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*Early critical responses, 1922 to 1950s*

Reflections and studies on Proust's early critical reception are (almost) as old as the reception itself: as early as the mid-twenties, critical overviews were published on Proust's success in France. Another specificity has to do with the posthumous publication of most volumes, for the debate surrounding *A la recherche du temps perdu* took place while the last three parts of the *Recherche* were being published: *La Prisonnière* (1923), *Albertine disparue* (1925), *Le Temps retrouvé* (1927), as well as the *Chroniques* volume (collected articles, also published in 1927), collections of letters and the *Correspondance générale* (1930-1936). This concomitance explains both the interest and the limits of many articles and books which have followed Proust's death. Moreover, the post-war publication of *Jean Santeuil* (1952) and *Contre Sainte-Beuve* (1954), decisively changed the perception of the birth of his work, and shed a new light on early analyses.

It is often said that, whereas *A la recherche* is now considered as the masterpiece of modern French literature, Proust was not acknowledged before the sixties; but a look at the early reception shows how simplistic this conception is. *A la recherche* was a commercial success in 1919, when Proust received the Goncourt Prize for *A l'ombre des Jeunes Filles*, and critics were unanimous in paying homage to him when he died, in November 1922. Nevertheless, his fortune dipped somewhat in France, in the twenties and thirties, while Proust was slowly discovered in other countries; after the war, his work came again to the fore, and was widely translated. Proust's early reception might therefore be symbolized by a spiral, combining moments of favour and periods of oblivion or negative critique.

1922-1940: recognition, controversies and disaffection in France

Just after Proust's death in November 1922, the NRF volume *Hommage à Marcel Proust* (1<sup>st</sup> January 1923), appeared as an exceptional tribute to the writer and gave birth to a consensual critical discourse, accounting for the origin of many topics that seem natural in later criticism. *A la recherche du temps perdu*, especially, is viewed as a unique book and a masterpiece combining psychological analysis (on time and memory) and social observations, sensibility and intelligence; Proust is often compared to Balzac and, especially, Montaigne, by Lucien Daudet and Fernand Gregh, for instance. An important omission is to be noticed: the NRF volume avoids gender issues, and homosexuality.

An acceptable *doxa* is presented to the reader; but also valuable insights, that were to be explored in the following years: the relation to modernism, to space (André Ferré, *Géographie de Marcel Proust*, 1939), to psychoanalysis (Jacques Rivière, *Quelques progrès dans l'étude du cœur humain*, 1927; Charles Blondel, *La psychographie de Marcel Proust*, 1932), but also music and metaphysics (Benoist-Meschin, *La musique et l'immortalité dans l'œuvre de Marcel Proust*, 1926; Jean Pommier, *La mystique de Proust*, 1939), aesthetics (Emeric Fiser, *L'Esthétique de Marcel Proust*, 1933), genesis (Feuillerat, *Comment Marcel Proust a composé son roman*, 1934) are tackled by critics in the twenties and thirties, as well as stylistics, genre issues and the relation to modern novel (following Albert Thibaudet, 'Marcel Proust et la tradition française', in the 1923 NRF volume). Still, many texts focused on the link between Proust's life and his work, in short essays seldom as interesting as Léon Pierre-Quint's *Marcel Proust: sa vie, son œuvre* (1925), which is still valuable reading as a historical document.

Proust's importance is shown by the list of authors who wrote on his works during the same period, such as Alain, Barrès, Bataille (*L'expérience intérieure*, 1943), Bernanos,

Brasillach, Claudel (one of the most hostile critics), Cocteau, Gide, Giraudoux, Larbaud, Mauriac – as well as, in English, Beckett, Conrad, Woolf, and various American writers living in Paris. Most are enthusiastic; some, more or less ambivalent: for instance, Gide’s first prejudices are famous, but he then shows a great interest for the *Recherche*, before ultimately expressing criticism about Proust’s depiction of homosexuality and his (supposed) hypocrisy. Sartre, for his part, considers the treatment of psychology in *A la Recherche* as typical of a *bourgeois* writer, but is more lenient in his late years; and *L’Être et le néant*, acknowledges in 1943 the importance of the analysis on the ‘successive plurality of the I’s.’<sup>1</sup>

Thus, Proust seemed institutionalised in the early twenties. His texts are published in anthologies for classrooms, in Benjamin Crémieux’s volume on *Le XX<sup>e</sup> siècle* (1924), and his reputation comes to a peak in 1925 but also remains an object of polemics, concerning his style (sometimes debased for its alleged preciousness), the publication of an unfinished *Temps retrouvé* and the numerous typos in the first edition. The pervasive presence of homosexuality and the tone of the last volumes are also criticized, some attacks being based on his letters published at the time. Gradually, by the end of the twenties, the reception has changed, and is not as auspicious as before; then interest increased again in the early thirties, when the publication of the whole *Recherche* gave a full view of Proust’s achievement; but by the end of the thirties, negative critics prevailed, as Douglas Alden’s assessment shows, in *Marcel Proust and his French Critics* (1940).

A slow recognition abroad

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<sup>1</sup> J.-P. Sartre, *L’Être et le néant* (Paris: Gallimard, 1976 [1943]), p. 149 (my translation). See Sandra Teroni, ‘Nous voilà délivrés de Proust’, in J. Brami, ed., *Marcel Proust 8. Lecteurs de Proust au XX<sup>e</sup> siècle et au début du XXI<sup>e</sup>* (Caen: Lettres modernes Minard, 2010), p. 117 (and p. 137 for a bibliography on Proust and Sartre).

The NRF volume contained texts written by foreign critics: from Germany (Curtius), Italy (Cecchi), Spain (Ortega), America, Sweden as well as four texts by English critics, one of them being a collective tribute. In Great Britain, particularly, among all countries, Proust has been immediately and continuously hailed.<sup>2</sup> His memory was celebrated a few weeks after his death by *Marcel Proust: An English Tribute* (1923), edited by C.K. Scott Moncrieff, the first translator of *A la recherche*, whose translation was published between 1922 and 1930 – except for *Le Temps retrouvé*, translated by Stephen Hudson (alias Sydney Schiff) and published in 1931. Proust is celebrated as the most accomplished heir of a brilliant French tradition. Generally speaking, critics and commentators (Woolf, Forster...) acclaim Proust's achievement, even though some denounce his style or his egotism, like D.H. Lawrence or Aldous Huxley. Published shortly after Clive Bell's *Proust* (1928), Samuel Beckett's volume (in 1931) remains one of the most decisive: it contains important reflections on time, characters, habits, music, and philosophy (especially through a comparison with Schopenhauer).

In Germany, Curtius's articles in 1922-1925 and his *Marcel Proust* (1925) are very influential on German criticism, while Zweig's tribute in 1925 (in Austria) draws the readers' attention to Proust's life. The translation, by Rudolf Schottlaender, of the first part, in 1925 (*I. Der Weg zu Swann*, II. *Im Schatten der jungen Mädchen*, 1926) then 1930 (*Die Herzogin von Guermantes*) immediately predates academic studies, in 1930-1937, addressing impressionism and classicism, Bergson, structure and style. Noteworthy among the most prominent critics, articles by Auerbach (1927) and Leo Spitzer (in *Stilstudien*, 1928), by Benjamin ('Zum Bilde Prousts' ['The Image of Proust'] 1929), who also translated *Sodome*, must be mentioned. But the Nazi regime interrupted the publication of translations, and academic studies were not numerous, the reaction of many intellectuals ranging from

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<sup>2</sup> See *Cahiers Marcel Proust 11. Etudes proustiennes IV*, 1982, p. 7. This volume is still authoritative, especially the article by R. Gibson, 'Proust et la critique anglo-saxonne', pp. 7-30.

indifference to defiance.<sup>3</sup> A similar chronology may be established in Italy, where the first critical studies devoted to Proust, focusing on aesthetics and psychoanalysis, were published in 1933: Francesco Casnati's *Proust* and Lorenza Maranini's *Proust. Arte e conoscenza*. Early articles had previously paid tribute to Proust, in 1922-1925, drawing comparisons with famous writers, French (Montaigne, Bergson) or European (Dostoyevsky), most of these topics being common in other countries. But, according to Carlo Bo, before the forties, the literary context in Italy was not favorable to Proust: he was not in a position to influence many Italian writers, for whom the question was no so much of a possible revolution of the novel, but of the choice of novel *genre* itself, against 'artistic prose',<sup>4</sup> which prevailed at that period.

Outside Europe, one may think of South America, where a translation by Pedro Salinas is published from 1920 onwards. Critical texts were sometimes written in Europe (Alfonso Reyes, for instance, lived in Madrid till 1924), or published there, like Ortega y Gasset's analysis on time and distance in the *NRF* volume (1923). But the reception in the United States is less studied. Still, it was not delayed (as is it often said), compared to England: *Swann* was published in 1922, *Les Jeunes Filles* and *Guermantes* in 1924-1925, and (as Elyane Dezon-Jones remarks) the first extract of *A la recherche* translated into English was published not by an English journal, but by an American one (*The Dial*).<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, by way of contrast with Great Britain, American critics paid attention to Proust mostly after his death, when *Sodome* raised a scandal and met success. Then, in 1932, *Le Temps retrouvé*

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<sup>3</sup> Pascale Fravallo-Tane, *A la recherche du temps perdu en France et en Allemagne (1913-1958)* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2008), p. 252.

<sup>4</sup> Carlo Bo, introduction to *Alla ricerca del tempo perduto*, quoted by Simonetta Boni, 'La réception de Proust dans les études françaises en Italie', in Mireille Naturel, ed., *La réception de Proust à l'étranger* (Illiers-Combray: Société des Amis de Marcel Proust et des amis de Combray, [2002]), p. 116.

<sup>5</sup> Elyane Dezon-Jones, 'La réception d'*A la recherche du temps perdu* aux Etats-Unis', in William C. Carter, ed., *The UAB Marcel Proust Symposium: in celebration of the 75th anniversary of Swann's way: 1913-1988*, (Birmingham, AL.: Summa, 1989), p. 34.

was published in the US in a translation by F.A. Blossom; the competition with Hudson's translation, in medias, was profitable for Proust.

Besides English criticism, Proust's reception is also mediated by American writers and journalists living in Paris, readers of the *Recherche* in French: Hemingway, Natalie Clifford Barney, Faulkner, Fitzgerald, Gertrude Stein, to name only a few among the writers who wrote on Proust, and admitted his influence or similarities between *A la recherche* and their own works – an admission also later made by Jack Kerouac. Among critical studies, one should mention Joseph Krutch's *Five Masters* (1930) and Edmund Wilson's *Study in the Imaginative Literature of 1870-1930* (1931). They predate the first wave of academic criticism, from 1932 onward,<sup>6</sup> addressing psychology, arts, society, memory, comparisons with Bergson and Saint Simon, genesis (Feuillerat, for instance, taught at Yale University, and his book had a profound effect on American criticism). At the end of the decade were published the first critical surveys, like Alden's *Proust and his French Critics* (1940).

Even if most of these books are now obsolete, some remain classics in Proustian studies; moreover, they deserve our attention as foundations of Proustian criticism and as witnesses of the construction of all the *clichés* that surround Proust's work.

After the War: 1945-1959

Despite Louis Martin-Chauffier ('Proust et le double "Je" de quatre personnes', 1943) and Ramon Fernandez (*Proust*, 1943), the idea then prevailed that Proust's work was anachronistic. But Etiemble's injunction ('Qu'il faut relire Marcel Proust', 1941<sup>7</sup>) was accomplished after the war, thanks both to the great success of André Maurois' *A la recherche de Marcel Proust* (1949), which mixes recollections and analysis, quotes early

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<sup>6</sup> Dezon-Jones, p. 43.

<sup>7</sup> René Etiemble, *Hygiène des lettres, V, C'est le bouquet* (Paris: Gallimard, 1967), p. 141 ff.

works by Proust; and to the publication of *Jean Santeuil* (1952) and *Contre Sainte Beuve* (1954), which played a great part.<sup>8</sup> The same year, the Clarac-Ferré edition of *A la recherche du temps perdu* was published by Gallimard, in the prestigious ‘Bibliothèque de la Pléiade’, stimulating proustian criticism and offering a better basis for translations.

During this period, were published books that have become classics in the field, like *Forme et signification* by Jean Rousset (1955, for the first versions), *Le Livre à venir* by Maurice Blanchot (published in 1959, some essays date back to 1954 and take *Jean Santeuil* into account), as well as studies on time (Poulet, *Études sur le temps humain, I*, 1950), psychology (Bonnet, *Le progrès spirituel dans l’œuvre de Marcel Proust*, 1946-1949), space and seclusion (Claude-Edmonde Magny, *Histoire du roman français depuis 1918*, 1950), humour (Donze, *Le comique dans l’œuvre de Marcel Proust*, 1955; Mansfield, *Le comique de Marcel Proust*, 1952), style (Louria, *La convergence stylistique*, 1957; Mouton, *Le style de Marcel Proust*, 1948), and philosophical readings with Levinas (*L’autre dans Proust*, 1947), Delattre (*Proust et Bergson*, 1948) or Newman (*Marcel Proust et l’existentialisme*, 1953); in English: Strauss (*Proust and Literature: The Novelist as Critic*, 1957), on Proust’s criticism, and Chernowitz (*Proust and Painting*, 1945). Most of them study topics and issues already analyzed in the twenties and thirties: there is always something new to discover in Proust’s work, even by following (apparently) similar paths that lead further.

As before, writers paid tribute to Proust in novels and fictions, like Claude Simon (as early as 1945 in *Le tricheur* and *La Corde raide*, 1947) or Nabokov (*Lolita*, 1955; the project of *Ada*, published in 1969, begun in the late fifties); or, privately, in letters (like Valéry), and explicitly, in essays: Bataille, once more (*La littérature et le mal*, 1957), Butor (who wrote pages on aesthetic experiments in 1955, later published in *Répertoire I*, 1960), Camus, very laudatory in *L’Homme révolté* (1951), and Sarraute (*L’ère du soupçon*, 1956) – the advent of

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<sup>8</sup> See Jean-Yves Tadié, *Proust: le dossier* (Paris: Pocket, 1998), p. 186.

*Nouveau Roman* was favorable to Proust, who gained a new status, as forefather of modern writing.

In other countries too was to be observed a reviviscence, or birth, of the interest for his works, as shows the increasing number of studies and the new translation projects. In Italy, Proust was not seen any more (at least not only), as a singular writer, beyond imitation and influence for writers. The number of translations is telling: *A la recherche* was published in Italian between 1946 and 1951 (involving seven translators), simultaneously with *Les Plaisirs et les jours* (1946) and *La Bible d'Amiens* (1946), before *Jean Santeuil* (1953) and a selection of letters (1958); extracts from other works or from the *Recherche* itself are published separately by distinct translators, during the same period. This acceleration stimulated critical reactions. A few were hostile: in 1945, Benedetto Croce denounced Proust's 'historical decadentism' (his judgement was based on simplifications regarding Proust and Bergson); but the journal *Letteratura* (1947) offered a tribute to Proust twenty-five years after his death and Giacomo Debenedetti suggested new critical perspectives in his *Saggi critici* (1952), followed by studies on themes (Tita del Valle, 1951), intertextuality, textual genetics (Gianfranco Contini, on *Jean Santeuil*, 1952), philosophy and aesthetics (Elemire Zolla, 1952; Vittorio Mathieu, 1959). The same type of editorial endeavours were launched in Japan, after a previous partial translation of the first volumes (up to *Guermantes I*, in 1935). A full translation was published in 1953-55, preceding two similar enterprises, after 1960, one of them by Kyuichiro Inoue, professor at the university of Tokyo, and active in genetics in the fifties onwards.

The situation was not the same in Northern Europe, where translations were late and incomplete, which explains the weak interest by readers before the last decades of the twentieth century. In Sweden, for instance, the first translation (*Swann*, 1930) was not flawless, and only a few studies were published after the war (K. Jaensson, 1944;

M. Tuominen, 1949). In Holland, apart from Simon Vestdijk, a writer and poet who wrote numerous texts on Proust from the thirties onward, the critical reception was very limited, sometimes hostile (for religious and political reasons), and the translation of *A la recherche* did not begin before the sixties. Even in Germany, a complete (and new) translation was published in 1953-57 only (by Eva Rechel-Mertens), after a famous publishing house (Suhrkamp) took up the first (and interrupted) project. At the same period, important studies are published by Jauss (on time, *Zeit and Erinnerung*, 1955) and Adorno (essays in *Noten Zur Literatur*, 1958).

In this respect, the reception in Great Britain and the United States is peculiar, for it remained continuous; in both countries, the number of studies even increased in the 1950s. In England, F.C. Green (since *The Mind of Proust*, 1949) and John Martin Cocking (*Proust*, 1956) were two of the most famous scholars. In the United States, Proust was more often taught in universities by new “Proustian specialists”, and Proustian studies benefited from important books: Philip Kolb published his PhD in 1948 (*La correspondance de Marcel Proust: chronologie and commentaire critique*), which constitutes the basis of the later publication of separate volumes of letters, before the great project of the *Correspondance* (1970-1993). Germaine Brée, Professor in Wisconsin, published in 1955 an English translation of her important essay *Du temps perdu au temps retrouvé* (1950), after a special issue of *Symposium* (1951) and an annotated edition of *Combray* in 1952. 1959 appears as a climax, as it is the year of the publication (in England and the United States) of the first volume of George Painter’s biography, decisive for studies in English.

Thus, it appears that Proust’s recognition as a master of the modern novel is more established than it is usually said; but also, that the reception of his work is made of accidents, shifts and reversals, according to a rhythm depending on countries and their connections with France.

Still, throughout these periods (1922 to the 1940s, the 1940s to the sixties), Proust has always been seen as an example of French culture, as its finest example or a *terminus ad quem* as Gracq would say. Finally, it is striking that many an early analysis remains stimulating: while they are often underestimated or even forgotten, numerous reviews and books of the first decades of Proustian criticism anticipate a great part of recent studies: readers should be aware of a tendency to amnesia, visible in many contemporary Proustian critics.