

## Marcel Proust or the bright side of Narcissism

When we use the word narcissistic to comment on the behaviour of someone, we are being deprecative. And in the context of a civilisation nostalgic of the past but confident in the future of humans, the clipping together of the name Narcissus and the excessive love of one Self tells us more about the user of such rhetorical figure than about the person it designates. And trying to appear superior to the person we designate as narcissistic, because it involves reflecting on one's self as non-narcissistic, becomes a sign of inferiority. When the Self identifies with the Ego, the mind finds a way to link them and we start thinking that the Ego, as *essence* of the Self, is God-given. Furthermore if there is ever to be such a symbol (sign of essence) as the Ego, there has to be *someone else* in the deal of *existence*.

When the Self and the Ego are at war, the myth of originality is no longer useful. We need to move on. A new aesthetical complex has to be put together. And at that point, Ideas and styles evolve around the myth of **complementarity**. But loving the other as our better half doesn't have to involve gender duality, for it is no longer sexual. But on the converse, where the genders no longer complete each other, how does love come about through sexual intercourse, as it seems to be the case with many homosexual couples? This is where the bright side of narcissism starts to shine.

Those whose behaviour is not narcissistic sometimes live their whole life believing they are not responsible for what happens. Things happen to them even if they don't *make* them happen. This fake weakness of the Self, the posing involving the Ego as a looser, triggering the strategic silence about the non-existence of symbols, helps the mind believe in the essential reality of the Ego. It cannot be my fault if my life is a mess, because I am not responsible for whom I am. The problem is many people believe what *I* do doesn't have to be similar to who *I* am, or even related to any of the symbols defining *me* as a person.

But such play and mental schemes fool the analytical mind and deceives it, by illusion, in order to make room for an image - the more global, the better! -, and open up discursive thinking to the collaboration of holistic thinking. The reasoning mind is useless if it's analyzing and reflecting doesn't lead to *global* thinking. Thus science needs art, but when art has ceased to be precise in its measurements; when art has lost the use of symbolic objectivity, the time has come to save it again from the belly of the whale and put back a little science in art. Too many non-symbolic signs quickly become unbearable in any society, especially so in a world where language and history play such an important role. And health is balance, in the mind as elsewhere.

In a long book of symbol smashing, *In Search of Lost Time*, Marcel Proust finds a way to subtly reintroduce a symbolic web in an apparently objective painting of the world, and to do so he charges the non-symbolic signs of his writing with a symbolic counter-code only a heroic reader could eventually master. The music of the phrase and the play with sound and letters (sometimes creating new links with colours), are private symbols. Only the reader knows how they work. A non-symbolic sign like the taste of a *madeleine* dipped in a cup of tea has an incredible power: it can help you built a world and believe in it, as it were the only possible world. And the reader doesn't even have to know the specific taste of that kind of cookie to take advantage of the aesthetic miracle the reading of Proust brings about.

Narcissism as long been used as a symbol of excessive love of one's self, an erotic downer to anyone who wants to be their partner in sexual intercourse or in domestic life. But if we take a closer look at it, we start to see the figure of intellectual fertility and personal initiative. And the work of Proust will certainly help us to do so!

### The duties of Renaissance men

The lost of meaning brought about by Nietzsche's tragic announcement about God's death, even though it had been prepared by Hölderlin and Feuerbach, had a bitter impact on literature at the beginning of the twentieth century. Before the financial crash ruined the economy, the crash of symbolic essences led thinkers and artists of what the French call «la belle Époque» to new styles and new themes having more to do with matter, raw material, non-symbolic signs of the somatic mind. Let go of all the rules and aesthetic constraints, try to reach the core of your natural self and find out it has a different point of view than your Ego's. Yes you can set up a world in your mind, apart from the world of which you are part of. Without stopping to be yourself, you can feel as *one* with the world.

In the field of philosophical studies, concerning the Ego, there has been a bit of uneasiness and even unrest about the Ego being a symbolic representation of individual consciousness. The *self made man* of a new Renaissance as a tendency to overlook the shallowness of some basic concepts, like *uniqueness* (of God or personality), and indulge in soothing aesthetics, while keeping alive the need for rational clarity. And the myth of heredity is what helps the human mind find a way to see the future brighter than the past, even if the brightness is only symbolic. If Hercules is finally admitted among the gods of Mount Olympus, regardless of Hera's schemes and humiliations, it is first and foremost because he is the son of Zeus. The strength displayed in his works, is only the proof of his origin.

If Orestes could be rehabilitated, having killed his own mother, it only shows how Greek society of the time of Aeschylus considered the mother murdering as a minor offense compared to the stabbing a husband, especially with the help of a lover. And such a compromise is typical of the Hellenistic world. At the end of *Orestes*, Aeschylus sets the tragic stage for a change: to future will bring irony. The double standard stands the test. Representations will be more efficient if they trigger various interpretations; and even more if certain interpretations are contradictory. As long as we rest assured there is a final, conclusive interpretation, and a need for such meaning, our aesthetic choices show signs of born-again idealism, even before it has started shedding the marks of pessimism.

It's always a short and ordinary fellow without a particular talent that becomes the most tyrannical leader. And he always comes about after a period of low symbolic, a revolution or cataclysm. Hermes, son of Maya (illusion: the most lethal weapon the gods have given to mankind) is a master of communications between gods and men, a cunning inventor and a creator of links between the non-symbolic part of the mind and the myth-making symbolic part. As long as he is a child, he suffers no competition. But as soon as we make him a grown man he is outdone by Hercules. Somewhere in the middle, these two mythological

figures find a common ground and the difference between the non-sexual child and the highly sexual man is blurred as Narcissus comes about.

The mythological figure of the young god Mercury (*Hermes*), not yet gender oriented, is always moving; he is a master of illusions. He represents the possible reconstruction, at the symbolic level of thinking, of the lost unity, and as such it compromises gender completion (complementarity). In the mind, love and sex do not work the same way: love is mythical and sex is pragmatic.

When the themes of love and war are no longer considered as contradictory, whether you are an idealist or a materialist, a Romantic or a Realist, when the god of war and the goddess of love are no longer opponents, but merge through osmosis in the same mythical essence we call *sex*, or intercourse, the time has come to redefine their differences, and to do so one needs first to look at their resemblance.

We say love is blind. What happens in the mind when one is in a state of love is the surrender of discursive thinking to the non-symbolic order of holistic thinking. And since in this particular state of mind we tend to avoid analytical survey, so we can freely believe our love encounter *had* to be, we claim we were made for one another. It was written in the sky!

About Hermes's loves we know very little, especially if we compare his love life to Aphrodite's or Zeus's. In all logic – and myths are logical twists – this Olympian god born to the nymph Maya (illusion), the child that grew so fast but never got to be old, represents duality itself. Partly bright and fiery, partly fluid and elusive, he is a swift inventor and a speedy messenger. Intelligent yes, but not a master of symbols like his brother Apollo, more of a maker than a talker, Hermes seems to have the same kind of intelligence Metis had when Zeus swallowed her, practical intelligence, a way out of any obstacle the mind might have to face, mental or physical. He dwells in both worlds. So when legend-makers give Hermes children of his own, they make the same imaginary sin as those who would fathom Peter Pan's progeny. And their doing so is the sign of passing time and changing things. Myths and styles, as ideas and certitudes, are always on the move.

The child king is back, a symbol of forgiving. In his worship are now absorbed all the different loves we knew, the highest love of celestial Venus (*Aphrodite Urania*) at the symbolic level of name giving and myth making, and the lowest love of earthly Venus (*Aphrodite Pandemion*) at the indexical level of feelings and physical urges.

How could have survived the myth of man-god if Jesus-Christ had lived to have children of his own. Myths are allergic to such «*aporion*». The myth of social completion in family bonding we call the myth of heredity works differently than the myth of gender completion in intimacy. Generational conflicts are signs of over-usage and abuse. But after irony has allowed heredity to take over death, heredity in turn must lead the way to heroism, as Laios had to yield to the arrogant young man he met at the crossroads (not knowing it was his own son Oedipus), Icarus had to fall, and the gifts of the gods in the box of Pandora had to become plagues as they were released. The overcoming of duality in an image allowing self-consciousness to capture its *oneness* is what G. Durand calls a subjectively homogenizing and objectively heterogenic representation.

Through the representation of a hero's deeds, the self gets a grasp of its oneness, but this cannot be achieved if the world is not first separated in two. Monsters and dragons are symbols of the absolute otherness of the world. On the other hand such a non-symbolic thing as *love at first sight* helps us understand the undividable oneness of life. A subjectively homogenizing representation helps the divided self, even if only in reflection, to feel as one. And without this essential identity, even though we could never prove that such a category of being existed, a person would only be a logical icon and would never evolve to be the reflecting representation of a symbolic entity known as the Ego. When a person gets to see the difference between being a sign and being an existing thing, when the mirror reveals the masquerade, objective representation is heterogenic or dualistic.

I feel as one because I identify with what people see in me. And since only my body is visible, even though some movements of the soul could sometimes be readable in my physical appearance, as long as I trust people's judgment I can believe I am one. And this mind strategy is called the myth of originality. And if ever there is only one, I have to be the one. All efforts to understand the world as one are bound to fail as long as the Ego has not merged into the world's Id.

The objectively heterogenic representation maintains duality as its vital principle. Indeed, the edification of the Ego as an apparently independent entity is unthinkable outside of reflective thinking, what Paul Ricoeur calls the «ipseity» (*ipse*) of self consciousness, as an alternative to the identity (*idem*) of a person. Out of two, essence and existence, *one* living being: this is the law of symbolic resistance to passing (non-cyclical) time. Taking part in the construction of the Ego of a child, as it triggers collaboration of reason and imagination, parents are brought to bridge non-symbolic existential conditions and make sense of their own life.

The myth of gender completion gives way to ideal mental representations of meaningful differences, but if it is constituent with romantic aesthetics, it is only contributory in tragic and rationalist aesthetics. Sex on the other hand is the context of tragic myth revival, constituent with the loss of meaning and indifference, and contributory to romantic and ironic aesthetics. Pure symbols, that is non-illustrated concepts, such as numbers have no use in sex. For sex deals first in images; the concepts come later. The kind of signs more likely to be used in or about sexual intercourse is what C.S. Peirce calls an *index*, a «pure» sign of existence, unspoiled by symbolization. His famous example for this category of signs is «*a feeling of red*». <sup>1</sup>

When Montaigne, another renaissance man, writes about his friendship with La Boétie: «Because it was him, because it was me», he treats symbols as if they were indexes. He applies the law of causality, which according to Peirce is constituent with existence, to the conjunction of indexical symbols. In other words, he uses the words of justification without justifying anything. His sentence doesn't give us a clue about how their existential experience of being buddies changed his life. He couldn't say anything about his feelings because, even though he had crammed his *Memoirs* with most of the western world's human knowledge, the whole western civilisation was build on symbols and symbolic expression has no real grip on the reality of human existence.

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<sup>1</sup> C.f. [www.neurosemiotics.com](http://www.neurosemiotics.com)

According to Hölderlin, the mutual neutralization of the contradictory forces of existence helps the mind find a way to make sense of the non-rational.

«...to meet as wrench the changing and exchanging of representations at such a peak that no longer the changing of representations but the representation itself appears»

But the times of such a high spirited self-sacrifice are gone, the times of immobility, no-movement (*ni-rvana*) and the world as one. For people accustomed to the ways of the world, and words getting to mean something else than what they were meant to mean, war and love could possibly be seized as «one», if the right rhetoric is used. We are all familiar with the *war of genders* and *enslaved hearts*, with conquer, surrender and chains. In all its glory in the sky, where shines Beethoven's banner «*Alle Menschen werden Brüder*» (Brothers every men), Romanticism has to deal with broken-hearts and frustrated heroes gone mad when it hits the ground.

Realism has to pick up the bones of Classicism and try to make sense of the fools who pretend they can take the place of God. «No problem! I'll do it! » they say, but everybody knows that the world we live in is Hell, than nothing is worth the effort trying making sense of it. This kind of talk could represent extreme knowledge or absolute stupidity. It's a slippery ground where duality reigns. And since in this new century, the twentieth of our millennium, was going to be modern, science unlimited and progress unstoppable, Realism had to get rid of all the lingering nostalgia, if art was going to help the people change the world.

And when the progress of the people seems to freeze, the moving forces have to be confronted once again to one another. When «stability» and «order», «defence» and «security» tend to be synonymous, we lie in the swamp of indifference. «It's all the same! », as a sign has sometimes to be read as «Wake up kid! It's your turn to shine». According to Andy Warhol each one of us is entitled to a few minutes of celebrity. Taking the chance of your life is the only way you will ever become someone, a recognizable symbol, even if you do so playing games. And sex is certainly the most played game in the world, even if the character you make for yourself in sex-play is abstinent. It involves all kind of dualities and all kind of word games and it leaves the mind free of symbols for a while...or completely destabilized by overpowering symbols. As long as sex is kept a family thing, love has to stay celestial, ideal and pure. But as soon as the wall is torn down between public and private life, sex is called back from exile and bourgeois mothers indulge to dress as whores without offending no one; men all want to be heroes and swing about the bat of Hercules, but most of them pretend it is for health balance, including sport and having a family.

If we look at it from a semiotic point of view, sex is in constant re-adaptation. As the symbol-making take place in the discursive mind, new indexes have to be shipped in from the imaginative mind. Changes occur revealing as lies what we thought was so true. Love is in exile, or has it died with God? Renaissance men always have to re-invent a non-contradictory world in order to set the first stone of Classicism. There would be no sense in making new symbols if the old ones had not gone stale, unusable from all the coats of illustrative efforts of the mind.

When indexes reign in the world of representations, there is no more sense of class, no logical framework to help us refrain from over-illustrating. All is in all. And if *Love in peace* or *Peace in love* are chocking statements for the Children of War, who know very well Love and War are not the same thing, they are more than suitable for the children of Peace. Neutralization of the opposite forces, such as existence and essence in the mind, and recourse to duality as a new opportunity to redeem failing oneness, bring about ironic aesthetics. Life is a game, a mirror-play, even if it has to be a parody of the real cosmic *lîlâ* (play), acting out the war implies the knowledge of the parties or gender compleutive dependence to one another. We have a ball, as long as illusion keeps us fooled about the oneness of love and sex. But this time, since we don't know anymore what love is, each one of us has to make his/her own god or his/her own goddess, as busy as our minds may be with conceptual thinking. Would we let sex lead the way... maybe love would be born again from its ashes.

Like a typical passive aggressive, Proust claims in silence, without uttering a word, that even though he is half-Jew and homosexual, and thus twice isolated, he still is the greatest French writer there could ever be. He tries to make one the land of France and its soul, by becoming, through the «alchemy of the verb» (Rimbaud), the avatar of France itself, the reincarnation of oneness. The project is colossal, and to make it happen the poet this time will need more than the reading help of his readers; he will also need their analytical skills and their imaginations to complete his/the work of art.

Any innovator daring enough to free him/herself from the nostalgia of golden age must bear the burden of tremendous guilt. For he/she has cut up the world in pieces and has refused to let be the natural flow of things in order to give way to the egotistic fantasy of the Ego. But if the Ego does exist, there has to be at least two worlds: his/hers and the others. The age of mystical communion and cosmic fusion is over. Tales can no longer end with: «they lived happy ever after and had many children». The tragic aesthetics of decadent Romanticism and triumphant Realism has us facing the facts: time goes by and its passage is painful since we always move further away from the golden origin.

The reign of children devouring Chronos (time) is compromised by Rhea's schemes. The baby god Zeus is replaced by a stone and his divine diet becomes fatal. The saying «the future belongs to those who get up early» replaces the belief in the superiority of «golden oldies». Heroism is born again in these troubled waters where the historical truth and the fiction lies can no longer be distinguished from one another. Like Moses in his reed basket, the mythological figure of the middle way necessarily bridges irreconcilable opponents such as Apollo, master of covenant order, and Dionysus, god of liberating confusion. A woman according more importance to her feminine image than to her duty as a wife and mother, or a man infatuated with his own virility, impeach the natural flow of the world and the apollonian order pretending to represent it. They want to be simultaneously the same and different, unique as an image, objectively homogenised in appearance, but double as a thinking matter, subjectively heterogenic in reflection.

Let's take a closer look at the mythological figure of Narcissus and try to see if it can help us get a better grasp of Proust's writing. Narcissus refuses to be the better half of Echo. He contemplates his own reflection in ecstasy, and in a centripetal move he closes up on himself, like an oyster on its precious pearl. Son of a flower (the nymph Liriope («Lily eyed») and of the river Cephissus, he knows about cyclic time and abides to its law, that of

eternal renewal. To the eyes of linear time (history) worshippers, who only have eyes for action, he runs in circles, trapped in his immobility. For Echo, instead of propagating his progeny, is wasted away from vale to vale.

The goddess Hera, sister and wife of Zeus, imposes her will on Aphrodite, that niece of hers born from the foam the fallen genitals of Uranus have created at the surface of the ocean. And she forces Aphrodite to marry the only son she bore to Zeus, the deformed blacksmith Hephaestus she threw from mount Olympus when she saw how ugly he was.

But no domestication of Eros can put out the fires of love. Even chained, the fury wakes us up at night. For the coincidence of love and family is an immobilisation; it is only doable through magic thinking. With the flow of time passes also happiness, whatever we do to prevent it.

Like Dionysus, Narcissus is first tragic. Indeed, the first stage of Narcissus story tells us about the broken engagement with Echo. And since the natural law is not abided, Narcissus is then drowned trying to kiss his own reflection at the calm water's surface. This second stage is ironic: it is a parody of sacred idol worship. Finally, in the third stage, he is turned into a flower, trapped in the contemplation of his own reflection, as if he was condemned to eternal sleep (*narkē*). But since he is the only one who can satisfactorily complete himself in contemplation, he becomes the hero of his own destiny. Apollo and Dionysus are reunited in one divine figure, similar in this fusion fashion to the love goddess Aphrodite who is double, *pandemion* and *urania*, worldly and celestial, carnal and spiritual, who's two sons Eros and Anteros are symbols of sexual intercourse and friendship (love without sex). And anterotic pleasure is to platonic love what erotic pleasure is to sex; it transcends real physical needs of self-satisfaction by yielding to the image of another human being, even if it means dwelling in imaginary illustration.

The goddess of love herself is born from the curbing of contradictory forces: once married, she brings about family and allows the reign of heredity without letting go of sexuality. And once the winged archer Eros is tied to the pole of the familial home, the only child left roaming about is Hermes, the son of Maya (illusion), everywhere at home, magician among men, messenger among gods. As cunning as Ulysses, he is an inventor like Dedalus and a master of illusions. No wonder Zeus takes him along every time his sexual appetite leads him down to the mortal's world. Hermes also leads the souls of the dead to the nether land. In Plautus *Amphitryon*, he takes the exact appearance of Sosie (in French, this name has come to mean look-alike). As for Narcissus, since he belongs to both world, can be considered as a «hermetic» figure.

After the non-differentiation brought about by the confusion of love and war, of which the very French baron of Charlus is a symbol, being Germanophile in the midst of the first World War, Proust has to reconstruct the world. But does he have the strength to undertake such a task? His book is all written down in several notebooks, but he thinks he is unable to finish it. Fortunately, he remembers he was first and foremost a reader – he has written *About Reading* as a preface to his book on Ruskin -, so he will use this science of reading to convince his own reader to take on the baton of a literary relay race. And as long as can be maintained the confusion of reader and writer, he doesn't have to choose between painting and music, insect and flower, truth and appearance. Thanks to this participation of the reader

in the mimesis, and not only in the *hermeneusis* (interpretation) and catharsis of the work of literature, he can become the greatest French writer and still keep pretending he is a failure. Without turning his back on minor art forms and futilities, Proust can now rest assured of his triumph. He made the best of both sides: the dark side of Narcissism, being condemned to go in circles and to always come back to the starting point, and the bright side of Narcissism, being linked to the reader by self-fertilization.

Ironic aesthetics deals with themes related to heredity, and these give its positive value to narcissism. Someone indulging in the erotic pleasure of self esteem feels he/she has the right to initiate the making of a new world and consequently to deny the symbolic superiority of the old world. But then, with the death of God or at least his eviction from the throne of Supreme Being, the responsibility of Self-edification is not necessarily welcomed with enthusiasm. Many a self-lover fights back by trying to replace God. And that is how the myth of non-differentiation leads tragic aesthetes to savour, preferably cold, the «unspeakable pleasure of anxiety» (Georges Bataille).

Symbolists, deceived by Realism and rebuked by its tricks, turn to culture as a way to surpass nature. Man is something that has to be overcome or taken further, says Nietzsche's Zarathustra, and if many see science as a mean to fulfill this project, others only believe it feasible in the arts. But science deals exclusively with symbols and can only control nature mentally; the existential dimension of human beings always slips through the cracks of any symbolic grid. B. Brecht thought he could convince the theatre-goers to become scientists, but to do so the spectators had to concentrate on rationalist criticism. Before long, the German playwright found out he couldn't frustrate them of the erotic pleasure of self-indulgence or the «*anterotic*» pleasure of illusion, since theatre, even as a dream of other times, cannot avoid being a mirror of the society it is produced in.

It happened three times in the history of France that after revolutions or social unrest kings and emperors were called back. The same thing happens in the world of art. When myths are over-used they need to be refreshed. Each time non-symbolic signs satisfy the user and bring his mind to a liberating catharsis, mind and body merge into self consciousness. Existence and essence are experienced as one.

If Art wants to take the royal road of renewed or Renaissance man, it has to break out of the symbolic chains maintaining it by force on the throne; it has to discover anew the indexical treasure of holistic treasure under historical disguises, where symbols have no grip, in the somatic mind. And this liberation was only starting in Proust's time. The world's nakedness had to be shown. But in such a highly symbolic medium as literature, this kind of strip-tease was hard to perform. Even in music, symbols had gain territory (Debussy). But before long, in the full bloom of Modernism, in the concrete music of Edgard Varèse, or the monochrome paintings of Mark Rothko, the difference will be blurred between essence and existence.

But the fulfillment of human being lies neither in science nor in art, rather in their mutual completion. That's what Proust, as a reader of Ruskin and Nietzsche had understood and what makes his work original. Even though his book appears at first as a messy jumble in which the rings of beautiful style seem to die out like circles in the water, the reader can make sense of it if is discovered the method used in the writing process: the coincidence of

contraries. And being one of a kind as it is mirroring all its predecessors is the mark of a classical work of art.

Proust wanted his book to be the ultimate reference in French literature. He never said so, but it seeps through every «pore» of his work, and he must have felt it was due to him since his talent was never really recognized in his life time. His literary egotism was so unimaginable and prodigious he felt his book had to contain all of literature and condemn all other books to uselessness. It might not even be necessary to think he was conscious of how much could be grasped in apparently insignificant details, like in medieval illuminations, to see in such hyper-symbolization the signature of a megalomaniac narcissist.

### **the making of the self**

The mythical figure of Narcissus and the legendary episodes constituting its epistemological nucleus are figments of the myth of heredity, a mental strategy facilitating the acquisition of erotic pleasure. We know the Ego is a symbol, used as a logical icon, but we neglect to see how, as a fiction tool produced by the reflective mind, it is an image of the individual, a representation of an existing independent entity. We choose to believe it is our essence, an independent part of the person having nothing to do with our existence. In order to believe in the happy outcome of our destiny, we fail to verify if the other really exists outside of one's self. Such is the case with Narcissus contemplating his own image reflected on the water's surface and taking it for the beloved «other».

In the field of Art, ironical aesthetics are marshalled around the same myth. We know that any work of art cannot avoid being an imitation of some sort, a derived product, and that the original model forever stays out of reach. But we play the game; we engage in *mimesis*, confident in the natural response of interpretation (*hermeneusis*) and appreciation (*catharsis*), a concrete change marking the efficiency of the whole semiotic process. And it is in such a playful context that the concept of **originality** is put together. In other words, no one could be original without being first an imitator. The chick aspires to its hatching, but does not want to crack its shell. How then could one be born, take its place and structure his/her own being without pushing no one around or destroying anything, just remaining his/her own self?

Through the period called economic liberalism, the myth of heredity underlies ironical aesthetics. In any such Renaissance the cult of personality appears to counterbalance the cult of family. Even if André Gide, the prophet of modern individualism, writes: «Family, I hate you! », he ended up creating an «artificial» family for himself. And Proust's Narrator wants Albertine to love him like his grandmother did. In Proust's work, the domestic warmth of familial affection finally eclipses the passionate fireworks of Swann and Odette or Charlus and Morel. The question of the inseparability of sex and progeny cantilevered by the inconsistency of individual desire and familial responsibility preoccupied Proust so much it made realist story telling look pale to his eyes, because it was unthinkable without putting back in place the rational order. So he gave his preference to monsters of contradiction such

as Charlus, Robert de Saint-Loup, Morel and Albertine, and of course to the stylistic disorder of ironical aesthetics.

In the beginning of *Sodom and Gomorrah*, he brings back the theory of the damned race he had sketched in *Contre Sainte-Beuve*, adding to it a few entomological and botanical observations. But doing so, he only makes it more confuse for the reader who is already dizzy from all the generic (as much for genre as for gender) changes he keeps making as he uses his systematic inversion method. The least we can say is that this theory is not clear. But, as he usually does, the author conveys the essential content of his theoretical discourse in tiny and apparently insignificant details.

*«...so an exceptional act of self-fertilization comes at the appointed time to give its own turn to the screw, to apply the brake, and bring the flower that had exaggeratedly departed from the norm back within it. My reflections had been following an incline that I shall describe in due course, and I had already drawn from the conspicuous stratagem of the flowers a consequence bearing on a whole unconscious element in the work of literature»*

The choice of self-fertilization hinders gender complementarity. And like the man-woman he tries to describe, the poem-study or philosophical novel he does it with is a hybrid form bearing the mark of duplicity. But in such a context of confusion where dream and reality are no longer seen as different states, they both become signs of originality. To become one's own Muse and be at the same time Zeus and Venus, such is the narcissist's choice. It makes Echo's existence useless.

Proust's life experience, as manifold and contradictory as they may be, are only used to enhance the fertilizing process. How indeed can he sustain that homosexuality is a symbol of literature, that self-fertilizing is its ultimate justification? Just like the «styles» of the flower-woman are arched by the weight of the buzzing, bothering and finally stinging insect, the styles of Proust are «fully» penetrated by his argument. Proust, like Narcissus, is at the same time the Muse and the inspired

A certain number of responsibilities are incumbent to a homosexuality: new values have to be created to justify or at least assume such a state of being. And many have been dismissed by such a demanding task. It is somewhat irritating to see how many young rebels who took part in the so called sexual revolution of the sixties have later turned to a conventional social frame that is finally nothing but an imitation, not to say a parody, of the heterosexual couples on which the bourgeois society grounds family and progeny.

William S. Burroughs preaches in the desert when he writes about homosexuals as dead like people having no claim on life and being obliged by their situation to create new values. Since his weirdness always shed a shadow on his mystical optimism, for he believed in a better world ahead and in life after death, his hopes were deceived. Same sex marriages have multiplied and when gay parents, as couples, adopt children, they generally do so to reproduce the familial context.

Proust theory on the subject, though veiled at first by stylistic circumvolutions, finally comes out in all of its nudity.

*«...similarly, the flower-woman that was here would, should the insect come, arch her «styles» coquettishly and, in order to be penetrated more fully by him, would imperceptibly, like a hypocritical but ardent young damsel, come to meet him halfway.»*

In Proust's metaphor, the fertilizing male is the insect, and it still takes on the aura of the decisive action. As for its female counterpart, she is the flower, making «half of the way» to meet «him». The use of the word «styles» is not unintentional. Proust even puts it in brackets. It is a botanical term with literary resonances, and it refers to the expression «the rings of beautiful style» (*Finding Time Again*). It relates to the curve and not the angular. The female flower «arcs» her «styles» in order to be «penetrated» by the fertilizing insect. The insect then becomes the idea, long worked out, that shall one day spring out and become the theme of the book. But in the course of these always moving poetic pages, that reason seems unable to capture; and much more so because these poetic pages are interchangeable.

Double meaning is here full blown. And that is what Proust will try to prove: the female organs of the flower and the manner of writing have a lot in common. Just like he does when he uses the word «theory» to write about the group of young ladies appearing to him on the beach of Balbec, he tries to induce a symbolic dimension in pure matter.

*«...I could one day take place among them in the theory they unrolled along the sea»*

A philosophical term is used to describe a non-symbolic material reality. In the case of «styles», the metaphor link goes from the particular to the general, a writer's style having only symbolic links with the blunt and erectile object that is a stiletto (from which the pistils or stamens of the flower get their name). But in the case of «theory», the metaphor rather goes from the general to the particular: the group of young ladies being the less abstract among all the «view of the mind» (the etymological meaning of the word *theory*).

A literary work is the product of such a meeting, a symbol of self-fertilization. The literary virus having brought about the metamorphosis of Realism into Modernism will now contaminate the modernist representation by subtly adding a metaphorical twist to illustration. Where symbol no longer seems to have a grip, in the wide ocean of indexes he offers to his readers, Proust drops in proto-symbolic signs, like a link between a colour and a vowel. And the reader is now the only one responsible of the symbolic completion of such a link. Details are often where occurs the revelation of such meta-meaning, like the series of useless buttons on one of Misses Swann pastel garments. Sewn in a row, even if they have no button-holes to fill, these buttons belong to such a category of proto-symbols, sign buoyant of an idea that only the distance of reading can recognize.

To symbolize the «non-symbolizable» or what can only be relatively symbolized because of its links to holistic thinking and emotional life is what Rimbaud was trying to do in his *Sonnet of the Vowels*. Proust goes further and hides a certain number of symbolic ploys where the reader only sees superficial futilities. He sets a symbolic web where the description of the non-symbolic seems to have made inoperative any symbolic interpretation, in the choice of colours for instance. As in the most graphic, not to say pornographic scene of the concluding book of *In Search of Lost Time*, the lateral bull's eye from which the

narrator sees Charlus being chained an iron bed and battered by a handsome working class tormentor gives him the opportunity to symbolize the baron's behaviour and describe him as Prometheus bound to a rock of «pure matter», thus capturing his «poetics» where at first only vice could be seen. Like the row of useless buttons and the Duchess de Guermantes little red shoes, the perversity of the baron helps us make symbolic links where meaning seems to have disappeared.

Much like Shakespeare being the only true hero of his dramas, his powerful poetry deceiving us in loving even his meanest characters, Proust projected himself in all of his characters turning thus his multi-faceted personality into lovable monsters. Being the most classical of modernists and one of the first neo-baroque writers of the twentieth century, Proust made possible the familiarization of morbidity which is the unmistakable sign of the passage of tragic aesthetics to ironic aesthetics. He does so when he describes Charlus's perversity as poetic. And furthermore, as he comments the maid's verbal invention – her name is Françoise - he worked at making the familiar heroic, which is the sign of the passage from ironic aesthetics to rationalistic aesthetics.

### Literature revisited as art

After the passage of tragic aesthetics to ironical aesthetics, Modernism takes over Realism. And because he is lost in self-contemplation, Narcissus is the laughing stock of men and gods. But thanks to the reader's inverted sting, his reflection, second stage of self-fertilization, brings him to the final bliss of recognition.

If the book is a gown, or a garment, the author must make sure the accessories do not clash with the whole. «*Go back quickly and put your little red shoes*» says the Duke of Guermantes to the Duchess. The accessories of a work of literature are its links with the other arts (painting, music) and the other genres (lyrical, dramatic). As long as the book is a novel, it comes under the epic genre, but the more it lets its critical mission evolve, the more its lyrical and dramatic tendencies are made visible.

Nostalgia gives way to enthusiasm. But a deeply rooted wisdom keeps us from betting it all on the future. Instead of being rejected, the past is rather altered in such a way that it becomes an unattainable ideal, an ineluctable model. And that is how a Renaissance leads the way to neo-classicism. In Proust time, it is already the fourth time, after Aristotle, Montaigne, Voltaire...Once more nostalgia is transmuted into enthusiasm. Blind faith in the future discredits imitation of models, even if it is in a very discrete manner. Being a Modernist, freed from the chains of Realism, an artist must find his own path. And it just happens that such a path irretrievably leads to neo-classicism.

According to Eugenio d'Ors, art hides itself. The art lover attention should not be turned to the ties and knots of the actual making of the work of art, and all that is not thoroughly achieved has no reason to be there. On the converse of it, baroque art shows itself, and what it represents has less importance than the manner it represents it. Proust in comparison to Mallarmé, as Manet in comparison of the other Impressionists, attach less importance to the

manner, always manifold like the styles of one person, than to what is illustrated by the representation, namely the argument. On this particular subject, the painter Paul-Émile Blanche, who left us a portrait of Proust, said about his friend Manet that he was a Classical artist:

«Manet is not a Realist painter, but a Classical painter. As soon as he puts a layer of colour on a canvas, he always thinks about pictures, more than about nature (...) even when painting pictures after a model, he never copied nature; I found out about his masterful simplifications...everything was a short cut»<sup>2</sup>

Proust does the same when he takes his book as the subject of his book; he allows the literary device to dethrone the sacred imitation of nature and of the society within it. He rocks the boat of Academism that has been for the longest time solely driven by disenchanted pessimists who believed great art was fatally «passé». And by proposing to his readers what Umberto Eco would later call an «open work», he offers himself a life-saver. Narcissus after all was not drowned, he just fell to sleep after masturbating.

In the field of art, Mannerism often coincides with decadent Realism; it tries to move away from it in order to let the artist express himself without turning his back to the ideas of the past. P. Francastel had studied this phenomenon in Italian painting of the sixteenth and seventeenth century. At the end of the nineteenth century, the success of Symbolism outshines the stronghold of Realism. The Mannerism of such artists as Jean Lorrain, Stefan George or Oscar Wilde has to be strongly shaken until all the elegant disguises fall and be revealed anew the naked beauty of a clear argument. And since the loves in novels are always metaphors used as rhetorical devices of literary seduction, since the beauty of a work of literature only has value for the links of the chain of inspired readers (c.f. Plato's *Ion*), illusion has to be dedicated to its noblest task: to educate while ravishing.

The third stage of Proust's aesthetical journey leads him to Classicism. It is only logical. In the cradle of Modernism stands now a new Hercules able to master the two snakes Hera had put there: marriage and solitude. And the idea-bug is as fertilizing as the «style» is flowered, that is to say hybrid. Like the style of Misses Swann (Odette de Crécy), an unexpected marriage of class and vulgarity (in the noblest of sense) Proust's style is as patchwork, as ravishing as it is deceiving. The successful «marriages» Odette makes with her gowns, garments and accessories, become the model of the literary work that has to be done. The «text» being a fabric (textile), as its Latin etymology shows us, the writer must make a dress. And since women's dress-making is the competence of very specialized artists whose talent is more visually than musically appreciated, Proust has to rely on description (*ut picture poesis*).

But as much as the pictorial part of Proust's writing is important, it doesn't completely overcast the musical game he plays with his readers in associating sounds, vowels and consonants, in regard of the different characters his «novel» deals with. Indeed, his poetics include a study of colours facilitating logical comprehension of such musical game. Even if the reader doesn't have the necessary knowledge to apprehend the musical system, he/she

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<sup>2</sup> Paul-Émile Blanche, Catalogue de l'Exposition Manet , Paris 1983

can certainly notice in the harmony or dissonance of colours an index of symbolic structuring. With the help of such a sound/colour association game, the «heroic» reader can grasp the cabalistic and alchemistic dimension of Proust's writing and from there reconstruct the musical idea of his work of literature.

Oriane is orange, coral and amaranthine. The reader doesn't need more than the palette Proust deploys in describing the Duchess of Guermantes to be convinced of the care he put in naming his characters and attributing them specific colours. Odette, the Lady in pink of the first book, is for her part always dressed in pastel colours and ends up appearing as a «symphony in white». In comparing them, the reader thinks of the white dawn and reddish sunset. As for Albertine, she first appears on the beach of Balbec in her black polo. .

The symbolic decoding occurs in Proust's work as much as in the Romantics, and it brings as well the reader to holistic peace. The unachieved project has to stay unachievable because it has more to do with science and philosophy than with literature. And philosophy, at least western philosophy, goes forward, since it is always practiced in the frame of discursive thinking, sometimes analytical (Voltaire, Wittgenstein), sometimes reflective (Rousseau, Camus). But novel, be it Realist or even Naturalistic, goes in circles. It only preaches for already converted readers. So, since it no longer corresponds to the needs of Modernity, it has to be broken, torn to pieces, from inside. And that is what Proust will intend to do, just like Pirandello did with drama.

In the works of Poe and Baudelaire, poetry is still largely regular, but the feline reigns. And their conversion to the religion of Night of which the cat is the emblem Hell becomes the new Paradise. Their style is still academic, but their themes are already tragic. Their boat has to sink in the abyss of dreams, like Nelligan's *Vaisseau d'or*. Reason and science can no longer save them. Dedalus couldn't invent anything to prevent the fall of Icarus.

If Realist writers have turned their back to the solace of Romantic purring, it returns by the back door. In the same way Romantic purring, still heard in the works of early Modernists, has replaced the pessimism of tragic aesthetics, the wheels of industrial machines, like the ones Charlie Chaplin so gracefully plays with in *Modern Times*, have replaced Romantic purring for the ironic aesthete.

Proust tries to demonstrate how we invent love, how we create for ourselves idols to adore – something very similar to Nietzsche's *Will zum Glauben* – and that the fertilizing of the female by the male of a species has no more value than the self-fertilizing of the artist. He even deconstructs love's mechanic before our very eyes. The men-women he tries to describe live in tension, like electrical power; they are resolutely modern, but from a scientific point of view, their habits and customs are inexplicable since they yet have to be created.

Charlus and Albertine are prototypes of these men-women. The baron Palamède de Charlus, Mémé for his close friends – if any! – represents a time gone by and as such becomes a symbol of tragic aesthetics. His superiority complex, of which his arrogance and snobbism are the most outstanding symptoms, is finally cured by the coming true of his poetic dream, his promethean fantasy of a civilizing master turned into a slave, when he gets whipped by the handsome, rugged and barbarian commoners he pays to do so.

As for Albertine, the woman-man in black, like the men in those days, she represents a world to come. She dies falling from a horse back, but it might as well have been of a car accident. With her, the Narrator plays the game of marriage only to discover how essential his solitude is. And finding in the novel form a mirroring factor of his life experience, he dives into the unknown...even if it means losing the notion of fiction.

Proust's project incorporates in the creation of a world the description of our world as well as the invention of his own. Facing one another as in a mirror, these two worlds become one mixture of historical data and literary inventions. His project is then essentially ironic. He knows it could never be fulfilled, but he undertakes it and transfers to his reader the responsibility of achieving it. In the first stage his project, Proust is properly tragic. Like in the first case of tragedy found in Aristotle's *Poetics*, his protagonist knows he is going to accomplish an irreparable deed and accomplishes it. He refuses marriage. Just like in Racine's work, whose theatre plays an important role in *In Search of Lost Time*, there are very few genuinely tragic characters in Proust's work, that is to say characters standing alone in front of God, always saying what they think and incapable of turning their back to the accomplished fact. If Phaedra, Junie, Titus and Berenice are such characters, Orestes and Hermione are mundane characters because they disguise their identity and their true intentions.

In *Finding Time Again*, Proust sets the stage for a fierce quarrel between two actresses closely linked to Racine: Berma, who is famous for her interpretation of Phaedra at the Comédie française, and Rachel, nicknamed «Rachel-quand-du-Seigneur», a phrase taken from one of Racine's plays. After being humiliated by Robert de Saint-Loup who used her as a front to hide his homosexuality, pretending she was his mistress, Rachel ends up delivering verses from Phaedra at a Guermantes party. And Rachel is Jewish, as is Robert's wife Gilberte, Swann's daughter. The fight between these two actresses symbolizes the clash of decadent aristocracy and rising bourgeoisie. And since actresses are now at the forefront, the passage from tragic aesthetics to ironic aesthetics is a thing of the past, the book the reader has in his hands has to be taken as a neo-classical attempt to push the limits of ironic aesthetics.

## **Inversion as a new way of life**

By trying to explain everything one advertently dismisses evidence: there can be no origin if not plural. We should always talk of origins. And that God thinks up the world is not enough; he still has to create it, make it and make man in his resemblance. There should only be gods and goddesses. And the door is open to vulgarization. Soon divinity is but a common thing. Narcissus finds it in his own reflection; he becomes his own idol. It certainly is ridiculous, but it is far better than the boring ob security of night, where one cannot see the difference between the self and the other.

But such confusion is not only glum decomposition of convened ideas, like it is for the tragic aesthete longing for the thrill of the «unspeakable pleasure of anxiety» (G. Bataille). It is not

felt as the death of God (Nietzsche), or even his indifference (Hölderlin), but rather as an opportunity to transcend the irreconcilable confrontation of the Good and the Bad. Beauty appears to be an adequate solution. And among different types of beauty –some might find beautiful deformity or cruelty, and others only find beauty in signs of essence (symbols) – the most universal beauty is similar to the human body.

Realists and Materialists want rational beauty, and since they suffer from non-differentiation such as cloning and mass production of human prototypes, they prefer conceptual representations. But Proust, like Nietzsche, takes advantage of confusion. And having the human body for sole temple, like the Buddhist teachings propose, is not so far from self-fertilization. Unfortunately, or fortunately for the reader, the only body Proust controls is his book – his own physical body being precluded by chronic illnesses. His task shall then be to make a book simultaneously concealing and revealing his nudity. In *Finding Time Again* he writes that for the longest time he thought writing his book would be like building a cathedral when he found out it was more like making a gown.

If the catharsis of drama is tied to suspension of disbelief in which the spectator is glued to fiction and cut from reality – and this helps understand its success in cinema and television – the catharsis proposed by Proust goes further. First he lets us be taken by illusion, but then, braking the mirror, he forces the reader to become a listener. After using the last visual device he had left – the lateral bull's eye in the male brothel where Charlus has his masochistic feast – Proust addresses the reader directly. Thus, reading *Finding Time Again* the reader really loses the sense of novel reading. There is no more story-telling, no more drama, only the voice of a thinker reflecting on the artistic value of his projection in writing. And he finds it only has meaning if it is read.

Music is the ultimate secret of memory. Hence, setting straight the case of Albertine, as she is related to painting and was introduced to the Narrator in Elstir's workshop seems less fundamental than trying to understand Swann by analysing the music of Vinteuil. Having to renounce marriage and recognition from peers thus weight less than the necessary isolation of the writing artist. The painter needs the others – and Elstir is known for making lesbian marriages; but the musician is on his own, satisfied with himself, simultaneously Muse, inspired performer and listener of his own creation. One is facing a work of pictorial art – and distance between the work of art and the beholder is often very helpful for a fuller appreciation -, but the listener is *in* the music.

Elstir is linked to Mme Swann; he had painted her as Miss Sacripant when they both were in Nice. It is then not a surprise that the first time the Narrator speaks with Albertine he does so in the painter's workshop. Vinteuil, for his part, is linked to homosexuality: as a neighbour he is quite boring, but as much as his music, his lesbian daughter makes him more interesting for the reader. Indeed, if impressionist painting brings about the confusion of sky and sea, music cancels their differences. It is the perfect «place» for self-fertilization. But beware! Homosexuality, if it is not devoted to such a «noble» end, stays in the chains of tragedy. And Morel, even if he is a very talented violinist, remains a dangerous man not worthy of any trust. As for Vinteuil's daughter, she desecrates her father's picture as she has sex with her girlfriend. Both are bad homosexuals because they are not wholesome as Charlus and Albertine are.

The mother's kiss awaited by the Narrator who went to bed early has a lot in common with the male insect towards which the female flower stretches her male sexual organ. And if the subjective point of view is feminine – the word here is «penetrated» - it is less to express the feminine side of the writer than to counterbalance the authority of the mother, more so because Proust's mother was Jewish (and one is Jewish by the mother), whereas in European culture authority is attached to the father figure, at least in language. But then again, is it not an imposture of discursive thinking. When Jacques Lacan writes that the phallus is the symbol of the mother, not only does he baffle most of his readers, he also unveils this imposture of the discursive mind. But in reality, there is no more superiority of the male than there is a divine person (God). Centuries of repressing the «female house fool» (*folle du logis*) – the expression is from Malebranche – have led us to believe the opposite. But for anyone who knows the law of contraries governing mirror games, this imposture appears as its opposite: the inability to be, the anonymity, that is to say the fundamental unreality. Neurosemiotics now allows us to consider the images and emotions of the holistic mind as thinking, as much as we do concepts, myths and allegories; its task is then to see how they exclude or complete one another.

Suspension of disbelief is the favourite rhetorical figure of Realism, and it is the basic ground of tragic aesthetics. We couldn't feel the tragic shiver of fear and anxiety in front (or within) a work of art if it was stripped of the dissimulating veils of artificial balance and harmony. And as much as drama has become Naturalistic, after being Romantic, it has none the less remained one of the most representative forms of Aristotle's third case compromise, the less tragic or more «mundane» of the three cases. The protagonist is on the verge of accomplishing an irreparable action, but he finds out he/she is making a mistake, and doesn't accomplish it.

The artist character inherited from Romanticism, a highly considered idol whose behaviour is inspiring, despite the suffering and humiliations he/she is put through, had to step back and give way to the reporter, inquirer and explorer. From Jules Verne and Jack London to Hergé, socially involved artists have devoted their talent to the description of the world, be it with images, in search of reader reaction. In the beginning, Proust didn't aim at anything else, but as he progressed in his always changing «novel», knowing that few readers would read it all, and that even fewer would read it twice, he had to modify its format. Only by passing the relaying baton to the reader, he makes his work understandable. Without its reflecting double, the Ego could never find out it is an illusion.

Literature is then, as Proust sees it, the «place» of self-fertilization; it allows the writer's discourse to swallow the scientific advanced research and the frivolity of fashion. Proust's poetry is thus a marriage of painting and music. It's textual body is that of an octopus, and each of its tentacles takes the form of a character. And the inverting mirror is the main tool of Narcissism. The author tells the story of an author who wants to write the book the reader is actually reading. As he progresses in reading this book, the reader finds him/herself in the midst of a labyrinth where he/she recognizes him/herself as the Minotaur. And even if Proust arms the reader and summons him/her to become a kind of Hercules, he still brings back everything to himself. Narcissus becomes a flower by self-fertilization. Charles (Swann), Charlus and Charlie (Morel) are facets, or avatars, of the all-controlling Narrator called – if only once – Marcel. As far as we can assert that two different existential entities are

identical, the Narrator Marcel and the writer Proust can be reckoned as the same person. The only remaining difference between them is that the Narrator is exclusively symbolic and the writer suffers the «slings and arrows» of managing the non-symbolic. The person that is the writer can only be recognized by the reader through references brought about by the reflective and playful dimensions of his literary work, a mirroring game revealing the mysteries of inversion, in every sense of the word: deconstruction and homosexuality (in French, homosexuality is also called «inversion»).