

Williams on Séginger (2015)

Séginger, Gisèle. *Un lyrisme de la finitude: Musset et la poésie*. Hermann, 2015, pp. 444, ISBN 978-2-7056-9091-5

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According to Gisèle Séginger, Alfred de Musset's contemporaries and successors unfairly caricatured him as a *poète doloriste*, ignoring the radical skepticism of his thought. Séginger convincingly argues that Musset, unlike other nineteenth-century writers, embraced *finitude* and warned against the dangers of Idealism and the Absolute (144; 339). Séginger seeks Musset's rehabilitation as a thinker and poet, suggesting that he predates aspects of Charles Baudelaire (270; 376–77), Jules Laforgue (242; 300), and Paul Verlaine (204).

The first chapter, "Écrire en temps de crise" (17–69), explains Musset's political disengagement which, along with his refusal to sacralize poetry, demarcates him from both engaged poets and proponents of *l'art pour l'art*. Musset is then more authentically revolutionary than any Romantic (65; 68). Chapter two, "Réenchanter la vie" (71–172), argues that Musset reenchanting everyday life without recourse to religion. Victor Hugo's and Alphonse de Lamartine's predilection for elevated, uninhabitable mountains provides a counterpoint to Musset's appreciation of the everyday (164–72). Chapter three, "Une poétique contre la métaphysique" (173–255), reaffirms that Musset prefers to be part of life, dismissing as *désuet* his contemporaries' vatic pretensions (191). A focused reading of the *Nuit* cycle powerfully conveys what Séginger terms Musset's *poétique* (204–55). Critics have wrongly attributed the Muse's values to Musset himself whereas, in fact, his poetry of the finite opposes the dangerous temptation of the Muse's grandiloquent Idealism (216–17). The fourth chapter, "Le renouveau du lyrisme" (257–322), demonstrates the instability of Musset's *je*, challenging his reputation for sentimental, confessional poetry (276).

For Séginger, Musset's unstable *je* surpasses definitions of lyricism proposed by Georg Hegel (284–85) and Germaine de Staël (297; 403–04). Séginger adapts Jacqueline Bernard's "4^e personne du singulier" (the written *je lyrique* combines *je* and *il*), presenting Musset's multifarious *je* as a "4^e personne du pluriel" (292–93). Continuing this attention to pronouns, Séginger says that Musset's *tu* is not rhetorical. By dedicating his poems to *les autres*, not *l'Autre*, he aims for genuine exchange (310). Whereas Hugo uses dialogism pedagogically (261), Musset treats the reader as an equal and brother (319). Female readers' status is less certain, however; for Séginger, "[p]eu importe l'identité de la destinataire" (315; see also 141).

According to the fifth chapter, "Le poète mineur" (323–66), Musset saw misunderstood poets as failures and wanted the public's comprehension (332), a conformism that paradoxically proves his nonconformism (334–35). Taking after Clément Marot and Mathurin Régnier, Musset foregrounds his human triviality (337; 342). He is more earthbound *grillon* than Lamartinian or Hugolian *aigle* (341–46). The sixth and final chapter, "Le dire poétique" (367–421) insists on the value placed by Musset on prosaic verse suited to expressing life. Although Hugo articulated the same approximate values, Séginger opposes Hugo and Musset, who she says surpassed the former's experiments with *vers brisés* (370–71) and subverted Hugolian *trimètre* (380).

Regarding the treatment of form, Séginger begins her study with contemporary dismissals of Musset's style (7). The initial chapters, however, treat Musset's poetry and prose as effectively transparent, requiring no explicit commentary. The book's second half insists often on Musset's rhythmic, musical, conversational, and lifelike voice (196; 204; 312; 369; 371; 383–85). Séginger apparently locates these qualities in the absence of contrived rhythmic patterns in his tetrametric alexandrines. Musset's own use of such patterns indicates the pedantry of the Muse (224) or proves his technical mastery to Charles Augustin Sainte-Beuve (318). Séginger also finds his octosyllables more "human" (93; 225). Musset's formal accomplishments are largely left implicit, however, because precise commentary is reserved for negative examples. More generally, consistent with her rehabilitative aim, Séginger's assessments of Musset come to seem predictably approbatory: Musset was a simultaneously spontaneous and a careful writer (282–83; 384–85) capable of a "grande maîtrise" of form (389).

In addition to its treatment of form, I have reservations about the book's repetitiveness. Séginger presents Musset's thought and values as reliably coherent, insisting twice on the irony of a reference to the soul's immortality (153; 246–47). Although chapter four shows Musset depicting his successive, shifting states of mind (312), Séginger's second chapter—which typically assembles excerpts, not integral readings of poems—makes Musset's thought appear monolithic. Séginger's Musset stands in opposition to the entire first half of the century, right down to Caspar David Friedrich's *Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog* (306–07). The demonstration of Musset's *lyrisme de la finitude* is compelling but, once established, lacks development. More formal analysis might have mitigated this tendency towards repetition and better served the rehabilitation of Musset's poetry.

This important book succeeds in its promotion of Musset as a thinker and should inspire further reappraisal of Musset as a versifier as well.

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