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Patrick M. Bray, *The Price of Literature: The French Novel's Theoretical Turn*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2019. xiv + 147 pp. Notes, works cited, and index. \$99.95 U.S. (cl). ISBN: 978-0-8101-3933-6; \$34.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN: 978-0-8101-3932-9; \$34.95 U.S. (eb). ISBN: 978-0-8101-3934-3.

Review by Adam Watt, University of Exeter.

This is an ambitious, yet peculiarly short book about some very long novels. Tackling major works by Mme de Staël, Victor Hugo, Honoré de Balzac, Gustave Flaubert, and Marcel Proust in the course of five brief chapters and a short conclusion, amounting in total to just 120 pages of text, is a brave, perhaps even foolhardy undertaking. Bray engages, at speed, given the compressed space in which he is working, with the considerable bulk of what he calls “certain iconic French novels:” *Corinne*, *Delphine*, *Notre-Dame de Paris*, *La Peau de chagrin*, *Bouvard et Pécuchet*, and *À la recherche du temps perdu*. He defines his work as “a literary essay” (p. 10), one in which he has “tried to streamline the academic apparatus” (p. 11). Undergraduate readers may find the approach appealing, but from a scholarly perspective the result is somewhat frustrating: Bray is an insightful and spirited close reader, but one is often left wanting more analysis, more reflection on existing scholarship, more hands-on engagement with the sparkling array of novels on the desk before him.

Bray seeks to offer an account of the place of theory in literary fiction in French between the early years of the nineteenth century and the *belle époque*, riffing in the first part of his title on a well-known remark made by Proust’s narrator in *Le Temps retrouvé*, that “une œuvre où il y a des théories est comme un objet sur lequel on laisse la marque du prix.”[1] To allude, however, as the book’s subtitle does, to a (singular) “theoretical turn” is somewhat problematic: Bray’s chosen sample of texts span well over a century’s literary production. The idea of a turn is little more than a hook for the title—it is not an especially conspicuous part of Bray’s argument. Rather, he is interested in how novels incorporate material that might be considered generically distinct from the narrative material literary history conventionally teaches us to expect from novels, and how these different sorts of material inter-relate. Under the banner of “theory” in the novel, then, Bray attends to passages by his chosen authors that are variously qualified as “thought,” “philosophy,” “ideas”—in short any “discourse that signals itself as different from the one in which it is inscribed” (p. 8). Before we get to the five author-driven chapters, however, there is a brief preface. This is both personal (the first sentence opens “For me, as a scholar [...]”; the second accounts for his “love of reading novels [...]”, (p. xi) and pointed in its position taking regarding the “price” of literature and literary study, price in the sense of value and the sense of what is sacrificed if we commit ourselves to (the study of) literature. Bray bemoans the demise of foreign-

language literary study in the US academy and the status of the sector more broadly, citing the high percentage of classes taught by non-tenure-track faculty and his “frustration at the general state of the university” (p. xi). These pages read like a disgruntled conversation overheard in a staffroom but lead us to Bray’s point of departure: his view that the study of literature in all its challenging literariness—what he sees as its under-acknowledged hybridity and multi-facetedness—is in fact an alternative route to the inter-disciplinarity for which literary studies have made way in the academy; in other words, for Bray, “literature itself, in how it grapples with different discourses and the abstractions of theory, is the material form of the perpetual exploration of the boundaries between knowledge and language” (p. xii).

Bray’s introduction then takes us from the catalyst for the study—Proust’s narrator’s observation about the presence of theory in a novel—to a brief overview of the chapters to come. Mme de Staël is a useful starting point for Bray since her influential *De la littérature considérée dans ses rapports avec les institutions sociales* (1800) provided a crucial transition from earlier wide-ranging conceptions of literature to something closer to our more narrow modern understanding of the term. Bray argues that Staël’s shift from a focus that is personal and psychological in *Delphine* (1802) to “what we might call the theoretical novel” (p. 16) with *Corinne* (1807) allows her to establish “the parameters of theory, politics, and sentiment in the modern novel” (p. 16). In relation to Hugo’s *Notre-Dame de Paris* (1831) Bray pursues a line of argument influenced by Michel Foucault, treating the three “rediscovered,” additional chapters included in the second, 1832 edition of the novel as a “counterdiscourse” serving to challenge and undermine prevailing contemporary positivistic attitudes. The following chapter, on Balzac’s *La Peau de chagrin* (1831) explores the fraught relationship between realist literary aesthetics and how theories of power and knowledge, and disquisitions on science (amongst other disciplines) are inlaid in the opening volume of the “Études philosophiques” section of the *Comédie humaine*. Bray’s fourth chapter seeks to show how in *Bouvard et Pécuchet* (published posthumously in 1881) the repeated, spectacular failures of Flaubert’s copyists to convert theories into practical application “undermines every aspect of what passes for the systematic organization of human knowledge” (p. 73). The final chapter, on Proust, focuses on the narrator’s literary-critical conversation with Albertine in *La Prisonnière* (1923) and his theoretical reflections in the Prince de Guermantes’ library towards the close of *Le Temps retrouvé* (1927). Bray suggests that the heightened literary qualities of Proust’s writing mean that when we encounter these passages we are primed to “feel intelligence” (p. 96) and live a sensory, meaningful encounter with theory (one which is awkward to express in English, though bound neatly together in the French adjective “sensible”). Bray’s conclusion, “Distributions of Literature,” returns somewhat uneasily to the conversational mode of his preface with an anecdote about explaining his book to his seven-year-old son. The thrust, though, of this brief coda is the notion, calqued on Jacques Rancière, of the “partage de la littérature” (p. 116). [2] Bray offers this as a term to account for the ability of literature, evinced by his study, to function as “a distribution of disciplines and meanings” (p. 121). We shouldn’t reject literary study as narrow or lacking merit: we should recognize that within the confines of the field readers might find their share of heterogeneity, multiplicity and *value*. This is hardly a conclusion that will stun academics or students of literature, though perhaps it is the author’s hope to reach readers who might be skeptical of the enterprise. If this is so, it is odd that more argumentative energy isn’t invested in accounting for why such long novels should be read in the first place. If those figures Bray rails against in his preface are as benightedly opposed to the value of literary study as he implies, to hold sway his argument surely needs to make a much more emphatic case for the considerable investment of time and effort required by works as long and demanding as those he dips into in the course of his essay.

Bray's book offers for consideration an interesting set of points on the literary map, though the overall impact of the book might have been greater had more been done to interconnect its chapters and the threads of his argument. We might fruitfully have learned more about how his later writers drew on or reacted against Staël; we might have benefited from more comparative analysis and discussion of the writers' respective handling of key terms such as "prix" or "théorie". Such synthesis and connection making is there, but only ever fleetingly. Though generally careful in its presentation, the book contains a number of slips and inconsistencies. In his introduction Bray lists those of his chosen authors that come chronologically after Mme de Staël by surname, only to list them again in the following paragraph complete with forenames (p. 10). The chapter that is based on previously published material ends with rather a jolt: to the material on the theory in Balzac's *La Peau de chagrin* (originally Bray's article of 2014 in *L'Esprit créateur*) is somewhat abruptly attached a two-page attack on recent data-driven "distant reading" approaches to literary criticism.[3] The connection to the body of the chapter is the suggestion that such approaches share the wrong-headedness of Raphaël's fruitless attempts to understand the nature of the talisman in the novel, but without earlier introduction in the chapter, what could be an engaging argument feels both rushed and forced. Between chapters three and four there is a distracting switch from endnote referencing to a variant of in-text referencing. Closer editorial scrutiny also ought to have caught some infelicities of expression (for instance the unwitting gothic air of how "the end of the literature chapter [in *Bouvard et Pécuchet*] ... exposes the stakes at the heart of the novel" (p. 86)). Equally, errors of detail ought to have been picked up before publication: Proust's first volume is not titled *Le Côté de chez Swann* (p. 134) and Albertine does not die at the end of *La Prisonnière* (p. 106): she is very much alive when she requests her luggage from Françoise and flees the narrator's apartment.

NOTES

[1] *A la recherche du temps perdu*, ed. by Jean-Yves Tadié, 'Bibliothèque de la Pléiade', 4 vols (Paris: Gallimard, 1987-89), IV, 461.

[2] See Jacques Rancière, *Le Partage du sensible. Esthétique et politique* (Paris: La Fabrique, 2000).

[3] Patrick M. Bray, "Theory's Chagrin in Balzac's *La Peau de chagrin*," *L'Esprit créateur*, 54/3(2014), 66-77.

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