Review by Michael Syrotinski, University of Glasgow.

Henri Thomas (1912-1993) is a writer who has been unjustly overlooked by critics and readers of the twentieth century novel in France. Pierre Lecoeur’s Henri Thomas, une poétique de la présence, a revised version of his doctoral thesis, is the first full-length study of Henri Thomas’s novels in their entirety. Although it does incorporate references to the many notes and carnets, the oeuvre circumscribed does not include his poetry—somewhat disappointing given the book’s focus on the poetic quality of the language of Thomas’s novels, and the determining influence of Baudelaire, Rimbaud and Tristan Corbière on his writing and indeed his life—or his many important translations of other Russian, German and English writers, notably Ernst Jünger, Shakespeare, Pushkin, Melville and Faulkner. Some attention to these might have helped give a fuller understanding of the restless nomadic quality and endless border crossing of Thomas’s novels themselves. The book is divided into two thematic sections broadly organized, firstly around different manifestations of “absence” in his work, and then the identification of the modes of “poetic presence” that form the often intense, revelatory moments of the writing.

Absence (whether as wandering, loss, failure, dispossession, or death) is often synonymous with a certain melancholia, as Lecoeur correctly puts it, and writing thus takes the form of a kind of mourning, or as he say, “parler à la place du disparu” (p. 36). Absence is presented in very indirect ways and Lecoeur is at his most engaging when he follows the rhythms and contours of Thomas’s writing in detailed close readings of specific novels, such as the mesmerising La Nuit de Londres (1956), a multi-layered temporal narrative of a night spent wandering alone around the rainy, hauntingly empty capital city. Lecoeur invokes the notion of literary “Terror”—“c’est-à-dire l’émergence d’un langage neuf, une manière d’être plus qu’une manière de dire” (pp. 151-152)—borrowing from Laurent Jenny (La Terreur et les signes, Gallimard, 1992), in order to look at the various figures of the writer in Thomas and the self-reflexivity this generates, coalescing in the analogy of the writer as the socially marginal “chiffonier” (rag picker). Lecoeur cleverly shows how the drifting discontinuity of Thomas’s writing inextricably binds together the accidents that often serve to trigger events with the “accidents of language” within the narrative, in other words, the mistakes, obsessively recurring words or ideas, and narrative interruptions—or anacoluthons, those “brusques sautes de syntaxe,” as Derrida so astutely noticed in his reading of Le Parjure—to create his own singular style and relationship to language. This foregrounding of the discontinuous, or “surgissement d’autre chose [...] qui s’apparente à une présence” (p.158), is where Lecoeur locates the heart of Thomas’s poetic language.

The second half of the book takes this poetic language of “Terror” in Thomas as a point of departure for a more extended reading of the ways in which it functions as reparation or redemption in the novels, mostly importantly as an exercise in often autobiographically-marked memory or resurrection of a certain personal mythology, in an effort to resurrect those elusive, yet decisive moments of childhood,
such that, in a neatly chiastic phrase, the writing for Lecoeur becomes a “glissement de l’expérience de
l’enfance à l’enfance de l’expérience” (pp. 226-227). The forms this take are analysed as so many recurrent
tropes in Thomas’s novels, such as parataxis, or accumulated names, or the metaphor of the
countryside, and these are developed at length, although the desire for theoretical short cuts leads to
rather reductive characterisations, such as the use of the term “psycho-récit” in discussing the interiority
of much of Thomas’s novels (p. 237). Here there are mentions of Bataille, and his celebrated expérience
intérieure, although this was a missed opportunity for a genuinely interesting theoretical connection.
Elsewhere, though, Lecoeur is spot on, pointing to the “impératif de saisie” (p. 261) as central to
Thomas’s novelistic enterprises after the Second World War, when the return to childhood experiences
came to dominate his novels of the 1960s and 1970s, and the otherworldly temporality that marked the
novels from the 1980s onwards, holding out the promise of a fleeting access to the “l’autre du temps”
itself (p. 289), what Thomas calls the eternal. Lecoeur intriguingly looks for the possible influence of
Spinoza’s Ethics, for whose work Thomas admires, as do fellow poets Yves Bonnefoy and Philippe
Jaccottet. This in turn leads to a discussion of the “impersonal” in Thomas where, as Lecoeur rightly
notes, there are clear echoes of Maurice Blanchot, although this connection is again left rather
underdeveloped.

A full bibliographical appendix is given, although the lists of more general literary, philosophical
references suggest this has not been as thoroughly revised in the transition from doctoral thesis to
publication as it might have. The index is disappointingly thin, and limited to proper names and titles of
texts, when it could have been a much more useful tool in navigating through the many ideas and links
to other theorists mentioned by Lecoeur. These shortcomings aside, the author deserves fulsome praise
for such a detailed and insightful analysis of the novels of Henri Thomas, and this book will without a
doubt be warmly welcomed by fans of his writing, as well as anyone interested in his intellectual and
literary contexts.

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