

Swann's Way: Marcel Proust's Sanctuary of Remembrance
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The title of Marcel Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu*, translated in English as *In Search of Lost Time*, beckons the reader on a quest towards memorialization of the past that the narrator builds and preserves with each succeeding metaphor and memory. Within the first volume *Swann's Way*, a fictionalized *künstlerroman* of Proust's own real-life artistic journey, 'the past' contains both the personal history of the young Marcel's artistic becoming and the social history of his childhood environment, rendered as two inextricably linked experiences. In this remembrance of a once-forgotten milieu, his method of preserving the sundered past of the nineteenth century lies primarily in the act of naming, the "sanctuary of a name" – or, in Proust's original French, "*le refuge des noms*" (405). It is in this act of preservation that his *ars poetica* is fully revealed to be that of a modernist whose manner of articulation is the very essence of his art. An understanding of Proust's fixation on the conceptual forms of things in themselves is tied to his reverence and preference for his own history, informing his artistic and sociological credos as he unlocks and safeguards their origins in his memory.

The following examination of the metaphors and memories that shape *Swann's Way* utilizes context surrounding Proust's aesthetic affinity for English writer John Ruskin, whose philosophical ideas he translated into French and diffused into his own oeuvre. The origins of Proust's metaphors are understood further in their wider social function in the novel, which will be discussed alongside Marxist critic Walter Benjamin's essay "The Image of Proust" that fully shapes this discussion as one of both the inner and outer spheres of experience that the novel is preoccupied with. Ultimately, Proust's veneration for the value of a writer's words – the artist's capturing of an object, a person, an experience – surpassing the object itself is what defines his status within the modernist milieu. Proust posits an empiricist theory made fully literary as he

reenacts the writer's journey towards a fully realized artistic perception amidst the crowdedness of modernity, marking the social and interior selves as intertwined.

I. Ruskinian Memory

American novelist Edmund White's concise biography, which focuses on Proust's social and artistic relationships, notably tracks the years preceding Proust's undertaking of his seven-volume achievement, writing of his time spent translating Ruskin as informative for his trajectory as an artist (77). At the core of Ruskin's architectural idealism is what literary scholar Pritika Pradhan calls a "liberating subjectivity and individuality" in the process of forming details of external objectivities, specifically Gothic architecture (Pradhan 720). Proust embodies a similar sentiment that bears a temporal relation in his representation of external structures as inviolable entryways to memories. In his essay titled "On Reading," a preface to his translation of Ruskin's *Sesame and Lilies*, Proust's conveys an absorption of Ruskin's architectural ardor, as he begins to question the temporality of monuments that exist presently for him but contain within them buried histories, writing that "in the middle of this public square, in the midst of the present day whose reign it here interrupts, a little of the twelfth century, vanished so long ago, rises up..." (43). Written just a few years before he would even begin *La Recherche*, he already realizes the conflict between the past and present through witnessing the monuments of the public square, as "those high, thin storehouses of the past are not in the present, they are in another time into which the present cannot penetrate"; concluding on a note that anticipates his narrator's realization with the madeleine that access to the past can only be gained involuntarily through the senses and are otherwise impenetrable (Proust, "On Reading" 43). This correspondence between the public history acknowledged within these monuments and his

narrator's private history within the madeleine become inseparable in his narrator's consciousness.

Ruskin's philosophy resonates further in Proust's prose in *Swann's Way* that effectively abandons the urbanized landscape of modernity through exaltation of two pillars of the past: nature and Gothic architecture. In a recollection of the Méséglise Way at Combray, the narrator reconstructs in his narrative the hedge of lilacs through associations of churchlike metaphors, seeing the hedge as a "series of chapels that disappeared under the litter of their flowers, heaped into wayside altars; below them, the sun was laying down a grid of brightness on the ground as if it had just passed through a stained-glass window..." (Proust, *Swann's Way* 140-41). This reconstruction of a nature now lost to him through the employment of architectural metaphors is a fundamental contour of Proust's method of preserving his past.

The narrator Marcel revels in recollection itself and fantasizes over imbuing objects with historic meaning in his youth, seen also in his meditations along the alternate Guermantes Way as he envisions the Duc and Duchesse. In this moment, he acknowledges their existence in his present, aware of a temporal distinction: he knew "this was where [they] lived... knew they were real and presently existing figures" (Proust, *Swann's Way* 175). He struggles, however, to aestheticize them as figures of the present, and can only view them in a historical sense: "but when I thought about them, I pictured them to myself sometimes made of tapestry... sometimes in changing colors, like Gilbert the Bad in the stained-glass window"; like the lilacs along the Méséglise Way, able only to schematize them in his mind as artifacts of the past rather than objects of the present in an anticipatory manner (Proust, *Swann's Way* 175). Once again melding social history with his interiority, he returns to his lantern as a child as well, imagining them "impalpable like the image [of the lantern] ... always wrapped in mystery of Merovingian times

and bathing as though in a sunset in the orange light emanating from that syllable *antes*” (Proust 175). This employment of “*antes*” is holistically Proustian – referencing the final syllable in “*Guermantes*”, embellishing in its phonological beauty, but also invoking the Latin “*antes*” which summons either, or both meanings: “rows (of plants)” and “before, in front of” (*Pocket Oxford Latin Dictionary* “*ante*”, “*antēs*”).

Literary scholar Emily Zants analyzes the function of the lantern that Proust’s narrator habitually falls back on in his metaphorical arrangements, emphasizing its narrative impact as a technique as intrinsic to the structure of the story as extensive academic studies understand involuntary memory and dreams to be (Zants 213). She also analyzes the medieval histories that the lantern illuminated on Marcel’s bedroom wall and the influence this undoubtedly had on his receptive becoming that gifts “a new technique, which the reader in turn may use, to look at his own world” (Zants 216). Similar to dreams and involuntary memory, the lantern and the sweeping history it imparts is a means towards understanding his own history, as it is a metaphor that fossilized early in his childhood as he witnessed its illumination before sleep.

Marcel’s reverence for the *antes*, the before and the past, is the central catalyst of his artistic journey of learning to utilize language as instruments for recollection, arranging memories as a row of plants. His writing ability comes to fruition and his metaphorical constructs are fully integrated in his realization of the three steeples in the end of the “Combray” section, where just as the young artist had begun to fear he lacked “aptitude for literature,” the image of the steeples emerges and inspires him to write (Proust, *Swann’s Way* 182). They themselves are artifacts of the past and integral structures that further imbue his artistic mind with a preference for such, while also activating him to achieve his goal of creation. The image creates a profound effect, “which took shape in words in [his] head,” which is then relayed to the

reader in quotes as the narrator unearths his first successful expression of his own experience (Proust, *Swann's Way* 184). This act of articulation is what fully preserves his epiphany.

II. Monuments in the Public Square

This mirroring of Marcel's external reality in the steeples and his internal artistic becoming in his rendering of their quality reflects his obsession with the mere forms of things, the architecture of concepts. In his established aesthetic manner, it is vital to acknowledge that he worships the church itself – its Gothic curves, rich tapestries and statues, the manifold shades of color in its stained-glass windows, and of course, its steeple – all while omitting any exaltation for the religious organization of the Church itself. The structure of the churches coexisting in his art and complementing his value of the structures of prose reveal the nexus of this *künstlerroman* to be a writer whose religion is his own art, where his words are instruments of preservation, each phrase acting as monuments to his past.

In the third section of *Swann's Way* "Place-Names: The Name," the narrator recollects on his relationship to Gilberte the person and Gilberte the name in itself, "the sanctuary" that its aural quality provides (405). Lydia Davis' translation from the French *refuge* to "sanctuary" here further accentuates the nature of Marcel's social, schematic mind. In line with the definition of the term from *The Oxford Dictionary of Christian Art and Architecture*, this choice of sanctuary evokes a "shrine" as well as "a claim to safety... refuge in a church" ("sanctuary"). The narrator thinks of names not as "an inaccessible ideal but as a real atmosphere in which [he] was going to immerse [himself]" (Proust 406). Marcel's own act of wordsmithing becomes in itself a personal refuge that is mirrored in his exaltation of architecture, a distinct aesthetic perspective within his self-articulation.

Unavoidable in Proust's memorialization of his surroundings is a language steeped in dominion, for though he carries a secular appreciation for medieval and religious architecture, its societal implications permeate regardless. Though, he uses this language in discussion of the man-nature connection, embodying a stance against human dominion over nature in his industrialized, twentieth-century France through a subversion that instead employs this language to embolden nature's dominion over human presence in Combray:

[E]ven in his most artificial creations, man is still working upon nature; certain places will always impose their own particular empire on their surroundings, hoist their immemorial insignia in the middle of the park just as they would have done far from any human intervention... and so it was that the sword lily, bending its blade with a regal abandon, extended over the eupatorium and wet-footed frogbit the ragged fleurs-de-lis, violet and yellow, of its lacustrine scepter. (139)

It is in this vision of Combray where nature, as a medieval, regal force prevails over what Walter Benjamin calls the emerging "physiology of chatter" (206). The social milieu that materializes within Marcel's prosaic surveying of his landscape is subordinated to the forces of the environment, such as the wind that he calls "the presiding spirit of Combray" (Proust, *Swann's Way* 148). This tension between the authorial position of the landscape on the village and the steeples that physically rise higher above that of all other structures in Combray is a manifestation of the heart of Proust's *ars poetica* – the inseparable qualities of the inner and outer modes of experience, the objects and his understanding of them.

Edmund White speaks of Ruskin's philosophy and politics as something Proust was exposed to during his project: there were "two Ruskins—the art critic who was fascinated by French cathedrals and by Venice, and the social reformer... appalled by the effects of unbridled

capitalism on the proletariat” and “against the horrors of the machine age” (White 77). This latter trait resonates notable in Benjamin’s Marxist analysis of Proust in a biographical essay that stresses the material implications of Proust’s legacy. Examining the lineage of the three artists, each having influenced the one that came after him, literary scholar Kevin A. Morrison characterizes Ruskin’s credo as “an aesthetic redemption of ordinary experience” that opposed modern scientific thinking and environmental degradation; clearly characteristic of not just Ruskin’s cultural criticisms, but of Proust’s *La Recherche* as well as Benjamin’s essays on the fading impact of storytelling in the modern, industrialized twentieth century (Morrison 125, 135).

In his essay “Proust and Social Spaces,” scholar Edward J. Hughes analyzes the intersection of the novel’s “private histories” and a “broader public one” in line with Benjamin’s essay that emphasized a sociological reading (151). Exploring the “reconfiguration of the social kaleidoscope” alongside mention of the narrator’s perceptions, the critic examines the tribalism present in the strict class boundaries that define Combray’s social landscape (Hughes 152). Hughes employs language of caste in his analysis, describing the family at Combray as a “clan” within a “closed world” that adheres to “ritual” (Hughes 152). Proust’s outer mapping of Combray and the polyphonic vignettes that Marcel observes around him and carries in his recollection is a level of reality that exists in the same world as that of the natural one described; they are linked within Marcel’s memory, forming his “kaleidoscope” of remembrance (Proust, *Swann’s Way* 4). Benjamin is aware of this dynamic as well, employing language of ecology in his understanding of the characters’ “vegetative existence... planted so firmly in their social habitat... inextricably intertwined in the thicket of their fate” (208).

Further ingrained within this kaleidoscope is class. Benjamin argues in his essay that much of the novel acts to “describe a class which is everywhere pledged to camouflage its material basis and for this very reason is attached to a feudalism which has no intrinsic economic significance but is all the more serviceable as a mask of the upper middle class” (210). Within the narrator’s aesthetic development of architecture is this immutable history of his bourgeoisie caste, camouflaged within the very prose of the novel but implicated in the wide array of personalities that the narrator interacts with; specifically, what Hughes appropriately labels “zoological portraits of individuals” (166). The character Swann, for example, is an outsider within the Combray household, yet navigates the castes of Combray, whether it be a bourgeoisie household such as Marcel’s or the aristocratic circles the narrator only retroactively becomes aware of.

Hughes rounds out his discussion of the intersection between introspection and social interaction with Swann, whose “ritual visits... inevitably spell for the boy the pain of separation from the mother – and a return to introspection – they also prompt reflection on social organization” (152). The Combray household’s obsessive and intricate rules surrounding who may and may not be known in their house, such as their welcoming of Swann yet their distaste for mentioning his wife Odette, reflects Hughes’ analysis that “social value is a changing commodity” (155). The socialization that occurs within the young Marcel in these moments of apprehending his social condition through recollection is informative for his art, as the origins of his zoological observations are presented to the reader. For example, the narrator reflects on his youth when he “had no notion of social hierarchy” yet still felt an instinctual impossibility of associating with Odette and Gilberte, which “had the effect above all, by making me imagine a great distance between them and us, of giving them prestige in my eyes” (Proust, *Swann’s Way*

101). This chasm between perceiving them with status and himself as othered accentuates a preliminary insecurity towards his own self based on social association and caste-formations, “conscious both of the worth of a creature like Mlle. Swann and also of how crude and ignorant [he] would appear to her” (Proust, *Swann’s Way* 102). In only beginning to try and discern the othering that is occurring in his milieu, the deep history of certain social correspondences plays a major role in shaping his *bildung*.

III. Conclusion

The writer’s artistic journey relies on architectural understandings of the relationship between society and nature within acts of reconciling one’s childhood. Marcel’s milieu – these social circles, these hedges of flowers, these steeples, are not remembered merely as tangible objects but rather as forms of the writer’s own ability, signifiers towards something far deeper and more internal that only the older, remembering writer is allowed to fully realize as he arranges them in his schematic orchestration. Young Marcel lies on a precipice before he arrives at the epiphany of the steeples:

As I observed, as I noted the shape of their spires, the shifting of their lines, the sunlight on their surfaces, I felt that I was not reaching the full depth of my impression, that something was behind that motion, that brightness, something which they seemed at once to hide and conceal. (Proust, *Swann’s Way* 184)

The brief but essential journal entry that this elicits marks the beginning of a quest that the narrator then entrenches himself in within the past and present: capturing the essence of his experiences. Though the key to this essence is the act of recollection, Benjamin provides a useful reminder that in this novel, “remembrance is the woof and forgetting the warf” (202). These acts

of knowing, alongside these acts of not knowing, are on equal ground and completely rely on the other.

Not coincidentally, in Proust's social world, a similar relation takes place in the understanding that "none of us constitutes a material whole" (*Swann's Way* 19). Proust's signpost in the opening pages of his labyrinthine portrait of life that "social personality is the creation of the minds of others" prefaces the subsequent dynamic between the exterior world and the interior, learning personality that perceives it (19). Proust's social and metaphorical decree are one and the same: symbiosis, nothing can exist in and of itself; from Proust's own influences garnered from Ruskin's Gothic aesthetic, to the amalgamation of metaphors that each accentuate an understanding of the ones that surround it, to the narrator and his bonds to family and acquaintances. The most transcendent relation, though, lies in the relationship between the experienced narrator and his younger, burgeoning writer-self that is still forming his social, intellectual, literary, and spiritual associations. A temporal transcendence occurs in this dynamic between the two selves that forgetting culminates and involuntary memory unravels. Proust captures the essence of childhood, the process of socialization and conceptualization through that tension of remembering and forgetting, positing experience not as chronological, but as a constant retracing of one's past, a quest that the writer must spend their whole life sifting through and reckoning with.

[3045 words]

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