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# Comparative criticism

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## A yearbook

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# Proust and the art of reading

LESLIE HILL

les propres lecteurs d'eux-mêmes...

Proust

For the reader schooled in the social and psychological realism of many nineteenth-century narratives, the European novel of the early decades of this century – the writings of authors such as Joyce, Kafka, Proust and their contemporaries – presents the character of what is arguably a substantial shift in continuity. In parallel with the verse poetics of Symbolism, yet within a genre that had, by then, been increasingly identified with the idea of literary realism, there are here all the signs of a change in direction testifying to the emergence of a whole new continent of creative endeavour.

The very practical difficulties of approach and interpretation which these texts present for traditional readers – for readers of traditional novels – have been a source of frequent and varied interest in critical discussion. It is however by no means certain in my view that these problems of reading have always been considered to their full extent. On the part of many readers there remains a temptation to want to relocate the major experimental novelists of the modern age within the framework of a suitably expanded version of psychological or meta-physical realism. The case I shall argue here takes an opposing view. It suggests that the problematic nature of the reading process is in important ways inherent to the work of the authors I have mentioned. It rests on a belief that one of the crucial factors involved in the understanding of these novelists lies in the way their work tends to resist many of the interpretative strategies that we employ when dealing with the realist novel of preceding generations. By taking note of the fact that, as the proliferating literature on the subject makes clear, these difficulties remain today as powerful and abiding lines of force commanding the

reception of these novelists by contemporary audiences, it asserts that criticism needs to consider the problems of reading not as proof of the random awkwardness of these novelists but as radical symptoms of a crisis of awareness in the house of fiction. Seen in this way, they suggest that what has become problematic in the modern novel is, in fact, the intelligibility and interpretability of the genre as a literary artefact.

Within this developing awareness of the 'modernism' of the novel in the early years of this century, many writers have been greeted with an appropriate recognition of how they may be seen to be breaking new ground. It is in the cases of Kafka and Joyce that this response has been most marked, elevating their names to the status of paradigms, or even slogans, of what is inherently and daringly modernistic. The case of Proust, which I intend to examine here in some detail, is less clear-cut. Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu* occupies in this context something of a theoretical limbo. While some, as for instance Harry Levin, have seen it as a grand finale to the realist tradition, others, taking their lead from Proust's own comments in the novel on the art of the Goncourt brothers, have considered it as a repudiation of mimetic realism.<sup>1</sup> This divergence of opinion, which it would be false to try to resolve, firmly places Proust's novel in an intermediary and pivotal position within the evolution of the novel form. For this reason the work offers a peculiarly fertile ground for evaluating the import of some of the major innovations of the modern novel with regard to the larger continuity of the genre as a whole and to the built-in tendential realism that the genre has often been seen to imply.<sup>2</sup>

*A la recherche du temps perdu* is a complex and many-faceted whole. But within that whole many interwoven dynamics co-exist, combining to create a unique synthesis. It is the nature of this synthesis as an object of reading which is perhaps still in need of precise definition. On the one hand, it is not difficult to isolate in the novel a whole repertory of realistic effects, and it is here that it is sometimes suggested that Proust's best achievements lie.<sup>3</sup> Much can be adduced in support of such a view: Proust's probing depiction of various social groups; his concern for a set of developing individual characters who recur with the regularity, if not the consistency, of those of Balzac's *Comédie humaine*; his close scrutiny of descriptive detail, both intuitive and actual. But at the same time many of the most characteristic aspects of *La Recherche* seem to expand far beyond the bounds of the conventional realist novel of the nineteenth century. His exhaustive recursive analyses of social and psychological behaviour, his dramatization of the inner life, both artistic

and spiritual, of one complex and, in effect, nameless narrator-hero, his attempt to saturate the framework of the novel with an analytical commentary which often seems to usurp the narrative function itself, his calculated disregard for expectations he has himself carefully built up, all these elements combine together to create a monstrously indeterminate totality which inclined many of the novel's early readers to think of it more in terms of the rambling digressiveness of autobiography than as evidence of a desire, in Balzac's phrase, to 'exprimer la réalité'. And today, when Proust's novel is read and reread, we have perhaps lost sight of the degree to which it charts out its own progress under the sign of the monstrous, the heteroclitite and the heterogeneous.

It is to the monstrosity of Proust's book as a reading experience that I want to return. For it is here that much of the novel's peculiar modernity may be seen. One example may suffice to indicate how the strangeness of Proust's enterprise differs from, say, the gigantism of Balzac, that nineteenth-century forbear whom Proust most resembles and from whom he most sharply diverges. *La Recherche* often invites the comparison with a Balzac novel, and it is significant that Proust has incorporated many aspects of his own reading of Balzac into the novel, by making his own creation, Charlus, an avid reader of the author.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, in many respects, Charlus is a striking reincarnation of that Balzac hero of many disguises, Jacques Collin, alias Vautrin, whose adventures are chronicled in *Le Père Goriot*, *Illusions perdues*, *Splendeurs et misères des courtisanes* and other works. As Proust with Charlus, Balzac presents in the figure of Vautrin a sense of dark, lawless forces lurking beneath the surface of reality. But there are crucial distinctions to be made. In *La Comédie humaine* Vautrin serves as a literary index of the ambivalent nature of social reality. Now a 'fameux gaillard',<sup>5</sup> now arch-criminal; now secret diplomat, now all-powerful demiurge; now Chief of Police, now the instrument of savage social vengeance, Vautrin presents in Balzac's work what are on the surface a series of plausible realistic portraits, passing from the familiar to the mysterious, while underneath revealing his identity as an agent of the jungle morality of contemporary Paris. As the discrepancy between surface and depth grows, so does the sense of the hidden monstrosity of social reality. Vautrin operates as a dramatic (and melodramatic) metaphor, focusing the audience's attention on the latent theme of all-consuming criminality whilst respecting, on the surface, the assumptions and beliefs of the reader concerning the plausibility – albeit at times *in extremis* – of Balzac's work as a faithful image of the world.<sup>6</sup>

In many ways Charlus enacts a similar set of testing oppositions: now regal aristocrat, now aficionado of the plebs, now overbearing patron, now pathetic lover, now male, now female. Charlus' different embodiments give rise to a near endless list. Yet unlike Vautrin, whose many masks invite the reader, once he has finished with the aesthetic fascination of each role, to discern beneath hyperbole a consistent thematic truth, Proust's Charlus resists interpretative reduction. If Balzac takes liberties with the real in the creation of Vautrin, it is in order that the essence of his vision may be funnelled and recognized more vividly. In *La Recherche*, however, at no point is the reader in a position to recognize in Charlus one continuous hidden identity behind the masks. The coherence of Charlus is not a rhetorical one, it is textual; the only continuity to the character lies in the fabric of *La Recherche* itself. This is to say that the function of Charlus in the novel is no longer contained within the thematic scope of metaphoric hyperbole. The character of Charlus is not convertible by the reader according to a process of metaphoric reduction; rather it is scattered by the text into a series of narrative occasions and encounters. To portray Charlus as a bumblebee is not to identify his thematic role in the novel, but to introduce complex doubts as to the nature of that identity.<sup>7</sup> In this way Charlus undergoes a chain of metamorphoses which the text refuses to control within the scope of that 'intuitive perception of the similarity within dissimilars' by which Aristotle judged the fitness of poetic metaphors.<sup>8</sup>

What happens in the figure of Charlus, as elsewhere in *La Recherche*, is that the reader is not given any organized pact of intelligibility, by which he might be able, as with Balzac, to transform excess into a probing vision of normality and to acknowledge in hyperbole a realistic truth. The reader is rather forced to submit to the thematic and epistemological indeterminacy of the text. The rhetorical metaphor, centred around a dominant kernel of 'properness' or 'propriety', is scattered into a series of contiguous and ramifying textual occasions which, while structural coherence is preserved by the narrative, refuse the easy synthesis of rhetorical demonstration.

This is no solitary phenomenon in Proust's novel. For the dynamic of his whole manner of writing is articulated to a similar end. Indeed, however much Proust's narrator may claim his text to be profoundly metaphoric, the fact remains, as Genette has finely argued, that the actual writing of the novel works more in terms of metonymic displacement than of metaphoric fusion, isolating more the singularity and difference of occasions than seeking to perceive in the merging of identities the proof

of a higher synthesis of poetic meaning.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, as the reader takes cognizance of the shifting monstrosity of Proust's text as a reading experience, it is the sentences themselves, with their awareness of thematic dispersion, that manifest most potently the heterogeneity of Proust's novelistic idiom. This is not merely the consequence of the sheer length of some of the sentences in the novel, which it is easy to overstress,<sup>10</sup> nor simply a result of their syntactic complexity, but, more challengingly, of their function. It is this I want to examine now.

The function of the novelistic sentence, it may be said truistically, is to narrate. But what this means in effect is that the task of the novelistic sentence is one of mediation. It mediates between the discursive world of the extra-literary and the discursive world of the narrative. It lives by the significant links it is able to forge between the text and the world, between narrative logic and contextual discourse. Characteristically it is subject to much internal transformation. It possesses none of the conventional codifying markers that isolate the verse line from contextual discourse as particular and different. It occupies that dynamic and moving interval between reader and narrative voice, binding them together in a pact of mutual acknowledgement. This pact operates according to a logic of exchange, by virtue of which what the reader injects into his reading as a 'willing suspension of disbelief' is returned to him, at a premium, as a vicarious experience and as a vision of a world both verbal and real.

In realist novels, the novelistic sentence achieves this bonding and correlation of fictional effects and external discourse through a number of articulated rhetorical strategies. The art of rhetoric is defined by Aristotle as 'the faculty of observing in any given case the available means of persuasion',<sup>11</sup> and it is similarly in persuading the reader of the plausible veracity of its constructions that, in realist texts, narrative rhetoric has its justification. It works by exploiting various dynamics of ordinary language and by appealing, implicitly and explicitly, to inherited assumptions about the inherent logic of literary forms and about human behaviour in general. The verisimilitude of a text, on both structural and thematic levels, functions in this way as an interpretative intermediary between reader and text, establishing between them a series of channels of communication. This is why it may be usefully described as a pact.

This pact is no monolithic entity. Its exact nature will vary from author to author, and from novel to novel. It is a space of interaction that is often subject to historical adjustment. But, in general terms, two levels may be distinguished in its operation within the realist tradition.



First, on the direct plane, realist novels exploit the general propensity of language to reconstitute certain particular referential contexts.<sup>12</sup> Language is not an inert collection of random meanings, but carries with it the historical weight of its centrality as a mode of social intercourse. Sentences tend thus, by the implications they transport with them, to organize themselves in coherent semantic universes which may be identified with particular referential situations. This is the result of a combination of logical and cultural data, and it is easy for the realist novel to exploit such data in order to suggest that the novel is dealing with an empirical world which it is merely reflecting in its words. A brief example will illustrate the point. These are the first lines of Balzac's *La Cousine Bette*:

Vers le milieu du mois de juillet de l'année 1838, une de ces voitures nouvellement mises en circulation sur les places de Paris et nommées des *milords*, cheminait, rue de l'Université, portant un gros homme de taille moyenne, en uniforme de capitaine de la garde nationale.

Dans le nombre de ces Parisiens accusés d'être si spirituels, il s'en trouve qui se croient infiniment mieux en uniforme que dans leurs habits ordinaires, et qui supposent chez les femmes des goûts assez dépravés pour imaginer qu'elles seront favorablement impressionnées à l'aspect d'un bonnet à poil et par le harnais militaire.<sup>13</sup>

Whatever the reader's foreknowledge of the historical moment to which these lines allude (and it may well be negligible), most readers will readily agree that there exists here an identifiable referential context. These lines possess, as Roland Barthes has argued in his reading of Balzac's *Sarrasine*, a coded hierarchical order which may be recognized as such by the reader.<sup>14</sup> What we have here is a particular verbal strategy aimed at creating in the audience a sense of recognizable reference. Contrary to what the realist doctrine of reflection or mirroring might suggest, it is the manipulation of language which acts here as the source of the sense of referential context.

There is more. For while the novelistic sentence as such asserts in this way the denotational function of language, it does so only within the scope of a fictional world. This fictional perspective (the roots of which lie as much in the metapsychology of reading as in literary convention) is an important one. For in the novel it has the effect, paradoxically, of freeing the referential dynamic of language from its given external contexts in such a way that we know, as readers, that the world we are dealing with, while still a recognizable world, is none the less a fictional one (the Paris of *La Cousine Bette* is, we say, part of the fictional world of *La Comédie humaine*). But the realist text takes the process one step further. For it strives to re-situate this new fictional context within the

factual world, so that we recognize in the fictional world the factual world of our own experience (the fictional world of *La Comédie humaine*, we say, doubles for the actual city of Paris). The impact of this dialectic of displacement and re-situation is two-fold: it withdraws the reader from his affective implication in the real world in which, as an ordinary citizen, he finds himself, thus suspending the reader's adherence to the reality principle and allowing him to enjoy the book as an object of pleasure.<sup>15</sup> At the same time, however, it relocates the reader's implication in the text within the recognizable world of his own experience, which returns to the reader with the added force of a familiar object seen afresh, permitting him now to enjoy the sense of the final identity of the world of fiction with the world of ordinary experience. At this point the realist illusion, which is perceived, significantly enough, as an illusion, may be said to have been achieved. We must remember, however, that this is once again the result of a verbal manipulation: for when the novel purports to denote the real, remarks Barthes, it does no more in fact than to connote a denotation of the real.<sup>16</sup>

Cultural connotation, as may be seen in the example quoted from Balzac, is a powerful source of effects sustaining the sense of the recognizable. It accounts for a second level of more indirect forces present in the pact. The reader's own historical expectations are used by realist novels in their recourse to general assumptions about life to motivate the events happening in the verbal world of fiction. They provide an indispensable fund of interpretative models within the medial no-man's-land between author and reader. They are often displayed in the realist text, as in the Balzac example, as implicit or explicit enthymemes, maxims or exempla. These are, in fact, the chief rhetorical devices of persuasion enumerated by Aristotle in his *Rhetoric*. Yet to stress the existence of such codified assumptions in the realist novel is not to say that the realist novel will necessarily, though this may be the case, follow them slavishly. Any creative novel, realistic or not, will engage the interpretative faculties of the reader and will often challenge particular forms of cultural verisimilitude. But the fact remains that the verisimilar provides the realist novel with the semantic terrain over which it moves. It holds such novels within a recognizable horizon of meaning, allowing them to sustain their creativity as an intervention into the ambient social world. In a universe saturated by rhetorical codes of interpretation the incisiveness of the realist novel as a critical vision of the world is purchased at the cost of its ultimate closure within that world as a recognizable fictional construct.

I have taken this long detour into the nature of literary realism in order

to describe a backdrop against which the modernity of Proust may be more easily gauged. For in realism, if we do have a powerful economy of meaning, we also have a literary mode that is historically determined. Realism is no natural given, but a particular hegemonic form of literary intelligibility, which has been grafted on to the genre of the novel and which may not be said to have grown naturally from it. It is my belief that only when armed with this insight is it possible to read Proust.

For in *A la recherche du temps perdu*, as in works like *Ulysses* or *Der Prozess*, it is realism as a hegemonic mode of intelligibility that has become fragile and uncertain; or, put in another way, it is the central achievement of such novels to have enacted, fictionally, the fragility and uncertainty of that intelligibility. For in *La Recherche* it is the whole economy of recognition that is put into crisis. It is no accident that the novel opens with a long meditation on the limits of recognition. From the first lines of the text a new posture of reading is sketched out by the narrator. It is a posture of reading that relinquishes the specular relation between subject and aesthetic object and which begins to explore reading as a mode of affective fusion and self-injection. The polarity between subject and object loses its pivot, as the initial words reveal:

Longtemps je me suis couché de bonne heure. Parfois, à peine ma bougie éteinte, mes yeux se fermaient si vite que je n'avais pas le temps de me dire: 'Je m'endors'. Et, une demi-heure après, la pensée qu'il était temps de chercher le sommeil m'éveillait; je voulais poser le volume que je croyais avoir encore dans les mains et souffler ma lumière; je n'avais pas cessé en dormant de faire des réflexions sur ce que je venais de lire, mais ces réflexions avaient pris un tour un peu particulier; il me semblait que j'étais moi-même ce dont parlait l'ouvrage: une église, un quatuor, la rivalité de François Ier et de Charles-Quint.

(1, 3)

The oddity of this experience is considerable, but it is in some ways only provisional, as the narrator slowly grasps where he is. But its effects are protracted and are enough to blur and recast the whole relation of subject to written object. And reading in these lines is presented as a model for the narrator's own process of understanding. The narrator is not allowed to apprehend the world in its transparency or its immediacy, but is forced to engage in a process of articulation denying him initially both position and identity. Reading stands here at the indeterminate and disruptive juncture of waking and dreaming, of first- and third-person, of awareness and oblivion. *La Recherche* begins in an area where the relation between the fictional and the contextual world becomes the object of much ambivalence, where the regular equilibrium between fictional effect and recognition effect is displaced to cope with much

hesitation and indeterminacy. The novel, synonymous here with the narrator's own sense of self, begins by seeking to trace its own position in a world where the effect of recognition is strangely distended and where the final instance of knowledge setting its seal of closure on the novel's verbal universe is massively deferred. In this sense, both formally and thematically, *La Recherche* may be said to exist only as a long deferment of recognition.

It is not that individual sentences or entire narrative segments do not present in the novel zones of familiarity or moments of provisional closure. For some of Proust's most telling novelistic effects draw their power from the sense of truths being glimpsed and of movements being resolved.<sup>17</sup> But these moments, as I shall suggest, follow a rather different logic than that of the mimetic text. It is not the case, either, that the novel rejects the referential dynamic of narrative language. For constantly the work draws, as it advances, on the language of social intercourse. In the Verdurin circle, in the Guermantes salon, in its account of the Dreyfus affair or the war, *La Recherche* encounters at its every turn the extra-literary universe of historical reality. But, as it has been pointed out, this reality is of a crucially verbal nature.<sup>18</sup> Rather than presenting a portrait of reality, the novel scrutinizes the private languages and codes of the social castes and psychological types existing in the recognizable world. The book incorporates but also makes problematic these external situations as a means of renewing its own language. It assimilates them rather in order to defer the moment when the literary artefact gels into sense. The effect of this manifold of social idioms and rituals on the novel is to hold *La Recherche* in suspense as the dramatization of a non-finite reading process.

In the early parts of the book, in the same way as in these opening lines, Proust thematizes the reading process under the double aegis of indeterminacy and logical uncertainty. There are many instances in the novel where the narrator-hero reflects on the experience of reading in particular and on the mechanisms of interpretation in general. But there are two early moments in the text where the process of reading is explored more properly. The first stands strategically at the end of the young protagonist's 'drame du coucher' (I, 37-43). Readers will recall the Oedipal tenor of the incident: the child, by the good offices of Françoise, passes to his mother a letter, which, transgressing the code of good behaviour, remains unanswered; the child waits up for his mother in order to snatch a goodnight kiss; the father, mounting the stairs with the air of a biblical Abraham, seems about to chastise the boy.

But something logically scandalous occurs. The mother is invited to spend the night in the boy's room; the night is concluded with a favour: the mother reads from George Sand's *François le Champi*, which, itself, is the disguised enactment, in literary form, of a Oedipal wish on the part of a foundling who, finally, marries his adoptive mother.

Like so many of the incidents of Combray the whole sequence has the decisive character of a unique event and the recursive status of an unconscious fantasy. The reading of George Sand is a scenario of initiation, standing as a threshold passed, of a past caught on the threshold of memory. It is an oddly suspended event. It enacts an Oedipal wish, but displaces it doubly into literature. It effects a transgression of the paternal code yet eludes the drama – but not the emotional consequences – of transgression. Reading comes over as a kind of authorized transgression, the source of both joy and pain. It marks a first accession to knowledge. But it stands in an eccentric logical place, at the junction of reality and fantasy, between childhood and adolescence, separation and communion, day and night, and guilt and favour. The medium of these encounters is the language of literature, in which affective substance is more important than recognizable meaning. For the text is abridged – censored – by the mother. This is of no matter for the boy, for what is paramount for him is the presence of his mother's voice in the text. The book for him is not an object of recognition but an object of desire, standing at the limits of his own emotional world.

What Proust presents here is a kind of anaclitic genesis of the desire for literature.<sup>19</sup> This desire takes the double form of a desire to read and a desire to write. This is made clear towards the end of the novel when George Sand's *François le Champi* recurs in the fiction to remind the narrator of his childhood and to propel him towards the realization of his own book. The writing of George Sand becomes a psychic signifier, 'electrified' by himself, able to symbolize his affective position as a human subject. As the logical culmination of the 'drame du coucher' it condenses into one linguistic object the structural forces attendant on his life as a child: his mother, who reads to him, his grandmother, who purchases the book, his father, who assents, Swann, whose presence causes the initial drama, and his relation to the opaqueness of words themselves. And the achievement of the novel is to have channelled these forces into the texture of literature itself.

Literature becomes the site of a potential revelation. This is possible for the narrator only because the reading experience, as this incident shows, takes place in an area that is immanent in, yet withdrawn from,

the world of ordinary experience. One further incident in the early part of *La Recherche* serves to illuminate the location of this area. As he recounts his days spent reading in Combray, the narrator presents the space of the reading experience in strikingly corporeal terms: the process of thought as he reads is likened to a 'crèche au fond de laquelle je restais enfoncé même pour regarder ce qui se passait au dehors' (I, 84). But this interiority overarches and redistributes the simple polarity of inner and outer. The narrator puts it as follows:

Cette obscure fraîcheur de ma chambre était au plein soleil de la rue ce que l'ombre est au rayon, c'est-à-dire aussi lumineuse que lui et offrait à mon imagination le spectacle total de l'été dont mes sens, si j'avais été en promenade, n'auraient pu jouir que par morceaux; et ainsi elle s'accordait bien à mon repos qui (grâce aux aventures racontées par mes livres et qui venaient l'émouvoir) supportait, pareil au repos d'une main immobile au milieu d'une eau courante, le choc et l'animation d'un torrent d'activité. (I, 83)

In what way, asks Paul de Man in his commentary on this passage, can shade be said to be as luminous as light?<sup>20</sup> Only in so far as there is a kind of osmosis of value, which identifies, even as it dissociates, shade with light and rest with activity. Distinct from the outer world, the fragmentation of which it does not share, yet metamorphosed into something other than a contrasted opposite, the posture of reading is a stance that is difficult to determine in simple logic. For it exists not as a space identical with itself, but as a deferred site of interchange on the edge of the body's contact with the world. It appropriates both the world of the book and the ambient sensory world by the 'incessants mouvements' it makes 'du dedans au dehors vers la découverte de la vérité' (I, 84). While the book remains an irreplaceable medium of fusion and interchange, the external world is volatilized and introjected by the reading mind. This enables a relation between reader and text that is freed from the incommunicability of the relation between subject and object. In the narrator's words:

Mais les sentiments que nous font éprouver la joie ou l'infortune d'un personnage réel ne se produisent en nous que par l'intermédiaire d'une image de cette joie ou de cette infortune; l'ingéniosité du premier romancier consista à comprendre que dans l'appareil de nos émotions, l'image étant le seul élément essentiel, la simplification qui consisterait à supprimer purement et simplement les personnages réels serait un perfectionnement décisif. Un être réel, si profondément que nous sympathisions avec lui, pour une grande part est perçu par nos sens, c'est-à-dire nous reste opaque, offre un poids mort que notre sensibilité ne peut soulever. . . La trouvaille du romancier a été d'avoir l'idée de remplacer des parties impénétrables à l'âme par une quantité égale de parties immatérielles, c'est-à-dire que notre âme peut s'assimiler. Qu'importe dès lors que les actions, les

émotions de ces êtres d'un nouveau genre nous apparaissent comme vraies, puisque nous les avons faites nôtres, puisque c'est en nous qu'elles se produisent, qu'elles tiennent sous leur dépendance, tandis que nous tournons fiévreusement les pages du livre, la rapidité de notre respiration et l'intensité de notre regard? (1, 85)

It is true that this euphoria will be tempered in later volumes by the cruel sense of the impenetrability of reality that it discards here so easily. It is true, too, that the narrator will become aware of the naive concessions he makes here to a facile novelistic art and a more important role will be accorded to the deciphering intelligence. But these qualifications should not blind us. Reading, because of the eccentricity of its position towards the outside world, is alone able to penetrate the truth of the outside world because, with respect to that world, it alone offers a totally creative response able to reveal the secrets of the narrator's own existence:

On cherche à retrouver dans les choses, devenues par là précieuses, le reflet que notre âme a projeté sur elles; on est déçu en constatant qu'elles semblent dépourvues dans la nature du charme qu'elles devaient, dans notre pensée, au voisinage de certaines idées; parfois on convertit toutes les forces de cette âme en habileté, en splendeur pour agir sur des êtres dont nous sentons bien qu'ils sont situés en dehors de nous et que nous ne les atteindrons jamais. Aussi, si j'imaginai toujours autour de la femme que j'aimais les lieux que je désirais le plus alors, si j'eusse voulu que ce fût elle qui me les fit visiter, qui m'ouvrit l'accès d'un monde inconnu, ce n'était pas par le hasard d'une simple association de pensée; non, c'est que mes rêves de voyage et d'amour n'étaient que des moments – que je sépare artificiellement aujourd'hui comme si je pratiquais des sections à des hauteurs différentes d'un jet d'eau irisé et en apparence immobile – dans un même et inflexible jaillissement de toutes les forces de ma vie. (1, 87)

Reading is a dynamic collaboration between reading subject and textual object; it stands at the point of a whorled imbrication of self with world, revealing the essence of each. As the episode of the 'clochers de Martinville' shows, reading begins to transform itself into a writing, but a writing that will need to be deferred till the time when the narrator will have mastered the devious craft of reading no longer adventure stories bought at the village greengrocer's, but the signs of living itself.

Yet, already, the nature of the reading process enacted by the narrator approaches its justification. I began some while ago considering the novelistic function of Proust's sentences, only to diverge into the thematics of reading as presented by the novel. *La Recherche* often involves its readers in such detours. But here that detour is of the essence. For it coincides with the whole notion of the novel itself as a protracted detour through sense. For what I have been saying is that the writing of *La Recherche* founds itself as a process of reading. Proust's novel is

a massive detour through interpretation: it is, as Gilles Deleuze has put it, the story of an apprenticeship of signs.<sup>21</sup>

This is not merely a question of thematic or narrative organization. For the process is writ large and small in each of the narrator's sentences. In their tightly woven momentum, the effect of these sentences is to approximate the experience of the reader to the movement of their own structure. They offer a unique fusion of plot and commentary, vastly privileging the latter and all but submerging the former. Their textured mobility stretches the reader's sense of recognition to the extreme, ultimately dissolving the reader as a specular participant in the construction of a finite rhetorical world. The reader's entanglement in the text is coextensive with the novel's elaborate art of deferment. To read *La Recherche* is to engage doubly in the recursive momentum of a process of reading.

In the complexity of the sentences some of Proust's most characteristic effects are communicated. Sentences operate a dynamic of deferment and displacement, of gloss and digression, of progress and regress. Beyond their particular narrative or analytical purpose, sentences are motivated by considerations of architecture and flux, by their interrelational musicality. For music, too, as the novel reminds us, is a sophisticated art of deferment and resolution, of transformation and repetition. It is always difficult, particularly in narrative prose, to know what importance to accord such non-semantic levels of textual performance. But it is no less certain that a major part of the impact of Proust's novel derives from the presence of such levels. For the musicality of Proust's writing is more than a personal mannerism. It is the sign of a concerted endeavour to influence radically, from within the text, the posture of reading of the audience. It displaces attention from plot and from recognition, forcing the reader to submit to the text with something of the 'evenly suspended attention' prescribed by Freud for the analyst of the unconscious.<sup>22</sup> To this degree the area in which *La Recherche* operates possesses a dynamic similar to that of transference in the psychoanalytic cure. There is an important difference, however, in that the positions of analyst and analysand, while structurally distinct, are, in the novel, not mutually exclusive. The novel works a complex oscillation between them, allowing the narrative voice to hold both positions alternately and yet simultaneously. As the work outlines an anaclitic genesis to fiction, so it proposes a transferential dynamic to the reading process. Not only does the narrator approach his own reading and writing as objects of desire, he also desires his own reader. He seeks to set the reader in a position



of desiring subject, aiming to seduce him into a relation of affective investment towards the text. He invites the reader, as one of the narrator's metaphors puts it, to enrobe himself in the text, to try it on as a garment covering his own bodily self (III, 1033). Rather than pursuing simply an analytical argument, the reader collaborates with the novel in embodying a certain kind of voice. And in any given reading, as readers of Proust will probably attest, it is in this kind of amnesiac rapture that we cover huge tracts of the text.

It is arguable that it is in such moments of intellectual abdication that the individuality and modernity of Proust's achievement may be most sharply caught. For in such lost moments, which are lost only for the recognition effect of realism, *La Recherche* ventures into a dimension all its own. As in Joyce or Kafka, the novelistic sentence becomes its only arbiter; it moves into a zone of radical exteriority to the given, advancing as a self-referring yet non-finite continuum. At such moments, the text takes on the substance of a body, one which, like that of Charlus, exists not in a transcendental space of identity to itself but as a shifting site of verbal displacements. It lives as a chain of sense having no other coherence than its own articulated transformation. The novel becomes a self-referring palimpsest dramatizing its own singular nature as an interpretative labyrinth.<sup>23</sup>

This interpretative process is more than just an expository commentary, founding the verisimilar intelligibility of the fiction. There are occasions when it does work as such, and to say otherwise would be to deny the coherence of the book as a narrative construct. But what is more striking is the extent to which this commentary is caught in the complex dynamic of narrative ironies and moving perspectives governing the text as a whole. The numerous maxims and enthymemes of analysis saturating the body of *La Recherche* function more as moments, and often provisional and misleading ones, in that larger process of interpretation which, as I have suggested, founds the text itself as fiction. The dynamic of the book is directed in this way more towards a notion of fiction as endless self-elucidation than towards that point of recognition where, impossibly for the narrator of *La Recherche*, the models of understanding might be seen to coincide with the objective nature of the real. For if reading is a creative act, what it creates is not a picture of the world but an image of the reading self.

*La Recherche* aims to uncover a truth about the reading self. This truth is not objective but subjective. This enterprise poses a problem of knowledge. It raises the question of the availability of a guarantee to

judge the truthfulness of a subjective truth. Faced with what were substantially the same problems in the psychoanalytic cure, Freud offers here an original criterion. For the guarantee, wrote Freud, that an analytic construction corresponds to the subjective truth of a patient lies not in the readiness of the analysand to affirm or deny that construction, but in his capacity to produce further, till then unavailable, information to confirm or prolong the construction.<sup>24</sup> Proust's novel follows a similar course. For the guarantee of truth in this context is to be found not in the narrator's willingness to accept a revelation existing beyond the text, in a mirror of self-knowledge where truth might be resolved in an identification of self with some external figure, but, paradoxically, in the unending movement of the text as a recurrent and self-correlating construction of the real. In short, the truth that the novel uncovers is to be found in its own unending continuity as a process of articulated digression. The continuity of *La Recherche* as fiction is the proof of its epistemological and artistic fecundity.

This continuity is not truthful because it catalogues a wide spectrum of reality, but by virtue of its ever-changing movement. This movement is not wilful self-indulgence on the part of an egocentric narrator. For it weaves a subtle dialectic of shifting intelligibilities, within the gaps of which truth may be apprehended. Truth exists not as a new and better verisimilar synthesis of the recognizable, but as a series of shocks disrupting the process of understanding. It appears as something radically heterogeneous in the semantic order. As the narrator recounts in *La Prisonnière*:

Chez Albertine, la sensation du mensonge était donnée par bien des particularités qu'on a déjà vues au cours de ce récit, mais principalement par ceci que, quand elle mentait, son récit péchait soit par insuffisance, omission, invraisemblance, soit par excès, au contraire, de petits faits destinés à le rendre vraisemblable. Le vraisemblable, malgré l'idée que se fait le menteur, n'est pas du tout le vrai. Dès qu'écoulant quelque chose de vrai, on entend quelque chose qui est seulement vraisemblable, qui l'est peut-être plus que le vrai, qui l'est peut-être trop, l'oreille un peu musicienne sent que ce n'est pas cela, comme pour un vers faux, ou un mot lu à haute voix pour un autre. L'oreille le sent et, si l'on aime, le cœur s'alarme. (III, 179)

The verisimilar, like the realist novelist, provides a plausible yet abusive text that tidies up and distorts the real. It is founded upon recognition. Truth, however, is a distortion within that distortion; it emerges as a supplementary element disrupting the homogeneity of sense. Truth, in this way, is of the order of the heterogeneous, a function of monstrosity and eccentricity. It stands inscribed not in discourse but on the material

edge of discourse, beyond the logical distinction between the sensible and the intelligible, as so many 'caractères hiéroglyphiques' (III, 878). The grasping of truth in signs is described in the same terms by the narrator:

J'avais suivi dans mon existence une marche inverse de celle des peuples qui ne se servent de l'écriture phonétique qu'après n'avoir considéré les caractères que comme une suite de symboles; moi qui, pendant tant d'années, n'avais cherché la vie et la pensée réelles des gens que dans l'énoncé direct qu'ils m'en fournissaient volontairement, par leur faute, j'en étais arrivé à ne plus attacher, au contraire, d'importance qu'aux témoignages qui ne sont pas une expression rationnelle et analytique de la vérité; les paroles elles-mêmes ne me renseignaient qu'à la condition d'être interprétées à la façon d'un afflux de sang à la figure d'une personne qui se trouble, à la façon encore d'un silence subit.(III, 88)

To apprehend a truth is to read not a statement but the enunciation of a statement. Interpretation in *La Recherche* is a symptomatology. It investigates the affective implication of subjectivity in sense, the heterogeneity of the relation between self and language. As it does so, other schemes of intelligibility become visible to the reader of Proust's novel, schemes that are non-discursive and revelatory, not verisimilar and recognitional. The structure of the book, confirmed in its complex significance only with much ironic delay by the narrator, impels the reader to detect the latent meanings inscribed in its narrative constructs. These are not to be found beneath the surface of the text in a kind of rhetorical reservoir of sense, as is the case with *La Comédie humaine*, but are interwoven in the heterogeneous symbolic correlations of meaning that articulate the novel's fictional progress. This symbolic patterning of Proust's book is a curious affair. For the novel's symbolism does not work extensively according to recognizable sets of *topoi*, but according to a relational logic where one part of the text becomes symbolic by enacting in condensed fashion threads that recur, transformed and displaced, elsewhere in the text. The symbols in *La Recherche* are irreducible. They are, as Beckett has it in a striking formula, autosymbolic.<sup>25</sup> They may be interpreted only by reference to themselves. *La Recherche* offers a remarkable compendium of mutually heterogeneous yet mutually explicative narrative moments. The 'madeleine' sequence, for instance, condenses in one affective bundle a whole range of elements coiled around the figure of oral eroticism, and it is in the relations between elements that may be found the veracity of that particular incident. Proust's symbols, in a way, are totally literal; but it is this literalism that is profoundly symbolic, allowing incidents to actualize avenues of sense that in the course of the interpretative act will

be enriched by accretion and recurrence. The novelistic moments of the book, transformed by the reading process to which they give rise, are scenarios of self, psychic signifiers dramatizing the position of self with regard to its latent truths. And this is one reason why, beyond standard verisimilitude, the narrator is so often present at events in the novel as a narratorial voyeur: the events that occur take place and signify *for him*.

As readers will know, this change in the status of narrative event provides the narrator with a final ecstatic revelation. Here the recognition effect, deferred within interpretation, asserts itself with dramatic impact. What the narrator recognizes is not the truth of the world as it is, but the truth of his own self figured in the story of his life. Fiction, through the intermediary of involuntary memory, becomes the vehicle of a radical awareness: that the world as recorded in the unconscious is more meaningful than the world as experienced, not because it captures the world more vividly but because it mediates between the world as object and the narrator as subject. It allows the self the possibility of reintegrating its own past, of gaining access to a zone crucial yet unavailable to the speaking 'je'. The text of the past – the past as truth – emerges from the 'lac inconnu' (III, 822) of the unconscious as a force of the uncanny, both familiar and yet alien. Its impact is to constrain the narrator, with a compulsion all its own, to engage on a synthesis of his story and to write his own book.

This synthesis, like all attempts at discursive totalization, is a future event, which the narrator can only project and on the threshold of which he stands at the finale of the novel. The text of his life remains held in constant deferment, withdrawn from consciousness by the negativity and heterogeneity of a work of truth. Reintegration of one's past is an infinite and recursive act. The book of living is an unmasterable script, which may only be assumed as an ineluctable act of reading. Yet reading, as we have seen, is a transformable process. The principle of deferment is a principle of creative interpretation. The story of a reading becomes the writing of a story. These two dynamics interfuse in the novel. For if there is a story of error and disappointment, there is also a story of investigation and creation. The unmasterable script of life is interpretable. But it is interpretable only as a redoubled act of reading, in a recursive re-reading of the text of life, where the act of reading becomes the writing of a reading. For only here do miscognition and recognition interweave, propelling the text towards the grasping of a truth.

The reader as aesthete undergoes a metamorphosis into the writer as artist. The site of this crucial reversal lies in the process of reading as

a redoubled and reversible activity. This is why the place of the reader in the novel is the fulcrum on which the conclusion of *La Recherche* turns. For the reader of the book is the re-reader of the narrator's text. It is the reader whom the text desires as the site of the novel's accomplishment, who is alone able to bond the story of error to the story of discovery and to interrelate the symbolic texture of the novel as a progressive act of recreation. But in pursuing this challenge of the reversible text, the reader is more than just an audience admiring the ecstasy of the narrator from outside. For already bodily implicated in the text of *La Recherche*, as I have argued, the reader becomes the re-reader of his own reading. At the extreme edge of the novel, in a reversal that has all the monstrosity of a truth, the novel opens up to the reader as a medium for his own self-knowledge. The book becomes the transferential pole upon which the reader projects his own affective energies. Moving subtly and ironically to resist in turn the narcissistic fantasies of the reader, the novel implicates the reader in a process of self-elucidation. Reading becomes a challenge goading the reader to recognize his own self – that self he has ever been reading – in the text. Held in suspense and deferred for close on 3,000 pages the novel brings the reader to the margin of his own reading, to that point where the creativity of the reading experience is triumphantly asserted. It is here, building on realism and displacing it, reasserting narrative and yet transforming it, that the modern novel of our age finds its peculiar singularity and distinctiveness. Reading the modern novel is no longer a rhetorical technique, however sophisticated, for it has become something other: it has become an art.

## NOTES

- 1 See Harry Levin, *The Gates of Horn* (New York, 1963). The Goncourt passages are in Proust, *A la recherche du temps perdu*, edited by Pierre Clarac and André Ferré, 3 vols. (Paris, 1954), vol. III, pp. 708–23 and *passim*. (All further references to Proust's novel will be to this edition and will be given directly in the text.)
- 2 See Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel* (Harmondsworth, 1963), who suggests (p. 37) that 'the lowest common denominator of the novel genre as a whole [is] its formal realism'.
- 3 As for instance by Jean-François Revel, *Sur Proust* (Paris, 1960).
- 4 See especially *La Recherche* vol. II, pp. 1038–9; 1050–8, etc. The convergence between these ideas and Proust's own may be easily seen from the comments on the author in Proust, *Contre Sainte-Beuve*, edited by Pierre Clarac and Yves Sandre (Paris, 1971), pp. 263–98 and *passim*.
- 5 *La Comédie humaine*, edited by Marcel Bouteron, 11 vols. (Paris, 1949–59), vol. II, p. 858.

- 6 On the whole issue of plausibility in Balzac, see Christopher Prendergast, *Balzac: Fiction and Melodrama* (London, 1978).
- 7 See *La Recherche*, vol. II, pp. 601–32. On the technique of metaphoric hyperbole see Balzac's opening words to *Le Cabinet des Antiques*, in *La Comédie humaine*, vol. IV, p. 335, and for a definition of rhetorical hyperbole, see Pierre Fontanier, *Les Figures du discours*, edited by Gérard Genette (Paris, 1968), pp. 123–4.
- 8 Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1459a, in the translation of Ingram Bywater, in *The Works of Aristotle*, edited by W. D. Ross, 12 vols. (Oxford, 1924), vol. XI.
- 9 See Gérard Genette, *Figures III* (Paris, 1972), pp. 41–63.
- 10 As I am reminded by Jean Milly, *La Phrase de Proust* (Paris, 1975), pp. 9–11.
- 11 *Rhetoric*, 1355b, translated by W. Rhys Roberts, in *The Works of Aristotle*, vol. XI.
- 12 See Tzvetan Todorov, *Les Genres du discours* (Paris, 1978).
- 13 *La Comédie humaine*, vol. VI, p. 135.
- 14 See Roland Barthes, *S/Z* (Paris, 1970), pp. 25–8.
- 15 On the dialectic of pleasure and reality, see Freud, *Gesammelte Werke*, 17 vols. (London, 1940–52), vol. VIII, pp. 230–8. See also Roland Barthes, *Le Plaisir du texte* (Paris, 1973).
- 16 Barthes, *S/Z*, pp. 14–16.
- 17 Witness for example the long sentence about the sea in *La Recherche*, vol. I, pp. 138–9, or the revelation of Legrandin's *snobisme*, vol. I, pp. 124–33.
- 18 See Gérard Genette, *Figures II* (Paris, 1969), pp. 223–94, and Jean-Yves Tadié, *Proust et le roman* (Paris, 1971), pp. 132–80.
- 19 On the whole notion of the anacritic, see Jean Laplanche, *Vie et mort en psychanalyse* (Paris, 1970). The term is originally Freud's, and a brief summary of its uses is provided in Jean Laplanche and J.-B. Pontalis, *The Language of Psycho-analysis*, translated by Donald Nicholson-Smith (London, 1973), pp. 29–32.
- 20 See Paul de Man, 'Proust et l'allégorie de la lecture', in *Mouvements premiers* (Paris, 1972), pp. 231–50.
- 21 See Gilles Deleuze, *Proust et les signes*, 2nd edn (Paris, 1970).
- 22 Freud's original term is 'gleichschwebende Aufmerksamkeit'. See *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. VIII, pp. 376–87.
- 23 See Gérard Genette, *Figures I* (Paris, 1966), pp. 39–68.
- 24 See *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. XIV, pp. 11–15.
- 25 Samuel Beckett, *Proust and Three Dialogues* (London, 1965), p. 80. On this idea of literal symbolism, compare the narrator's own reflections on allegory, in *La Recherche*, vol. I, p. 82.