

Evans on Hernikat Schaller (2017)

Hernikat Schaller, Laura. *Parodie et pastiche dans l'œuvre poétique de Théodore de Banville*. Classiques Garnier, 2017, pp. 510, ISBN 978-2-406-05995-0

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Thanks to the pioneering work of Peter J. Edwards and Peter S. Hambly, the last thirty years have seen a steady renewal of French interest in Théodore de Banville. Following the valiant attempts of Philippe Andrès, author of four monographs on the poet between 1993 and 2009, and Myriam Robic (2010), Laura Hernikat Schaller offers a rich and meticulously documented study of one of Banville's most notorious areas of activity: playful pastiche and irreverent parody. She focuses on *Odes funambulesques*, the best-selling volume of effervescent Parisian satires which made Banville known to a wider public in the same year that *Les Fleurs du Mal* appeared, and on his fixed form poems of the 1870s, *ballades* in the style of François Villon and *rondels* after Charles d'Orléans.

The first section, "Poétique de la parodie," offers a useful review of terminology from Gérard Genette to Daniel Sangsue, proposing a familiar dichotomy: parody as transformation of an existing text, with pastiche denoting imitation of a recognisable style, ludic but not necessarily intended as satirical or comic. Part two then identifies "Tremplins vers la pratique parodique," namely the role played by the literary vogue for *la fantaisie* and by the Parisian press, in the development of Banville's playful style. The characteristics of *fantaisie*—humor, freedom, caprice, originality, creative imagination, variety, genre-mixing and technical prowess—abound in *Odes funambulesques*, where the poet creates a genuinely original, and influential, poetic voice with which to respond to a creeping anxiety over the declining fortunes of lyricism in a mercantile society. Many of the poems received pre-publication in the literary press, and a journalistic approach is central to this refreshing new poetry: firstly, in an aesthetics of the fragment, since short poems were published alongside articles on diverse, unrelated subjects, and secondly, in Banville's penchant for caricature, as opposed to the grandiose tonality of Romantic verse. Journalistic deadlines also acted for Banville as a creative catalyst, with prolixity offering a substitute for the faltering inspiration of the post-Romantic generation. The rigid forms of verse here come into their own, with mechanical reproduction guiding the creative impulse, both hack journalist and hack poet required to fill a set number of lines with haste. As Hernikat Schaller argues, this journalistic aesthetic brings striking new features to the poem: frequent use of direct speech and dialogue, a preference for brevity, an ironic tone, as well as the forensic dissection of Parisian society.

In her close readings of *Odes funambulesques*, which lampoon the pretensions of the artistic milieu, from theatre directors and literary critics to substandard authors and *littérature industrielle*, Hernikat Schaller shows how parody, pastiche, and satire come together in complementary ways. Banville rewrites famous poems by Victor Hugo, the humor emerging from a sense of technical virtuosity, as well as the incongruous, trivial subject matter. The volume pokes fun at the nineteenth-century vogue for Orientalism, and also sends up the rhyming excesses of sixteenth-century versifiers, with parody functioning as a means for poetry to laugh at itself. Indeed, the whole volume abounds with ostentatious, eccentric rhymes as the poet thrives on a gleeful and hyperbolic sense of the absurd. Unlike those of Arthur Rimbaud and Paul Verlaine, Banville's parodies are good-natured, gentle, and never crude, but rather delight in a paroxysm of linguistic play.

Banville's fixed form poems, *les pastiches de genre*, emerge from the patriotic post-war fervor of the 1870s, as he resuscitates national literary history by insisting on the virtues of filiation and homage. With their clichés of medieval imagery and language, these poems have been read as mere *exercices de style*, but for Hernikat Schaller, they play a central role in Banville's innovative poetic project: "toute l'œuvre poétique de Banville est subordonnée à cette volonté de nouveauté, qui passe notamment par la restitution d'anciennes formes" (372). This tension between imitation and originality goes to the heart of nineteenth-century poetic anxieties, setting Banville's parodies and pastiches apart from those of his contemporaries. As Hernikat Schaller argues, for many fin-de-siècle authors, these were subversive, anti-authoritarian modes of writing, whereas for Banville the reflexive self-knowledge of post-Romantic poetry places the poet permanently on the tightrope between homage and irreverence, authority, and (self-)mockery, the absolute and the trivial, the lyrical and the grotesque—tensions which are perfectly encapsulated in texts which invite us to read them in both senses at once. By demonstrating the subtleties of Banville's *comique versifié* and its importance to the evolution of nineteenth-century French poetry, this excellent study will no doubt become a cornerstone of work on Banville, as well as on parody and post-Romantic poetics more broadly.

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