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The huge bulk of Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu* is a tantalising presence in the later writings of Roland Barthes. He pores over the surface of the novel as Ishmael pored over the vitreous skin of the Sperm Whale, detained by a "thick array" of signs and cyphers and drawn downwards from its topmost markings to the "far other delineations" that lie beneath. Yet Barthes, unlike Ishmael and Ahab himself, is anxious to avoid charges of obsessiveness and fanaticism. Proust's work is long, involuted and self-absorbed but there is no reason why these qualities should produce monomania in critics and ordinary readers of the novel.

In many of his comments on Proust, Barthes seems to warn against an excess of seriousness. Good readings, of this author at least, he suggests, are light, partial and tangential. Getting the book right is a matter of seeing the mighty body of the text aslant and askew. "D'une lecture à l'autre, on ne saute jamais les mêmes passages" (From one reading to another, one never skips the same passages), he writes in *Le Plaisir du texte* (1973). Besides, Proust's entire undertaking is in a sense an exercise in idling, he adds in one of the interviews collected posthumously as *Le Grain de la voix* (1981), and it would not be in keeping with the book's delicious associative textures to read it in an other than idly pleasure-seeking frame of mind. Repudiating the notion that he might be thought a Proust "specialist," he writes, again in *Le Plaisir du texte*, "Proust, c'est ce qui me vient, ce n'est pas ce que j'appelle; ce n'est pas une 'autorité'" (Proust is that which comes to me, not that which I call forth; he is not an "authority"). Only scholars and specialists would want to turn the reading of Proust prematurely towards long labour and goal-directed linearity. "Je ne suis pas 'proustien'" (I am not a "Proustian"), he repeats elsewhere in *Le Grain de la voix*.

To some extent Barthes's view of himself as a thoroughly negligent and opportunistic reader of Proust is borne out by the uses to which the brand-name "Proust" is put in his critical and theoretical writings. Barthes's *A la recherche du temps perdu* is a cabinet of curiosities inside which the reader's attention is endlessly dispersed, and an inexhaustible dossier of singular moments from which supporting evidence could be plucked for any general claim whatsoever. In *L'Empire*

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des signes (1970), the affected simplicity of Proust's princesse de Parme is called upon to illustrate a characteristically Western notion of good manners, just as Albertine and the "little band" are recruited to help explain the highly coded language of fashion journalism in *Système de la mode* (1967). In one of many Proust references to be found in *Fragments d'un discours amoureux* (1977), the refusal of the narrator's mother to answer his urgent plea for her presence—in the celebrated scene of the withheld bedtime kiss—becomes the very model of the rejected lover's fate: any answer is preferable to "no answer" when it comes to avowals of love. The living reality of Barthes's dead mother, in *La Chambre claire* (1980), is echoed by Proust's narrator's account of his dead grandmother momentarily restored to life by involuntary memory. One could go on.

In all such cases Proust's text is co-opted, in the form of an eloquent excerpt, to underwrite an argument or to reinforce an assertion. Remembering Barthes's central distinction between *studium* and *punctum* in *La Chambre claire*, one could say of this procedure that it causes the studious elaboration of Proust's long novel to come apart into a series of punctual intensities. Or again, remembering Barthes's commentary on Albertine's linguistic aberrations in *Fragments d'un discours amoureux*, one could say that each of these citations is a keyhole through which an entire scene of passion becomes newly visible.

However, in contrast with this view of a scattered Proust and of the Proust reader as a pleasure-seeking scavenger among the remembered scraps and remnants of a great book, a much more august strain of celebration is also to be heard in Barthes's work. Proust is not any old writer, and not even any old great writer enjoying undeniable classic status. He is an emblematic distillation of literature itself in its triumphant mode, and of literature looking outwards from its parochial formal concerns to the intelligible world at large:

> I mean that Proust's work, at least for me, is the key work of reference, the general *mathesis,* the *mandala* of an entire literary cosmogony.[1]

> Proust is a complete system for reading the world. Which means that if we give even the smallest credence to this system, and only because we are seduced by it, we shall find that there is, in our daily lives, no incident, encounter, characteristic or situation that does not have its reference point in Proust. Proust can be my memory, my culture, my language.[2]

What is memorably witty in both these passages is that Barthes distances himself from full-time professional Proustians not by treating their daily devotions with scorn but by going much further than they do towards complete worshipful self-immersion in the splendours of somebody else's writing. Where Proust scholars merely busy themselves with archival, taxonomic or interpretative tasks, Barthes listens to the voice of God, discovers his own personhood in the words of

another, stumbles upon an entire symbolic model of the universe, and finds himself on the threshold of a new superscience. This is the art of the encomium, and that of the love-letter, reaching their high-water mark. "Je suis loin d'y penser tout le temps" (I am far from thinking about it all the time), Barthes says of Proust's work, and there is of course nothing surprising about this remark: being imprinted and infused with Proust to the extent he describes relieves one of the need to treat his book as a mundane object of curiosity, or even to reread it *in extenso*. The exertions of the ordinary, or indeed of the extraordinary, reader are oddly irrelevant to the book as *mathesis* or *mandala*. In these guises, the book is the promise of epistemic success given durable textual form.

What Proust as a scattering of punctual intensities and Proust as a world-system have in common is that they both spring from a thoroughgoing refusal of interpretation on Barthes's part, and speak of an unlimited recalcitrance towards the efforts of criticism. The ambition, not unknown among scholars of modern literature, to produce a "new reading" of Proust becomes a rather pitiful urge, a shrinking away from pleasure and intellectual responsibility alike. But this is not yet the full story of Barthes's encounter with his exemplary signifying leviathan, for at least one further, and seemingly quite distinct, pattern of response remains to be considered.

This concerns the project of Proust's book rather than its textual stuff, and the promise of eventual satisfaction that it holds out to its author before writing begins. Before the book can offer knowledge of the world to its intended reader it must first exist, and its coming into existence as book is the essential process of *Bildung* upon which Proust's mighty *Bildungsroman* luxuriously dwells. In his seminal essay on "Proust et les noms," Barthes speaks of the novel as tracing "un immense, un incessant apprentissage" (an immense, an unceasing apprenticeship), and on this promissory, future-driven dimension of the Proustian undertaking he writes with supreme lucidity and vigour:

> The work is written by seeking the work, which begins fictively when it is terminated practically. Is this not the meaning of *A la recherche*—to present the image of a book which is written exclusively by seeking the Book? By an illogical twist of tense, the material work written by Proust thus occupies a strangely intermediary place in the Narrator's activity, situated between an impulse (*I want to write*) and a decision (*I will write*). This is because the writer's time is not a diachronic but an epic time; without present and without past, the writer is entirely given over to a transport, whose goal, if it could be known, would appear as unreal in the eyes of the world as were the romances of chivalry in the eyes of Don Quixote's contemporaries.[3]

Here, in the preface to his *Essais critiques* (1964), Barthes refers us to Mallarmé's *Livre* as well as to Proust's, and to the *livre à venir* to which a long generation of European writers were variously in thrall. Beneath the planning process, beneath the notes, drafts, cancellations and

interpolations that litter the author's path towards the printed page, an inscrutable enthusiasm runs. Proust's work, so meticulous in its account of the vicissitudes of desire, now begins to acquire, in the unquenchable thirst for literature that drives the whole enquiry, its characteristic underlying energy, its *daimon*. Barthes has found another way of allowing the "material work written by Proust" to disappear from view. The million and a half words of Proust's actual novel dissolve into the sketch of a possible novel, and that sketch into the timeless moment that separates a wish from its implementation. All that Proustian verbal travail has become a hiatus between two emotional states, a wordless mental spasm.

In part, this silencing of Proust has a straightforward and perfectly familiar motive. For many readers of criticism, it is a sign of good manners and good professional practice on the part of the critic that he should not enter into competition with his target author, that he should not seek to outwrite him, and that, to this end, he should avoid re-expressing in his own terms the inner facetings of the original text. Barthes himself offers a modernised and theoretically coherent version of this view in his essay "Qu'est-ce que la critique?", and uses the case of Proust as a main illustration of his central tenet. Criticism is a discourse on discourse, a metalanguage, and its task is to produce a logic or a "systematics" of the literary text rather than a verbal replica of it. Criticism seeks "to 'integrate' (in the mathematical sense of the term) the largest possible amount of Proustian language" and in so doing moves towards the silence and the expressionless neutrality of an equation.[4] Critics should go to work unencumbered by a wish to be stylists, and need not even think of themselves as writers in any significant sense. They are a mechanism for the articulation of rhetorical character in literary texts, and would compromise their own performance of this role by developing character of their own. This systematic and *logicisant* Barthes has become famous over the last thirty years, and the centrality that his thinking still has in the human sciences flows in large measure from the call to order that he directed at a number of otherwise wayward and diffuse intellectual disciplines. For many of his university-based followers, style was a toxic secretion within the academic body, and the sooner it could be drained off the sooner precision and professionalism could be restored to the analysis of culture.

Yet Barthes had another, very different, persona, and in this alternative incarnation was writer, stylist and verbal virtuoso to his fingertips. Proust, who was readily available to dramatise the difference between writer and critic, was also on hand, when the occasion required, to speak of the passions they shared and of their common destiny. Barthes's peroration in *Critique et vérité* (1966), for example, deploys Proust as a spirit-guide, accompanying the critic on his ascent towards *écriture:*

To read is to desire the work, to want to be the work, to refuse to echo the work using any discourse other than that of the work: the only commentary which a pure reader could produce, if he were to remain purely a reader, would be a pastiche (as the example of Proust, lover of reading and of pastiches, shows). To go from reading to criticism is to change desires, it is no longer to desire the work but to desire one's own language. But by that very process it is to send the work back to the desire to write from which it arose. And so discourse circulates around the book: *reading, writing:* all literature goes from one desire to another. How many writers have written only because they have read? How many critics have read only in order to write? They have brought together the two sides of the book, the two aspects of the sign, so that a single discourse may emerge from them. Criticism is only a moment in the period of history which is beginning and which leads us to unity—to the truth of writing.[5]

Proust is the exemplary "readerly" writer, whose novel is saturated in literary allusions and imitative tributes to his predecessors, but he is also his own finest critic. Metalanguage is not "out there," in the province of criticism as a specialised craft, but ingrained in the very fibres of Proust's fiction. That fiction contains a proleptic portrait of the critic as writer—militant, flamboyant and unashamed—and Barthes's identification with Proust in this guise could scarcely be closer. In the original French, the imperfect syntactic rhyme between the questions "combien d'écrivains n'ont écrit que pour avoir lu?" and "combien de critiques n'ont lu que pour écrire?" tells its own ruthless story: the writer writes only becuase he has been pricked into action by other people's texts but to move beyond the servile act of reading once and for all. "Pour avoir lu" speaks not only of a past in which one read books but of a cleansed future in which there are no books left to read. The desire of the critic repeats that of the writer, and is indistinguishable from it.

It might at first seem strange, in view of Barthes's multiform admiration for *A la recherche du temps perdu*, that he should have so little to say about the fibrous fabric of Proust's writing and that he should abstain, in Proust's case, from varieties of textual analysis in which he elsewhere excelled. Even "Proust et les noms," which is his longest single critical discussion of this author, is "seminal" more for its adroit summary of Proust's narrator's own onomastic speculations than for original discussion of key passages. Proust is not summoned up by Barthes to be discussed. Noticing this, we might be tempted to say that differences precisely of style between two such highly individualised writers made for an uneasy relationship at the level of detailed analysis. Where Proust is Ciceronian, Barthes is Senecan. Where Proust's syntax is hypotactic, Barthes's is paratactic. The opulence of the one does not sit well with the quizzical brevity of the other.

There is something in this view, I would guess, but not very much, for Barthes often shows real relish for writers whose syntactic and other habits are dissimilar to his own. *Sade, Fourier, Loyola* (1971), for

example, is a sustained exercise in exogamous critical imagining of this kind. A more probable reason for Barthes's taboo on the analysis of Proust is that the great novelist came to represent not writing itself but the promise, the perpetual incipience, of writing. *A la recherche du temps perdu* was, to be sure, a thick array of signs, an encyclopaedic corpus of signifying instances, but there was something derisory about those—the specialists—who merely scurried back and forth on the stretched skin of this immense organism. Proust was too important to be submitted to dissection or decipherment. Remembering the very first word of *Moby Dick*, its first chapter-title, we could say that Proust's book mattered to Barthes more in its generalised "loomings" than in the copious and artful individual sentences by which other critics have been so readily seduced. The memory of reading Proust, the anticipation of reading him again, or even a mere side-glance at his mountainous volumes, were themselves the crucial empowerment. They helped Barthes to become the astonishing creative writer that he was in the last decades of his life, and remains twenty years after his death.

Notes

1 The original reads: "Je comprends que l'œuvre de Proust est du moins pour moi, l'œuvre de référence, la *mathésis* générale, le *mandala* de toute la cosmogonie littéraire." Roland Barthes, *Le Plaisir du texte* (Paris: Seuil, 1973), 59. Author's translation.

2 The original reads: "Proust, c'est un système complet de lecture du monde. Cela veut dire que, si nous admettons tant soit peu ce système, ne serait-ce que parce qu'il nous séduit, il n'y a pas, dans notre vie quotidienne, d'incident, de rencontre, de trait, de situation, qui n'ait sa référence dans Proust: Proust peut être ma mémoire, ma culture, mon langage." Roland Barthes, *Le Grain de la voix* (Paris: Seuil, 1981), 184–85. Author's translation.

3 The original reads: "L'œuvre s'écrit en cherchant l'œuvre, et c'est lorsqu'elle commence fictivement qu'elle est terminée pratiquement. N'est-ce pas le sens du *Temps Perdu* que de présenter l'image d'un livre qui s'écrit tout seul en cherchant le Livre? Par une retorsion illogique du temps, l'œuvre matérielle écrite par Proust occupe ainsi dans l'activité du Narrateur une place bizarrement intermédiaire, située entre une velléité (*je veux écrire*) et une décision (*je vais écrire*). C'est que le temps de l'écrivain n'est pas un temps diachronique, mais un temps épique; sans présent et sans passé, il est tout entier livré à un *emportement*, dont le but, s'il pouvait être connu, paraîtrait aussi irréel aux yeux du monde que l'étaient les romans de chevalerie aux yeux des contemporains de don Quichotte." Roland Barthes, *Essais critiques* (Paris: Seuil, 1964), 11. English translation by Richard Howard.

4 *Essais critiques*, 255.

5 The original reads: "Lire, c'est désirer l'œuvre, c'est vouloir être l'œuvre, c'est refuser de doubler l'œuvre en dehors de toute autre parole que la parole même de l'œuvre: le seul commentaire que pourrait produire un pur lecteur, et qui le resterait, c'est le pastiche (comme l'indiquerait l'exemple de Proust, amateur de lectures et de pastiches). Passer de la lecture à la critique, c'est changer de désir, c'est désirer non plus l'œuvre, mais son propre langage. Mais par là-même aussi, c'est renvoyer l'œuvre au désir de l'écriture, dont elle était sortie. Ainsi tourne la parole autour du livre: *lire, écrire*: d'un désir à l'autre va toute littérature. Combien d'ecrivains n'ont écrit que pour avoir lu? Combien de critiques n'ont lu que pour écrire? Ils ont rapproché les deux bords du livre, les deux faces du signe, pour que n'en sorte qu'une parole. La critique n'est qu'un moment de cette histoire dans laquelle nous entrons et qui nous conduit à l'unité—à la vérité de l'écriture." Roland Barthes, *Critique et Vérité* (Paris: Seuil, 1966), 79. English translation by Katrine Pilcher Keuneman.