the realm of illusion, each separate mode poses its own limitations. Although it can be admitted that the novel, because of the mediation of its representational aspect through writing, always denounces its blatantly fictional mode, the theatrical illusion of visual, unmediated representation is designated as that of either comedy or tragedy according to the way in which the illusion respects its own status as illusion. If both comedy and tragedy are founded on a similar theatrical metaphor, tragedy depends upon a temporary belief in the veracity of the illusion it creates, whereas comedy constantly points to its theatrical dimension, bringing into play—within the play itself—the écart between the illusion and its denunciation as pure fiction. Comedy constantly and overtly subverts the very illusion upon which it depends for its duration.

It is, consequently, due to this particular aspect of comedy that Brisacier’s sword—in fact, any sword used on the theatrical stage—can always only be “une épée de comédie.” Since a sword is that precise instrument by means of which an act of violence is effected, like the violence itself, any attempt at its representation according to the theatrical ethic will always violate that code within which it is inscribed. The sword can be either real or the prop of the
illusion onstage; as either one or the other, it is forever condemned to denounce the fictionality of the tragic representation, yet its capacity to render present the *écart* between fiction and nonfiction is ideally suited to comedy. A tragic sword is, in fact, an anomaly within the play of the theater. Unlike the mask, which is inherent to the illusion of the stage, the sword is inimical to it, belonging rather to the world of the innkeepers. Yet like the mask, its improper presence in the other ethic causes that ethic to malfunction; but whereas the mask camouflages as truth the illusion that has been smuggled into the innkeeper’s discourse, the sword brandishes the fictionality of the metaphorical masks of the theater.

Thus, when the violent event, or its instrument, must be represented onstage, the inherent premises of that convention necessarily intervene in the production of the illusion; but they do so not at all in the way adequate reference managed to diminish the figurative power of the misplaced theatrical signifier. Brisacier is confronted with a choice according to which he must either profane the tragic illusion with an event that points to itself as illusion; or he must present the event, in which case the violence would have to be real rather than staged and would express a profanation of a comparable, if different, sort. Whichever solution he may choose, it is obvious that the illusion upon which the theatrical convention is founded would be violated by his representation:

In this instance the nature of the violent event envisaged by Brisacier is not simply representational; rather, he imagines an actual presentation of violence onstage. Like La Rancune’s false biography of Brisacier, the introduction of a claim for authenticity—“J’ai eu un moment l’idée d’être vrai”—involves a similar crossing of purposes, as truth is exemplary of the notion of adequate reference and, therefore, clearly derives from the offstage world. And since Brisacier’s religious devotion to the tragic illusion would insist that violence onstage not assert its blatantly fictive nature, any violence would have to be
played as real violence, which is to say that it could not be played. Consequently, the real fire he would introduce into the play could never be delimited by the space of the theater, because it is the property of another world and not a theatrical prop: it would be neither contained nor controlled by the theater and its semiotic ethic.

To represent violence tragically it would be necessary to create a hyperbole of violence that would ultimately destroy the text of the illusion (the play) as well as the semiotic ethic within which it is inscribed (the theater). If violence is to be recognized as such within the ethic of the theater, it would involve nothing less than the complete and irrevocable destruction of it and its illusion. Yet this annihilation of the theater would blur the distinction between the two worlds; in fact, one would explode into the other. Hence, burning down the theater would also imply either that Brisacier never abandon his role or, conversely, that he never again accept a theatrical role. But even this statement of alternatives is inaccurate, since after the conflagration the distinction between on- and off-stage would be not simply unnecessary but highly inappropriate, as there would no longer be two worlds. The difference Brisacier recognizes between theater and nontheater affords that exterior context according to which he determines not only the propriety or the impropriety of the play of illusion, but also the way in which his or another’s discourse will be perceived. Once the means for formulating this distinction is destroyed, it would be impossible for him to decide whether or not he was playing a role, since there would be no way of differentiating between actors and innkeepers. He would lose his identity both as an actor onstage and as Brisacier offstage. Whereas the mask he wears offstage allows him to remain readable, albeit incorrectly so, to the innkeeper, the vicissitudes of the metaphorical masks he voluntarily assumes onstage—unless he accepts to compromise his “religion”—would ultimately make him radically unreadable to himself.

Clearly, violence derives from a logic that is not that of illusion; and its appearance onstage in either form, real or represented, would undermine the play of illusion and subvert the linguistic convention of the theater. Similarly, in the world where only literal meaning is admitted, the fictive discourse of the actor, whose logic is equally foreign to the innkeeper’s ethic, caused that convention to misfire and to make a dubious truth out of an obvious falsehood. convincing the innkeeper of its authenticity precisely because he had no reason to relinquish willingly his belief in its truthful mode. Whereas the demise of offstage discourse was evident only to those aware of its inauthenticity, the theatrical illusion risks an infinitely more visible defeat when it is confronted with the task of representing violence. The choice is between feigning the violent event, in which case it manifests its inauthenticity, and its performance as real, rather than represented, violence, which explodes the illusion and destroys the theater.
The two semiotic ethics are not at all dissimilar, for, despite appearances, no essential difference can be articulated between the on- and offstage worlds, either with respect to the way in which each representational logic has determined how discourses are to be understood, or regarding the ultimate aim of these discourses to mystify their audience. Nor do the innkeeper and the actors differ significantly in their functions, since, in either world, they occupy the same places of audience and performer. Signification in each world depends upon the establishment of a fundamental correspondence between signifier and signified; it is the ethic itself that determines how this correspondence is to be understood: as authentic and adequate, or as illusory and deceitful. There is, however, harbored within each performance, a potential, not for differentiation, but for destruction, for the destruction of that apparent difference upon the recognition of which the proper understanding of the discourse is contingent. According to the terms of the narrative itself, in the innkeeper’s world, discourse, which was thought to have been truthful, was but a convincing performance: it persuaded its audience that what was really fiction was actually fact. Such discourse can thus be said to have exhibited the seductive function of rhetorical language. On the other hand, onstage discourse immediately affirmed its deceit, implicitly manifesting what had been deleted for its effective performance. It avowed itself to be tropological language and asked to be understood as such.

Brisacier’s relationship to the language of both the on- and offstage worlds is much like that of a verbal sign to its corresponding discourse; he was, in essence, a signifier to be read either literally or figuratively as determined by the appropriate convention. Furthermore, whether he was Brisacier—“le propre fils du grand khan” or Brisacier-Achille, he was always prefigured by and within the discourse he would subsequently appropriate.\(^{10}\) Brisacier’s role-playing involved what can be termed his self-animation in a language that had already predisposed a place for him, a gesture curiously analogous to the rhetorical figure of personification. Each time that he assumed the person of his role—and correspondingly the first person pronoun of that discourse—he made of himself “une espèce d’être réel et physique, doué de sentiment et de vie, enfin ce qu’on appelle une personne,” and this was accomplished “par simple façon de parler, ou par une fiction toute verbale.”\(^{11}\) Yet, if Brisacier did occupy that place “grâce à quoi le discours peut survenir,”\(^{12}\) it rendered him painfully aware of the fact that untroubled existence there was impossible, as he risked either miscomprehension or self-annihilation. That he found himself in this privileged, but no less intolerable, situation was, therefore, a direct result of his complete identification with the fictional role he was playing, be it “le propre fils du grand khan” through the mediation of the mask, or Achille through the convention of the theater itself. Rather than finally having been able to make sense of his situation and to choose between one world and the other, he was
obligated to exist according to both modes of signification—and not alternately, one after the other, but simultaneously, because each mode was always present in the other. Hence, to the extent that the analogy between Brisacier and a signifier is valid, it can be said that he personifies the aporia between persuasion and trope, the two aspects of rhetorical language that have described as well the discursive logics of the two conventions. He thus brilliantly dramatizes the contradiction inherent in and named by the rhetoric of person-(i)fic(a)tion, which attempts to create in language the figure of the person necessitated by a fiction it then wishes to conceal. For example, either Brisacier personified his role through the persuasive rhetoric of illusion, which subsequently could not know its own illusory nature; or he manifested rhetoric’s fundamentally tropological character and revealed the person-fiction, the pure fiction of the person. The figure of Brisacier demonstrates that both aspects of discourse were present in each world; their recognition was simply a matter of the degree to which their presence had been admitted. However, the actual conditions of their misalliance were only disclosed when, through Brisacier, each ethic was asked to comprehend the presence of that aspect of its discourse upon the exclusion of which its existence was founded. To Brisacier, who was aware of their cohabitation, seductive rhetoric and tropological language immediately revealed the fact that they were mutually dependent and mutually destructive, and that they circumscribed the very impossibility of the dimension they created. According to the Roman tragique, then, rhetorical language, their impossible copresence, was both where it was averred to be and where it seemed not to be, where it was concealed by an ethic that rejected the possibility of its existence. Rhetorical language figuratively armed and disarmed that discourse whereby it was uttered. Its logic neither respected nor even recognized that of its vehicle, and the play of its figures could not be controlled, as they always exceeded the limits of their inscription and threatened imminent destruction to the discourse itself and to its comprehension.

Yet, at the same time as he created the figure of the person, Brisacier refused to be content merely with his awareness of the linguistic deceit and to remain within the bounds of that language which had figured him: “j’ai eu un moment l’idée d’être vrai”; “comment me dépêtrer de l’infernial réseau d’intrigues où les récits de La Rancune viennent de m’engager?” (p. 157). Brisacier’s desire for authenticity incited him to attempt to go beyond his awareness of both the fallacy inherent in language as it pretends to describe a reality and the fiction it is capable of creating through its staged representations. But although his religious devotion to role-playing made it impossible for him to play the role, his desire to be a person was equally impracticable, for he was condemned to play according to the rules of the game of language, which itself constantly confounded his very status. If the problem that first confronted Brisacier was
that of the difference between being someone one is not and believing in the temporary authenticity of that belief, the paradox is that finally it was just that state of belief in the being which led him to demystify the belief. Because of his own status as a "figurer of figures," he learned of the impossibility of being authentically in his inherently rhetorical language. And if he ultimately accepted the pretense of the role he was playing, he did discover that he was only its locus, a place marked by the rhetorical masks he wore.

Although the Roman tragique may well wager the lucidity of Nervalian madness in its own self-definition, it finally warns against the desire to go beyond an awareness of the deceit of language, which was its privileged discovery. Furthermore, Brisacier himself explicitly defines madness as a belief in the authenticity of the illusion: "ma folie est de me croire un Romain" (p. 156; italics mine). And since it is precisely that symptomatic gesture of role-playing which has left the impersonator figured by, and inexorably trapped within, the play of rhetorical forces, Nervalian madness has asserted its knowledge that real madness, in fact, lies in that desire to go beyond one's awareness of an impossible choice, whereas sanity, Dumas's perhaps, does not even recognize that there is a choice. The impersonator's dizzying obsession, like Rimbaud's, is that of attempting, nonetheless, to trap within this recalcitrant and inadequate language the impossibility of its truth: "Ce fut d'abord une étude. J'écrivais des silences, des nuits, je notais l'inexprimable. Je fixais des vertiges." 

3. Ibid., p. 43.
5. Léon Cellier: "Il enrobe le tout [the various fragments composing "A Alexandre Dumas"] de variations à la fois humoristiques et profondes où, sans avoir l'air d'y toucher, il définit sa folie" ("Préface" in Gérard de Nerval, Les Filles du feu, Les Chimères [Paris: Garnier-Flammarion, 1965], p. 13). The Roman tragique had originally appeared in the 10 March 1844 issue of L'Artiste and was reprinted in the same periodical in March 1879. The three versions reproduce essentially the same text, offering only a few variants (Nerval, p. 1264). Aristide Marie has published a manuscript fragment that precedes the letter known as the Roman tragique, situating Brisacier and indicating Nerval's own intention to write an epistolary novel that would be a sequel to the Roman comique (Gérard de Nerval: Le poète et l'homme [Paris: Hachette, 1955], pp. 110–11).
6. The present essay has been abstracted from a longer study dealing with Nervalian rhetoric. Because of the limitations it has imposed upon itself in its present form, it is but an outline, a suggestion of a direction for an eventual elaboration. It is for this reason that certain more theoretical aspects of the analysis have been sketched out or briefly intimated rather than pursued to their logical conclusions. See Catherine Lowe, "The Person and the Fiction: The Figure of Nervalian Rhetoric" (Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 1978).
7. P. 151: "je n'ai à vous offrir que ce que vous appelez si justement des théories impossibles, un livre infaissable, dont voici le premier chapitre" (Nerval's italics).
8. The distinction between grammatical and rhetorical logic has been examined by Paul De Man in "Semiology and Rhetoric," *Diacritics* 3 (Fall 1973): 27–33.

9. Although the analogy face/name // signifier/signified has been determined as the one appropriate to this discussion, there are other possible variations, equally valid and equally justifiable, such as name/face // signerifier/signified. The analogy could be expanded to include the notion of referent as well, which might engender other variations on the model of referent/sign (signifier/signified).


