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Valentina Gosetti, *Aloysius Bertrand's Gaspard de la Nuit: Beyond the Prose Poem*. Oxford, U.K.: Modern Humanities Research Association and Routledge, 2016. xii + 170 pp. Illustrations, notes, appendix, bibliography, and index. \$120.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-1-9096-6283-4.

Review by Catherine Witt, Reed College.

The Dijonnais poet and journalist Louis Jacques Napoléon Bertrand, alias Aloysius Bertrand (1807-1841), went to great lengths to highlight the spectacular esthetic effects at the core of his poetic project when putting together his collection, *Gaspard de la Nuit, fantaisies à la manière de Rembrandt et de Callot* (posth. 1842). Shirking a formal prefatorial exposition of the poetic principles underlying what he labeled his *fantaisies* (“[l’auteur] ne parangonne point en tête de son livre quelque belle théorie littéraire”), Bertrand merely alludes to the likeness of these peculiar compositions to “le mécanisme [des] ombres chinoises [de Monsieur Séraphin]” and the rambunctious puppet theater of “Polichinelle.”[1] In typical Romantic fashion, a commitment to the thrill and naïve enchantments of popular spectacle supersedes the authority of poetic tradition and formal rules of composition. Moreover, the elaborate paratextual apparatus that Bertrand mobilizes in his book, including two prefaces, ornate title pages, illustrations, and numerous epigraphs citing Walter Scott, Chénier, Chateaubriand, Nodier, and Hugo, as well as other Romantic heroes, makes clear that his *fantaisies* or “bambochades romantiques” tapped into sources of inspiration quite distinctive to the French imagination in the late 1820s and 1830s: a colorful historicism; the picturesque; exoticism; the fantastic; and the playful fusing of art, music, pantomime, and literature under the aegis of mannerism and *fantaisie*. *Gaspard de la Nuit* is an exquisitely odd and capricious book—in the poet’s words: “un livre fait pour exciter vivement la curiosité”—that openly proclaims its ties to what Bertrand himself termed “romantisme fashionable.”[2]

In her informative and thoroughly researched monograph, Valentina Gosetti contends that developing a fuller understanding of Bertrand’s *Gaspard de la Nuit* is contingent upon a wider appreciation of the historical, social, cultural, and literary contexts in which the collection was produced. Invoking Hans Robert Jauss’s reception theory as a methodological framework, Gosetti sets out to examine how Bertrand’s compositions respond both thematically and formally to the cultural codes of readers (she mainly considers critics and other writers) in the French Romantic era spanning the 1820s to 1830s. Her privileging of a historicist approach to Bertrand’s work through the lens of two key notions, provincialism and Romantic intertextuality, aligns with that of recent French scholarship on Bertrand and the abundant, albeit little-known, literary productions of French writers from this period. Indeed, Gosetti acknowledges her debt to the pioneering scholarship of colleagues like Nathalie Vincent-Munnia, Luc Bonenfant, and Nicolas Wanlin.[3] Their work on Bertrand and other contemporary practitioners of experimental poetic prose has drawn attention to the importance of thinking through the modalities of contemporary readers’ recognition and negotiation of the generical hybridity of these compositions, which not only oscillate between short stories (*la nouvelle*) and more traditional forms of lyric poetry (*la ballade*), but also rely on poetic and aesthetic principles borrowed from other art forms and cultural productions, including nineteenth-century print culture (books, newspapers, illustrated

catalogues, engravings, and etchings), music (*la fantaisie* and *la chanson*), and various kinds of popular entertainment (*le vaudeville* and *les funambules*). Gosetti's discussion of Bertrand's cultural milieu and literary production is further enriched by a number of articles by specialists and non-specialists published in the aftermath of his revival during the 2010-2011 session of the *Agrégation de lettres modernes*.^[4] One of the significant merits of Gosetti's book, in this respect, stems from the attention it draws within the English-speaking academic world to an important renewal in France, Belgium, and Canada of literary criticism on early French Romanticism.

While intensely in dialogue with Francophone scholarship on Bertrand, Gosetti's introduction makes clear that the goal of her study is not to revisit the amply rehearsed critical question of Bertrand's alleged invention of the genre of the prose poem, over which generations of French critics, from Suzanne Bernard to Yves Vadé, have mused. Because anthologies and surveys offer only cursory glosses of individual compositions, they do little justice to the complex, layered, and frequently self-referential nature of the collection taken as a whole. In fact, Gosetti, whose own study of *Gaspard de la Nuit* attends mainly to the first three sections of the collection ("L'École Flamande," "Le Vieux Paris," and "La Nuit et ses prestiges"), does not sufficiently insist on the importance of Bertrand's conception of his book as a carefully crafted totality. She does, however, remind us that Bertrand never called his compositions anything other than *fantaisies* or *bambochades*, and consequently asserts that reading *Gaspard de la Nuit* through the Structuralist lens of genre is not only anachronistic, but also tends to perpetuate critical commonplaces pertaining to Bertrand's presumed status as a minor provincial poet whose invention of the prose poem barely saved him from oblivion. Departing from the idea that French Romanticism in the 1820s and 1830s was a time of unprecedented cultural exchange, Gosetti resorts to a rich array of primary sources—including correspondence, periodicals, historical accounts, contemporary literary works and reviews, as well as engravings and photographs (in chapter two on old Dijon)—to begin dispelling the various myths that have plagued the reception of Bertrand's work: his marginality as a provincial writer; his unoriginality as a poet reliant on Romantic clichés; and his precursory role as the inventor of the prose poem.

The first four chapters of the monograph, which constitute the core of Gosetti's historicist reading of *Gaspard de la Nuit*, provide the necessary background against which she returns, in the final chapter, to the question of the form of Bertrand's compositions. The structure of her argument unfolds with utmost clarity. Chapters one and two attend to the various ways in which Bertrand's provincialism, rather than being cause for neglect, is an important critical consideration for interpreting his work. Basing her observations on an analysis of the "Série provinciale" in *Les Français peints par eux-mêmes* (1840-1842), Gosetti begins examining the cultural importance of the idea of provincialism and the resurgence of an "esprit de province" in the aftermath of the French Revolution. She suggests that the "complexe provincial" (p. 18) of characters like Lucien de Rubempré in *Illusions perdues* occludes the reality of a "provincial pride" (p. 19) to which Bertrand's intense literary and journalistic activities in both Dijon and Paris attest. Indeed, Gosetti depicts the young poet-journalist as an active and successful cultural mediator between Paris and Dijon. In the capital, he frequented influential figures such as Sainte-Beuve, Hugo, and Nodier, while in Dijon, Bertrand occupied a central position as a proponent of Romanticism within the city's intellectual circles. Building on the work of Jacques-Rémi Dahan, Gosetti documents the role of *Le Provincial*, a newspaper founded by Bertrand's friends Théophile Foisset and the poet Charles Brugnot, in Dijon's cultural awakening to Romantic ideas.^[5] In chapter two Gosetti argues that Bertrand's book carefully exploits the fascination for the exoticism and *couleur locale* associated with the provinces, which she understands widely as including not only medieval and gothic Dijon and Burgundy, but also Flanders, the Romantic South (Spain and Italy), and "Le Vieux Paris." What interests Gosetti are the tensions between familiarity and unfamiliarity that play out in Bertrand's reproduction of popular Romantic stereotypes and clichés. She examines these tensions with a view to showing how Bertrand both exploited and subverted patterns of cultural recognition operative in the French collective imagination at the time he composed the *fantaisies*.

Gosetti's interest in the dynamics of recognition and defamiliarization shifts in chapter three to a discussion of how new insights into the operations of the fantastic in *Gaspard de la Nuit* may be gleaned from its reinscription within its original cultural context, which Gosetti characterizes as having a fluid understanding of "le fantastique," "le fantasque," and "la fantasisie." Whereas none of the modern definitions of the fantastic (Castex, Todorov, and Caillois) are able to account for Bertrand's parody of fantastic tropes (nighttime, sleep, dreams, madness, animated objects), appreciating the originality of Bertrand's reappropriation of contemporary sources in his *fantaisies* becomes possible, according to Gosetti, when read alongside a number of widely translated foreign writers, most notably Washington Irving and Walter Scott (not E.T.A. Hoffmann, as many scholars would have it), as well as leading French Romantics such as Charles Nodier and the Victor Hugo of *Odes et Ballades*. The reconstruction of Bertrand's fantastic imagination—one peopled with gnomes, dwarfs, ghosts, and witches—rests on a constellation of primary sources, including several excerpts of articles published in *Le Provincial* that exemplify the kinds of "cultural exchanges" (p. 6) or "interculturality" (p. 145) Gosetti deems key for understanding the actual inventiveness of Bertrand's deceptive unoriginality.

Chapter four deepens the exploration of intertextual ties to Romantic sources of inspiration through a welcome turn to close reading. Two case studies focus Gosetti's attention: "La Viole de Gamba" and "Ondine." While these *fantaisies* are among the best-known and most frequently commented compositions in Bertrand's small corpus of works (Bonenfant, Murphy, et al.), Gosetti offers fresh readings of both, closely attending to Bertrand's practice of cultural *détournement*. In the case of "La Viole de Gamba," Gosetti suggests that Bertrand hijacks the principle of the "programme de salle" (i.e., scenarios "available for spectators at popular pantomimes of the *Théâtre des Funambules*") to create a "pantomime féérique" that reappropriates forms and figures associated with contemporary popular art, including the carnival, the *Commedia dell'Arte*, and the famous impersonator of Pierrot at the *Théâtre des Funambules*, Jean-Gaspard Deburau (p. 92). Similarly, Gosetti shows that the humorous staging of a peevish water nymph who fails to seduce a mortal in "Ondine" overturns the clichéd representations of this figure in popular contemporary works such as Loève-Veimars's anthology *Ballades, légendes et chants populaires de l'Angleterre et l'Écosse* (1825) and Hugo's *Odes et Ballades*. The effect sought in both *fantaisies*, Gosetti points out, is always a jolting reversal of familiar themes.

A more canonical critical discussion of form in *Gaspard de la Nuit* takes place in the last chapter, at the outset of which Gosetti rehearses her introductory reflections on the dangers of resorting to anachronistic labels such as the *poème en prose* to discuss Bertrand's *fantaisies*. Following in the footsteps of Suzanne Bernard and Nathalie Vincent-Munnia, she goes on to discuss how the "generic mobility" (p. 123) evidenced by the eclecticism and protean nature of the compositions compiled in works such as the *Tablettes romantiques* (1823)—a fascinating assortment of elegies, odes, songs, *poèmes*, tales, and fragments of poetic prose—were in fact characteristic of French poetry in the 1820s and 1830s. Gosetti argues that the experimental nature of Bertrand's fragmentary narrative structures, punctuation, typography, and attentiveness to pagination was thus far from unique, which becomes clear when she asserts that "a new generation of little-known Romantic writers was already overtly challenging the boundaries between prose and poetry...the 'prose poem', with its generic paradoxes was, indeed, 'in the air'" (p. 126). The chapter concludes with a review of the tepid critical reception of *Gaspard de la Nuit* following its posthumous publication in 1842, which reveals the confusion of critics in the face of compositions—variously labeled "imagnettes," "charmants croquis," "petites ballades en prose," "suite de tableaux"—whose strangeness, preciousness, and outdated appeal defied straightforward description. By contrast, Gosetti's comprehensive investigation of how Bertrand achieved "a unique synthesis of the literary material available at the time of his writing" (p. 119) persuasively demonstrates the originality of Bertrand's endeavor, as well as the boldness with which he pushed against established poetic, aesthetic, stylistic, and even social boundaries.

Historicism operates on two levels in this study of *Gaspard de la Nuit*. On the one hand, it is a feature of Bertrand's romantic imagination, which brings to life gothic Dijon, Old Paris, the bandit-infested roads

of Mérimée's and Musset's Spain, the Haarlem of Flemish painters Jan Brueghel, Pieter Neefs, David Teniers, Rembrandt, and so forth. Gosetti's study conceives of Bertrand's work as a consistent and playful reappropriation of clichés distinctive to the popular imagination of the time, which she, in turn, documents through a survey of contemporary cultural productions. On the other hand, historicism also characterizes Gosetti's critical approach to reading *Gaspard de la Nuit* with an eye to providing a more authentic and historically accurate understanding of Bertrand's cultural environment and the specular relationship of his work to this milieu. Paradoxically perhaps, these two historicisms are at odds with each other. While the former generates fiction (mental pictures, associative effects, and aesthetic experiences), the latter takes on a restorative function. Gosetti aims to set Bertrand's record straight, and this study certainly succeeds in providing an engaging and multifaceted historical contextualization of *Gaspard de la Nuit*. But reading Bertrand's *fantaisies* to show how they conform to readers' "horizon of expectations" in the 1820s and 1830s risks the countervailing effect of foreclosing the multiple potential horizons of legibility contained in each poem. Although Gosetti avoids reifying the work in this way, her readings of individual excerpts do not address what can arguably be seen as an important facet of Bertrand's historicist imagination, namely the philological impetus of his writing--his tangible, vibrant love of words, whether archaic, dialectal, foreign, technical, jargonistic, ecclesiastic, or other, as well as their materiality and evocative power. Bertrand's words--and therein perhaps lies his genius--play a game of foiling expectations that invites a reconsideration of what it means to read.

This study, which includes an appendix containing four beautiful English translations by Gian Lombardo, is a valuable contribution to the scholarship on Bertrand in the Anglophone world.[6] It will be of great interest to historians and literary scholars of French Romanticism.

NOTES

[1] See the preface to *Gaspard de la Nuit. Fantaisies à la manière de Rembrandt et Callot*, Jean-Luc Steinmetz, ed. (Paris: Livre de Poche, 2002), pp. 59-60.

[2] Quoted from "Annonce par Bertrand de la publication de *Gaspard de la Nuit*" in the Steinmetz edition, pp. 207-208.

[3] See Nathalie Vincent-Munni's *Les Premiers poèmes en prose: généalogie d'un genre dans la première moitié du dix-neuvième siècle* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 1996); Luc Bonenfant's *Les avatars du genre romantique: transferts génériques dans l'œuvre d'Aloysius Bertrand* (Montreal: Éditions Nota Bene, 2002); and Nicolas Wanlin's *Aloysius Bertrand. Le sens du pittoresque. Usages et valeurs des arts dans Gaspard de la Nuit* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2010).

[4] Notably Steve Murphy, ed., *Lectures de Gaspard de la Nuit de Louis ("Aloysius") Bertrand* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2010); André Guyaux, ed., "*Un livre d'art fantasque et vagabond*": *Gaspard de la Nuit d'Aloysius Bertrand* (Paris: Éditions Classiques Garnier, 2010); Sylvain Ledda and Aurélie Loiseleur, eds., *Aloysius Bertrand, poétique d'un crieur de nuit* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2010); and Nicolas Wanlin, ed., *Gaspard de la Nuit: Le Grand Œuvre d'un petit romantique* (Paris: Presses de l'Université Paris-Sorbonne, 2010).

[5] Jacques-Rémi Dahan, "Les Correspondants parisiens du *Provincial de Dijon*: collaboration ou instrumentalisation?" in Marie-Ève Thérénty and Alain Vaillant, eds., *Presses et Plumes: journalisme et littérature au XIXe siècle* (Paris: Nouveau Monde, 2004), pp. 105-119.

[6] For more translations of Bertrand's work by Gian Lombardo, see *Flemish School, Old Paris, & Night and Its Spells* (Niantic, CT: Quale Press, 2000).

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