

Hawthorne on Staro? (2015)

Staro?, Anita. *Au carrefour des esthétiques: Rachilde et son écriture romanesque 1880–1913*. Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego, 2015, pp. 419, ISBN 978-83-7969-436-5

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Anita Staro?'s well-researched, thorough, and impressive new study of Rachilde (Marguerite Eymery Vallette, 1860–1953), *Au carrefour des esthétiques*, sets out to correct an oversight: while critics have started to pay attention to Rachilde once again (following a period of oblivion after her death), even the wealth of recent works fall short of doing this long-lived and productive author justice because they pigeonhole her as a Decadent or a Symbolist and fail to account for how her work evolved esthetically over time. To that end, Staro? proposes a close reading of a wide range of Rachilde's works to show that she is a better writer than she is often said to be. "Le but de ce travail," writes Staro?, "est [...] de montrer la qualité de l'écriture de Rachilde" (35).

The study is divided into two parts. The first focuses on background—the necessary biographical overview (chapter one) and the theoretical background (chapter two)—while the second part offers an analysis of a wide range of specific works over the course of three consecutive decades in Rachilde's career. The chapters that make up this second, critical part divide Rachilde's novelistic output of the period 1880–1913 into three movements: "inversion," "suggestion," and "poétique de l'aventure." This corpus thus shuns Rachilde's juvenilia (the adolescent works published in regional newspapers), leaves aside her theater, and ends before WWI, after which time Rachilde's influence diminishes, says Staro?. She chooses to end her study in 1913 rather than 1914, because the crucial fact is not what happens on the stage of world politics, but the aesthetic shifts that accumulate in that pre-war watershed year of 1913 (Proust, Stravinsky, the *Ballets russes*), and herald a new cultural era.

Staro? divides the novels studied in part two into decades that correspond to three aesthetic periods in Rachilde's writing. The first chapter is placed "sous le signe de l'inversion." As the title suggests, the emphasis here is on novels such as *Monsieur Vénus* and *Madame Adonis*. These are the novels of Rachilde's formative years, and they situate her in "une approche ouvertement décadente," contends Staro? (161), combining a fascination with the monstrous side of humanity with a belief in the fundamental goodness of nature.

The novels of the 1890s foreground the "puissance de la suggestion," and show Rachilde gravitating towards the aesthetics of Symbolism, with its inward turn and emphasis on an exploration of the self. Staro? analyzes novels such as *La Princesse des ténèbres* and *La Jongleuse* (to name but two), showing that Rachilde is a far more skillful writer than some readers recognize (see 184). *La Princesse des ténèbres*, for example, is focalized entirely through the protagonist Madeleine, so that it becomes impossible to know what "really" happens. The reader must decide whether to trust the narrator and accept something supernatural, or conclude that the narrator is unreliable due to madness or some such distortion of perception (223–24).

At the beginning of the twentieth century, modernity was in the air and novelists turned away from the self-obsessed preoccupations of the Symbolists, looking outwards in a spirit of adventure. Staro? tracks this change in Rachilde's work through novels such as *Le Dessous*, *Le meneur de Louves*, and *Son printemps*. Staro? notes that for the first time one may observe a "souci de vérité" in Rachilde's work, as exemplified by the author's reliance on sources such as Grégoire de Tours in the medieval setting of *Le Meneur*. From inner landscapes, Rachilde turns outward, demonstrating a new concern with the exterior, the descriptive, and the referential (296).

Staro? does not pursue the developments in Rachilde's œuvre after World War I, even though there were both continuities and departures in those decades. (Although Rachilde's rate of publication slowed, she continued publishing until the end of World War II.) There is still much to be said about Rachilde's output taken as a whole, then, which Staro? is quick to acknowledge in her conclusion.

Here, Staro? reiterates that it is "incontestable" that Rachilde's writing underwent "une évolution importante" (302), and she ends with an invitation to further reading: "Personnalité fascinante, écrivain courageux et original, Rachilde mérite qu'on s'intéresse à son œuvre qui n'a pas fini d'étonner par sa richesse et variété" (303). These are reasonable, carefully calibrated claims that would be hard to dispute. They are not particularly revolutionary, nor far-reaching. But they are solidly grounded, and, as far as she goes, Staro? makes an important contribution to the field. Anyone treating any of the novels she discusses (I have not offered a full and faithful list here, but the "table des matières" at the front of the book is clear on this matter) would do well to be mindful of her insightful and deliberative readings.

In addition to this critical commentary, there are some additional surprise bonuses in Staro?'s book. To begin with, there is a very handy appendix listing all the books Rachilde reviewed in the *Mercure de France*, month by month, from April 1896 to July 1914 (319–89). It is an impressive testament to Rachilde's work as a critic and a useful guide to what she was reading and how it may have influenced her. In addition, Staro? provides a reference to what is, to the best of my knowledge, the only extant recording of Rachilde's voice, part of an hour-long broadcast on France Culture (<https://www.franceculture.fr/emissions/une-vie-une-oeuvre/marguerite-eymerie-dite-rachilde-homme-de-lettres-1860-1953-rediffusion#>).

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