



“English Parnassianism” and the Place of France in the English Canon

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In the late 1860s and the early 1870s a shift took place in English attitudes to France and to French culture. The defeat of France by Prussia in the War of 1870 acted as a catalyst for feelings of sympathy which had begun to surface after a long period during which France remained the ancestral enemy in spite the alliance with Britain during the Crimean War. France had represented, for the Victorians, corruption in government, degeneracy in culture, and salacity in literature. “She was reading a French novel” were words to strike fear into the heart of a parent of the 1850s. Tennyson, appointed Poet Laureate in 1851, warned Queen Victoria against art contaminated with “poisonous honey stol’n from France”, in a poem first published in 1872 (1880: 535). Oscar Wilde was to change the function of Tennyson’s metaphor: “your soul will grow eager to know more, and will feed upon poisonous honey”, says his Gilbert (Wilde 1999: 850). Two explanations have been proposed for Tennyson’s disgust. Firstly, that Monckton Milnes had shown him his collection of French erotica, and secondly, that he was cross with Swinburne for contributing a sonnet in praise of Gautier’s scandalous novel *Mademoiselle de Maupin* to a funeral *festschrift* for the latter.

The founders of the Aesthetic movement, like Walter Pater and Algernon Swinburne, saw in French art and literature an alternative to the Victorian ethos which insisted on a moral purpose for all artistic production, and a refuge from a threatening materialistic world. Théodore de Banville, model and mentor for the “English Parnassians”, wrote in 1861 of “ce siècle de fer” [“this iron century”], (Banville 1999: 6, 197-198) and Gautier’s “[T]out ce qui est utile est laid” [“Anything useful is ugly”] (1966: 45) of 1835, was to be echoed by Oscar Wilde in the “Preface” to *Dorian Gray*, 1891, with his “all art is quite useless” (Wilde 1999: 17). Tennyson was not keen on this idea either:

Art for Art’s sake! Hail, truest Lord of Hell!
Hail Genius, Master of the Moral Will!
“The filthiest of all paintings painted well
Is mightier than the purest painted ill!”
Yea, mightier than the purest painted well,
So prone are we toward the broad way to Hell! (Starkie 1960: 39)¹

Another impulse for the reaction in favour of more rigid forms in verse was the excesses of the so-called “Spasmodic” school. The term was coined by Charles Kingsley to describe a group of minor poets of the 1840s and 1850s, who wrote “turgid verse plays of inordinate length” in “an extravagant, bombastic, “neo-romantic” verse” with “little formal discipline or structure” (Cuddon 1999). Many of these names for schools and movements originated as mildly pejorative nicknames: Hopkins’s “Rondeliers” for the English Parnassians, and Barbey D’Aurevilly’s christening of the French *parnassiens* (after the magazine *Le Parnasse contemporain*). The iconic Laureate himself did not escape censure. Edmund Gosse wrote of Tennyson having set a “disastrous” fashion for blank verse, and of the Brownings being “bent more on vigour than grace”. His horror of “chaos” led him also to wish that he might be dead “before the English poets take Walt Whitman for their model in style” (1877: 71).

The English Parnassians’ move to strict verse forms also originated in France. The *parnassien* school sprang directly from the doctrine of “Art for Art’s Sake”, vigorously proclaimed in Théophile Gautier’s preface to *Mademoiselle de Maupin*, of 1835, and in his poem “L’Art”:

Fi du rythme commode,
Comme un soulier trop grand,
Du mode
Que tout pied quitte et prend! (1947: 131)

Austin Dobson, probably the best poet of the English movement, translated this, attempting as far as possible (as befits a disciple) fidelity in scansion and rhyme-scheme, by:

O Poet, then, forbear
The loosely-sandalled verse,
Choose rather thou to wear
The buskin—strait and terse. (“Ars Victrix”, in Dobson 1909: 204-205)

Banville enunciated the *parnassien* doctrine in his *Petit traité de poésie française*, which exalted form, rhyme, colour, and music before all other considerations: “Ne te dis pas hypocritement: J’ai sacrifié la Rime à la Pensée. Dis-toi: mon génie est voilé, obscurci, puisque je vois s’obscurcir ce qui en est le signe visible.” [“Do not tell yourself hypocritically: I have sacrificed Rhyme to Thought. Say rather that it is your genius that is veiled, obscured, since its outward sign is obscured”] (Banville 1891: 268-269). And Banville appropriated as his tool, and that of the *parnassiens*, “la versification du XVIIe siècle, perfectionnée par les grands poètes du XIXe” [“the versification of the sixteenth century, perfected by the great poets of the nineteenth”] (Banville 1891: 4). Verse is “la parole humaine rythmée de façon à être chantée” [“human speech so modulated as to be sung”] (1891: 5). Every poem is therefore perfect in itself, with its content, its form, its rhymes, its tune; it cannot be done again or altered; there is no such thing as a prose poem, because prose can always be modified.

Another influential Banville text was his *Trente-six Ballades joyeuses* of 1873, the model for Andrew Lang’s greatest verse success, the *Ballades in Blue China*, with its motto “*Tout par Soullas*” [Old French: “All by Delight”] (1883: title). This collection included translations of Banville’s ballades, notably the “Ballade de Banville aux Enfants perdus”, where he substituted for Banville’s refrain,

“Embarquons-nous vers la belle Cythère” (Banville 1999: 6, 7-208), his own adaptation of a line from Tennyson’s “Ulysses”, “It may be we shall touch the happy isle” (1883: 31-33). Lang also adapts Banville’s “Ballade de Victor Hugo”, with the refrain “Mais le père est là-bas, dans l’île” (Banville 1999: 6, 245-246), to his own tribute to Tennyson, the “Ballade for the Laureate”, with the refrain “The Master’s yonder, in the Isle” (1923: 1, 238-239).

The substitution of Tennyson’s middle-class *villegiatura* on the Isle of Wight for Hugo’s political exile on Guernsey is somewhat bathetic. These encomia were a commonplace of the period: Dobson placed his tributes to Hugo and Tennyson on succeeding pages of his *Collected Poems* (Dobson 1909: 318-320).

The fashion in the 1870s and 1880s for *formes fixes*, the *rondeau*, the *ballade*, the *villanelle*, the *chant royal*, and the rest, stems, therefore, firstly from a not unusual rejection of the preceding generation, and secondly from the French *Parnasse*, and was nurtured by an increased political sympathy with France. Gosse wrote of his own verse that: “[T]he voice is not of 1911 — it is of 1872, or of a still earlier date [...]. If I am a poet at all, I belong to the age of the Franco-German War” (1911: vi-vii). He identifies his poems thereby as belonging to the precise historical moment when sympathy for a defeated France coincided with such purely literary factors as the reception of Swinburne’s and Rossetti’s translations of Villon, the publication of Banville’s *Petit traité*, and the definitive edition of Gautier’s *Émaux et Camées*.

Gosse wrote of Dobson that “What attracted him to [the fixed forms] was the discipline they demanded, the impossibility of cultivating them while remaining slipshod or irregular” (1925: 186). The “English Parnassians”,² who tried so hard to adapt these forms to compositions in their native tongue, were not so punctilious in their discipleship as strictly to follow Banville’s or Gautier’s theories. They shrank from what James Keith Robinson calls “the subversive aspect of the *parnassien* ideal, the postulation of aestheticism as a way of life in protest against a dominant Philistinism” (1953b: 754). That was to come later, with Dowson, Lionel Johnson, and Wilde. The delay illustrates, perhaps, a lack of robustness in the character of the English intellectual, and certainly a want of tolerance in English society, in the 1870s and 1880s. Andrew Lang, an associate of Walter Pater in his days at Oxford, shrank even in those early days from admitting the full commitment. He wrote of Gérard de Nerval that he “unhappily [...] took the thing in earnest, [...] really despised wealth and fame and repute” (Lang 1871: 288). They were content to produce what are in effect pastiches, whether of Villon, Charles d’Orléans, Ronsard, or Du Bellay, or of the French literary archaeologists who, in the nineteenth-century, rescued these poets from oblivion. The best applications of the English Parnassians’ talents were to light verse and translation. Such translations contained, again, elements of pastiche, in some cases not necessarily of the source text. Lang, for instance, incorporated echoes of English verse of the seventeenth century — Marvell, Herrick, or the “Cavalier” poets, like Suckling or Carew, whom he categorized among writers of “*vers de société*”— into his translations of the *Pléiade*, the group of seven poets formed in 1556 by Pierre de Ronsard. The other six were Joachim Du Bellay, Étienne Jodelle, Jean Antoine de Baïf, Pontus de Tyard, Jacques Peletier, and Rémy Belleau.

Lang, indeed, in his essay “Théodore de Banville” (Lang 1891: 51-76), regarded in some quarters as one of three manifestos of the English Parnassian movement, doubted the applicability of the *formes fixes* to “serious modern poetry”, declaring that “for my own part I scarcely believe the revival would serve the nobler ends of English poetry”, and thought the forms would best serve for “decorative

poetry, the poetry some call *vers de société*” (Lang 1891: 75). Part of the attraction for him was the quality Banville had claimed, that the forms possessed the “‘fresh and unconscious grace which marks the productions of primitive times’” (Lang 1891: 75) — a translated quotation from the *Petit traité*. Lang was to become one of the most noted of the early anthropologists, or folklorists (the terms were virtually interchangeable in his time). The mainspring of these “Romantic anthropologists”, as Robert Crawford calls them (1986: 849), was this quest for untainted purity, for what Sainte-Beuve had called “cette poésie qui coule de source [...] qui n’est pas une poésie d’auteur” [“that authorless poetry which springs from the very source”] (“Monsieur Fauriel”, 1876: 4, 235). Banville claimed that “[L]a Poésie lui est révélée d’une manière extra-humaine et surnaturelle” “[P]oetry is revealed to [humanity] in an extra-human and supernatural way”] (Banville 1891:11).

Edmund Gosse, in his own manifesto “A Plea for Certain Exotic Forms of Verse”, is heavily indebted to Banville, following him in enumerating and describing the various forms, and deciding that “the *rondel*, the *rondeau*, the *triolet*” are suited to “joyous or gay thought” — by which I take it he meant something like Lang’s *vers de société* — and that “the *villanelle*, the *ballade*, and the *chant royal*” are “usually wedded to serious or stately expression” (1877: 57). Gosse then spoils the effect, by quoting his own *chant royal*, an appalling sub-Arnoldian confection. Admittedly, the form is very difficult to execute, and perhaps on that count Austin Dobson can be cleared of the charge of complete sycophancy when he praised the poem in his own manifesto, “A Note on Some Foreign Forms of Verse” (Adams 1878: 333-349). Gosse does, however, come close to Banville’s position by stating that “the attention should be attracted by the wit, or fancy, or pathos, in the thoughts and expression, and not, until later study, by the form at all” (1877: 71). Later he was to correspond with Mallarmé, and gained the latter’s praise for his grasp of Symbolism: “[Mallarmé’s] aim [...] is to use words in such harmonious combination as will suggest to the reader a mood or a condition *which is not mentioned in the text*, but is nevertheless paramount”. “*Tout est là*” (1913: 373-374), Mallarmé wrote back. Banville had said much the same thing twenty years earlier:

La poésie a pour but de faire passer des impressions dans l’âme du lecteur et de susciter des images dans son esprit, — mais non pas en décrivant ces impressions et ces images. C’est par un ordre de moyens beaucoup plus compliqués et plus mystérieux.

[The aim of poetry is to convey impressions into the reader’s soul, and to conjure up images in his mind, — but not by describing such impressions and images. This occurs through the use of much more complicated and mysterious means].
(Banville 1891 : 269)

Sadly, of our three chief Parnassians, Andrew Lang, Edmund Gosse, and Austin Dobson (others included Robert Bridges, Cosmo Monkhouse, John Payne, and Theo Marzials), Gosse, whose grasp of the theory was the most acute, was by some distance the worst practitioner:

And then upon her face I fell,
My sweet, lost Celia’s, and my arms

Clasped round once more the miracle
 Of her divine and tender charms;
 The room grew dark, I know not why, —
 I gazed and saw that, suddenly,
 The moon was ashen in the sky. (“The New Endymion”, 1911: 87)

The third of the three manifestos, Dobson’s “A Note”, was published the year after Gosse’s “Plea” as an appendix to Davenport Adams’s *Latter-Day Lyrics* (Adams 1878), an anthology which included a separate section of poems in the new French forms. This consisted of *triolet*s, by Bridges and Dobson; a *rondel* by Payne; six *rondeaux*, by Bridges, Dobson, Gosse, Payne, Waddington and Marzials; two double *rondeaux*, by Payne and Monkhouse; a *kyrielle* and a *virelai*, both by Payne; four *villanelles*, by Dobson, Pfeiffer, Gosse, and Payne; two *ballades*, by Dobson and Payne; a *double ballade* by Dobson; and two *chants royal*, by Gosse and Payne. Dobson’s “Note” adds nothing to Gosse’s exegesis, save that he is more easily understood on the forms, using the *a,b,a,b*, notation. He follows his two predecessors in his opinion that “they are admirable vehicles for the expression of trifles or *jeux d’esprit*” (Adams 1878: 335).

Robinson claims that Dobson’s *Proverbs in Porcelain*, of 1877, was the first collection of poetry employing the old French forms to attract general notice (1953a: 37), but Gosse notes also Bridges’s *Poems*, of 1873. His own *On Viol and Flute* also appeared in 1873. Lang’s collections had titles just as dainty, including *Ballades in Blue China*, *Grass of Parnassus*, and *Rhymes à la Mode*.

The English Parnassians formed a close-knit mutual admiration society. Gosse returned Dobson’s compliments about his *chant royal* by writing of the latter’s “exquisite creations” (1925: 168). Lang, not to be outdone, produced “A Review in Rhyme”:

A scent of dead roses, a glance at a pun,
 A toss of old powder, a glint of the sun,
 They meet in the volume that Dobson has done! (1892a: 34-35)

Gosse, meanwhile, wrote of Lang’s “measured, accomplished verse, dancing in fetters” (1925: 168). The “fetters” are of course the *formes fixes*. The movement was soon to understand how galling these fetters could be. Arguments broke out over how far it was permissible to go in pursuit of the recurrent rhymes demanded by the forms. Dobson suggested that “it should be allowable to rhyme such words as ‘hail’ and ‘hale’, but not [...] ‘prove’, ‘reprove’, ‘approve’” (Adams 1878: 349). Lang, parodying Chaucer, wrote of translating Banville:

And eke to me it is a great penaunce,
 Syth rhyme in English hath such scarsete
 To follow, word by word, the curiosite
 Of *Banville*, flower of them that make in France. (Lang 1891:57)

Both *parnassiens* and Parnassians, in their pastiching of the ancient poetry, were of course engaged in changing its function. Banville wrote that “En un mot, j’ai voulu non évoquer la ballade ancienne, mais la faire renaître dans une fille vivante qui lui ressemble, et créer la Ballade nouvelle” [“In a word, my intention is not to call back the ancient *Ballade*, but to give it new birth in a living child, the image of its parent, by creating the new *Ballade*”] (Banville 1891: 184). The transmission shifts,

from lyrics springing from, and addressed to, a rural, feudal society, to those composed by bourgeois poets, for a bourgeois audience. Banville might have protested that all poetry should be made to be sung, and indeed much of his verse has been set to music, but the late nineteenth-century audience was made up of readers, not listeners. It was also highly sentimental. Robinson comments on Dobson's "On a Fan that Belonged to the Marquise de Pompadour", which appeared in *Proverbs in Porcelain*:

It is irrelevant to protest that the self-consciousness with which [Dobson] contemplated the scene would have been incomprehensible in the Pompadour's own time, when the monarch himself, on seeing the funeral cortege of his former mistress, merely remarked that madame had a wet day for her journey. Dobson was a Victorian, and he felt as a Victorian. (1953a: 36)

Joseph Boulmier, author of *Les Villanelles*, with whom Lang exchanged flattering poems in that form, was upset by the difference in sentiment between the medieval and the *parnassien* villanelle:

En fait de style, ce qu'il faut avant tout à la villanelle, c'est du tendre et du naïf. [...] Mais ce qu'elle abhorre, et à juste titre, — en raison de son origine paysanne, — c'est l'emphase, la sonorité banale, la mièvrerie prétentieuse, la jonglerie des mots.

[[W]hat the villanelle needs most, as regards style, is the tender and the naïve. [...] But what it detests, and rightly, in view of its peasant origin, is bombast, banal sonority, pretentious affectation, tricks with words]. (1879 : 17)

But the Victorian audience knew what it liked in the Parnassians:

Speak of the play — the children's play,
Of Dobson, Gosse, and Andrew Lang. (William Caine, "Ballade of Three Poets", in Falconer 1899: No. 13).

This about sums up what Hans Robert Jauss calls the *Erwartungshorizont*, the horizon of expectations (Jauss 1982: 25, of their public. It was nursery tea-time in the gardens of the West. Reaction was not slow to come. Gerard Manley Hopkins, who christened the group the "Rondeliers", condemned the Parnassians as a symptom of a decadent, "Alexandrine", age (Abbott 1982: 275-276). Had they had access to this, the Parnassians would have relished the second adjective; they themselves spoke of living in a belated, Silver, or Alexandrian age; they were already half-way to the Decadent Movement as such. Hence their own reaction in later days: Lang's trajectory has already been mentioned, and Henley was to reject the *rondeaux*, roundels, and *ballades* in his *Collected Poems*, in a letter of 1896 to their editor, who was, ironically, that arch-Parnassian, Austin Dobson (Connell 1949). Oscar Wilde was kinder when he wrote nostalgically of:

Days when one loved the exquisite intricacy and musical repetitions of the *ballade*, and the *villanelle* with its linked long-drawn echoes and its curious completeness; days when one solemnly sought to discover the proper temper in which a *triolet* should be written; delightful days, in which, I am glad to say, there was far more rhyme than reason (1890: 319).

Henley, former Parnassian, and editor in 1868 of that short-lived bastion of the *formes fixes*, the weekly *London*, and his cohorts were to turn viciously on Wilde at his downfall. In a review of *Dorian Gray* in *The Scots Observer*, at that date under Henley’s editorship, Charles Whibley, whom John Connell identifies as Henley’s “jackal”, wrote “[I]f he can write only for none but outlawed noblemen and perverted telegraph-boys, the sooner he takes to tailoring (or some other decent trade) the better for his own reputation and public morals” (Connell 1949: 188). Andrew Lang was not above some unpleasant comments not only about Wilde, but about his former friend and collaborator Walter Pater, writing bitterly of “the fruits of philosophy as inculcated by Messrs Wilde, Pater, Morris, Ruskin, Crane, and similar Masters” (c.1895).

So what, then, were the consequences, what was the afterlife, of this deliberately minor and belated movement? First, and most obviously, it led on into the Decadent phase, and thus into Symbolism. I cannot better G. M. Young in describing the atmosphere first generated in the Oxford of the early 1870s, when Lang was a don at Merton:

the new ritualism or the new dandyism, of *villanelles* and peacock’s feathers, Utamaro and Cellini, strange odours, strange sins. What rapture to repeat, in a French accent more strange than all, some sonnet of José-Maria de Heredia: what ecstasy in the very syllables — Narcisse Virgilio Diaz. (Young 1960: 162).

A further consequence could be claimed: after the high seriousness of Leavis’s “Great Tradition”, comic or light verse, *vers de société*, has again become more acceptable as a part of the system. The only poem by Andrew Lang, for instance, included in Christopher Ricks’s *New Oxford Book of Victorian Verse* of 1987 is “The Last Chance”, a jokey little number about fishing (Ricks 2002: 555). Lang himself wrote (c. 1892) that this was the only poem of his he wished to appear in A.H. Miles’s enormous anthology, *The Poets and the Poetry of the Century* (Miles 1891-1897). W.H. Auden, writing about Hood, claimed that the “minor poet” is often most original when writing as a comic (1967: 19). Indeed, if any of the verse produced by the English Parnassians deserves to be remembered, it is that in which they use the old French forms as the vehicle for light-weight, humorous comment on the late nineteenth century social and literary scenes.

So much for genre. As to form, the exercise involved in the use of the *formes fixes* has been continued, according to Robinson, by Hardy and Chesterton, Pound and Eliot (1953a: 38). James Fenton quotes Dylan Thomas’s “Do not go gentle into that good night”, as an example of a villanelle with a serious content and function; he contrasts it with Henley’s “A Dainty Thing’s the Villanelle”, whose sole function is as an elegant illustration of the form (Fenton 2002: 18-20). A volume of *Pléiade* translations, in original metres and with the source texts, has recently been published (Shapiro 2002). Shapiro’s translations of Marot’s rondeaux, and of some of Ronsard’s less well known sonnets, are erotic treasures, far removed from the “*mièvrerie*” Boulmier complained of in the *parnassien* villanelle.

“Theme”, as a heading, should follow “genre” and “form”. The English Parnassians’ themes were those of the Renaissance and its precursors in the Middle Ages, and of their resuscitators in the 1830s: the complaints, the transience, and the delights of life and love. Their great gift to the English canon is the appropriation of the poets of the French sixteenth and preceding centuries. A large part of St John Lucas’s *The Oxford Book of French Verse* (1946), first published in 1907, is taken up

by the poetry of Ronsard, Du Bellay, Belleau and other poets of the *Pléiade*. These are in many cases the same poems Andrew Lang translated in his first collection of verses, *Ballads and Lyrics of Old France: with other Poems* (Lang 1909), first published in 1872. The association with the now disgraced aesthetes led to a lean period at the end of the century. Hilaire Belloc signalled a revival with his anthological study of the poems of the *Pléiade* (1904), which was, appropriately enough, the year of the *Entente Cordiale*. George Wyndham's *Ronsard & La Pléiade* followed (1906), and the *Oxford Book*, as noted, in 1907. Lytton Strachey's *Landmarks in French Literature* (1969), heavily weighted towards the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, appeared in 1912, the same year as the first *Georgian Poetry*. It was only five years to *Prufrock*. Nerval's "*El Desdichado*" surfaces in "The Waste Land", a generation after Lang concluded an essay on Nerval (1871: 282-293) with a translation of that sonnet. The English Parnassians, most of all Andrew Lang, drew attention not only to pre-classical France, but to the poets of early and late Romanticism as well.

Pierre Bourdieu has written of minor poets that:

[S]uch authors, condemned by their failures or successes of doubtful merit, and simply and purely fated to be erased from the history of literature, also affect the functioning of the field by their very existence and by the reactions they arouse (1996: 70-71).

I would argue that another way in which Dobson, Gosse, and Lang, and especially the last, "affected the function of the field" was their (perhaps unintentional) role as anthologists. Just as Lang's *A Collection of Ballads*, after Scott, provides the texts for most of what we know of the old Scottish ballads (not *ballades*), so the anthological function of collections of translations, such as those included in *Ballads and Lyrics* and subsequent volumes, has modified the English canon and provided a mine of intertextuality in which to delve.

Endnotes:

¹ Quoted as "an unpublished poem from [Tennyson's] pen, dated 1869".

² The name is supposed to have been invented by Gosse. I cannot trace his having used the term any earlier than 1904.

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