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Review of Michael Bishop, *Nineteenth-Century French Poetry*

Marshall C. Olds
University of Nebraska-Lincoln, molds2@unl.edu

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Nineteenth-Century French Poetry. By **Michael Bishop**. Twayne's Critical History of Poetry Series. New York and Don Mills, ON: Twayne Publishers, 1993. Pp. x + 367. Michael Bishop has written extensively and well on some of the best of mid and late twentieth-century French poets—Char, Deguy, Jaccottet—and in this volume turns his attention to a thematic consideration of the major practitioners of the last century. The results are somewhat mixed. On the one hand, just about everyone is included whom one would expect to find (Lamartine, Vigny, Baudelaire, Hugo, Mallarmé, Verlaine, Rimbaud, Lautréamont, Laforgue; Desbordes-Valmore is present, Musset is not). Moreover, Bishop has read through the *œuvre* of each poet, so his perceptive observations pertain not only to familiar poems but also to some that have the merit of being less so. On the other hand, this reader experienced throughout a double sense of frustration with the thematic approach as applied here, and with the failure to establish or identify the audience to whom the book is addressed. The chapter devoted to each poet sketches a lively biographical portrait of two pages and then moves on to a series of themes and topics that

allow Bishop to encompass the entire *œuvre* in 30 or 40 pages. The subheadings of the Verlaine chapter, for example, are: Saturn and the Devil; Parnassianism, Impressionism, Naturalism, Symbolism: Poetry's Modes; Body; Woman; Aspiration, Hope, Self-Renewal; Gods; Loves; Parallels, Unity, Innocence; Forms: Constancy, Disarticulation, Horizon. My point is not that these topics have little to do with Verlaine; indeed, they signal facets of the verse throughout the poet's career. Such a configuration for a chapter does not lend itself to a sustained reading, however. Discussion sometimes collapses into lists of observations illustrated by the quotation of single lines of verse, sometimes into lists with no illustration or reference whatsoever. Nowhere in the book is an entire poem discussed in any detail. Among the longest quotations are two quatrains from Verlaine.

One must choose, of course, between trying to fit in just about everything and selecting only those works that best illustrate what one wants to say. It is a mistake, I feel, to assume that a general overview should do the former, and this irrespective of audience. What initiate to nineteenth-century poetry is going to begin with all of Hugo? What serious reader in the period (*or* initiate) will be content with schematic treatment of what is often the most challenging body of French literature? There is, to my mind, no clear sense of whom this book was written for. Translations to aid the beginner abound and yet so do cryptic references. The combination can have unforeseen results. Of Vigny's "divided consciousness" one reads: "He is more Baudelairian, more *fêlé* ("cracked") than at first it may seem . . ." (82).

Many of the book's conceptual difficulties may have been imposed on Bishop by editorial fiat, and so I do not wish to harp unduly on weaknesses that are inherent to commissioned work. There is one shortcoming that could only originate with the author, however, and that is the incessant name-dropping of twentieth-century poets. It is a shortcoming both because there is no balance with earlier periods (what Lamartine shares with the eighteenth century is as illuminating as what he does with the twentieth) and because the references are never substantiated by comparative discussion. Here is a typical example: "In such marriages [between high seriousness and delight] Desbordes-Valmore cannot but bring to mind the tonality of Apollinaire, but nor is she immeasurably removed from that haunting the work of Eluard or, nearer to us, Guillevic—*toutes proportions gardées*" (19). (It should be mentioned that this turn of mind makes the book's "Selected Bibliography" of little use, containing as it does too many titles on twentieth-century poets. It also omits major titles on the poets purportedly under study, such as L. M. Porter's 1990 *Crisis of French Symbolism* and F. C. St. Aubyn's 1987 *Stéphane Mallarmé*, also for Twayne). More than anything, though, this preoccupation with the twentieth century points to the book that really should have been written instead of *Nineteenth-Century French Poetry.* Bishop's first love affair is very apparently with

contemporary idiom: it illuminates whatever else he reads. As in the above quotation, one senses that there is much behind the hasty remark, and one sincerely regrets that Bishop did not spend more time fleshing out these important echoes.

Marshall C. Olds
University of Nebraska