

Edgington on Evans (2014)

Evans, David. *Théodore de Banville: Constructing Poetic Value in Nineteenth-Century France*. Oxford: Legenda, 2014. Pp. x + 322. ISBN: 978-1-909662-34-6

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In this excellent monograph, David Evans considers with aplomb Théodore de Banville's voluminous verse output, along with the infamous *Petit Traité de poésie française*, detailing the ways in which Banville's virtuosity has been consistently misunderstood over the last century. His central theses are, first, that Banville's technically accomplished verse cannot be dismissed as devoid of meaning in the face of its hyper-developed form and, second, that the focus on rhyme that pervades critical analyses of his poetry is unjustified.

The introduction sets out the main obstacles to the recuperation of Banville's oeuvre by highlighting the "tension between form and content" that it presumably demonstrates within the context of the broader "assumption [...] that the artifice of verse form necessarily requires the sacrifice of meaning" (5). This urge to dismiss Banville as a mere *rhéteur*, Evans argues, is the unfortunate result of misreadings of his *Petit Traité* against the shifting economic background of the nineteenth-century publishing industry. The emerging capitalist marketplace forced the poet to choose "between artistic integrity and financial survival"; as a result, he was "ennobled and debased at the same time, much as his product also [walked] the tightrope between luxury item for the privileged few and production-line trinket for the masses" (6, 10–11).

Read literally as a how-to manual for would-be poets of mass appeal, the *Petit Traité* seems to represent Banville's acquiescence to the demands of the contemporary marketplace. Evans, however, expertly dismisses, in his first chapter, readings of the text that take it at face value rather than "as a parody of what was a well-established genre" (31). The aspect of the text that has been "most heinously misinterpreted by critics," the *consonne d'appui*, is put into parallel with the *cheville*, or filler word, that Banville counterintuitively "validates [...] as a compositional tool" (50, 62). Reading the *Petit Traité* as a parodic *art poétique*, then, Evans rejects the claim that Banville's "poetic practice [...] foregrounds sound patterns to such an extent that [...] semantic meaning [is] sacrificed to the *tra-la-la* of assonance and alliteration" (65).

The ambiguous musicality of Banville's verse is examined further in chapter two where Evans calls into question the near-ubiquitous critical reliance on musical metaphors. He writes,

[w]hile musicality [...] may provide an appealing metaphor for some impressionistic critical embroidery around the formal and structural elements of verse, it becomes highly problematic when [...] such hazy musical terminology is used as [...] a stable yardstick against which to judge the relative success of different poems. (94)

Convincing analyses of *Les Stalactites*, *Odelettes*, *Les Exilés*, and "Variations" that locate "the musicality of verse [...] not in sound but rather, in flight," and minimize the importance of rhyme in Banville's verse, instead proposing the caesura "as a privileged site of tension," follow (118, 127).

Expanding his analysis of instability in Banville's verse to the *Odes funambulesques* in chapter three, Evans comments extensively on enjambment. As he puts it, if "*rejets* undermine the rhyme by pulling the reader across the *entrevers* [...] we might [nevertheless] see them as actually reinforcing the rhyme, since the poet often finds an ingenious [...] rhyme thanks only to a ludicrous *enjambement*" (175–76). While acknowledging that such rich rhymes attract "even closer scrutiny," Evans argues that "this hyper-materialist verse articulates something far more important, the aesthetic anxiety at the heart of post-Romantic poetry" (186, 197).

Of Banville's entire verse oeuvre, his fixed form poems of the 1870s (*Ballades*, *Rondels*, *Caprices*) are most subject to claims of inauthenticity in the wake of Romantic lyricism as they "cast doubt on the integrity of metrical verse" when interpreted as "anachronistic pastiche stubbornly at odds with post-Baudelairean poetic modernity" (203, 208). Throughout chapter four, Evans resists such an interpretation suggesting that Banville "[e]levates" them above mere historical pastiche by maintaining a productive tension between reverence and a playful sense of the absurd" (222). Equally in focus here is Banville's desire to appropriate these forms as essentially French.

In the epilogue, which explores Banville's poetic lineage beginning with the *rhétoriciens* before tracing his influence on French verse through Dada and the OuLiPo, Evans reaches the conclusion that Banville's oeuvre:

offers a [...] framework for understanding the complex ways in which inspiration and toil, tradition and innovation, form and freedom, science and mystery, faith and skepticism, readers, critics and scholars, as well as industry, capitalism and craftsmanship interact in the production, reception and evaluation of poetry. (285)

Evans manages to interweave these notions deftly. The effort is particularly commendable in light of the fact that, in rehabilitating Banville's verse, he highlights the works of other French poets who have fallen either into obscurity or out of critical favor all while blending close readings with rigorous formal analyses. Indeed, few contemporary scholars are as knowledgeable on the technical mechanics of French verse and, at the same time, as able to render in-depth examinations of lines and syllables not merely comprehensible, but readable.

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