

Forrest on de Guido (2015)

Guido, Cédric de. *Marcel Schwob, du journal au recueil*. Classiques Garnier, 2015, pp. 414, ISBN 978-2-8124-4549-1

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When considering the secondary careers of those French nineteenth-century men and women of letters who wrote for the press, the consensus of scholars is generally that these occupations were a means to another end: the production of works of literature. In this light, whether the motivation was financial (making ends meet) or strategic (to stimulate future book sales), the journalistic precursors of novels, poetry, or short-story collections reflect the authors' extra-journalistic vision and ambition: the trajectory may begin in a periodical, but the ultimate goal is the published volume. This assumption has marked assessments of the journalistic work of Marcel Schwob, much of which did find its way into post-publication compilations from *Coeur double* (1891) to *Vies imaginaires* (1896). The tendency as well is to link the vast erudition that emerges in Schwob's writings with a particular fin-de-siècle practice of engaging in esoteric, arcane, or specialized knowledge and language. It is unthinkable, so the consensus has been, that his objective would paradoxically be to situate that erudition first and foremost within the journalistic medium, a medium which one is more inclined to associate with the dissemination of information in an intelligible form than with the often perplexing "narratives" or "studies" that he offered his readers. And yet, this is precisely what Cédric de Guido proposes in *Marcel Schwob, du journal au recueil*. If almost all of Schwob's pieces appeared first in the press, he argues persuasively, then scholars should not minimize his relationship to the medium, but rather reassess his work in relation to it.

The press, de Guido contends, is more than just a reflection of the conditions under which Schwob had to work; it is the medium that gives his *œuvre* and his literary method coherence. The typical artist's complaints about the constraints on creativity imposed by journalism never emerge in Schwob. On the contrary, constraints possess metaphorical margins and spaces between lines (or columns), and Schwob gleefully explored and exploited them. This playfulness emerges in the relationship of his signature brief pieces to other articles either: 1) in the columns of the same page, 2) on other pages of the same issue, 3) in recent issues of the same paper, or 4) in recent issues of articles appearing in other journals. But levity is not the end result: here it adds greater depth and richness to the already complex reception of Schwob's method and works. It also adds greater ambiguity, a quality that situates him clearly within the aesthetics that would define the next century. While Schwob offers himself to his reader as a credible journalist through the way in which he builds an intertextual relationship with the reporting of other columns (internal and external) on current events or interest, he confounds the reader's ability to determine the precise generic nature of the piece under her eyes. Schwob's "tales," for example, often possess qualities that one identifies with current event *chroniques* (theatrical and literary reviews, local news). His *chroniques* can double as scholarly studies as in his article on the trial and execution of the murderer Michel Eyraud, which allowed Schwob to satisfy his continuing fascination with the secret languages of criminal worlds and mountebanks. Some of his *chroniques* often parade as current events, but borrow stylistic elements from the medieval chronicle, which not only works to obscure the generic specificity and contemporaneity of the piece, but equally to offer it as an important precursor of the form. If I place "narratives," "studies," and "tales" in quotation marks, it is to echo de Guido's emphasis on the blurring of lines among genres. In addition, Schwob's parodic use of extensive quotes from columnists whom he wryly disparages approximates the skillful manipulation of translation found in his *Vies imaginaires*. While erudition and knowledge are central to an appreciation of Schwob, he plays with knowledge rather than displaying it.

The scholarly writer-journalist Schwob discomposes his reader who often finds fiction where she expects facts, history instead of legend, and as in the *Vies*, a privileging of the individualizing yet insignificant detail over overarching historical relevance. Schwob the *écrivain-journaliste*, as de Guido demonstrates, continually engages the tension between journalism and literature, and in doing so frustrates reader expectations at every turn. Where he deploys specialized or exotic words, the meaning of which the reader will at some point struggle to comprehend, he downplays sense and showcases sonority, graphic texture, or merely a linguistic *effet de réel*. As Christian Berg has noted in "Signes de signes: Marcel Schwob et le 'rapport mystérieux des signes'" (*Marcel Schwob d'hier et d'aujourd'hui*, 2002), Schwob, the student of Michel Bréal and Ferdinand de Saussure, was at the forefront of modern linguistics. He staged the crisis of the sign, and ultimately of meaning in, for example, "Le Roi au masque d'or." Crisis is a loaded descriptor, however, for Schwob celebrated giving the reader the opportunity to endow elusive words with the fictive meaning of her choice, as in *Le Livre de Monelle*.

Without diminishing the significance of the deliberate, yet sometimes shifting shape that Schwob gave to the collections, de Guido maintains that the fuller picture is that they are the result of a post- rather than a pre-publication design, and that therein lies the very modernity of Schwob's *oeuvre*. While he claims that the Schwob of this broader assessment is not the Symbolist

that scholars find in the compilations, that the author considered himself classical and conservative, one cannot overlook the fact that practices such as the refusal of causality, the privileging of narrative fragmentation and circularity, the blurring of temporal, spatial, linguistic, and generic boundaries, all situate him squarely within a fin-de-siècle aesthetic. That said, with *Marcel Schwob, du journal au recueil*, de Guido joins such heavyweights as Bruno Fabre and Agnès Lhermitte with this very important addition to scholarship on Schwob.

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