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Pierre Lecœur, *Henri Thomas, une poétique de la présence*. Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2014. 402 pp. Bibliography and index. 46.00€. (cl). ISBN 978-2-8124-3061-9.

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 Lecœur'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 Lecœur correctly puts it, and writing thus takes the form of a kind of mourning, or as he says, “parler à la place du disparu” (p. 36). Absence is presented in very indirect ways and Lecœur 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. Lecœur 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 Terre 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 “chiffonnier” (rag picker). Lecœur 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 Lecœur 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 chiasmic phrase, the writing for Lecoœur 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, Lecoœur 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. Lecoœur 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 Lecoœur 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 Lecoœur. 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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