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H-France Review Vol. 21 (May 2021), No. 75

François Proulx, *Victims of the Book: Reading and Masculinity in Fin-de-Siècle France*. Toronto, Buffalo, N.Y., and London: University of Toronto Press, 2019. vi + 390 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$66.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 9781487505479; \$66.00 U.S. (eb). ISBN 9781487532185.

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Scholars have long recognised that the figure of the novel-reader served as a reservoir of gendered anxieties in nineteenth-century France. H-France subscribers will no doubt recall the fate of Emma Bovary, who “cherchait à savoir ce que l’on entendait au juste dans la vie par les mots de *félicité*, de *passion* et d’*ivresse*, qui lui avaient paru si beaux dans les livres.”[1] Contemporary observers recognised a range of dangers in women’s autonomous reading, from sparking romantic illusions, as Flaubert alleged of his protagonist, to the corruption of women’s morals, as Flaubert’s critics alleged of his book. The burgeoning number of women readers, in tandem with the mushrooming supply of supposedly dangerous novels, provoked concerns that have been traced and classified in everything from academic monographs to successful coffee-table art books.[2]

François Proulx’s *Victims of the Book* arrives at this anxious intersection between gender and reading but then turns in a new direction, focusing on novels from the decades prior to 1914 “that stage the familiar story of Emma Bovary with a difference: the avid, easily influenced, and often ill-fated reader at the centre of the narrative is a young man” (p. 3). In Proulx’s analysis, during the early decades of the Third Republic the “earlier discourses about the dangers and pernicious effects of reading” were “redeployed” around the adolescent male (p. 3). As in so many narratives of this period of French history, the defeat of 1870 and its aftermath—most notably, in Proulx’s analysis, the debates over the role of the expanding education system under the Third Republic—serve as a critical turning point that shifted cultural attention to the figure of the male adolescent. At this moment, “the precocious or excessive consumption of literature made possible and fostered by education was imagined to potentially divert young men from the path to productive economic activity and its symbolic corollary, reproductive, marital heterosexuality” (p. 6). Whether this new fixation on young men’s reading simply displaced older concerns with women’s *Bovarysme*, or whether the two discourses travelled in tandem, remains an open question.

Proulx labels his object of analysis “the fin-de-siècle novel of formation” (p. 9): a corpus that incorporates canonical works such as Maurice Barrès’s *Les Déracinés* and Paul Bourget’s *Le Disciple* but extends over a much vaster field, drawing in dozens of novels that have been “the object of little or no critical attention” (p. 12). Proulx notes the sheer number of novels published

in the 1890s and 1900s whose very titles reflect the themes of his analysis: *La Vie stérile*, *L'Âge incertain*, *La Crise virile*, and countless other permutations. Yet, rather than descend into the statistical arguments and mechanical correlations that sometimes bog down corpus analyses and distant readings, Proulx's narrative remains supple and analytical. He is as comfortable unravelling the complexities of irony in a paragraph of Gide as he is charting trends in characterization across a decade's worth of minor novels. Crucially, while Proulx shores up his arguments with allusions to the broader corpus of novels that follow the patterns he recognises, he hangs his chapters and subsections on the analysis of exemplary authors, such as Jules Vallès, events, like the Chambige Affair, or individual works, including André Gide's *Les Faux-Monnayeurs*. In the final chapter, on Marcel Proust's unpublished novel *Jean Santeuil*, Proulx also engages in close manuscript work. Proulx is particularly impressive at rooting his (occasionally quite knotty) formal and aesthetic arguments directly in debates that address historical context. To take one example, his analysis of Vallès's use of classical rhetorical tropes is brought out because it charges a further level of irony into the treatment of a theme (the value of classical education) that was not only threaded through the fate of his characters but also reflected back onto a prominent educational debate.

As Proulx reminds us, about seven hundred novels a year were published in France by the fin-de-siècle: more than triple the volume at mid-century. By drawing on a wide range of forgotten literature that was actually written and read in the period, Proulx acquires the authority to diagnose contemporary preoccupations and concerns, rather than inferring grand cultural trends only from those novels that have been ascribed literary value by later generations of critics. As such, *Victims of the Book* makes a contribution not only to literary criticism, but also to the historiography of fin-de-siècle French masculinity, a vibrant field since at least the generation of Annelise Maugue and Robert A. Nye, and which has been excavated more recently by historians such as Christopher E. Forth. Proulx's work contributes most obviously to the discussion initiated by Judith Surkis's important *Sexing the Citizen*, which itself drew novelists such as Maurice Barrès and Jean Aicard into its excavation of the debates over adolescent male sexuality.<sup>[3]</sup> But while degeneration and declining virility are well-established themes of the scholarly literature on fin-de-siècle French masculinity, Proulx makes a compelling case that the act of reading occupied a prominent position in this imaginary. The fertile irony that spawns Proulx's study is that the people who were most anxious about the deleterious impact of novels were none other than their authors, the novelists.

Proulx's book adopts a tripartite thematic structure. Part one, "Youth in Crisis," is a rigorously contextual introduction to the ways in which the novels of formation under examination refracted the developments and preoccupations of fin-de-siècle France. Proulx opens in a way typical of his method of shifting our gaze from the storied to the forgotten: he recalls that 1897 saw the publication of two famous books—Maurice Barrès's *Les Déracinés* and Émile Durkheim's *Suicide*—but sits Albert Sueur's "highly forgettable" (p. 18) novel *Crise de jeunesse* of the same year as a third book alongside them. Sueur's protagonist, Fabien Després, is a typical example of Proulx's theme: a man so lost in idealised versions of love and women derived from the novels he reads that, when he finally summons the courage to take a ladder to the bedroom window of his object of affection, he is so lost at what to say that he starts quoting *La nouvelle Héloïse*.

The main preoccupation of Proulx's early chapters, however, is not fiction itself but rather the juncture between literature and the various discourses—critical, sociological, pedagogical, philosophical, and even physiological—that sought to address the perceived dangers of excess

novel-reading among young men. Proulx argues, in particular, that anxieties about young French men's reading habits intersected directly with contemporary concerns about the impact and regulation of pornography and prostitution. In one memorable passage, the rows of novels in the Flammarion shop window were clearly figured as prostitutes. Arrayed in the vitrine, wearing their colourful garments, they have titles that "display their promising wares": "From this mound of books," Gaston Deschamps imagined in 1899, "a cacophony of solicitous and impertinent supplications seems to rise: 'take me, monsieur, but me, me, me...'" (quoted on p. 30). As with prostitution, the perceived solution was not eradication but regulation. The problem, as Deschamps put it, was that "the typical Frenchman" (quoted on p. 28; transl. by Proulx) would always seek to move beyond a well-tempered school curriculum to more enticing lascivious material. How could such wandering desire be channelled?

As chapter two makes clear, the perceived dangers of novel-reading were not purely moral but could also be physiological, from bodily degeneration to impotence and infertility. The rise of educational opportunities brought a sense of threat: fin-de-siècle authors made their young men up from the provinces carry the promise of social mobility alongside the dread of intergenerational decline. Novels of the time frequently depict the passive, decadent sons of manual labourers who go off to the lycée or university and lose their virility through excessive reading and intellectualism. Proulx's claim pushes further, to suggest that worries over the growth of "unnatural" (p. 75) boys who stay inside to read books rather than go out and chase girls was "closely bound up with contemporary discourses denouncing the perceived threat of same-sex activity among adolescents, particularly in secondary school dormitories" (p. 72). Desire was sent off course in other ways, too, and Proulx multiplies examples of protagonists whose sexuality is redirected through masturbation "towards imaginary, immaterial combinations of vague literary tropes" (p. 77). It is not hard to see how such concerns about sexual misdirection intersected with the fears of decline--moral and demographic--in the early Third Republic.

Part two isolates "The Three Dangers of Literature"--which Proulx takes from a novel of the period, André Beaunier's *Les Trois Legrand, ou le danger de la littérature* (1903)--and an author is made to stand for each. For the first danger, "literary education," it is Jules Vallès; for the second, "novelistic seduction," we have Paul Bourget; and for the third, "writerly ambition," Maurice Barrès.

The first theme of young men's education is well-established, due not least to the shadow of Barrès and Bourget's iconic novels. What Proulx adds is to carefully trace the theme of Latin across the novels of formation. At the fin-de-siècle, the traditional pre-eminence that French elites had assigned to Latin and classical studies was in dispute, and the Republic eventually equalised the *bac moderne* and *bac classique* in 1902. Proulx uses Vallès's *Jacques Vingtras* trilogy to draw out the polyvalent ways in which authors related the theme of Latin education to the tropes already outlined. Vingtras, a farmer's son, is the victim of a half-successful education, caught between the prestige of classical education and the challenges of reality. He gets refused from factory work because his boss did not want a man with his "shoulder to the wheel of Latin" (quoted on p. 101; transl. by Proulx). He reads books about the French Revolution and is struck by the contrast with the Latin world in which he had been absorbed. Since Vingtras never has children, the "dead tongue of Latin brings about the death of a bloodline, foreclosing not only economic productivity but biological reproductivity" (p. 102). Moreover, Proulx brings out the way that Vallès uses classical rhetorical tropes to mock the study of antiquity.

The subsequent chapter uses the Chambige Affair as a frame for exploring Bourget's *Le Disciple*. On 25 January 1888 in Constantine, Algeria, Henri Chambige, an aspiring young writer, shot and killed Magdeleine Grille. At the subsequent trial, the role of novels came firmly into play, as his lawyer Ludovic Travieux made frequent reference to the accused's novel-reading habits and made analogies to Werther, Raskolnikov, and others. The most original feature of Proulx's account, however, is to focus on the theme of same-sex relationships and queer seductions. In his assessment of the Chambige Affair, Gabriel Tarde firmly but obliquely raised the notion that the accused had indulged in sexual liaisons with boys at his boarding school. In Tarde's analysis, the fact that Chambige had "[learned] music on an out-of-tune piano" left him with an enduring "taste for anomaly" (quoted on p. 132; transl. by Proulx). For Proulx, a part of the success of *Le Disciple* was due to the way that it tackled the theme of desire through "circumlocution and insistent distanciation" (p. 136), by marked contrast with Octave Mirbeau's 1890 novel *Sébastien Roch*, which contained the rape of a Jesuit schoolboy by his teacher. The young boys of *Le Disciple* instead "play out their slippery relations of desire and identification" through literature. In Proulx's account, Bourget killed Chambige in the "fictional mirror of Robert [Greslou]," the student protagonist of the novel who is murdered at its conclusion. *Le Disciple's* success was therefore to redirect the potentially threatening network of same-sex literary and social relations into "a passionate but emphatically moral pact between young male reader and older novelist, in the service of the social order" (p. 147).

For his third theme, Proulx turns to Barrès, exploring his rejection and subsequent embrace of Balzacian models in *Les Déracinés*. Proulx uses Barrès's own confrontation with the influence of models from the past to reflect back onto the novel itself, arguing that he redeploys "Balzacian schemas of ambition and ascent" (p. 149) as he traces the trajectories of his seven characters.

The final section, part three, "Forming the Reader," turns its attention to the strategies that authors used to overcome the "paradox" (p. 174) that haunts Proulx's entire corpus: writing a book (specifically a novel of formation) about the dangers of reading books. Here the authors--Martin du Gard, Gide, and Proust--are perhaps more familiar than the texts under discussion, as Proulx ranges across both published novels and unpublished notes and manuscripts. Martin du Gard used various forms of irony to confront the question of bad reading, Gide adopted the position of the "benevolent father-uncle," "who initiates his young reader into a mode of reading where books are the object of both wonderment and irreverence" (p. 210). Proust's *Jean Santeuil*, meanwhile, confronts many of the themes revealed elsewhere in the book--childhood, first love, contact with Parisian high society, the desire to be a writer that meets parental opposition, intimations of infertility--but offers reflections on how reading "as an active endeavour, rather than the passive reception of wisdom" (p. 219), permit the deeper understanding of the truth of both "the self and the outside world" (p. 243), rather than the retreat into interiority and imagination that so concerned anxious commentators.

Taken as a whole, *Victims of the Book* is a refreshingly successful example of literary analysis that addresses both critical and historiographical concerns. In his introduction, Proulx carefully justifies his methodology of dynamic reading, which promises to interweave distant sweeps of the corpus and close analysis of individual passages and authors. This approach--reading texts irrespective of literary reputation, discerning patterns, and drawing out rich examples--will perhaps be so familiar to cultural historians that it seems to sidestep a more fundamental question: why isolate literature? The answer in Proulx's case is clear enough. Literature, and

particularly the fin-de-siècle novel of formation, wrestled with specific common questions and confronted a unique challenge: how to write novels for young men about the danger of young men reading novels. The merits of Proulx's close readings of Vallès's rhetorical tricks or Proust's manuscripts will be best judged by specialists on the respective authors. For scholars of the period more generally, the chief value of *Victims of the Book* is less the multiplicity of its readings, insightful as these are, than the overall approach, which is to situate young men's reading habits firmly at the centre of the anxieties over degeneration, education, and sexuality that so bedevilled and preoccupied French observers at the turn of the century.

## NOTES

[1] Gustave Flaubert, *Madame Bovary* (Paris: Garnier-Flammarion, 1966), p. 69.

[2] For the former, Martyn Lyons, *Readers and Society in Nineteenth-Century France: Workers, Women, Peasants* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001); for the latter, Laure Adler and Stefan Bollmann, *Les femmes qui lisent sont dangereuses*, trans. Jean Torrent (Paris: Flammarion, 2006).

[3] Annelise Maugue, *L'identité masculine en crise au tournant du siècle: 1871-1914* (Paris: Rivages, 1987); Robert A. Nye, *Masculinity and Male Codes of Honor in Modern France* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); Christopher E. Forth, *The Dreyfus Affair and the Crisis of French Manhood* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004); Judith Surkis, *Sexing the Citizen: Masculinity and Morality in France, 1870-1920* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2006).

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ISSN 1553-9172