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Catriona Seth, *Évariste Parny (1753–1814). Créole, révolutionnaire, académicien*. Collection “La République des Lettres.” Paris: Éditions Hermann, 2014. 332 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. 36 € (pb.) ISBN 978-2-7056-89575

Review by Aimée Boutin, Florida State University

The author of a voluminous *thèse* and numerous scholarly articles on Évariste Parny and other eighteenth-century poets and writers, Catriona Seth has now published an impressive literary biography of the man and his works, significantly titled *Évariste Parny (1753–1814). Créole, révolutionnaire, académicien*. Remarkably detailed, the book draws from a range of sources including administrative documents, unpublished letters, *éloges*, and poems, and is based on extensive research in archives in Paris, Aix, Réunion, Philadelphia, and Cambridge (USA). Her work substantially extends the pioneering biographical work of Raphaël Barquissieu. [1] As stated succinctly in the conclusion, her goal is clear: “Il faut lire Parny” (p. 293).

The book intends to rehabilitate a forgotten yet influential eighteenth-century figure by presenting Parny as an individual and as a member of a class, a generation, a milieu. While Seth aims to lay the groundwork for understanding how and why Parny gained literary fame and lost it, the book at hand is a literary and historical biography, not a reception study. Parny’s importance and influence is both assumed and revealed: this book is for those readers who have heard of him, but indeed recognize the scant extent of the available scholarship. If readers know Parny at all, they might be familiar with his significant contributions to the genres of elegiac, erotic, and exotic poetry, his role in the development of the personal lyricism of Alphonse de Lamartine and Alfred de Musset, or his influence on poets and composers such as Charles Baudelaire and Maurice Ravel.

The book’s title and subtitle, *Évariste Parny (1753–1814). Créole, révolutionnaire, académicien*, set the program of the study, and will serve to frame my discussion. By choosing to title the book *Évariste Parny (1753–1814)* Seth draws immediate attention to the man’s plebeian name and his revolutionary generation, both of which made it hard to fit in. The first chapter of Seth’s book is devoted to Parny’s ancestral origins in La Réunion where the family had lived since 1698. Although the poet’s grandfather, Pierre Parny, was a baker from Burgundy, he ascended the social ladder and in two generations succeeded in rewriting the family’s origins. Seth explains how the Forges de Parny family acquired their aristocratic title through a juridical decision in January 1782 and through the protection of Marie-Antoinette. The *chevalier de Parny* or Deforges-Parny would even be authorized to use the courtesy title *vicomte de Parny* as of 1786 (his brother was *comte de Parny*) (p. 151).

In 1764, Parny was sent to be educated in France and then pursued a military career. Seth underscores the role of the Collège de Rennes, where Parny made life-long friendships with the abbot Thé du Chatellier, Pierre-Louis Ginguéné, Antoine de Bertin, and Auguste Pinczon du Sel. Along with a coterie of friends and like-minded Creoles (such as Bertin) Parny retreated to “la Caserne,” a residence and “laboratoire de maturation pour des écrivains en devenir” (p. 51). His education and service in the military solidified the social networks that would serve to keep at bay those who perceived the Parny

brothers as arrivistes (p. 139). Seth also stresses the role of family, especially of the poet's elder brother; Paul de Forges de Parny (le comte de Parny) shored up the falsified aristocratic family name by securing the position of *écuyer de la Reine*, and cultivated his ties to maternal aristocratic relatives. Parny's strategies for social advancement make clear the manipulations that were still possible in the unequal society of the Ancien Regime if one had the benefit of connections (see p. 174). Parny was not beneath falsifying the length of his military service to the crown (as aide-de-camp in various missions or as captain in the Queen's regiment) or exaggerating ties to distant family relations. The irony of course, not lost on Seth or her readers, is that Parny fought hard to secure aristocratic titles that would mean nothing come 1789.

Parny's Creole origins compounded his tenuous social rank. Like other eighteenth-century precursors to French Romanticism (Chenier, Bertin, Léonard), Parny was born outside metropolitan France and remained attached to his native land, La Réunion, known prior to 1793 as the Isle of Bourbon. As the aptly worded chapter title states, Parny lived "entre deux cultures" as "Creole de Paris" and "Parisien de Bourbon" (p. 89). Unlike Françoise Lionnet who sees Parny "through the prism of contemporary concerns" as a "*tropicopolitan*" (referring to Srinivas Aravamudan's term), Seth does not use the terminology of postcolonial race studies to describe Parny's ambivalence toward his Creole roots.<sup>[2]</sup> As Seth's research demonstrates, Parny was from a slaveholding family, inherited slaves with his parents' estates, and had an illegitimate daughter with a Madagascan slave (p. 83). Contrasting the life of the *colons* and that of the expatriated, Parny's correspondence with his older sister, Geneviève Panon du Portail (known as Javotte), who remained on the Mascarenes Islands, proves to be a useful lens into the poet's double exile. Seth concludes that Parny found it hard to reconcile his republican ideals ("un rejet philosophique des inégalités et de la privation de la liberté" [p. 80]) with his social origins, never for example joining the Société des Amis des Noirs (p. 169).

Throughout the book, Seth emphasizes Parny's experience of cultural differences acquired from travels back and forth to Réunion (in 1774–76, then again in 1783–86), and to Brazil and India. His travel narratives and eyewitness accounts of the Brazilian port and unequal colonial societies of Rio, Le Cap, and Bourbon, she argues, prepared the way for *Chansons madécasses* in 1787 (p. 70). Although Parny, unlike fellow Creole poet Bertin, returned to Réunion twice, home never took the sheen of a lost paradise in his works: Seth observes that "Parny est l'un des premiers à être né au sein d'une société dont il constate le côté néfaste" (p. 73). Seth's summary remarks on Parny's ambivalence toward the Creole character (p. 76) offer only a partial explanation for why he is not remembered or celebrated in La Réunion today (p. 280). It would be interesting to know more about the posthumous reception of Parny in the Mascarenes.

Seth's research establishes that Parny wrote little about events of the French Revolution such as the fall of the Bastille, the abolition of slavery in 1794, or the execution of Marie-Antoinette, his brother's protector. Seth disputes Parny's own claim that the Revolution took nothing from him because he had nothing (p. 188); instead she argues that it took a toll on his well-being, his health, and his writing. Throughout, Seth stresses that, despite his light verse, Parny was not a lightweight. His ideas about tolerance, liberty, and cultural relativism place him among the enlightened thinkers of his era. Seth adroitly shows these ideals in a range of works from *Hymne de la Jeunesse* to *La Guerre des Dieux* and *Le Voyage de Céline*. The anticlericalism of *La Guerre des Dieux*, published with the support of members of *La Décade*, reveals Parny not as an atheist but as a deist, à la Voltaire (p. 226). The revolutionary period forced Parny to abandon love poetry to write propaganda—what some have seen as opportunistic verse to curry favor and earn his republican credentials ("[des] brevet[s] de civisme" [p. 191]). Financial difficulties and suspect past social allegiances meant that Parny was constantly soliciting support and money from aristocratic and royal patrons or government officials. Seth is careful, however, to avoid depicting Parny as a mere opportunist; rather, her historical contextualization and precise readings of selections from his poems show Parny's poetry merits the distinction it received from the academy of his peers and deserves a long-lasting recognition.

In 1803 Parny was the first non-metropolitan to be elected to the *Institut*, the forerunner of the Académie. Again, social and institutional recognition was a hard-won battle. Seth shows Parny weathering the success and fallout of his controversial work, *La Guerre des Dieux* (1799), and navigating the political minefield of appointments; becoming an “immortel” had little to do with the quality of one’s achievement or the potential for lasting impact on future generations of poets. Parny’s first collection of poems, *Poésies érotiques*, was a literary watershed. Because it renewed the elegiac form of Latin poet Albius Tibullus, he was henceforth known as “le Tibulle français.” Accordingly, Parny promoted the imitation of the Ancients in his *Discours de réception* at the *Institut*, stressing “la vérité des sentiments et de l’expression” (p. 236) proper to the elegiac tradition.

*Créole, révolutionnaire, académicien*: One can wonder why the subtitle to *Évariste Parny (1753–1814)* does not include *poète* since Seth has done a fine job assessing the value and importance of his poetry here and in her scholarly articles. Throughout this literary biography, Seth quotes from the poetry and quotations are analyzed in terms of their distinctive theme, images, and stylistic features. Seth’s attention to poetic talent identifies the stylistic elegance and simplicity of Parny’s poetry, even in his works of propaganda. Seth points out the innovations in some of Parny’s most forgettable occasional verse such as *Le Vengeur* (which makes original use of technical vocabulary). Discussion of the poetry is usefully contextualized thanks to many references to Bertin, and to Jacques Delille, André Chenier, and Jean-Antoine Roucher (whose poetry Seth knows intimately; she is one of the editors of the Pléiade edition, *Anthologie de la poésie française du XVIIIe au XIXe siècle*).<sup>[3]</sup> Although many occasional poems such as “Goddam! poème par un French-dog” are mentioned (though sadly, there is no index of poems referenced), three works stand out: *Poésies érotiques*, *Chansons madécasses*, and *La Guerre des dieux*.

*Poésies érotiques* celebrate the thirteen-year-old Creole Éléonore (modeled according to Seth on Esther Lelièvre whom Parny met in La Réunion during his 1774–76 visit [pp. 85–89]) and provide a new elegiac model for the direct expression of passion that would garner the admiration of François-René de Chateaubriand and C.A. Sainte-Beuve. *Chansons madécasses*, among the first *poèmes en prose* in the French language, were inspired by Madagascar (a place Parny never visited) and by the poetry of Ossian. They blend exoticism and sensualist poetics with a politically astute critique of slavery that casts Parny as an Enlightenment thinker. *La Guerre des Dieux*, which emulates the heroicomic vein of Latin authors and the modern acumen of Voltaire (p. 219), was a *succès de scandale*; its anticlericalism earned him many enemies and the work was censored by the Catholic Church in 1817. *Le Paradis perdu*, about which Seth published a separate study, is treated summarily.<sup>[4]</sup> Throughout, Seth’s treatment of the poetry affirms that Parny was a “poète incontestable” (p. 235); her authoritative literary biography aims to show that to rehabilitate the poet one must understand the man and his milieu.

## NOTES

[1] Raphaël Barquissieu (aka Barquissau). *Les poètes créoles du XVIIIe siècle: Parny, Bertin, Léonard* (Paris: J. Vigneau, 1949).

[2] Srinivas Aravamudan, *Tropicopolitans: Colonialism and Agency, 1688–1804* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1999); Françoise Lionnet, “‘New World’ Exiles and Ironists from Évariste Parny to Ananda Devi,” in Patrick Crowley and Jane Hiddleston, eds., *Postcolonial Poetics: Genre and Form* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2011), pp. 13–34 (28).

[3] Martine Bercot, Michel Collot, and Catriona Seth, eds., *Anthologie de la poésie française: XVIIIe siècle, XIXe siècle, XXe siècle* (Paris: Gallimard, Pléiade, 2000).

[4] Ritchie Robertson and Catriona Seth, eds., *Le Paradis perdu* (London: MHRA, 2009).

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