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Recherche I

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ABSTRACT: *Recherche*, (re-)search: do I *research* to find something not yet found or do I *re-search* back to find something that has been lost? These two directionalities structure Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu* and are reflected in its reception. But what if they only seem mutually exclusive, yet really are one and the same thing?

Recherche I

JULIE GAILLARD

According to the logical axis of time — the sequential time of the clock — the movement of ‘research’ (*recherche*) is always a movement forward, insofar as it is intentionally oriented toward a goal. Whether the search is oriented toward an object lost in the past or an object that is still to be discovered or invented in the future, whether the researcher knows what they are searching for or not is of no importance regarding the temporal directionality of the action denoted by this verb: one (re)searches always forward. Accordingly, both in English and in French, the prefix ‘re-’ has a strictly intensive value: iterative usages, where ‘to re-search’ or ‘*rechercher*’ means ‘to search again’, are quite rare and always colloquial.

At first sight, the title of Marcel Proust’s famous novel, *À la recherche du temps perdu* (*In Search of Lost Time*) introduces a disturbance in this directionality of the arrow of time. The object of the search, of the ‘*recherche*’, is ‘lost time’: something that should be retrieved, resuscitated. But because this object is time itself, the title is of course

paradoxical, since it implies that what is searched for in a movement oriented forward in the axis of sequential time is something that is by definition irretrievable according to the very same understanding of time as infinite succession from past to future.

Two distinct translations of Proust's title exist in English. Up until a revised translation was published in 1992, the novel was known to the Anglophone readership since its first translation by C. K. Scott Moncrieff as *Remembrance of Things Past*, a phrase borrowed from Shakespeare's sonnet 30.¹ While Scott Moncrieff's translation of the text has been widely acclaimed, his rendition of the title is misleading. Proust himself complained to his French editor about this misinterpretation,² which indeed does away with the intensive value of 'research', occludes the intentional duality according to which time lost will be 'regained', and gears the entire project towards the resurrection of past memories. The revised, more literal translation (*In Search of Lost Time*) adequately captures the forward directionality of the search, as well as its seeming paradox with respect to linear time. But because of the constraints of the English language, it cannot fully capture two essential nuances. '*Temps perdu*', in French, is time lost,

1 Charles Kenneth Scott Moncrieff translated the first six volumes of *À la recherche du temps perdu* between 1922 and 1930. Presented as the first volume of a novel whose title was already translated as *Remembrance of Things Past*, *Swann's Way* was therefore published at a time when three volumes still remained to be published in French, i.e., when the final revelation of 'time regained' and the temporal structure of the whole novel had not yet been disclosed to a readership unaware of the author's design. The title has been rectified by D. J. Enright in a revised translation taking into account the second Pléiade edition of the French text published in 1987–89.

2 See Jean-Yves Tadié, *Marcel Proust. Biographie*, 2 vols (Paris: Gallimard, 1996), II, p. 478.

but also time wasted: while lost time is a metaphor of the past, time can be wasted in past, present, or future. In the French syntagma '*À la recherche du temps perdu*', this ambiguity is brought into a productive resonance with the prefix 're-'. Everything happens indeed as if the double meaning of '*temps perdu*' bounced back to reactivate the iterative dimension of the prefix 're-', now divided into two co-existing yet contradictory meanings and directions, *at the same time* intensive and iterative, forward and backward. Proust embeds the temporal eeriness of his entire novel within the enigmatic closure of a syllepsis that also opens unto a logical nightmare. What if the originality and extraordinary complexity of Proust's prolific endeavour was actually encapsulated in this two-letters prefix: 're-'? What if this coexistence of the intensive value of the prefix ghosted by a reactivated iterative value sufficed to frame the temporal paradoxes of this seven-volume masterpiece, and, indeed, the very nature of artistic creation?

The general features of the temporal paradoxes that inform Proust's novel are, of course, widely known. In the very last volume of the novel, the narrator discovers his vocation as a writer: he will write the novel that we just read. One discovers at the end how and why one must begin. That revelation occurs in the wake of a series of involuntary states that unsettle the time of the clock — states of which involuntary memory, epitomized in the Madeleine episode, is of course the most famous and most widely commented instance. The adult narrator takes a bite of a Petite Madeleine soaked in tea. He is suddenly overwhelmed by a delicious sensation of pleasure that does not seem to have an immediate or tangible cause, and that momentarily interrupts the course of life. The narrator starts

to search for the cause and meaning of this eerie sensation, and, just as suddenly as the unexplainable sensation had unsettled him, the childhood memory to which this taste refers appears to him.³ The present sensation has awoken in the narrator the memory of a past, forgotten sensation, which appears from the depth of night with the character of a vibrant and sensory certainty, and, as it were, presents the past again, 'like a stage set',⁴ as a *scene*, offered to his joyful contemplation. No act of voluntary memory would have been able to reconstruct such a past in its sensory vivacity and presence. Proust devotes many pages to search for the deeper meaning of such scenes emerging from the involuntary collision of a past and a present sensation, until the narrator, in the final revelation, realizes that this bringing together of one quality common to two distinct sensations allows to abstract their common essence outside of the contingencies of time and succession, and to produce pure time. Life had produced such random moments of truth, art can also produce them by way of style.⁵

But then again, what motivates this *recherche* and keeps it in motion? Is it the appeal of its end? Or the initial momentum of its beginning? Is it possible that these are one and the same? Because of the structure of the book, and because the action of searching seems to be a voluntary action that also focuses on events presented by involuntary actions of the faculties, the *recherche* (as the eponymous

3 Marcel Proust, *In Search of Lost Time*, 6 vols, trans. by C. K. Scott Moncrieff and Terence Kilmartin, rev. by D. J. Enright (New York: Modern Library, 1992), I: *Swann's Way*, p. 63.

4 Ibid., p. 64. 'comme un décor de théâtre', in *À la recherche du temps perdu*, 7 vols, ed. by Jean-Yves Tadié and others (Paris: Gallimard, 1988–90), I: *Du côté de chez Swann* (1988), p. 47.

5 See Marcel Proust, *À la recherche du temps perdu*, 7 vols, ed. by Jean-Yves Tadié and others (Paris: Gallimard, 1988–90), VII: *Le Temps retrouvé* (1989), p. 196.

action of searching that gears the book according to certain directionalities) could imply both a motion *forward* of a search that, at its end, discovers that the narrator's life has been following a destiny, *and* also this movement *backward* towards past sensations and scenes that have been lost, forgotten, or repressed and would potentially hold the key to the source and meaning of the entire endeavour. This opposition between possible interpretations of the directionality of the search is widely reflected in Proustian criticism, within which general patterns can be outlined schematically according to the privileging of a retrogradient (or deterministic) hypothesis or a progradient (or teleological) hypothesis. But is it possible to imagine a third hypothesis that would synthesize and complicate the two? Before exploring this possibility of a hypothesis *a fine ad initium* in my other contribution to this volume, I shall briefly observe some of the core arguments that generally inform the criticism based on the first two hypotheses.

The retrogradient or deterministic hypothesis is most commonly represented in psychoanalytic readings, which see the novel as polarized by past events. In this hypothesis, the origin of the search is to be found in the 'lost time' of childhood crystallized in screen memories or primal scenes, which have usually been interpreted according to Oedipal models.⁶ In one of the most exhaustive and com-

6 Most readings indeed agree that the Madeleine scene is a screen memory indicating the repression of a fantasy of maternal incest. See Serge Doubrovsky, *La Place de la madeleine. Écriture et fantasme chez Proust* (Grenoble: ELLUG, 2000). See also Jean-Yves Tadié, *Le Lac inconnu. Entre Proust et Freud* (Paris: Gallimard, 2012), pp. 74–81 on screen memories and p. 90, where the author reads in the good-night kiss scene a link with an archaic bond with the mother's breast. In an article titled 'Proustiens, encore un effort...! La déconstruction de l'inceste maternel dans *À la recherche du temps perdu*' (*French Forum*, 31.3 (Fall 2006), pp. 77–96), Giuseppina Mecchia proposes to

elling psychoanalytic readings of the novel, Julia Kristeva, for instance, demonstrates clearly that the sequence encompassing Mamma's goodnight kiss and the Madeleine, at the very beginning of *Swann's Way*, encrypts a repressed desire for maternal incest.⁷ She argues that the source for involuntary memory seems to be the underlying conflict with the maternal imago, and equates involuntary memory with unconscious memory.⁸ Kristeva sees in the osmotic bond of the narrator with the mother a relation that is traumatic in nature.⁹ Because traces of this traumatic bond are instantiated in scenes that keep recurring throughout the book, across the series of the narrator's love objects, across the new rooms where the grown-up will have to go to bed without the comfort of a kiss, one can indeed consider that *La Recherche* is oriented according to and toward this primal origin.

Yet Kristeva also goes beyond most psychoanalytic readings of Proust by considering not only the content of these scenes — be it manifest, latent, or intertextual — but also the very style and language in which these scenes are written. Style is the locus of what she calls, after Proust, a trans-substantiation:¹⁰ that is, the operation

de-pathologize the relation of the narrator to the maternal figure by resorting to Deleuze and Guattari's famous 'anti-oedipal' claims. While she mobilizes the notion of an intensive, non-personal, pre-oedipal regime of desire to contend that the *Recherche* destroys the myth of incest as tragic destiny, the incestual framework and its originary character are altogether not called into question.

7 Julia Kristeva, *Le Temps sensible. Proust et l'expérience littéraire* (Paris: Gallimard, 2000), pp. 14–46.

8 Julia Kristeva, 'Entretien: La Transsubstantiation de Proust: une suspension du refoulement', in *Marcel Proust, visiteur des psychanalystes*, ed. by Andrée Bauduin and Françoise Coblenc (Paris: PUF, 2003), pp. 63–95 (p. 66).

9 Kristeva, 'Transsubstantiation de Proust', pp. 65 and 67.

10 See Kristeva, *Temps sensible*, p. 46; Kristeva, 'Transsubstantiation de Proust'.

through which signifiers are transfigured through their immersion in the drives, in order to reach essences. Beyond the unconscious, she even identifies a Schopenhauerian ambition to escape subjectivity and reach a pre-psychical state.¹¹ This attempt to go beyond any kind of representation is still interpreted as an attempt to overcome the trauma of separation. Psychoanalytic readings generally locate the source, the *impetus* of the search in past events that continue to shape the present, in primal scenes that must be deciphered, and are therefore predominantly deterministic.

A progredient hypothesis takes the opposite view and interprets the *Recherche* as the narrative of an apprenticeship and tale of a vocation, entirely turned forward, according to a teleology that will culminate in its last volume, when the stages of life reveal themselves as steps toward the accomplishment of a destiny. That hypothesis has been most famously formulated by Deleuze, who provocatively contended that the unity of Proust's novel does not lie in the exploration of memories of the past, but in the narrative of an apprenticeship. In the very first paragraphs of *Proust and Signs*, Deleuze states:

On the one hand, the Search is not simply an effort to recall, an exploration of memory: search, *recherche*, is to be taken in the strong sense of the term, as we say 'the search for truth.' [...] [M]emory intervenes as a means of search, of investigation, but not the most profound means; and time past intervenes as a structure of time, but not the most profound structure. In Proust, the steeples of Martinville and Vinteuil's little phrase, which cause no memory, no resurrection of the past to intervene, will always prevail over the Madeleine and the

11 Kristeva, 'Transsubstanciation de Proust', pp. 67–68.

cobblestones of Venice, which depend on memory and thereby still refer to a 'material explanation.'¹²

According to this hypothesis, the entire novel unfolds as an apprenticeship of signs of various natures, which one learns to decipher, thereby progressing from mundane and amorous signs towards a greater knowledge of truth, which only gives itself in art. Deleuze argues that involuntary memory plays an important, yet secondary role in this progression: reminiscences are signs that must be deciphered, and deciphering them prepares us to the plenitude of aesthetic ideas. Such contemplation, connecting the subject with the pure time of essences beyond any empirical temporality, can only be reached by way of the superior signs of art.¹³ Deleuze indeed identifies four distinct structures of time. Time lost and time regained are each subdivided into two distinct types. Within time lost, there is the time that passes (the time of the clock, which one can measure differentially between two states of the same being), and there is also the time we waste (for instance, in loving someone who is not our type). Within time regained, there is, on the one hand, the time regained within time lost: for instance, the sudden affective realization, given through involuntary memory, just as the narrator bends over to unbutton his boot, that the grandmother is dead. Yet there is also a last kind of time, an originary and absolute time, that of a true eternity, that admittedly goes beyond any experiential dimensions of time, but which Deleuze recognizes as their principle, and which only gives itself through the signs of

12 Gilles Deleuze, *Proust and Signs*, trans. by Richard Howard (London: Continuum, 2008), p. 3; *Proust et les Signes* (Paris: PUF, 1964), pp. 9–10.

13 See *ibid.*, pp. 4–9.

art.¹⁴ While that time is not accessible through the sensuous signs, those are nonetheless necessary: for '[o]ur apprenticeship would never find its realization in art if it did not pass through those signs that give us a foretaste of time regained, and prepare us for the fulfilment of aesthetic ideas. But they do nothing more than prepare us: a mere beginning.'¹⁵ Sensuous signs serve a crucial propaedeutic function in the trajectory that will lead to the final understanding of the true vocation and give access to the pure time of ideal essences beyond material signs. They are steps in an apprenticeship that reveals in the end its teleological nature. The time of essences is, to some extent, at stake in involuntary memory, yet only in an opaque fashion, since it is always embodied as a local essence: the Madeleine gives us Combray, the cobblestones give us Venice, etc. Even if these scenes do not give us the real Combray but rather Combray as it should have been, in an essential form detached from both past and present, its essence is nonetheless differential: its truth lies in the intertwining of a worldly, local scene and an ideal, abstract essence.¹⁶ On the contrary, the time regained in the work of art is a primordial time, beyond experience, which is deployed neither in space, nor in succession: it is time pure and immemorial.

While Kristeva and Deleuze lead their respective enquiries in opposite directions, both reach the conclusion that the Time ultimately at stake in *À la recherche du temps perdu* is a pure time beyond empirical time, a pure time whose underlying structure is discovered at the end of the search/*recherche*. The question remains whether the immemorial time of the unconscious, identified by Kristeva

14 See *ibid.*, pp. 12–17.

15 *Ibid.*, p. 35.

16 *Ibid.*, p. 40.

as the determining impetus of the *recherche*, and the immemorial time of essences, identified by Deleuze as its underlying teleological structure, can be reconciled.

If the hypothesis of the unconscious indeed implies a *backward* directionality of the *Recherche*, and if inversely the hypothesis of pure, immemorial time really directs it *forward*, then neither of these hypotheses can account for the paradox of 're-'. The beginning of this essay considered the way in which the double syllepsis structuring the French title enclosed a logical nightmare, preventing any stable interpretation: one cannot decide, among all the possible directional combinations, whether 're-' is intensive or iterative, orients itself along the flow of time or against it. By giving pre-eminence to one of the directions, one runs the risk of missing the fact that Proust does not orient his novel according to one or the other polarity of the arrow of time: rather, he troubles the poles, sets the compass frantically spinning, and makes the breaking of the arrow the preamble for its artistic re-creation.

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