The late arrival of ‘der deutsche Proust’:

Translating *A la recherche du temps perdu* into German

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ABSTRACT

Marcel Proust’s *A la recherche du temps perdu*, an unparalleled chronicle of European modernity’s transition from the nineteenth to the twentieth century,was published between 1913 and 1927. It was not until the 1950s, however, that a complete German translation of the novel appeared. Earlier attempts did not get far: Rudolph Schottlaender’s 1925 translation of the first volume was critically panned, and the subsequent translation of the next two volumes by Walter Benjamin and Franz Hessel was unfortunately curtailed by the rise of Nazism and these writers’ untimely deaths. A full rendering into German of Proust’s *magnum opus* was only completed between 1953 and 1957 by Eva Rechel-Mertens. Reconstructing the upheavals of the translation history of Proust’s *Recherche* into German, this article also draws on new archival research into Rechel-Mertens’s literary estate, held at the Deutsches Literaturarchiv, to ask to what extent it was already too late for a German readership to be introduced to a German Proust, as Peter Suhrkamp once wrote to Rechel-Mertens. Examining behind-the-scenes correspondence between publishers, translators, and critics, this essay investigates the seemingly random and turbulent history of the late emergence of a ‘deutscher Proust’ and the implications of this for modern German – and, indeed, European – literature.

Marcel Prousts *A la recherche du temps perdu* wurde zwischen 1913 und 1927 veröffentlicht. Eine vollständige deutsche Übersetzung des Romans erschien jedoch erst in den 1950er Jahren. Frühere Versuche waren nicht weit gediehen: Rudolph Schottlaenders Übersetzung des ersten Bandes von 1925 wurde von der Kritik verrissen, und eine spätere Übersetzung der beiden nächsten Bände von Walter Benjamin und Franz Hessel wurde unglücklicherweise durch den Aufstieg des Nationalsozialismus und den frühen Tod der Autoren unterbrochen. Eine vollständige deutsche Übersetzung von Prousts Hauptwerk wurde erst zwischen 1953 und 1957 von Eva Rechel-Mertens fertiggestellt. Der vorliegende Artikel rekonstruiert die bruchstückhafte Übersetzungsgeschichte von Prousts *Recherche* ins Deutsche und stellt aufbauend auf neuen Archivforschungen im Nachlass Rechel-Mertens, der sich heute im Deutschen Literaturarchiv befindet, die Frage, inwiefern es für die Einführung des Werkes von Proust in Deutschland schon zu spät war, wie Peter Suhrkamp einmal an Rechel-Mertens schrieb. Dieser Aufsatz bietet einen Blick hinter die Kulissen der Korrespondenz zwischen Verleger:innen, Übersetzer:innen und Kritiker:innen und untersucht die scheinbar zufällige und turbulente Geschichte der späten Entstehung eines ‚deutschen Proust‘ und die Auswirkungen, die sich daraus für die moderne deutsche – und tatsächlich für die europäische – Literatur ergeben.

*‘Le devoir et la tâche d’un écrivain sont ceux d’un traducteur’*

*Marcel Proust,* Le temps retrouvé*, 1927*

In 1953, the publisher Peter Suhrkamp sold his house in the seaside resort of Kampen on the island of Sylt, just off Germany’s west coast near the Danish border, to Axel Springer, who had founded the *Bild Zeitung* the year before. Suhrkamp’s motivation for this sizeable liquidation of assets was the generation of sufficient capital to be able at last to purchase the translation rights to Marcel Proust’s *A la recherche du temps perdu*.[[1]](#endnote-1) If nothing else, this anecdote illustrates the lengths some were willing to go to, in order finally to have this novel existing in its entirety in German.

It is striking that a full German translation of Marcel Proust’s *A la recherche du temps perdu*, originally published in French between 1913 and 1927, was only completed towards the end of the 1950s after various false starts, unforeseeable hitches, and changes of circumstance on the part of publishers and translators alike. Since the turbulent events of this protracted process are relatively unknown in the Anglophone context, this essay draws on archival work undertaken at the Deutsches Literaturarchiv in Marbach am Neckar in order to trace the history of the multiple attempts to produce a complete German translation of Proust’s *magnum opus* and the contributions of key players involved at various stages from its early beginnings in the mid-1910s through to the publication of the final volume of a completed translation in 1957. Less a comparison of the various German translations, which in any case has been undertaken elsewhere in various studies, this article constitutes an investigation of the behind-the-scenes machinations of various publishing and translation processes, as well as their effects and implications for German – and, indeed, European – literary culture.[[2]](#endnote-2)

For many European publishers and philosophers, Proust – and, crucially, having read Proust – carried huge cultural capital, particularly in the 1950s and 1960s, becoming a standard intellectual reference point, a key node in the vast network of twentieth-century European cultural identity.[[3]](#endnote-3) The most pressing question regarding a German rendition of the *Recherche*, frequently articulated in private correspondence between writers, critics, publishers, and translators over a period of several decades, but most particularly in the immediate decade following the end of the Second World War, concerns German culture’s readiness to receive Proust and his work and whether or not, as Peter Suhrkamp, the director of the Suhrkamp publishing house feared, it was already too late for this. In this regard, therefore, if lateness can be understood as a driving force of modern German – and, indeed, European literature – then this is *a fortiori* the case for the late translation of Proust’s *Recherche* into German and its enduring significance within the German literary context.[[4]](#endnote-4) In the pages of the journal *Morgenblatt für Freunde der Literatur*, Suhrkamp declared ‘Jetzt bin ich es, der sich, wir ich glaube, am meisten freut, seinen deutschen Proust zu haben’.[[5]](#endnote-5) His use of the possessive pronoun alongside the linguistic adjective is telling: ‘der deutsche Proust’, it was expected, would belong not only to a revivified postwar German cultural milieu, but also to its individual readers.

The publication of a completed German version of Proust’s *Recherche* resonates with what George Steiner in a review in the *Times Literary Supplement* in 1973 of Adorno’s *Gesammelte Schriften* called ‘the Suhrkamp culture’.[[6]](#endnote-6) For Steiner, this postwar publishing phenomenon had ‘dominate[d] so much of German high literacy and intellectual ranking’ in the first decades of the postwar period ‘[a]lmost single handed, by force of cultural-political vision and technical acumen’.[[7]](#endnote-7) While Steiner raised concerns about ‘the danger of indiscriminate sanctification’ of certain authors that may be produced by this Suhrkamp culture, whereby certain works might ‘pass into a state of unread monumentality’, he nonetheless also remarked that ‘in so far as it has made widely available the most important, demanding philosophical voices of the age, in so far as it has filled German bookshelves with the presence of that German-Jewish intellectual and nervous genius which Nazism sought to obliterate, the Suhrkamp initiative has been a permanent gain’.[[8]](#endnote-8) In striving towards the publication of a complete translation of Proust’s monumental novel, then, publishers and translators alike embodied a particular cultural desire for the recuperation of European values and ideals in German society and culture following – but neither erasing nor ignoring – the cataclysmic events of early twentieth-century history.[[9]](#endnote-9)

Alongside the relatively late arrival of a complete German translation of Proust’s novel, particularly when compared to the *Recherche*’s translation into other European languages,[[10]](#endnote-10)it is perhaps even more surprising that the Deutsches Literaturarchiv should possess in its holdings some 464 items that are connected with Proust. These range from primary and secondary publications on his life and works, to personal notes and correspondence, publication contracts and contemporary reviews. Perhaps due to the fact that these documents concerning a French author are held in a German research institution, they have been only cursorily examined until now. Yet they hold the key to understanding the fraught and often random-seeming events that determined the late publication of the first full German translation of the *Recherche*, which, in turn, illuminate this novel’s status as one of the most significant works of European modernist literature. Before exploring these archival sources, however, a comparison of the development of Proust’s original novel in a French literary context with various subsequent attempts at rendering it into German will allow revealing parallels to emerge.

PROUST IN FRANCE

As familiar as the order of the seven volumes of Proust’s *Recherche* might be to present-day readers, the writing and publication process throughout most of the second and third decades of the twentieth century was rather more chaotic than it appears now that the work has long been published in its entirety. Having spent the years between 1909 and 1912 devoting his full attention to the writing of a novel that he describes in a letter to Mme Geneviève Straus, a patron of his who had provided him with several notebooks, as ‘a fairly long piece of work’,[[11]](#endnote-11) Proust not only signed a publishing contract with Bernard Grasset but also consented to front all the costs of producing the book himself.

The story of the novel’s prior rejection by publishers including Fasquelle and Ollendorff, as well as the newly founded *Nouvelle Revue Française*, the driving force behind Éditions Gallimard, is worth rehearsing, since it has a bearing on subsequent developments in the translation of Proust’s work into German. As the later laureate of the Nobel Prize for Literature and founding editor of the *NRF* André Gide confessed to Proust in their correspondence, ‘the rejection of this book will remain the gravest mistake for the NRF – and (for I have the shame of being largely responsible for it) one of the bitterest, most remorseful regrets of my life’.[[12]](#endnote-12) Gide’s remorse was not to last too long, however. With the outbreak of the First World War in 1914, the publication process of the planned second volume was interrupted, allowing Proust the opportunity to switch publishers to Gallimard.[[13]](#endnote-13) This move also allowed the author to expand and refine his overall project: originally planned as a three-volume novel comprising *Du côté de chez Swann*, *Le Côté de Guermantes*, and *Le Temps retrouvé* under the provisional title of *Les intermittances du cœur*, the work evolved over the ensuing decade to become the seven-volume *A la recherche du temps perdu*.[[14]](#endnote-14) With the publication of the second volume *A l’ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs* in the aftermath of World War One, Proust experienced a certain initial anxiety that his readers would have little interest in the novel he had begun five years earlier, followed swiftly by surprise, as yet another instance of unplanned good fortune intervened.

On 10 December 1919, Proust was awarded the Prix Goncourt for the second volume of the *Recherche*, an accolade that brought him as much strife as it did renown. Aged forty-eight at the time, Proust was considered by many to be too old to be awarded a prize generally reserved for younger novelists. The author himself confessed his astonishment in a letter to Gallimard that everyone in Paris appeared to be reading the work he had considered to be a ‘listless interlude’.[[15]](#endnote-15) Posterity would prove the irony of this unexpected turn of events and of the critical outrage against it, since of the one hundred or so novels to have been given the Goncourt since its founding in 1903, *A l’ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs* constitutes an exception in the sense that it is still read and appreciated today. Many other Goncourt-winning writers and their novels have fallen by the wayside of literary history, but in spite of – or, perhaps, because of – this, for Proust the unpredictable honour of winning the Goncourt, a prize which he himself had disparaged in his private correspondence, proved to be a catalyst for his novel’s development and success.[[16]](#endnote-16) Given his death in 1922 at the age of fifty-one, Proust did not live to see the publication of the final three volumes of his *Recherche*, nor did he experience the full success of the entire novel, which ensured the longevity of its own afterlife in much the same way as the novel’s narrator describes the legacy of Beethoven’s late compositions: ‘the work itself creates its own posterity’.[[17]](#endnote-17) Nevertheless, as this brief rehearsal of the publication trajectory of Proust’s novel has aimed to show, the path to pre-eminence was hardly straightforward, the journey along it often fraught with unexpected, apparently arbitrary, instances of good fortune and bad luck. And, if that is the case for the original publication of the *Recherche* in France, then it is even more so for its translation into German, which was to be dogged by misfortune, misguided decisions, and multifarious *forces* that might certain be described as *majeure*.

PROUST IN GERMANY

Although German translations of French literary works constituted in the early twentieth century a significant portion of published books in Germany, the translation process of Proust’s *Recherche* into German was a protracted undertaking which took the best part of half a century to be completed. As Bernd Jürgend Fischer, himself the most recent translator of Proust’s novel into German, indicates in his 2017 *Handbuch* *zu Marcel Prousts ‘Auf der Suche nach der verlorenen Zeit’*, Proust was almost certainly introduced to a German readership by none other than the modernist poet Rainer Maria Rilke, who recommended to his close friend Princess Marie-Auguste von Thurn und Taxis in a letter dated 21 January 1914 that she read *Du côté de chez Swann*.[[18]](#endnote-18)In February that same year, Rilke wrote to Anton Kippenberg, the manager of the Insel publishing house, exhorting him to acquire the rights to Proust without delay and describing the first volume of the *Recherche* as incomparably remarkable book: ‘ein unvergleichlich merkwürdiges Buch von einem neuen Autor, sollte eine Übersetzung angeboten werden, wäre sie unbedingt zu nehmen; freilich, 500 Seiten eigensten Ausdrucks, und zwei ebenso starke Bände stehen bevor!’.[[19]](#endnote-19) In spite of what Vincent Ferré describes as the novel’s ‘slow recognition abroad’,[[20]](#endnote-20) appreciation of Proust’s *Recherche* in Germany spread steadily by word-of-mouth until, in February 1922, the eminent philologist and Romance Studies scholar Ernst Robert Curtius published an essay simply titled ‘Marcel Proust’ in *Die Neue Merkur*, which treated the five published volumes of the *Recherche* and would later form part of his monograph *Französischer Geist im neuen Europa* (1925).[[21]](#endnote-21) In this way – and in others – Curtius, for his part, would have a long-lasting influence not only on the German reception of Proust, but also on the novel’s translation into German.

Following Proust’s winning of the Prix Goncourt for the second volume of the *Recherche*, the translation rights to the novel in Germany were acquired by the avant-garde publishing house Die Schmiede in Berlin, an up-and-coming firm established in 1921 that had already published works by many authors including Gottfried Benn and Franz Kafka. It is interesting to note, as Fischer points out, that Die Schmiede did in fact enquire as to whether Curtius himself would be willing to undertake a translation of Proust, but he turned down the offer.[[22]](#endnote-22) Curtius subsequently put forward the name of a former doctoral student of his, Eva Rechel-Mertens, as his preferred candidate to bring Proust’s novel to a Germanophone audience. Perhaps because of his rejection of their offer, however, Die Schmiede chose to ignore Curtius’s recommendation and instead offered the contract to translate the first volume of the *Recherche* to a young – and, it must be said, somewhat inexperienced – philologist by the name of Rudolf Schottlaender. Under the title of *Auf den Spuren der verlorenen Zeit* (literally, ‘on the trail of lost time’) *Du côté de chez Swann* was published in two volumes in 1926 as *Der Weg zu Swann*. It is no exaggeration to say that Schottlaender’s efforts were – however predictably – eviscerated in the press by Curtius, who even went so far as to describe Schottlaender’s work as a physical attack on Proust.[[23]](#endnote-23)

Although she would eventually be the very translator who completed the first full translation of Proust’s *Recherche*, it would be several decades before Rechel-Mertens officially applied her skills to the task. Nevertheless, her literary estate held at the Deutsches Literaturarchiv yields the script of a lecture that Rechel-Mertens gave to the Goethe Society in Wiesbaden in October 1976, in which she reveals that, in fact, her first experience – however informal – of translating Proust’s novel came in the early 1920s while she was still a university student when Curtius was perhaps already lining her up as a potential Proust translator. In her lecture, she relates how she picked up Curtius from the station on his return from a trip abroad and he told her that he had brought with him a book for her, whose title (*Du côte de chez Swann*) he presumed she would not understand at all: ‘“Diesmal”, sagte er zu mir, “bringe ich Ihnen ein Buch mit, dessen Titel Sie überhaupt nicht verstehen werden. Es heißt *Du Côté de chez Swann*. Was stellen Sie sich darunter vor?”’.[[24]](#endnote-24) After some consideration, Rechel-Mertens replied: ‘Nach einigem Besinnen gab ich immerhin zu seinem Erstaunen zur Antwort: “Es muss so etwas heißen wie ‘Dahin oder daher, wo ein gewisser Swann wohnt’”’.[[25]](#endnote-25) It is rather ironic to notice that not only was this answer correct, it was arguably more accurate than the final title that Rechel-Mertens’s translation of the first volume of the *Recherche* would be given when published around three decades later: *In Swanns Welt* (literally, ‘in Swann’s world’). In a letter written in July 1953 to the publisher Siegfried Unseld, who at time worked for the Suhrkamp publishing house and went on to become its director after the death of the founder Peter Suhrkamp in 1959, Rechel-Mertens suggests that a better German title for the first volume of the *Recherche* might be *Auf der Seite, wo es zu Swann geht*. Admitting that this title was ‘sehr spröde’, she nonetheless took pains to point out that, ‘ich bleibe dabei, dass auch der französische Titel, als Verlags-Slogan betrachtet, sehr schlecht ist’.[[26]](#endnote-26)

Die Schmiede’s reputation would never recover from the scandal of Schottlaender’s critically-panned translation, and he was not commissioned to produce further volumes. Nevertheless, the publishing house was able to keep the rights to Proust’s novel for several more years and in the meantime, after the intervention of Gallimard, engaged Walter Benjamin and Franz Hessel, who were friends and were both based in Berlin at the time, to work on subsequent volumes.[[27]](#endnote-27) For Benjamin this was extremely fortuitous, since his *Habilitationsschrift* on the *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels* had been only recently rejected by the university in Frankfurt along with his application for a teaching position there.[[28]](#endnote-28) His prior experience of translating Baudelaire’s *Tableaux parisiens* and Saint-John Perse’s *Anabase* prose poem sequence, coupled with Hessel’s familiarity with the lives of artists and writers of the Belle Époque demonstrated in his 1920 work *Pariser Romanze*, as well as his overseeing of the 44-volume German translation of Honoré de Balzac’s *Comédie humaine* for the Rowohlt publishing house, meant that the duo were ideally placed to undertake the translation of Proust’s *Recherche*. Initially contracted to render the second and third volumes, Benjamin and Hessel were subsequently offered the opportunity to produce a new translation of the first volume, along with the later volumes as and when they were published in French.

The duo’s efforts were considerably better received than Schottlaender’s.[[29]](#endnote-29) The process of translating several volumes in partnership took its toll in various ways, however, and was furthermore subject to matters outside of the control of both Benjamin and Hessel, as well as their publishers. After Die Schmiede closed down in 1929, the Munich-based publisher Reinhard Piper acquired the rights to Proust’s *Recherche* and was keen for Benjamin and Hessel to continue to produce a complete German translation of the *Recherche*. The duo’s interest in pursuing the project long-term had by this point, however, for both intellectual and personal reasons,started to wane. Benjamin in particular, in spite of the enormous admiration he had for the *Recherche*, to which his critical work testifies, found prolonged exposure to Proust’s sentences – ‘der Nil der Sprache’,[[30]](#endnote-30) as he termed them – to be creatively stifling. As he had already admitted in a letter to the historian Gershom Scholem back in September 1926, working with a writer pursuing goals so similar to Benjamin’s own occasionally led him to worry about the cross-contamination of his work with Proust’s.[[31]](#endnote-31) Hessel’s admiration for Proust’s writing raised different, though related, concerns, as he wrote to the Piper publishing house in 1928: ‘Wobei wir Sie nochmals darauf hinweisen, daß der Autor, den Sie zu verlegen im Begriff sind, Marcel Proust ist, d. h. unter den modernen Franzosen der, welcher bis in die letzte stilistische und syntaktische Nuance seinem Übersetzer die größten Schwierigkeiten bereitet und, wie er selbst immer wieder verbessert hat, auch in der Übersetzung immer wieder verbessert werden muß’.[[32]](#endnote-32) Accordingly, Hessel advised, he and Benjamin must likewise continue to develop their own translation praxis as opposed to simply relying on established patterns or techniques from the earlier volumes they had translated: ‘Gerade weil wir, wie Sie mit Recht bemerken, die literarische Verantwortung für die Übersetzung tragen, können wir uns nicht einfach bei dem beruhigen, was wir vor zwei Jahren gemacht haben, sondern müssen die Arbeit auf den Stand unserer gegenwärtigen Einsicht und unseres gegenwärtigen Könnens bringen’.[[33]](#endnote-33) Each translator seems to have found, in their own way, Proust’s *Recherche* to be potentially overwhelming. Aside from the relatively low remuneration received by the two translators for their labours, Benjamin also privately expressed frustrations with the Piper publishing house for insisting that Proust’s novel must be translated as an entire work, which inevitably put more pressure on individual translators – or, indeed, teams of two – instead of spreading the work around. In a letter to the Swiss writer and literary critic Max Rychner, for instance, Benjamin laments working for a publisher, ‘der sich ebenso wenig wie sein Vorgänger zu der Erkenntnis durchringen könne, dass Proust nur als Œuvre, nicht in einzelnen Bänden in Deutschland durchgesetzt werden könne’.[[34]](#endnote-34) In the late 1920s, chauvinist denunciations of Proust’s homosexuality and accusations of snobbery had also already been published in the right-wing press; with rising fascism in the thirties, it was made exponentially more difficult for a publisher to continue producing translations of the work of a foreign, half-Jewish, gay man.[[35]](#endnote-35) With fascism on the rise in Germany, Benjamin emigrated in 1932 and Hessel followed suit in 1938. Neither lived to see that collapse of Hitler’s regime: Benjamin committed suicide while fleeing from the Nazis in Spain in 1940 and Hessel died a year later after his release from the Les Milles camp in Aix-en-Provence due to complications following a stroke suffered during his internment. By the end of their tragically curtailed lives, they had translated the first three volumes of the *Recherche* and part of a fourth.[[36]](#endnote-36)

All things considered, it would seem that the publisher’s insistence on producing the German translation of Proust ‘als Œuvre’, as Benjamin phrased it, caused more delays and problems, rather making things easier.[[37]](#endnote-37) In German translation, Proust’s monumental work was steadily becoming an insurmountable mountain. Eventually it was indeed translated in its entirety by an individual translator but it would take another two decades before the work was undertaken, a task no doubt made somewhat less unpredictable due to the completion of all seven volumes of the *Recherche* by that time.

THIRD TIME’S A CHARM

Fischer cites the Suhrkamp author Hermann Hesse as a significant influence on the publisher’s extreme eagerness to acquire the Proust rights, noting how the future Nobel Prize laureate had advocated since 1925 for a German translation of the *Recherche*.[[38]](#endnote-38) Hesse’s wish was finally granted in the 1950s as a full translation was undertaken and completed in only four years’ time by Curtius’s original preferred candidate for the task.[[39]](#endnote-39)

Born in May 1895 in Perleberg bei Berlin, Eva Jenny Martha Mertens was the youngest of three daughters in a family of high ranking civil servants and officers.[[40]](#endnote-40) She grew up in Frankfurt an der Oder and later studied Romanistik, Germanistik, and Anglistik at the Universities of Berlin and Marburg. In 1925, she completed her doctorate under Curtius in Marburg with a dissertation on Honoré de Balzac and visual art, and from 1930 until 1955 she worked as a research assistant in Curtius’s department of Romance Studies at the University of Bonn, while also lecturing at the University of Heidelberg. Throughout her life, however, her primary work was as a translator of predominantly French literature, rendering into German the work of Balzac and Roger Martin du Gard, as well as that of Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre.[[41]](#endnote-41) Her complete translation of Proust’s *Recherche*, begun in 1953 and finished in 1957, is without doubt her best known and most highly regarded achievement. For this she received the 1957 Deutscher Kritikerpreis, as well as the 1966 Johann-Heinrich-Voß-Preis for Translation. Upon its publication, her translation of Proust’s *Recherche* received a great deal of positive criticism, particularly (and perhaps unsurprisingly) from Curtius himself in both the press and in private correspondence.[[42]](#endnote-42) After the first volume of Rechel-Mertens’s translation was released, Curtius wrote to Suhrkamp to thank him for ‘the German Proust’, making an explicit comparison between his reading of the original novel in French and Rechel-Mertens’s version: ‘Aufrichtig bedanke ich mich für den deutschen Proust. Er ist schon seit einigen Tagen in meinen Händen und übt auch in der Übersetzung den selben Reiz auf mich wie das Original’.[[43]](#endnote-43) Unlike in his negative response to the earlier Schottlaender version, which focused on technical aspects of translation, here he described the allure of the prose and recounted a much more subjective experience of being charmed or enchanted by Rechel-Mertens’s words.

Curtius’s excitement at the possibility that the arrival of a ‘deutscher Proust’ might be imminently expected was already palpable in a hastily scrawled note that he had sent to Rechel-Mertens back in March 1950 to inform her that Suhrkamp had officially acquired the translation rights to the *Recherche*. ‘Heute möchte ich Ihnen nur noch sagen, dass Suhrkamp die Rechte für Proust erworben hat. Seinem Lektor, dem göttlichen Podszus, habe ich Sie als einzig möglichen Übersetzer empfohlen. Hoffentlich wird es was!’ he enthuses.[[44]](#endnote-44) While something indeed did come of it in time, it would take several years and the input of several voices to bring Suhrkamp and Rechel-Mertens together. A decisive input came from the journalist Wolfgang Hirsch, who recalled Curtius’s original suggestion in the 1930s that Rechel-Mertens undertake the translation and recommended to the publisher that he pay the Bonn-based intellectual a visit to discover whether that might still be an option for the new Suhrkamp translation.[[45]](#endnote-45) Taking Hirsch at his word, Suhrkamp had one of the readers at his publishing house, Friedrich Podszus write to Rechel-Mertens in December 1952 to enquire as to whether she would be interested in translating Proust’s *Recherche* in its entirety for them.[[46]](#endnote-46) Her reply in the affirmative came only three days later and he arranged to meet Rechel-Mertens in person between Christmas and New Year.[[47]](#endnote-47)

On 29 December Podszus wrote to Suhrkamp personally to report on their meeting and offer his first impressions – the ‘best imaginable’ – of Rechel-Mertens.[[48]](#endnote-48) He reports not only that Curtius had told her he had put her forward as the desirable translator for Proust, but also that she was familiar with Proust’s work from her studies and had also followed the calamities associated with the first attempt to translate the *Recherche*: ‘Sie erzählte mir, dass Curtius ihr schon einmal mitgeteilt habe, dass er sie in Vorschlag gebracht hätte. Sie sei sich der großen Aufgabe bewusst, die mit dem deutschen Proust gegeben sei. Sie war als Übersetzerin Roger Martin du Gards oft in Frankreich, hat Gide sehr gut gekannt, kennt seit ihrer Studienzeit Proust und die Kalamitäten, die mit dem ersten Versuch verknüpft waren’.[[49]](#endnote-49) After a two-hour conversation, Rechel-Mertens had made it clear to Podszus that, in spite of all of the potential difficulties that needed to be taken into account when translating Proust, she would not turn down Surhkamp’s offer. Furthermore, in order to properly undertake the work, she declared that she would devote herself solely to the task of translating the *Recherche*, laying aside all other commitments. She even went so far as to suggest that she saw the translation of this novel not only as a task for which she would be prepared to give up her university teaching, but also one for which she had been destined: ‘Sie würde – das Endresultat der zweistündigen Unterhaltung – nicht nein sagen trotz aller Schwierigkeiten, die zu überlegen und zu überwinden wären. […] Sie ist sich bewusst, dass sie sich für Proust gänzlich frei machen müsste. Diese Übersetzung wäre eine schicksalhafte Lebensaufgabe. Sie weiß, wer Proust ist. [...] Sie deutete an, dass ihr die Aufgabe so wert sei, dass sie ihre Lehrtätigkeit an der Universität aufgeben würde.’.[[50]](#endnote-50) However much Curtius had had a hand in engineering the situation, Podszus pointed out to Suhrkamp that Rechel-Mertens consciously distanced herself from Curtius in some respects.[[51]](#endnote-51) Nevertheless, along with Curtius, Podszus, and Suhrkamp himself, Rechel-Mertens shared a firm conviction that in spite of previous misfortunes and publishing difficulties, a ‘deutscher Proust’ would be hugely significant for German literature.[[52]](#endnote-52)

A LATE ARRIVAL

Since her death in 1981 at the age of eighty-six in Heidelberg, Rechel-Mertens’s *Nachlass* has been kept at the Deutsches Literaturarchiv. It comprises some twenty-two boxes covering thirty years’ worth of correspondence. The folders containing direct communications between her and Suhrkamp, as well as others employed at the publishing house, over the five-year period are filled with notes penned and typed frequently on an almost daily basis. Suhrkamp, it seems, was extremely keen to be kept up to date with every development in Rechel-Mertens’s work. While the publisher seems overall to have been pleased with the translation, rarely venturing any criticisms of Rechel-Mertens’s rendition of Proust’s arabesque sentences, there were however on multiple occasions differences of opinion regarding the time frame in which the work should – and, indeed, could – be completed. Suhrkamp, more often than not, focused on the practicalities of producing copies of the novel and Rechel-Mertens, for her part, fought to ensure the appropriate time was spent on accurately translating the *Recherche* without excessive haste. This, unsurprisingly, sometimes led to a rather terse exchange of letters.

In February 1953, Rechel-Mertens had started work on the translation of the first volume of the *Recherche* with a view to submitting it to Suhrkamp around six months later at the start of August. Tensions between publishing practices and the translation process appear, however, to have been a thorny issue particularly as timelines and schedules were negotiated at the outset. Due to pressures from the Gallimard publishing house, however, which had maintained significant involvement in the process of bringing out a German translation of Proust since the Schottlaender scandal thirty years earlier, Suhrkamp had hoped to have the first volume in German published before the end of October. ‘2 ½ Monate für die Herstellung dieses großen Romans ist etwas wenig Zeit’, he grumbled to Rechel-Mertens in a letter dated 6 February 1953. ‘Jedenfalls würde mir sehr daran liegen, das Manuskript des ersten Bandes in der druckfertigen Fassung am 1. Juli in den Händen zu haben,’ he went on, ‘so daß der Satz dann aufgenommen werden kann’.[[53]](#endnote-53) Rechel-Mertens resolutely resisted this time pressure, however, insisting that she certainly had no intention of tackling Proust at such speed and that it would not suit her at all for this to be taken as the expected norm for the duration of her contract: ‘Keinesfalls möchte ich darauf eingehen, dass ein solches “Herstellungs”-Tempo als Norm für den Gesamtauftrag eingesetzt wird. Ich brauche Sie nicht zu belehren, sehr geehrter Herr Dr. Suhrkamp, dass es sich bei der Schaffung eines “deutschen Proust” um eine gleichzeitig so intensive und so umfassende geistige Tätigkeit handelt, dass man ihn nicht mit der Uhr in der Hand bemessen kann’, she replied.[[54]](#endnote-54) The typographical errors and rewritings in Rechel-Mertens’s note suggest that it was written not only with speed but perhaps also with a certain frustration that the pressure from Gallimard was in turn exerted on her via Suhrkamp, not least because she was already hard at work to keep to the tight deadline for delivering the first volume of the *Recherche*.

Throughout the translation process, as far as might be gleaned from her correspondence with her publishers, Rechel-Mertens seems to all intents and purposes to have been an extremely capable and also rather patient translator, even if she did not always take pains to keep Suhrkamp regularly up to date with the project’s progress. In a letter written to Rechel-Mertens at the end of May 1953, Suhrkamp fretted that he had spent the previous two weeks wanting to enquire every day as to how her translation of *Du côté de chez Swann* was progressing: ‘Seit vierzehn Tagen will ich mich schon täglich, aber ganz leise, nach dem Stand Ihrer Arbeit an dem ersten Proust-Roman Du Côte de chez Swann erkundigen. Ich bin etwas beunruhigt, weil der Kontakt zwischen uns darüber seit längerem völlig unterbrochen ist’.[[55]](#endnote-55) As Suhrkamp indicates later in this letter, the motivating factor for his getting in touch with Rechel-Mertens is his not illegitimate concern that the publishing house order the correct amount of paper for printing the book, such materials being frequently in short supply in postwar Germany. At Rechel-Mertens’s end, there were no issues with her work, she had simply been engrossed in the project, even undertaking a trip to Paris that weekend. In her swiftly penned reply upon her return on Monday 5 June 1953, she reassured Suhrkamp that work on the manuscript was going well, that he would receive it on time, and that she could even precisely estimate how many pages he would need for a copy of the book: ‘Vor allem möchte ich Sie wegen des Ablieferungstermins für den Proust beruhigen, Sie bekommen das Manuskript bestimmt rechtzeitig. Die Arbeit daran ist schon sehr weit fortgeschritten. Ich nehme mit ziemlicher Bestimmtheit an, dass der Gesamtumfang des ersten Romans 530 Seiten von der Art wie der Ihnen seiner Zeit zur Verfügung gestellte Teil betragen wird’.[[56]](#endnote-56) She also uses this opportunity to imply that, going forward, Suhrkamp should not be surprised if she does not elect to inform the publishing house regularly about the progress of her work, especially if they have not responded to her earlier updates: ‘Mein korrespondenzliches Gewissen ist übrigens ziemlich rein: Ich hatte Ihnen am 2. April über den Fortgang meiner Arbeit berichtet, dafür aber keine Rückmeldung erhalten, auch nicht weiter erwartet’.[[57]](#endnote-57) Following their aforementioned discussions regarding time pressure, during which Suhrkamp hoped that Rechel-Mertens would have finished the translating the entire *Recherche* by the end of July 1956, the translator succeeded in bargaining for more time, resulting in Suhrkamp’s decision to push back the deadline for submission of the final volume until spring 1957.[[58]](#endnote-58)

Suhrkamp’s worries over the progress of ‘der deutsche Proust’ were not without foundation, nor were they entirely concerned with purely practical matters. In their earlier discussions regarding the timeframe for submission of the whole project, he addressed this directly. Reminding Rechel-Mertens of a prior conversation, he remarked that it was essentially already too late for the introduction of Proust’s work into Germany: ‘Sie werden sich gewiß auch entsinnen, daß ich bei unserer Besprechung äußerte, es sei an sich für die Einführung des Werkes von Proust in Deutschland schon zu spät. Deshalb dürfe die Herausgabe nicht mehr zerstreut erfolgen, sondern so konzentriert wie irgend möglich’.[[59]](#endnote-59) Suhrkamp’s remarks articulate a profound sense of cultural anxiety, whereby German literature understands itself to have been left behind after the Nazi period and the horrors perpetrated prior to and during the Second World War. Recalling Adorno’s earlier optimistic characterisation in a letter to Thomas Mann in August 1951 of aesthetic lateness as revealing ‘the latent possibility of a European language, which had formerly been obstructed by national divisions but now, at the end, shines forth’,[[60]](#endnote-60) the lateness of the ‘German Proust’s’ arrival emerges as a driving force not only in the propagation and extension of the project of Suhrkamp culture, but also of a desired return to more broadly to Germany’s prior status as the nation of *Kulturkritik* and *Geschichtsphilosophie*.[[61]](#endnote-61)

THE FINISHED ARTICLE

While direct comparison of Rechel-Mertens’s translation with those of others, and detailed analysis of these, would exceed the scope of this essay, as far as questions about the content of Rechel-Mertens’s translation are concerned, translator and publisher were on the same page throughout the process, as their correspondence reveals. Any queries were talked through patiently and resolved without issue. One key decision made by Rechel-Mertens was that throughout her translation she would keep the sentence structure as close to Proust’s as possible, avoiding inserting extra full stops as Benjamin and Hessel had occasionally done for clarity’s sake.[[62]](#endnote-62) While the Benjamin and Hessel version generally refrains from reproducing Proust’s hypotaxis in its most substantial magnitude, Benjamin in particular, as Barbara Kleiner has discussed, chose to concentrate his translation efforts in reproducing a similarly developed style to Proust’s, as well as replicating his unusual imagery, prizing these aspects of the *Recherche* above punctuational felicity.[[63]](#endnote-63)

In Rechel-Mertens’s version of the novel for Suhrkamp, Unseld furthermore insisted that the forms of address across all seven volumes of the *Recherche* ought to be standardised.[[64]](#endnote-64) In this he followed a suggestion made by Rechel-Mertens to use the original French versions forms of address, such as *Monsieur* and *Madame*, in the German, in spite of – or, more accurately, because of – the fact that there were numerous instances in the manuscript where she had sometimes inadvertently used German forms of address. Given the rapid tempo of her production of the translation, this is hardly surprising. Yet it is also nevertheless suggestive regarding the extent to which Proust and his work would assimilate within a German literary context, especially given the relatively late arrival of a complete translation. On 12 December 1953, Unseld wrote to Rechel-Mertens to confirm personally that the publishers would accept the decision to maintain the use of French titles and honorifics in the novel, as well as leaving untranslated the frequent quotations from Jean Racine that pepper Proust’s novel.[[65]](#endnote-65)

As Rechel-Mertens submitted her manuscript for the first volume of the *Recherche* in October 1953, the Suhrkamp publishing house was ready with a series of precisely planned and co-ordinated marketing strategies, publications, and events to anticipate and promote the arrival of ‘der deutsche Proust’ in various media, despite Rechel-Mertens aforementioned scepticism regarding the choice of the German title for *Du côté de chez Swann*. The archived correspondence between the translator and the publishing house further reveals the extent to which strife broke out in terms of organisational and promotional matters, as opposed to the content of the complete German translation itself. On the 17 July 1953, Suhrkamp had already written to Rechel-Mertens with a detailed précis of his plans for Proustian *Vorpropaganda*.[[66]](#endnote-66) It would seem from this lengthy list that contextualisation and information regarding Proust’s life and work were among the highest prioritised strategies included in the Suhrkamp marketing campaign for the complete German translation of the *Recherche*. First and foremost, the forthcoming publication of the first volume was to be announced to the book trade in the Suhrkamp autumn catalogue. Beyond this, Suhrkamp also planned various smaller publications in which the German reading public would be informed not only about Proust but also about the genesis of his novel, as well as the reception of it by its first readers and critics decades earlier, through the republication of significant articles and reviews from the *Nouvelle revue française* and an essay by Curtius, for example. Moreover, it was planned that the Suhrkamp publishing house would release a special Proust edition of the German literary magazine *Morgenblatt für Freunde der Literatur* alongside a piece on the translation in *Dichten und Trachten*, the annual review of the Suhrkamp publishing house, and a small brochure of collected essays on Proust and his work.[[67]](#endnote-67)

When Rechel-Mertens suggested that extracts from her translation be printed in advance in the literary journal *Merkur* and in one of Suhrkamp’s own smaller publications, as well as in various newspaper feuilletons, she specifically recommended not choosing any lines from the ‘well-thumbed’ first part of the novel, such as the famously grammatically troubling opening line ‘Longtemps, je me suis couché de bonne heure’ or the madeleine episode; rather, she expressed a preference for a later passage in the section ‘Un amour de Swann’ concerning ‘das kleine Thema’ (‘la petite phrase’) of the fictional Vinteuil sonata which Charles Swann associates with his love for his future wife Odette de Crécy.[[68]](#endnote-68) It is clear from her correspondence that as a translator Rechel-Mertens was especially proud of her rendering of this passage into German. In her aforementioned Goethe Society lecture in 1976, she specifically emphasises not only the grammatical difficulties of translating this extract of the novel, but also how she overcame them in her version.[[69]](#endnote-69) In this way, through Rechel-Mertens’s suggestion, the art of translation and the practice of publishing were at last able to come together relatively harmoniously, such that appropriate preparations for the release of the first volume of the *Recherche* were put into motion that simultaneously recognised the competence of its translator.[[70]](#endnote-70)

In the early phases of the preparations for the introduction of ‘der deutsche Proust’ to a German reading public, Unseld had already weighted the publication of the Rechel-Mertens’s translation with great cultural significance for German literature in the twentieth century. To his mind, establishing a Proust readership in Germany might constitute a way to relate the past with the present and to redefine a sense of individual and national identity. On 29 March 1954, he sent to Rechel-Mertens the advertising copy for the publication of the novel. In this, he wrote rapturously of answering the call to savour all the sweetness and tenderness of Proust’s prose: ‘Lasst uns dem Anruf folgen, die ganze Süsse und Zärtlichkeit dieser Prosa auszukosten, ihre äusserste Sensibilität zu empfinden und uns tragen zu lassen vom schmelzenden Fluss der Motive, gepackt vom Erkenntnishunger des Romanciers und seinem Drang nach Wahrheit, der ohne Grenzen war und der unser Wissen um die Geheimnisse unserer eigenen Vergangenheit und unserer heutigen Existenz unerhört bereichert’.[[71]](#endnote-71) Appealing directly to readers’ sense of national cultural responsibility, Unseld encouraged readers to help prove that the ‘German Proust’ would not only fulfil a high-minded sense of literary obligation, but also that German readers would be mature and, crucially, European enough to make Proust their own: ‘Helfen wir zu beweisen, dass der “deutsche Proust” mehr sein wird als die hochherzige Erfüllung einer literarischen Verpflichtung, sondern dass wir reif sind und Europäer genug, ihn uns zu eigen zu machen’.[[72]](#endnote-72) It is clear from Unseld’s blurb for Rechel-Mertens’s translation of the *Recherche* that a German self-image as a European was understood to be an attractive proposition for any reading public potentially interested in Proust. In this sense, a German rendition of the *Recherche* not only allowed German readers to join the search for lost time, it also paved the way for a return to a lost European cultural community. Even if the arrival of ‘der deutsche Proust’ was late, therefore, it was not too late.

In a manner not all that dissimilar to that of Proust following the Second World War, Suhrkamp had been worried, back in the early months of 1953, that if translator and publishing house were unable to stick to a tight schedule, then what they already imagined to be the relatively narrow appetite for a German version of Proust would not be sustained over the course of all seven volumes; in a letter to Rechel-Mertens, he warned her early on that they could hardly expect the number of copies demanded and produced to exceed five thousand.[[73]](#endnote-73) Indeed, the publisher’s intensive marketing campaign for the translation both prior to its publication and subsequently paid off. In a letter to Rechel-Mertens in December 1953, by which time she was already deep into translating the second volume of the *Recherche*, Unseld wrote that ‘[d]as Ankommen der Ausgabe im Buchhandel übertrifft doch unsere Erwartungen’.[[74]](#endnote-74) Booksellers, he wrote, who initially had hardly dared to approach the volume now realised that it might appeal to a broader audience than they had imagined after all: ‘die Buchhändler, die sich anfänglich kaum an das Objekt wagten, entdecken jetzt doch “breitere Möglichkeiten”’.[[75]](#endnote-75) So confident was Suhrkamp in the superiority of Rechel-Mertens’s rendition, Unseld informed her, that he suggested she ought not to be irritated by any criticism of her work.[[76]](#endnote-76) Moreover, he suggested, as she proceeded with the subsequent volumes of the *Recherche*,she should avoid being moved to draw comparatively on the earlier Benjamin translation any more than she already was.[[77]](#endnote-77) In this, he reveals once again the tensions intrinsic to this postwar undertaking of a full German translation of Proust’s novel between a return to a European cultural milieu and moving forwards, between looking back and looking ahead.

ADORNO’S MERIDIAN

A thorough stylistic and grammatical consideration of whether Proust’s *Recherche* and its German renditions – in particular the first full translation by Rechel-Mertens ­– truly enabled a reconciliation between German literature and a broader European cultural context would go beyond the scope of the present article, and other already extant studies go some way to answering this question, as mentioned above. Nevertheless, what the examination of material from the earlier portions of correspondence in Rechel-Mertens *Nachlass* discussed above has offered are new insights into the often random-seeming difficulties and unexpected stumbling blocks not only along the path to the original publication of Proust’s work, but also during the production of a complete version of the novel in German, and – perhaps most significantly – of the correspondences between these obstacles and dilemmas.

Upon the publication of the final volume of Eva Rechel-Mertens’s complete translation, Theodor W. Adorno announced in his somewhat fragmented essay ‘Zu Proust’ that, in its German incarnation, the *Recherche* could perform a momentous task for German literature, less in terms of a potential model for other writers to imitate than in terms of providing a standard by which the quality of their prose might be measured: ‘Wie man jedem deutschen lyrischen Gedicht anhört, ob es dem Geist nach vor-georgisch oder nach-georgisch ist, auch wenn es mit der Georgischen Lyrik selber gar nichts zu tun hat, so sollte sich wohl die deutsche Prosa scheiden nach einer vor-proustischen und nach-proustischen’, he suggested.[[78]](#endnote-78) Indeed, the arrival of a full German translation of Proust’s novel constituted, for Adorno, a literary caesura that would raise up a German literary tradition left reeling by the catastrophe of Nazism; moreover, he claimed, from a literary perspective, he could not think of wishing for anything more beautiful than for Germans to make this ‘secular poet’ their own in all his ‘unfathomable richness’: ‘Ich wüßte mir literarisch nichts Schöneres zu wünschen, als daß die Deutschen den säkularen Dichter verbindlich und in all seinem abgründigen Reichtum so sich zueigneten, wie nur je einen aus anderen Jahrhunderten’.[[79]](#endnote-79) Adorno suggests a certain inevitability to Proust’s canonisation in German literature in his remark that for many French readers Proust was considered to be German, thus evoking an earlier sense of a German *Kulturnation*, such that ‘German’ is used as a convenient shorthand for ‘European’, and implying a sense of cultural restoration whereby Proust is brough back to where he rightfully belongs through translation.[[80]](#endnote-80) His point is certainly remarkable: one writer is a ‘German’ poet, the other a French novelist accessible to German readers through translation. George himself was multilingual, beginning almost as more of a French author than a German one, and half of his poetic oeuvre is translation. Yet Adorno’s underlying – or even explicit – argument is that this is of little relevance: literature will, it seems, be literature.[[81]](#endnote-81)

If, as Adorno argued, der deutsche Proust was to be the defining line against which works of German literature were to be measured, then it is undeniable that this literary meridian was to a significant extent drawn and made possible by multiple actors in the Suhrkamp publishing house and, most specifically, by the work of Eva Rechel-Mertens herself. Did the late arrival of the ‘German Proust’ mean that German readers were able to attain a postwar Europeanness? Not in the sense of erasing the past. If, however, modern European literature as a whole may be understood not so much as that which is new, but as that which is late, in an ongoing quest for legitimacy, then it is difficult to imagine a more intrinsically European literary event than the complex postwar lateness of the arrival of ‘der deutsche Proust’.

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1. Bernd-Jürgen Fischer, *Handbuch zu Marcel Prousts ‘Auf der Suche nach der verlorenen Zeit’*, p. 139. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. For comparisons of various German translations of Proust’s *Recherche*, see, for example, Nathalie Mälzer, *Proust oder ähnlich: ProustÜbersetzen in Deutschland* (Das Arsenal: Berlin, 1996), pp. 102–145 and Michael Wood, ‘Translations’, in: Adam Watt, (ed.), *Marcel Proust in Context*, Cambridge 2013, pp. 230–240 (pp. 236–38). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. For further discussion of Proust and Pierre Bourdieu’s sociological construction of ‘cultural capital’, see Michael Lucey, ‘Introduction: Proust’s Modernist Sociology’, in *Paragraph* 45:1 (2022): 1–21. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. See, for example, Karen Leeder, ‘Figuring Lateness in Modern German Culture’, in New German Critique, 125 (2015), 1–30 and Ben Hutchinson, *Lateness and Modern European Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Peter Suhrkamp, *Morgenblatt für Freunde der Literatur*, 11 (1957), 1. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. George Steiner, ‘Adorno: Love and Cognition’, in *The Times Literary Supplement*, 3705 (9 March 1973), 253–56 (255). [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. *Ibid*. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. *Ibid*. Although Steiner explicitly references German-Jewish philosophers in his review article, Proust’s signifcance as French-Jewish author to the project of Suhrkamp culture should also not be understated. For further discussion of Jewishness and its importance to Proust’s work, as well as to modern European literature more broadly, see Walter Cohen, *A History of European Literature: From Antiquity to the Present* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), pp. 421–425. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. While literary historians typically associate the success of ‘Suhrkamp culture’ with the *Gruppe 47*, who understood themselves as the equivalent of the ‘zero hour’ or *Stunde Null* in German literature, because of the two literary circles’ historical overlap, Suhrkamp, as Jan Bürger observes, ‘did not believe that it was possible to make a radical and, at the same time, healing break with Nazi barbarism’; the idea of a zero hour or a break might provide distance from aesthetic standards been propagated under Nazism, yet, for Suhrkamp, ‘they also served to block out key events in one’s personal as well as collective past’. See Jan Bürger, ‘Tradition versus Amnesia: Peter Suhrkamp in the Immediate Postwar Period, 1945–1950’, in *The Germanic Review: Literature, Culture, Theory*, 89:3 (2014), 308–14 (309). See also Stephen Brockmann, *German Literary Culture at the Zero Hour* (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2004). [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. C. K. Scott Moncrieff’s English translation, for example, was begun before all volumes of the *Recherche* had been published, with the first volume being released in September 1922, shortly before Proust’s death. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. *Correspondance de Marcel Proust*, ed. Philip Kolb (Paris: Plon, 1970–1993), VIII, p. 39. Unless otherwise indicated all translations are the author’s own. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. *Correspondance de Marcel Proust*, ed. Philip Kolb (Paris: Plon, 1970–1993), XIII, pp. 50–51. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. For a detailed account of the history of the publication of the *Recherche* in France, see Nathalie Mauriac Dyer, ‘Composition and publication of *A la recherche du temps perdu*’, in *Marcel Proust in Context*, ed. Adam Watt (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 34–40. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. The introduction of the character of Albertine and the expansion of her story in *La Prisonnière* (originally titled *La Fugitive*)and *Albertine disparue* are among the most substantial changes to Proust’s initial plans. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. *Correspondence de Marcel Proust*, Band XVIII, p. 491. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. *Ibid*, p. 528. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Marcel Proust, *A l’ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs* (Paris: Gallimard, 1919), p. 176: ‘l’œuvre […] crée elle-même sa postérité’. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Fischer, *Handbuch zu Marcel Prousts ‘Auf der Suche nach der verlorenen Zeit’* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 2017),p. 137. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Rainer Maria Rilke, *Briefe: Band I*, ed. Horst Nalewski (Frankfurt am Main: Insel, 1991), p. 515. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Vicent Ferré, ‘Early critical responses, 1922 to 1950s’, in *Marcel Proust in Context*, ed. Adam Watt (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 191–98. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Ernst Robert Curtius, ‘Marcel Proust’, in *Der Neue Merkur*, 5 (1921–1922), pp. 745–61, Ernst Robert Curtius, *Französischer Geist im neuen Europa* (Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt: Stuttgart, 1925). [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. Fischer, *Handbuch zu Marcel Prousts ‘Auf der Suche nach der verlorenen Zeit’*, p. 138. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. Curtius describes the novel as being ‘vom Verdeutscher übel zugerichtet worden’. Ernst Robert Curtius, 'Die deutsche Marcel Proust Ausgabe / Eine Umfrage', in *Die literarische Welt*, 8.1.1926. For a more detailed discussion of the predominantly negative reception of Schottlaender’s translation, see Mälzer, *Proust oder ähnlich*, pp. 12–26. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. DLA Marbach (NL Rechel-Mertens), ‘Mein Weg zu Proust’. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. *Ibid*. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. DLA Marbach (SUA: Suhrkamp), Eva Rechel-Mertens to Siegfried Unseld, Heidelberg, 30.7.1953. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. Pierre Assouline, *Gaston Gallimard, Un demi-siècle d’édition française* (Paris: Balland, 1984). Cited in Mälzer, *Proust oder ähnlich*, p. 29. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. For further discussion of the significance of the assignment to translate Proust to the development of Benjamin’s own work, as well as his ‘rekindled interest in collaboration’ and the influence of Hessel himself on Benjamin’s intellectual profile, see Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, Anton Kaes, Joseph Leo Koerner, Dorothea E. von Mücke, Judith Ryan und David E. Wellbery, eds., *A New History of German Literature*, Cambridge, Massachusetts 2004, pp. 748–53, (p. 749). [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. See, for example, Erich Franzen’s review in *Die Literarische Welt*, which describes Benjamin and Hessel’s *Im Schatten der jungen Mädchen* as ‘not just a real translation, but a lasting work of art’ (‘keine bloße Vermittlung des originals, sondern ein für such bestehendes Kunstwerk’). Erich Franzen, ‘Buch-Chronik der Woche. Marcel Proust: Im Schatten der jungen Mädchen’, in *Die Literarische Welt*, 15–16 (15 April 1927), 5–6. Cited in Mälzer, *Proust oder ähnlich*, p. 41. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. Walter Benjamin, ‘Zum Bilde Prousts’ in *Illuminationen: Ausgewählte Schriften*, ed. Hannah Arendt (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1961), pp. 355–370 (p. 355). [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. See Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Briefe, 6 Vols*, Vol. III, Frankfurt 1993, p. 195. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. Letter held in Piper archive from Franz Hessel to Piper publishing house, 16.12.1928. Cited in Mälzer, *Proust oder ähnlich*, p. 39. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. *Ibid*. [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Briefe, 6 Vols*, Vol. II, Frankfurt 1993, p. 485. [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. ‘Tedious negotiations led to general disinterest, until the project died slowly and quietly’, not least because ‘the German reading public was already moving in other, less open directions’. See Gumbrecht et al., *A New History of German Literature*, pp. 748–53, (p. 753). [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
36. It is interesting to note that ‘the manuscript of *Sodom und Gomorrah*, portions of which Benjamin had enthusiastically recited to [Benjamin’s lover, Asja] Lacis as she directed her illegal communist theatre in Riga, has to this day never been discovered’. See Gumbrecht et al., *A New History of German Literature*, pp. 748–753, (p. 753). For further discussion of this, see also Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, *Walter Benjamin: A Critical Life* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap, 2014), pp. 248–49. [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
37. Letter held in Piper archive from Franz Hessel to Piper publishing house, 16.12.1928. Cited in Mälzer, *Proust oder ähnlich*, p. 39. [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
38. See, for example, Hermann Hesse ‘Der Bücherberg’, in *Berliner Tageblatt*, 29 April 1926, also published in *Sämtliche Werke, Vol 19, Die Welt im Buch: Rezensionen und Aufsätze aus den Jahren 1926–1934* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2003), p. 46. Cited in Fischer, *Handbuch zu Marcel Prousts ‘Auf der Suche nach der verlorenen Zeit’*, p. 139. [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
39. Ingo Cornils discusses Hermann Hesse’s pivotal role in helping to establish the Suhrkamp Verlag alongisde his programmatic and philosophical influence on Peter Suhrkamp and Siegfried Unseld, especially their commitment to European and World literature. See Ingo Cornils, ‘A Model European? Hermann Hesse’s Influence on the Suhrkamp Verlag’, in *German Life and Letters*, 68:1 (2015), 54–65. [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
40. In 1938 she married the engineer Georg Rechel from then on was known as Eva Rechel-Mertens. [↑](#endnote-ref-40)
41. This in spite of her professed dislike of existentialist literature as revealed by Suhrkamp’s reader Friedrich Podszus to the publisher in a report of his initial meeting with Rechel-Mertens. DLA Marbach (SUA: Suhrkamp), Friedrich Podszus to Peter Suhrkamp, Heidelberg, 29.12.1952. [↑](#endnote-ref-41)
42. For a comprehensive account of the reception of Proust’s *Recherche* in Germany, see Pascale Fravolo-Tane, *A la recherche du temps perdu en France et en Allemagne (1913–1958)*, (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2008). [↑](#endnote-ref-42)
43. DLA Marbach (SUA: Suhrkamp), Ernst Robert Curtius to Peter Suhrkamp, Heidelberg, 3.11.1953. [↑](#endnote-ref-43)
44. DLA Marbach (NL Rechel-Mertens), Ernst Robert Curtius to Eva Rechel-Mertens, Bonn, 20.3.1950. [↑](#endnote-ref-44)
45. ‘Als die schlechte Schottländersche Übersetzung von *Swann* herauskam, hatte – soweit ich weiss – Prof. Curtius vorgeschlagen, dass eine seiner Schülerinnen unter seiner Aufsicht die Übersetzung in die Hände nehme. Dieser Plan ließe sich in variierter Form möglicherweise auch heute noch verwirklichen, wenn Sie dem (mir persönlich unbekannten) Gelehrten in Bonn einen Besuch abstatten’. DLA Marbach (SUA: Suhrkamp), Wolfgang Hirsch to Peter Suhrkamp, Amsterdam, 28.10.1952. [↑](#endnote-ref-45)
46. DLA Marbach (NL Rechel-Mertens), Friedrich Podszus to Eva Rechel-Mertens. Frankfurt am Main, 18.12.1952. [↑](#endnote-ref-46)
47. DLA Marbach (NL Rechel-Mertens), Eva Rechel-Mertens to Peter Suhrkamp, Heidelberg, 21.12.1952. [↑](#endnote-ref-47)
48. ‘Mein Eindruck von der Dame war der denkbar beste. […] ernst, diszipliniert, nicht blaustrümpfig’. DLA Marbach (SUA: Suhrkamp), Friedrich Podszus to Peter Suhrkamp, Heidelberg, 29.12.1952. [↑](#endnote-ref-48)
49. *Ibid*. [↑](#endnote-ref-49)
50. *Ibid*. [↑](#endnote-ref-50)
51. *Ibid*. ‘In manchem rückt sie von Curtius ab’. [↑](#endnote-ref-51)
52. *Ibid*. ‘Gleich uns meint sie, dass ein deutscher Proust trotz des Unsterns, trotz der verlegerischen Schwierigkeiten von eminenter Bedeutung für die deutsche Literatur, vor allem auch für die heranwachsende Jugend sei, die allzu sehr im Wirkungsschatten der angelsächsischen, insbesondere der amerikanischen Literatur experimentiere.’ Their collective scepticism regarding what they perceived as the overexposure of young German readers and writers to Anglophone literature – in particular American literature – of increasingly improving quality seems to have been a strong motivating factor for both publisher and translator to rekindle interest in literature they considered distinctly European, and not always in the newest literary works (see Rechel-Mertens’s aforementioned impatience with the popularity of French existentialist literature). [↑](#endnote-ref-52)
53. DLA Marbach (NL Rechel-Mertens), Peter Suhrkamp to Eva Rechel-Mertens, Frankfurt am Main, 6.2.1953. [↑](#endnote-ref-53)
54. DLA Marbach (SUA: Suhrkamp), Eva Rechel-Mertens to Peter Suhrkamp, Heidelberg, 15.2.1953. [↑](#endnote-ref-54)
55. DLA Marbach (NL Rechel-Mertens), Peter Suhrkamp to Eva Rechel-Mertens, Frankfurt am Main, 28.5.1953. [↑](#endnote-ref-55)
56. DLA Marbach (SUA: Suhrkamp), Eva Rechel-Mertens to Peter Suhrkamp. Heidelberg, 1.6.1953. [↑](#endnote-ref-56)
57. *Ibid*. [↑](#endnote-ref-57)
58. DLA Marbach (NL Rechel-Mertens), Peter Suhrkamp to Eva Rechel-Mertens, Frankfurt am Main, 4.3.1953. [↑](#endnote-ref-58)
59. *Ibid*. [↑](#endnote-ref-59)
60. ‘[D]ie latente Möglichkeit eines Europäisch […], die durch die nationale Spaltung verhindert ward, aber nun am Ende […] durchleuchtet’. Theodor W. Adorno and Thomas Mann, *Briefwechsel 1943–1955*, ed. Christian Gödde and Thomas Sprecher (Suhrkamp: Frankfurt am Main, 2002), p. 87. [↑](#endnote-ref-60)
61. For further discussion of these distinctly – if not exclusively – Germanic concepts in relation to understandings of European cultural lateness, see Hutchinson, *Lateness*, pp. 6–10 and 198–99. [↑](#endnote-ref-61)
62. For comparison between the Scott Moncrieff English translation and Benjamin and Hessel’s version alongside Proust’s original text, see Wood, ‘Translation’, esp. 236–238. As Wood rightly points out, ‘the differences among the translations are interesting but their conversions are perhaps more interesting still, since they remind us that in each case we are reading Proust’ (p. 238). [↑](#endnote-ref-62)
63. ‘Benjamin verzichtet auf die Wiedergabe der großen Sätze Prousts, gibt aber dafür den entwickelten Stil und die ungewöhnliche Bildlichkeit Prousts bis in ihre feinsten Verästelungen hinein. Umgekehrt entscheidet sich Eva Rechel-Mertens von vorneherein, Prousts Perioden zu erhalten’. Barbara Kleiner, *Sprache und Entfremdung. Die Proust-Übersetzung Benjamins innerhalb seiner Sprach- und Übersetzungstheorie*, Bonn 1980, p. 176. [↑](#endnote-ref-63)
64. DLA Marbach (NL Rechel-Mertens), Siegfried Unseld to Eva Rechel-Mertens, Frankfurt am Main, 30.7.1953. [↑](#endnote-ref-64)
65. DLA Marbach (NL Rechel-Mertens), Siegfried Unseld to Eva Rechel-Mertens, Frankfurt am Main, 12.10.1953. [↑](#endnote-ref-65)
66. DLA Marbach (NL Rechel-Mertens), Peter Suhrkamp to Eva Rechel-Mertens, Frankfurt am Main, 17.7.1953. [↑](#endnote-ref-66)
67. *Ibid*. [↑](#endnote-ref-67)
68. DLA Marbach (SUA: Suhrkamp), Eva Rechel-Mertens to Peter Suhrkamp, Heidelberg, 30.7.1953. [↑](#endnote-ref-68)
69. DLA Marbach (NL Rechel-Mertens), ‘Mein Weg zu Proust’. [↑](#endnote-ref-69)
70. Incidentally, it is perhaps unsurprising to note that this pride in her own work was sustained over her entire career by Rechel-Mertens. Indeed, when a later edition of the Suhrkamp translation was published in the 1980s which omitted to include her name on the title page, she made no bones about expressing her irritation. ‘Der fehlende Übersetzername in der neuen Proustausgabe ist mir offen gestanden ärgerlich’, she wrote to Maria Dessauer, who at the time was a reader for the Suhrkamp publishing house, as well as a renowned German translator of Gustave Flaubert. DLA Marbach (NL Rechel-Mertens), Eva Rechel-Mertens to Maria Dessauer. Heidelberg, 6.3.1981. [↑](#endnote-ref-70)
71. DLA Marbach (NL Rechel-Mertens), Siegfried Unseld to Eva Rechel-Mertens, Frankfurt am Main, 29.3.1954. [↑](#endnote-ref-71)
72. *Ibid*. [↑](#endnote-ref-72)
73. DLA Marbach (NL Rechel-Mertens), Peter Suhrkamp to Eva Rechel-Mertens. Frankfurt am Main, 4.3.1953. [↑](#endnote-ref-73)
74. DLA Marbach (NL Rechel-Mertens), Siegfried Unseld to Eva Rechel-Mertens. Frankfurt am Main, 3.12.1953. [↑](#endnote-ref-74)
75. *Ibid*. [↑](#endnote-ref-75)
76. Perhaps most notably Peter Szondi criticised oversights and omissions due to what he perceived to be an excessive amount of French left included and untranslated, professing himself so dissatisfied with the ‘Gebrochenheit und Unmusikalität’ of Rechel-Mertens’s work that he would not recommend anyone to attempt to read Proust in German. See Peter Szondi, *Briefe*, ed. Christoph König and ‎Thomas Sparr (Suhrkamp: Frankfurt am Main, 1993), p. 38. [↑](#endnote-ref-76)
77. ‘Herr Dr. Suhrkamp dankt Ihnen für Ihre Grüße. Er läßt Ihnen sagen, Sie möchten sich von keiner Kritik, auch nicht von der Gegenwart-Kritik irritieren oder etwa bewegen lassen, mehr als vorgesehen, die Benjamin Übertragung zum Vergleich heranzuziehen’. DLA Marbach (NL Rechel-Mertens), Siegfried Unseld to Eva Rechel-Mertens. Frankfurt am Main, 3.12.1953. [↑](#endnote-ref-77)
78. Theodor W. Adorno, ‘Zu Proust’, in *Gesammelte Schriften, Vol 11: Notizen zur Literatur*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1974), pp. 669–675 (p. 669). [↑](#endnote-ref-78)
79. *Ibid*, p. 669. [↑](#endnote-ref-79)
80. *Ibid*. ‘Vielen Franzosen gilt Proust für “deutsch”’. [↑](#endnote-ref-80)
81. The author is indebted to Christophe Fricker for these observations on Stefan George. [↑](#endnote-ref-81)