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The nature and status of theory in *Le Temps retrouvé*

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► **To cite this version:**

Vincent Ferré. The nature and status of theory in *Le Temps retrouvé*. *Le Temps retrouvé, Eighty Years After/80 ans après*, Dec 2007, Londres, United Kingdom. pp.195-208. halshs-00773508

HAL Id: halshs-00773508

<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-00773508>

Submitted on 14 Jan 2013

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Most Proustian critics consider the theoretical pages in *Le Temps retrouvé*, especially what is commonly called “L’adoration perpétuelle”, as sequences contrasting sharply with the narrative; but they indiscriminately use different terms to designate them, and view such sequences simply as nonfictional, only to examine the *effect* produced by the presence of such pages, their relation to the Proustian theories expressed in the *Contre Sainte-Beuve* papers or the thoughts of philosophers. They skip any analysis of the status and nature of such sequences, which are, implicitly, taken for granted. Still, the confusion caused by the numerous terms used to refer to those theories in *Le Temps retrouvé* should invite us to be more careful. Thus, one critic equally uses ‘méditation sur l’oubli’, ‘réflexions’ et ‘charmante variation sur l’idéalisme subjectif procuré par l’ivresse’ as designations for the thoughts of the protagonist;¹ another critic mentions the importance of ‘l’essai’ in *Le Temps retrouvé*, but his analysis is based on a very loose association between this generic label (‘Essay’) and ‘philosophie’, ‘méditation’ (once more) and reflexivity.² To conclude this overview with a seminal text, let us quote Jean-Yves Tadié, who wonders if Proust is not ‘déchiré en deux, romancier, et moraliste’³; he broadens this last notion to ‘abstraction’ and ‘généralité’, and speaks of ‘les vérités d’une valeur esthétique inférieure (i.e. les lois)’, as well as the ‘textes doctrinaux’ that are the ‘Adoration perpétuelle’ and the concluding pages of *Le Temps retrouvé*.⁴

Many other examples could be examined;⁵ in the space available to me here I will focus on this aspect neglected by most Proustian critics: the analysis of the nature of the theoretical pages in *Le Temps retrouvé*. What should they be called? Is it legitimate (and for what reasons?) to view them as *philosophy* or *essay*? Strikingly, there is no discussion of this assimilation, nor of the nature of such pages (viewed simply as nonfictional by critics), while the nature of the *Recherche* as a whole has been much debated (is it a novel?). More precisely, I shall address the assimilation of those pages with an essay: does the analysis of the differences between the theoretical, *essayistic* sequences (that is, viewed by critics as fragments of an *essay*⁶) and the fictional narrative allow us to conclude that there is another genre present within *A la recherche*? Symmetrically, can the differences between those sequences on the one hand, and articles or prefaces written by Proust or even the *Contre Sainte-Beuve* project, on the other hand, be explained by the status of the essayistic fragments, which are inserted into a novel? Finally, when we encounter them within a fiction, are those sequences that remind us of essays any different in nature to the essays Proust published independently of *A la recherche*?

To answer those questions, the use of the word *essay* and the link between the theoretical sequences and the narrative in *Le Temps Retrouvé* needs to be clarified. First, I will examine the logical implications of the

¹ Anne Henry, 1986: 198.

² Alain de Lattre, 1978: 26.

³ Jean-Yves Tadié, 1971: 413.

⁴ *Ibid.* : 413-414 and *RTP IV*, p.449-496 and 609 *sq.*

⁵ See for instance Jacques Rancière (‘art poétique en règle’, 1998: 153), Paul Ricoeur (‘dissertation’, 1984: 253— see also Luc Fraisse, 1995: 7), Barbara Carnevali (‘philosophie’ and ‘roman-essai’ [*romanzo-saggio*] in the French translation, 2006:1), and so on.

⁶ All theoretical statements cannot be considered as of the same nature: a difference exists, as will be shown, between essayistic fragments and *lois*.

common idea that such sequences do not belong to fiction but are close to essay (which is nonfictional): can they possibly belong – as most critics implicitly consider – to another *genre*, while they are inside a novel? Then I will focus on the obstacles to this assimilation of the essay: the status of the *I*, the insertion of the sequences in a fictional frame (the novel), the semantic convergence between them and the narrative, but also the importance of general laws (*lois*), which appear as a link between the two. Ultimately, what are we to call these sequences *evoking* the essay form, inside a novel, and producing the *impression* that we are reading theory? And how do we explain the presence of such pages in a novel? Why would a novelist combine narrative and theory?

I.i An essay? Logical implications of a false premise

Most critics – to name only a few: Tadié, Henry, Benjamin, Genette – consider *A la recherche du temps perdu*, and especially *Le Temps retrouvé*, as heterogeneous, because of the presence of theoretical pages, which (allegedly) do not belong to the expectations of common readers of a novel⁷. Among other terms used to designate them, the most frequent is *essay*:⁸ one may recall Genette's famous statement in *Figures III*, concerning '[l']invasion de l'histoire par le commentaire, du roman par l'essai, du récit par son propre discours'.⁹ Repeated (sometimes unconsciously) by many critics, this identification with essay is in fact as old as *A la recherche* itself: ever since its publication, Proust has been compared with Montaigne, the tutelary god (and father) of the French essay, as the *NRF* volume published in 1923 as a tribute to Proust shows, among other examples.

To avoid confusions, a brief definition is required, of what the term *essay* designates in the European literature of the 20th century, at the time when Proust wrote *A la recherche*: an *essay strictly speaking* (that is, published apart, and not included in a novel) is a nonfictional text in prose, with an argumentative purpose, diverse in its topics, with a relation to truth that is different from the relation of science (truth is the *aim* of the essay, and implies a sort of experiment to approach a truth); such a text is also characterized by subjectivity (the *I* present in an essay refers to a real person and exposes his/her thoughts as they are developing), which explains the rejection of any system as well as of method in argumentation, of exhaustiveness (which may be related to the fragmentary nature of its composition)¹⁰. Of course, this brief definition does not claim to be *the* definition of the essay; on the contrary, it is grounded on the observation of many essays and theoretical texts published during the first half of the 20th century. Such a historical inscription is to be underlined, since many papers on essay, for a few decades, deal with a transhistorical genre which is mere chimera: are Montaigne or Bacon's essays really the same as those by Adorno or Barthes? Also, many works addressing the presence of 'essay' and theory in novels simply lack any definition.¹¹

⁷ For a clear expression of this common (but often implicit) idea, see for instance Northrop Frye (1957: 308): "this interest in ideas and theoretical statements is alien to the genius of the novel proper, where the technical problem is to dissolve all theory into personal relationships."

⁸ *Philosophy* is also used very often. On this identification with *philosophy*, and its relativity due to cultural reasons, see an online article (Ferré, 2007), on the way French, English, American and German critics view *La Recherche* as *philosophical*.

⁹ Gérard Genette, 1972: 264-265 (emphasis mine).

¹⁰ This article being the third part of a triptych on the modern novel and the essay, a more complete definition of the essay (with bibliographical references) is provided in a previous article on Hermann Broch (Ferré, 2005). The second article examines the biographies in *USA* (by John Dos Passos) in relation to the tradition of American essays, and the effect on readers (Ferré, 2009). The three articles prepare the forthcoming publication of *L'Essai fictionnel : essai et roman chez Proust, Broch et Dos Passos*.

¹¹ See, for instance, Claire de Obaldia, *The Essayistic Spirit* (1995), and some articles in *Récits de la pensée. Etudes sur le roman et l'essai*, edited by Gilles Philippe (2000).

The identification, by Proustian critics, of the theoretical sequences in *A la recherche* with the essay is easy to understand, given their common points, particularly obvious in the case of ‘L’Adoration perpétuelle’ – the most commented upon, among those sequences, together with the pages on homosexuality in *Sodome et Gomorrhe* – because of its length and density. Still, ‘L’Adoration perpétuelle’ is an exception in this respect, compared to other *essayistic* fragments, shorter and overlooked by critics, which also deserve critical consideration.

Indeed, they share the same features: (to put it briefly) the marked presence of an *I*, indices of discursive writing, an abstract vocabulary, the progression of thoughts and their relation to truth – they combine multiple and even contradictory statements.¹² Moreover, their designation by Proust, in his letters or statements, is to be taken into account: beyond their diversity (‘réflexions’, ‘pensées’, ‘raisonnement’, ‘théorie’, ‘philosophie’...), these descriptions underline the theoretical dimension of such sequences. Moreover, the term used by Proust in a public statement is, precisely, ‘essai’: ‘[*Du côté de chez Swann*] a la saveur d’une autobiographie et d’un *essai*, déborde de sensibilité et d’intelligence [...]’.¹³ The term is glossed by ‘intelligence’, preventing any confusion arising from its polysemy; such a statement is quite important, at a time when the *essay* was not firmly identified as a genre. It is an indication of the generic reference (in Proust’s mind) of those *essayistic* sequences; but is it more than a *reference*?

The problem is that such elements (explaining the assimilation of the essay form) are usually implicit in critical texts, which focus on the relation to truth; but this sole criterium does not allow us the grasp the real nature of these sequences, nor to consider them as *essay*.

I.ii Is the generic reference to essays grounded?

Indeed, an incomplete analysis of these features leads most critics to exaggerate the gap between *essayistic* fragments and the narrative, and to come to conclusions regarding a difference of *genre*. I shall mention two elements (among others) which are misinterpreted, to show that they do not prove the existence of a generic gap between narrative and theory in Proust’s novel; thus, the identification of *essayistic* sequences as *essays* is to be questioned.

Though the theoretical sequences in *A la recherche* explicitly aim at exposing truth and claim to make ‘reality statements’ (*Wirklichkeitsaussage*), as Käte Hamburger puts it¹⁴ – contrary to the narrative, which is in the realm of fiction, of invention –, many *essayistic* fragments expose theories about the fictional world of *A la recherche*, not about the real world, to which the reader belongs. Germaine Brée underlined this gap sixty years ago: ‘Seul le narrateur se trouve engagé dans ces décrets de la raison, ces jugements absolus qui sont à mi-chemin entre la condamnation et l’admonestation. Lorsque, les formulant à partir du “nous” ou du “on”, en aphorismes, le narrateur veut étendre à notre vie les conclusions qu’il a tirées de la sienne, nous pouvons fort bien les récuser sans que le monde proustien en soit ébranlé.’¹⁵ But, even though Tadié expresses a similar intuition when he wonders if ‘la méditation artistique du *Temps retrouvé* [n’est pas] une clef qui n’ouvre pas d’autre œuvre que la *Recherche*’,¹⁶ most Proustian critics have overlooked the consequences concerning the nature of theory in *Le Temps retrouvé*.

¹² See Vincent Descombes (1987) and, in this volume, Stéphane Chaudier’s remarks.

¹³ (Emphasis mine) Extract of an article published with a pseudonym, in which Proust quotes this statement by Jacques Blanche, in *Gil Blas* (April 1914, 18th) – see Annick Bouillaguet, 1994: 64.

¹⁴ See Käte Hamburger, 1957.

¹⁵ Germaine Brée, 1950: 273-274.

¹⁶ Jean-Yves Tadié, 1971:424.

Another reason why the theoretical fragments may be considered (by critics) as essays is their allegedly digressive nature. Such is the cliché: Proust is long, and the digressions are often theories. In *Le Hors sujet*, Pierre Bayard has shown the absurdity of such a conception, suggesting provocatively that we might suppress most theoretical pages in *A la recherche...* Unfortunately (but not so much for our purpose), that threat has been literally executed by Raoul Ruiz and Gilles Taurand in their *Temps Retrouvé* (1999), with dramatic consequences.¹⁷ Bayard's *reductio ad absurdum* and Ruiz's adaptation both perfectly illustrate the limits and aporias of a reading that considers theoretical fragments to be superfluous. Randa Sabry's analysis had already shown that Proust's novel is a challenge to any definition of *digression* and any apprehension in such terms¹⁸. Moreover, the frequent assimilation of digression and theory does not resist a close reading: not all developments perceived as digressive belong to theory, as Albert Feuillerat showed as early as 1934, and as the first Pléiade edition confirms: Pierre Clarac and André Ferré decided to add in notes both narrative and theoretical fragments.

Thus, the presence of common points between the essayistic fragments and discursive writing, and their theoretical dimension do not suffice to prove that such fragments belong to the genre of the essay, and that another genre has colonized Proust's novel. Neither do other elements, such as genetic criticism, the question of intelligibility, references to philosophical works, and so on.¹⁹ Accordingly, then, we logically have to turn to other aspects, neglected by critics, which will lead us to identify the nature of theoretical fragments in *Le Temps retrouvé*.

II.i The fictional essay

The inclusion of essayistic fragments in a novel, the use of examples, the semantic convergence between theory and narrative, or the nature of the *I*: these questions have been studied at length by Proustian critics, but have their *generic* implications been fully grasped?

To begin with, let us consider a simple fact: the inclusion by Proust of theoretical sequences in his novel is (strangely, but obviously) not considered by critics in the same way as his integration of nonfictional pages into *A la recherche*. The way he has integrated into his novel his (independent) narrations of a road trip, of soirées or his descriptions of churches and paintings is well known;²⁰ why, then, should we treat differently the pages from the *Contre Sainte-Beuve* papers or notes from the *Carnets*? They also are *fictionalized* when inserted into the novel. The possibility for the novel to integrate anything is a cliché, but the seminal analysis by Bakhtin, often quoted, is (most of the time) misinterpreted: according to his essay 'Discourse in the novel', a novel may contain 'Various forms of literary but extra-artistic authorial speech (moral, philosophical or scientific statements, oratory, ethnographic descriptions, memoranda and so forth)'.²¹ But Bakhtin's analysis goes beyond this description, since he also considers *the change in status* of such material, as we will see.

Secondly, the presence in the essayistic fragments, to prove or illustrate the theories, of examples taken from the narrative, shows that the two elements (the theories and the narrative) belong to the same universe, to which the theories refer. To mention a famous

¹⁷ I shall let aside this question here, examined in another article (2003). See also Martine Beugnet and Marion Schmid (2005).

¹⁸ Randa Sabry, 1992:230 *sq.*

¹⁹ For a demonstration on these points, see Ferré, 2003, chapter 2.

²⁰ Anne Henry (1986 : 143) compares, for instance, the pages written by Proust on Gustave Moreau (*CSB*, p. 669-670 : « Nous sommes dans un salon, nous causons, tout d'un coup nous levons les yeux et nous apercevons une toile que nous ne connaissons pas et que nous avons pourtant déjà reconnue, comme le souvenir d'une vie antérieure ») and the description of the apparition of a motive of the sonata in *La Prisonnière* (*RTP III*, p. 763 *sq.*).

²¹ Mikhail Bakhtin, 1981:262.

example, the ‘leçon d’idéalisme’²² received by the Narrator in *Le Temps retrouvé* is based on his past – on the narrative past.

The third element to take into account, on a more general level, is the relation between the theoretical sequences and the fictional narrative. Thus, an essayistic fragment may shed some light on the narrative: “[...] je me rendais compte aussi que cette souffrance que j’avais connue d’abord avec Gilberte, que notre amour n’appartient pas à l’être qui l’inspire, est salutaire”.²³ The relation here is not one of illustration or explanation, but is a real interaction: to put it briefly, the theories need the narrative and its fictional universe; their alleged ‘reality statements’ are in fact fictional and refer to fiction.

Along with this remark, the last element is the nature of the *I* that exposes his conceptions in the theoretical sequences. In an essay, strictly speaking, the *I* of the writer refers to a real person: as Jean Marcel puts it, an essay is a ‘discours réflexif [...] entretenu par un *JE non métaphorique*’.²⁴ The ‘reality statements’, thus, are *real* only if they are expressed by a real speaker.²⁵ In the case of *A la recherche*, the conclusion is important. Nowadays, after decades of debate, a consensus has emerged about the status of the text: the presence of an autobiographical dimension does not change its fictional nature, and for many critics, *A la recherche* is a novel.²⁶ But the consequences for the theories included in the novel are not taken into account by critics,²⁷ nor are they by theoreticians of the essay in general. Very tellingly, the same Jean Marcel explicitly eludes the difficulty and refuses to clarify the nature of the *I* when, dealing with the ‘la présence de la forme de l’essai dans les formes narratives’, he mentions the ‘*JE métaphorique du narrateur*’, immediately adding that it is ‘parfois considéré comme non métaphorique dans la mesure où il renvoie au *JE réel* de l’auteur – *mais il n’y a pas lieu de soulever ici cette question difficile*’²⁸ – here I mention a text by a francophone critic, but even in the analyses of German theoreticians of *Essayismus* (that is, the presence of ‘essays’ in novels), this question is not addressed.²⁹ Still, it seems possible to answer logically that *A la recherche* being a novel, the *I* is not Marcel Proust but is fictional;³⁰ thus, the *I* shares a fictional status with the narrative, as well as with the theories that he exposes, which explains their contradictions and incoherence, their errors or evolution.

The fictional nature of the essayistic sequences, hence, is a point in common shared by maxims and general laws, pronounced by the narrator and so many of the characters, which explains the frequent confusion between laws and essayistic sequences. Most critics use the term ‘lois’, borrowed from Proust, to speak of *any* form of theory in *A la recherche*, while at least two forms – essayistic sequences and laws – can be distinguished, according to length and density, according to the relation to the textual environment and depending on the identity of the speaker.³¹

²² RTP, IV, p.489.

²³ RTP, IV, p.475.

²⁴ Jean Marcel, 1992:318.

²⁵ Käte Hamburger, 1957: 56.

²⁶ For a more recent synthesis than Jean-Yves Tadié’s demonstration (1971) see for instance Luc Fraisse, 1995:93.

²⁷ As far as my knowledge goes, there is only one exception: Florence Godeau (1995) underlines the difference between the *Is* in *Contre Sainte-Beuve* and *A la recherche du temps perdu*.

²⁸ Jean Marcel, 1992:319 (emphasis mine). At least, Jean Marcel mentions the existence of a problem which is usually neglected.

²⁹ See Bruno Berger (1964), Gerhard Haas (1966), Adolf Frisé (1963) and their successors.

³⁰ There would be much to say about the use of *Marcel* by many English and American critics (when they mean *the narrator* and/or *the hero*), which seems impossible to ground on the occurrence found in *La Prisonnière*, and which renews a prejudicial confusion. Besides, it is not possible to reconstruct Proust’s views par analyzing exclusively the speech of the narrator (without references to Proust’s articles, essays and letters), as Joshua Landy (2004) pretends, imitating what René Girard (1961) had already tried (and failed) to do.

³¹ On this important distinction, see Ferré, 2003, chapter 3.

II.ii Essayistic novel, ‘forme mixte’ and ‘tierce forme’

It seems, thus, appropriate to suggest to use the term ‘fictional essay’ to designate the theory-laden sequences such as we encounter in ‘L’Adoration perpétuelle’. They resemble essays by some of their features, but are contained in a novel – the present demonstration refers to *Le Temps Retrouvé* but its conclusions may, of course, be applied to the whole *Recherche*. The term ‘fictional essay’³² distinguishes them from *philosophy*, from *essay* strictly speaking – two labels which seem obvious and unquestionable to many critics – but also from simplistic, culturally-b(i)ased or artificial formulas: *essayistic novel*, used by specialists of *Essayismus*, is a very convenient expression, but it refers to a model based on an exclusively German-speaking tradition (Goethe, Musil, Thomas Mann and Broch, especially), while the presence of the ‘essay’ in a novel is not limited to that area. Neither can we use ‘forme mixte’ nor ‘tierce forme’, that are suggested by Barthes: according to him, *A la recherche* is not exclusively a novel nor an essay, but ‘[a]ucun des deux ou les deux à la fois : ce que j’appellerai *une tierce forme*.’³³ Beautiful as the expression is, may anybody (other than Barthes) use it?³⁴ Beyond the paradox, which brings the reader to think that Proust is unique in the history of literature, it is in fact possible to decide between essay, novel, ‘aucun des deux’ or ‘les deux à la fois’, and I shall logically choose *novel*. Proust’s work is not in-between, and all the theory (both general laws and essayistic fragments) contained in the novel is fictional.

‘Fictional essay’ not only appears as logical, but also as adequate because it reminds us of the closeness between those theoretical sequences and essays (strictly speaking) published in the first decades of the 20th century; hence, it takes into account the difference between the narrative and these theoretical sequences. But at the same time, it warns us of the gap between them and essays, since the sequences only *mimic* the essay and produce an *essayistic effect* (to paraphrase Mireille Calle-Gruber’s phrase on *fictional effect* or ‘effet de fiction’³⁵): the assimilation, implicit or explicit, with an essay strictly speaking is not possible. The adjective *fictional* here possesses its full meaning, denoting the fictionalization of ideas, derived sometimes from other writers (essayists, philosophers), sometimes from nonfictional texts by Proust: those ideas, in Bakhtinian terms, become ‘images of ideas’ when they enter the novel.³⁶

Conclusion

When Antoine Compagnon opposes two volumes of *A la recherche*, that is *Du côté de chez Swann* and *Le Temps retrouvé* – the latter being associated with philosophy³⁷ – he echoes Jean-Yves Tadié, according to whom ‘*Le Temps retrouvé* semble consacrer la disparition de toute fiction’.³⁸ But in fact, *fiction* is still alive in *Le Temps retrouvé*, in the essayistic

³² I shall not explicitly answer here to a possible objection, that all essays are fictional. The beginning of an answer is to be found in the definition given p. 3.

³³ Roland Barthes, 1984: 336. See also his remark on the texts written by Proust before *La Recherche*: ‘[ils relèvent,] notamment au niveau de certains fragments [...], d’une *forme mixte*, incertaine, hésitante, à la fois romanesque et intellectuelle’ (335).

³⁴ Vincent Descombes does, which might explain his difficulties when he refers to *the essay* (see the multiple terms used to designate theory ; 1987: 9-31).

³⁵ While Mireille Calle-Gruber deals with narratives (novels) in her *L’Effet-fiction – de l’illusion romanesque* (1989), I suggest to use the idea for *discourses* (“essays” in a novel).

³⁶ Mikhail Bakhtin, 1984 : 91.

³⁷ *SG* : vii.

³⁸ Jean-Yves Tadié, 1971:418. For a similar (and previous) statement, see Brian G. Rogers, 1965:138

discourse, in this bewildering form that appears as a *translation* of an essay into a novel. As we know, the heterodiegetic (fictional) narrative is for Gérard Genette a mimesis of ‘formes factuelles comme l’Histoire, la chronique, le reportage’;³⁹ I shall argue that the relation of the *fictional essay* to *essays* (strictly speaking) is of the same kind. It is, thus, an example of the ‘interaction des régimes fictionnel et factuel’;⁴⁰ in the case of the *essayistic sequences* of *A la recherche*, we are not dealing with a (fictional) narrative (which is Genette’s topic), but with a (fictional) *discourse*, the essay being here a model for a theoretical discourse included in fiction: the fictional essay.

A more exhaustive demonstration would also analyse the reasons why a writer like Proust decided to include essayistic sequences, and not only general laws, into his novel; and reflect on the consequences of the fictional nature of such sequences. Here, I will only evoke briefly three main reasons. First, the relation of the essay (as a genre) to modernity and the historical moment was an established fact when Proust wrote *A la recherche*. The essay was – in France, but also in Great Britain, as Virginia Woolf’s texts show – considered as a *new* genre, despite its prestigious genealogy, going back to Montaigne. And Proust presented his ‘lois générales’ as an original aspect of his novel, some of them in fact amounting to what we have called the ‘fictional essay’. Secondly, the presence of a fictional essay is coherent with the movement of *A la recherche* towards totalization (both a necessity and an unreachable goal), since these theoretical sequences are a means to combine the rational and the irrational spheres (reason and sentiment, to put it briefly). Thirdly, essay as a genre is supposed to be able to reach knowledge (of the world, of oneself), which is one of the missions of literature as exposed in *Le Temps retrouvé*. Transferred into a novel, Proust maximally exploits the essay and its cognitive function.

But he was not the only writer to do so, at the time. To understand better the nature and status of theory, it would be important to compare more thoroughly, in this perspective, *A la recherche du temps perdu* with other novels published in the first half of the XXth century, by Musil, Broch, Thomas Mann or Woolf, among others, all of them exploring in a new way the combination between essay and novel⁴¹.

³⁹ Gérard Genette, 1991:90.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ I would like to thank Adam Watt and Delphine Martin, who have read and improved the translation of my original paper into English.