

Suter on Wolf (2014)

Wolf, Nelly. *Proses du monde: les enjeux sociaux des styles littéraires*. Villeneuve d'Ascq: Presses universitaires du Septentrion, 2014. Pp. 264. ISBN: 978-2-7574-0608-3

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Proses du monde is a meticulously structured book whose essential work is to unveil language as a “mime,” as opposed to mere “narrator,” of the subject matter it describes, and to establish how an author’s prose performs the ideology of its socio-historical moment. In a sweeping study ranging from the mid-nineteenth century to the *Trente glorieuses*, Wolf interprets stylistic elements such as lexicon, oralization, syntax, and morphology as synecdochal representations of the evolution of French culture.

Wolf’s method of *sociolecture* follows Claude Duchet’s notion of the sociality of literary texts, but she aims instead to explore the sociality of literary styles. Her previous book, *Le Roman de la démocratie* (2003), treated the nineteenth-century realist novel’s narrative form as a mimesis of the social contract; *Proses du monde* continues in this vein, this time positing literary style as “l’équivalent linguistique du contrat social” (76). Far from embracing a purely sociological approach, Wolf’s *sociolecture* creates a system of concentric interpretive circles: she weaves close readings into a spider web of increasingly wide cultural contexts. If this strategy rings particularly true to the critical *Zeitgeist*, Wolf reminds us that it only became possible for the first time in the nineteenth century when the novel’s prose begins to dissociate itself from *la langue haute*—a stylistic divorce born in the wake of a revolutionary moment.

Wolf’s first section concentrates on the second half of the nineteenth century, a period whose prose reflects “l’arrivée du peuple dans la culture de l’écrit” (16). The democratization of that era is generally understood to manifest itself in the realist novel’s rejections of Ancien Régime hierarchies of style, genre, and social structure—from its anonymous and abstract third-person narrator, to its lowborn or bourgeois protagonists. But Wolf proceeds from a more microscopic view, aiming instead to locate the particularities of the “diction démocratique” (24). Surveying George Sand, Émile Zola, J.-K. Huysmans, the Goncourt brothers, and Jules Renard, she breaks down the various modes of oralization at work in their fictional writings. As both harbinger and byproduct of a literary era privileging the spoken language of *le peuple*, these modes range from the transactional to the citational, from the voice of the narrator to those of the characters themselves. In series of comparisons of these authors to different métiers, Wolf relates a novelist’s prose style to the “work” it enacts: Sand *menuisier*; Zola *blanchisseuse*; Huysmans *fabricant de perles fausses*. In elaborating these extended allegories, Wolf reminds us of Louis-Ferdinand Céline’s comparison of his prose to his mother’s craft as a lace-maker; likewise, the image on the book’s cover shows a close-up of the dirt-covered hands of an artisan. Unfortunately, Wolf only employs this edifying trope of “l’écrivain-travailleur” in the book’s first section—perhaps because the metaphor is relevant only insofar as these artisanal crafts remain viable trades (which, as Céline himself points out in *Mort à crédit*, means not much farther than the turn of the twentieth century). She nevertheless succeeds in establishing how the transformation from artisan to *ouvrier* parallels the developments of literature’s relationship to the voice of *le peuple*.

Wolf’s second section tackles the national identity of Interbellum and Post-War France, as represented by Jewish writers of Eastern European origin: Albert Cohen, Irène Némirovsky, and Georges Perec, whose literary styles demonstrate an adherence to—or rejection of—the *pacte républicain*. With Perec, Wolf weaves a brilliant parallel between the aesthetically topical, of both person and prose—the author’s facial scar, his penchant for *oulipien* spelling mutations and renounced diacritics—to the properly topical: the author’s situation as an orphaned Jew whose roots figured more prominently in his work than he was inclined to acknowledge.

The third section examines the “disengagement” of literature in the years enveloping the Second World War, arguing that it was not an action so much as an act—“la posture du désengagement” (16). Wolf divides her subjects into two camps of ambivalence: André Gide and Louis Aragon were supposedly writers of engaged works whose prose styles prove otherwise. In *Geneviève* (1936), Gide’s interest in the emancipation of women is a sort of apolitical politics—*cet engagement qui n’en est pas un*. Likewise, Aragon’s devotion to the communist cause is undermined during the famous “compétition nautique” in *Aurélien* (1944), for the tale does not exactly narrate the trouncing of its bourgeois protagonist by his proletarian competitor, but rather the defeat of Aragon himself—of his poetry by prose, of his surrealism by the political real. Meanwhile, Albert Camus and Alain Robbe-Grillet rejected literary engagement, yet their “écriture blanche” is shown to betray politically charged undertones.

Wolf is at her liveliest in the fourth and final section, which covers *les Trente glorieuses*—France’s heyday of wealth and stability from 1950–1980. These *sociolectures* are constructed around the figure of the *Français moyen*, a personification of wider cultural movements away from the extremities that defined French society, politics, and literature, towards the center. The prose of this period followed suit, reflecting the influence of visual modes of mass culture (cinema, graphic arts, comic strips), the era’s penchant for statistics, and the ethos of the increasingly swollen bourgeoisie. The main conundrum of the *Français moyen* is essentially the hipster’s paradox: how to be different once this aim becomes a universal endeavor. The *Français moyen*, rejected in the name of exceptionalism and originality by Gabriel Matzneff, Annie Ernaux, and Patrick Modiano, becomes inadvertently re-embedded into prose in the form of “un français moyen” (222).

While style is “un acte social,” Wolf proves that this act is saddled with the contingencies of social context that supersede authorial intention (239). The performance of style results from both conscious choices and the unconscious reproduction of the ethos of the author’s historical present.

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