ROMANCE STUDIES:
Readings in Excess and Betrayal, from Modernism to the Present

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2. "Combray": Marcel Proust and the Modernist Novel

Published in parts between 1913 and 1927, Marcel Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu* (variously translated as *Remembrance of Things Past* or *In Search of Lost Time*) is one of the classic novels of the twentieth century and, alongside texts such as Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* (1915), James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922), Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* (1927) or William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* (1929), is regarded as one of the high points of literary modernism. As such, even though the text looks backwards, to the past—the "lost time" of the narrator's childhood—it makes that past new by reflecting on it via a modernist sensibility for which the representation of a thing has a life of its own. Alert to how events are framed, differently for different observers (or readers), Proust's novel opens up to a multiplicity of perspectives that may make reading it difficult (because it upends our expectations, reminding us that the nature of things is fluid, constantly shifting, and that there is no single stable viewpoint on them) but that also teaches us how to read in new ways.

1. Modernism and the Novel

What, then, is modernism? It is, in brief, an umbrella term for a series of ruptures and changes within the arts, from the late nineteenth century to the middle of the twentieth century, and ranging from painting to architecture, poetry to dance, that challenged our assumptions and expectations as to the nature of a work of art, and the relationship between representation and the "real."

But at this point, and at the outset of the course, it is worth making a note of what those assumptions and expectations might be. This will also provide a baseline, to which we can return at a later date, to gauge what we have learned and how we may have re-examined our initial assumptions. We always start from somewhere, and this is a good moment at which to reflect on where we are starting from. Pause the video, and think about what you look for in a novel, and even what you expected of Proust's novel, and how it may or may not have lived up to those expectations. While you do that, I'll have a cup of tea, but I'll be right back.

The scene in which Proust's narrator dips a madeleine (a small cake) in a cup of tea is one of the most famous in world literature. He is suddenly invaded by a "delicious pleasure"

that at first he cannot explain. He assumes it is connected to what he is eating and drinking: "I drink a second mouthful, in which I find nothing more than in the first, a third that gives me a little less than the second. [. . .] Clearly, the truth I am seeking is not in the drink, but in me" (45). And yet without the drink, the sensation and the long-buried memory that follows soon after would have remained dormant, trapped in his unconscious. The drink (and its accompanying snack) dislodges something, sets something in motion, and enables the narrative to unfold. The stimulated body is primary: affect drives reflection and thought.

I wonder what you expect from novels in general, and perhaps Proust in particular. A story, perhaps? Plot and characters? A glimpse of life at a moment in time? In some ways, this is what we get. But in other ways, at least at first glance, the text may seem prompted more by serendipity and chance than by the kind of tight emplotment familiar from, say, genre fiction such as a thriller or a detective story. What is more, you may have noticed the somewhat shadowy but all-pervasive figure of the (as yet unnamed) narrator, who is pictured at the outset as a reader as much as a writer: "I had not ceased while sleeping," he tells us, "to form reflections on what I had just read, but these reflections had taken a rather peculiar turn" (3). Such self-reflectiveness and this "peculiar turn" are part and parcel of the changes instigated in modernist art and culture.

Modernism asks us to think again about the relationship between art and life. So, in painting, artists from Vincent Van Gogh to Pablo Picasso question the notion that the central characteristic of the visual arts should be resemblance, the idea that a picture should "look like" something else. Or better put, perhaps, they make us reconsider what is meant by resemblance and what separates an object (or an event or a mood) from its representation. This self-consciousness about the work of art as, precisely, a work of art, a thing in itself and not a mere copy of an original, is pithily expressed in the Belgian artist René Magritte's *The Treachery of Images*, which consists of a picture of a pipe and beneath it the inscription "*Ceci n'est pas une pipe*": "This is not a pipe."

In literature, the "realist" novel of the nineteenth century, typified by Honoré de Balzac in France or Charles Dickens in England, gave way to a series of stylistic innovations and experiments that often surprised and disconcerted readers, and even the authorities: the first volume of Proust's novel was initially rejected by publishers; Joyce's *Ulysses* was

banned in both the UK and the USA. As in other arts, modernist literary works were seen as scandalous assaults on the entire aesthetic tradition, as writers frequently wrestled with language itself, defying the so-called “rules” of grammar or “good” writing, to remind us that there is always something contingent about the conventions governing how we imagine the relationship between words and things. As with Magritte’s painting, then (and also, say, as with the brushstrokes and piled-up paint so evidently visible on a Van Gogh canvas), modernist texts remind us that literature is never simply a transparent window onto the world: we need to learn to see the window itself, and its framing, to recognize how it shapes what and how we see.

2. Windows onto Reality

It is no surprise that windows are a theme in Proust. The novel begins, after all, with an evocation of rooms, specifically the narrator’s bedroom in the present and the ways in which, on waking up at night, in the darkness and confusion of the transition from sleep to wakefulness, the narrator’s mind conjures up other bedrooms from his past, with their windows and doors that open up to other times and other places. Then windows feature centrally in the memories that follow.

The first of these reminiscences revolves around the narrator as a child—desperate for his mother to come up and give him a good-night kiss—sitting at the open window at the foot of his bed, looking out and listening in on the adult world below, as his parents discuss the visit of their just-departed dinner guest, M. Swann. The son’s concerns are all about his desire for maternal contact, and his fear that he will be punished for staying up too late, though he tells us that “even if I had had to throw myself out of the window five minutes later, I still preferred this” (34). This threshold between inside and outside, above and below, childhood and adulthood, is a site of risk and danger. In the process, the renegade child also unwittingly eavesdrops on (and, by proxy, the narrator informs the reader of) seemingly inconsequential gossip about Swann’s love life that will come to the fore in the second half of the volume.

The second set of memories, which is in some ways when the novel truly gets going, is an extended evocation of holidays at the provincial town of Combray, prompted by the famous madeleine scene (itself a sort of window, an opening to the past). This begins with the narrator’s recollection of the room that once belonged to his aunt Léonie, a perpetual

self-declared invalid, and the window from which she would observe and comment on the town and its inhabitants with all their comings and goings: “she had the street there before her eyes and on it from morning to night, to divert her melancholy, like the Persian princes, would read the daily but immemorial chronicle of Combray” (53). And towards the end is another scene at a window, this time with the narrator looking in rather than looking out, as he accidentally spies on an amorous tryst between a neighbour’s daughter and an older woman, an unexpected glimpse into private lives that is abruptly terminated when the friend “came and closed the shutters and the window” (167).

The novel reminds us therefore that our view of the world is a perspective shaped by the architecture of particular institutions and experiences, and that it is always partial, even if we see more than we should (or more than we know we are seeing). Again, in contrast to the universalizing pretences of realism, with its invocation of an all-seeing eye, Proust’s narrator tells us that all vision and understanding (or misunderstanding) are embedded, materially and socially, in specific practices and assumptions, even if these come to be taken for granted.

Image 1: The Maison de tante Léonie, part of the Proust Museum in Illiers-Combray

3. Multiple Perspectives, Defamiliarization, and Difficulty

If there is no over-arching point of view or perspective—no omniscient narrator or eye in the sky that could see without the aid (and the constraints) of a situated frame—equally, each of our situations is different and distinct, however much they may overlap. In other words, modernism outlines a fragmented world, with multiple viewpoints that do not easily cohere into a unified whole. Again, there are instances of this multiplicity in the visual arts: Cubism, for instance, abandons the illusion of a unified perspective that is the legacy of the Renaissance, to provide instead, even on a single picture plane, the view from various possible standpoints without any obvious hierarchy among them. In literature, T S Eliot's *The Waste Land* reappropriates quotations and snippets from many traditions to present what sometimes feels like a cacophony of different voices. "These fragments I have shored against my ruins" (20), the poem concludes, as though only such a collage of languages and styles could pre-empt utter dissolution.

Proust's novel also brings together a multitude of fragments so as to forestall something like ruination. We are reminded, after all, that memory itself is piecemeal: until the chance encounter with the madeleine, much of the narrator's youth in Combray remained steeped in oblivion; "It was all really quite dead to me," he tells us (44). And when the recollection comes flooding back, prompted by what are literally morsels or scraps ("a mouthful of tea mixed with cake crumbs" [45]), the structure of the "edifice of memory" resting on an "almost impalpable droplet" is described in terms very similar to Eliot's, as relying upon a fragile support amid "the ruins of all the rest." In every other respect, "because of these recollections abandoned so long outside my memory, nothing survived, everything had come apart" (47). The novel's narrative logic, then, consists in putting the pieces together again, assembling a mosaic that might convey something of a past that is otherwise lost.

At first sight, memory seems to be restorative: to promise, for all its contingent, fragmentary, intermittent nature, the possibility of "time regained" ("*Le Temps retrouvé*," the title of the final volume of Proust's novel). Yet even as it salvages and patches—re-collects—what was otherwise lost to oblivion, memory also introduces new fissures and splits. For the narrator in the present is not quite (anymore) who he once was. The passage of time opens up a distance within the narrative "I." To put this another way, through recollection comes the affirmation of what Proust's near contemporary, the poet Arthur

Rimbaud, expressed in the formula "*Je est un autre*"; "I is an other" (*Complete Works* 113). Memory offers a glimpse of the other within the self. It enacts a dislocation or displacement manifested in the narrator's initial confusion about where he is: in his room in the present or in some other room in the past. More disturbingly, he can no longer even be sure *who* he is.

A doubled or split consciousness haunts the entire project as scenes from the narrator's past are recollected and seen anew, from a temporal and spatial distance that makes it difficult to establish any kind of centre to the narrative. This sense of dislocation is mirrored in the focalization of the recounted events from a child's perspective, for children are often at the margins of the adult world, easily overlooked or ignored. Here, that margin becomes the centre, or rather the relationship between margin and centre is destabilized. For there is an advantage to being on the sidelines, as in the scenes in which the narrator is depicted as accidentally glimpsing or eavesdropping on situations or conversations he perhaps ought not to have seen or heard, which at the time he does not necessarily understand but which acquire new significance upon being recollected many years later. Seeing or reviewing (seeing again) the world through the eyes of a child opens up new vistas, in the gap between the event and its belated meaningfulness.

Modernism is often concerned with such double takes, by which what seems familiar and is taken for granted comes to be seen in a new light. "Make it new!" was the modernist slogan, proclaimed by the US poet, Ezra Pound (*The Cantos* 265). Hence the apparent paradox that an exercise in recollection such as Proust's novel can also be a paragon of modernist intent: at first sight the narrative may seem steeped in nostalgia for a lost world, but it is best seen as taking what is old and making it new again, "defamiliarizing" it or "making it strange" to use the term associated with Russian literary critics of the era.

The point of art, according to Viktor Shklovsky, is "to make objects 'unfamiliar,' to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception" (16). And no doubt there are ways in which Proust's novel is difficult; it is certainly long. More generally, modernist literature as a whole is often perceived as challenging and even daunting. Sometimes that reputation is overblown—here, for instance, we should not overlook the sly humour throughout, not least in the depiction of the relationship between Aunt Léonie and her maid, Justine; the text has its pleasures if we allow ourselves to see them. At other times, there is an elitist cast to modernist writing, for example arguably in Eliot's

The Waste Land with its frequent rendition of untranslated quotations from diverse languages or its extraordinary range of allusion and reference. Yet in Eliot a certain incomprehensibility is part of the point: we are reminded that transparency is not necessarily a virtue, and is in fact an illusion; again we are made aware of the text as a window that is as much a barrier separating us from the world outside as it is an opening that we are somehow to see through.

In almost all cases, modernist literature not only makes us reflect on what we expect of it, but also places expectations upon the reader. *It aims to shake us out of our habits, so we become more active readers, and as such better readers*, not least by ensuring we recognize both our own limits and the limits (the framing, the margins, what goes unseen or misunderstood) inherent to representation itself.

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Image: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Maison_Tante_L%C3%A9onie.jpg

Song: "Memories" (Maroon 5)