

NOTE ON BARTHES' CRITICISM OF PROUST AND THE DUALITY SENSE/FIELD OF SENSE

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The position that Barthes holds when reading Proust can be easily characterized today, thanks to the publication of Barthes' main texts about Proust in *Marcel Proust, Mélanges* (2020). Barthes' reading of Proust highlights the play of a duality between 'sense' and 'field of sense' in *À la recherche du temps perdu* (*In Search of Lost Time*). It also examines the specific temporality of the narrative, which enforces an equality of past, present, and future, as well as the remarkable reflexivity and conclusion of the novel that makes Proust's past the future of the narrator. Barthes' comments on *À la recherche du temps perdu* illuminate and revise the main concepts of his literary theory, and find in the interplay of the sense/field of sense duality a means to redefine literature on one hand, and on the other, to surpass the critical impasses addressed in *Le Degré zéro de l'écriture* (*Writing Degree Zero*).

Key words: Barthes, Proust, sense/field of sense, literary theory

БЕЛЕШКА ЗА БАРТОВОТО КРИТИЧКО ЧИТАЊЕ НА ПРУСТ И ЗА ДУАЛНОСТА СМИСЛА/ПОЛЕ НА СМИСЛАТА

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Денес може лесно да се дефинира позицијата што ја зазема Ролан Барт при читањето на Марсел Пруст, благодарение на објавувањето на неговите најзначајни текстови во врска со Пруст, во делото *Marcel Proust, Mélanges* (2020). Бартовото читање на Пруст ја нагласува играта на дуалноста помеѓу „смисла“ и „поле на смислата“ во *À la recherche du temps perdu* (*Во иштражувањето на изгубеното време*). Истовремено, ова читање ги истражува како специфичната темпоралност на наративот, која наметнува истоветност на минатото, сегашноста и иднината, така и необичната повратност и завршеток на романот, кои прават минатото на Пруст да биде иднина на нараторот. Коментарите на Барт во врска со *À la recherche du temps perdu* ги расветлуваат и ги ревидираат главните концепти на неговата книжевна теорија. Преку интеракцијата на дуалноста смисла/поле на смислата, тие упатуваат на тоа како, од една страна, да се рedefинира книжевноста и како да се надминат, од друга страна, критичките безизлезности коишто Барт ги согледа во *Le Degré zéro de l'écriture* (*Нулта степен на писмо*).

Клучни зборови: Барт, Пруст, сетило/сетилно поле, книжевна теорија

The position that Barthes holds when he reads Proust can be easily characterized today, thanks to the publication of Barthes' main texts about Proust in *Marcel Proust, Mélanges* (2020). These texts are followed by a selection of notes that Barthes wrote about Proust without intending to publish them. These notes are brief, punctual and disparate, like illustrations of reactions to *À la Recherche du temps perdu* (*In Search of Lost Time*)*. Barthes' criticism of Proust should be read literally; it refers to specific aspects of *À la Recherche du temps perdu* using methods inseparable from descriptions of the novel. It is not based on any constraining paradigm or on a prescriptive identification of *À la Recherche du temps perdu*. It is free from unequivocal methodological commitments. It is all the more instructive to characterize what constitutes Barthes' critical thought.

1 Barthes' criticism of Proust and its implications

All the documents to be read in these *Mélanges*, along with other quotations and references to Proust by Barthes in his other works, make it possible to identify Barthes' position from three perspectives: the "scientific" orientations of Barthes' reading; characterizations of his readings by Barthes himself; and biographical analogies between Proust and himself that Barthes highlights. These analogies mainly relate to the mourning of his mother and his temptation to write a novel. The first two characterizations are almost constantly contemporary with each other, while the last one largely belongs to the 1970s. Barthes' criticism becomes more personal, as the publication of *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes* (1975)¹ and his courses at the Collège de France show. These three characterizations correspond to the chronology of his reading of Proust; however, this chronology is not as illuminating as one might think. Let us consider two examples. Barthes' article "Proust et les noms" (Barthes, 2020: 17)² is viewed as properly scientific, but it also implicitly refers to the vision of the world that Barthes personally recognizes in Proust and the ontology that this vision entails. The preparatory notes for the seminar "Proust et la photographie: Examen d'un fonds d'archives photographiques mal connu" (ibid, 167) consist of literal comments about Nadar's photos of individuals who might have been role models for Proust. These notes are more than simple identifications of possible sources that Proust might have used; they outline a theory of representation. Many of Barthes' comments about Proust have implications that disclose or relate to the principles and structure of Barthes' criticism. They serve as reading operators.

The implications of Barthes' criticism of Proust cannot be disassociated from the paradox that structures it: Barthes reads the temporality of *À la recherche du*

* The editors have provided English translations of the quoted French material in footnotes, whenever such translations were available.

¹ *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*. Macmillan, London, 1977.

² First publication of the article in 1967.

temps perdu through the atemporality of the novel, which he perceives as a whole. This paradoxical reading does not suggest the duality that many commentators have identified in the novel: on the one hand, a disparate world, and on the other, a kind of Platonism that counterbalances this world's disparities. The paradox of Barthes' reading is tied to the recognition of the infinite temporal games of *À la recherche du temps perdu* and the relativism they imply, on one hand, and, on the other, to the *sense* and *field of sense* (for these notions, see Markus, 2015) that each temporal game reveals. Each temporal game exemplifies a sense – that is, the way in which an “object” – a memory, a person, a thing – appears, and a field of sense, which refers to the conditions of this apparition – its place and moment. Proust's “madeleine” remarkably illustrates this duality. The “madeleine” appears as a “madeleine” at the time and place where it is viewed, and these elements constitute the field of this apparition. Moreover, the “madeleine” episode bears another apparition – a sudden memory – of which it is the field. Barthes did not specifically comment on the “madeleine” episode, but the sense and field of sense duality organizes most of his arguments about Proust. This duality enables Barthes to read the temporal disparities of *À la recherche du temps perdu* as many apparitions in the various fields of sense that qualify the many contexts of the novel's world as a totality. Barthes' comments about the photos of individuals who were or might have been models for the characters in *À la recherche du temps perdu* confirm the sense and field of sense duality. Reading is a “leurre” (lure); it invites readers to think that they can explicitly decipher the relationship between sense and field of sense. It may be a “leurre” because there are many decipherings, but just as many appearances or apparitions of an “object” that is not deconstructed by this multiplicity.

This double phenomenology does not prevent Barthes from confessing the personal character of his criticism in his lecture “Longtemps, je me suis couché de bonne heure” (Barthes, 2020: 121) Many of his comments about Proust are explicitly or implicitly about himself. He did not consider himself an expert on Proust, but rather a reader. His reading is generalizable because it is personal and uses his own specific vocabulary that “covers” Proust's work, offering a comprehensive approach to it. The development of his final reflection on Proust is inseparable from two biographical facts: his desire to write a novel and the death of his mother, which he viewed as parallel to the death of Proust's mother and which prompted the writing of *La Chambre Claire* (1980)³. The desire to write a novel is linked to the time paradox of *À la recherche du temps perdu*. Photography, with its constant present and its relationship to past scenes and events, redeems the death of the mother. Its atemporality renders the erasure of temporal distance useless and confirms deletion and loss. The phenomenology of photography in *La Chambre claire* is inseparable from the paradoxical temporality of *À la recherche du temps perdu* and the sense/field of sense duality.

³ *Camera lucida : reflections on photography*. Hill and Wang, New York, 1981.

Remarkably, the sense and field of sense duality, as well as the double phenomenology that Barthes identifies in Proust, should be examined in Barthes' discourses about signifier, text, textuality and literature. The essays about Proust offer a kind of archaeology of Barthes' criticism and invite a revision and re-situation of the linguistic references and the prevalence of signifiers that he privileges.

2 From the characterization of *À la recherche du temps perdu* to the sense and field of sense duality

Barthes clearly characterizes *À la recherche du temps perdu*, its narrative system (2020: 31),⁴ its paradoxical reflexive conclusion – which highlights the play upon memory – its use of proper names, and its cultural and sociological views, such as worldliness and social sharing. For Barthes, Proust's work is continuous and multiple and should be read with this continuity and multiplicity in mind, as they are effective means to manifestly expose memories. These critical propositions are remarkably objective. However, the descriptions of *À la recherche du temps perdu* that they induce remain far from the magnitude that Barthes perceives in the novel. *À la recherche du temps perdu* should be read as presenting a “mathesis” and a “mandala” (Barthes, 1973: 59 and note 6 *infra*). These propositions, however, carry implications that allow for a broad vision of the novel, commensurate with its magnitude, and justify viewing the narrative system, the string of proper names, and the sociological descriptions as exemplifications of the sense and field of sense duality.

2.1 *À la recherche du temps perdu*, its narrative and reflexivity, imply a play upon the appearance/ apparition of time and the equality of past, present, and future.

Barthes stresses the importance of questioning the relationship between the author Proust and his work, or, in other words, between life and literature. He notes that this question should have a straightforward answer: although the novel suggests no shared identity between the author and the narrator, both share the same functional characterization: both want to write according to the past, which is the future of the work: “Le passé de Proust est le futur du narrateur.” (Barthes, 2020: 37). The book that the reader has just read is the one that, according to the narrative argument, has yet to be written. *À la recherche du temps perdu* deals with moving away from the past while highlighting the past as its own future. Barthes believes that the reading of *À la recherche du temps perdu* develops according to the social signs and

⁴ See “Dossier d’enseignement pour un cours donné à Rabat”, *Marcel Proust. Mélanges*, 31–44. First publication of the article in 1970.

identities that the novel represents.⁵ He assumes that, due to the relationship between past and future in the world of the novel and the projection of this relationship in the world of the reader, these signs are constantly recognized. In the manner of Deleuze, he suggests a Platonism of *À la recherche du temps perdu*, which is confirmed by its reflexive conclusion. Barthes, moreover, links this reflexivity to the figuration of the difficult entry of literary creation into literature at the beginning of the 20th century. In other words, it is challenging to recognize the sense of a work and to identify it as fully literary.

More remarkably, Barthes' comments about the paradoxical reflexivity of *À la recherche du temps perdu* are complemented by his approach to Proust's presentation of time.

1. In *À la recherche du temps perdu*, the temporal theme should be read according to the characters, their social and historical backgrounds, and the world's time. Because we are historical and temporal beings, we can view time as the envelope of all beings and things.
2. Without time and its envelope, we would not be able to perceive the constancy of signs; in other words, the equality of present, past, and future. The past can be constantly present without losing the evidence of its obsolescence.
3. Without this equality, we could not speak of loss or death. Because of this equality, we must not neglect the emotional power of the novel. (This is one of the reasons that led Barthes to want to write a novel.)
4. Because of this equality and its innumerable moments, time serves as the field for any apparition/appearance of any "object."

These views about the paradoxical temporality of *À la recherche du temps perdu* and the envelope of time explain why Barthes reads the novel as a kind of whole, presenting literature's possible entirety and the world's extension: "Je comprends que l'œuvre de Proust est, du moins pour moi, l'œuvre de référence, la mathésis générale, le mandala de toute la cosmogonie littéraire." (Barthes, 1973, 59)⁶. The world's expanse and the entirety of literature cannot be fully articulated, but can be designated through moments in time, the equality of past, present, and future, and their constant apparition/appearance.

⁵ Barthes describes the inscription of Proust in the Third Republic, at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, the social classes evoked by *A la Recherche du temps perdu* – aristocrats, bourgeoisie of high finance, of Jewish origin, that to which Swann belongs, bourgeoisie of the new rich, still close to the petty bourgeoisie (the Verdurins), the liberal bourgeoisie and the people.

⁶ "I recognize that Proust's work, for myself at least, is *the* reference work, the general *mathesis*, the *mandala* of the entire literary cosmogony" (*The Pleasure of the text*, Hill and Wang, New York, 1975, p. 36)

2.2 Proust's Proper Names⁷

The semantics of proper names in Proust, which Barthes analyzes, is valid in itself and carries a paradox that guides Barthes' reflection. The proper name is a "rigid designator"; it also organizes several interrelated "meanings." The linguistic perspective that Barthes chooses leads him to see this system of proper names as homogeneous. Although he does not explicitly characterize this homogeneity, Barthes notes that this system is homogeneous because it belongs to literature. However, a close reading of this article shows that Barthes conceives each proper name in *À la recherche du temps perdu* as something that exposes several fields of sense, and that the various proper names form a system in relation to one another, as these fields of sense, more or less extensive, intersect. Objects, realia, and all kinds of thought belong to several fields of sense and are characterized according to the specific field in which they appear. In *À la recherche du temps perdu*, the system of proper names is entirely pluralistic, making each proper name and the character who possesses it a composition of multiple fields of sense. Contrary to what Deleuze asserted and what Barthes initially accepted, denominations – and, in particular, proper names – do not suggest Platonism but raise the question of the form that the set of everything belonging to these denominations and proper names can take. The form is what develops the series of names and draws attention to their intersections. The novel is a vast picture of combinations of apparitions/appearances – all equal – and shows a broad relativism and the innumerable relationships of agents in the world. It is the perfect presentation of the broadest field of sense.

3 *À la recherche du temps perdu* : an inclusive and readable novel

In his remarks on narrative reflexivity, the equality of past, present, and future, and proper names, Barthes implicitly notes that *À la recherche du temps perdu* is a novel that encompasses many different times and fields of sense. In other words, the novel is a field of sense that makes many apparitions/appearances possible – memories are examples of these apparitions/appearances, which can function as fields of sense. Because of the sense/field of sense duality, many realities can be seen as reflected in the novel; they appear. These apparitions/appearances do not necessarily imply a strict realism. They are representational versions of the intersections of fields of sense and the equality of times.

In what is the preparation for the seminar that will not take place, "Proust et la photographie", Barthes proposes to examine photos of individuals who might have been sources for Proust's characters. Barthes does not actually engage in a search for sources but tries to read these photos as if they were included in *À la recherche*

⁷ Roland Barthes. "Proust et les noms". *Marcel Proust, Mélanges*, 17–29.

du temps perdu. They are dated, historical portraits of social figures, making it possible to link them to the historical world of the novel. They are entirely compatible with the equality of times in the novel, might serve as apparitions/appearances within it, and can be inserted into its fields of sense.

In the preparatory pages for this seminar, Barthes remarks that the attention given to these photos relates to the imagination. The imagination can be understood as the actualization of what is not there through photos. Photos eternally present what is, just as eternally, not there. The imagination makes *À la recherche du temps perdu* a constant presentation of an absent world, inclusive of many moments and places.

These critical propositions of Barthes, viewed in terms of their implications, offer a very specific description of *À la recherche du temps perdu*. Barthes affirmed that his attitude toward *À la recherche du temps perdu* is first and foremost that of a reader, not a Proust specialist or interpreter (Barthes, 1973: 59). To put it another way: Barthes, as a critic of Proust, would be foreign to any hermeneutics, any search for meaning, and any deep characterization of the link between the author, Proust, and his work. Anyone who agrees with Barthes' stance should conclude that his criticism is only a literal criticism – a literal reading of the names, the narrative play and reflexivity, and the photos linked to the novel. This literal criticism does not appeal to meaning because, through its names, its narrative duality, its inclusive imagination, and its equal temporality, *À la recherche du temps perdu* is a novel exemplarily readable: everything is historical and permanent, seeming to follow a consistent mimesis.

Barthes' criticism can be viewed as the reading device for *À la recherche du temps perdu*. The reader Barthes can read the novel "personally" and identify its architecture: the "fact" of the novel does not contradict the "fact" of the reader. Barthes' personal reading is cohesive with the apparition of the reader Barthes and the identification of the novel as the field of sense of this apparition. The reader is in no way independent of the many ways in which he can appear in the novel's fields of sense. Similarly, the novel is not independent of the various ways and fields of sense that qualify its reader. In other words, the work symbolizes what exists in reality. The reflexivity of *À la recherche du temps perdu* shows that the narration can refer to many of the realities it evokes and their possibilities.

4 Barthes' reading of Proust and elements of his literary theory

Barthes' reading of Proust and its main arguments and notions shed light on central concepts in Barthes' theory. Let us associate central notions of Barthes' theory with the main ideas he uses to describe the world of Proust and *À la recherche du temps perdu*.

Literature – Apparition/Appearance. In the first two pages of *Le Degré zéro de l'écriture*, Barthes wrote: "Il n'y a pas de langage écrit sans affiche, et ce qui est vrai du Père Duchêne l'est aussi de la littérature. Elle doit aussi signaler quelque

chose, différent de son contenu et de sa forme, qui est sa propre clôture, ce par quoi précisément elle s'impose comme Littérature." (1953: 5–8)⁸. This opening of *Le Degré zéro de l'écriture* is paradoxical: the literary work is a kind of closure; however, it must also be an appearance and an apparition – that is the meaning of "affiche." Whatever characterization of literature and "écriture" literary works prioritize, they reveal that their specificity or autonomy, on the one hand, and their situation in the world and the way they address a possible audience, on the other, are inseparable. The appearance/apparition is the first characterization of "le degré zéro de l'écriture."

Signifier – Reflexivity. Barthes' reading of Proust indicates that *À la recherche du temps perdu* is a document – a text – and that it cannot be dissociated from what it says about itself through its reflexivity and from what readers say about it; Barthes is one of these innumerable readers. Seeing literature as prioritizing signifiers amounts to basing reading on the union and dissociation of the text, its reflexivity that confirms its emergence (apparition), and the freedom of the reader.

Textuality – Equality of Past, Present, and Future. In *Le Plaisir du texte*, Barthes wrote: "Lisant un texte rapporté par Stendhal (mais qui n'est pas de lui), j'y retrouve Proust par un détail minuscule. [...] Ailleurs, mais de la même façon, ce sont les pommiers normands en fleurs que je lis à partir de Proust. Je savoure le règne des formules, le renversement des origines, la désinvolture qui fait venir le texte antérieur du texte ultérieur. [...] Et c'est bien cela l'inter-texte : l'impossibilité de vivre hors du texte infini." (58).⁹ These remarks lead to two explicit conclusions. Time makes the text and generates textuality, which is defined by its paradoxical present. Any text, or any work, can serve as a basis for the apparition of another text and function as a field of sense. The equality of past, present, and future makes this apparition constantly possible.

Narrative – Reflexivity. In his article "Introduction à l'analyse structurale des récits" (1966 : 1–27)¹⁰ Barthes draws attention to the difficulty of reconciling the countless diversity of narratives with a structural approach to that diversity. This structural approach does not help determine whether the chain of events and actions exemplifies succession or consequence and whether the understanding of the entire narrative depends on a vertical integrative reading or a horizontal reading open to

⁸ "It is impossible to write without labelling oneself: as with *Le Père Duchêne*, so equally with Literature. It too must signify something other than its content and its individual form, something which defines its limits and imposes it as Literature". (*Writing degree zero*. Hill and Wang, New York, 1977, p. 1–2)

⁹ "Reading a text cited by Stendhal (but not written by him) I find Proust in one minute detail. [...] Elsewhere, but in the same way, it is the blossoming apple trees of Normandy which I read according to Proust. I savor the sway of formulas, the reversal of origins, the ease which brings the anterior text out of the subsequent one. [...] Which is what the inter-text is: the impossibility of living outside the infinite text..." (*The Pleasure of the texte*, 35–36).

¹⁰ "An Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narrative", *New Literary History*, Vol. 6, No. 2, On Narrative and Narratives. (Winter, 1975), 237–272.

all divergences. Any narrative, even a brief one, is too complex to be structurally accounted for. In fact, in a narrative, everything is a play on the sense and field of sense duality. This play may have the appearance of succession or consequence.

Effect of Reality – Sense and Field of Sense. Barthes's article on the "Reality effect"¹¹ seeks to justify the realism of minor descriptions that have no clear function within the work. Barthes is confronted with a realism that he cannot account for. To address this issue, it is useful to return to the "sense" and "field of sense" duality. A realistic description without a specific function brings its object into view; it makes it appear. However autonomous this description may be, it is understandable only according to the field of sense to which it can be related. Descriptions without justification mimic the apparition/appearance of the literary work.

5 Barthes reading Proust: the reading subject

The re-reading of Barthes' main theoretical notions under the duality of sense and field of sense reveals that these notions, in their strict definitions, reflect a flattening of the literary object, a form of disqualification.

The notion of *degré zéro de l'écriture* must be understood literally: *degré zéro* means that writing loses the obviousness of its composition and presents itself as a form of exteriority: "Cette Faim du Mot, commune à toute la Poésie moderne, fait de la parole poétique une parole terrible et inhumaine. Elle institue un discours plein de trous et plein de lumières, plein d'absences et de signes surnourrissants, sans prévision ni permanence d'intention..." (1953 : 71).¹² In a way, the reader becomes a stranger to this writing.

The signifier, considered literally, makes words evident, frees them from relationships, and exposes them as forms of exteriority. In its strictest characterization, the text leads to the indistinction of literature and removes all singularity and individuality from any discourse. The hypothesis of a relationship to what can be considered a literary work fades away.

The article on the structural analysis of narrative is so complex and diverse in its characterization of narratives that the hypothesis of a strict characterization dissipates.

The notion of the "effect of the real" is paradoxical: it maintains the hypothesis of mimesis while acknowledging that one cannot account for its function. The "effect of the real" does not allow for a statement about a relationship to exteriority, except to say that it can be recognized as visible. In the case of all these notions,

¹¹ Roland Barthes, "L'effet de réel", *Communications*, 11, 1968, 84–89. ("The Reality Effect", in *The Rustle of Language*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1986, 141–148).

¹² "This Hunger of the Word, common to the whole of modern poetry, makes poetic speech terrible and inhuman. It initiates a discourse full of gaps and full of lights, filled with absences and overnourishing signs, without foresight or stability of intention..." (ibid, 48).

the perception of the written characters is effective; it does not specify what the relationship of perception consists of.

Barthes' reading of Proust corrects all these points and defines the conditions for a complete identification of the literary work and for an effective relationship of perception and reading. *À la Recherche du temps perdu* thinks and perceives itself through the play of narrative reflexivity, which is manifest in the conclusion. This conclusion exposes the condition of the recognition of the novel as a literary work. Because it exemplifies the duality of sense and field of sense, it presents the conditions of its accessibility: the reader, who is also defined by this duality, is thus capable of penetrating the work, any work. This is why Barthes finds himself included in the infinity of the text.

Barthes notes, as we have already pointed out, that reading is undoubtedly imaginary and a lure. From this remark, one should not conclude that it is an illusion but rather observe the difficult balance of reading: it is the intersection, the superimposition of two fields of sense, that of the work and that of the reader; it is the moment of a specific appearance of the reader, inevitably provisional. The reader is then explicitly constituted as a subject. The commentaries of *Proust Mélanges* are testimonies to this constitution. We understand why Barthes states that his reading of Proust is a personal reading and why his work has become increasingly personal.

The counterpart to Barthes as a reader is Proust as a writer, as he can be explicitly or implicitly characterized in *Proust, Mélanges* based on the various fields of sense described by Barthes and the implications of Barthes' formula: "Proust's past is the narrator's future" – the narrator is the apparition/appearance of Proust that is yet to come. Proust constructs the games of appearance/apparition, which imply his person and are his signature, much like how in Cy Twombly's work, writing appears and disappears and constitutes the painter's signature. We must return to the opening of *Le Degré zéro de l'écriture*. In this essay, Barthes had the project to express "une Passion de l'écriture qui suit pas à pas le déchirement de la conscience bourgeoise" (1953: 13)¹³ and he read Proust only as an introduction to literature. Barthes, as a reader of Proust, surpassed these starting points. He made a remark from *Le Degré zéro de l'écriture*: Proust composes his narrative according to a phenomenological order (ibid, 56), serving as the starting point for entering the sense and field of sense duality.

¹³ "...a Passion of writing, which recounts stage by stage the disintegration of bourgeois consciousness." (ibid, 5).

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