

THE CHIMERAS Written by Gérard de Nerval
Translated by Henry Weinfield Illustrated by
Douglas Kinsey

Review by Ravi Teja Yelamanchili

THE CHIMERAS written by Gérard de Nerval, was originally published in 1854 in French.

Though the collection contains only eight poems, it is a work of monumental genius. THE CHIMERAS It is a vision of unfettered idealism, madness, hope, and despair—that blossoms into a beautiful sonnet sermon Nerval calls ‘Golden Verses’.

On page 21, Nerval writes: “This sublime, insensate madman, it was he, one could be sure, / This Icarus forgotten who again began to soar”. The myth of Icarus and Daedalus is a cautionary tale. It is the story of a son who ignores his father’s wisdom and flies to the sun—though he knew the wax would melt from his wings, and the ocean would devour him. For Nerval characters like Icarus are heroes—martyrs who died in the pursuit of idealism and truth. Nerval places figures like Icarus alongside Christ and other prophets from often incongruous religions and myths. Henry Weinfield’s brilliant English translation and Douglas Kinsey’s beautiful illustrations add rich layers and levels of depth to this collection.

Weinfield’s and Kinsey’s THE CHIMERAS, was my first time reading Nerval. When I first saw Weinfield’s and Kinsey’s translation I was immediately drawn to the book’s cover art. It has an illustration of a chimera on it. On the body of the chimera are white lines, which reminded me of a cave painting. I randomly flipped the book open to page 11 to a poem titled ‘Artemis’, and saw the lines:

*“White roses fall! Profanation to our gods:
Fall, white phantoms, from your skies, scorched abodes:
—The saint of the abyss is more saintly to my eyes.”*

The moment I read those lines I was mesmerized, and looked Nerval up on Google, to learn that he that was one of the great giants of French Romanticism. There are many books out there, and we all have only so much time to read. I only spend time reading books that expose me to perspectives and ideas that challenge my own, teach me valuable skills, and or make me a better person. Had any one of the three artists not done exceptional work I doubt I would have continued reading this book. Nerval and Weinfield have created poetry that is exceptionally beautiful and elegant. The poetry is complex and forces the reader to confront the inescapable darkness and egocentrism prevalent at the core of human nature.

Traditionally, the sonnet was a form used to write love poems—and most sonnets were written in praise of a woman and or her beauty. THE CHIMERAS is a sonnet sequence, where the ‘truth’ is personified, and



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praised in verse—in Greek mythology, the chimera is a female. In *THE CHIMERAS* the ‘truth’ that Nerval pines after takes on the form of a chimera: many headed, strange bodied, etc— each sonnet in the sequence forming one of the parts of the chimera. Since each individual sonnet is a crossbreeding of various religions, and myths— each individual sonnet can also be thought of as a chimera as well.

Growing up I was raised in a bilingual family, and I never really thought too much about what an accent meant until recently. An accent is the superpositioning of one language and by extension one culture on another. Many immigrant families, like my own, often find themselves negotiating and bartering two different cultures. The task of the translator is similar to the aforementioned phenomenon—there is a constant negotiation between different languages and the cultures. It is particularly complex when translating work from a different time and poetic tradition.

Translating between French and English is particularly interesting because English is influenced heavily by French and German. I have read before that the English of the ‘upper class’ was derived more heavily from French, while the English of the lower classes was derived more heavily from German. When reading a French to English translation, I would expect to find these linguistic patterns also present in the resulting translated work, and often do. Interestingly, Weinfield’s translation reads more like the translation of a 1900’s-1950’s Greek Myth or Epic, than a French poem. After reading Weinfield’s translation of *THE CHIMERAS*, I decided to read several other translations of *THE CHIMERAS* as well.

Other translations of *THE CHIMERAS* read more like a French to English translation, the expected linguistic patterns finding their way into the poetry. Weinfield’s careful word selection ensures that that the poetry has a unique ‘mythical’ tone to it. I would also argue that it is the most faithful translation of *THE CHIMERAS* I have read so far. Translating work this faithfully takes great skill. In the poem “Myrtho”, Nerval’s writes “À ton front inondé des clartés d’Orient,”. Weinfield’s translation reads, “Your forehead flooded by the Orient’s bright rays”. Weinfield uses the word “Orient” while other translators refrain from using it, and instead write “morning light”, or “radiance of the East”. The reference to Asia is lost when d’Orient is translated to “morning light” or “radiance of the East”.

If the word orient wasn’t capitalized it would simply mean “situated in or belonging to the East” — referring to the position of the morning sun. Capitalizing the word ‘Orient’ carries a more Eurocentric reference to Asia. Nerval wrote *THE CHIMERAS*, in the 1850’s in the heart of European Imperialism. Around this time a great deal of Eastern scripture and literature was being translated by the likes of Ralph T. H. Griffith, Max Muller, Karl Friedrich Neumann, and etc. The word ‘Orient’ plays a critical role in *THE CHIMERAS*, since the book draws from many myths and scriptures. Additionally, the Romanticist movement as whole was heavily influenced by Eastern scripture and philosophy— so, changing the word Orient drastically alters the meaning and decontextualizes of the poem.

In mythology Myrto is a Maenad, or a female follower of Dionysus. Many translators change the name Iacchus to Bacchus, possibly to make the poem more accessible to the reader. Though even in mythology Bac-

chus is closely associated with Iacchus, they are not one and the same. Iacchus is a minor god belonging to an agrarian cult, associated with Demeter and Persephone; while Bacchus has been associated with several different cults such as the hedonistic cult of Bacchus. Demeter and Persephone play an important role in explaining the natural cycles of the world, life, and death; while the cult of Bacchus was associated more so with sensual pleasures. Translating Iacchus into the Bacchus completely strips the poem of its Eleusian Mysteries (the agrarian cult) context. In the third verse of the poem "Myrtho", Weinfield's translation reads "the volcano comes alive" while others translated to "the volcano boiled up again", and "I know why that volcano is aflame". A characteristic of many myths is the personification of natural phenomenon. In a poem that draws very heavily on Greek Mythology, there is mountain of difference between saying the "volcano is alive", and "the volcano boiled up again". While the word alive is a personification of a natural event, the latter are both retellings of an event. Myths serve many purposes—retelling events is one of them, but another is explaining why they happened. If a child were to ask, "why is there lava everywhere?", "it boiled up again" does not adequately answer why. On the other hand, "it came alive", or "it was sleeping, and now it is awake" not only answers what, but also provides a more satiating answer to why something happened the way it did. Additionally, using the word 'alive' as opposed to 'boiled up again' does a better job of tying back into the narrative of Demeter and Persephone, the seasons, life and death, etc.

Several years back when I was discussing the work of Rabindranath Tagore with one of my Bengali friends, they explained to me that Bengali is a very flowery language. He had me listen to Tagore in Bengali, to get a better understanding of what the poem would have sounded like in its original language. I don't speak French, so to get a better sense of what Nerval's work sounds like, I listened to several French readings of his poetry. When I compared Weinfield's translations with the translations of other English translators I found that Weinfield's was very close to Nerval's original sound. Weinfield is an accomplished poet with a great ear and captures Nerval's melodies with precision. Many poetry translators, especially with rhyming poetry, will try to force rhymes just to maintain form—resulting in clunky writing. Weinfield's translation is very elegant—the rhymes and sounds, remarkably close to Nerval's.

Weinfield's and Kinsey's project is unlike any other take on THE CHIMERAS: each of Nerval's sonnets are accompanied by one of the Kinsey's illustrations. Each of the pieces are stylistically very different. The illustration that goes alongside 'Myrtho' on page 3 looks a bit like a Renaissance painting, while the painting on page 18 has a post-Impressionist feel to it. However, each of the paintings are a blending of many different styles—and any attempts at categorizing them would be reductionist and do Kinsey's work little justice. The artwork influences the poems in a very interesting way. I find visual arts to be more accessible to my eye than words and found myself first looking at the paintings, then reading the poetry. Furthermore, since the paintings were laid out on the left side of the book as opposed to the right side—I found myself taking a quick glimpse of Kinsey's art before reading each of the lines.

When we read English, most of us, read from the left side to the right side of the page. In poetry the end of each line functions as a soft pause, or

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a fractional comma or period. When the paintings are laid out on the left side of the manuscript, the reader's eyes instinctually start on the left side and moves to the right again, where it stops. Then it goes back to the left side where it catches a glimpse of Kinsey's painting before the next line is read. This to me was a bit like going to a museum looking at a work of art, and then reading the label underneath it. However, since the artwork and the sonnets were given equal page economy, the reader looks at the artwork as they read the poems. Nerval's sonnets on their own are extremely complex and often the emotional power of the poems is muzzled by the intellectual. Kinsey's illustrations are abstract and use bold color choices and patterns— this helps draw the emotions out of the poems, while at the same time not forcing interpretation on the reader.

In summation, I would like to thank Weinfield and Kinsey for the work they have done. Had it not been for them, I would have never read Nerval's magnificent poetry. Thank you both for your remarkable work!