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NEW CRITICAL ESSAYS

Translated by
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Proust and Names

We know that *Remembrance of Things Past* is the story of a writing. It may be useful to recall this story, the better to understand how it *comes out*, since this outcome represents what, ultimately, permits the writer to write.

The birth of a book which we shall not know (but whose harbinger is Proust's own book) functions as a drama in three acts. The first act sets forth the will to write: the young narrator perceives this will in himself through the erotic pleasure Bergotte's sentences afford him and the joy he experiences describing the steeples of Martinville. The second act—a very long one, since it occupies the essential part of *Remembrance*—deals with the inability to write. This inability is articulated in three scenes or, one might say, three distresses: first, Norpois affords the young narrator a discouraging image of literature: a ridiculous image, though one he may not even have the talent to fulfill; then, much later, a second image will depress him further: a rediscovered passage from the Goncourt *Journal*, at once glamorous and laughable, confirms in him, by comparison, his own impotence to transform sensation into notation; lastly, more serious still because bearing on his very sensibility and no longer on his talent, a final incident dis-

suades him from writing for good: taking the train to Paris after a long illness, the narrator observes three trees in the countryside and experiences only indifference before their beauty; he concludes that he will never write; sadly liberated from every obligation toward a vow he is decidedly incapable of fulfilling, he decides to return to the world's frivolity and attends an afternoon party at the Duchess de Guermantes's. Here, by a truly dramatic reversal, having drunk the very lees of renunciation, the narrator will rediscover, under his hand, the power to write. This third act occupies all of *The Past Recaptured* and also includes three episodes; the first consists of three successive fits of vertigo: these are three reminiscences (St. Mark's, the trees from the train, Balbec), looming out of three trivial incidents during his arrival at the Hôtel de Guermantes (the uneven paving stones of the courtyard, the noise of a little spoon, a starched napkin handed him by a servant); these reminiscences are felicities which must now be understood if they are to be preserved, or at least recalled, at will: in a second episode, which forms the essential part of the Proustian theory of literature, the narrator systematically devotes himself to exploring the signs he has received and thereby to understanding, in a single impulse, the world and the Book, the Book as world and the world as Book. A final suspension, however, postpones the power to write: examining the guests he had lost sight of for so long, the narrator is stupefied to perceive that they have aged: Time, which has restored writing to him, risks at the same moment snatching it from him: will he live long enough to write his work? Yes, if he agrees to withdraw from the world, to lose his worldly life in order to save his life as a writer.

The story told by the narrator thus has all the dramatic characteristics of an initiation; it involves a veritable mystagogy, articulated in three dialectical movements: desire (the mystagogue postulates a revelation), failure (he assumes dan-

gers, darkness, nothingness), assumption (it is at failure's climax that he finds victory). Now, in order to write *Remembrance*, Proust himself experienced, in his own life, this initiatic pattern: the precocious desire to write (formed as early as his *lycée* years) was followed by a long period not of failures but of groping, as if the true and unique work were being sought, abandoned, resumed, without ever being found; and like the narrator's, this negative initiation, so to speak, was accomplished through a certain experience of literature: other men's books fascinated, then disappointed Proust, just as those of Bergotte or the Goncourts fascinated and disappointed the narrator; this passage through literature, so similar to the trajectory of initiations, filled with darkness and illusions, was accomplished by means of parody and pastiche (what better testimony to fascination and demystification than pastiche?), of desperate infatuation (Ruskin) and contestation (Sainte-Beuve). Proust thus approached *Remembrance* (of which, as we know, certain fragments already occur in his *Contre Sainte-Beuve*), but the work did not manage to "take." The main units were there (relationships of characters[1] crystallizing episodes[2]) being tested in various combinations, as in a kaleidoscope, but still missing was that federating act which would permit Proust to write *Remembrance* without flagging, from 1909 to his death, at the cost of a retreat which so resembles, as we know, that of the narrator himself at the end of *The Past Recaptured.*

We shall not attempt here to explain Proust's work by his life; we shall concern ourselves only with acts internal to the discourse itself (consequently, poetic and not biographical acts), whether this discourse be the narrator's or Marcel

[1]For instance: the inopportune visitor of the Combray evenings, who will be Swann; the lover of the little band of girls, who will be the narrator.

[2]For instance, the morning reading of *Le Figaro*, brought to the narrator by his mother.

Proust's. Now the homology which, from all evidence, governs the two discourses calls for a symmetrical denouement: the establishment of writing by reminiscence (in the narrator) must correspond (in Proust) to some similar discovery likely to establish, in its imminent continuity, all the writing of *Remembrance.* What, then, is the accident—not biographical, but creative—which gathers together a work already conceived, tested, but not quite written? What is the new cement which will grant syntagmatic unity to so many scattered, discontinuous units? What is it which permits Proust to utter his work? In a word, what does the writer find, symmetrical to the reminiscences the narrator had explored and exploited during the Guermantes party?

The two discourses, the narrator's and Marcel Proust's, are homologous but not analogous. The narrator is *going* to write, and this future maintains him in an order of existence, not of speech; he is at grips with a psychology, not with a technique. Marcel Proust, on the contrary, writes; he struggles with the categories of language, not with those of behavior. Belonging to the referential world, reminiscence cannot be directly a unit of discourse, and what Proust needs is a strictly poetic element (in the sense Jakobson gives to the word); but also this linguistic feature, like reminiscence, must have the power to constitute the essence of novelistic objects. Now there is a class of verbal units which possesses to the highest degree this constitutive power, and this class is that of proper names. The proper name possesses the three properties which the narrator concedes to reminiscence: the power of essentialization (since one "unfolds" a proper name exactly as one does a memory): the proper name is in a sense the linguistic form of reminiscence. Therefore, the (poetic) event which "launched" *Remembrance* is the discovery of Names; doubtless, since his *Contre Sainte-Beuve,* Proust already possessed certain names *(Combray, Guermantes);* but it was only between 1907 and 1909, it appears,

that he constituted in its entirety the onomastic system of *Remembrance:* once this system was found, the work was written immediately.[1]

Proust's work describes an immense, an incessant apprenticeship.[2] This apprenticeship always knows two moments (in love, in art, in worldliness): an illusion and a disappointment; from these two moments is born the truth, i.e., writing; but between dream and waking, before the truth appears, the Proustian narrator must perform an ambiguous task (for it leads to the truth through many misunderstandings), which consists in desperately interrogating the signs: signs emitted by the work of art, by the beloved, by the milieu frequented. The proper name is also a sign, and not of course a simple index which would designate without signifying, according to the current conception from Peirce to Russell. As sign, the proper name offers itself to an exploration, a decipherment: it is at once a "milieu" (in the biological sense of the term) into which one must plunge, steeping in all the reveries it bears,[3] and a precious object, compressed, embalmed, which must be opened like a flower.[4] In other words, if the Name (as we shall henceforth call the proper name) is a sign, it is a voluminous sign, a sign always pregnant with a dense texture of meaning, which no amount of wear can reduce, can flatten, contrary to the common noun, which releases only

[1]Proust has given his theory of the proper noun twice over: in *Contre Sainte-Beuve* (Chapter 14: "Names of Persons") and in *Swann's Way* ("Place names: the Name").

[2]This is the thesis of Gilles Deleuze in his remarkable book *Proust and Signs.*

[3]"Not thinking of the names as an inaccessible ideal, but as a real ambiance into which I would plunge" *(Swann's Way).*

[4]". . . Delicately to remove the wrappings of habit and to see again in its first freshness this name *Guermantes* . . ." *(Contre Sainte-Beuve).*

one of its meanings by syntagm. The Proustian Name is in itself and in every case the equivalent of an entire dictionary column: the name *Guermantes* immediately covers everything that memory, usage, culture can put into it; it knows no selective restriction, the syntagm in which it is placed is indifferent to it; it is, therefore, in a certain fashion, a semantic monstrosity, for, provided with all the characteristics of the common noun, it can nonetheless exist and function outside of any projective rule. This is the price—or the ransom—of the phenomenon of "hypersemanticity" of which it is the seat,[1] and which closely relates it, of course, to the poetic word.

By its semantic density (one would almost like to be able to say, its *lamination*), the Proustian Name offers itself to a veritable semic analysis, which the narrator himself does not fail to postulate or to sketch out: what he calls the Name's different "figures"[2] are veritable semes, endowed with a perfect semantic validity, despite their imaginary character (which proves once more how necessary it is to distinguish the signified from the referent). The name *Guermantes* thus contains several *primitives* (to borrow a word from Leibniz): "*a castle keep without density, which was nothing but a strip of orange-tinted light and at the top of which the lord and his lady decided the life or the death of their vassals*"; "*a yellowing and rosetted tower which traverses the ages*"; the Parisian mansion of the Guermantes, "*limpid as its name*"; a feudal castle in the middle of Paris, etc. These semes are, of

[1]Cf. U. Weinreich, "On the Semantic Structure of Language," in J. H. Greenberg, *Universals of Language*.

[2]"But later, I find in the duration of this same name within myself, seven or eight different figures one after the other . . ." (*The Guermantes Way*).

course, "images," but in the higher language of literature, they are no less pure signifieds, offered like those of the denotating language to a whole systematics of meaning. Certain of these semic images are traditional, cultural: *Parma* does not designate an Emilian city situated on the Po, founded by the Etruscans, and comprising 138,000 inhabitants; the true signified of these two syllables is composed of two semes: Stendhalian sweetness and the reflection of violets *(Swann's Way).* Others are individual, memorial: *Balbec* has as its semes two words spoken long ago to the narrator, one by Legrandin (Balbec is a stormy place at the end of the earth), the other by Swann (its church is half Norman gothic, half Romanesque), so that the Name always has two simultaneous meanings: "Gothic architecture and a storm at sea" *(Swann's Way).* Thus, each Name has its semic specter, variable in time, according to the chronology of its reader, who adds or subtracts elements exactly as language does in its diachrony. The Name is, in effect, *catalyzable;* it can be filled, dilated, the interstices of its semic armature can be infinitely added to. This semic dilation of the proper name can be defined in another way: each Name contains several "scenes" appearing at first in a discontinuous, erratic manner, but which ask only to be federated and to form thereby a little narrative, for to recount is never anything but to link together, by metonymic processes, a limited number of complete units: *Balbec* thus conceals not only several scenes but also the movement which can collect them together in one and the same narrative syntagm, for its heteroclite syllables were doubtless generated by an archaic way of pronouncing, "*which I did not expect I would ever encounter until my arrival, when the innkeeper would serve me* café au lait *and then take me to see the sea flinging itself against the walls of the church, and to*

whom I lent the argumentative, solemn and medieval aspect of a character out of an old French romance" (Swann's Way). It is because the Name offers itself to an infinitely rich catalysis that it can be said that, poetically, the whole of *Remembrance* emerges from a few names *("This* Guermantes *was something like the plot of a novel: The Guermantes Way).*

Yet they must be carefully chosen—or found. Here there appears, in the Proustian theory of the Name, a major problem, if not of linguistics, at least of semiology: the motivation of the sign. Doubtless this problem is somewhat artificial, since it actually comes up only for the novelist, who has the freedom (but also the obligation) to create proper names at once new and yet "exact"; but as it happens the narrator and the novelist cover the same trajectory in contrary directions: the narrator believes he can decipher, in the names given to him, a kind of natural affinity between signifier and signified, between the vocalic color of *Parma* and the mauve sweetness of its content; the novelist, having to invent a site at once Norman, Gothic, and windy, must search the general tablature for phonemes, a few sounds tuned to the combination of these signifieds; one decodes, the other encodes, but the same system is involved and this system is, one way or another, a motivated system, based on a relation of *imitation* between signifier and signified. Encoder and decoder might here adopt for themselves Cratylus's assertion: *"The name's property consists in representing the thing as it is."* According to Proust, who merely theorizes the novelist's art in general, the proper name is a simulation or, as Plato said (with mistrust, it is true), a "fantasmagoria."

The motivations Proust alleges are of two kinds, natural and cultural. The former derive from symbolic phonetics (Weinreich has noted that phonetic symbolism derives from the sign's hypersemanticity). This is not the place to continue the argument on this question (once known under the name of

imitative harmony), where we would find, among others, the names of Plato, Leibniz, Diderot, and Jakobson. We shall merely cite this text by Proust, less famous than but perhaps as pertinent as Rimbaud's "Sonnet of the Vowels": "... *Bayeux, so high in its noble reddish lace and whose crest is illuminated by the old gold of its last syllable; Vitré, whose acute accent lozenged the old stained glass with black wood; mild Lamballe whose whiteness shades from eggshell to pearl gray; Coutances, a Norman cathedral whose final diphthong, fat and yellowing, crowns it with a tower of butter,*" etc. (*Swann's Way.* We may note that the motivation asserted by Proust is not only phonetic but also, sometimes, graphic.) Proust's examples, by their freedom and their richness (it is no longer a question of attributing to the *i/o* opposition the traditional contrast of *thin/round:* here it is an entire gamut of phonic signs which is described by Proust), indicate that in most cases phonetic motivation is not direct: the decoder intercalates between sound and meaning an intermediary concept, half material, half abstract, which functions as a key and opens the "narrowed" passage from signifier to signified: if *Balbec* signifies by affinity a complex of high-crested waves, steep cliffs, and bristling architecture, it is because we possess a conceptual relay, that of the word *rugueux* (rugose), which "works" for touch, hearing, and sight. In other words, the phonetic motivation requires an internal nomination: language surreptitiously returns to a relation which was mythically postulated as immediate: most apparent motivations are based on metaphors so traditional (the word *rugueux* applied to sound) that they are no longer perceived as such, having passed entirely to the side of denotation; nonetheless, motivation is determined at the cost of an old semantic anomaly or, one might say, of an old transgression. For it is obviously to metaphor that we must reattach the phenomena of symbolic phonetism, and it would be no use studying the one without the other. Proust would furnish good raw material for this

combined study: his phonetic motivations imply in almost every case (except perhaps for *Balbec*) an equivalence between sound and color: *ieu* is old gold, *é* is black, *an* is yellowing, blond, and golden (in *Coutances* and *Guermantes*), *i* is purple.[1] Here is an obviously general tendency: it is a question of shifting to the aspect of sound certain features belonging to sight (and more particularly to color, by reason of its simultaneously vibratory and modulating nature), i.e., in short, of neutralizing the opposition of several virtual classes resulting from the separation of senses (but is this separation historical or anthropological? From what period and from where do our "five senses" come? A renewed study of metaphor should henceforth consider, it would seem, the inventory of the nominal classes attested to by general linguistics). All in all, if phonetic motivation implies a metaphoric process, and consequently a transgression, this transgression occurs at tested points of transition, such as color: it is for this reason, no doubt, that the motivations Proust advances, while being very highly developed, appear to be so "just."

There remains another type of motivation, more "cultural" and thereby analogous to those we find in language: this type governs in effect both the invention of neologisms, aligned on a morphematic model, and the invention of proper names, these "inspired" by a phonetic model. When a writer invents a proper name, he is actually governed by the same rules of motivation as Plato's legislator when he wants to create a common noun: he must in a sense "copy" the thing and, since this is obviously impossible, at least must copy the way in which language itself has created certain of its names. The equality of common and proper names before creation is

[1] "Sylvie's color is purple, reddish-purple, or a kind of violet velvet . . . And this name itself, purple on account of its two *i*'s—Sylvie, the true Daughter of Fire" *(Contre Sainte-Beuve)*.

nicely illustrated by an extreme case: that in which the writer pretends to employ ordinary words which nonetheless he makes up out of whole cloth: this is the case with Joyce and with Michaux; in the latter's *Voyage en Grande Garabagne*, a word like *arpette* has—and with good reason—no meaning but is nonetheless filled with a diffuse signification, by reason not only of its context but also of its subjection to a phonic model very common in French.[1] The same is true of the Proustian names. Whether or not *Laumes*, *Argencourt*, *Villeparisis*, *Combray*, or *Doncières* exist, they nonetheless possess (and this is what matters) what we may call a "Francophonic plausibility": their true signified is *France* or, better still, "Frenchness"; their phonetism, and at least to an equal degree their graphism, are elaborated in conformity with certain sounds and groups of letters specifically attached to French toponymy: it is culture (that of the French) which imposes upon the Name a natural motivation: what is imitated is of course not in Nature but in history, yet a history so old that it constitutes the language which has resulted from it as a veritable nature, the source of models and reasons. The proper name, and singularly the Proustian Name, therefore, has a common signification: it signifies at least the nationality and all the images which can be associated with it. It can even refer to more particular signifieds, such as the province (not so much as a region, but as a milieu), in Balzac, or as the social class, in Proust: not of course by the ennobling particle, a crude means, but by the institution of a broad onomastic system, articulated on the opposition of the aristocracy and the commonalty on the one hand, and on the opposition of long syllables with mute final *e*'s (final syllables provided, so to speak, with a long

[1] These invented words have been well analyzed from a linguistic point of view by Delphine Perret, in her Sorbonne thesis of 1966, *Étude de la langue littéraire d'après le Voyage en Grande Garabagne d'Henri Michaux*.

train) and abrupt short syllables: on one side the paradigm of *Guermantes, Laumes, Agrigente;* on the other that of *Verdurin, Morel, Jupien, Legrandin, Sazerat, Cottard, Brichot,* etc.[1]

Proustian onomastics seems so organized that it actually constitutes, to all appearances, the definitive initiation of *Remembrance:* to possess a system of names was for Proust—and is for us—to hold the essential significations of the book, the armature of its signs, its profound syntax. We therefore see that the Proustian Name fully wields the two major dimensions of the sign: on the one hand, it can be read all by itself as a totality of significations (*Guermantes* contains several figures), in short, as an essence (an "original entity," Proust says), or if we prefer, an absence, since the sign designates what is not there;[2] and on the other hand it sustains with its congeners certain metonymic relations, establishes Narrative: *Swann* and *Guermantes* are not only two paths, two ways, they are also two phonetisms, like *Verdurin* and *Laumes.* If the proper name in Proust has this ecumenical function, summarizing all of language, it is because its structure coincides with that of the work itself: to advance gradually into the Name's significations (as the narrator keeps doing) is to be initiated into the world, to learn to decipher its essences: the signs of the world (of love, of worldliness) consist of the same stages as its names; between the thing and its appearance develops the dream, just as between the referent and its signifier is interposed the signified: the Name is nothing, if we should be so

[1]What is involved here is, of course, a tendency, not a law. Further, I am using *long* and *short* syllables without phonetic rigor, but rather as an ordinary impression, based moreover largely on the written forms, the French being accustomed by their academic, essentially written culture, to perceive a tyrannical opposition between masculine rhymes and feminine rhymes, the former perceived as short, the latter as long.

[2]"We can imagine only what is absent" *(The Past Recaptured).* We may further recall that, for Proust, to imagine is to unfold a sign.

unfortunate as to articulate it directly on its referent (what, *in reality*, is the Duchess de Guermantes?), i.e., if we miss in it its nature as *sign*. The signified is thus the site of the imaginary: here, no doubt, is Proust's new thought, the reason why he has historically displaced the old problem of realism, which until his advent was always posed in terms of referents: the writer works not on the relation of the thing and its form (what was called, in classical times, his "painting" and, more recently, his "expression"), but on the relation of signified and signifier, i.e., on a sign. It is this relation of which Proust gives us the linguistic theory in his reflections on the Name and in the etymological discussions he entrusts to Brichot, which would have little meaning if the writer did not accord them an emblematic function.

These remarks are not only oriented by my concern to recall, after Claude Lévi-Strauss, the signifying and not the indicial character of the proper name. I also want to insist on the Cratylean character of the name (and of the sign) in Proust: not only because Proust sees the relation of signifier and signified as a motivated relation, one copying the other and reproducing in its material form the signified essence of the thing (and not the thing itself), but also because, for Proust as for Cratylus, "the virtue of names is to teach": there is a propaedeutics of names which leads, by paths often long, various, and indirect, to the essence of things. It is for this reason that no one is closer to the Cratylean Legislator, founder of names *(demiourgos onomatôn)*, than the Proustian writer, not because he is free to invent the names he likes, but because he is obliged to invent them "properly." This realism (in the scholastic sense of the term), which insists that names be the "reflection" of ideas, has taken a radical form in Proust, but we may speculate if it is not more or less consciously present in every act of writing and if it is really possible to be a writer without believing, in some sense, in the natural relation of names and es-

sences: the poetic function, in the broadest sense of the term, would thus be defined by a Cratylean consciousness of signs and the writer would be the mouthpiece of a great age-old myth which decrees that language imitates ideas and that, contrary to the specifications of linguistic science, signs are motivated. This consideration should incline the critic still further to read literature in the mythic perspective which establishes its language and to decipher the literary word (which is never the word in common usage), not as the dictionary explicates it, but as the writer constructs it.

(1967)