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Dominique Billy, *Les Formes poétiques selon Baudelaire*. Paris: Honoré Champion éditeur, 2015. 484 pp. Bibliography and indexes. €95.00 (pb). ISBN 978-2-7453-2697-3.

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Though daunting, Dominique Billy's latest book is worth the specialist's stamina. *Les Formes poétiques selon Baudelaire* is an impressive reference book on the versification of all poems in *Les Fleurs du mal* for scholars of Baudelaire and of French poetry in general. Though Billy specializes in Medieval versification, he has also published on the phonology of seventeenth-century rhyme as well as on prosodic aspects of nineteenth-century lyric works by Verlaine, Corbière, Rimbaud, and Brizeux, which makes him an excellent guide on Baudelaire's particular uses of rhyme, meter, and syntax stretching from classicism to romanticism. Setting out to go beyond merely observing Baudelaire's deviances from tradition, Billy contextualizes the poet's place in the history of poetic forms and seeks to examine why he made the aesthetic choices he did.

Billy takes a non-ideological, scientific approach whose cataloging of poems in *Les Fleurs du mal* according to their structure reveals the flux that Baudelaire negotiated between tradition and originality. Patiently describing the generalities in order to flesh out the surprising anomalies, Billy presents *Les Fleurs du mal* as a rich paradox in poetic creation that captivates through its idiosyncratic rhythmic patterns and syntactical structures as much as through its subject matter. Despite the protests of contemporaries such as Théophile Gautier and Théodore de Banville regarding Baudelaire's loose interpretation of fixed forms, Billy demonstrates that Baudelaire was not so much iconoclastic as he was a genius in taking liberties while staying within the parameters of certain received notions of constraints.

Billy opens with a clear introduction that outlines his simple yet challenging objective of looking at the whole picture of Baudelaire's use of form—"Baudelaire fait feu de tout bois" (p. 14)—in order to filter a "certain originalité" (p. 18). Wary of dubbing Baudelaire whimsical or provocative, Billy methodically and neutrally sets out to reveal the lengths to which the poet went in order to stretch the limits of traditional forms. The opening chapter, "Transformations," accordingly moves from a general overview of Baudelaire's place in the history of versification to an examination of concrete examples of how the poet revisited drafts of certain poems as he made a concerted effort to create dissonance between text and its "forme rimico-métrique" (p. 24).

From this point forward, Billy devotes each chapter to specific structures, in each case providing a helpful short history and description of the structure in question and pointing to Baudelaire's possible or definite influences before detailing the poet's particular use of rhyme scheme, couplets, quatrains, etc. When turning to specific examples of poems, Billy analyzes general patterns with the aid of charts and graphs in order to expose the departures from traditional patterns (although, some of these visuals take a lot more effort to decode than others and can appear downright cryptic). After observations in chapter two on the "rime suivie" and the general ambivalence that Baudelaire displayed towards the structure of his stanzas, Billy turns to a more detailed analysis of Baudelaire's original use of couplets in the following

chapter, “Les Distiques,” and notes how the refrain in overlooked poems such as “Les Litanies de Satan,” “Franciscae meae laudes,” and “Abel et Caïn” actually becomes a discursive “solidarité” (p. 53) suggestive of a unique prayer form rather than a mere instrument of mechanical repetition. Detecting what he calls a “stylisation de l’antithèse” (p. 61) in “Abel et Caïn,” Billy provides a good example of how he reads structure to find meaning by noting how the thematic antitheses presented throughout the narrative of the poem are countered by a rhythmic unity in each quatrain that is otherwise hidden by the typographic division of each stanza. The structural opposition thus cleverly captures the irony of a violent, protracted battle that takes place between two fraternal protagonists.

Billy’s shorter opening chapters warm up the reader for a lengthy one on “Les Quatrains” (chapter four). The same general idea of Baudelaire’s poetic license, or “différenciation par la ‘couleur’” (p. 71), applies to all of the rhythmic and metrical schemes that Baudelaire applies to quatrains, and Billy provides a systematic rundown of “rimes alternées,” “rimes embrassées,” and “rimes plates,” in turn subdividing these three categories into the arrangement of rhymes, the gender of rhymes, the length of the poems, meter, the caesura, the interdependence of verses, the question of pauses, and finally the autonomy of the stanza, all the while pausing to analyze examples of poems along the way. Billy’s exhaustive approach is not meant to stifle *Les Fleurs du mal*; on the contrary, it leads to the simple and evocative takeaway point that the liberties Baudelaire takes with traditional forms paradoxically create a “dynamique interne” in each poem through which the tensions and oppositions between stanzas coalesce into a larger narrative of the poet’s attempts to forge a unique aesthetic. Billy ends this chapter by pointing to the transformations that occur between three different versions of “Le Vin des chiffonniers,” noting how Baudelaire’s gradual turn to the use of stanzas as well as modifications and even inversions in rhyme scheme tell a story of “une recherche de plus grande richesse” (p. 141). In chapter five, “Formes complexes,” Billy continues to build upon this “richesse” by briefly examining “Le Beau navire” and “Le Vampire,” two highly unconventionally structured poems that either disrupt metric continuity or appropriate various rhyme schemes and thereby express an unfolding movement and dialogue.[1]

The following chapter, chapter six, on the “quintil” (cinquain) carries more punch in how it moves away from a dry, statistical rundown loaded with diagrams and, instead, fluidly brings into striking relief how Baudelaire set himself apart in his use of the cinquain not only from past models but also from a plethora of contemporary ones such as Hugo, Musset, Lamartine, and Gautier. The author’s running observation is that Baudelaire approaches the four forms of the cinquain with surprising variety. Poems such as “Le Poison,” which showcases a curious combination of heptasyllabic lines and alexandrines that express friction and contrast, as well as “Le Goût du néant,” which detaches the fifth line of each cinquain and therefore produces an effect of instability, leads Billy to conclude that Baudelaire was so original that he hovered at the point of creating his own signature fixed form (p. 163). The final section on “quintils-miroirs,” a framed structure in which the last line of the cinquain repeats the first one, is particularly revealing of Baudelaire’s ironic take on experimentation, as it melds his penchant for flexibility (“surprise”) with “monotonie” and “symétrie” (p. 164). Though constraining himself to a “construction rigoureuse” (p. 164), the way in which he integrates the refrain is highly varied and unpredictable. To pick a particularly good example out of several, Billy offers a fascinating reading of “Lesbos” as a complex “cascade de reprises syntaxiques, menée en deux mouvements parallèles” that belies an “intention formelle” (p. 186). After sifting through various possible sources of Baudelaire’s “quintils-miroirs,” via the studies of Albert Cassagne and Graham Robb,[2] Billy arrives at his own persuasive thesis that it was in fact Marceline Desbordes-Valmore and her emphasis on the variation of the placement of the refrain as well as variations within the refrain itself who served as Baudelaire’s primary source of inspiration. Billy’s overview of “le modèle valmorien” lends itself to what could be construed as chauvinistic overtones (he refers throughout to Baudelaire’s female counterpart as Marceline, and describes Baudelaire’s compositions as “plus ambitieuses” [p. 197]), but his thorough and interesting examination of the specific ways that Baudelaire innovated Desbordes-Valmore’s poems is original and fruitful for future research.

Billy's remarks on Baudelaire's appropriation of "La Chanson" in chapter seven provide a good segue to the following and extensive chapter on "Le Sonnet" (chapter eight), since Billy demonstrates how Baudelaire was intent on transforming the "chanson populaire" into a proper literary form inspired by the sonnet. Again building upon and seeking to redress Robb's previous observations, and again demonstrating the important influence of Desbordes-Valmore, Billy shows how Baudelaire negotiated the line between freer refrains of popular music and rigidly fixed poetic forms. The famous "L'Invitation au voyage" gets its own section in this chapter, and Billy explores its genealogy, influences, and critical reception, as well as its formal particularities and eventual transformation into prose, all to demonstrate how the "caractère impair" of Baudelaire's use of pentasyllabic and heptasyllabic lines creates a certain "instabilité naturelle" (p. 221) that lends itself well to the dynamics of song.[3]

Given Baudelaire's preponderant use of the sonnet, it is no surprise that Billy's longest chapter is devoted to this particular form. It is clear that he is particularly galvanized by Baudelaire's use of the sonnet since, above all forms, it begs and even insists on the question: "Pourquoi alors cette obstination à malmener une forme fixe si apte à satisfaire de grandes exigences esthétiques?" (p. 238). Billy is also keen on clearing up any misconceptions on the form of the sonnet, especially in regards to how it has been misconstrued by critics who have taken Baudelaire to task for his apparent negligence. But, to paraphrase a question also begged by Billy, how can we talk about variance from the sonnet when its "norme" has changed over time? For Billy, critics such as Gautier, Banville, and Cassagne were remiss in their narrow interpretation of rules and missed the overall point that Baudelaire's experimentation within constraints demonstrates "une quête indubitable de la beauté à travers la forme poétique" (p. 282).[4]

At this point, Billy pulls us once again into his workshop of numerous specific examples appended with graphs and charts. Above all, he considers Baudelaire's departure from the "parangon banvillien" (p. 283) of the sonnet in how he breaches the closed form of each quatrain by abandoning the quadruple rhyme, varies the gender of rhymes and thus destabilizes a sense of cohesion between the quatrains and tercets, and augments the number of rhymes traditionally permitted in a sonnet. Billy showcases Baudelaire's "hybrid" and thus paradoxical construction of the sonnet with a reading of "Sur *Le Tasse en Prison* d'Eugène Delacroix," noting the poet's use of "rimes suivies" in a form that typically proscribes them. This dramatic variance evokes the image of a renegade, marginalized artist embodied by Tasso and Delacroix: as the pressure of the sonnet resists the "rimes suivies" typically reserved for longer poems, "il s'agit d'un drame de l'enfermement" (p. 303). With still 100 pages to go, Billy then turns to a detailed overview of Baudelaire's use of quatrains and tercets in the sonnet. Again, he illuminates the surprising anomalies, goes on to single out what he dubs "sonnets fantaisistes" ("Bien loin d'ici" is an inverted sonnet, while "L'Avertisseur" and "L'Esprit conforme" are "polaires"), explores form and syntax, delves into the discursive organization of the tercets, and, finally and appropriately, considers the question of denouement. Billy concludes the chapter by reiterating Baudelaire's adeptness and genuineness—he is not a mere "poète dandy" (p. 403)—as he adroitly explored experimentation in a decidedly oppressive age and stilted artistic climate.

Just when we think we can confidently close the book given his elegant concluding remarks on the sonnet, Billy ends with a full chapter on "Harmonie du soir," a poem that has received considerable attention due to its evocative imagery and unusual pantoum form. A revisiting of an article that he published on the same poem in 2006, peppered with slight additions and readjustments,[5] Billy once again trumps previous critics (Robb and especially Banville) by uncovering the real source of Baudelaire's use of the pantoum: it is not Hugo's model from *Les Orientales*, but Auguste Vacquerie's "L'Heure du berger" (1840). Redressing misconceptions and misguided readings of Baudelaire's poem leads Billy to note the departures and deviances (as well as borrowings) from preceding poets that succeed in creating a haunting and enduring "musicalité" (p. 415): "La prééminence des rimes et de leur entrelacement joint aux choix des mots-rime et à leur rotation constituait sans doute l'un des facteurs de la réussite esthétique de ce poème" (pp. 419-420).[6]

Finally, we arrive at Billy's conclusion, which nicely encapsulates the common thread that runs throughout *Les Formes poétiques*: Baudelaire went to extreme lengths and took great pains to produce poetry. Indeed, the lengths that Billy goes to himself in his book reflects the formidable task that Baudelaire set for himself with each and every poem. Billy demands a lot of his reader, as it takes patience and simply time to read his book cover to cover (as I have noted in my endnotes, some sections might have been truncated and inserted into the appendix). Realistically, then, the book is best served as a reference guide that, thanks to its index, can aid the researcher with specific poems from *Les Fleurs du mal* or instances of Baudelaire's particular use of forms. A less generous reader of *Les formes poétiques* might make the accusation that Billy assigns *Les Fleurs du mal* the role of a cadaver as he dispassionately slices his scalpel through all of its poems' flesh and sinews and organs; and it must be said that the target of my primary critique would be the flat tone of the author's prose and his tepid overuse of the word "intéressant." But clinical approach and lackluster language aside, I prefer to use a much more fun and colorful analogy—inspired by Baudelaire's "Morale du joujou"—and say that Billy offers us *Les Fleurs du mal* as a Rubik's cube with which to play with all of the patterns of Baudelaire's lyric forms. It can be tantalizingly frustrating to attempt to get to a sense of cohesion or finality, but it's the process and the endurance and the "redos" required by readings and re-readings of *Les Fleurs du mal* that is the source of our perpetual grappling and enjoyment.

#### NOTES

[1] Given the very short length of this chapter in comparison to the others, it might have been reserved for the appendix.

[2] By consistently nuancing what might be more casually viewed as Baudelaire's revolutionary approach to poetry, it is clear that Billy wants to show that he offers a more informed and thus more astute approach to questions of form in *Les Fleurs du mal* than previous readers. The study to which Billy repeatedly refers is Robb's *La Poésie de Baudelaire et la poésie française 1838-1852* (Paris: Aubier, 1993).

[3] It should be mentioned that Billy also devotes a section in this chapter to "Le Jet d'eau," whose rhythm succeeds in mimicking cascading water (movement) that always falls into the same place (stasis) by amplifying the refrain within the constraints of the octave.

[4] Since Théodore de Banville plays a major role in this chapter on the sonnet as well as in the final chapter on the pantoum, it should be pointed out that David Evans's recent study on Banville—even if it undoubtedly appeared when Billy's book would have been in press—convincingly nuances the commonplace, "face-value" reading of the *Petit Traité de poésie française* (1870) as a manual that prescribes slavish adherence to the rules of poetry. In fact, in Evans's focus on Banville's irony and sense of playfulness that discerningly differentiates between artistry and mechanical verse-making, Baudelaire and Banville seem to be kindred spirits more than antitheses: "Carefully booby-trapped throughout," Evans argues, "[the *Petit Traité*]" ensures that the secret of genuine poeticity will constantly elude his reader" (35). See David Evans, *Théodore de Banville: Constructing Poetic Value in Nineteenth-Century France* (London: Legenda, 2014).

[5] See Dominique Billy, "Harmonie du soir et la postérité formelle de la note XI des *Orientales*," *Studi Francesi* 148 (2006): 65-85.

[6] As sensitive and interesting as this study of "Harmonie du soir" is, it might have been truncated to serve as an appendix or made to serve as a brief subsection or even footnote in the chapter on quatrains.

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