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Thanh-Vân Ton-That, *Proust avant la Recherche: Jeunesse et genèse d'une écriture au tournant du siècle*. Bern: Peter Lang, 2012. viii + 277 pp. \$64.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-3-0343-0277-7.

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For a long time critics have regarded Proust's juvenilia--that is, his early critical writings, his first published book, *Les Plaisirs et les jours*, his abandoned novel *Jean Santeuil*, and his series of literary pastiches--as imperfect works worthy of attention solely as preparatory *avant-textes* for *A la recherche du temps perdu*. Over the past twenty years or so, a new scholarly interest in these works has helped to rehabilitate them as oeuvres of considerable interest in their own right, both as a part of the rich literary and cultural heritage of the Belle Epoque and as early jewels of Proustian style, thought and criticism. First attempts to reappraise these works came from Switzerland, with a collective volume edited by Luzius Keller, *Bezüge und Strukturen: Studien zu Les Plaisirs et les jours*, followed by Keller's translation of *Les Plaisirs et les jours* into German, his beautiful reading of the volume in *Proust Lesen* and André Oeschger's subtle study of pastiche and parody in *Mondanität und Dekadenz: Intertextuelle Filiationen in Marcel Prousts Les Plaisirs et les jours*.^[1] Pierre Daum has published a comprehensive study of the volume with *Les Plaisirs et les Jours de Marcel Proust. Étude d'un recueil*.^[2] In the Anglophone world, Renée Kingcaid has identified Decadent topoi in her *Neurosis and Narrative: The Decadent Short Fiction of Proust, Lorrain, and Rachilde* and Frank Rosengarten has offered a compelling reading of the intersection between art, class and ideology in *The Writings of the Young Marcel Proust (1885-1900): An Ideological Critique*.^[3] More recently, Marion Schmid in *Proust dans la décadence* traces the intellectual journey that leads Proust from fin-de-siècle Decadence towards modernity, paying particular attention to the intertextual dynamics of assimilation and rejection in the early works and the *Recherche*.^[4]

Thanh-Vân Ton-That revisits this rich field in this engagingly written study of Proust's early fictional and critical writings. Her own work also goes back in history, for, as she explains in the preface, the book is composed of chapters of her thesis, as well as previously published articles reworked and recast under the wider perspective of the genesis of Proust's writing at the turn of the century. Her corpus is loosely delineated as both the works which lead up to and develop in parallel with the *Recherche* (hence her inclusion of the *Contre Sainte-Beuve* and articles that pertain to the period of maturity) and an initial "matrix" or "core" whose themes are incessantly reworked in the *Recherche* (pp. 4-5). Thus, rather than focusing on one particular text of the juvenilia as do many of the studies cited above--and this is one of the main strengths of this book--she traces the dynamics of Proust's writing through the full breadth of the early texts, nonetheless without losing out of sight their manifold ripples in the novel of remembrance. The *Recherche*, she argues, cannot be dissociated from the juvenilia: it continues to be haunted by motifs and obsessions that first crystallised in the different cultural and literary context of the fin de siècle. The book is divided into three chapters that explore, respectively, questions of genre; the imaginary that nourished the juvenilia and, later, the novel of remembrance; and the literary influences that have shaped the early writings.

Reflecting its own heteroclitic origins, *Proust avant la Recherche* gets off to quite a fragmented start, without any clearly defined critical agenda or objective, apart from the broad question of the early works' originality. But, though it remains somewhat disjointed throughout, in perfect symbiosis with the heterogeneous, fractured corpus of texts it investigates, its meandering enquiries open up many a fascinating path for exploring important questions in Proust scholarship such as the generic hybridity of Proust's writing, the autofictional dimension of his novel and its interstitial position between two centuries. The first chapter offers stimulating insights into the cross-overs between different genres with specific emphasis on the theatricality of writing already tangible in the early work, the porous boundary between prose and poetry and the *mise en abyme* of the self.

Chapter two explores the theme of *mondanité*, the dichotomy between the sacred and the perverse, and the tensions between autobiography, history and fiction. This chapter, the strongest and most enjoyable of the book, engages with Proust's Decadent *mises en scène* of cruelty and perversion, returning to such crucial texts as "La Confession d'une jeune fille," "Violante ou la mondanité," and "Sentiments filiaux d'un parricide" where, in fin-de-siècle mode, Proust stirs a heady mix of sadism, profanation and atonement. Whilst these texts have been studied previously by a number of critics, including Antoine Compagnon and Catherine Viollet [5], the author also unearths lesser-known, fascinating scenes such as Jean's encounter with the Dutch nun in *Jean Santeuil*, which allows her to make an interesting link between the young man's desire to unravel the violent sensations experienced by his friend Henri and the ecstatic resurrection of the past in the madeleine episode in the *Recherche*.

The close reading here, which teases out complex intertextual filiations between the early works and the novel, is brilliant and ingenious. In a tour de force, Thanh-Vân Ton-That, an expert in what she herself calls reading "à l'envers du texte" (p. 130), takes us from the perverted nun via the Eulalie of Combray to Albertine and Morel—revealing all these figures to be metamorphoses of a "religieuse en fleurs" (p. 135). The author is at her very best in these stylistic and thematic dissections of Proust's densely textured prose, which offer the reader a feast of Proustian onomastics, tacit echoes and inscriptions. Her quote of Proust's epistolary auto-portrait in a letter to Robert Dreyfus ("Connaissez-vous X, ma chère, c'est-à-dire M. P.? Je vous avouerais pour moi qu'il me déplait un peu, avec ses grands élans perpétuels, son air affairé, ses grandes passions et ses adjectifs. Surtout il me paraît très fou ou très faux. [...] Est-ce un p. ..., est-ce un fou, est-ce un fumiste, est-ce un imbécile?" (cited by author, p. 97), likewise, is a real gem. The chapter finishes with brio with a section on the *arrière-cuisine* of the *Recherche* that examines the complex nexus between gastronomy, creation and sensuality in Proust's work.

Chapter three, finally, traces the literary influences on the writings of the young Proust, focusing on such well-known models as Baudelaire, Flaubert and Barbey d'Aureville, but also on lesser-studied ones such as Victor Hugo, Verlaine, Barrès, Péguy and Colette. A re-examination of Proust's many affinities with Baudelaire (dandyism, his identification with the misunderstood writer, the poetics of cruelty) allows the author to read the *Recherche* as an encrypted *plaidoyer* "Pour Baudelaire." The unexpected connection she makes between the Proustian associations of purity and crime, religion and debauchery with Maupassant's novels and short stories, notably "Une partie de champagne" and "La Maison Tellier," is illuminating, as are her readings of Proust's poetic geography influenced by Barbey d'Aureville and the comparisons and contrasts she draws with Barrès, Péguy and Colette. The very brief conclusion remains ambiguous as to the scholarly and literary value of the texts studied. Whilst the author assigns them the "vérités mystérieuses" that Proust himself acknowledged in his early works, she no less dismisses *Jean Santeuil* as "œuvre mal dégrossie" and disregards valorising readings of *Les Plaisirs et les jours* as an "éloge de la banalité" (p. 253). The question of originality is done away with rather hastily as a liberation from a cumbersome literary heritage.

Proust avant la Recherche, for all its merits, lacks the broader critical perspective that would be required for a fuller understanding of Proust's early works. The book would have benefited from a more rigorous updating of secondary sources. A number of crucial titles on Proust's juvenilia, on his relations to Decadence and the fin de siècle, and his intertextual sources (Keller's *Proust Lesen*, Rosengarten, Kingcaid, Schmid cited above, but also Brian G. Rogers's, *Proust et Barbey d'Aurevilly. Le Dessous des cartes* and Luc Fraisse's *La Petite musique du style. Proust et ses sources littéraires*)^[5] are absent from the bibliography and main text. These studies would have enhanced the contextualisation of Proust's work at the turn of the century and strengthened the theoretical reflection on imitation and originality. Thus, to do full justice to the early works, *Proust avant la Recherche* should be read alongside other studies, as a rich mine of Proustian themes and concerns and as an engaging study of the *Recherche's* genealogy.

NOTES

[1] Luzius Keller, ed. (with the collaboration of André Oeschger), *Bezüge und Strukturen: Studien zu Les Plaisirs et les jours* (Frankfurt am Main: Insel, 1987); Marcel Proust, *Freuden und Tage*, transl. by Luzius Keller (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 1988), Keller, *Proust Lesen* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 1991); André Oeschger, *Mondanität und Dekadenz: Intertextuelle Filiationen in Marcel Prousts Les Plaisirs et les jours* (Bern: Peter Lang, 1992).

[2] Pierre Daum, *Les Plaisirs et les Jours de Marcel Proust. Étude d'un recueil* (Paris, Nizet, 1993).

[3] Renée Kingcaid, *Neurosis and Narrative: The Decadent Short Fiction of Proust, Lorrain, and Rachilde* (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1992); Frank Rosengarten, *The Writings of the Young Marcel Proust (1885-1900): An Ideological Critique* (Geneva: Peter Lang, 2001).

[4] Marion Schmid, *Proust dans la décadence* (Paris: Champion, 2008).

[5] Antoine Compagnon, *Proust entre deux siècles* (Paris: Seuil, 1989); Catherine Viollet, "La Confession d'une jeune fille: aveu ou fiction?", *Bulletin d'informations proustiennes* 22(1992), 7-24.

[6] Brian G. Rogers, *Proust et Barbey d'Aurevilly. Le Dessous des cartes* (Paris: Champion 2000); Luc Fraisse, *La Petite musique du style. Proust et ses sources littéraires* (Paris: Garnier 2011).

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