ROLAND BARTHES

The Rustle of Language

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Longtemps, je me suis couché de bonne heure . . .

Some of you will have recognized my title, and the passage it initiates: "Time was, I went to bed early. Some evenings, my candle was no sooner out than my eyes would close so quickly I had no time to think: 'I'm falling asleep.' And half an hour later, the thought that it was time to go to sleep would waken me . . .": it is the opening of *In Search of Lost Time.* Does this mean I am offering you a lecture "on" Proust? Yes and no. My subject will be, if you like, *Proust and I.* How pretentious! Nietzsche spared no irony about the Germans' use of that conjunction: "Schopenhauer *and* Hartmann," he jeered. "Proust and I" is worse still. Let me suggest that, paradoxically, the pretentiousness subsides once I myself take the stand, and not some witness: by setting Proust and myself on one and the same line, I am not in the least comparing myself to this great writer but, quite differently, *identifying myself with him:* an association of practice, not of value. Let me explain: in figurative language, in the novel, for instance, it seems to me that one more or less identifies oneself with one of the characters represented; this projection, I believe, is the very wellspring of literature; but in certain marginal cases, once the reader himself wants to write a work, he no longer identifies himself merely with this or that fictive character but also and especially with the actual author of the book he has read, insofar as that author wanted to write this book and succeeded in doing so; now, Proust is the privileged site of this special identification, insofar as his *Search . . .* is the narrative of a desire to write: I am not identifying myself with the prestigious author of a monumental work but with the

worker—now tormented, now exalted, in any case modest—who wanted to undertake a task upon which, from the very start of his project, he conferred an absolute character.

1

Therefore, first of all, Proust . . .

In Search of Lost Time was preceded by many writings: a book, translations, articles. The great work was not really launched, it seems, until the summer of 1909; and from that point on, as we know, a stubborn race was run against death and incompletion. Apparently there was, in that year (even if it is futile to try dating the inception of a work with any specificity), a crucial period of hesitation. Certainly, Proust seems to be at the intersection of two paths, two genres, torn between two "ways" he does not yet know could converge, any more than the Narrator knows, for a very long time—until Gilberte's marriage to Saint-Loup—that Swann's Way meets the Guermantes' Way: the way of the Essay (of Criticism) and the way of the Novel. At the time of his mother's death, in 1905, Proust passes through a period of despondency, but also of sterile agitation; he wants to write, to create a work, but which? Or rather, which form? Proust writes to Mme de Noailles, in December 1908: "I'd like, sick as I am, to write on Sainte-Beuve [incarnation of the aesthetic values he abhors]. The thing has taken shape in my mind in two different ways, between which I must choose. Now, I am totally without will, and without any power to see my way."

I should point out that Proust's hesitation—to which, quite naturally, he gives a psychological form—corresponds to a structural alternation: the two "ways" he hesitates between are the two terms of an opposition articulated by Jakobson: that of Metaphor and Metonymy. Metaphor sustains any discourse which asks: "What is it? What does it mean?"—the real question of any Essay. Metonymy, on the contrary, asks another question: "What can follow what I say? What can be engendered by the episode I am telling?"; this is the Novel's question. Jakobson

cited the experiment conducted in a classroom, where schoolchildren were asked to react to the word *hut*; some said that a hut was a little cabin (metaphor), others that it had burned down (metonymy); Proust is a divided subject, like Jakobson's class; he knows that each incident in life can give rise either to a commentary (an interpretation) or to an affabulation which produces or imagines the narrative *before* and *after*: to interpret is to take the Critical path, to argue theory (siding against Sainte-Beuve); to think incidents and impressions, to describe their developments, is on the contrary to weave a Narrative, however loosely, however gradually.

Proust's indecision is profound, insofar as Proust is no novice (in 1909, he is thirty-eight); he has already written, and what he has written (especially on the level of certain fragments) often derives from a mixed, uncertain, hesitant form, both fictive and intellectual; for example, in order to express his ideas about Sainte-Beuve (realm of the Essay, of Metaphor), Proust writes a fictive dialogue between himself and his mother (realm of the Narrative, of Metonymy). Not only is this indecision profound, it is even, perhaps, *cherished*: Proust loves and admires certain writers who, he remarks, have also practiced a certain indecision of genres: Nerval, Baudelaire . . .

We must recover the *pathos* of this debate. Proust is seeking a form which will accommodate suffering (he has just experienced it in an absolute form through his mother's death) and transcend it; now; "intelligence" (a Proustian word), indicted by Proust beginning with *Contre Sainte-Beuve*, if we follow the romantic tradition, is a power which traumatizes or desiccates affect; Novalis called poetry "that which heals the wounds of intellect"; the Novel can do this too, but not just any novel: a novel which is not written according to Sainte-Beuve's notions.

We do not know by what determination Proust emerged from this hesitation, and why (if indeed there was a circumstantial cause), after having given up his *Contre Sainte-Beuve* (rejected by *Le Figaro* in August 1909), he flung himself so deeply into his *Search* . . . ; but we do know the form he chose: it is the very

form of his *Search . . .* : novel? essay? Neither one, or both at once: what I should call *a third form*. Let us question this third genre a moment.

If I began these reflections with the first sentence of Proust's *Search . . .*, it is because it opens an episode of some fifty pages which, like a Tibetan *mandala*, collects together within its view the entire Proustian oeuvre. What does this episode discuss? Sleep. Proustian sleep has an inceptive value: it organizes what is original (and "typical") in the novel (but this organization, as we shall see, is in fact a disorganization).

Of course, there is a good sleep and a bad. The good kind is the one begun, inaugurated, permitted, consecrated by the mother's evening kiss; it is the right sleep, in accord with Nature (to sleep by night, to act by day). The bad kind is the sleep far from the mother: the son sleeps by day, while the mother is up; they see each other only at the brief intersection of the right time and the inverted time: awakening for one, bedtime for the other; this bad sleep (under Veronal) can only be justified, redeemed by the entire novel, since it is at the painful price of this inversion that Proust's *Search . . .*, night after night, will be written.

And what is this good sleep (of childhood)? It is a "half waking" ("I have tried to wrap my first chapter in the impressions of half waking.") Although Proust speaks on one occasion of the "depths of our unconscious," this sleep has nothing Freudian about it; it is not oneiric (there are few real dreams in Proust's work); rather, it is constituted by the depths of consciousness *as disorder*. A paradox defines it nicely: it is a sleep which can be written, because it is a consciousness of sleep; the whole episode (and, consequently, I believe, the whole work which emerges from it) is thus held suspended in a sort of grammatical scandal: to say "I'm asleep" is in effect, literally, as impossible as to say "I'm dead"; writing is precisely that activity which tampers with language—the impossibilities of language—to the advantage of discourse.

What does this sleep (or this half waking) do? It leads to a

"false consciousness": a consciousness out of order, vacillating, intermittent; the logical carapace of Time is attacked; there is no longer a chrono-logy (if we may separate the two parts of the word): "A man who is asleep [read: that Proustian sleep which is a half waking] holds in a circle around him the course of the hours, the order of years and worlds . . . but *their ranks can mingle, can break*" [italics mine]. Sleep establishes another logic, a logic of Vacillation, of Decompartmentalization, and it is this new logic which Proust discovers in the episode of the madeleine, or rather of the biscuit, as it is recounted in *Contre Sainte-Beuve* (i.e., before his *Search* . . .): "I remained motionless . . . when suddenly the shaken partitions of my memory gave way." Naturally, such a logical revolution can only provoke a reaction of stupidity: Humblot, the reader for Editions Ollendorf, receiving the manuscript of *Swann's Way*, declared: "I don't know if I've gone completely blind and deaf, but I can't see any interest in reading thirty pages [*precisely our mandala*] on how a Gentleman tosses and turns in bed before falling asleep." The interest, however, is crucial: it will open the floodgates of *Time*: once chrono-logy is shaken, intellectual or narrative fragments will form a series shielded from the ancestral law of Narrative or of Rationality, and this series will spontaneously produce the *third form*, neither Essay nor Novel. The structure of this work will be, strictly speaking, *rhapsodic*, i.e. (etymologically), *sewn*; moreover, this is a Proustian metaphor: the work is produced like a gown; the rhapsodic text implies an original art, like that of the couturiere: pieces, fragments are subject to certain correspondences, arrangements, reappearances: a dress is not a patchwork, any more than is *A la Recherde du temps perdu*.

Emerging from sleep, the work (*the third form*) rests on a provocative principle: the *disorganization* of Time (of chronology). Now, this is a very modern principle. Bachelard calls *rhythm* that force which aims to "rid the soul of the false permanence of ill-made durations," and this definition applies very nicely to Proust's novel, whose every sumptuous effort is to subtract Time Remembered from the false permanence of

biography. Nietzsche, more lapidarily, says that "we must reduce the universe to crumbs, lose respect for the whole," and John Cage, prophesying the new musical work, announces: "In any case, the whole will constitute a disorganization." This vacillation is not an aleatory anarchy of associations of ideas: "I see," Proust says with a certain bitterness, "readers supposing that I am writing, by trusting to arbitrary and fortuitous associations of ideas, the story of my life." In fact, if we adopt Bachelard's word, what we are dealing with is a *rhythm*, and a highly complex one: "systems of moments" (Bachelard again) succeed each other, but also correspond to each other. For what the principle of vacillation disorganizes is not Time's intelligibility but biography's illusory logic, insofar as it traditionally follows the purely mathematical order of the years.

This disorganization of biography is not its destruction. In the work, many elements of personal life are retained, in an identifiable fashion, but these elements are in a sense *shifted*. I shall indicate two of these shifts, insofar as they turn not on details (of which biographies of Proust are full) but on major creative options.

The first shift is that of the discoursing person (in the grammatical sense of the word *person*). The Proustian oeuvre brings on stage (or into writing) an "I" (the Narrator); but this "I," one may say, is not quite a self (subject and object of traditional autobiography): "I" is not the one who remembers, confides, confesses, he is the one who discourses; the person this "I" brings on stage is a writing self whose links with the self of civil life are uncertain, displaced. Proust himself has explained this well: Sainte-Beuve's method fails to realize that "a book is the product of a different 'self' from the one we manifest in our habits, in society, in our vices." The result of this dialectic is that it is vain to wonder if the book's Narrator is Proust (in the civil meaning of the patronymic): it is simply *another* Proust, often unknown to himself.

The second shift is more flagrant (easier to define): in Proust's novel, there is certainly "narrative" (it is not an essay), but this

narrative is not that of a life which the Narrator apprehends at birth and follows from year to year until the moment he takes up his pen to tell the story. What Proust *recounts*, what he puts into narration, is not his life but *his desire to write:* Time weighs heavily on his desire, maintains it in a chronology; it (the steeples of Martinville, Bergotte's phrase) encounters trials, discouragements (the verdict of Monsieur de Norpois, the incomparable prestige of the Goncourts' *Journal*), and ultimately triumphs when the Narrator, arriving at the Guermantes' party, discovers *what he must write:* Time regained, and thereby assures himself that he is going to be able to write: *In Search of Lost Time* (though it is already written).

As we see, what passes into the work is certainly the author's life, but a life *disoriented*. George Painter, Proust's biographer, has accurately seen that the novel is constituted by what he has called a "symbolic biography," or again, "a symbolic story of Proust's life": Proust understood (and this is genius) that he did not have to "recount" his life, but that his life nonetheless had the signification of a work of art. "A man's life of any worth is a continual Allegory," says Keats, quoted by Painter. Posterity proves Proust increasingly right: his work is not only read as a monument of universal literature but as the impassioned expression of an absolutely personal subject who ceaselessly returns to his own life, not as to a curriculum vitae, but as to a constellation of circumstances and figures. More and more, we find ourselves loving not "Proust" (civil name of an author filed away in the histories of literature) but "Marcel," a singular being, at once child and adult, *puer senilis*, impassioned yet wise, victim of eccentric manias and the site of a sovereign reflection on the world, love, art, time, death. I have proposed calling this very special interest readers take in the life of Marcel Proust "Marcelism" in order to distinguish it from "Proustism," which would be merely a preference for a certain work or a certain literary manner.

If I have emphasized in Proust's work-as-life the theme of a new logic which permits one—in any case, permitted Proust—

to abolish the contradiction between Novel and Essay, it is because this theme concerns me personally. Why? That is what I want to explain now. Hence I shall be speaking of "myself." "Myself" is to be understood here in the full sense: not the asepticized substitute of a general reader (any substitution is an asepsis); I shall be speaking of the one for whom no one else can be substituted, for better and for worse. It is the *intimate* which seeks utterance in me, seeks to make its cry heard, confronting generality, confronting science.

2

Dante (another famous opening, another overwhelming allusion) begins his poem "*Nel mezzo del camin di nostra vita . . .*" In 1300, Dante was thirty-five (he was to die twenty-one years later). I am much older than that, and the time I have left to live will never be half the length of my life so far. For the "middle of our life" is obviously not an arithmetical point: how, at the moment of writing, could I know my life's total duration so precisely that I could divide it into two equal parts? It is a semantic point, the perhaps belated moment when there occurs in my life the summons of a new meaning, the desire for a mutation: to change lives, to break off and to begin, to submit myself to an initiation, as Dante made his way into the *selva oscura,* led by a great initiator, Virgil (and for me, at least during this text, the initiator is Proust). Age, need we be reminded?—but yes, we do, so indifferently do we experience each other's age—age is only very partially a chronological datum, a garland of years; there are classes, compartments of age: we pass through life from lock to lock; at certain points there are thresholds, gradients, shocks; age is not gradual and progressive, it is mutative: to consider one's age, if that age is what we French call *un certain age,* is not a coquetry intended to bring forth kindly protestations; rather, it is an active task: what are the real forces which my age implies and seeks to mobilize? That is the question, appearing quite lately, which it seems to me has

made the present moment the "middle of the journey of my life."

Why today?

There comes a time (and this is a problem of consciousness) when "our days are numbered": there begins a backwards count, vague yet irreversible. You *knew* you were mortal (everyone has told you so, ever since you had ears to hear); suddenly you *feel* mortal (this is not a natural feeling; the natural one is to believe yourself immortal; whence so many accidents due to carelessness). This evidence, once it is experienced, transforms the landscape: I must, imperatively, lodge my work in a compartment which has uncertain contours but which I know (new consciousness) are *finite*: the last compartment. Or rather, because the compartment is designated, because there are no longer any "outside-instances," the work I am going to lodge there assumes a kind of formality, a solemn instance. Like Proust ill, threatened by death (or believing himself so), we come back to the phrase of St. John quoted, approximately, in *Contre Sainte-Beuve:* "Work, while you still have the light."

And then a time also comes (the same time) when what you have done, worked, written, appears doomed to repetition: What! Until my death, to be writing articles, giving courses, lectures, on "subjects" which alone will vary, and so little! (It's that "on" which bothers me.) This feeling is a cruel one; for it confronts me with the foreclosure of anything New or even of any Adventure (that which "advenes"—which befalls me); I see my future, until death, as a series: when I've finished this text, this lecture, I'll have nothing else to do but start again with another . . . Can this be all? No, Sisyphus is not happy: he is alienated, not by the effort of his labor, or even by its vanity, but by its repetition.

Finally, an event (and no longer only a consciousness) can supervene which will mark, incise, articulate this gradual silting up of work, and determine that mutation, that transformation of the landscape which I have called the "middle of life." Rancé, hero of the Fronde, a worldly dandy, comes from his travels

and discovers the body of his mistress, decapitated by an accident: he withdraws from the world and founds the Trappist Order. For Proust, the "middle of life's journey" was certainly his mother's death (1905), even if the mutation of existence, the inauguration of the new work, occurred only a few years later. A cruel bereavement, a unique and somehow irreducible bereavement can constitute for me that "pinnacle of the particular" Proust spoke of; though belated, this bereavement will be for me the middle of my life; for the "middle of life" is perhaps never anything but the moment when you discover that death is real, and no longer merely dreadful.

Journeying thus, there occurs all of a sudden this obvious situation: on the one hand, I no longer have time to try several lives: I must choose my last life, my new life, "*Vita Nova*," Michelet said, marrying at fifty-one a girl of twenty and preparing to write new books of natural history; and on the other hand, I must emerge from that shadowy state (medieval theory called it *acedie*) to which the attrition of repeated tasks and mourning dispose me. Now, for the subject who writes, who has chosen to write, there can be no "new life," it seems to me, except in the discovery of a new practice of writing. To change doctrine, theory, philosophy, method, belief, spectacular though this seems, is in fact quite banal: one does such things the way one breathes; one invests, one lays aside, one reinvests: intellectual conversions are the very pulsion of the intelligence, once it is attentive to the world's surprises; but the search, the discovery, the practice of a new form—this, I believe, is equivalent to that *Vita Nova* whose determinations I have described.

It is here, in this middle of my journey, at this pinnacle of my particularity, that I come back to two readings (in truth, so often repeated that I cannot date them). The first is that of a great novel: *War and Peace*. I am not speaking here of a work but of a disruption, one that for me culminates at the death of old Prince Bolkonsky, in the last words he addresses to his daughter, Maria, in the explosion of tenderness which, under the impulsion of his death, lacerates these two beings who love

each other without ever engaging in the discourse (the verbiage) of love. My second reading is that of an episode in Proust's novel (this work intervenes here at quite a different level than at the beginning of this text: I am now identifying myself with the Narrator, not with the writer), the grandmother's death; this is a narrative of absolute purity; I mean that here grief is pure, insofar as it is not commented upon (contrary to other episodes of the *Search* . . .), one in which the cruelty of the death which supervenes, which will separate forever, is expressed only through indirect objects and incidents: the rest room in the Pavilion of the Champs-Elysées, the pathetic head which sways under the comb wielded by Françoise.

From these two readings, from the emotion they constantly reawaken in me, I have learned two lessons. First of all, that I received these episodes as "moments of truth" (I find no other expression): suddenly literature (for it is literature which matters here) coincides absolutely with an emotional landslide, a "cry"; in the body of the reader who suffers, by memory or anticipation, the remote separation of the beloved person, a transcendence is posited: What Lucifer created *at the same time* love and death? The "moment of truth" has nothing to do with "realism" (moreover, it is absent from every theory of the novel). The "moment of truth," supposing an analytic notion of such a thing could be produced, implies a recognition of *pathos* in the simple, non-pejorative sense of the term, and literary science, strangely enough, has difficulty acknowledging *pathos* as a force of our reading; Nietzsche, no doubt, could help us establish the notion, but we are still far from a "pathetic" theory or from a "pathetic" history of the Novel; for in order even to sketch such a thing, we should have to disperse the "whole" of the novelistic universe, no longer to place a book's essence in its structure, but on the contrary acknowledge that the work moves, lives, germinates, through a kind of "collapse" which leaves only certain moments standing, moments which are strictly speaking its summits, our vital, concerned reading following only a "skyline": moments of truth are the *plus-value* points of the anecdote.

The second lesson, I should say the second courage I derived from this scalding contact with the Novel, is that one must acknowledge that the work to be written (since I am defining myself as "the subject who wants to write") actively represents, *without saying so,* a sentiment of which I was sure, but which I now have great difficulty naming, for I cannot emerge from a circle of worn-out words, dubious by dint of having been used without rigor. What I can say, what I cannot help but say, is that this sentiment which must animate the work has something to do with love: what then—kindess? generosity? charity? Perhaps, simply because Rousseau has given it the dignity of a "philosopheme": pity (or compassion).

One of these days I should like to develop this power of the novel—this loving or amorous power (certain mystics do not dissociate *Agape* from *Eros*)—either by means of an Essay (I have spoken of a Pathetic History of Literature) or by means of a Novel, it being understood that for convenience's sake this is what I am calling any Form which is new in relation to my past practice, to my past discourse. Such a form I cannot subject in advance to the Novel's structural rules—I can only ask it to fulfill, in my own eyes, three missions. The first would permit me to *say* whom I love (Sade, yes, Sade used to say that the novel consists in painting those one loves), and not to say *to* them that I love them (which would be a strictly lyrical project); I expect from the novel a kind of transcendence of egotism, insofar as to say whom one loves is to testify that they have not lived (and frequently suffered) "for nothing": say, through sovereign writing, the illness of Proust's mother, the death of old Prince Bolkonsky, the grief of his daughter, Maria (members of Tolstoy's own family), the anguish of Madeleine Gide (in *Et nunc manet in te*) do not fall into History's nothingness: these lives, these sufferings are gathered up, pondered, justified (this is how we must understand the theme of Resurrection in Michelet's History). The second mission entrusted to this (fantasized and probably impossible) Novel would permit me, fully but indirectly, the representation of an affective order. I read

almost everywhere that it is characteristic of a "moden" sensibility to "conceal its tenderness" (beneath the stratagems of writing); but why? Is it "truer," is it more valuable because one struggles to conceal it? An entire ethic, today, scorns and condemns the expression of *pathos* (in the simple sense I intend), with regard to either political or pulsional (sexual) rationality; the Novel, as I read or desire it, is precisely that Form which, by delegating the discourse of affect to characters, permits saying that affect openly: here *the pathetic* can be said, for the Novel, since it is representation and not expression, can never be for the subject who writes it a discourse of bad faith. Finally and perhaps especially, the Novel (I still mean by the Novel that uncertain, quite uncanonical Form, insofar as I do not conceive it but only remember or desire it), since its writing is mediate (it presents ideas and feelings only by intermediaries)—the Novel, then, exerts no pressure upon the other (the reader); its power is the truth of affects, not of ideas: hence, it is never arrogant, terrorist: according to Nietzsche's typology, it aligns itself with Art, not with Priesthood.

Does all this mean I am going to write a novel? How should I know? I don't know if it will be possible still to call a "novel" the work I desire and which I expect to break with the uniformly intellectual nature of my previous writings (even if a number of fictive elements taint their rigor). It is important for me to act *as if* I were to write this utopian novel. And here I regain, to conclude, a method. I put myself in the position of the subject who *makes* something, and no longer of the subject who speaks *about* something: I am not studying a product, I assume a production; I abolish the discourse on discourse; the world no longer comes to me as an object, but as a writing, i.e., a practice: I proceed to another type of knowledge (that of the Amateur), and it is in this that I am methodical. "As if": is not this formula the very expression of scientific procedure, as we see it in mathematics? I venture a hypothesis and I explore, I discover the wealth of what follows from it; I postulate a novel to be written, whereby I can expect to learn more about the novel

than by merely considering it as object already written by others. Perhaps it is finally at the heart of this subjectivity, of this very intimacy which I have invoked, perhaps it is at the "pinnacle of my particularity" that I am scientific without knowing it, vaguely oriented toward that *Scienza Nuova* Vico spoke of: should it not express at once the world's brilliance and the world's suffering, all that beguiles and offends me?

Lecture given at the Collège de France, 1978