

*Quand la folie parle*



*Quand la folie parle:*  
The Dialectic Effect of Madness in French  
Literature since the Nineteenth Century

Edited by

Gillian Ni Cheallaigh, Laura Jackson  
and Siobhán McIlvanney

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**P U B L I S H I N G**

*Quand la folie parle:*  
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*In memory of Suzanne Dow*

**“Sans la reconnaissance de la valeur humaine de la folie,  
c’est l’homme même qui disparaît.”**

—François Tosquelles, *L’enseignement de la folie* (1992)

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## FOREWORD

Non-conformism and unconventionality have long been considered “troublesome” in women—whether manifested in medieval “witchcraft” or in more modern unmarried motherhood—and history has consequently long endeavoured to silence such women through stigmatising them as abnormal or disordered. As the nuanced and varied treatment of the topic in this volume demonstrates, madness is an inherently relative state, an ever-changing position along a diverse spectrum, and that relativity is further inflected with, and exacerbated by, cultural, historical and sexual prejudice: in other words, woman is often “mad” because (male) society and the medical establishment have judged her to be so. Drawing on, and contesting, this entrenched misogynous tradition which frequently dismissed as insane any putatively deviant female performances, the 1970s French feminist movement sought to recuperate madness, (along with the more physiologically anchored hysteria), as a positive and empowering expression of female cultural and sexual difference and, importantly, to do so from a gynocentric perspective. Since the 1970s and ’80s, however, little academic interest in French and francophone studies has focused on the subject of madness and its literary manifestations. Thus, the publication of *Quand la folie parle* presents a timely reinvigoration of this complex topic, one which succeeds in surmounting previously dichotomised representations of madness as either a nefarious or liberating force in order to provide a considered and insightful analysis of its many ambivalences.

*Quand la folie parle* comprises a wide-ranging, historically-informed selection of innovative analyses which allow the “madwoman,” and “madman,” to leave her/his peripheral, pathologised position in the attic and become part of, and thus influence or “acculturate,” the literary mainstream—and to speak in his or her own voice, as many of the texts analysed are strongly autobiographical. This gendered inclusiveness extends to the genres and modes of the texts examined, which embrace the scientific, the religious, the medical, the psychoanalytic, the historical, the erotic, and, of course, the properly literary. The authors discussed, from Nerval and Houellebecq to NDiaye and Lê, provide a refreshingly “balanced” picture of mental illness, presenting madness or depression as a contestatory, creative stance against often mind-numbing social, racial or consumerist conventions, while refusing to play down the inevitable

difficulties accompanying this isolating condition. The author Emma Santos is a case in point. This collection is particularly significant in that it provides an in-depth (and long overdue) examination of Santos' richly resonant corpus, which warns against the pitfalls of poeticising madness and marginality. The critical neglect of Santos' *œuvre* to date further exemplifies this marginalisation: when the subaltern is deemed insane, s/he may speak—indeed may shout—from the peripheries, but no-one pays attention.

This stimulating study, authored by a range of young and talented international scholars, is of key importance in defining and refining our ongoing endeavours to theorise and analyse the literary representations of the problematics of mental health. The “dialectic effect” referenced in the title of the collection extends not only to the dynamics at work within the volume itself, as the different contributions implicitly dialogue with one another, but equally to the reader of these essays, who is engaged throughout in the debates put forward. *Quand la folie parle* presents a compassionate and persuasive defence of madness as a polymorphous and fascinating literary case study. And it obliges us to listen.

Siobhán McIlvanney, King's College London.

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## INTRODUCTION

Madness is an almost protean, universal term now encompassing many psychologically-rooted maladies, whether their cause is physiological, social, genetic or other. These maladies are almost always expressive in some way, psychosomatically manifesting and physically visible or audible. Even when the result is catatonia or aphasia, the absence of language in the failure or refusal to speak at all is itself a statement and an expression. If this malady is often seen culturally as a *mal-à-dire*, an inability to properly communicate or *make sense in language*, this volume of essays demonstrates that in fact the *non-sense* of madness in the texts included achieves a force of expression, often more powerful than the usual order of logic. This volume includes discussions both of texts that speak *of* madness as well as those that speak *from* madness—writing madness into the text through a mad *je* in a first-person narrative or through language that may be construed as mad because of elements of its style, for example poetic content and language; incoherence; excess or ellipsis.

It becomes clear through the analyses in this collection that if madness may be expressive, it may speak not just idiosyncratically for one particular individual, but may express a social or collective voice. Madness may be generally characterized as an isolating, exclusionary experience, most often experienced in a unique way by a single individual, however throughout modern history it has functioned as a social valve; expressing something of the *logos* it opposes itself to. It may offer a means for dialogue, a means to critique, to protest, or it may be in fact the result of such a dialogue or protest ending in abjection and/or suicidal failure. Viewed more holistically, when individual experiences are taken together, we can often recognise a dialectic process in operation.

Aspects of this process were recognised and beautifully described by psychiatrist Thomas Szasz, a major figure of the twentieth-century anti-psychiatry movement, who was a staunch critic of the psychiatric system from within the psychiatric profession itself. In his work *Ideology and Insanity* (1973) Szasz argues passionately that modern approaches to so-called madness in its various manifestations tend to over-rationalize the issue, and that medical and psychiatric discourses claiming for themselves a “scientific” neutrality and objectivity, operate to neglect the ethical and

political dimension, and obscure the extent to which ideology informs and indeed *forms* science and medical diagnosis. He states:

The dialectical interplay of the opposing tendencies or themes of freedom and slavery, liberation and oppression, competence and incompetence, responsibility and license, order and chaos, so essential to the growth, life and death of the individual, is transformed, in psychiatry and allied fields, into the opposing tendencies or themes of “maturity” and “immaturity,” “independence” and “dependence,” “mental health” and “mental illness,” and “sanity” and “insanity.”<sup>1</sup>

Szasz echoes the central sentiments of Michel Foucault’s seminal *Histoire de la folie à l’âge classique* (1961), where, among other influential insights, Foucault argues that where the Renaissance gave the right of speech to the *fou* and indeed at times gave him centre stage, the Classic Age reduces the madman/woman to silence. For Szasz the process of reducing an ever-greater number of human problems to defined (and pathologized) categories of “madness” and thus making them “problems” to be “solved” poses a serious danger to the healthy development of human society.<sup>2</sup> This process, in his view, begun in the seventeenth century and gaining momentum in the eighteenth century, “went ‘critical’—becoming explosive—in the second half of the nineteenth century” (*ibid.*). If a “dialectic” is “the interplay of contradictory principles or opposed forces [...] seeking truth through debate or discussion,” this volume aims to provide a platform for the traditionally-silenced force of the mad, and at the very least to foreground the debate, the discussion, the interplay, while not claiming to offer any definitive “truth.”<sup>3</sup> In the terms of Szasz, this volume aims to re-orient the debate away from “problems” and “solutions” and focus rather on what we may learn of, and from, the human experiences, truths and tragedies that exist at the heart of humanity under the guise of madness, and which normative reason has either not envisaged or has obscured.

In the nineteenth century, the intersection of medical and mystical or religious discourses often occurred at a point of madness, as hysteria and the religious hysteria surrounding miracles exposed an unexpected convergence of science and religion revealing the social fractures beneath. In the 1970s, madness takes a frontline position in the feminist struggle, from where it reveals the consequences of patriarchy’s repression and is appropriated as a means of resistance: the previously marginalised figure of the hysteric is re-appropriated as a figure of revolt. The dialogue between women and society, between women and the psychiatrists trained to treat and tame them, erupts in discourses of madness. And in the post-

colonial, post-modern consumer society at the turn of the present century, madness is still as prevalent a discourse as ever in French literature, whether popular fiction or francophone. In an era dominated by the discourse of psychoanalysis (and the scientific discourse of psychology), but also marked by the strength and force of its avant-garde and transgressive literature, we examine some of the relationships between these ostensibly “sane” and “in-sane” discourses. The chapters here explore how “perhaps writing may be thought as the site of reason and unreason’s unintended meeting” and what that encounter produces.<sup>4</sup>

This volume originated in a postgraduate conference on the representations of madness held in London in 2011, which attracted a high volume of contributors from a very wide geographical area, and across many periods of French literature. It draws together some of the most recent research currently being done on madness in French literature from the nineteenth century to the present, among researchers in some of the world’s leading universities as far apart as California, Geneva and Zimbabwe. The contributions to the conference made it clear that madness is central to French literature across the genres and periods. The initial title for the conference was “The Many Faces of Madness: Representations of Madness in French Literature from the Middle Ages,” and the range and scope of new and challenging perspectives provided a wealth of material exposing the extent to which madness exists in dialectic with literature and society. As Sigmund Freud, Michel Foucault, Shoshana Felman, Julia Kristeva have all recognised, there is an important and interesting relationship between *écriture* and madness or *déraison*. The resultant title *Quand la folie parle* was chosen to reflect more fully the dynamic of the relationship between madness and literature as identified by the volume’s chapters, and the unique way in which writing (based on a system of linguistic logical sequence) and madness (the disruption of that logic and sequence) interact. A decision was taken to focus on the period from the nineteenth century onwards because of the contemporaneous desire to rigidify and dichotomise mental health conditions and categories, recognized by Szasz and Foucault, among others.

Each of the papers included here has evolved and developed as the contributors’ research has progressed, giving an up-to-date reflection of current research amongst the new generation of researchers on madness in French literature. This volume presents those discussions of madness in French literature in the post-Enlightenment context, beginning with the emergence of the psychiatric profession in the mid-nineteenth century up to the present day. As France emerged from the hegemony of the church and power began, at least theoretically, to vest in the secular state,

madness played a key role as a vehicle of dialectic, and allows us a perspective on some of the major social changes and ideological movements since that time. We see the part it played in cultural and social revolution, including the growth of secularism, the positivistic project of scientific rationality, post-'68 feminism, psychoanalysis and the exponential growth of the psychiatric profession.

The book falls into three largely chronological sections which reflect dominant preoccupations of the literature focussed on madness in each period. The first of these focuses on post-Enlightenment shifts, and Lucy Merkin, Martina Diaz and Emilie Garrigou-Kempton give a fascinating and informative insight into the social upheaval of the time, as France oscillated between religious ideology and secular, scientific positivism. Equally, it is perhaps unsurprising that in a volume on madness in French literature there should be a high proportion of discussions on women and feminism, given the extent to which madness (and hysteria in particular) has been seen in western culture as "the female malady." Madness has played a significant role in both the oppressive sexism of western culture *and* the feminism developed in the attempt to liberate women from that oppression. Chapters by Gillian Ni Cheallaigh, Elsa Polverol and Nathalie Ségeral form something of a bridge between, and a critique of, the male "mad canon" of Breton and Nerval and their reification of the mad woman or women in general, and these chapters focus generally on texts from the peak of the French Feminist revolution. They reveal how madness was used by the authors to open a critical dialogue with psychiatry and other "mad" male revolutionaries. Interestingly, we see madness turned against its own disciples. Of significant interest in this section is the intense and renewed focus on the works of Emma Santos, a writer who has been largely neglected and whose works have received surprisingly little critical attention to date, despite their success at the time of publication and the style, creative force and intellectual content of the writing. This volume goes some way to redressing this neglect of a writer whose importance is being increasingly recognized among researchers in the fields of women's writing, feminism, and psychoanalysis. The remaining chapters bring us to the turn of the current century in a more general context, reflecting the diversity and richness of the authors of *l'extrême contemporain*, with texts from *l'héxagone* by popular novelists Michel Houellebecq and Marie Darrieussecq, from francophone Africa as well as a chapter on the highly successful *Rosie Carpe*, aligned with "les romans antillais" though written by French author Marie NDiaye. We see how the dialectic force of madness persists, in chapters by Russell Williams and Laura Jackson, as Houellebecq and Darrieussecq use the depressive subject and hysterical (in

all senses of the word) metamorphosis respectively to critique consumer culture and contemporary society from different perspectives. Finally Sarah Burnautzki and Josias Maririmba examine how NDiaye and Florent Couao-Zotti use madness to decentre European discourses of normativity and expose the ways in which these discourses are marginalizing.

Lucy Merkin discusses the ambivalent attitude of Nerval towards the conflicting discourses of scientific and religious thought in nineteenth-century France. Focussing on *Aurélie* (1855) and *Les illuminés* (1852), she highlights how he criticises the silencing effect of scientific diagnosis and the pathologizing of religious madness, whilst simultaneously adhering to such diagnoses. Although Nerval was apparently resigned to his diagnosis, he remained critical of both science and the medical profession, and held an ambivalent attitude to the religious madness he was diagnosed with—reflecting the uncertain and complex mood of the era. Merkin's historically-informed and well-contextualised chapter highlights how Nerval shows the manner in which marginal social, spiritual and political attitudes were pathologised, yet also makes clear how those same attitudes formed a vital part of social and cultural life.

Martina Diaz's chapter traces the birth of fetishism through a discussion of the founding text of Alfred Binet, "Le Fétichisme dans l'amour," and examines how—in a practice common to nineteenth-century psychiatry—Binet dialogues with and contests the competence of existing literature on the subject. Diaz gives an informative analysis of his *théorie fétichiste* and the rapport it has with literature, with writing itself, in a text which exemplifies the apogee of psychiatric thought at the dawn of psychoanalysis.

For Emilie Garrigou-Kempton, as late nineteenth-century France transformed into a political and cultural battlefield between religion and science, the concomitant increase of miraculous healings and the growing epidemic of hysteria were far from coincidental. Rather, this was indicative of unstable and contentious attitudes towards secularism at the time. Discussing Charcot's scientific theories on miracles in *La foi qui guérit* (1892) and the influence of those theories on Zola's novel, *Lourdes*, published two years later, Garrigou-Kempton argues that hysteria and the new and highly visible phenomenon of miracles played a significant role in the epistemological shift which challenged traditional medical understandings of bodily processes and would eventually open the way for psychoanalysis.

Gillian Ni Cheallaigh's chapter opens the section on "Madness and the Feminine," and the focus on Emma Santos, with an analysis of the asylum narratives of three women authors writing from the early 1970s to the

present day. The accounts of Emma Santos, Linda Lê and Gisèle Pineau are narrated mainly from a quasi-autobiographical, first-person perspective that opens up the reader to the problematic, paradoxical relationship between women and the asylum. Ostensibly intended to be a space for patients (statistically majority women) to be treated, cared for, cured, this becomes also a space of imprisonment, disempowerment and silencing for so many of its patients. Ni Cheallaigh examines how, nonetheless, the asylum offers a locus of possibility, a space of refuge where these writers seek to forge a new language of their own, and find a way to write, to speak and have their voice heard beyond the asylum walls. This attempt, however, has mixed results, and not all three manage to escape the entrapment of madness and the asylum.

Elsa Polverol's chapter intensifies the focus on Emma Santos. Describing the chain of events which left Santos irrevocably physically and psychologically scarred, following a car accident in her early teens, Polverol discusses the "semi-decapitation" and putative madness which drove Santos to the asylum and to literature. Polverol argues that Santos' narrative is articulated through this "coupure" and that Santos exploits the resulting trauma as a means to question her era, just as she also exploits her social and intellectual context to produce an individual *écriture*. In this way, for Polverol, Santos' writing is engaged in a dialectic with the major discourses of 1970s France, but this is manipulated to produce and re-produce a unique and individual body of writing.

A further valuable perspective on Santos is offered by Nathalie Ségeral, who reads Unica Zürn's *L'Homme-Jasmin* (1970) and Emma Santos' *La malcastrée* (1976) and *L'itinéraire psychiatrique* (1977) in dialogue, in order to show that both authors use similar tropes and a similar surrealist style of narrative to rehabilitate the mad woman as a speaking subject and as a writer. Ségeral highlights the sexed subjectivity of madness and institutionalisation, and the gendering of the discourse on madness at stake in these women's attempts to reclaim their story, through an exploration of maternal delusions as central images used by both writers to re-appropriate their experiences.

Moving away from the focus on women's madness and women's writing, in the final and most contemporary section, Russell Williams' study of Michel Houellebecq's fiction, in particular *Extension du domaine de la lutte* (1994) and *Les particules élémentaires* (1998), argues that the depressive experience subtends Houellebecq's writing and presents a critique of current consumer society. Depression is treated ambivalently, as both a symptom of the ills of contemporary society but also as a potential form of resistance thereto. Concluding that we might see a

“depressive aesthetics” in the writing, a more positive—though still ambivalent—aspect to the depressive experience for the author and for his writing project, Williams shows how Houellebecq derides the dual economies of sex and success by which modern society is driven in his view and how, contrary to the promises made by consumer-driven media, the one does not guarantee the other.

Laura Jackson offers a study of how recent feminist writing has re-appropriated the figure of the hysteric as a means for social and political critique, in a chapter which focuses on Marie Darrieussecq’s polemical text *Truismes* (1996). Just as *écriture féminine* endows the literary figure of the hysteric with a certain disruptive power, Jackson explores how Darrieussecq’s hybrid narrator appears to acquire a similar potential. Jackson reads the narrator’s porcine metamorphosis as an “embodied” critique of her gendered marginalisation and argues that the monstrous and abject hybrid body of the narrator, coupled with a writing project which exhibits aspects of the hysterical in its “textual hybridity”—its oscillation between fantastic and more realist elements, and its refusal to fit in to straightforward genre classifications—is *performative* of the contradictions faced by women in patriarchal society.

Using the ideas and theories of Frantz Fanon and Edouard Glissant, Sarah Burnautzki’s chapter explores how Marie NDiaye employs madness—a common feature of antillaise literature—as a subversive trope; a means to resist cultural elitism and inscribe an alternative perspective regarding the effects of colonialism and slavery on both the indigenous Gaudeloupian communities, and the white so-called French population. Through her analysis of the inter-racial *dédoublement* of the “mère folle,” presenting a *Médée noire* and *Médée blanche* (Rosie Carpe herself), Burnautzki explores the significance of these figures of the mad mother in NDiaye’s text and in francophone literature in general, and we see how the “mère folle” can be used to resignify the body of the black woman and re-inscribe alternatively the memories of slavery. We also see how the emergence of madness in two very different contexts, Guadeloupe and metropolitan France, is related and mutually imbricated in an “entangled history” which powerfully traces the disorienting effect of colonialism on both the colonized and the colonizers.

Turning our attention to madness as a force for peace, as opposed to resistance, Josias Maririmba’s chapter examines the work of francophone writer and dramatist Florent Couao-Zotti, whose work attempts to challenge the view that madness is simply an instrument of violence. For Maririmba, the liberating power of Zotti’s writing is its ability to affect multicultural reality through presenting madness as a figure of co-

existence. Maririmba argues that the voice of madness in Zotti's writing emancipates a message of liberty, hope, respect, diversity and tolerance—often held prisoner to the spirit of colonialism—in a discourse which is decidedly turned towards representations of a history of domination.

By underlining the persistence of madness as a trope throughout the ages, and its use and usefulness as a vehicle of expression in different cultures, societies, periods and political regimes, this volume attempts to recognise the human value of madness and its value to humanity. To recognize this gives a voice to this perhaps most human of qualities, intrinsic, persistent and insistent in social and cultural life and unlikely ever to be “solved” or “cured” despite the best (and worst) efforts of the “mind doctors.” This, perhaps, is the most important truth in relation to madness; that for the humanity of mankind to survive, madness must not be shut out or shut up.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas S. Szasz, *Ideology and Insanity: essays on the psychiatric dehumanization of man* (London & New York: Marion Boyars, 1973), 2.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>3</sup> Chris Baldick, *Oxford Concise Dictionary of Literary Terms* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2001) [2004], 65.

<sup>4</sup> Suzanne Dow, *Madness in Twentieth-Century French Women's Writing* (Bern & Oxford: Peter Lang, 2009), 7.

**PART I:**  
**POST-ENLIGHTENMENT SHIFTS**

## CHAPTER ONE

# NERVAL AND RELIGIOUS MADNESS: THE MEETING OF SCIENCE AND RELIGION IN EARLY NINETEENTH-CENTURY FRENCH CULTURE

LUCY MERKIN

This chapter considers the theme of religious madness in early nineteenth-century French culture, examining the ways in which this inherently ambiguous concept exemplifies the problematic relationship between scientific and religious thought in post-Revolutionary French society. I focus upon the writings of Gérard de Nerval, relating Nerval's portrayal of religious madness to the specificities of his era, namely the recent emergence of the psychiatric profession and the appearance of various esoteric movements, which arose in response to the dwindling authority of the Catholic Church. In particular, I consider Nerval's semi-autobiographical *Aurélia* (1855), as well as certain portraits from *Les illuminés* (1852), analysing the ways in which these texts exploit the fundamental ambiguity of the category of religious madness, assimilating both medical and mystical discourse, yet ultimately refusing to attach absolute authority to either ideological perspective. I first deal with Nerval's exploration of his own experience of religious madness in *Aurélia*, before looking at how, in *Les illuminés*, this theme is fused with the newly emergent nineteenth-century concept of eccentricity.

### **Historical and Cultural Context**

Nerval's writings emerged during an age of deep-rooted social, political and epistemological instability, and his narratives embrace the inherent ideological tensions of the era during which they were conceived. In the opening chapter of "Sylvie," published within the collection *Les filles du*

*feu* (1854), the narrator underlines the unique character of early nineteenth-century France, describing a society devoid of a dominant ideological framework or an authoritative system of belief:

Nous vivions alors dans une époque étrange, comme celles qui d'ordinaire succèdent aux révolutions ou aux abaissements des grands règnes. [...] c'était un mélange d'activité, d'hésitation et de paresse, d'utopies brillantes, d'aspirations philosophiques ou religieuses, d'enthousiasmes vagues, mêlés de certains instincts de renaissance; d'ennuis des discordes passées, d'espoirs incertains, – quelque chose comme l'époque de Pérégrinus et d'Apulée (OC III, 538).<sup>1</sup>

As indicated by the narrator, the social and political turmoil of the 1789 Revolution had widespread ideological consequences. The long-standing authority of the Catholic Church, weakened over the course of the eighteenth century by the spread of Enlightenment philosophy, was further displaced by the 1789 Revolution and its chaotic aftermath. This was coupled by the growing authority of modern science, according to which empirical observation was the sole means of obtaining authentic knowledge. The increasing prestige of materialist science posed a significant threat to ancient metaphysical and theological assumptions, since these could not be empirically verified; therefore, the spread of modern science rendered problematic the very notion of religious faith. In “Isis,” another constituent text of *Les filles du feu* the narrator underlines the specificity of post-Revolutionary culture, which is characterised in terms of a perpetually unresolved tension between Enlightenment and counter-Enlightenment thought. The narrative voice is situated within the overarching ideological debate of his age, incarnating the hesitation between philosophical scepticism and traditional Catholicism, here posited as incompatible extremes:

Enfant d'un siècle sceptique plutôt qu'incrédule, flottant entre deux éducations contraires, celle de la révolution, qui niait tout, et celle de la réaction sociale, qui prétend ramener l'ensemble des croyances chrétiennes, me verrais-je entraîné à tout croire, comme nos pères les philosophes l'avaient été à tout nier ? (OC III, 619)

The narrator here defines himself in terms of the contradictory ideological framework of early nineteenth-century France, evoking the all-pervasive tension between the rational scepticism of Enlightenment philosophy and religious faith. Resisting the binary nature of this debate, Nerval's narrator refuses to identify fully either with the atheist materialism of the Enlightenment *ideologues* or with the “réaction sociale,” which sought to

reinstate traditional Catholicism. Throughout his writings, Nerval mediates between these apparently incompatible perspectives. He explores a range of alternative forms of faith, seeking systems of belief that would embrace the contradictions of his age, fusing both metaphysical and materialist conceptions of the human condition. Indeed, despite the declining status of the Catholic Church and the increasing influence of materialist science, early nineteenth-century French society was nevertheless characterised by a dominant religiosity. A wealth of spiritual movements emerged in an attempt to replace traditional Catholicism and to meet the demands of post-Revolutionary society, preserving mystical beliefs in the context of empirical science and modern materialist culture. Nerval's writings are haunted by the fear of the "mort des religions" ("Quintus Aucler," *Les illuminés*, OC II, 1135) in post-Enlightenment French society; and the desire to overcome the void left by the declining authority of the Catholic Church underpins all of his major works. Both *Aurélia* and *Les illuminés* reveal Nerval's persistent desire for religiosity in the face of Enlightenment scepticism and materialist culture. In both texts the theme of religious madness is bound up with the unique nature of the ideological context in which Nerval was writing.

### **Religious Madness as Pathology**

The notion that there exists some fundamental connection between madness and religious faith has persisted throughout history, and is even a key feature of major religious texts. A notable manifestation of this phenomenon is the Byzantine tradition of the "holy fool," central to Eastern Orthodoxy, and with biblical origins in the writings of Saint Paul. According to this tradition, the holy fool is an individual who rejects conventional reason and earthly values, feigning madness in an attempt to imitate Christ and to achieve inner enlightenment or enhanced spiritual wisdom. Over the course of history, unconventional thought and conduct associated with religious faith have been attributed with both positive and negative connotations, evoking privileged spiritual vision as well as social deviance and pathological delirium. The inherent instability of the concept of religious madness, and its necessary dependence upon prevalent ideology, are exemplified by its changing status and fluctuating connotations in nineteenth-century French culture. Whereas previously all spiritual phenomena had been considered to be the prerogative of dominant religious authorities, the transforming epistemological backdrop of post-Revolutionary France meant that religious madness was now reinterpreted from a scientific perspective. For the first time in early nineteenth-century

France, religious madness was established as a distinct pathological category requiring clinical attention. The early psychiatric notion of religious madness was two-fold: either excessive religious sentiment was perceived as the cause of mental alienation; or pathological religiosity was understood as a symptom of madness. On the one hand, the idea, central to early psychiatry, that imbalanced passions were the primary source of mental illness, implied that the emotive dimension of religious experience was a major cause of madness. At the same time, apparently visionary and mystical experience was increasingly interpreted as pathological hallucination and considered symptomatic of mental illness.

From the late eighteenth century, Philippe Pinel and Jean-Etienne Esquirol, major figures within the early French psychiatric profession, attributed mental alienation to imbalances of the passions. In his *Traité médico-philosophique sur l'aliénation mentale* (1809),<sup>2</sup> Pinel outlines his method of *traitement moral*, a therapeutic practice directed at the affective elements of the psyche and which incorporated a secularised form of the pastoral care of the Church into the domain of medical science, thereby excluding religious orders from the care of the mentally ill.<sup>3</sup> In *Des passions considérées comme causes symptômes, et moyens curatifs de l'aliénation mentale* (1805),<sup>4</sup> Esquirol develops the theory of the relationship between madness and the passions, introducing the idea that a specific *passion dominante* is responsible for each of the multiple varieties of mental alienation.<sup>5</sup> According to Esquirol, this *passion dominante* would often take the form of religious or political sentiment, since both areas of experience were associated with powerful emotional responses. In *Des maladies mentales* (1838), Esquirol suggests that an exaggerated emotional response can carry an individual from a normal to a pathological mental state: "Les passions modifient les idées, les croyances, les déterminations de l'homme le plus raisonnable."<sup>6</sup> He outlines his theory that extreme passion, associated with religion, politics or intellectual obsession, is inextricably bound up with the loss of reason and is therefore responsible for the onset of pathological madness:

La fureur exprime le plus haut degré d'exaltation des passions véhémentes. On aime ou on hait avec fureur. On appelle fureur un violent accès de colère. Le fanatisme religieux, politique et l'enthousiasme se convertissent quelquefois en véritable fureur. Cet état extrême des passions, qui prive l'homme de la raison, qui le porte aux déterminations les plus funestes, conduit assez souvent à l'aliénation mentale.<sup>7</sup>

This idea, fundamental to early psychiatric thought, was developed over the course of the nineteenth century, and often explicitly linked to the

ideological instability of the age. In keeping with the ideas of his predecessors Jacques-Joseph Moreau de Tours, in *La psychologie morbide* (1859), develops the notion that religious faith constitutes a primary source of pathological madness, “L’enthousiasme politique ou religieux, ce denier surtout, ne surexcite pas seulement les facultés de l’intellect, il agit avec non moins d’énergie sur les sentiments affectifs dont l’exaltation extrême peut également se convertir en véritable état pathologique.”<sup>8</sup> Early nineteenth-century alienists introduced the diagnostic category of *folie religieuse* to refer to what they perceived to be an increasing incidence of cases of madness associated with religious phenomena. In keeping with contemporaneous psychiatric ideas, religious madness tended to be perceived as a form of monomania (see below), since it was thought to affect only a single aspect of an individual’s reason. The term *monomanie religieuse* thus became widespread, and was itself subdivided to refer to specific manifestations of this phenomenon.

Besides the fact that religion was now considered to constitute a major cause of pathological mental states, visionary experience, which had previously been interpreted as a religious phenomenon, was now increasingly perceived by alienists as a form of pathological delirium and examined from a clinical perspective. The appropriation of the study of hallucinatory and visionary experience, long attributed to spiritual phenomena, by the nineteenth-century medical profession exemplifies the extremely controversial nature of religious madness as a pathological category. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, Esquirol gave the first purely medical definition of hallucination, characterising it as “un des élémens de la folie,” and thereby stripping it of its religious connotations: “Un homme qui a la conviction intime d’une sensation actuelle perçue, alors que nul objet extérieur propre à exciter cette sensation n’est à portée de ses sens, est dans un état d’hallucination.”<sup>9</sup> The association of visionary experience and clinical pathology, as established by Esquirol, was integral to the practice of “retrospective medicine,” which flourished during the early decades of the nineteenth century.<sup>10</sup> This sought to prove that the visionary experiences and enhanced intellectual qualities of influential figures from the past, including Socrates and Joan of Arc, were actually nothing more than symptoms of pathological mental states.<sup>11</sup> Practitioners of retrospective medicine, notably François Leuret and Louis-François Lélut, reconsidered the experiences of important historical figures, especially religious visionaries, in the light of nineteenth-century psychiatric thought. Both Leuret and Lélut conceived of hallucination in physiological terms, attributing it to disorders of the nervous system and thereby denying its mystical connotations. Rather than being considered in

a positive light as an indicator of privileged spiritual vision, the study of hallucination was now assimilated by the medical profession, and perceived as an undesirable symptom of mental alienation.

### Nerval's *Aurélia*

The concept of religious madness is especially relevant to the life and writings of Nerval, appearing both within his fictional and non-fictional narratives. Nerval was himself diagnosed with both *théomanie* and *démonomanie*, both of which were subcategories of the wider category of *monomanie religieuse*, extensively studied by early alienists and believed to be widespread in France in the early nineteenth century. Nerval's first hand experience of the nineteenth-century psychiatric profession is a recurrent theme within his correspondence, as well as being central to *Aurélia*. He refers explicitly to his diagnosis with religious madness in a letter of 1841 addressed to Mme Dumas:

Je suis convenu de me laisser classer dans une affection définie par les docteurs et appelée indifféremment Théomanie ou Démonomanie dans le dictionnaire médicale. A l'aide des définitions incluses dans ces deux articles, la science a le droit d'escamoter ou réduire au silence tous les prophètes et voyants prédits par l'Apocalypse, dont je me flattais d'être l'un ! Mais je me résigne à mon sort, et si je manque à ma prédestination, j'accuserai le docteur Blanche d'avoir subtilisé l'Esprit divin (OC I, 1383).

Nerval here attacks the categorical approach of modern materialist science, criticising the tendency of the early psychiatric profession to reduce visionary and spiritual experience to scientifically explicable pathological phenomena. In *Aurélia*, Nerval fuses autobiography and fiction in an extensive exploration of his own experiences of religious madness. From the outset, this semi-autobiographical account captures the ambiguity of the concept of religious madness: the narrative straddles the boundary between scientific and spiritual perspectives, never wholly embracing nor rejecting either ideological framework. Whilst at times the narrator appears to adhere to the contemporaneous medical interpretation of his experience as a pathological condition, at other times he indicates the spiritual significance of his hallucinatory visions. In a letter to his father, written in 1853, Nerval claims that his motivation for writing *Aurélia* is primarily scientific, even suggesting that his account will potentially be of value to the medical profession: "J'entrepris d'écrire et de constater toutes les impressions que m'a laissées ma maladie. Ce ne sera pas une étude inutile pour l'observation et la science. Jamais je ne me suis reconnu

plus de faculté d'analyse et de description" (OC III, 832). Such pretensions to impartiality and objectivity are reflected in the narrative of *Aurélia* with the recurrent use of terms associated with scientific methodology, such as "observer" and "analyser." The inherently problematic status of religious madness for Nerval is established at the very beginning of *Aurélia* and persists throughout. In the very first lines of this work, the narrator alludes to his "longue maladie" (OC III, 696), thereby appearing to confirm the pathological nature of his condition; yet this medical viewpoint is instantly called into question as the narrator proceeds to attach a positive dimension to his experiences, even suggesting that his illness constitutes a desirable state:

Je ne sais pourquoi je me sers de ce terme maladie, car jamais, quant à ce qui est de moi-même, je ne me suis senti mieux portant. Parfois, je croyais ma force et mon activité doublées; il me semblait tout savoir, tout comprendre; l'imagination m'apportait des délices infinies. En recouvrant ce que les hommes appellent la raison, faudra-t-il regretter de les avoir perdus? (OC III, 695)

Throughout the remainder of the narrative, the narrator oscillates between the scientific and the spiritual, blurring the boundary between these seemingly incompatible interpretations of his condition. At times, the narrator explicitly undermines the mystical dimension of his illness with comments such as: "Je compris, en me voyant parmi les aliénés, que tout n'avait été pour moi qu'illusions jusque-là" (OC III, 738). However, elsewhere the narrator's visions are conveyed directly to the reader with no attempt at a rational or scientific explanation. In the opening lines of *Aurélia*, the narrator cites Dante, Apuleius and Swedenborg as his "modèles poétiques" (OC III, 696). These figures are associated with the religious movements of Catholicism, paganism and Illuminism respectively, and ideas relating to each of these movements are assimilated into the narrative, attaching a distinctly spiritual dimension to the text. Such allusions to religious movements are merged with multiple references to literature, history and modern science. Therefore, the work as a whole continually vacillates between different frameworks of reference, revealing a distinct lack of stable narrative perspective. The final episode of *Aurélia* consists of the direct transcription of a series of hallucinatory images and theological references. This closing section of the text is entirely devoid of narrative commentary and makes no distinction between pathological delirium and authentic visionary experience. This episode is entitled "Mémorables" in a direct reference to the writings of Emmanuel Swedenborg, a highly influential eighteenth-century visionary whose

writings resisted the distinction between materialist and occultist science. In the early nineteenth century, Swedenborg's writings elicited opposing responses, and, whilst admired by some as a genuine mystic, by others he was dismissed as a madman. Therefore, such allusions to the writings of this well-known esoteric thinker only add to the overall ambiguity surrounding the status of visionary experience in *Aurélia*.

### ***Les illuminés: Background***

Besides *Aurélia*, the question of religious madness is also fundamental to Nerval's *Les illuminés*; a collection of semi-fictionalised portraits of historical visionaries and madmen, all of whom are characterised by their social marginality and their unconventional mystical beliefs. The title of *Les illuminés* is instantly problematic, since the term *illuminé* defies straightforward definition and does not readily confer unity upon the disparate subjects of Nerval's collection of portraits. At the time of publication of *Les illuminés*, the word *illuminé* was employed both in a precise sense and in a much wider sense. In its narrow sense, the term was used to refer to members of a number of specific secret societies, most notably the eighteenth-century Bavarian sect of *Illuminaten*, founded by Adam Weishaupt in 1776. Other religious groups whose members were known as *illuminés* include the Alumbrados, a sixteenth-century Spanish mystical society persecuted by the Inquisition, as well as the secret international brotherhood of Roscrucians, a Protestant following, closely resembling Freemasonry, which was founded by the Swiss alchemist, Paracelsus.<sup>12</sup> Besides its association with these specific societies, the term *illuminé* was more commonly used in a broad sense to refer to a wide range of esoteric followings, which were founded upon a common set of values, largely derived from the thought of Jakob Boehme, and which together constituted the Illuminist movement.<sup>13</sup> Accordingly, Peter Dayan characterises the use of the word *illuminé* "au sens large" as follows: "on peut appeler « illuminé » tout adepte d'une secte à doctrine ésotérique, qu'on peut rattacher à la Tradition cabalistique; ce qui englobe aussi bien les martinistes, les rose-Croix, les francs-maçons, que les Illuminés au sens restreint."<sup>14</sup> In both cases, the term designates followers of marginal mystical movements which posited themselves as alternatives to traditional Catholicism; and, both in its broad and narrow sense, it has metaphorical connotations, evoking some form of inner illumination or spiritual enlightenment.

Paradoxically, the subjects of *Les illuminés* cannot be readily identified with either definition of the term *illuminé*: the individuals selected by

Nerval hold unconventional mystical beliefs, which fall outside recognised currents of esoteric thought. Nerval's *illuminés* either exist at the margins of the broad eighteenth-century Illuminist movement or have no obvious association with it at all. Accordingly, Jean Richer identifies only two "véritables illuminés" in the work, namely Jacques Cazotte and Peter Balsamo ("Cagliostro"), claiming that the remaining individuals are merely eccentrics with no true relation to the Illuminist movement.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, major, influential figures associated with this historical esoteric movement are conspicuously absent from Nerval's text; or, as is the case for Emmanuel Swedenborg, Dom Pernety and Martinez Pasqually, are marginalised within the work and mentioned only in passing rather than constituting its primary subject matter.

The theme of the eighteenth-century Illuminist movement is central to an article written by Nerval in 1849, entitled "Les prophètes rouges" (OC I, 1271-1274), which was published as part of *Le diable rouge. Almanach cabalistique*. The individuals depicted within this text correspond readily both to the title of *Les Illuminés* and to its early subtitle; "Les précurseurs du socialisme". "Les prophètes rouges" consists of a collection of portraits dealing directly with the themes of the eighteenth-century Illuminist movement and the development of Romantic Socialism. This text thereby highlights the overlap between metaphysical beliefs and political ideology in major currents of eighteenth-century esoteric thought. Indeed, the subjects of Nerval's 1849 article are influential mystical and socialist thinkers, central figures within the eighteenth-century Illuminist movement, including Philippe Buchez, Adam Mickiewicz, Victor Prosper Considérant and Pierre Leroux. The parallels between this article and Nerval's 1852 collection of portraits are striking, and the figures portrayed in both works have much in common in terms of their mystical beliefs and the socialist or revolutionary ideas with which they are associated.<sup>16</sup> However, despite the multiple points of contact between the subject matter of "Les Prophètes rouges" and *Les illuminés*, more significant are the fundamental differences between these two texts. Whereas "Les Prophètes rouges" constitutes an essentially historical account of major mystical and socialist thinkers, *Les illuminés* is a more creative work which merges fictional and historical discourse, presenting eccentric, marginal figures with no place in mainstream historical narratives. Therefore, despite the ostensible overlap between the subject matter of these texts, they occupy very different roles within Nerval's writings. Whilst "Les Prophètes rouges" is concerned with well-documented, highly influential thinkers, major representatives of the movements evoked both by the title and by the subtitle of *Les illuminés*, such individuals are confined to the margins