

H-France Review Vol. 7 (June 2007), No. 72

Christine M. Cano, *Proust's Deadline*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2006. x + 140 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$35.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-252-03070-3.

Review by William C. Carter, University of Alabama at Birmingham.

In this carefully researched and comprehensive book, Cano relates with admirable succinctness the story of the writing and publication of Marcel Proust's vast novel. She begins by detailing the many daunting editorial decisions that he and his publishers faced in bringing to publication the first four parts of *A la recherche du temps perdu: Du côté de chez Swann, A l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs, Le Côté de Guermantes, and Sodome et Gomorrhe*. After Proust died in 1922, his publisher Gaston Gallimard and Proust's brother Robert edited and published the remaining work as *La Prisonnière, La Fugitive ou Albertine disparue*, and *Le Temps retrouvé*—volumes whose definitive forms remain a subject of controversy in the scholarly community. Cano writes of the posthumous editions: “The preparation of Proust's final notebooks after his death can be described as an effort to eliminate incoherence on several levels: certainly, by correcting particular incoherencies in the text, repetitions and inconsistencies which Proust had no time to revise; but also by restoring to *Albertine disparue* the material he had cut, so as to safeguard its narrative ties with *Le Temps retrouvé*” (p. 87). The version of *A la recherche du temps perdu* published by Gallimard and Robert Proust remained the standard one for decades.

Proust ultimately found a practical solution that served aesthetic concerns as well, as Cano observes: “Since the editorial interval is both division and delay—fragmentation into volumes and the hiatus between their publication—Proust will finally come to use this delay as a positive structure to lend rhythm and order to successive publication. The interval between volumes can be seen not only as a necessary part of the reading process, but as a way of providing time for the revision and completion of future volumes announced” (p. 40).

Cano devotes two chapters to addressing “Proust's assertions that his novel was conceived in such a way as to withstand the eventualities of passing time” (p. 6). World War I and Proust's death in 1922, “while [he was] apparently engaged in an extreme revision of the final volumes, may have left the novel in pieces.” Cano therefore explores “these two events from the perspective of their reception and interpretation in critical and editorial accounts” (pp. 6-7).

Cano's study examines the scholarly works about the revisions that Proust made to his novel. Among the most important of these are Albert Feuillerat's *Comment Proust a composé son roman*, Robert Vigneron's “Genèse de Swann,” in *Études sur Stendhal et sur Proust*, and Alison Winton's *Proust's Additions: The Making of A la recherche du temps perdu*. [1] Feuillerat's and Vigneron's comparisons, cited by Cano, of Proust's expansion of his book to tumors and a deformed creature are inappropriate. Such analogies suggest, as Cano observes, that the *Recherche* morphed into “Frankenstein's monster, independent, pursuing its own trajectory to the detriment of the creator or to the ruin of the work of art” (p. 71). The best analogy for Proust's structure, I believe, is the one provided by the novelist himself: the circular shape of the cosmos whose ever-expanding extremes are framed by Time, just as he framed the narrative. In *Le Temps retrouvé*, the narrator mentions the cosmic nature of his all-encompassing endeavor: “la transcription d'un univers qui était à redessiner tout entier” (“my attempt to transcribe a universe which had to be totally redrawn”). [2]

Of Winton's study, Cano observes: “But if many of [Proust's] additions appear to have the function of

attributing lies to Albertine, they are offset by others that absolve her of guilt; the real function of the additions then, is to generate uncertainty” (p. 105). Cano does not, however, ask the obvious follow-up question: Why is Proust doing this? This process of generating uncertainty is related to one of the novel’s central themes, that of the narrator taking the wrong path during his quest—a theme first elaborated in the beginning of the novel: Swann’s mistaking eros for art. Proust’s late additions are not new directions so much as they are elaborations and enrichment of the original thematic material.

Chapter four, “Grasset’s Revenge,” discusses the “ongoing polemic that the French daily *Libération* once dubbed ‘the war of the Prousts,’” a battle ignited by the “1987 publication of *Albertine disparue* by Grasset Editions...based on an unpublished typescript revised by Proust just before his death and rediscovered among a relative’s belongings; it differed dramatically from previous editions of the same volume (*Albertine disparue ou La Fugitive*), omitting some 250 pages; and, most important, it was the only new edition to put into question the ideology of Gallimard Editions, which had presented *A la recherche du temps perdu* as a completed work ever since Proust’s death.” Cano claims her aim is “not to rehearse the hypotheses that have sustained this debate, but to lend them a wider context.” She proposes, by doing so, to show that “Proust’s revisions to *Albertine disparue* can be read within the context of his own definitions of narrative coherence and artificial closure, concepts that unfolded throughout the publication of *Du côté de chez Swann*” (pp. 7-8).

Would the narrator himself have accepted what Cano describes as “metonymical ‘proof’ of Albertine’s lesbianism—that she was riding on the banks of the Vivonne, therefore near to Montjouvain, therefore near to Mademoiselle Vinteuil and her lover”? How can we accept this as certain proof of Albertine’s lesbianism? I say this coincidence is not irrefutable proof. Imagine presenting in a court of law as evidence of Albertine’s sexual orientation the fact of her presence on the banks of the Vivonne in proximity to the residence of Mlle Vinteuil and her lesbian lover. The evidence cited by Cano is totally circumstantial. Albertine remains the epitome of the unknowable other. It is also important for readers of the novel to remember that Albertine functions not only as a real girl but also as a metaphor for all that the narrator desires: she is, he says, “une grande déesse du Temps” (“a great goddess of Time”). [3]

Cano is discreet in expressing her own opinions, but ultimately approves the editorial decisions of the new (1989) Pléiade version of *A la recherche du temps perdu*: “Integrated into the *Recherche*, Grasset’s *Albertine disparue* would demolish precisely the framework that Proust repeatedly invoked as both the proof and the symbol of his ‘construction.’ This is no doubt why it remains in the margins—an extraordinarily important document but not an integral part of *A la recherche du temps perdu*” (p. 114). She also agrees with those of us—as opposed to Vigner and others—like Philip Kolb, Jean-Yves Tadié, Harold Bloom, and myself, who have long maintained that Proust’s infatuation with his doomed chauffeur, Alfred Agostinelli, determined neither the characterization nor the fate of Albertine. [4]

In discussing the autobiographical documents, such as Proust’s letters and the early drafts of *A la recherche du temps perdu*, Cano sometimes runs to the risk of not paying sufficient attention to the thematic material of the novel itself. She claims, for example, that “Writing is the horizontal line that marks the passage of time and is itself the passage of time, a linear displacement leading toward death. Read as an appeal to the power of poetic language to overcome contingency, *A la recherche du temps perdu* may be all the more eloquent because of it” (p. 9). True enough, but one wonders how the work could possibly be read any other way, since Proust made this the novel’s great theme: the triumph of art over the contingencies and destructive forces of time.

Every Proust scholar will find *Proust’s Deadline* a useful and engaging guide to the history of the creation and current status of *A la recherche du temps perdu*, as well as to its proliferating editions and translations.

NOTES

[1] Albert Feuillerat, *Comment Marcel Proust a composé son roman* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1934). Robert Vigneron, "Genèse de Swann," "Désintégration de Marcel Proust," in *Études sur Stendhal et sur Proust* (Paris: Nizet, 1978), pp. 308-51. Alison Winton, *Proust's Additions: The Making of A la recherche du temps perdu*. 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977.)

[2] Marcel Proust, *A la recherche du temps perdu* (Paris: Gallimard, 1989), 4: 623; *In Search of Lost Time*, trans. by C. K. Scott Moncrieff and Terence Kilmartin; revised by D. J. Enright (New York: Modern Library, 1993) 6: 528.

[3] Proust, *A la recherche du temps perdu*, 3: 888; *In Search of Lost Time*, 5: 520.

[4] Philip Kolb, *Le Carnet de 1908* (Paris: Gallimard, 1976); Jean-Yves Tadié, *Marcel Proust* (Paris: Gallimard, 1996); and "Historique du premier roman de Proust," in *Saggi ricerche di letteratura francese* 4 (1963): 217-77; Harold Bloom, "Proust: The True Persuasion of Sexual Jealousy," in *The Western Canon: The Books and Schools of the Ages* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1994), pp. 395-412; William C. Carter, *Marcel Proust: A Life* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000.)

William C. Carter University of Alabama at Birmingham billcart@uab.edu

Copyright © 2007 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and its location on the H-France website. No republication or distribution by print media will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France.

H-France Review Vol. 7 (June 2007), No. 72

ISSN 1553-9172