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# Rancière's Proust: A Rebirth of Aesthetics

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Philosopher and literary theorist, Jacques Rancière, has argued that Marcel Proust's work as a novelist enables us to understand how modern literature articulates and largely resolves a specifically aesthetic crisis. From Rancière's standpoint, Proust shows us how the dominant conflict in nineteenth-century French literature was carried beyond a mere opposition and given a new aesthetic significance in the modern novel. In this paper, I will discuss Jacques Rancière's attempt to assess Proust's contribution to literature in the wake of the aesthetic tradition epitomized by Kant and Schiller. Crucial to this attempt is the deployment of aesthetics as a historical discourse that introduces the possibility of variation in relation to the real. More specifically, I will examine Rancière's argument that metaphor in Proust's work has the capacity to transform a sense of doubleness into a new understanding of the real. Metaphor, according to Rancière, allows Proust to distance us from the real, that it to say, to produce fictive language, and then to employ form in a manner that introduces a new sense of the world through the vehicle of literature. Proust's achievement in this regard becomes a successful attempt to resolve one of the founding oppositions that strucures modern aesthetics. In my conclusion, I will argue that Proust employs a concept of textuality that was perhaps first uncovered by Walter Benjamin and more recently developed by Julia Kristeva, whose readings of the same writer surpass a limited appropriation of Kant's thought.

The boundaries between art and life are unstable, thus allowing literature to assume a vitality that refutes the strong opposition between the fictive and the real. This inherent flexibility allows us to imagine how specific texts are uniquely inserted into literary history. For Rancière, Proust is exemplary in showing us how aesthetic experience provides the key to the relationship between art and life

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that fiction presupposes and transforms. Proust's originality in his argument can be traced back to a breakthrough that is not unrelated to this author's reading of *Arabian Nights*. Hence, if *impression* is the talisman that opens the cave of material, *architecture* is the word that allows the writer to produce literary works that are formally unified.[1] But the literary work of art is not constricted in a domain that simply dispenses with the sensibility. The impression derives from a singularity that is non-referential; it does not communicate a message but bespeaks the unthinkable coalescence of a peculiar shock and the duality of metaphor.

The Proustian impression is both a sudden and unpredictable response to lived experience and a formation of new meaning. In emphasizing this doubleness at the level of the impression, Rancière shows us that Proust's relationship to the past recalls both heterogeneity and the possibility of form that allows the literary work to acquire intelligibility through reading and interpretation:

> The impression is double not only because it is felt in two temporalities at once; it is double because it is both the shock that disorients, breaks the boundaries of the world, and brings forth primordial chaos, creates meaning, establishes correspondences, and determines vocations. Dionysos's realm is that of Apollo and Hermes.[2]

When conceived in this manner, doubleness in Proust does not exclude shock but must be distinguished from what Baudelaire experienced and, according to Benjamin, enabled him to write a new kind of poetry. Benjamin had contended earlier that the two authors are in fact quite different, noting that Proust refashioned Bergsonian memory for artistic ends: "Proust immediately confronts this involuntary memory with a voluntary memory, one that is in the service of the intellect."[3] For Baudelaire, in contrast, the shock experience was

[1] Jacques Rancière, *Mute Speech* ((New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), p. 156.
[2] Ibid. p. 157.
[3] Walter Benjamin, "The Image of Proust" in *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken Books, 1962), p. 158

not only primary but was intended to be read historically, thus introducing a mode of time that Proust does not usually evoke.[4]

Rancière describes how Proust combines sensation and language in a metaphorical leap into aesthetic plurality in contrast to the historical distance that Baudelaire's poetry so often exemplifies. This metaphorical leap is not metaphysical in the old sense because it involves primordial contact with sensations that suddenly decenter us when we come closest to what is proximate. Metaphor is what springs into being when the shock experience disrupts the patterns of everyday life:

> It is metaphor alone that unfolds and makes manifold the *one* of pure sensation that punctuates the concatenations of habits and beliefs. Metaphor, as a power of both order and disorder, is charged with a twofold labor. It brings together distant objects and makes their coming-together speak. But metaphor also undoes the laws of representation. It is metaphor that inverts the earth and sun in Elstir's canvas, in conformity with the truth of vision that is also the truth of its allusion.[5]

Metaphor suggests how Proust attempts to undo the initial shock that temporarily destroys the narrator's relation to objects and to resist the tendency to stabilize the literary work through verbal representation. Unlike what classical rhetoric codifies as adequate to its own canon, metaphor in modern literature suggests that life and art communicate—but only through their difference.[6]

This reconfiguration of the relationship between art and life is not to be observed within the framework of the literary work alone. Rancière also helps us envision this configuration through Proust's contribution to literary history, which can be read as a successful effort to resolve an aesthetic conflict. Proust is able to produce a literature that moves beyond the two-fold impasse that emerges in "the Flaubertian frivolity of subject that drags form down to its insignificance and the Mallarméan essentiality that leads to the paralysis of

[4] Ibid., p. 162,
[5] Jacques Rancière, op. cit., p. 159.
[6] Ibid., p. 163.

writing."[7] Gustave Flaubert's contribution to the prose tradition shows us how the goal of verbal transparency culminates in an irrevocable plunge into material life. For Rancière, this plunge can be related to the project of abolishing art in time, which ought to coincide with the productive transposition of art into life and the abandonment of aesthetics through its fulfillment. However, instead of achieving this goal, Ranciere suggests that Flaubert fails to move beyond a mere negation of aesthetics, while he abandons life to an immersion in material content. This failure is demonstrated in both *L'Education sentimental* and *Madame Bovary*, two novels in which major characters demonstrate how blind ambition prevents aesthetic distance from fusing personal experience with self-understanding. In contrast, Stéphane Mallarmé produces tightly structured poems, such as the early "Hérodiade" and "L'après-midi d'un faune" as well as the magisterial "Plusiers sonnets," inaugurating a style of formal writing that forsakes mundane experience, while alluding to a realm of pure essences that cannot be retrieved.[8] And yet, while envisioning poetry as a dramatic spectacle through which the body politic acquires utopian features, Mallarmé also fails to indicate how art can be translated into a redemption of everyday life.

Rancière cogently argues that the novels of Proust uniquely express the aesthetic contradiction that Friedrich Schiller first articulated in his seminal text, *Über die ästhetische Erziehung des Menchen* (1795). Schiller identifies this contradiction in terms of two drives, namely, the sensuous drive and the drive for form, which call attention to the difference between material existence and moral reason.[9] In *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, Kant had proposed only five years earlier that aesthetics performs the role of bridge between nature and freedom.[10] The disciplinary meaning of this opposition, however, derives from the dissimilar spheres of science and ethics and requires a mediatory sphere to mitigate an

[7] Ibid., p. 156.
[8] See Stéphane Mallarmé, "Hérodiade," "L'Après-midi d'un faune," "Plusiers sonnets," *Oeuvres complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1998), pp. 17-22, 22-25, 36-46.
[9] Friedrich Schiller, "Twelfth Letter," *The Aesthetic Education of Man* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), pp. 78-83.
[10] See Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), p. 14.

undue harshness and to prevent the sensibility from becoming superfluous. Schiller, however, defines aesthetics as the sphere of freedom and does not require that it be grounded in politics, even while he argues that it may have political significance. At the same time, Schiller requires a third term, namely, the play impulse, to negotiate the conflict between heteronomy and formal rigor.[11] This third drive produces a sphere of activity that enables aesthetics to constitute human nature and to contribute, if only indirectly, to man's political future. The elaboration of what this entails is fundamental and prevents us from identifying Schiller—who is correctly read as developing the legacy of Kant—as a mere epigone when in truth his originality largely consists in restoring political content to aesthetic theory. In short, Schiller provides a political dimension to a philosophical debate that was arguably political in its longer history, if Kant's predecessors are read as continuing the classical conception of art that descends from Plato and is revitalized by Shafesbury and Burke.[12] Without politicizing aesthetics in a direct way, Schiller extends the possibility of critique to include politics as it functions in a world that sustains the contradiction between nature and freedom. In such a situation, any possible redistribution of the sensible would assume an aesthetic meaning, just as it entails a critical relationship to political institutions.

We might pause for a moment and place Schiller's aesthetic project in the historical context to which it responds as a theoretical challenge. Kant argues that the judgment of the beautiful is disinterested because the subject's relation to the aesthetic object is not based on "the power of form over matter, or intelligence over sensibility."[13] In the wake of the French Revolution, Schiller formalizes the

[11] Friedrich Schiller, "Fourteenth Letter," op. cit., pp. 95-99.
[12] Gadamer contends that Kant contributes to the long tradition of aesthetics that was originally political and is only later "subjectivized" in transcendental philosophy. For details, see Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1991), pp. 42-81. Gadamer's argument, of course, does not require that we see aesthetics as politics but that it is related to a past history that was originally in tune with political experience and might be revisited within this framework, assuming that aesthetics can be interpreted in a hermeneutical context.
[13] Jacques Rancière, "Aesthetics and Politics" in *Aesthetics and its Discontents* (Cambridge and New York: Polity Press, 2009), pp. 30-31.

political meaning of disinterested play as a freedom from domination that prefigures a new sort of community. For Rancière, Schiller's appropriation of "free play" presupposes a suspension of interests that normally oppose active engagement to passive reception. Rancière uses the example of the *Juno Ludovisi* as evoked in Schiller's aesthetic treatise to mark the difference between the regime of representation and the regime of art:

> The statue is a 'free appearance'. It stands thus in a twofold contrast to its representative status: it is not an appearance drawn from reality that would serve as its model. Nor is it an active form imposed on matter. As a sensory form, it is heterogeneous to the ordinary forms of sensory experience that these dualities inform.[14]

The will of the sculptor in this example is suspended in the contemplation of the goddess whose perfection is inseparable from non-appearance. And yet, conscious inactivity is not simply a refusal of politics but a style of announcing a way of life that would not be founded on an earlier antagonism

The regime of art might be defined in phenomenological terms as a suspension of the natural attitude that is commonly used to justify both a naïve approach to the object world and a more ideological defense of political inequality. This suspension underlies the inherently literary nature of fiction, which becomes thematic whenever the text calls attention to the trait of having been constructed. But suspension is not primarily a contemplative achievement. In this regard, perhaps Hegel is just as useful as Husserl as a guide for reading Schiller as an aesthetic theorist. What is generally called dialectics no doubt received an initial impetus from Schiller's description of aesthetic play, which implies both negation and preservation (*Aufhebung*) in the formation of a higher unity.[15] This description has the advantage of allowing us to better understand how aesthetics elevates art over life through a process of transformation, rather than through a mere withdrawal from practice.

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[14] Ibid., pp. 29-30.
[15] See Friedrich Schiller, "Eighteenth Letter," op. cit., pp, 122-25.

However, while the avant-gardes have typically sought to fulfill the promise of aesthetics by closing the gap between art and life, Marcel Proust in *À recherche du temps perdu* can be shown to narrate the difference between art and life and to stage their possible reunion. Rancière argues that Proust balances the unstable opposition between art and life in form and content, thus producing an image of the aesthetic that testifies to the singularity of a writer who captured the significance of time in a redistribution of the sensible. In approaching this contradiction, Proust is exemplary in demonstrating how the oscillation between opposed principles lends coherence to the work of literature that invites us to read in view of a dual task. The two "ways" that are identified in the first and concluding books of Proust's great narrative encode opposed aesthetic options that remain operative throughout this text and indicate how life as lived is not incompatible with the transcendental thrust of the literary imagination. Joshua Landry has discussed how Marcel, the narrator, invariably perceives "worlds, that is to say systems that are both homogeneous and heterogeneous, alien to everyday experience and at the same time perfectly coherent from within."[16]

Hence, in *Du Côté de chez Swann*, if "Méséglise way" leads to a flat plain where the possibility of love is intermingled with the signs of natural growth, "Guermantes way" evokes a medieval past through water-lilies and the steeple of Saint-Hilaire.[17] But this opposition is not contrived; it expresses two desires at the same time: first, it shows how quotidian reality is always already shot through with a sense of what surpasses and comes to us in material form; second, it shows how this same spiritual intimation introduces a tension with everyday life in various forms that escape the present. Proust in these passages echoes his early study of John Ruskin, but the perspectives of Marcel differ from those of Proust in the same way that a memoir differs from a unified work of art.[18] Moreover, in

[16] Joshua Landry, *Philosophy as Fiction: Self, Deception and Knowledge in Proust* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 66.
[17] The possible conjunction of the two ways, as well as their ability to merge conscious and unconscious motivations, is announced in Marcel Proust, *Du Côté de chez Swann, A la recherche du temps perdu* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1992), pp. 175-79.
[18] See Joshua Landry, op. cit., p. 40.

*Le Temps retrouvé*, the reader is ultimately encouraged to link back to Combray upon learning that both the social poseur, Madame Verdurin, and Swann's daughter, Gilberte, have married into the Guermantes's family.[19] The interpenetration of aesthetics and a world that is in touch with sensory experience is crucial to the construction of the Proustian text, just as it is basic to how key documents in the aesthetic tradition invite us to break with rigid dichotomies.[20] For Rancière, the double hermeneutic animating Proust's work provides a moving image of a discourse that has not been exhausted any more than it has been fully understood.

Walter Benjamin's reading of Proust can be read as complementary to Rancière's attempt to discover an aesthetic mid-point between Flaubert's realism and Mallarmé's hermeticism. Benjamin goes so far as to claim that Proust's writing is the counterpart to Penelope's weaving, rather than its mere likeness.[21] In elaborating this contention, Benjamin cites Proust's habit later in life of turning his days into periods of darkness in order to produce an increasingly accurate record of what is usually only revealed to us in our dreams. The role of memory is therefore crucial and surpasses the role of author and plot as the essential component in creativity.[22] Memory, however, is not to be confused with a contemplative gathering together of what extends into the past and has finally come to light. Proust's view of things is a textual web that allows intellect and sensibility to interpenetrate in a manner that implicitly relates our eagerness to restrict them to discrete domains for the purpose of clearly distinguishing them. At the same time, Proust's strategy can be read as an attempt to reduce the gap

[19] In the midst of a somewhat macabre scene of reunion, the Narrator brings together Combray and the world of the Guermantes in referring to these significant, if not always happy, marriages. See Marcel Proust, *Le Temps retrouvé*, op. cit., pp. 314-16.
[20] Deleuze emphasizes how Proust evokes a "plurality of worlds" in which verbal signs can be interpreted, even when their appearance is not always unitary. See Gilles Deleuze, *Proust and Signs* (New York: George Braziller, 1972), p. 5. However, Deleuze's semiotic reading of Proust would differ considerably from Rancière's aesthetic reading and should be distinguished from it.
[21] Walter Benjamin, op. cit., 202.
[22] Ibid., p. 203.

between art and life in a manner that in some respects looks forward to the practices of the surrealists.

More recently, Julia Kristeva has deepened Benjamin's response to Proust's work as a novelist whose use of language expresses a belief in the imaginary. For Kristeva, language in Proust implies a unique mode of temporality: "'Time regained would then be the time of language as an imaginary experience. What is perceived and what is said are separated by a distance, an incompatibility, an inadequacy that somehow brings them together"[23] Like Rancière, Kristeva also emphasizes how Proust's use of signs is firmly grounded in a sense of doubleness; hence, "sensation and idea" constitutes "a represented perception of an embodied image."[24] Noting Proust's indebtedness to major figures in the history of aesthetics, Kristeva also emphasizes how the French writer "rejects psychology precisely because it is restricted to the subjective," while the notion of 'involuntary memory' combines with time to mark a more original sense of the psyche.[25] .

The reflections on textuality that animate both Benjamin and Kristeva point to Rancière's approach to Proust, which is informed by an awareness of how the "aesthetic unconscious" performs a crucial role in enabling the French author to compose a complete work of art. For Rancière, the aesthetic unconscious in contrast to the unconscious of psychoanalysis does not point to a process that exceeds consciousness but integrates the effects of the unconscious into the literary work. Proust's work presents the self as both reflective and open-ended, just as it provides an aesthetic basis for recovering unity through the mode of contemplation as opposed to discursive reasoning. What this means is that unity is achieved only intermittently through aesthetic experience, rather than as the telos of a long-range goal. Hence, the work of art provides the preeminent occasion for a sense of identity that can carry us beyond the experience of the individual self. From this standpoint, Schelling's remarks on art during the Age of

[23] Julia Kristeva, *Time and Sense: Proust and the Experience of Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), p. 204.
[24] Ibid., p. 210.
[25] Ibid., p. 309.

Idealism acquire a special significance, especially when read in the light of Proust's literary achievement: "The work of art merely reflects to me what is otherwise not reflected by anything, namely, that absolutely identical which has already divided itself even in the self." Finally, and as a consequence, what is divided even in consciousness "comes, through the miracle of art, to be radiated back from the products thereof."[26]

In conclusion, we might consider how Rancière employs the example of Proust's novels to argue that aesthetics in its crucial modern phase has always implicitly, if not explicitly, depended on a contrast between art and life as well as on their practical connection. Art invariably requires an internal awareness of the difference between life and presentation, which places metaphor in the foreground of literary expression. Literature is also a specific art that demonstrates how mundane experience and a movement beyond everyday life are intertwined in carefully constructed texts that blend conscious and unconscious motivations. The "doubling" that can be discerned in literary texts, particularly in the Proustian narrative, maps onto the aesthetic predicament that has defined our culture, at least since the late eighteenth century, when a new response to life was required to offset a stark opposition that was dramatized in a widely experienced political failure. This new response to life as inseparable from the contribution of literature, which sustains the possibility of some future unity, especially when unity has not been realized in historical time.

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[26] F. W. J. Schelling, *System of Transcendental Idealism* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia, 1978), p. 210.

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