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David Evans, *Théodore de Banville: Constructing Poetic Value in Nineteenth-Century France*. Oakville, Conn. and Oxford: Legenda, 2014. 322 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. £55.00 (\$99.00 U.S.) (hb). ISBN 978-1-9096-6234-6.

Review by Rosemary Lloyd, University of Adelaide.

For Charles Baudelaire, the poet Théodore de Banville, born two years after him but enjoying success well before him, was remarkable for his “air de maîtrise et ce beau nonchaloir.”<sup>[1]</sup> Elsewhere, Baudelaire described Banville as “Le poète le plus habile de la jeune école nouvelle, à ce point qu’il a réduit l’art de la poésie à de purs procédés mécaniques, et qu’il peut enseigner à devenir poète en vingt-cinq leçons,”<sup>[2]</sup> an apparently snide comment that should, however, be read in the context of his own claim, in his notes for a preface to *Les Fleurs du Mal*, that he could teach anyone to write a competent poem in twenty lessons.<sup>[3]</sup> Others were less ambivalent, the critic Paul de Mantz enthusing that “Lorsqu’on ferme les *Cariatides* et les *Stalactites* on reste en proie à un long éblouissement, tourbillonnantes visions où s’emmêlent toutes les couleurs et toutes les formes, musiques confuses où l’on croit entendre chanter, avec tous les rythmes, toutes les idées.”<sup>[4]</sup> For the critic and poet Emmanuel Des Essartes, “La réelle originalité de Banville ne consiste pas tant dans cette heureuse rivalité avec le peintre de fantaisie que dans la précieuse découverte de la poésie parisienne. Plus que tout autre il a pris la société moderne pour sujet de ses poétiques études.”<sup>[5]</sup> Despite these tributes, and many like them, both during his lifetime and in the century after his death, Banville has frequently been dismissed as a poetic acrobat, a superb manipulator of rhythm and rhyme, who, however, had little of value to say. Much of this reputation rested on two shaky foundations: the inability to consult his works in their entirety; and a misreading, or perhaps better, a repetition of clichéd readings, of his treatise on poetry. Drawing on the multivolume Slatkine edition of Banville’s complete poetry and on an intelligently nuanced exploration of the *Petit Traité de poésie française*, David Evans has given us a far more comprehensive and subtler assessment of Banville’s achievements.

Central to this assessment is the broader debate about what Evans terms “the relationship between poetic form, meaning and truth in art” (p. 5). As a specialist of nineteenth-century French poetry and an outstanding metrician, Evans is well placed to pursue such a study, and his work is thoroughly grounded both in critical studies and in primary texts. Moreover, his sense of humor, an essential quality in dealing with Banville, never deserts him. Take, for instance, this sentence, which contains a strikingly visual image worthy of Banville at his most playful: if Banville is an ideal focus for studies of both the philosophical underpinning and the formal minutiae of verse, it is because “he delights in grasping the nettles which many other poets skirt, often in gleefully provocative ways” (p. 25). The image of, say, Victor Hugo or Théophile Gautier, *en femme*, delicately flinching their way round rhetorical and metrical stinging nettles is worthy of contemporary cartoonists.

The work begins with a gleeful and provocative analysis of Banville’s treatise on poetry, highlighting the omnipresence of the humor running through it, but also drawing our attention to the masterful ways in which Banville plays with language—that of political history and science, in particular, at a

historical moment when the Third Republic had just begun, and when scientists were increasingly attempting to make their work accessible to a wider public. It is above all a time marked, as Evans argues, by a distrust of words, the “product of a socio-politically turbulent century in which an elected president could declare himself emperor overnight, a voracious press printed more text daily than readers had ever witnessed before, advertising slogans could make ever more unrealistic promises, and nothing was stable” (p. 153). As Tennyson put it “The hills are shadows, and they flow / From form to form, and nothing stands” (*Memoriam*, Section 123). Banville’s response to this linguistic and metaphysical uncertainty was to deploy an exceptional ability to play with various levels of language, thereby offering an inkling of what poetry can best achieve. But, as Evans points out, “Banville’s poetics hinges on [a] tension between musicality and mechanism, inspiration and graft” (p. 57), and it is the nature of that musicality that forms the focus of the second chapter, a reading of Banville’s poetry “not in terms of sound patterns and formal fireworks, but rather, in terms of the elusive mystery of poeticity of which it forms the central pillar” (p. 80).

Evans’s second chapter, nicely titled “The Silent Music of the Stars,” opens with a close exploration of what some Banville critics have termed his “musicality,” an expression Evans reveals to be rife with ambiguity and apparently doomed to vagueness, impressionism and terminological imprecision. What is shown by Evans’s close readings, especially of poems that include the word “chanson” in their title, is that “Banville links musicality not to sound patterns or metrical forms, but to a hazy veil of uncertainty” (p. 96), the thematics of elusiveness and illusion. The following analysis of this concept of musicality, based on poems from *Odelettes*, with their trills and arpeggios, and the much later *Les Exilés*, with its cosmic scope and serious tone, is a brilliant and highly readable exploration of the poet’s techniques. What is particularly remarkable in this chapter is Evans’s ability to move among assessment of other critics, readings of Banville’s own critical or theoretical statements, and appraisals of the texts themselves, and to draw on all of these to reach new insights expressed with admirable clarity.

The parodic volume *Odes funambulesques*, the collection for which Banville is probably still best known, earns a chapter to itself, one which explores the aphoristic pronouncement “le beau n’est pas ce qu’on pense” (p. 163) as the foundation of the volume’s poetics. Here, poetic invention, ludic rhymes, and carnivalesque freedom jostle to dislodge the poet from his tight rope. But *Odes funambulesques* is not just a playful demonstration of artistic skill, according to Evans; rather, through its apparent compromise of the poetic ideal, it places itself at the very heart of contemporary anxieties over artistic value in an increasingly commercialized world. It’s almost as much fun to read this chapter as it is to read the volume itself, especially when Evans offers us a list of exuberant and very Parisian rhymes (“feuilletons / Pythons,” for instance, or “caméléon / Odéon”) or when he shows how the work is, as he puts it, “bursting at the seams with fashionable contemporary references” (p. 177): “la Jung-Frau” rhyming with “Cagliostro,” for example, “verni” with “Gavarni,” “Meyerbeer” with “hier,” or “une curcubite” with “Jules Labitte.” Above all, what this chapter demonstrates is the complexity and indeed ambivalence with which Banville uses these odes to strip bare the formal mechanism of verse poetry, mechanizing traditional procedures in a parodic way. Seen in this light, *Odes funambulesques* is a remarkably modern work, highlighting the insoluble tension between order and turbulence, never allowing the reader to settle on a single meaning, and constantly drawing attention to what Banville perceives as the life force of poetry: the tug-of-war between chaos and control.

From this exuberant survey, Evans moves to explore Banville’s output in the 1870s, when he seems so exclusively focused on fixed-form poems as to have forgotten his own warning in the *Petit Traité* about the traps posed by such apparently empty *exercices de style*. Evans, however, argues that the use of fixed forms is “linked to a sustained reflection on the complex relationship between verse mechanisms, aesthetic value, innovation and filiation” (p. 205). It was, after all, a time of vital and often painful questions about national identity, in the wake of the crushing defeat of France in the Franco-Prussian war, questions that encouraged a re-examination of history in general and literary history in particular. Dialogues between poets across the centuries led to a sharpened awareness of earlier poetic forms, like

the *ballade*, but modern re-workings of these forms, rather than being a glorious resuscitation of inherited tradition, could all too easily fall into pastiche or parody. Evans's question, "is it possible to take such verse on its own ludic terms, along with the serious aesthetic questions it raises" (p. 213), lies, of course, at the heart of what one might term the Banville problem, the perception of him as a verbal acrobat with nothing of value to say. Can an argument indeed be made that he is instead breaking free of these imprisoning forms, letting Pegasus fly well beyond the confines of form? It is, of course, a question that Mallarmé so brilliantly and pithily debates in *Divagations* where he presents centuries of poetry forming a cathedral-like "cri de pierre" from the immobility of which a "tourbillonnant génie" at last breaks free: "Théodore de Banville," Mallarmé contends, "parfois devient ce sylphe suprême."<sup>[6]</sup> On the basis of his close analyses of specific examples of Banville's fixed-form usage in the poems written in the 1870s, Evans concludes that "the interplay between fixed and mobile structure acts out the tension between tradition and innovation on which [Banville's] entire poetics is based" (p. 249). The obvious question that arises is that of whether or not poetry has to contain meaningful semantic content, or whether it can create something that, as Evans puts it, "transcends language, form and theory" (p. 250).

The concluding chapter to this ambitious investigation situates Banville's poetic theory and practice in the field of French literature more broadly, emphasizing the ways in which his work can be seen to offer a detailed and probing exploration of the central, and timeless, questions concerning form and function. Here Banville's poetry is set within a rich framework, ranging from the lofty claims of Romanticism through the debunking works of Surrealism and Dadaism to the formal fireworks of Oulipo, with, for instance, Michelle Grangaud's *sexanagrammatine*, a sestina in which each of the thirty-nine lines is an anagram of the same expression.

If there are moments in this study when a desire for completeness in an analysis of a poem blurs the need to focus on the general argument, these are few and, in any case, consistently informative. Evans writes well, with clarity and nuance, eschewing jargon and revealing that musicality is not just in his subject but in his medium. This is a work that should be in all university libraries and will richly reward anyone with an interest in poetry. Above all, it should send many back to explore what Banville really has to offer.

#### NOTES

[1] Charles Baudelaire, *Œuvres complètes*, I (Paris: Gallimard, 1975), p. 208.

[2] Baudelaire, *Correspondance*, I (Paris: Gallimard, 1973), p. 209.

[3] Baudelaire, *Œuvres complètes*, I (Paris: Gallimard, 1975), p. 183.

[4] Paul de Mantz, "Compte rendu," *Revue française* XI, November 1857-January 1858, p. 397.

[5] Emmanuel Des Essarts, "Banville," *L'Artiste*, Feb. 15 1860, p. 52. Des Essarts was soon to publish his own *Poésies parisiennes*.

[6] Stéphane Mallarmé, *Œuvres complètes*, II (Paris: Gallimard, 2003), p. 143.

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