

**Discordant Harmonies and Turbulent Serenity:  
The Eco-poetic Rhythms of Nature's – and Art's – Resistance**

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Abstract

This article argues that the poetic and critical writings of Théodore de Banville represent a concerted and successful attempt to give the natural world an independent voice in literature. Ecocriticism calls for creative practices and reading strategies that refuse to see humankind as separate from nature, and allow it to resist any colonizing gestures that might presume to speak on its behalf. While the poetry of Lamartine, Hugo, Vigny and Leconte de Lisle features nature throughout, its eco-poetic potential is weakened by simplistic urban/rural oppositions which construct a nostalgic idyll as a refuge from industry, progress and society. Banville, however, places humankind at the heart of a nature pulsating with the restless energy of animistic spirits. Nature, for him, shares with genuine art an unassimilable quality. His writings on painting and poetry express this irreducible essence through interart analogies and oxymoron, while the verse of *Les Exilés* consistently places natural phenomena at points of tension between traditional cultural forms and a rebellious, unpredictable syntax.

Keywords

Poetry; environment; ecocriticism; versification; painting; interart; oxymoron; Vigny; Leconte de Lisle; Banville

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From the very titles of the most popular volumes of poetry that emerged from French Romanticism, such as Lamartine's *Méditations poétiques* (1820) or Hugo's *Les Feuilles d'automne* (1831), *Les Chants du crépuscule* (1835), *Les Rayons et les ombres* (1840) and *Les Contemplations* (1856), it is clear that quiet communion with a harmonious natural world idealized as a sanctuary, sacred and sublime, lies at the heart of a poetry turning its back on the alienating experience of urban industrialization. Few poets, though, manage to avoid the pitfalls of rural nostalgia and sterile pastoral fantasy of which ecocritical theorists have been wary since the early 1990s, and much of the encounter with the natural world in Lamartine and Hugo remains picturesque and sentimental, devoid of any explicit ecopolitical engagement. In *Les Destinées*, a volume of 'poèmes philosophiques' published posthumously in

1864, Alfred de Vigny appears to articulate just such an engagement. In ‘La Mort du loup’, written in 1843, humans appear as colonizers of the natural world – ‘Les premiers possesseurs du bois et du rocher’ (72) – while the wild animal seems to represent an unassimilable otherness: ‘ne jamais entrer dans le pacte des villes|Que l’homme a fait avec les animaux serviles’ (69-70). In death, the animal’s silent dignity renders it sublime, as the hunter-poet cries:

Que j’ai honte de nous, débiles que nous sommes!  
 Comment on doit quitter la vie et tous ses maux,  
 C’est vous qui le savez, sublimes animaux!  
 A voir ce que l’on fut sur terre et ce qu’on laisse  
 Seul le silence est grand; tout le reste est faiblesse. (74-78)

While our contemporary environmental conscience would balk at shooting an animal for sport, the hunter feels shame not for killing the wolf, but rather for the futile commotion of human activity, ‘la vie et tous ses maux’. In a colonizing gesture, the last eight lines of the poem see the hunter translate the wolf’s gaze into language – ‘Et ton dernier regard m’est allé jusqu’au cœur!|Il disait’ (80-81) – only to produce a moral which fits his own world view. In his eyes, the dying wolf does not question the ethics of the hunt, but rather encourages him to adopt a stoical silence amid the tumult of the world: ‘Gémir, pleurer, prier, est également lâche.[...][...] comme moi, souffre et meurs sans parler’ (85-88). Just as Lamartine and Hugo focus on the music of nature in order to argue for the poetic text’s kinship with those divine rhythms and harmonies, so too Vigny constructs a nature that quietly accepts human dominion while justifying his elitist distaste for his fellow men.

This rejection of industrial society compels Vigny, in ‘La Maison du Berger’ of 1844, to offer a simplistic urban/rural opposition in rather cloying terms:

Pars courageusement, laisse toutes les villes;  
 [...] Marche à travers les champs une fleur à la main. (22-28)

Once again, it is the ‘silence austère’ (29) of nature that awaits us in a sanctified environment in which lilies sway ‘comme des encensoirs’ (32), and the poet alone, isolated from civilization, manages to penetrate ‘une épaisse bruyère|Où les pas du chasseur ont peine à se plonger’ (43-44). The railways of modernity, by contrast, are seen as a noisy, polluting intrusion, a ‘taureau de fer qui fume, souffle et beugle’ (78), a ‘dragon mugissant’ (90) that produces ‘un brouillard étouffant’ (112) similar to the ‘charbon noir des villes’ (265). In the poet’s eyes, the railway represents a dangerous technology whose potential for significant harm is unknown to those who submit to it in the name of economic prosperity, while also alienating us from the countryside glimpsed through the window; the speed of the train’s passage through nature is at odds with the ‘long regard’ (130) necessary to scrutinize her ‘secrets divins’ (132). It might seem that we are squarely in the realm of the ‘manifesto for ecological correctness’ that Jonathan Bate in *The Song of the Earth* sees as antithetical to genuine ecopoetic expression (2000: 42). Greg Garrard argues that ‘at the root of pastoral is the idea of nature as a stable, enduring counterpoint to the disruptive energy and change of human societies’ (2012: 63), and such a concept risks, in Timothy Clark’s memorable words, making such poetry ‘a kind of green psychic therapy’ that merely functions as ‘the wishful illusion of an industrial consumerist society rather than a site of effective opposition to it’ (2011: 23). Section three of the poem, however, takes a surprising turn, in the form of a separation from, rather than a movement towards, the natural world. Whereas, in section one, nature seemed to

represent an idyllic sanctuary, here it becomes a source of terror, as the poet implores his companion:

Ne me laisse jamais seul avec la Nature;  
Car je la connais trop pour n'en pas avoir peur. (279-80)

As he did with the wolf, the poet translates the message of anthropomorphized, feminized nature into words, and at first she seems to confirm the poet's nostalgic desire to return to the primitive state of purity that pre-existed the harmful effects of human activity:

Avant vous j'étais belle et toujours parfumée,  
J'abandonnais au vent mes cheveux tout entiers (295-96)

Yet, instead of yearning to restore the original mythical harmony between humans and their environment, nature as translated by the poet expresses a cold indifference:

Après vous, traversant l'espace où tout s'élançait,  
J'irai seule et sereine, en un chaste silence (299-300)

As a result of this proto-existentialist insight, which Hugo also explores in the second half of *Les Contemplations* – 'J'appelle sans qu'on me réponde; O vents! ô flots!' ('Paroles sur la dune', 34-35) – the poet turns away from this 'froide Nature' (316) to consider instead 'la majesté des souffrances humaines' (321), declaring 'Vous ne recevrez pas un cri d'amour de moi' (322). Over the course of 336 lines, the poet has gone from celebration of a fictional pastoral idyll, via a misanthropic scepticism about industrial progress, to estrangement from a natural world that, because it will outlast us, is to be simultaneously celebrated and feared. As Garrard observes, 'Romantic nature is never seriously endangered, and may in its normal state be poor in biological diversity; rather, it is loved for its vastness, beauty and endurance' (2012: 48). From a genuinely ecopoetic perspective, therefore, the poem contains little of substance to contribute to the task of finding 'a creative practice and a critical methodology that do not fall short of giving voice to the natural world' (Rigby, 2004: 428).

With his *Poèmes barbares* (1862-1889), whose title suggests a similar idealization of the primitive and the pre-cultural, Leconte de Lisle offers an environmental awareness underpinned by the same rejection of humankind. 'La Fontaine aux lianes' at first appears to be a Lamartinian fantasy, depicting the thick forest as a 'sanctuaire' (52) that offers shelter within its 'ombres divines' (11). The discovery of the corpse of a young man floating Ophelia-like in the water invites us to read the poem as the aftermath of Lamartine's 'Le Vallon', written several decades earlier, in which the poet returned to the valley of his childhood 'pour attendre la mort' (4) in a place in which 'Le bruit lointain du monde expire en arrivant' (30). Whereas for Lamartine 'la nature est là qui t'invite et qui t'aime' (49), for Leconte de Lisle 'La nature se rit des souffrances humaines' (109), so that, as for Vigny, it remains indifferent, inviolable and eternal:

Nul pied ne foulera vos feuilles non fanées:  
Vous verrez passer l'homme et le monde changeant. (7-8)

Throughout the *Poèmes barbares*, this resistance is something to be celebrated in opposition to a human society in thrall to the relentless, insatiable logic of capitalism:

C'est le clairon fatal qui sonne dans nos fièvres:  
Debout! Marchez, courez, volez, plus loin, plus haut! ('Ultra cœlos', 43-44)

In 'La Forêt vierge', the unspoiled forest remains an unconquerable force, since 'l'indomptable a toujours reverdi' (16). One day, of course, it will inevitably be invaded by the colonist:

Comme une irruption de fourmis en voyage  
 Qu'on écrase et qu'on brûle et qui marchent toujours,  
 Les flots t'apporteront le roi des derniers jours,  
 Le destructeur des bois, l'homme au pâle visage. (49-52)

The environmental critique of the ills of deforestation is explicit – ‘Il déracinera tes baobabs superbes’ (57); ‘Sa torche embrasera coteau, vallon et plaine’ (62) – but despite this campaign of destruction, nature will remain long after our demise:

Les larmes et le sang arroseront ta cendre,  
 Et tu rejailliras de la nôtre, ô forêt! (71-72)

Ecocriticism attempts to dismantle this facile opposition between cultural constructions of unspoiled nature and polluting humanity, instead locating humankind, which belongs to nature as much as it does to culture, inextricably within our environment, in order to explore more sustainable ways of dwelling in it. Leconte de Lisle, however, has little interest in that complex network of belonging, responsibility, negotiation and community, affirming in a letter to José-Maria de Heredia on 11 February 1871: ‘Je ne désire plus qu’une seule chose qui n’est pas la moins impossible à réaliser et qui serait de vivre en paix loin de Paris, afin d’achever mes poèmes commencés, sans plus me préoccuper des peuples et des rois’ (2004: 53). He prefers a nature that symbolizes a refuge from society, projecting onto it elitist notions of the sublime, and inherent aesthetic value, as in ‘L’Aurore’:

Mais, ô nature, ô ciel, flots sacrés, monts sublimes,  
 Bois dont les vents amis font murmurer les cimes,  
 Formes de l’idéal, magnifiques aux yeux. (31-33)

Despite appearances, these poems of misanthropic pessimism do little to conceptualize our environmental Other beyond a set of fossilizing binaries – nature/culture, rural/urban, ecology/industry – incapable of providing a sufficiently nuanced response to the social, economic, political and ecological complexities brought about by the industrial revolution.

The only voice that nature possesses in this poetry conforms to the Romantic notion of a universal harmony, a kind of symphony orchestra whose various choirs and songs unite to provide a pastoral antidote to the clatter and roar of the industrial city, as in ‘Le Bernica’, from *Poèmes barbares*, which celebrates the birdsong heard in a mountainous ravine on the island of Réunion:

Ce sont des chœurs soudains, des chansons infinies,  
 Un long gazouillement d’appels joyeux mêlé,  
 Ou des plaintes d’amour à des rires unies;  
 Et si douces, pourtant, flottent ces harmonies,  
 Que le repos de l’air n’en est jamais troublé.

Mais l’âme s’en pénètre; elle se plonge, entière,  
 Dans l’heureuse beauté de ce monde charmant;  
 Elle se sent oiseau, fleur, eau vive et lumière;  
 Elle revêt ta robe, ô pureté première!  
 Et se repose en Dieu silencieusement. (31-40)

These stanzas move from the multiple, overlapping sounds of the birdsong to their restorative effect on the poet’s soul, as he plunges into the heart of nature in a remarkable moment of self-divestiture, abandoning his human identity, morphing into progressively more immaterial natural phenomena – bird, flower, water, light – before attaining a divine silence. The development of the sonorous fabric of the verse mirrors that of this movement towards transcendence, as pleasantly balanced alexandrines with their regular four accents, two mobile and two fixed (2/4//4/2 in lines 32 and 36,

3/3//3/3 in lines 33 and 37), give way to a destabilizing structure of five accents just as the poet disintegrates into his alternative identities: ‘Elle se **sent/ oiseau, // fleur, / eau vive/ et lumière**’ (38). Finally, the six syllables of ‘silencieusement’ fill an entire hemistich, creating a three-accent line that eradicates the traditional sense of balance, transcending verse structure as noiseless communion with the divine is achieved. The effect might be said to be seductive, hypnotic even, but as Clark argues, in such cases ‘the poetic itself [...] is seen as a touchstone of both ecological and psychic health, a restorative talisman of the union of mind and nature, of thinking and feeling’ (2011: 22). The experience thus serves the exotic, orientalist fantasy of a human subject rejecting the modern world, rather than giving voice to nature itself.

As well as a problem of the poet’s self-interest, this is also a problem of framing. There is a real sense in which a poet unaccustomed to thinking outside of the regular, predictable rhythms of the alexandrine – with its limited, mechanical stock of rhyme words (‘harmonies/infinies’, ‘lumière/première’) – imposes an interpretative frame on the natural world that bends it to fit an anthropocentric world-view. In a chapter entitled ‘Landscapes of the Line’, Clive Scott asks ‘what is the versification of natural perception?’, ‘how does verse topographize?’, ‘what is the proper methodology for a study of Nature in verse?’ (2000: 120). He suggests that in Vigny’s poem ‘La Sauvage’ (1843), with the unshakeable caesura of its highly regular lines implying rigid control, ‘the French alexandrine acts as a vehicle of European law and as an instrument of deforestation [...] the serene dispenser of order [...] the colonist’s instrument of law’ (2000: 124). How, then, can nature escape the tyranny of the alexandrine if it is assimilated into the regular, sterilizing forms of metrical verse? Terry Gifford argues that the mission of the post-pastoral should be to seek ‘not a stable, complacent form of harmony in the human relationship with nature – our species’ relationship with its home planet in its macro and its micro ecologies’, but rather ‘a dynamic, self-adjusting accommodation to “discordant harmonies”’ that is able ‘to find new forms in the face of new conditions’ (2014: 28-29). Certainly, the rhyme *étoiles/voiles* – without which French Romantic poetry simply could not function – is one of the most glaring examples of this ‘complacent’ harmony whose fossilizing influence on both verse form and poetic thought cannot be underestimated, along with others such as  *NUIT/bruit, lumière/pierre, funèbres/ténèbres, sombre/ombre, gloire/croire* or *pur/azur*. Might it be possible, then, to see in moments of prosodic disruption an attempt to re-appropriate on behalf of the natural world precisely that dynamic mode of expression, tuned to the potential of new forms to inspire new modes of thinking, lending a less assimilable voice to the ‘discordant harmonies’ of the natural world?

At first sight, the signs are hardly promising. At no point in any of the aforementioned poems by Vigny or Leconte de Lisle – those that might lay claim to some kind of ecopoetic engagement, no matter how crude – does the form diverge from the traditional 6/6 alexandrine. Elsewhere in *Poèmes barbares*, however, we find a small number of lines in which the presence of natural phenomena is accompanied by rhythmic disruption, such as these examples from the opening poem ‘Qaïn’. Consider the following indivisible semantic units, dislocated over the *entrevers* by emphatic *enjambement*:

Les bandes d’étalons, par la plaine **inondée**  
→ **De lumière**, gisaient sous le dattier roussi (26-27)

Silence, ô Cavalier de la Géhenne! **O Bêtes**  
→ **Furieuses**, qu’il traîne après lui, taisez-vous! (241-42)

Since both expressions articulate a kind of uncontrollable force representative of the inassimilable Other, as the light floods the plain and the furious beasts roar, it seems highly significant that this uncontainable energy surges forth at the very point at which the high cultural artifice of verse traditionally marks a dignified pause. A similar effect is created when Mallarmé's faun, having tried to project the nymphs of his imagination onto his sylvan surroundings, is forced to confront the inscrutable reality of 'les vrais|Bois mêmes' ('L'Après-midi d'un faune', 5-6); the real woods beyond the cultural realm of symbols, metaphors and fantasies resist both his over-interpretative gaze and the restrictive verse form. This tension between cultural forms and the excessive, disruptive force of nature is also created in 'Qaïn' by the placement of unaccentuable clitics before the caesura:

Et les taureaux, et **les**// dromadaires aussi (28)

Et l'aurore qui rit avec ses lèvres roses,  
De jour en jour, en **cet**// adorable berceau (261-62)

While such examples are infrequent in *Poèmes barbares*, it is clear that the bulls, the camels and the dawn cannot be contained in the repressive environment of metrical verse, and the natural world runs riot in lines that resist rhythmic recuperation in the regular Hugolian trimètre (4/4/4), thanks to unaccentuable elements at the eighth syllable: 'drom**ma**/daires'; 'ad**o**/rable'. While such techniques are absent from Vigny, and rare in Leconte de Lisle, they are strikingly frequent in the poems of Théodore de Banville. Moreover, in his writings on art from the early 1840s to the late 1880s, the inassimilable quality of nature is consistently linked to the indefinable quality of genuine art, and a close reading of his essays on painters and poets reveals his nuanced grasp of the fragility of both the natural and the aesthetic, and the vital self-sustaining relationship between them.

Banville certainly demonstrates an acute environmental conscience in his second volume of memoirs, *L'Âme de Paris*:

Le Ciel est tout, et seul reste divin; car la main de l'Homme peut anéantir, tourmenter, torturer, transfigurer tout le reste; mais le Ciel, non. L'Homme, Prométhée toujours en révolte, peut percer les monts, exhausser les plaines, arracher les forêts comme des brins d'herbe, émietter les roches avec la dynamite, endiguer les torrents, tarir les fleuves, creuser des canaux qu'il gouverne, répandre dans les flots l'huile qui apaise la colère de l'Océan; mais il n'a aucun moyen de contrarier le Ciel, et d'en faire disparaître la moindre parcelle. (1890: 286)

In opposition to industrial society's ruthless plundering of natural resources, Banville insists on animistic forces that exist in everything, from birds and animals to trees, rocks and rivers. Such a superstition certainly makes for entertaining dinner-party chit-chat, as the Goncourts note in their diary: 'on causait de la prétendue croyance de Banville aux lutins, dont il cherchait à endormir la *malveillance* avec de petits morceaux de papier vert' (*J*, XIX: 145; original italics). Certainly, Banville's childhood recollections may seem faintly ridiculous, as he muses matter-of-factly, in *Mes souvenirs*, on the existence of woodland fairies that might seem less fanciful in his verse as metaphors for the lively spirit of the natural world:

Cette Font-Georges, enchantement de ma petite enfance [...] les paysans apportaient des liards dans la fontaine, pour indemniser, dans la mesure de leurs moyens, les génies bienfaisants des sources [...] ce qui est bien certain, c'est que la nuit, au clair de la lune, les Fées venaient danser et chanter près de ce flot murmurant; et comme moi-même j'y ai souvent dormi, couché dans l'herbe, c'est à ces moments-là sans doute qu'elles ont baisé mes lèvres d'enfant et qu'elles m'ont communiqué la divine et inguérissable fièvre de la poésie. (1882: 12)

By insisting that his lifelong devotion to poetry finds its origins in the nocturnal, dream-like encounter with these sprites, he ties the crux of the poetic endeavour to the supernatural forces behind nature, a conviction that recurs throughout his journalism. Describing ‘Une Promenade au Quartier-Latin’ in 1848, he exclaims: ‘de ces bosquets éblouissants comme des pierreries et des soleils, de ces feuillages touffus, de ces bassins et de ces fontaines, je voudrais voir sortir le troupeau charmant des nymphes et des naïades qui les font vivre’ (*CLAM*, I: 368), and he tasks visual artists with making these entities palpable in their images of nature. In an article on Victor Giraud, it is the animistic world-view of Hellenic culture, once again linked to poetry, that he wishes to see restored: ‘il reste maintenant à ressusciter sous son vrai soleil la divine Hellas, patrie de la poésie, où le frémissement des feuillages, le murmure de la mer d’azur, le bruissement des fontaines sonores sont pleins du souffle des dieux’ (*CLAM*, I: 364). It is as if the prose itself were touched by the ‘frémissement’ and ‘le souffle des dieux’, with patterns of alliteration and assonance underlining the kinship between the poetic and the natural (‘patrie de la **p**oésie/**f**rémiss**e**ment des **f**euillages/**l**e **m**urmure de la **m**er d’**a**zur’). Throughout Banville’s verse and critical prose, this subtle network of movements and sounds – the ‘frémissement’, ‘murmure’ and ‘bruissement’ – defines both the natural world and genuine art, locating the essence of each in an indistinct expressive haze.

The ‘frémissements’ embody perhaps the most important aspect of the natural world for Banville: its irrepressible energy and constant movement. He admires the craftsmanship of Rodolphe Bresdin’s dark and twisted lithographs that depict ‘les forces vives de l’incommensurable nature [...] où tout déborde’, thanks to ‘ce jeu inouï de la lumière en ses gammes infinies, en ses nuances insaisissables’ (*CLAM*, I: 352-53).



Rodolphe Bresdin, *Le Bon Samaritain* (1861)

Brooklyn Museum

Yet, he argues that the way in which they set humankind apart from this monstrous, threatening presence – a divorce reminiscent of the apocalyptic fantasies, or existential fears, of Vigny and Leconte de Lisle – is a gross misrepresentation. In Bresdin's work:

Les racines sont des monstres qui rampent sous la terre, les branches ne peuvent que se ressouvenir de ces poses d'animaux féroces qu'elles affectent et ne peuvent les avoir apprises dans leur vie immobile. Isolé dans la forêt, l'homme comprend que cette création exaspérée des premiers âges qu'il a refrénée et domptée le souffre impatiemment roi du monde; [...] le monstre-feuillage, cachant dans ses profondeurs un monde d'animaux nés du néant, va envahir, étouffer, émietter les villes, enterrer l'humanité sous ses décombres vivantes et renaissantes. (*CLAM*, I: 351)

For Banville, Bresdin distorts the harmonious relationship between nature, the gods and humankind, as well as the joyous life force embodied by the animistic spirits of the forest:

L'harmonie, vraie âme surnaturelle des choses, rentre dans la création soumise par les dieux et par les hommes aux lois triomphantes de la musique. Alors, vous la trouverez encore vivante, la grande nature, mais de sa vie réelle et non d'un cauchemar fantasmagorique; les arbres vivent, habités par les dryades frémissantes, mais ce sont des bras amoureux qu'elles lèvent vers le ciel; les sources vivent, mais leur regard est le bleu regard des naïades éperdues dont les chevelures dénouées se mêlent aux flottantes chevelures des saules. (*CLAM*, I: 355)

Once again, the trees are inhabited by 'dryades frémissantes', the waters by naiads whose 'chevelures dénouées' form a chiasmic bond with the 'flottantes chevelures' of the willows, expressing the free-flowing life force of an unrepressed nature that humankind, crucially, shares. In an essay on Corot, Banville reverses the pathetic fallacy so that nature is not a passive, blank canvas onto which we project our own emotions; rather, it is the artist who senses and translates the mysterious emotions of the natural world:

Il connaît la douleur des forêts éplorées, l'ineffable mélancolie des soirs, l'éclatante joie des printemps et des aurores; il devine quelle pensée incline les branches et fait plier les feuillages; il sait ce que diraient, s'ils pouvaient parler, les chemins perdus dans les bois. Le lien, le grand lien qui fait de nous les frères des ruisseaux et des arbres, il le voit; ses figures, poétiques aussi, comme ses forêts, ne sont pas des étrangères dans la forêt qui les entoure. (*CLAM*, I: 275)

As he insists on the family ties that bind us to nature, Banville marks a return to the pantheistic philosophies of the ancient Greeks, for whom 'l'homme ne s'était pas senti assez divin ou assez orgueilleux pour s'abstraire de la nature immortelle et pour croire son existence indépendante de celle de l'univers créé. C'était lui-même qu'il entendait frémir dans la voix des eaux et des feuillages' (*CLAM*, I: 407). Thus humankind and nature share the same 'frisson' of life, as Banville suggests in essays on both 'L'Art nouveau' (1882) – 'Nous voulons des hommes réels, vivant dans une vraie nature, baignés dans l'air frissonnant et vibrant, [...] palpitants de réalité' (*CLAM*, I:393) – and the Diorama (1849): 'c'est la nature et la vie humaine elle-mêmes avec leur variété infinie et mouvante' (*CLAM*, I: 375).

While the critic's inability to render in words the ineffable quality of an artwork was a hyperbolic commonplace of nineteenth-century French art criticism, in the context of a natural world in constant movement – 'frémissant', 'frissonnant', 'palpitant' and 'vibrant' – this failure of language may be seen to ensure the ongoing resistance of both the natural world and the artwork to our attempt to tame or possess it – to enframe it, as Bate would say, following Heidegger (2000: 255). When



Banville claims that ‘il n’y a aucun moyen de donner une idée de la peinture de Delacroix avec des mots’ (*CLAM*, I: 271), and writes of Fromentin that ‘nous ne pouvons pas avec des mots donner au lecteur une idée quelconque de ses tableaux, flottant dans une atmosphère en mouvement que nous chercherions en vain au fond d’un encier’ (*CLAM*, I: 334), it is precisely this ‘atmosphère en mouvement’, characteristic of both the natural world and art, that resists being reduced to expression in language. While Bate’s focus in *The Song of the Earth* is the poetic image, Banville’s art criticism features striking recurrent features which suggest that the irreducibility of nature may be suggested, if not in the language of criticism, then in the transgressive, illogical terms of both intermediality – which Peter Dayan calls the ‘interart analogy’ (2011: 3) – and a crucial device of poetic language: oxymoron. Banville admires the paintings of Henri Regnault for ‘la symphonie jaune, couleur de la joie, qu’il a plu au peintre d’éveiller comme une divine musique’ (*CLAM*, I: 346) and those by Français for the ‘symphonie de jaune et de rose, harmonisée pour peindre une prairie de fleurs’ (*CLAM*, I: 359). There can be no painting, of course, without paint, but as Dayan has shown, much of artists’ discourse about genuine artworks, in the grand tradition of interart aesthetics since the mid-nineteenth century, requires that their essence – that which makes them authentic, inimitable and irreducible – be expressed in the terms of another art, as they refuse to be analyzed in the mechanical, technical terms of their own medium. For Banville, therefore in the canvases of Regnault, Corot and Delacroix it is the musical essence of both nature and painting itself that resists any attempt to pin it down as an entomologist would a butterfly.

Oxymoron allows the poet to perform a similar kind of linguistic resistance in his art criticism. In his Bresdin essay, as he yearns for an artist capable of giving authentic expression to nature, the latter’s incommunicable essence is located in a typical example: ‘oh! qui dira la forêt, les minutieux enfantillages de ses jeux, les formidables excès de ses délires, et le *silencieux rugissement* de tous les monstres enchaînés qui la composent?’ (*CLAM*, I: 351; my italics). Both oxymoron and the interart analogy feature in the following passage, in which Banville claims that Fromentin offers a glimpse of ‘real’ nature, rather than a sterile cultural representation:

Nous sommes en pleine nature, en pleine vie, en plein idéal. Voilà bien la nature vraie, et voilà la poésie cependant, c’est l’inspiration ardente et ce n’est pas la violence; *l’orangeuse symphonie de la lumière* arrive au calme par de mystérieux accords, les arbres pénétrés par le jour et par l’air vivent sans s’imposer brutalement et sans écraser les créatures humaines; la pensée joue, libre, ailée, à travers ce *mouvement immobile*. (*CLAM*, I: 333; my italics)

While a painting is necessarily a silent and static artefact, this depiction of nature transcends the limits of the medium in two ways, suggesting both a symphony of light and a constant movement, reminiscent of the ‘frémissement’ and ‘frisson’ of the natural world itself.

This interart vocabulary is central to Banville’s writing on poetry as well as on painting. In his *Petit traité de poésie française* (1872), having quoted a sextine by Ferdinand de Gramont – six stanzas of six lines featuring the same rhyme words in a different order each time – Banville makes a bold, not to say far-fetched, claim for one of them: ‘dans notre Sextine, avec le seul mot VOLAGES il rend tous ces ondoiements et ces frémissements dans l’atmosphère visible qui sont la magie de la palette de Corot, ce demi-dieu du matin et du crépuscule!’ (1998: 238). This is doubly problematic, going beyond the now familiar technique of ascribing movement to a painting, by claiming that one single rhyme word – appended successively to the

nouns ‘insectes’, ‘lueurs’, ‘figures’, ‘sylphides’, ‘chœurs’ and ‘échos’, and rhyming with ‘feuillages’ and ‘rivages’ in each stanza – might render the ‘mouvement immobile’ of a nature painting. It is unclear how one word might encapsulate the ‘ondoissements’ and ‘frémissements’ of nature and art – through its interaction with different nouns, perhaps, all of which express different aspects of nature’s network of perpetual activity? The interart analogy of both music and painting recurs in a description of the mighty Hugo

habituant le vers à exprimer les sons, les harmonies, les murmures, le frisson de la vie, les sensations purement *musicales*, et, d’autre part, lui enseignant à *peindre* la nature extérieure, l’horreur des forêts et des roches, l’enchantement des plaines fleuries, la pauvreté des rouges montagnes pelées et sans herbe, la caverne, la solitude, le jardin des rois et l’antre des lions. (*CLAM*, I: 81; my italics)

Similarly, in a long essay on La Fontaine for *Les Poètes français* (1861), Banville deploys both the interart metaphor – in his claim that ‘avec le son, avec la couleur, il traduit la nature agitée et mélodieuse’ (*CLAM*, I: 33) – and a choice oxymoron: ‘toutes les choses auxquelles l’éternel mouvement de la matière a imposé une forme; toutes les voix seront traduites, et aussi *le silencieux murmure* qui s’élève de la création emprisonnée’ (*CLAM*, I: 40; my italics).

What La Fontaine and Hugo have in common, for Banville and nineteenth-century poets more generally, is that they illustrate in productive but different ways the discourse of freedom that proved so intoxicating after the repressive classicism of the eighteenth century. In 1860, the *vers libre* of Kahn, Krysinska and Laforgue was still twenty-five years away, but Hugo, the self-proclaimed liberator of verse, represented a different kind of freedom, with the infamous *enjambement* of *Hernani*’s ‘escalier|Dérobé’, and his claim to have swept ‘un vent révolutionnaire’ over ‘les bataillons d’alexandrins carrés’ (‘Réponse à un acte d’accusation’, 65-66; *Les Contemplations*). As for La Fontaine, he was the poet of *vers libres* in the plural, a dynamic and unpredictable heterometric hybrid, constantly changing, pulsing with the same energy as the natural world:

Son rythme, ce bronze inouï produit par la fusion et l’amalgame de tous les métaux poétiques, son rythme, ce prétendu vers libre [...] est le portrait même de son univers, où toute molécule matérielle et divine est entraînée dans le même tourbillon de vie. (*CLAM*, I: 42)

Before La Fontaine, Banville claims, nature was reduced in art to precious, artificial parks – ‘pour les seigneurs et pour les lecteurs de poésie, la Nature c’étaient les ombrages, les charmilles, les pièces d’eau, les parterres de Versailles habités par des courtisans vêtus d’or et par de blanches statues’ (*CLAM*, I: 53) – while vast, wild nature was absent: ‘tout cela était ignoré, inconnu, volontairement oublié par un monde d’apparat dédaignant les plus beaux feuillages du monde, s’ils n’étaient peignés et accommodés par Le Nôtre’ (*CLAM*, I: 53). The poet of *Les Fables*, however, brings all the elements of the natural world, humankind included, together in harmony, much as Orpheus did – ‘il vit, devina, sentit, qu’il n’y a qu’une seule Âme universelle [...] tout se passerait désormais entre parents appartenant à la même famille’ (*CLAM*, I: 54) – thus producing poetry whose irrepressible energy provides fitting expression for ‘la nature sans cesse débordante de vie’ (*CLAM*, I: 41).

With both La Fontaine and Hugo, claims Banville, this ‘frisson de vie’, or ‘tourbillon de vie’, expresses itself in the very form of their poetry. In his essay ‘État de la poésie en 1889’, he blames the flaccid, invertebrate versification of the eighteenth century – as tame as Louis XIV’s Versailles gardens at the hands of Le Nôtre – on a fatal lack of lifeblood: ‘la versification des tragiques, des idylliques, des

didactiques du XVIIIe siècle, molle, incolore, invertébrée, n'ayant pas de sang dans les veines' (*CLAM*, I: 232). In stark contrast, 'le vers de La Fontaine rampe, marche, court, voltige en dansant, s'enfuit dans l'air comme un libre oiseau et après s'être imprégné du parfum des herbes et des fleurs, s'enivre d'infini et de lumière' (*CLAM*, I: 56), while in Hugo's poetry the alexandrine is 'varié, divers, immense, infini comme la nature. Là, il a la force du géant et la grâce enfantine, la frondaison du chêne séculaire et la gentillesse de la fleurette tout à l'heure éclos' (*CLAM*, I: 235). In La Fontaine's *Fables*, the effect of flight is created by shifting unpredictably between alexandrines, decasyllables, octosyllables or shorter metres in abrupt changes of tempo, whereas Hugo's alexandrines reflect the healthy diversity of the biosphere, jerking the line out of the somnolent, automatic torpor into which the eighteenth century had plunged it, by introducing more than four accents – including adjacent accents that create a destabilizing staccato effect – and enjambement, such as in these examples from *Les Contemplations*:

Les voilà! tout s'émeut./ **pierres, tertres, gazons**  
(‘Les Oiseaux’, 46)

Une **terre** au flanc **maigre**./ **âpre, avare, inclément**  
(‘Les Luttés et les rêves’, XI, 1)

Je vous **aime**, et **vous, lierre**/ au **seuil** des antres **sourds**  
(‘Aux arbres’, 28)

L'instituteur lucide et grave, **magistrat**  
→ **Du progrès**, médecin de l'ignorance, et **prêtre**  
→ **De l'idée** (‘A propos d'Horace’, 196-98)

Yet Banville's own ecopoetic rhythms go several steps further both at the caesura and the *entrevers*, as we shall see in a close reading of *Les Exilés* (1866/1875), which explores at length our fragile, delicate relationship with the natural world.

The narrative arc of *Les Exilés* opens with a lament for contemporary humanity's estrangement from nature and from the gods who inhabit it. As the gods begin their exile, Aphrodite blames the fatal disintegration of universal harmony on a faithless, materialistic age:

Homme, vil meurtrier des Dieux, es-tu content?  
Les bois profonds, les monts et le ciel éclatant  
Sont vides, et les flots sont vides: c'est ton règne!  
[...]  
La Nature n'est plus qu'un grand spectre farouche.  
Son cœur brisé n'a plus de battements.  
(‘L'Exil des Dieux’, 141-43; *OPC*, IV: 12)

The crisis is a rhythmic one, since nature's heart has stopped beating, with all the repercussions that this occurrence might imply for verse poetry. It is also a linguistic one, as the poet suggests in ‘La Cithare’:

L'homme et les animaux, les Dieux et les Étoiles  
Vivaient en exil dans l'univers infini,  
Faute d'avoir trouvé le langage béni  
Qui peut associer ensemble tous les Êtres,  
(204-7; *OPC*, IV: 63)

For Banville, the lost harmony of the universe can only be restored by the poet's sensitivity to the mysterious, metalinguistic language of nature, as in ‘L'Ile’ with the figure of ‘le sage’ – clearly a reference to Victor Hugo, still living in exile in Guernsey:

Si ce vent inconnu fouette sa chevelure,  
C'est parce qu'il entend le mot mystérieux  
Que depuis cinq mille ans bégayait la nature!

(66-68; *OPC*, IV: 52)

Whereas Bresdin's lithographs were teeming with menace, throughout *Les Exilés* nature is seen as an irrepressible, joyful, excessive force, escaping our clutches. In 'L'Éducation de l'Amour', 'la végétation en démente [...] grimpe aux montagnes, s'élançe [Dans l'air bleu [...] noire frondaison que l'œil en vain poursuit]' (82-89; *OPC*, IV: 87), and in 'Baudelaire', verse form is also described as alive, sharing nature's life force: 'Voilà ce qu'on voit dans ces vivantes rimes' (41; *OPC*, IV: 184). Thus in the final poem, 'Le Festin des Dieux', as humanity is reconciled with nature and the gods thanks to the poet's harmonies, Aphrodite's energy spills triumphantly, and emphatically, over both the line-end and the caesura:

Son corps nu, vigoureux, comme un grand lys éclos,  
S'élançait adorable et poli sous les flots  
De cette toison folle, et, triomphant **sans vaines**

→ **Entraves**, ses beaux seins aigus montraient leurs veines  
(109-12; *OPC*, IV: 206)

La grande Aphrodite, caressante et **laissant**

→ **Courir** sur son dos **sa**/ chevelure embaumée  
(190-91; *OPC*, IV: 209)

Both examples are highly apposite, and placing the expression 'vaines entraves' over the *entrevers* hammers home the point – as if it were not evident enough – that regular, mechanical verse form is a frame that simply cannot contain the spirits of the natural world, whose hair flows freely down their back and across arbitrary metrical boundaries. The especially striking aspect of *Les Exilés* is the frequency with which Banville employs this mimetic rhythmic effect in the presence of natural phenomena. This performance of rhythmic resistance ensures that nature escapes the enframing tendencies of orderly cultural forms, protecting its 'langage béni' and 'mot mystérieux' from appropriation.

Consider the representation of the vast ocean in 'L'Exil des Dieux', which features numerous points of tension between the competing imperatives of a metrical form – perhaps representing the repressive shackles of a culturally mediated, docile nature – and syntactic units expressing a wild nature that refuses to submit to enframing:

La mer aux vastes flots baigne leurs pieds, **la mer**

→ **Douloureuse**, où, groupés de distance en distance  
(14-15; *OPC*, IV: 8)

Poseidon apparaît, s'élevant sur **la cime**

→ **Des ondes**. Près de lui, fugitifs dans l'abîme  
(91-92, *OPC*, IV: 8)

Banville makes an explicit link between the rhythmic potential of the alexandrine and the stormy sea in an article on Baudelaire from 1885: 'le grand hexamètre pareil à la mer tumultueuse' (*CLAM*, I: 167). In the aforementioned examples, we see the waves crashing against the sides of regular verse form, which cannot contain it. A similar tension accompanies images of woodlands and forests, which also include key terms familiar from Banville's art criticism, such as the interart analogy and the 'frisson':

Et voici qu'à présent **le feuillage d'un bois**

→ **Mélodieux**, immense et rempli de murmures,

Sur le front du chanteur étendait ses ramures  
(‘La Cithare’, 18-20; *OPC*, IV: 56-57)

Garde assez d’eau de pluie, alors que **la forêt**  
→ **Brûle**, pour faire boire un Titan qui viendrait.  
(‘L’Éducation de l’Amour’, 73-74; *OPC*, IV: 86)

Il chantait toujours. Et **les bois**  
→ **Frisonnants** écoutaient la voix  
(‘Les Torts du cygne’, 49-50; *OPC*, IV: 110)

In contrast to the docile songbirds of Lamartine and Hugo, Aphrodite’s furious shrieks – like those of an eagle – pierce the safe, mannered harmony of the rhyme, as does the laugh of the water-nymph:

Aphrodite poussait des cris, comme **un aiglon**  
→ **Furieux**, cependant que Phoebos-Apollon  
(‘Dioné’, 23-24; *OPC*, IV: 54)

Debout contre le roc, **la Naïade argentine**  
→ **Rit**. Elle est nue. Encore au bleu matin des jours  
(‘La Source’, 2-3; *OPC*, IV: 102)

The meagre confines of the individual line are incapable of capturing the vast dimensions and indomitable power of meteorological phenomena, such as the dawn light, sunshine, clear skies and storms:

Le matin frissonnant s’éveille, et **la clarté**  
→ **De l’aube** mord déjà le ciel ensanglanté.  
(‘L’Exil des Dieux’, 5-6; *OPC*, IV: 7)

Dont le fauve soleil dore d’**éblouissantes**  
→ **Parures de rayons** les cheveux dénoués!  
(‘La Cithare’, 80-81; *OPC*, IV: 59)

Et rien ne te connaît dans **le grand désert bleu**  
→ **Des cieux**, et **le soleil/ de feu** n’est plus un Dieu!  
(‘L’Exil des Dieux’, 149-50; *OPC*, IV: 12)

Traversèrent **les cieux voilés**  
→ **D’azur**. Ceux-là, c’étaient des Anges.  
(‘Les Torts du cygne’, 53-54; *OPC*, IV: 110)

O douleur! son beau corps fait d’une neige pure  
Rougit, et sous le vent jaloux subit **l’injure**  
→ **De l’orage**; son sein aigu, déjà meurtri  
(‘L’Exil des Dieux’, 113-15; *OPC*, IV: 9)

Emportés loin des cieux jaloux par **l’aile noire**  
→ **De l’orage**, fuyant dans la brume des soirs  
(‘Le Festin des Dieux’, 148-49; *OPC*, IV: 207)

The latter two examples provide a fitting response to Edward Kamau Brathwaite, who argues in *History of the Voice* that regular, canonical metrical form ‘carries with it a certain kind of experience, which is not the experience of a hurricane. The hurricane does not roar in pentameters. And that’s the problem: how do you get a rhythm which approximates the *natural* experience, the *environmental* experience?’ (1984: 8; original italics). Whereas Brathwaite’s solution is the use of non-standard English, or ‘nation language’ (1984: 13), Banville gives a voice to the hurricane by harnessing another crucial oxymoron, which he calls ‘l’harmonieux orage du rythme et des

chants' in a review of Verlaine's *La Bonne Chanson* of 1870 (*CLAM*, I: 215). This expression encapsulates perfectly the tension – the 'frisson' or 'frémissement' – between the harmony of his rhymes and the *rejets* that, by rushing the reader on to the next line, deny them the chance to resonate fully in the reverent cultural space of the *entrevers* pause. So, too, verse – in the song of Orpheus which unites the natural world in harmony – strains at the bridle, caught in the 'harmonieux orage' of that moment of exquisite tension:

Car les arbres lointains, entraînés par **la force**  
 → **Des vers**, orme touffu, chênes à la rude écorce,  
 Étaient venus, cédant au charme de la voix  
 ('La Cithare', 15-17; *OPC*, IV: 56)

It might be too simplistic, however, to ascribe the cultural institution of verse to the regular, and to relate wild nature to the irregular, since these moments of tension encourage the reader to hesitate between two competing readings, both of which have their attractions. Rather, it would be more productive to see these versificatory pressure points as a formal *mise en scène* of the hesitations that necessarily beset any attempt at interpreting, or constructing, the voice of the natural world.

This tension between colonization and resistance also characterizes the frequent dislocation of natural phenomena over the caesura, such as these noun/adjective pairings, of which only the first two are recuperable in the Hugolian *trimètre*, while those with a post-caesural monosyllable provide a particularly disruptive effect:

Les touffes d'or,/ **les lys// vivants**,/ les feux vermeils.  
 ('La Rose', 28; *OPC*, IV: 26)

Descend sur nous/ **l'obscur// silen/ce** de la nuit.  
 ('Le Festin des Dieux', 5; *OPC*, IV: 202)

Cacher au fond du **lac/ pâle** ou de la caverne  
 ('La Reine Omphale', 63; *OPC*, IV: 43)

Hôte de **l'ouragan/ sombre** et du flot amer  
 ('L'Ile', 19; *OPC*, IV: 50)

Brillait **une forêt/ rouge** de grandes fleurs  
 ('Le Festin des Dieux', 30; *OPC*, IV: 203)

Blanches comme **l'horreur/ pâle** des avalanches  
 ('Érinna', 40; *OPC*, IV: 99)

Et les arbres **aux durs/ rameaux** venus du fond  
 ('La Cithare', 162; *OPC*, IV: 62)

Les aloès, **les grands/ tulipiers** aux fleurs jaunes  
 ('L'Éducation de l'Amour', 51; *OPC*, IV: 86)

Souvent **une cascade/ affreuse** au front d'écume  
 ('L'Éducation de l'Amour', 268; *OPC*, IV: 93)

S'endormit près **des grands/ lions** dans les bois sourds,  
 ('L'Éducation de l'Amour', 337; *OPC*, IV: 96)

Et la mer, et **la mer/ plaintive**, son amante  
 ('L'Âme de Célio', 229; *OPC*, IV: 145)

L'ombre triste, **le houx/ luisant**, les eaux dormantes  
(‘Les Jardins’, 23; *OPC*, IV: 179)

Tout ouvert sur **le vaste/ azur** mystérieux  
(‘Le Festin des Dieux’, 13; *OPC*, IV: 202)

As well as performing a rhythmic revolt against metrical enframing, many of these expressions communicate nature’s resistance on a semantic level, from the ‘lys vivants’ to the ‘cascade affreuse’, the ‘horreur pâle’ and the ‘obscur silence’ of nature, which presents us with an irresolvable interpretative conundrum. As for the trans-caesural compound nouns, they feature irrepressible images such as lifeblood, flight, blooming flowers, and the explosion of light in spring and summer:

Et semble avoir/ **un sang// de pour/pre** sous sa chair  
(‘La Rose’, 39; *OPC*, IV: 26)

Comme la neige/ où **rien// d’humain/** n’a mis sa trace!  
(‘Érinna’, 38; *OPC*, IV: 99)

Avec **le barde/ ailé// des cieux,** le rossignol  
(‘L’Âme de Célio’, 254; *OPC*, IV: 145)

Renaissance, et dans **le vol/ des astres,** d’un pied sûr  
(‘La Mort de l’Amour’, 29; *OPC*, IV: 33)

Et son sang, d’où **les fleurs/ du matin** vont éclore  
(‘La Cithare’, 143; *OPC*, IV: 61)

Se joue, et sur **le lit/ de fleurs** que l’onde arrose  
(‘La Source’, 97; *OPC*, IV: 105)

Et quand viennent **les jours/ d’été**, blancs et féériques  
(‘L’Âme de Célio’, 233; *OPC*, IV: 145)

J’étais comme **un avril/ en fleur.** Nulle souillure  
(‘À la Muse’, 6; *OPC*, IV: 201)

Similarly, in lines in which natural phenomena are accompanied by unaccentuable pre-caesural elements that introduce a malfunction into the industrial rhythm of the metrical machine, we find references to leaps and bounds, the interart analogy, escape, flight, disorder, and crepuscular haze:

Bondir autour/ de **la//** fontain/e violette  
(‘La Cithare’, 247; *OPC*, IV: 65)

La forêt som/bre et **les//** étoil/es désolées  
(‘La Cithare’, 348; *OPC*, IV: 68)

Voir la Rose, c’est **comme/** écouter une lyre!  
(‘La Rose’, 42; *OPC*, IV: 26)

Par l’arbre muet, **par/** le fleuve qui s’enfuit  
(‘La Cithare’, 134; *OPC*, IV: 61)

Et les hommes et **les/** oiseaux aériens  
(‘La Cithare’, 274; *OPC*, IV: 66)

Des reptiles; dans **les/** rameaux échevelés  
(‘L’Éducation de l’Amour’, 98; *OPC*, IV: 87)

Et dévorait jusqu'à l'heure du crépuscule  
(‘L'Éducation de l'Amour’, 199; *OPC*, IV: 91)

In a few examples, the anticipated mid-line accent is delayed until one syllable after the caesura, destabilizing the oppressive mechanism with an awkward 7/5 scansion:

On ne sait quel flot bleu/ **pas**se, et traverse encore  
(‘L'Éducation de l'Amour’, 63; *OPC*, IV: 86)

Il grandit, il devint/ **fa**uve comme ses hôtes  
(‘L'Éducation de l'Amour’, 195; *OPC*, IV: 91)

During the eighteenth century, the unimaginative, endless regurgitation of the same 6/6 scansion coincided with the precious, mannered domestication of both the natural world and poetic language. In contrast, these irregularities – with which Banville far exceeds the handful that Baudelaire offers in *Les Fleurs du Mal* (1857) and prefigures Rimbaud's campaign of metrical obliteration in the early 1870s – illustrate a point that Banville makes in an essay on Hugo (1885): ‘l'immobilité c'est la mort’ (*CLAM*, I: 95), for both the natural world and aesthetic practice.

Banville often combines these techniques at key moments in the restoration of universal harmony, such as Orpheus's song, played on his cithara:

Esprits des bois et **des/ fontaines, éc**outez  
→ **La Cithare!** Écoutez le cri de sa victoire!  
Viens, écoute-la, **Nuit/ sainte** à la splendeur noire!  
(‘La Cithare’, 86-88; *OPC*, IV: 59)

Nature revelling in the refreshing energy of the spring:

La nature s'éprend de **ce matin vermeil**  
→ **De la vie, aux clartés/ d'aur**ore. **Le sole**il  
→ **Du print**emps, qui de loin dans sa grotte l'admire  
(‘La Source’, 27-29; *OPC*, IV: 103)

The gods, rehabilitated thanks to the poet's efforts, reflecting on their exile in the wilderness, at the mercy of the elements:

Nous flottions, errants, **dans/ le** frisson **des nuées**  
→ **Et des fleu**ves, dans **les/ for**êts et sur **les mont**s  
→ **Sourcilleu**x; les méchants nous appelaient démons  
(‘Le Festin des Dieux’, 152-54; *OPC*, IV: 207)

And, fittingly, at the moment of glorious reunion:

Les Dieux et l'Homme et **la/ Nature** au flanc sonore  
Sont comme **une famille/ imm**ense qui s'adore  
(‘Le Festin des Dieux’, 179-80; *OPC*, IV: 208)

Both poetry and the natural world are thus endangered species in the face of industrial processes that reduce rhythm to a metrical machine and dehumanize our farming practices, as Banville notes in an essay on Manet (1872): ‘comment ne pas être archaïque pour représenter l'idylle, dans un temps où elle se compose de machines à ensemercer, de machines à faucher, à lier les gerbes, à ranger le blé dans le grenier’ (*CLAM*, I: 339). Such rhythmic diversity, therefore, may be seen as a vital preservation strategy.

Bate suggests that ‘ecopoetics asks in what respects a poem may be a making [...] of the dwelling-place’, and argues that ‘metre itself – a quiet but persistent music, a recurring cycle, a heartbeat – is an answering to nature's own rhythms, an echoing of the song of the earth itself’ (2000:75). For Banville, however, the music of nature and



poetry is anything but quiet. It thrives on the disorientating experience of unpredictable shifts between order and disorder, producing what Scott calls ‘versificational moments’, in which ‘shifts of sensory awareness, a shift in the scale of consciousness, a shift in the quality of attention [...] encourage us to imagine that all verse-junctures are adjustments of consciousness’, so that ‘the poem is a complex web of checks and balances in which now one device, now another, acts as the agent of either disruption or control’ (2002: 139-41). From an ecopoetic perspective, these moments of hesitation ensure that nature remain close to us but ultimately inassimilable, in the same way that authentic aesthetic experience moves us in indescribable ways. As Banville writes in an essay on Eustache Le Sueur in 1864:

L’art est immortel, puisqu’il a, comme la nature, le don de se reproduire et de se renouveler à jamais par des contrastes violents, prodigieux, inattendus, où le doigt de Dieu éclate, faisant sortir du rocher frappé de mort, la source fraîche et jaillissante. (*CLAM*, I: 248).

As we have seen, these ‘contrastés violents, prodigieux, inattendus’ feature in his poetry as formal tensions that mirror our interpretative hesitations over the natural world, producing an effective ecopoetic antidote to what Bate sees as the inherent danger of artistic tradition:

The perennial problem of artistic representation in any form, whether painting, poetry or fiction: artists try to tell you something about the world, about life [...] but they can only do so via a repertoire of techniques and conventions that are inherited from previous art. [...] The intrusion of artistic tradition is necessary to both the compositional process and the affective response, but it contaminates the purity of the relationship with nature itself. (2000: 126)

Banville’s poetry, on the contrary, achieves a non-appropriating engagement with nature that, in Kate Rigby’s words, ‘lets things be in their obscure otherness in the very process of revealing them within the work of art’, offering the natural world ‘a dimension of being which, far from being made possible by human language, always, somehow, escapes it’ (2004: 430-35). This is achieved thanks to irresolvable formal tensions, the mysterious terms of the interart analogy, and oxymoron – a key feature of poetic language from Gifford’s ‘discordant harmonies’ to Banville’s ‘mouvement immobile’, ‘silencieux rugissement’, ‘harmonieux orage’, ‘silencieux murmure’, and the ‘turbulente sérénité’ that features in the following essay on François-Louis Français of 1872. Banville’s criticism of many painters’ approach to nature is the same as that which ecocritics make of Romantic poetry: ‘ils n’ont pas levé ses voiles et approfondi ses mystères. Ils me font voir la forêt sonore, tremblante et mystérieuse, comme ils l’ont vue eux-mêmes, – d’un peu loin; près d’elle, mais en dehors d’elle’ (*CLAM*, I: 357). However,

Il ne faut pas non plus oublier ni tuer les vrais dieux et les Nymphes, qui, réellement, peuplent les ruisseaux, les antres, les fontaines et vivent sous les écorces; car, celui qui ne les voit pas dans la Nature infinie, ne comprendra jamais le tumulte, l’effervescence et la *turbulente sérénité* de la forêt! (*CLAM*, I: 357; my italics)

The genuine work of art, therefore, must suggest the infinite complexity of both the natural world and art itself, just as a painting by Corot in the Musée du Luxembourg communicates ‘le mystère, la terreur, la joie folle et l’incroyable complication de la véritable forêt’ (*CLAM*, I: 389). For Banville, in a century devoted to measuring, classifying and exploiting as much of the natural world as possible, this ‘incroyable complication’ is a vital mode of resistance. Whether that be thanks to animistic spirits, gods and nymphs, or an inherent musicality, is a question of belief, but as Éros asks the public in his closing speech of Banville’s play *Diane au bois* (1864):

Croire que l'on entend au loin l'archet d'Orphée,  
N'est-ce pas le meilleur d'un monde où tout n'est rien?  
(II, vi, 938-39; *TC*, I: 286)

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