NOTES TO LITERATURE

Volume Two

THEODOR W. ADORNO

EDITED BY ROLF TIEDEMANN

TRANSLATED FROM THE GERMAN
BY SHIERRY WEBER NICHOLSEN

COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY PRESS
New York

COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY PRESS
NEW YORK OXFORD

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
(Revised for vol. 2)

Adorno, Theodor W., 1903–1969.
Notes to literature.

(European perspectives)
Translation of: Noten zur Literatur.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
1. Literature—History and criticism.
I. Tiedemann, Rolf. II. Title. III. Series.
PN514.A313 1991 809 90-27732
ISBN 0-231-06332-6 (v. 1 : alk. paper)
ISBN 0-231-06912-X (v. 2 : alk. paper)

∞

Casebound editions of Columbia University Press books
are Smyth-sewn and printed on permanent
and durable acid-free paper.

Book design: Teresa Bonner
Printed in the United States of America
c 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Acknowledgment is gratefully extended by the Press to Inter Nationes for a special grant toward the cost of translation.

On Proust

I. Swann's Way

Not that *Du Côté de Chez Swann* is something new for me—Proust has played a central role in my intellectual economy for decades, and I simply could not imagine him absent from the continuity of my concerns. Through a series of unfortunate circumstances, which began even before the outbreak of the Third Reich, Proust's work was lost sight of in Germany, and the translation begun by Walter Benjamin and Franz Hessel was never completed. I expect something crucial to emerge from the experience of Proust in Germany, not in the sense of imitation but in the sense of a standard. Just as one can tell whether any particular German poem is pre- or post-Stefan George in spirit, even if it has nothing to do with George's poetry as such, so German prose should no doubt be divided into pre- and post-Proustian. Anyone who does not measure himself against Proust's demand that one break through the familiar superficial relationships and find the most precise names for phenomena ought to feel guilty for being behind the times. Given the disoriented state of German prose, if not the crisis of language in general, one hopes for rescue from the reception of an author who combines the exemplary with the advanced. Many French people consider Proust "German." I could think of nothing better for literature than for the Germans to adopt this author of our times, in all his profound richness, as completely as they would someone from the past.

II. Within a Budding Grove

I would like to say in advance that I cannot speak about this book in the role of a critic. For the past thirty years Proust has been too important an element of my spiritual existence for me to have the detachment to do so, and the quality of his work seems to me to be such that the critic's claim to superiority would amount to impudence. If I did the first volume of the new German edition the honors at a publisher's evening in Frankfurt, that indicates the only position I can take on this epochal author who may still be in need of an introduction. Although people in Germany will hardly continue to be closed to a European event of this rank, one can still imagine the resistance Proust provokes. If one gives a radio talk about Proust, who conjures up French society around 1900 in precise and intricate detail, one owes it to one's listeners to say why they ought to take an interest in him.

When I first read an essay on Proust thirty years ago—and not a good one—I was seized with a fascination of the kind one experiences when one falls in love with the name of a woman one has never seen. This fascination increased as my familiarity with the work grew. Walter Benjamin once told me that he did not want to read one word more of Proust than he had to translate, because otherwise he would fall into an addictive dependency that would impede him in his own production, which was certainly original enough. Clearly, however, Proust's magnetic force affects not only dedicated writers but every reader of sufficient attention and refinement to grasp the novel's dense texture and its complex movement. It is as though under the mask of autobiography Proust were giving out the secrets of every person while at the same time reporting on something extremely specialized, on incommensurable, extremely subtle and private experiences from the sphere of luxury. Every sentence is dictated both by the exceptional situation of the writer and by his will to let pass only that content that eludes the general grasp. There is something compelling and exemplary about his oeuvre nonetheless. If one dared to use metaphors from the natural sciences, one could say that Proust is concerned with an intellectual splitting of the atom, trying to lay open the most minute elements of the real and show them as force fields in which all the power of life is crystallized. In the volume I am speaking about today, which in Eva Rechel-Merten's translation is called *Im Schatten junger Mädchenblüte*, it is no accident that some of the most wonderful insights accompany the description of something as ephemeral as the clothing of Odette, the former demimondaine whom the financier

Swann married and who ultimately has a splendid career in society. I will read you some of it to give you a firsthand impression. Madame Swann's

> clothes were connected with the time of year and of day by a bond both inevitable and unique, I felt that the flowers upon the stiff straw brim of her hat, the baby-ribbons upon her dress, had been even more naturally born of the month of May than the flowers in gardens and in woods; and to learn what latest change there was in weather or season I had not to raise my eyes higher than to her parasol, open and outstretched like another, a nearer sky, round, clement, mobile, blue. For these rites, if they were of sovereign importance, subjugated their glory (and, consequently, Mme. Swann her own) in condescending obedience to the day, the spring, the sun, none of which struck me as being sufficiently flattered that so elegant a woman had been graciously pleased not to ignore their existence, and had chosen on their account a gown of a brighter, of a thinner fabric, suggesting to me, by the opening of its collar and sleeves, the moist warmness of the throat and wrists that they exposed,—in a word, had taken for them all the pains that a great personage takes who, having gaily condescended to pay a visit to common folk in the country, whom everyone, even the most plebeian, knows, yet makes a point of donning, for the occasion, suitable attire. On her arrival I would greet Mme. Swann, she stop me and say (in English) 'Good morning,' and smile. We would walk a little way together. And I learned then that these canons according to which she dressed, it was for her own satisfaction that she obeyed them, as though yielding to a Superior Wisdom of which she herself was High Priestess: for if it should happen that, feeling too warm, she threw open or even took off altogether and gave me to carry the jacket which she had intended to keep buttoned up, I would discover in the blouse beneath it a thousand details of execution which had had every chance of remaining there unperceived, like those parts of an orchestral score to which the composer has devoted infinite labour albeit they may never reach the ears of the public: or in the sleeves of the jacket that lay folded across my arm I would see, I would drink in slowly, for my own pleasure or from affection for its wearer, some exquisite detail, a deliciously tinted strip, a lining of mauve satinette which, ordinarily concealed from every eye, was yet just as delicately fashioned as the outer parts, like those gothic carvings on a cathedral, hidden on the inside of a balustrade eighty feet from the ground, as perfect as are the bas-reliefs over the main porch, and yet never seen by any living man until, hap-

pening to pass that way upon his travels, an artist obtains leave to climb up there among them, to stroll in the open air, sweeping the whole town with a comprehensive gaze, between the soaring towers.*

The extraordinary character of a passage like this, however, lies not in its enraptured precision of imagination but in the fact that the reader feels addressed by it as by an inherited memory, an image that suddenly flashes out, perhaps in a foreign city, an image that one's parents must have seen long before one's own birth. Proust looks at even adult life with such alien and wondering eyes that under his immersed gaze the present is virtually transformed into prehistory, into childhood. This has an aspect that is not at all esoteric but rather democratic. For every somewhat sheltered child whose responsiveness has not been driven out of him in his earliest years has at his disposal infinite possibilities of experience. I remember a classmate of mine who did not turn out to be anything special in the eyes of the world. We were perhaps twelve years old when we read Molière's *The Miser* in French class. My classmate pointed out to me that the teacher pronounced the title, *L'avare*, in a manner reminiscent of provincial dialect, a manner that betrayed inadequate education, an inferior milieu, and that when one heard this hard "r" one would never believe this otherwise excellent teacher spoke French at all. One might find an observation like this in Proust. But this capacity gets lost in others. The compulsion to adapt prohibits one from listening to reality with such precision, from taking its soundings. One need only make the effort to refrain from dealing directly with subject matter or pursuing one's aims in a conversation and instead follow the overtones, the falseness, the artificiality, the urge to dominate, the flattery, or whatever it may be that accompanies one's own or one's partner's voice. If one were aware of their implications at every moment one would fall into such fundamental despair about the world and what has become of oneself in it that one would lose the desire, and probably the strength as well, to continue to play along.

Proust, however, did not go along with the renunciation of responsiveness, nor with the false maturity of resignation. He kept faith with the childhood potential for unimpaired experience and, with all the reflectiveness and awareness of an adult, perceived the world in as undeformed a manner as the day it was created, in fact developed a technique

* Marcel Proust, *Remembrance of Things Past*, vol. 1, translated by C. K. Scott Moncrieff (New York: Random House, 1934), pp. 484–85.

to resist the automatization and mechanization of his own thought. He strives indefatigably for immediacy, for a second naiveté, and the position of the pampered amateur from which he approached his literary task works to the advantage of these efforts. The sense he emanates of something familiar in the midst of what is most out of the ordinary is due to the unparalleled discipline with which he handles things every individual once knew, in childhood, and then repressed, things that now return to him with the force of the familiar. What seems so extremely individuated in Proust is not inherently individuated; it seems so only because we no longer dare to react in this way, or are no longer capable of doing so. Actually, Proust restores the promise of the universality we were cheated of. In his texts it makes us blush, like the mention of a name carefully kept secret.

Remembrance of Things Past examines internal and external reality, using as its instrument the existence of a man without a skin. This has its price. It is well known that Proust, at least in his later years, always kept his fur coat on, even at parties, taking it off only for a moment when leaving in order to soften the contrast between the temperature in the room and the cold outside, even on a summer evening. The man without a skin kept his fur coat on spiritually as well. Because of the unrestricted capacity for suffering to which the possibility of utopia is linked in him, he tried to banish suffering through the most artful arrangements. His fairy tale model is the princess and the pea. His father, a famous physician and head of public health in France, coined an expression that was taken up internationally, that of the *cordon sanitaire*. Proust internalized it. His whole life is governed by the law of the *cordon sanitaire* in order to protect itself against the crude blows that might deaden the child's reactive capacity. But nothing would be more wrong than to suspect cowardice or weakness in these arrangements. Proust transformed into strength the timidity that must have played a key role for this boy who was bound to the image of his mother. His pathos-laden sensitivity, his subjugation to the *valeurs* of the concrete stand under a heroic discipline. Literally, nothing is to be lost.

Proust's fidelity to childhood is a fidelity to the idea of happiness, which he would not let himself be talked out of for anything in the world. Noblesse oblige: the privileged status of the multi-millionaire, which permitted him his boundless refinement, obligated him to be the way everyone ought one day to be able to be. But because he is not satisfied with any happiness other than complete happiness, his need for

happiness becomes a need for the full truth, unimpeded by conventionality. Such truth, however, is pain, disappointment, knowledge of the false life. The story Proust tells is that of happiness unattained or endangered. At the top of the list of his psychological subjects stands jealousy, whose rhythm is recurrent and establishes the unity within the multiplicity. To the question of the possibility of happiness Proust responds by depicting the impossibility of love. Being fully oneself, absolutely differentiated, means at the same time isolation and profound alienation. The unfettered potential, and readiness, for happiness hinders one's own fulfillment.

Thus in Proust, whom the French, with good reason, frequently experience as German, everything individual and transient becomes null, as in Hegelian philosophy. The polarity of happiness and transience directs him to memory. Undamaged experience is produced only in memory, far beyond immediacy, and through memory aging and death seem to be overcome in the aesthetic image. But this happiness achieved through the rescue of experience, a happiness that will not let anything be taken from it, represents an unconditional renunciation of consolation. Rather the whole of life be sacrificed for complete happiness than one bit of it be accepted that does not meet the criterion of utmost fulfillment. This is the inner story of the *Remembrance of Things Past*. Total remembrance is the response to total transience, and hope lies only in the strength to become aware of transience and preserve it in writing. Proust is a martyr to happiness.