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NOTES
TO
LITERATURE

Volume One

THEODOR W. ADORNO

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Short Commentaries on Proust

In arguing against short commentaries on individual passages from *Remembrance of Things Past*, one might say that with Proust's bewilderingly rich and intricate creation the reader is more in need of an orienting overview than of something that entangles him still more deeply in details—from which the path to the whole is in any case difficult and laborious. This objection does not seem to me to do justice to the matter. We are no longer lacking in grand surveys of Proust. In Proust, however, the relationship of the whole to the detail is not that of an overall architectonic plan to the specifics that fill it in: it is against precisely that, against the brutal untruth of a subsuming form forced on from above, that Proust revolted. Just as the temperament of his work challenges customary notions about the general and the particular and gives aesthetic force to the dictum from Hegel's *Logic* that the particular is the general and vice versa, with each mediated through the other, so the whole, resistant to abstract outlines, crystallizes out of intertwined individual presentations. Each of them conceals within itself constellations of what ultimately emerges as the idea of the novel. Great musicians of Proust's era, like Alban Berg, knew that living totality is achieved only through rank vegetal proliferation. The productive force that aims at unity is identical to the passive capacity to lose oneself in details without restraint or reservation. In the inner formal composition of Proust's work, however—and it was not only on account of its long, obscure sentences that Proust's work struck the Frenchmen of his time as so German—there dwells, Proust's primarily optical gifts notwithstanding and with no cheap analogy to composition intended, a musical impulse. It is evi-

denced most emphatically in the paradox that Proust's great theme, the rescue of the transient, is fulfilled through its own transience, time. The *durée* the work investigates is concentrated in countless moments, often isolated from one another. At one point Proust extols the medieval masters who introduced ornaments into their cathedrals so hidden that they must have known that no human being would ever set eyes on them. Such unity is not one arranged for the human eye but rather an invisible unity in the midst of dispersion, and it would be evident only to a divine observer. Proust should be read with the idea of those cathedrals in mind, dwelling on the concrete without grasping prematurely at something that yields itself not directly but only through its thousand facets. This is why I do not want merely to point out the ostensible high points of his work, nor to advance an interpretation of the whole that would at best simply repeat the statements of intention which the author himself inserted into his work. Instead, I hope through immersion in fragments to illuminate something of the work's substance, which derives its unforgettable quality solely from the coloring of the here and now. I believe I will be more faithful to Proust's own intention by proceeding in this way than by trying to distill it and present it in abstract form.

*On Swann's Way, vol. I, pp. 57-60**

In his *Introduction to Metaphysics*, Henri Bergson, Proust's kinsman in more than spirit, compares the classificatory concepts of causal-mechanistic science to ready-made clothing that hangs loosely on the bodies of objects, while the intuitions he extols are as precisely tailored to the matter at hand as the creations of *haute couture*. While Proust was equally capable of expressing a scientific or metaphysical relationship in a simile drawn from the sphere of worldliness, it is also true that he himself followed Bergson's rule, whether he was acquainted with it or not. To be sure, he did not use intuition alone. In his work its powers are counterbalanced by those of French rationality, of a fitting quantity of sophisticated human understanding. It is the tension and conjunction of these two elements that make up the Proustian atmosphere. But Bergson's allergic reaction to ready-made thought, to the pre-given and established

*References are to *Remembrance of Things Past*, translated by C. K. Moncrieff and Frederick A. Blossom, 2 vols. (New York: Random House, 1927-32).

cliché, is certainly characteristic of Proust: his sense of tact cannot stomach the things everyone says; this sensitivity is his organ for untruth and thus for truth. Although Proust adds his voice to the old chorus about social hypocrisy and insincerity, but like that chorus never expressly criticizes their social basis, he nevertheless became a critic of society, against his will and hence all the more authentically. He had a far-reaching respect for society's norms and its contents; as a novelist, however, he suspended its system of categories and thereby pierced its claim to self-evidence, the illusion that it is a part of nature. Only someone who senses his immense energy of opposition to opinion, from which every sentence of Proust, the Platonist, has been polemically wrung, will understand him, secure against mistaking him for the spoiled narcissist that he of course also was. It is this resistance, a second alienation of the alienated world as a means to its restitution, that gives this refined man his freshness. It makes him as unsuitable for a literary model as only Kafka can be, for any imitation of Proust's mode of proceeding would presuppose that this resistance had already been effected, would exempt itself from it, and hence would fail from the outset to achieve what Proust did. The anecdote about the old monk who appears in a dream on the first night after his death to a friend in his order and whispers, "It's all completely different," could serve as the motto for Proust's "search for lost time" [as the French title reads literally]—a body of research into the way it really was, as opposed to the way everyone says it was: the whole novel is an appeal at law filed by life against life. The episode about Marcel's disagreement with his revered Uncle Adolf ultimately reveals the complete disparity between subjective motives and objective events. But despite Marcel's break with Uncle Adolf, the demimondaine who occasions the disaster through no fault of her own is not lost to the novel. As Odette Swann, she becomes one of its central figures and manages to achieve the highest social honors, just as the son of the same uncle's valet, Morel, brings about the fall of the powerful Baron de Charlus thousands of pages later. Proust's work captures one of the strangest of experiences, an experience that seems to elude all generalization and for that reason is the prototype of true universality in Proust's work: that the people who are decisive in our lives appear in them as though appointed and dispensed by an unknown author, as though we had awaited them in this very place and no other; and that, perhaps divided up into several figures, they cross our paths again and again. This experience probably boils down to the fact that as

it came to its end liberal society, which still mistakenly thought of itself as an open society, became a closed one in Bergson's terms, a system of preestablished disharmony.

On Swann's Way, vol. I, pp. 133-37
On The Guermantes' Way, vol. II, pp. 724
and 785

Of the rigidified notions that prevailing consciousness guards like possessions and that Proust's obstinacy, the obstinacy of a child who cannot be talked out of something, destroys, perhaps the most important is the notion of the unity and wholeness of the person. There is scarcely any point on which his work contains such a wholesome antidote to the false idols of today as this one. The supremacy of time provides the aesthetic demonstration of Ernst Mach's thesis, derived from Hume, that the ego cannot be salvaged; but whereas Mach and Hume rejected the ego only as the unifying principle of cognition, Proust presents the full empirical self with the bill for its non-identity. The spirit in which that occurs, however, is not only akin to that of positivism but also opposed to it. Proust carries out concretely what poetics usually only sets up as a formal requirement—the development of the characters. In the process it becomes clear that the characters are not characters: a frailty appears in what is stable, a frailty ratified but by no means produced by death. This process of dissolution, however, is not so much psychological as it is a fugitive series of images. In them Proust's psychological work attacks psychology itself. What changes in people, what becomes alien to the point of unrecognizability and returns as in a musical repeat, are the images into which we transpose them. Proust knows that there are no human beings in themselves beyond this world of images; that the individual is an abstraction, that its being-for-itself has as little reality as its mere being-for-us, which the vulgar prejudice considers an illusion. From this point of view, the infinitely complex structure of Proust's novel is an attempt to reconstruct, through a totality that includes psychology, personal relationships, and the psychology of intelligible character, or the transformation of images, a reality which no view oriented toward mere psychological or sociological data for the sake of isolating them can grasp. In this too Proust's work represents the end of the nineteenth century, the last panorama. Proust sees the ultimate truth,

however, in the images of human beings, which are above those human beings, beyond their essence and beyond their appearance, which itself forms part of their essence. The process by which the novel unfolds is the description of the path traveled by these images. That path has stations, like the three passages about Oriane Guermantes: the first confrontation of her image with empirical reality in the church at Combray, then her rediscovery and modification while the narrator's family is living in the Duchess' house in Paris, in her immediate proximity, and finally the fixing of her image in the photograph the narrator sees at the home of his friend Saint-Loup.

On The Guermantes' Way, vol. II,

pp. 741-42

One of the formulations that can be used to characterize Proust could itself have been drawn from his novel, which reflects on itself like a hall of mirrors. It is the notion that Proust, born in 1871, already saw the world with the eyes of someone thirty or fifty years younger; hence that at a new stage in the novel form he also represents a new mode of experience. This places his work, which plays with so many models from the French tradition—the memoirs of Saint-Simon and Balzac's *Comédie humaine*, for instance—in direct proximity to a movement that was antagonistic to tradition, a movement whose beginnings Proust lived just long enough to experience: Surrealism. This affinity sums up Proust's modernness. The contemporary becomes mythical for him as it does for Joyce. In the guise of metaphors, disruptive Surrealist "actions" like Dali's appearing at a soirée in a diving suit would be completely appropriate in a description like that of the Princesse de Guermantes' grand soirée in *Cities of the Plain*. But Proust's mythologizing tendency is not out to reduce the contemporary to the archaic, to what remains identical to itself; certainly it is not the product of a craving for psychological archetypes. Rather, it is surrealist in that it coaxes mythical images out of modernity at the points where it is most modern; in this, it is akin to the philosophy of Walter Benjamin, Proust's first great translator. In *The Guermantes' Way*, a theater party is described. The auditorium with its elegantly dressed audience is transformed into a kind of Ionian seascape and even comes to resemble the underwater realm of maritime nature deities. But the narrator himself talks about how "figures of sea mon-

sters," mythical images, take form only in accordance with the laws of optics and the angle of refraction—thus in obedience to a natural-scientific necessity external to consciousness. The things we see around us look back at us ambiguously and enigmatically, because we no longer perceive what we see as in any way like us: Proust speaks of "minerals and people to whom we have no relationship." The social alienation of human beings from one another in liberal bourgeois society as it displayed and delighted in itself in the theater; the disenchantment of the world, which gave human beings things and made human beings mere things: all this bestows another meaning on the inscrutable. Proust reminds us that it is an illusory one when he says that in such moments we doubt our sanity. Nevertheless, it is truth. Alienation becomes complete, and social relationships reveal themselves to be a blind second nature, like the mythical landscape into whose allegorical image what is unattainable and unapproachable congeals. The beauty that things take on in such descriptions is the hopeless beauty of their semblance. In representing history they express history's bondage to nature.

On The Guermantes' Way, vol. II,

pp. 742-43

The description of the theater as a prehistoric Mediterranean landscape introduces several pages about the Princess de Guermantes-Bavière, who can then be introduced as the Great Goddess. The things Proust says about her and the effect she has on those present provide an example of the passages scattered throughout his work that lead unsympathetic readers to complain about his snobbery, passages that challenge the stupid notion of a mediocre Progress, which asks why one should be interested in an aristocracy that by Proust's day had already been deprived of its actual function and that is not at all statistically representative. Even André Gide, who in a sense belonged, socially speaking, to that group by birth more than Proust did, seems to have been irritated by Proust's princesses, and André Maurois, many details of whose book point beyond the sphere of communications from which it derives, mentions snobbery as a danger that Proust overcame. Instead, it would be more appropriate to deal with Proust in accordance with Hugo von Hofmannsthal's remark that he would rather give a good explanation for a weakness he had been reproached with than deny it. For it is obvious that

Proust himself was impressed with his Swann because, as the narrator never tires of repeating, Swann actually belonged to the Jockey Club and was received in high society even though he was the son of a stockbroker. It is so obvious that it must have been important to Proust to call attention to his own provocative inclination. The best way to track down its meaning, however, is to follow the provocation. Snobbery, as the concept dominates Proust's novel, is the erotic cathexis of social matters. Hence it violates a social taboo, which is revenged on the person who broaches the delicate issue. If the pimp, the antithesis of the snob, acknowledges the intertwining of sex and gain through his profession, an intertwining that bourgeois society covers up, then conversely the snob demonstrates something equally universal, the deflection of love from the immediacy of the person to social relationships. The pimp socializes sex; the snob sexualizes society. Precisely because society does not actually tolerate love but rather subordinates it to the realm of its ends, it keeps a fanatical eye out to make sure that love has nothing to do with it, that it is nature, pure immediacy. The snob disdains the socially accepted love match that has an ulterior purpose but falls in love with the hierarchical order itself, which drives love out of him and which simply cannot tolerate being loved. The snob lets the cat out of the bag, the cat the Proustian oeuvre then bells. Like Carl Sternheim forty years ago, Proust, the critic of snobbery, is automatically charged—and with good reason—with having succumbed to that vice, a vice, incidentally, he called harmless. But only someone who has succumbed to social relationships in his own way instead of denying them with the resentment of one who has been excluded can reflect them back. What Proust came to see in these allegedly superfluous lives of luxury, however, vindicates his infatuation. For the enraptured snob the social order is transfigured into a fairytale image, just as the beloved was once transfigured for the true lover. Proust's snobbery is absolved by what the instincts of a homogenized middle-class society secretly hold against him: the fact that the Archangels and Powers he adores no longer have swords and have themselves become defenseless imitations of their liquidated past. Like every love, snobbery wants to escape from the entanglement of bourgeois relationships into a world that no longer uses the greatest good of the greatest number to gloss over the fact that it satisfies human needs only by accident. Proust's regression is utopian. He is defeated by it, as is love, but in his defeat he denounces the society that decrees that it shall not be. The impossibility of love that Proust depicts in his socialites, and especially in the Baron de

Charlus, who is actually the central figure of the novel, and who ultimately retains the friendship only of a pimp, has since then spread like a deadly chill over all of society, where a functionalized totality stifles love wherever it still stirs. In this respect Proust was prophetic, a quality he once attributed to the Jews. He humbly courted the favor of arch-reactionaries like Gaston Calmette and Léon Daudet, but one of those who sometimes wore a monocle was named Karl Marx.

*On Within a Budding Grove, vol. I,
pp. 568-70*

The Baron de Charlus is the brother of the Duke of Guermantes. The scene in which he first appears testifies to Proust's relationship to French *décadence*, which he both embodies and detaches himself from, in that his work calls it by name historically. A famous novel of that period is called *A Rebours, Against the Grain*: Proust brushed experience against the grain. But "it's all completely different" would remain stamped with the impotence of the exotic if its force were not also that of "this is how it is." I would like to call attention to Proust's remark that many people sigh to indicate that it is too hot for them without really feeling that way. This remark is as eccentric as it is obvious. False generality disintegrates under Proust's ravenous gaze, but in return what is usually considered coincidental acquires an oblique, irrational universality. Everyone who brings to the reading of Proust the necessary prerequisites for it will feel at many points that this is what it was like for him too, exactly what it was like. Proust shares with the great tradition in the novel the category of the contingent as developed by the young Lukács. He depicts a life bereft of meaning, a life the subject can no longer shape into a cosmos. For Proust's perseverance, however, which surpasses that of the nineteenth-century novelists, contingency is not completely bereft of meaning. It carries with it a semblance of necessity, as though some reference to meaning had been interspersed throughout existence, chaotic, mocking, haunting in its dissociated fragments. This constellation of a necessity in something that is wholly contingent, a necessity that can be perceived only negatively—this too anticipating Kafka—carries Proust's fanatically individuated work far beyond his own individuation: at its center he reveals the universality through which it is mediated. Such universality, however, is that of the negative. Like the Naturalists, his

antitheses, before him, Proust is correct in his most out-of-the-way observations, but his correctness is that of disillusionment, and it refuses all consolation. He gives where he takes: where he is correct, there is pain. His medium is paranoia, to which Proust was close in his instinctual structure and which is also present in the physiognomy of his Charlus. The one who has burnt his bridges behind him gives sense and meaning to the meaningless, but it is precisely his madness that captures what the world has done to itself and to us.

On The Captive, vol. II, pp. 425-27

Like the second part of the first volume, the fifth volume of Proust's novel is a depiction of jealousy. The narrator has brought Albertine to live with him; he distrusts everything she says and does and keeps her under a control from which she finally escapes through flight; afterwards she has a fatal accident. The author never tires of asserting that even while he is plumbing the depths of his sufferings over Albertine he no longer loves her. Love and jealousy are not so closely linked as the popular notion would have it. Jealousy always presumes a relationship of possession that makes the loved one into a thing and thus offends against the spontaneity in which the idea of love is rooted. But Proust's jealousy is not merely an impotent attempt to hold onto the fugitive, whom he loves for her fleetingness, because of the fact that she can never be completely captured. Rather, this jealousy wants to restore love, as Proust wanted to restore, or reproduce, life. But it can do so only at the price of the loved one's individuation. If she is not to be damaged by her own falseness, the beloved must be transformed back into nature, into a generic creature, a member of a species. In forfeiting her own psychological individuality she acquires that other and better individuality that is the object of love, that of the image that every human being embodies and that is an alien to him as, the Cabalah claims, the mystical name is to the one who bears it. This takes place in sleep. In sleep Albertine lays aside what makes her a character in the order of the world. Dissolving into the amorphous, she takes on the form of her immortal part, to which love is directed: beauty without gaze or image. It is as though the description of Albertine's sleep were an exegesis of Baudelaire's line about the woman whom night makes beautiful. This beauty provides what existence withholds, security; but it is security in something that has been

lost. Poor, frail, confused love finds a refuge in the place where the beloved comes to resemble death. In the era of its decay, love has not been more fervently celebrated since the second act of Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde* than in the description of Albertine's sleep, which with sublime irony proves the narrator wrong in denying his love.

On The Captive, vol. II, pp. 508-10

One can no longer speak directly of the ultimate things. The impotent word that calls them by name weakens them. Both naïveté and a defiant casualness in expressing metaphysical ideas reveal their lack of grounding. But Proust's spirit was completely metaphysical in the midst of a world that forbids the language of metaphysics: this tension is the moving spirit behind his whole work. Only once, in *The Captive*, does he open a crack, so hastily that the eye has no time to accustom itself to such light. Even the word he uses cannot be taken at its word. Here, in his depiction of Bergotte's death, there is actually a sentence whose tone, at least in the German version, echoes Kafka. It reads: "So that the idea that Bergotte was not wholly and permanently dead is by no means improbable" (510). [The German translation by Eva Rechel-Mertens to which Adorno refers reads: "Der Gedanke, Bergotte sei nicht für alle Zeiten tot, ist demnach nicht völlig ungläubhaft."] The idea that leads to this statement is the idea that the moral force of the writer whose epitaph Proust is writing belongs to an order other than the order of nature, and for this reason it holds out the promise that the order of nature is not the ultimate order. This experience is comparable to the experience of great works of art: the sense that their substance could not possibly *not* be true, that their success and their authenticity themselves point to the reality of what they vouch for. One feels impelled to put the role of art in Proust's work, his trust in the objective force of its success, into conjunction with that thought, that last, pale, secularized, and nevertheless inextinguishable shadow of the ontological proof of God. The man whose death is the only thing in Proust's work associated with hope is not only witness to "kindliness and conscientiousness" but himself a great writer. Proust's model for him was Anatole France. The thought of eternal life is inspired by the Voltairean skeptic: enlightenment, the process of demythologization, is to veer around and carry beyond its own context a nature mindful of itself. Proust's work is authentic because its intention, which aims at

salvation, is free of apology, of any attempt to justify anything that exists, to promise any permanence. On the principle of *non confundar* he places his hopes on unreserved surrender to the natural context; for him once again, the rest, in all its hidden meaning, is silence. Hence time, the power of transience itself, becomes the highest being that Proust's work, it too a *roman philosophique* like those of Voltaire and France in its thousand refractions, acknowledges. Proust keeps a greater distance from any kind of positiveness, and the substance of his work is proportionately closer to the theological than Bergson's doctrine. The idea of immortality is tolerated only in what is itself, as Proust well knew, transient—in works of art as the last metaphors for revelation in the authentic language. Thus in a later passage, on the night after his first feuilleton has appeared in *Le Figaro*, Proust dreams of Bergotte as though he were still alive—as though the printed word were lodging a protest against death, until the writer, awakening, realizes the vanity of even this comfort. No interpretation is adequate to this passage, not, as the cliché would have it, because it is above thought in its artistic dignity, but because it has made its home on the border where thought too finds its limit.