Quandt on Gosetti (2016)


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Valentina Gosetti sets out to redress the limited exposure of Aloysius Bertrand’s Gaspard de la nuit—typically passed over as a mere Romantic caprice that is read more through Charles Baudelaire’s prose poems than for its intrinsic literary merit—by “moving beyond the prose poem as a critical parameter” (2) and instead situating the author in his historical, cultural, and literary contexts. In clear and eloquent prose, Gosetti presents a lively and thoroughly interesting account of Gaspard that illuminates a creative experimental work deserving of its proper spot in the canon of French Romantic literature.

In her opening chapter Gosetti launches into her revivification of Bertrand by highlighting the excitement spurred by the literary and cultural exchanges taking place in post-Revolutionary provincial France. Particularly engaging, her section on the “Romantic Cultural Awakening in Dijon” attests to how Bertrand’s literary sensibilities were cultivated in a milieu that celebrated its regionalism and channeled “provincial pride” into a “cultural and intellectual emancipation” (21) that also depended on Paris for artistic cultivation and inspiration. This tension between Paris and Dijon produced a unique flavor of Romanticism that, Gosetti goes on to argue, permeates Gaspard de la Nuit. The second chapter delves deeper into the “appeal of a provincial exoticism” by examining contemporary “récits de voyage.” Capturing Bertrand’s playfulness as she situates the first preface of Gaspard within a whole network of Romantic trends and stereotypes, Gosetti is at her most compelling here as she showcases the author’s sense of inventiveness and engagement with his hybrid literary scene. Casting Gaspard as a Voyage pittoresque in its own right, Gosetti demonstrates how the collection of “fantaisies” encapsulates and flaunts all strands of Romanticism (Flemish art, Spain, Old Paris) within the setting of familiar terrain.

Gosetti’s question in chapter three as to whether Gaspard is a “fantastic” text is a way for her to comb through the critical apparatus on the subject (Pierre-Georges Castex, Roger Caillois, Tzvetan Todorov, Jean-Claude Milner) in order to distill Bertrand’s irony. The playfulness at work in Gaspard is not only related to the most obvious of influences (E.T.A. Hoffmann’s Fantaisiestücke, for example), but to a myriad of fantastical works that were mediated or written by Charles Nodier and, by extension, Victor Hugo and his circle. The fourth chapter goes on to provide “case studies” of Bertrand’s own brand of the fantastic in the form of “La viole de Gamba” and “Ondine.” Astutely examining asterisks, blanks, and textual gaps that reflect Bertrand’s sharp sense of wit and humor as he systematically overturned established clichés, Gosetti provides rich readings of these “fantaisies,” proposing that Bertrand was playfully imitating the Théâtre des Funambules in the first case and the northern myth of Ossian in the second. Bertrand, then, not only drew from a wide network of literary sources, but from visual and musical ones as well.

Continuing in the vein of Bertrand’s playfulness and penchant for experimentation, Gosetti continues in her fifth and final chapter with the hermeneutics of form, revealing how the dynamic literary scene in Dijon—which, as she demonstrates, manifests itself in the theoretical debates that appeared in the regional periodical Le Provincial—cultivated a sense of “generic mobility” when it came to verse and narrative forms. Noting Bertrand’s directives to a typesetter (“Règle générale.—Blanchir comme si le texte était de la poésie”), Gosetti links this “challenge to classification” (122) to Nodier’s “Smarra” and, to a lesser and more general extent, Hugo. Also noting the myriad of authors who published in Tablettes romantiques (1823), she convincingly shows us through this trove of well-researched sources that Bertrand had a lot of competition when it came to undermining and thus experimenting with different genres and forms. Here, however, Gosetti demonstrates through visual examples from Le Provincial how the author set himself apart by cultivating the evocative power of the journalistic “non-dit” (spaces, blanks) through his experimentation with creative typesetting. Concluding the chapter by referring to both contemporary and later reviews and assessments of Gaspard that prophesized its enduring appeal (Émile Deschamps, Charles Baudelaire, Stéphane Mallarmé), Gosetti concludes that Bertrand’s “fantaisies” represent a “daring aesthetic choice” (138) that defies all categories and attempts at definition.

Gosetti succeeds in rekindling Gaspard de la Nuit as a Romantic text that can serve as a good pedagogical tool as well as an important source for research in its own right since it both highlights the major Romantic trends of the 1820s and 1830s and anticipates later nineteenth-century forms of prose and poetry. Gosetti’s chapters do lack a certain fluidity; the book reads more as a collection of articles than as a cohesive study. At times, expanded discussion of major influences such as Hugo (and to some extent Honoré de Balzac) might have revealed Bertrand’s debt to the high level of experimentation operative in early romantic novels and poems. Nevertheless, armed with formidable footnotes, a genealogy of critics from Bertrand’s time to our
own, and an impressive bibliography, Gosetti convinces the reader many times over that *Gaspard de la Nuit* is an audacious nexus of literary and artistic motifs that emerge once the portrait of the artist is allowed to share the Romantic limelight.

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