PROPER NAMES

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The eternity of the masterpieces does not wrest them free from time.

The present—unaware, capricious—seeks justification and foundation in the works of the past, which, though completed, thus take on new meaning, are revitalized and live. Proust, who no longer belongs to the present, since he can already guide it, enjoys the fabulous fate of countless afterlives.

What was he to the readers of the period between the two world wars, who, around 1933, tempted by an entire literature of heroism, action and rural nostalgia, were beginning to forget him? A master of the differential calculus of souls, a psychologist of the infinitesimal. A magician of inexpressible rhythms. One who, by a linguistic miracle, rediscovered and re-created a world and a time that had been lost in the scattering of instants. An emulator of Freud and Bergson, he posed futile problems of influences (the equivalent of canonization itself) for the critics. The aroma of the madeleine dipped in camomile tea was already pervading dusty textbooks, and served as a viaticum for students setting out for the unknown land of baccalaureate exams.

There was also Proust the sociologist. The new Saint-Simon of a nobility *sans* Versailles, the analyst of a world of preciosity and artificiality, a world frozen in history, caught up in conventions more concrete than reality itself; a world that (remarkably)

offers its inhabitants, by its very abstractions, those dramatic and profound situations that, in a Shakespeare or a Dostoevsky, probed the humanity of man.

We have not changed all that. But the meticulousness of the analysis that once filled us with awe now no longer seems to us valid in itself; and the "explanations" that often in Proust's work are added to the analysis do not always convince us. It is doubtless to these "theories," these reasonings on the mechanism of the soul, so abundant in *Remembrance of Things Past*, that Sartre's remark of 1938 applies: "Proust's psychology? It is not even Bergson's: it's Ribot's."[1] That judgment, though harsh, reflects in any case the disrepute into which a whole aspect of Proust's work fell in the eyes of a generation that had been brought up on it.

But a disrepute that takes us to the essential. The theory of the scientist or philosopher is unequivocally related to the object that is its theme. The poet's theory (and everything he or she says) contains a hidden ambiguity, for it is a question not of expressing but of creating the object. Reasoning, like images or symbols, is meant to produce a certain rhythm in which the reality sought after will magically appear. The truths or errors stated do not count independently. They are spells and incantations. To discern within Proust's psychology the forces of empirical psychology is not to break, but to succumb to, the spell of Proust's work, in which theory is but a means.

It is obvious that this ambiguity is the very light that bathes Proust's poetry. The contours of the events, persons and things, despite the accuracy of delineation, the sculpting of personality traits and characters, remain in total indeterminacy. To the very end we will not know, in this world that is nonetheless our own, historically and geographically determined, exactly what took place. A world that is never definitive—a world in which realization does not sacrifice virtuality. The latter presses at the gates of being, and, like Banquo's ghost, sits down in the king's place. Like thoughts that carry with them a dimension of "second thoughts," actions also have their "second actions," with

unforeseeable intentions, and things their "second things," in unsuspected perspectives and dimensions. This is the true interiorization of the Proustian world. It is not the result of a subjective vision of reality, nor even of the inner coordinates to which events, disdaining all objective points of reference and seeming to spring out of nowhere, correspond. Nor is it due to any metaphysical basis that might be sensed behind the allegorical, symbolic, or enigmatic appearances. It arises, rather, from the very structure of the appearances, which are at once what they are and the infinity of what they exclude. This is the case of the soul itself, which, within the universe of formulable legalities and choices made for eternity, reverses itself to become an "outlaw," in a compossibility of opposites, an annulment of all choices. It is curious to note to what point Proust's amoralism introduces the maddest freedom into his universe, and confers the sparkle of virtuality upon definite objects and beings, their potential undimmed by definition. It is as if moral rules banished enchantments from the world more harshly than did the laws of nature—as if magic, like the fabled witches' sabbath, began as soon as ethics eased. The most incredible metamorphoses and evolutions of the characters occur as being the most natural, in a world reverting to Sodom and Gomorrah. Relations between mutually exclusive terms set in. All is dizzyingly possible.

It is this movement of defined reality slipping free of its definition that constitutes the very mystery penetrating Proustian reality. A mystery having nothing of the nocturnal: it does not extend the world into the invisible. The power of being to be incomparably more than it is does not derive from I know not what symbolic function it would take on, nor from a dynamism that would unfold it into a becoming, but from its infinite sparkle under the reflective gaze. Reality enjoys the benefit of infinite auto-referentiality: whence all the bite of its realness. Joy, suffering, emotion: in Proust they are never facts that count in themselves. The *I* is already separate from its state, in the very intimacy in which it normally stands with itself, like a stick immersed in water, breaking while remaining whole.

Spiritual effort acts at the level at which the *I* must take up what was apparently so naturally already its own. In Proust, the true emotion is always the emotion of the emotion. The former communicates to the latter all its warmth, and additionally all its anxiety. Despite Lachelier's principle, which distinguishes pain from reflection on pain, one being painful and the other only true or false, Proustian reflection, dominated by a separation between the *I* and its state, imparts its own accent to the inner life by a kind of refraction. It is as if I were constantly accompanied by another self, in unparalleled friendship, but also in a cold strangeness that life attempts to overcome. The mystery in Proust is the mystery of the other.

The result is something unique in Proust, something unprecedented in literature. His analyses, even when reminiscent of Ribot (which is rare, Sartre notwithstanding), merely translate that strangeness between self and self which is the spur of the soul. The rarified atmosphere in which events take place gives an aristocratic air to even the most mundane matters, imparting to simple words, such as "I suffered" or "I took pleasure in," an immaterial resonance, marked with the nobility of a rare and precious social relationship. It is not the inner event that counts, but the way in which the *I* grasps it and is overcome by it, as if encountering it in someone else. It is this way of taking hold of the event that constitutes the event itself. Hence the life of the psyche takes on an inimitable vibrancy. Behind the moving forces of the soul, it is the quiver in which the *I* grasps itself, the dialogue with the other within the self, the soul of the soul.

In this sense, Proust is the poet of the social; but not at all as the depictor of mores. The emotion elicited by a reflection on an emotion is completely within that reflection. Places and things move him through other people—through his grandmother, through his past self. The knowledge of what Albertine is doing, what Albertine is seeing and who is seeing Albertine has no intrinsic interest as knowledge, but it is infinitely exciting because of its deep strangeness in Albertine—because of that strangeness that laughs in the face of knowledge.

The story of Albertine as prisoner and as having disappeared, into which the very voluminous work of Proust launches, and all that searching down the tangled pathways of "Lost Time," is the narrative of the inner life's sudden intensification brought about by an insatiable curiosity about the alterity of the other, at once empty and inexhaustible. The reality of Albertine is her evanescence in her very captivity—a reality made up of nothingness. She is a prisoner, though she has already disappeared, and she has disappeared though a prisoner—since despite the strictest surveillance she retains a dimension of secrecy. The objective facts Proust is able to gather about her after her death do not dispel the doubt that surrounded her when her lies disguised her fugues. When she is no longer there to defend her absence, when evidence abounds, leaving no room for doubt, the doubt remains intact. Albertine's nothingness uncovers her total alterity. Death is the death of other people, contrary to the tendency of contemporary philosophy, which is focussed on one's own solitary death. Only the former is central to the search for lost time.[2] But the daily death—and the death of every instant—of other persons, as they withdraw into themselves, does not plunge beings into an incommunicable solitude: that is precisely what nurtures love. That is Eros in all its ontological purity, which does not require participation in a third term (tastes, common interests, a connaturality of souls)—but direct relationship with what gives itself in withholding itself, with the other *qua* other, with mystery.

The theme of solitude, of the basic incommunicability of the person, appears in modern thought and literature as the fundamental obstacle to universal brotherhood. The pathos of socialism crumbles against the eternal Bastille in which each of us remains his or her own captive, and in which we find ourselves when the celebration is over, the torches gone out and the crowd drawn back. The despair of the impossible communication, which fills (for example) Estaunié's[3] "solitudes"—rather unjustly forgotten—marks the limit of all pity, all generosity, all love. In short, collectivism shares this same despair. It seeks a term

outside persons, in which each person will participate independently in order to blend into a community—impossible one on one. An ideal, a collective representation, a common enemy: these will unite individuals who cannot touch one another, cannot suffer one another.

But if communication thus bears the sign of failure or inauthenticity, it is because it is sought as fusion. One sets out from the idea that duality should be transformed into unity—that the social relation should end in communion. This is the last vestige of a conception identifying being and knowing—that is, the event by which the multiplicity of the real ends up referring to one sole being, and by which, through the miracle of clarity, everything I encounter exists as having come out of myself. The last vestige of idealism. The failure of communication is the failure of knowledge. One does not see that the success of knowledge would in fact destroy the nearness, the proximity, of the other. A proximity that, far from meaning something less than identification, opens up the horizons of social existence, brings out all the surplus of our experience of friendship and love, and brings to the definitiveness of our identical existence all the virtuality of the non-definitive.

Marcel did not love Albertine, if love is a fusion with the other, the ecstasy of one being before the perfections of the other, or the peace of possession. Tomorrow he will break with the young woman, who bores him. He will take that trip he has been planning for a long time. The story of Marcel's love is laced with confessions apparently designed to put in question the very consistency of that love. But that non-love is in fact love; that struggle with the ungraspable, possession; that absence of Albertine, her presence.

Thus the theme of solitude in Proust takes on a new meaning. Its event is in its conversion into communication. Its despair is an inexhaustible source of hope. A paradoxical conception, in a civilization that, despite the progress made since the Eleatics, sees in unity the very apotheosis of being. But Proust's most profound teaching—if indeed poetry teaches—consists in situating

the real in a relation with what for ever remains other—with the other as absence and mystery. It consists in rediscovering this relation also within the very intimacy of the *I* and in inaugurating a dialectic that breaks definitively with Parmenides.