

## BOOK REVIEW

Imprinted by Proust

Eleanor Lischka

Thomas Baldwin, *Roland Barthes: The Proust Variations* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2019).

As its title suggests, Thomas Baldwin's *The Proust Variations* deploys the idea of the musical 'variation' as a lens through which to consider Barthes' extensive critical writings on *À la recherche du temps perdu*. Baldwin's point of departure is a 1972 roundtable discussion with Gérard Genette, in which Barthes explains both Proust's novel and the role of the critic in terms of variation, offering a sort of negative definition of the term. The critic should not see Proust's novel as consisting of 'variations on a theme' (the proliferation of motifs from a thematic origin point), but instead as, in Baldwin's words, 'made of variety' (p. 67). The Barthesian critic does not, therefore, try to elucidate an original theme from which such variety emanates, but rather de-structures and rewrites to produce their own variations. To understand the nature of Barthes' rewriting of Proust is the principal task of this book. Baldwin ambitiously examines not just *what* Barthes says about Proust, but also *how* the novel is diffracted through the prism of the critic's own *réécriture*. Rather than understand Barthes' Proust criticism as a hermeneutic practice, he suggests that we see what might traditionally have been called Proust's 'influence' on the critic as an example of how, in Barthes' own words, the languages we inherit from such texts are 'des formes qu'on peut remplir différemment' (cited p. 17). He shows how, for Barthes, Proust's novel is thus the ultimate 'texte scriptible', its limitless continuity approaching Mallarmé's idealised vision of the Book as it rewrites itself in seemingly infinite variations, and invites us to do the same. Baldwin's development of the idea of variation also allows him to devote particular focus to musical themes, with one chapter

focusing on Barthes' essays on Proust and music, and another reading both authors through an elaboration of Émile Benveniste's distinction between *rhythmos* (metronomic rhythm) and *rhuthmos* (swing).

What emerges from Baldwin's wide-ranging analysis is a view of Barthes as deeply imprinted by Proust's novel. *The Proust Variations* succeeds in showing just how crucial a figure the novelist was for him precisely because Proust's work so effectively eludes the conclusive tendencies of schematic criticism. Baldwin shows how the inability to pin down *À la recherche* in itself continues to inform Barthes' thought over the course of his career from the 1950s on, as his fluctuating response to it both provokes and is provoked by the evolution of his critical instincts. In so doing, Baldwin also makes a remarkable case for just how much of Barthes' thinking is already 'in' Proust. For this reason, this book will appeal as much to those interested principally in Barthes as it will to those with a desire to understand his relationship with Proust. Comparing the former's erotics of the gap ('[l]'endroit le plus érotique [...] où le vêtement bâille', cited p. 68) to Proust's *intermittences*, for example, Baldwin shows how structural analysis cannot fully encompass the 'playful porousness' (p. 52) of *À la recherche*. His final chapter, 'Neutral, Nuance', argues that while Proust's style diverges significantly from the 'écriture blanche' of Camus, for example, the sheer variety of perspective in his novel achieves some of the same neutrality for which Barthes praised *L'Étranger*. *The Proust Variations* is notable for the breadth of its scope across Barthes' oeuvre, drawing extensively on unpublished works including a set of teaching notes for a seminar series that took place at the University of Rabat in 1969–70 to form a comprehensive view of his disparate, and sometimes contradictory, ideas on the novelist. It is a strength of the book that Baldwin is not afraid to expose and problematise Barthes' inconsistencies. While the Barthes of 1972, for example, sees Proust as heralding modernity, in both 'De l'œuvre au texte' (1971) and *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes* (1975) he is lumped together with Balzac as inimical to *réécriture*, because 'on ne peut aujourd'hui écrire "comme ça"' (cited p. 121). Indeed, Barthes' critical fragments on Proust's work, as Baldwin points out, refuse to cohere into a single assimilable view, mimicking, in their messiness, the perspectival superabundance we find in *À la recherche*. Although the mushrooming of what Baldwin calls 'variety' across two such complex writers threatens to become unmanageable, *The Proust Variations* meets Barthes on his own terms, admirably demonstrating how, by

Eleanor Lischka

accepting the inconsistency at the heart of his writings on Proust, we might open up new possibilities for criticism.

\*\*\*

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Eleanor Lischka is studying for a DPhil at the University of Oxford on poetry and the poetics of sound in the work of Marcel Proust. She was recently awarded the 2021 Gapper Postgraduate Prize.

#### COPYRIGHT INFORMATION

This article is copyright © 2022 *Barthes Studies* and is the result of the independent labour of the scholar or scholars credited with authorship. The material contained in this document may be freely distributed, as long as the origin of information used is credited in the appropriate manner (through bibliographic citation, for example).