The nature and status of theory in Le Temps retrouvé
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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

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1 Anne Henry, 1986: 198.
3 Jean-Yves Tadié, 1971: 413.
4 Ibid. : 413-414 and RTP IV, p.449-496 and 609 sq.
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.1 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*: 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

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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.


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*.

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. 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 […].’ 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 it – 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.’ 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*’, 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.
Another reason why the theoretical fragments may be considered (by critics) as essays is their allegedly digressive nature. Such is the cliche: 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. 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 terms. 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. 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 (independant) narrations of a road trip, of soirées or his descriptions of churches and paintings is well known; 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)’. 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

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17 I shall let aside this question here, examined in another article (2003). See also Martine Beugnet and Marion Schmid (2005).
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 connaissions 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.).
example, the ‘leçon d’idéalisme’ 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”. 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_’. The ‘reality statements’, thus, are _real_ only if they are expressed by a real speaker. 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. But the consequences for the theories included in the novel are not taken into account by critics, 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’ – 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. Still, it seems possible to answer logically that _A la recherche_ being a novel, the _I_ is not Marcel Proust but is fictional; 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.  

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22 _RTP_, IV, p.489.
23 _RTP_, IV, p.475.
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.i 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’ 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’. Beautiful as the expression is, may anybody (other than Barthes) use it? 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’): 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.

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 philosophy he echoes Jean-Yves Tadié, according to whom ‘Le Temps retrouvé semble consacrer la disparition de toute fiction’. But in fact, fiction is still alive in Le Temps retrouvé, in the essayistic

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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 ‘intéraction 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 included 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 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 XX\(^{th}\) century, by Musil, Broch, Thomas Mann or Woolf, among others, all of them exploring in a new way the combination between essay and novel\(^ {41}\).

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\(^{39}\) 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.