Abstract
This article attempts to explain the special place that Sylvie occupies in both Ner- val’s œuvre and the general context of nineteenth-century French prose. The structure of the nouvelle is examined through a close reading of two key motifs: vines intertwined with roses, and flowing water. The different iterations of these motifs are interpreted as expressing the impossibility of recovering the symbolical and sentimental values that the author-narrator cherished in the past. This structure is identified as one of the factors that allowed Sylvie to be well received in neoclassical circles. It is suggested that this construction is also what caused Proust’s fascination with, and scepticism towards, the nouvelle. The article concludes that Sylvie should be considered a unique text which opens the way for a new type of writing, whilst also closing it down. The nouvelle’s referential logic is different from that of Romantic, neoclassical or realist works. Indeed, the reason why it cannot be taken as a model is that it presents the reader with a particular kind of réel, which is inseparable from the crisis of Romanticism.

Keywords Nerval · Romanticism · Neoclassicism · Proust · Biographical writing

In a self-reflexive gesture, Sylvie’s narrator comments nearing the end of the nouvelle: ‘si j’écrivais un roman, jamais je ne pourrais faire accepter l’histoire d’un cœur épris de deux amours simultanés’ (564)1. What is, then, this text? It is generally accepted that Sylvie was read as an autobiography when it was first published

1 In Sylvie’s quotes, only the page number will be referenced. If no indication is given, the emphasis in them is mine while that of all other quotes is from the original.
(Mizuno, 2013: 164), but its generic status has been and continues to be the object of critical debate. Pierre Laforgue argues in favour of considering it a fairy tale about the impossibility of fairy tales in modernity (2015), whilst Jacques Bony posits that it is best understood as the superposition of a fantastic intrigue on top of a roman rustique from the likes of Lamartine or Sand (1993). Michel Brix recently noted that the nouvelle belongs to ‘la tradition du roman personnel, ou intime’ (2015: 573). While this category is anachronistic in relation to the generic labels of the time, it serves to understand Nerval’s special conception of Sylvie.

It is well known that he considered it ‘une de mes meilleures nouvelles’ (1993c: 735) and that he grudgingly resigned himself to including it in Les filles du feu (Letter to Daniel Giraud, December 1853, 1993d: 830–31). Brix rightly, albeit briefly, underscores the significance of Sylvie as a turning point in Nerval’s work. He portrays Nerval as a champion of autobiography, a second-class genre in the nineteenth century. Furthermore, Nerval was no Rousseau or Chateaubriand: there was no public interest in him. Paradoxically, when he finally gathered the courage to write about himself openly, in Les Nuits d’octobre (without masking autobiography under another, more reputed genre, such as travel literature in Voyage en Orient), that marks the end of ‘le projet autobiographique qui l’avait défini jusqu’ici’ (Brix, 2015: 573). He will then publish Sylvie, in which the narrator’s persona is similar but not identifiable to the author’s —hence, a roman personnel. Yet, the authorial je of Les Nuits d’octobre returns in his final two prose works, Pandora and Aurélia. However, the main theme of both nouvelles is insanity, which was the accusation that Nerval tried to defend himself against in all of his prior non-fiction publications. There is, thus, a before and after Sylvie. The following article offers a reading of the nouvelle that contributes to the understanding of the reasons why this is the case —which, as Brix notes, ‘sont loin d’être claires’ (2015: 572).

The focus will be on two major, yet neglected motifs: vines intertwined with roses on the one hand, and flowing water on the other. The analysis of their different iterations throughout the text shows that Sylvie is structured on the degradation of the author-narrator’s poetic and sentimental values. This formal construction will be explored in relation to the historical debates surrounding the end of Romanticism.

The nouvelle was originally published in the Revue des deux mondes, the biggest exponent of l’école du ‘bon sens’, and it was indeed well received by neoclassical critics (See Mizuno, 2013). The historical quarrel of Romanticism and Neoclassicism can, to a certain extent, be reduced to the issue of materialism, that is, to the Aristotelian principle that ‘high’ art should not represent ‘low’ subjects (Kekus, 2019: 467). Sylvie’s particular structure allowed neoclassical critics to consider it a rejection of historical ‘réalisme’, defined at the time as an excessive focus on material, ‘low’ details (Mizuno, 2013). However, Nerval’s nouvelle is not simply a partisan rejection of the poetic principles which he had followed throughout his writing career.

Marcel Proust was fascinated by the mystery that is Sylvie. Yet, unlike the neoclassical critics, he did not fully adhere to its textual construction. He had some objections, which he could not precisely formulate. The relation between Nerval and Proust has been abundantly researched (See Sandford, 1975; Simon, 1997; Quintane, 2017); however, there is one particular remark in Proust’s article on Sylvie that is widely quoted, but hardly ever explicated, that is, its last sentence: ‘Peut-être y a-t-il
encore un peu trop d’intelligence dans sa nouvelle…” (1971: 242). The close reading of the two mentioned motifs will not only reveal a sober absence of sentimentality in the nouvelle’s ending —already perceived by the neoclassical critics of the time—, but, in fact, a voluntary lack of lyricism or even artistry. Contrary to the triumph of aesthetics in the *Recherche*, the transmutation of life into literature in *Sylvie* gets derailed.

Proust constantly hesitates when trying to get to the essence of the nouvelle, claiming that Nerval is not a ‘writer-thinker’ but that those type of writers should look at him as a reference (1971: 241–42). The struggles of the modernist writer are in themselves significant. In the conclusion, I will argue that, when it comes to generic classification, *Sylvie* should to a certain extent have its own category. Due to the very specific, transitional historic context from which it emerges, it opens the way for a new type of writing, whilst also closing it down —much like the *Recherche*. The truly unique nature of the nouvelle derives from a calculated, persistent realism which —to Proust’s distaste— leaves the reader facing a particular type of réel that does not carry any type of meaning or symbolism, as it would in Romantic works —a réel which could go unnoticed to neoclassical critics.

Nevertheless, Proust’s remark about Nerval’s excess of intelligence can simultaneously be understood as pointing to an opposite problem: not a lack of aesthetic elaboration, but an excessive symbolic charge. In a 1938 article titled ‘*Sylvie* ou la pensée de Nerval’, Georges Poulet postulated that, while the nouvelle presents itself as a *récit* about the emotional life of a certain protagonist, it should actually be considered ‘une allégorie métaphysique qui a pour sujet la destinée humaine’ (1966: 15). The story emerges as the author-narrator confronts his own past, and the rules that govern this process of making sense of one’s subjectivity differ from the usual conventions of *récits*. Thus, *Sylvie* ‘se poursuit de tableau en tableau’ (1966: 19), with each canvas constituting an allegorical representation of an idea or feeling that Nerval seeks to elucidate. Yet, the present article will show that, if allegory is ‘the process of turning narrative systems into conceptual ones’ (Preminger & Brogan, 1993, s.v. Allegory), it is ultimately unsuccessful in *Sylvie*, since the narrative elements take revenge on the conceptual ones in its ending, which, more than just a lack of poetic elaboration, formalizes a certain dissolution of meaning.

The article is divided into three parts. The first one offers a close reading of a passage from chapter iii, ‘Résolution’; the second and third ones each delve into the mentioned motifs, which first appear in this passage. This extract is indeed crucial in the nouvelle’s development. It anticipates the narrator’s failure through a symbolism that has as much to do with allegory as it has with the accustomed foreshadowing devices of *récits*. The chapter’s title is particularly telling in this sense: the narrator resolves to travel to Le Valois in search of Sylvie, and it is only logical that at the start of this adventure the reader finds the first instances of the motifs that will shape it.

‘Résolution’, a Flawed Start to the Quest

In an anxious state of mind, the narrator thinks about spending his newly-acquired fortune to seduce Aurélie, the actress that obsesses him. Unable to sleep, the memory
of a childhood love, Adrienne, comes to haunt him. In an attempt to escape this world of fantasies, he says to himself: ‘Reprenons pied sur le réel’ (543). Yet, ‘le réel’ takes the form of a reverie in which he imagines present-day Sylvie, the other girl he loved during his youth, waiting for him:

Elle existe, elle, bonne et pure de cœur sans doute. Je revois sa fenêtre où le pampre s’enlace au rosier, la cage de fauvettes suspendue à gauche ; j’entends le bruit de ses fuseaux sonores et sa chanson favorite :
La belle était assise.
Près du ruisseau coulant….
Elle m’attend encore … Qui l’aurait épousée ? Elle est si pauvre !
Dans son village et dans ceux qui l’entourent, de bons paysans en blouse, aux mains rudes, à la face amaigrie, au teint hâlé ! Elle m’aimait seul, moi le petit Parisien, quand j’allais voir près de Loisy mon pauvre oncle, mort aujourd’hui.
Depuis trois ans, je dissipe en seigneur le bien modeste qu’il m’a laissé et qui pouvait suffire à ma vie. Avec Sylvie, je l’aurais conservé. Le hasard m’en rend une partie. Il est temps encore (543).

Many critics have pointed out the importance of Nerval’s use of verb tenses in Sylvie (See Raitt, 1988: 849–51). The present at the start of the fragment (‘Elle existe’) creates a contrast with the previous paragraph, written in imperfect (‘Et Sylvie que j’aimais tant’, 543), mimicking the dazzling apparition of Sylvie’s image in the narrator’s mind, as well as the process by which ‘j’aimais’ turns into ‘j’aime encore’ (even if those exact words are not in the text). It should be noted that it is a present tense that refers to the past, or, to be exact, to an image from the past which the narrator supposes still exists in the present, as the start of the next paragraph clearly reveals (‘Elle m’attend encore’). In fact, the three verbs it contains (‘elle m’attend’, ‘qui l’aurait épousée’, ‘elle est’) formally thematize the narrator’s desire to believe that this past lives on: the alternation of present, conditional past, and present expresses this triumph of the past made present over any hypothetic change.

Besides the use of the present tense in ‘elle existe’, the impactful, instant materialization of Sylvie’s image is conveyed by the repetition of ‘elle’, the shortness of the sentence, and the fact that it is exclusively made up of one or two syllable words — with the exception of ‘existe’. The pronoun’s repetition also has a semantic purpose: it underscores the fact that ‘elle’, Sylvie, has a heart, as opposed to actresses such as Aurélie, who are said to be heartless just a few pages prior (538). ‘Elle m’attend’ at the start of the second paragraph clearly parallels ‘elle existe’. In the few lines between the two, there are two other verbs conjugated in the present, ‘je revois’ and ‘j’entends’. These four verbs create a circular structure: the narrator suddenly realizes Sylvie must still live in Le Valois, he sees and hears her in a short reverie, and thus, moved by the image, thinks she must still be waiting for him there.

It is in this reverie where the motifs that will be discussed extensively in the next parts of the article make their first appearance. Their repetition throughout the nouvelle heavily determines the function that they accomplish here. Nevertheless, they have symbolic values which can be interpreted without considering their subsequent iterations.
The reverie is markedly split into visual and auditory elements, underlining the fact that it is made up of fragmentary memories pieced together. There are two of each type: the window and the bird’s cage on the one hand, the noisy spindles and the song on the other. Each pair of visual and auditory memories has a relatively clear positive implication and a more subtle negative one. Covering the window, a vine climbs on to a rose bush; this suggestive image, in this chapter’s context, can easily be interpreted as a metaphor for lovers. Equally, the traditional song seems to satisfy the narrator’s prototypically Romantic longing for an ancient, ideal lyricism (See Richard, 1955: 69). Moreover, the river that the song alludes to, together with the vegetation surrounding the window, establishes a locus amoenus. However, this idyllic atmosphere is tarnished. ‘La cage de fauvettes’ is actually lost in the past: the narrator will soon discover that Sylvie has replaced it by a more bourgeois box of canaries (559). ‘Sylvie’ is the generic noun of the bird species ‘fauvettes’ (Bony, 1993: 1213), which suggests a certain imprisonment, disturbingly bringing to the fore yet again the fact that we are inside of the narrator’s mind. More clearly, that peaceful memory is contaminated by the Renaissance and cuckoo clocks a handful of lines below (544), both of which function as symbols of the narrator’s own bourgeois attitude (the fact that the bird cage is ‘suspendue’, as the cuckoo clock would be, reinforces the association between the two). Furthermore, the already mentioned dissociation between sight and hearing is emphasized here in a somewhat troubling manner: the narrator does not hear the ‘fauvettes’, as would be expected by the sentence’s progression, but rather the ‘fuseaux sonores’. The spindles, much like ‘la cage de fauvettes’, belong to the past: Sylvie now works with a ‘mécanique’, a tool used to manufacture gloves (559); she is not waiting for the narrator like Penelope for Ulysses. Moreover, the noise they produce —clearly underlined in the text (‘bruit’, ‘sonores’)— becomes amplified in the few last lines of the reverie, revealing an anxiety that ends it.

Indeed, not only does it silence the birds, but also the song that Sylvie is singing. This is not apparent at all. How is the song suppressed, if its verses are transcribed? Upon closer examination, there is an ellipsis sign which seems to indicate that they are cut short. Still, this could be simply attributed to the narrator’s will to end the song there or to his memory failing him. Or, if we consider the creative process instead of the diegetic world, this premature ending can also be interpreted as a reference to Rousseau’s half-forgotten songs in Les Confessions (Rousseau, 1959: 12). However, the last transcribed words refer to a landscape element which generally produces a deafening sound, a ‘ruisseau coulant…’ Furthermore, the river phonetically echoes the spindles that made the birds inaudible (fuseaux-ruisseau). Nevertheless, what would generate anxiety here? Is this not a locus amoenus? This is in fact a representation of true anxiety, as Heidegger defines it, that is, as purposeless fear when facing one’s own finitude, when facing the passage of time (2010: §40). Indeed, the motif of flowing water as an image of l’écoulement du temps is essential to the design of Sylvie. In this case, the (intrusive) sound of the river wakes the narrator up, as he (desperately) says to himself ‘elle m’attend encore’. Just a few lines below, the theme of clocks and time becomes paramount, as the narrator returns to reality and wonders with visible concern what Sylvie is doing at that very moment (543). Apparently self-assured (but actually full of doubts), the narrator, contradicting in logical terms...
the security with which he just affirmed that Sylvie is waiting for him, asks himself: ‘Qui l’aurait épousée?’ As he and the reader will discover, she is about to marry le grand frisé.

The ‘resolution’ that the chapter is titled after occurs in the following paragraph, as it is formalized by the transformation of ‘elle m’attend encore’ into ‘il est temps encore’. It can be characterized, using once more Heidegger’s conceptuality, as an ‘inauthentic resolution’. Anxiety is a key affective disposition in the German philosopher’s project, since it leads to the apprehension of the Dasein’s unity in being-towards-death; however, as it is clearly the case here, anxiety can also be escaped using the language of das Mann, an anonymous language (spoken both by everyone and by no one) that provides accepted truths, avoiding any actual reflection. Indeed, in order to achieve his resolution, the narrator does not really think by himself, rather, he lets others (das Mann) think for him. The arguments are: Sylvie is poor; she is surrounded by provincial people; she only ever loved me; if I were with her, I would not be wasting my wealth. Which voice is behind all of these? It is certainly not the voice of somebody who is in love, but rather an anonymous voice who sees everything from afar and formulates easily acceptable truths, the voice of gossip —to the point that the narrator refers to himself as ‘le petit Parisien’, which is what people in Le Valois call him. There is even a reference to the most important of such truths according to Heidegger: by repeating that ‘people die’ (in this case, the narrator’s ‘pauvre oncle’), the thought of one’s own death, which could lead to an ‘authentic resolution’, is paradoxically chased off. The deciding argument that leads to the narrator’s resolution is the strange, inherently contradictory idea that, by seducing Sylvie with his newly-acquired fortune, he could then preserve it, since her rusticitas would prevent him from spending it in mundane ways. The inadequacy of the two worlds, Sylvie’s and his, is humorously made explicit by the cab driver when, at the name of ‘Loisy’, he simply replies: ‘je vais vous conduire à la poste’ (544).

**Le Pampre S’enlace (Toujours) Au Rosier**

As Marcel Proust noted, the description of Sylvie’s window, ‘où le pampre s’enlace au rosier’, closely resembles a verse from ‘El desdichado’: ‘la treille où le pampre au rose s’allie’ (1993b). Proust believed that by considering ‘[les] tentatives différentes pour exprimer la même chose’, we see the author ‘sans génie vraiment déterminé, créant sa forme d’art en même temps que sa pensée’. With a hint of irony, Proust closes: ‘d’ailleurs, c’est ensuite à chaque maison de Sylvie que nous voyons les roses s’unir aux vignes’ (1971: 235). Whilst the symbol of intertwined vines and roses certainly has a cognitive function, a place in la pensée de Nerval, its repetition throughout Sylvie is not only the correlate of the author’s developing thought. The repetition itself is part of a specific, finished ‘forme d’art’. In other words, the motif does not have a purely symbolic function, it also has an important role in terms of the récit.

Proust is right to affirm that, coincidentally, ‘chaque maison de Sylvie’ has vines and roses. When the narrator reaches Loisy, the first thing he sees is ‘vingt châumières dont la vigne et les roses grimpantes festonnent les murs’ (548). In the case of the house of Sylvie’s aunt, there are common hops instead of rose bushes (549), while...
in the abandoned *Temple de la philosophie* there are laurels in lieu of vines, even if only in the narrator’s memories about it (to his despair, they are no longer there in the diegetic present, 557). Finally, years later, every time that the narrator visits Sylvie and her husband, he stays in an hotel room with a window ‘encadrée de vigne et de roses’ (568). This list already hints at the fact that the motif cannot be reduced to the progressive elaboration of a symbol, each one of its iterations tied to the particular moment of the plot in which it is placed.

The first two instances of the motif—the houses at Loisy, the aunt’s *chaumière*—are only separated by a few lines. They both occur in the context of the narrator remembering past events that would confirm Sylvie’s imagined, typically Romantic refinement (which was key in the ‘Résolution’ passage). The strong aesthetic quality of the image goes beyond the motif itself, determining the entire episode of remembrance: the contrast between the red roses and the green vines carries over into many other objects, and it is crucial in making Sylvie stand out among the people from Le Valois. Indeed, immediately following the quoted description of Loisy’s naturally ornamented houses, the narrator focuses on the working spinners, ‘coiffées de mouchoirs rouges’, and notices that ‘Sylvie n’est point avec elles’—the present tense here breaks with the use of the imperfect as in the studied extract. Her absence is explained in an oneciric logic (as if the narrator suddenly realizes that he has mixed two relatively distant periods of time): ‘C’est presque une demoiselle depuis qu’elle exécute de fines dentelles’ (548). *Presque*, but not quite, which is just how the narrator wishes her to be: he always wants to have the upper hand and he will be disappointed to find out that she has become familiarised with Rousseau and Walter Scott (554 and 560). The explicitly affirmed distinction between the spinners and Sylvie is then implicitly reinforced: the narrator finds her working ‘avec un doux bruit sur le carreau vert que soutenaient ses genoux’ (548). Notice besides the contrast with the red handkerchiefs worn by—apparently all—the spinners, that the noise is not ‘sonore’, as it was in the passage studied, but ‘doux’. There is no trace of anxiety in this image. The mention of the knees at the end gives it a sensual character, which reciprocally amplifies and is amplified by that present *in nuce* in the symbol of vines and roses. This leads to the final sentence of this chapter: ‘je continuais à réciter des fragments de *l’Héloïse* pendant que Sylvie cueillait des fraises’ (548). The image of union that was announced in the entanglement of vines and roses is powerfully materialized here in the strawberries. Indeed, these wild fruits parallel the intertwined plants in the aesthetic complementarity of the red and green colours; the reader is sensible to this chromatic play since those same colours were opposed instead of combined when highlighting Sylvie’s exceptionality.

While sparked by present-day desire, these are innocent childhood memories. Indeed, it is no surprise that the nouvelle’s next chapter, which will end with the aunt moved to tears by the view of Sylvie and the narrator dressed as bride and groom, starts with a slightly different version of the motif, a version in which the roses (generally associated with passionate love) have been removed and the vine is ‘vierge’: ‘des treillages de houblon et de vigne vierge’ (549). There is a careful phonetic elaboration in this sentence which makes it stand out, signposting the motif to the reader: the paronomasia of ‘vigne vierge’, the circularity created by the echo of ‘treillages’ in ‘vier-ge’, and the fact that ‘houblon’ contains the only [u] phonetic unit. Once
again, Sylvie’s refinement is underscored, in this case by the aunt, who stops her from helping out in the kitchen while exclaiming: ‘abîmer tes jolis doigts qui font de la dentelle’. Sylvie then responds: ‘Dites donc, si vous en avez des morceaux de l’ancienne, cela me fera des modèles’ (550). This foreshadows the chapter’s main events —Sylvie and the narrator dressing up in the old wedding costumes—, while also linking them to the previous episode: the aunt’s lace pieces recall ‘le carreau vert’ that Sylvie worked on, confirming its vaguely erotic or sensual charge (both laces having the same connotations).

The third iteration of the motif, the vegetation surrounding le Temple de la philosophie, is the least recognizable; it spans over multiple sentences and encompasses a variety of plants (‘lierre’, ‘ronce’, ‘roses’, ‘églantier’, ‘framboise’ and ‘laurier’, 557). However, this lack of clarity is tied to the specific narrative function it accomplishes, to the place it occupies in the storyline. Indeed, it only makes sense that, as the narrator struggles to find the past in the present, the motif also becomes harder to identify. The Temple of Philosophy has ‘la forme du temple de la Sibylle Tiburtine’. Poulet notes here a connection with ‘Délifica’, a poem from Les Chimères ‘où résonne “une chanson d’amour qui toujours recommence”’ (1966: 58). The intertextual association is not actually needed to perceive the tone of the passage, since the echo of Sylvie in ‘Sibylle’ is quite apparent. Nerval masterfully gives a sense of absence by simultaneously invoking and breaking apart the motif. Instead of vines and roses decorating the façades of houses, ‘le lierre’ and ‘la ronce’ conquer the temple’s ruins. After this first vague allusion to the motif, its presence/absence is confirmed by the mention of roses in the context of an ubi sunt interrogation—they are in fact no longer there—: ‘Où sont les buissons de roses qui entouraient la colline?’ (557). To be exact, there are actually a few rose bushes remaining: Nerval pushes the image of a degraded past further as the narrator notices that ‘l’églantier et le framboisier en cachent les derniers plants’. The ‘lauriers’ though—which appear following the roses in lieu of the usual vines—‘ont péri sous notre ciel brumeux’ (557).

This occurrence of the motif conveys the irremediable loss of the past in yet another way: it is an allegory for Sylvie’s growth from a child to an adolescent to an adult. On the one hand, the word ‘sauvage’ is repeated within a few lines, establishing a parallelism between the last rose bushes, which are returning to ‘l’état sauve’ (557), and the memory of Sylvie as ‘une enfant sauve’ (558). On the other, in the description of the temple, the narrator recalls ‘des fêtes où les jeunes filles vêtues de blanc venaient recevoir des prix d’étude et de sagesse’ (557) —presumably including laurel crowns. The actual reference to laurels highlights the theme of growing up, which was implicitly present in these celebrations: ‘Quant aux lauriers, les a-t-on coupés, comme le dit la chanson des jeunes filles qui ne veulent plus aller au bois?’ (557). It should be remembered that the important lyrical memory of Sylvie picking up strawberries is set in the forest, a typically initiatory space. The idea that this second half of the motif (the lauriers) works as a symbol for Sylvie’s adolescence is reinforced by the fact that its first half (the roses) seems to allude to her childhood: not just because of the mentioned association ‘état sauve’-‘enfant sauve’, but also because of the raspberries that cover the roses (very semantically close to the strawberries that appeared in the narrator’s previous memory). Furthermore, there is also a foreshadowing of the transformation from the adolescent that the narra-
Sylvie, or the End of Romanticism

The narrator knew to the adult that he will find. Here, as it was the case in the description of the houses at Loisy, the motif of vines and roses drifts into a chromatic contrast, but, contrary to what happened in that instance, no synthesis is achieved at the end. Indeed, this nouvelle’s chapter comes to a closure with the narrator’s resolution to escape the toxic air that is invading ‘les landes où la bruyère rose relève le vert des fougères’ (558). The chromatic contrast is highlighted by the careful phonetic design of the sentence: the internal rhyme bruyère-relève-fougères; the isocolon formed by the syntagms ‘la bruyère rose’ and ‘le vert des fougères’, of six syllables each; and the textual proximity between ‘rose’ and ‘vert’, which mimics the expressed spatial juxtaposition. The narrator arrives at this conclusion immediately after glancing over ‘la tour de Gabrielle’. Just two chapters later, as he talks to Sylvie and discovers that she has become a modern working woman, he describes: ‘la tour féodale et le petit château qui abrita les amours de Henri IV et Gabrielle se teignaient des rougeurs du soir sur le vert sombre de la forêt’ (560). Gabrielle d’Estrées was Henri IV’s long-time mistress; she died aged twenty-six before the king could accomplish his project of marrying her (Britannica, 2021). It seems safe to say that the narrator does not manage to escape the treacherous air that stems from this menacing, dark, red and green landscape; he too loses Sylvie, albeit symbolically.

There is, though, one last reappearance of the motif in the last pages of the nouvelle, in the context of the narrator’s regular trips to visit Sylvie and her husband. It is clearly presented, ‘la fenêtre, encadrée de vigne et de roses’ (568), and it could pass as the synthesis or reconciliation that was missing. However, it is a mockery of the typically Romantic pathetic fallacy (the topos of the poet pretending that nature perfectly reflects his feelings), at least for the most part. It is not in vain that the narrator jokingly alludes to Werther —complementing the reference to Gabrielle d’Estrées with one in which it is instead the male lover who dies (568). Yet, Nerval is not Flaubert. While the continued presence of those plants ironically underlines the caducity of the narrator’s love for Sylvie, there is also a tragic pathos in his apparently resigned, almost cheerful acceptance of that fact. Commenting on Nerval’s landscape descriptions, Jean-Pierre Richard writes: ‘Cet art méritait d’être analysé pour des raisons essentiellement négatives : il nous décrit un personnage qui n’est pas Nerval, qui est même une sorte d’anti-Nerval. […] Sous la légèreté voulue, l’obsession a tôt fait de transparaître’ (1955: 12). When the narrator opens the ornamented window in the morning, he sees ‘avec ravissement un horizon vert de dix lieues’ (568). No red tones. Their absence is markedly felt since the reddish sunshine at dawn plays a key role in the narrator’s passion for Sylvie (Poulet, 1966: 39–49). After this general view, he then focuses on the ‘clochers aigus, construits, comme on dit là, en pointes d’ossements’ (568). And, similar to the way in which the rose bushes at the temple pushed further and further the idea of absence, he develops this already chilling image, linking it precisely with the temple’s ruins, which were nearby Ermenonville: ‘on distinguerait Ermenonville à travers le bois, s’il avait un clocher, — mais dans ce lieu philosophique on a bien négligé l’église’ (568).

Thus, the unmistakeable reappearance of the motif at the very end of the nouvelle does not fulfill the promise of happiness and love that it contained in its first instance, in the studied reverie, but rather, in its easily identifiable form, the simplest yet, it tries to cover —to no avail— the narrator’s despair at the failure of that promise. He
openly reflects on that failure when he sees Sylvie at her husband’s bakery: ‘Je me dis: “Là était le bonheur peut-être; cependant…”’ (568). In accomplishing this function, the motif closes the récit in on itself. The relationship between this fragment and the chapter ‘Résolution’ is strongly underlined: ‘Cette chambre est un dernier retour vers le bric-à-brac […]’ (568). Overall, the motif’s evolution is that of Sylvie’s narrative: after its presence in the ambivalent reverie, the narrator finds it in an idyllic sequence of memories (Loisy, the strawberries, the aunt), but he is then faced with its perversion (in the temple and in the castle), and, ultimately, with its irreparable loss (in the hotel room), as nature mockingly refuses to abide by his symbolic universe.

**Lakes, Rivers and Waterfalls: Time Flows**

The importance of flowing water in the initial reverie cannot be overstated. It anticipates the narrator’s inability to make the past present, which constitutes the entire argument of Sylvie. Nerval expertly deploys this motif throughout the nouvelle, reworking it into different images (peaceful lakes, fetid stagnant waters, roaring waterfalls…) in order to express the narrator’s relationship with time at every phase of the narrative. This part of the article studies four instances of the motif: the lengthy description of the river Thève when the narrator reaches Le Valois in the early morning (554); the aquatic elements surrounding the already mentioned ‘tour de Gabrielle’ (558); the brief—but key—allusion to the sawmills set alongside the Nonette when the narrator ends his brief romance with Aurélie (566); and finally, the ‘eau morte’ in the artificial lakes scattered around Le Valois (567). In all four cases, the motif incorporates a reference to stars, be it literal stars or as a name or metaphor for water lilies. This last disjunctive is already telling: the lilies will work as allegorical symbols, representing the earthly, contingent reflection of a Platonic ideal.

The allusion to stars is also found in the actual first instance of the motif, in the chapter ‘Résolution’. The last thing described by the narrator on his way to Le Valois is ‘[les] pommiers dont j’ai vu bien des fois les fleurs éclater dans la nuit comme des étoiles de la terre’ (544). These telluric flowers anticipate ‘la frêle broderie des étoiles d’eau’ (554) that appears in the first out of the four instances of the motif. Its context is important: the narrator finishes his overnight journey, arrives at Le Valois and goes on a walk with Sylvie (it is thus the next event of the story, even if there are analeptic chapters which separate it from ‘Résolution’). The two words characterizing the water lilies are significative: ‘broderie’ remits to Sylvie’s crafts, whilst ‘frêle’ is clearly more apt to describe Sylvie’s presupposed fragility rather than that of a flower lily. And not just the fragility that the narrator expects to find in Sylvie (which would allow him to save her from whatever her current situation might be, from that young man with whom he finds her dancing, 554), but also the fragility of the Sylvie that lives in the narrator’s mind. Indeed, these flowers flourish in pockets of stagnant water along the river Thève. There is an opposition at the core of the motif between flowing water, associated with the menacing passage of time, and stagnant water, representing crystalized memories. The dichotomy is highlighted here by the adversative sentence preluding the scene’s description: ‘Il faisait grand jour, mais le temps était sombre. La Thève bruissait à notre gauche, laissant à ses coudes des remous d’eau
stagnante [...]’. Once again, as in the studied passage, the eroding power of time is conveyed through the noisy sound of a river. Only if these implications are perceived do the first words that the narrator addresses to Sylvie make sense: ‘vous ne m’aimez plus’ (554). In the end, it turns out that the real Sylvie is not in any sort of danger, the narrator does not appear to have any competitors —‘je le jugeais peu dangereux’ is his comment on the young man with whom she danced (555). However, the Sylvie in his mind is actually in serious peril. It is no coincidence that, just before the mention of Paris interrupts the conversation between the two, pushing the narrator towards other memories, those of Aurélie, the last part of Le Valois that he refers to as they talk about their past is ‘une cascade qui tombe du haut de rochers’ (555).

Although unspecified, it is probably the same waterfall that descends from Henri iv’s chateau in the second instance of the motif, which is the most elaborate one. After a discouraging meditation on Rousseau’s forgotten legacy prompted by the temple’s ruins, the narrator avoids giving in to his Romantic self and looks instead in the direction of the chateau. At first it appears to be a relieving sight (notice the odd use of revoir, the same verb employed in the studied reverie): ‘J’ai revu le château, les eaux paisibles qui le bordent,’ —yet, it quickly becomes disturbing— ‘la cascade qui gémit dans les roches’ (558). The chateau is a fortress of memory, but not even fortresses are immune to time. Its threat is represented in a distant, nightmarish artificial lake which reflects the castle’s tower from the narrator’s perspective: ‘la tour de Gabrielle se reflète de loin sur les eaux d’un lac factice étoilé de fleurs éphémères; l’écume bouillonne, l’insecte bruit…’ (558). Nerval astoundingly turns a typically peaceful image of stasis, that of a lake, into a gothic metaphor of the devouring passage of time. Indeed, a brutal organic world emerges, the waterfall’s gémissements are overshadowed by the intrusive buzzing sound of insects, which puts an end to the description just as the deafening sound of the river did in the studied passage (there is, again, an ellipsis sign, indicating that the narrator is forced to abandon that train of thought). It is, of course, an imagined world. If the tower is reflected ‘de loin’, then, by the laws of refraction, the narrator must also be far from the lake; in any case, he would not be close enough to appreciate the (fantastic) detail of boiling foam².

This distance serves to underscore the violence of the image: the observed, fragile water lilies from the previous instance of the motif are replaced here by imagined, constantly renewed ‘fleurs éphémères’ (he does not actually see some flowers, but the never-ending chain of flowers). The narrator is very much aware of his distorted perception as he laments: ‘[Sylvie donnait] autrefois tant de charme aux lieux que je viens de parcourir!’ (558). In the end, what is being threatened by time here? Is it the shared, public memory of Gabrielle and Henri iv? Or is it that memory as it pertains to the narrator and Sylvie, as a model for their relationship? Remember that it is from this lake that stems the perfidious air mentioned in the previous part, conquering the red and green ‘landes’ —which allude to the vines and roses, that is, ultimately, to Sylvie and the narrator. The ‘landes’, combined with the remark ‘que tout cela est solitaire et triste!’ (558), indicate that the danger lies in that what once was a hopeful

² The image of a boiling lake is a leitmotif in fantastic Medieval literature, highly valued by Romanticism. See for instance Chrétien de Troyes, 2015: vv. 401 ff.
referent, Gabrielle and Henri iv, is now revealed to be a sinister omen (as Gabrielle died at a young age).

The third instance of the motif can pass off as inconsequential and simple, but it has a subtle, significant connection with the chapter ‘Résolution’. It is found in the last pages of the nouvelle, just before the narrator has Aurélie imitate Adrienne, causing their romance to end. On their way to the square where the narrator met Adrienne, they traverse ‘des villages rappelant ceux de la Suisse, où l’eau de la Nonette fait mouvoir des scieries’ (566). An inoffensive, picturesque scene —yet, those are the scenes that have to arouse the reader’s suspicion, as Jean-Pierre Richard pointed out (1955: 12). It is followed by a short sentence which foreshadows the failure of the narrator’s project: ‘Ces aspects chers à mes souvenirs l’intéressaient sans l’arrêter’ (566). Nevertheless, the sawmills already portrayed that defeat, the last in the long line that makes up the nouvelle. Indeed, when the narrator departs for Le Valois, anguished over the image of ‘le ruisseau coulant’, he reflects on how sad (‘triste’) is the route, and comments: ‘Toujours ces deux files d’arbres monotones qui grimacent des formes vagues’ (544). In the context of ‘Résolution’, the reader is allowed to see ‘filles’ lurking behind ‘files’: the narrator has just transitioned from his obsession over Aurélie/Adrienne to the project of reviving his boyhood love for Sylvie, but these anthropomorphic trees reveal that this transition is unsuccessful, that his thoughts are still split between those two other women. Therefore, it is not trivial that a sawmill is mentioned lines before the collapse of this bifold love. The metaphor might be coarse, but it complements the others belonging to this key motif that paces the nouvelle, and its coarseness is in part a reflection of modernity’s technological vulgarity.

Aurélie’s response to the narrator when asked to act as Adrienne supposes ‘un éclair’ which, paradoxically, makes the figurative star of Le Valois —‘tour à tour bleu et rose […] Adrienne ou Sylvie’— disappear forever3. Without that star —and we arrive here at the fourth and final instance of the motif— ‘les étangs, creusés à si grands frais, étalent en vain leur eau morte que le cygne dédaigne’ (567). This is yet another different perspective on the same artificial lakes which were a source of joy during the narrator’s childhood and a hellish landscape filled with organic lifeforms just a few pages beforehand. It should be noted that the reference to their cost is a reprise of the condemnation of modernity. This is the catastrophic end point of the itinerary traced by the motif: dead waters which the swan despises; the swan that appeared out of nowhere when a young narrator was able to make peace with Sylvie (546), that is, the ideal —but also, as in Baudelaire’s ‘Le Cygne’, poetry itself (See Jauss, 1982). And indeed, in a reflexive twist, the text shuns poetry from that point on. If the sawmills metaphor already strikes the reader in its willed simplicity and even ugliness, the last pages of Sylvie embrace the —as Jean-Pierre Richard calls it— ‘art de la carte postale’ (1955: 12). Nowhere is this clearer than in the studied last appearance of the vines and roses motif, flat, devoid of all of its past lyricism, made to signify meaninglessness.

3 The theme of the guiding star is also present in ‘El desdichado’; it will become key in Aurélia.
Conclusions

How is this meaninglessness to be understood? It is obviously very far from, for instance, the Sartrean *nausée*. The world here makes perfect sense; however, the sense that the narrator previously attributed to it is nowhere to be found. In a certain way, the world goes on without the narrator. The vines are, as always, intertwined with roses, but the narrator and Sylvie have gone their separate ways; Sylvie no longer waits for him near the river, instead, sawmills use its flow to cut the trees which, at the start of his adventure, in the phantasmagoria during his overnight journey, reminded him of both her and Adrienne. The motifs are markedly allegorical: it is not just that the entangled vines and roses symbolize *the narrator’s love* for Sylvie; the representation of the narrator’s feelings aspires to be an allegory for *love itself*. However, the motifs also have a clear narrative function; they structure the fiction’s development, which ultimately invalidates their allegorical aspirations.

From a historical perspective, the narrator’s failure to find a symbolic meaning that he longed for in the past has to be linked to the crisis of Romanticism. Nerval is of course rightly known as a *poète maudit*, and he had been a prominent partisan of *fantaisisme* during the 1840s. He was more at ease publishing in *L’Artiste* rather than in the *Revue des deux mondes* (Kekus, 2019: 461). Yet, it was in the *Revue* that Sylvie was published in 1853. Indeed, when the narrator addresses the reader prior to the lamentation over Le Valois having lost its star —the last lyrical passage of the nouvelle before its prosaically devastating ending—, his words are not a merely rhetorical *captatio*: ‘qu’on me pardonne ce style vieilli’. Additionally, they are immediately followed by yet another invocation of Rousseau’s authority: ‘Rousseau dit que le spectacle de la nature console de tout’ (567). The references to the Enlightenment philosopher appeal to a series of critical essays recently published in the *Revue*, looking for the reader’s sympathy (Mizuno, 2013). However, in the nouvelle’s closure, nature does everything but comfort the narrator. Pierre Laforgue argues that the appendix, ‘Chansons et légendes du Valois’, is a refuge of lyricism, a counterpart to the nouvelle (2015). In this sense, he interprets the mention of Sylvie’s children as a hopeful horizon for the post-1848 generation, as opposed to the intellectual climate portrayed in the opening chapters of the nouvelle, set around 1830 (2015: 55). In any case, the future for Nerval’s generation seems pretty bleak.

The question at hand here, the one posed by the last appearance of vines and roses in the nouvelle, is the same one that Barthes asked in ‘L’effet de réel’: ‘quelle est, en définitive, si l’on peut dire, la signification de cette insignifiance?’ (1968: 85). Semiotically, the answer is the same: ‘le signifié est expulsé du signe’ (1968: 88). In the last instance of the motif, strictly speaking, the dictionary entry for vines and roses —its meaning— is not invoked, it is just a description of Le Valois, it just points to the referent. Yet, the arc traced by the other instances of the motif makes it significant; in relation to them, it connotes the narrator’s failures. Still, even if there is an overall

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4 There is a similar motif which has not been studied in this article, Sylvie’s ‘Athenian’ smile (see 546, 548, 554 and 568). It is particularly appealing to a neoclassical sensitivity (Gautier defined Sylvie as ‘un marbre grec légèrement teinté de pastel’, quoted in Mizuno, 2013: 155). However, in its last instance (568), it seems to signal the transformation of Sylvie into a silent statue, reversing the Pygmalion myth —demonstrating this would require a close reading of every instance of the motif.
structure here, the last vines and roses, as Barthes’s realist details, do not allow ‘la possibilité de développer une forme du signifié’ (1968: 88): it is precisely in invalidating a structure posited by the narrator, in their resistance as le réel, that they allow the reader to see another structure —that of meaning turning into absence of meaning.

Indeed, Sylvie is clearly not an example of bourgeois Realism. On the other hand, as shown by the critical acclaim from l’école du ‘bon sens’, it is not réalisme as it was understood at the time, as that fault which Nerval accused himself of in Les Nuits d’octobre: ‘Fantaisiste! Réaliste!! Essayiste!!!’ (1993: 348). At last, it is certainly not a case of neoclassical idealism. In its unique mixing of fiction and autobiography, Sylvie plants the seeds for the Recherche. However, while Proust’s intelligence grants access to a long-forgotten world, Nerval’s provides an unquestionable, ultimately silent testimony of its loss. Proust’s narrator pledges at the end of the Recherche to write the book that the reader has in his hands; Nerval’s, cornered by the opacity of le réel, sees his own life as impossible: ‘jamais je ne pourrais faire accepter l’histoire d’un cœur épris de deux amours simultanés’ (564).

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