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The Moment of Truth: Proust, Barthes, and the Contingency of Old Age

Abstract

In his Preface to the *Life of Rancé*, Roland Barthes raised a set of questions about how to write about old age. A decade and a half later, proposing a new start for himself as a writer, he takes as his model Marcel Proust, a writer who rehabilitates the idea of pity in relation to ageing, and makes an encounter with old age a final turning point in his novel. The current reading of Proust, using Barthes's thoughts on both old age and Proust as a frame, argues for a much more selectively compassionate treatment of old age than Barthes claims for Proust, and questions the place of old age in Proust's aesthetic and intellectual scheme. Adam Phillips has argued that Proust is, in opening himself to accidental encounters with the past, also more comfortable than other writers with the contingency of the future, and death's imperviousness to prediction and control. Ageing and the approach of death are starkly depicted in the final volume of Proust's work, it is true, but their effects are mitigated by the constants of hierarchy and privilege in Proust's fictional world, and the question of what their depiction is *for* remains moot.

Keywords: Proust, Barthes, contingency, old age, ageing, time, death, novel

Introduction

In his 1993 essay 'Contingency for Beginners', psychoanalyst Adam Phillips devotes a short section to the writer Marcel Proust as the writer on contingency *par excellence*. Phillips compares Proust, identified with the narrator of *A la recherche du temps perdu*, to Freud, whose study of errors and accidents, *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, reconceives both as always 'meaningful', and so no longer completely accidental. Every accident is in fact intentional according to the logic of the unconscious, 'suppressed psychical material' demanding recognition.¹ Proust, as Phillips suggests, is equally open to the possibility of learning about ourselves through chance encounters with our own past. These experiences for Proust are not, however, a matter of the past inside us, 'busily and furtively arranging for its own disclosure' (12). They require a certain encounter with the world, with a material object, which we cannot seek out, and may or may not be lucky enough to stumble upon.

Early in the first volume of his novel, Proust reflects on the encounter—with the famous madeleine—that wins back the foundational experience of 'pure time' upon which the book rests. He puts such moments into a contingent relation, as Phillips notes, with another chance event:

There is a great deal of chance in all this, and a second sort of chance, that of our death, often does not let us wait very long for the favours of the first.²

A self that ‘lives its contingency without contesting it’,³ as Phillips puts it, must also have a more direct apprehension of its own death, and the way in which this death resists any attempts at prediction, evasion or control. It is that self, Phillips writes, that ‘has no contracts to make and that is linked with one’s own death in a way that the self of the unconscious desire can never be’. The idea that this self ‘entails [...] the belated recovery, or processing, of the earliest forms of experience’ seems to chime, although Phillips does not articulate this, with the opening pages of Proust’s novel, the memories there of oneself as a child emerging from sleep, and the intense attachment to the mother which is identified strongly with this barely formed self.

This is a seductive account of Proust; one that suggests a model for psychic wellness, a selfhood that can adjust to emotional disappointment and accept shattering loss. Malcolm Bowie seems broadly to agree with this account in his guide to the novel, *Proust Among the Stars*, suggesting that for Proust, ‘[d]eath is a fact to be acknowledged, rather than a problem to be solved’.⁴ Bowie indeed sees the whole work as bookended by scenes of death in identifying the sleep of the earliest pages as a kind of oblivion, source of a ‘deeper and more elusive terror’ than waking experience or thought, in which the child is ‘desiring darkness but recoiling from it too [...] a consciousness feeding on the thought of its own extinction’ (269). Bowie sees a gulf open, however, over the course of the novel between the narrated child and the narrating adult. The idea of a self that ‘has no contracts to make’ seems strongly at odds with the subject we find in the pages of Proust’s novel. For the bulk of the novel the narrator is far from the ‘radically undefended’ self to which he returns when bodily memories overcome him and the ‘habit of living’, in Samuel Beckett’s characteristically negative construction of the narrative, gives way to the ‘suffering of being’.⁵ Over the course of countless pages, in the narrator’s dealings with Albertine and even his beloved grandmother, whom he at different moments wants push towards death and to pull back into life, we encounter a self which contests—albeit in invariably self-defeating ways—the separateness of the other and its capacity to desert, whether this desertion is through betrayal, emotional indifference or death.

The final volume of Proust’s novel offers two parallel sets of revelations that are at odds with one another, and crystallise this tension between Proust’s narrator’s embrace of

chance in his artistic design and philosophical outlook, and his resistance to what he sees as the arbitrary separations, disclosing in turn their essential separateness, from those to whom he has formed an attachment. The realization of the path beyond time offered to him by his involuntary memories is followed swiftly by a revelation about time's implacable effects on himself and those around him, effects neither predictable nor easily translated into meaning or aesthetic design. He has discovered the boons of recovered memory but he never reaches the same assurance in relation to the linear time that seems only to deplete. What this piece will offer, then, as its contribution to the welter of writing on these themes in Proust's work is to think about time and contingency in relation to the representation of old age, a theme famously prominent in the closing scenes of the novel, but relatively little discussed in criticism in its own right. In particular it will re-read Proust's novel in relation to a neglected essay by Roland Barthes, his idiosyncratic 1965 preface to Chateaubriand's work of hagiography, *Life of Rancé* (1844), which takes as its governing concern the writing of old age as both theme and aesthetic.

'I am no longer anything but time':⁶ Barthes's 'Life of *Rancé* and Proust's *Finding Time Again*

Barthes's 1965 preface foreshadows a more sustained reflection on ageing in the late 1970s and early 1980s, when, despite only being in his early 60s at the time and not unwell, Barthes starts to think of his own life in terms of its end, at the moment when, as he puts it in his seminar at the Collège de France in December 1978, he begins to realise that his 'days are numbered', and 'death is real'.⁷ He was, of course, to die suddenly and accidentally just a year later, giving these remarks—a cliché but also a truth to observe—an added bite. He determines to change direction: this erstwhile arch-structuralist will turn from criticism to fiction, take subjectivity as a principle, and in both endeavours will align himself with Proust and *A la recherche du temps perdu* as his most important and cherished model. Barthes never writes the projected novel, to be called (following Dante and Michelet) *Vita Nova*, but his reflections on the necessary conditions and principles for writing such a work form the subject of the Collège de France course published as *The Preparation of the Novel*, which begins by developing the lecture on Proust given at the beginning of 1978, 'Longtemps je me suis couché de bonne heure'. Later, in the session of March 10th 1979, Barthes introduces the idea of a Moment of Truth, exemplified in the touching details given about the grandmother

in Proust's novel: a textual moment that goes to the 'root of the concrete' and—in giving such a vivid image of mortal life—'designates *what will die*' (106-7). Proust passes on to Barthes, as the latter puts it, the 'problem' of the 'truth of affect, related to if not identical with 'the quiddity of things', in such moments (104). These Moments are not explicitly or necessarily depictions of old age, but the two key examples that Barthes gives (the 'death of old Prince Bolkonski in *War and Peace*' (105) and the death of Marcel's grandmother, are constitutively framed as encounters not only with the end of life but also advanced ageing. The grandmother's 'disordered grey locks' or 'brown and wrinkled cheeks' (106) are the touchstones for Barthes's own turn towards subjectivity as theme, and affect as stylistic end. This is a turn occasioned by a bereavement, a response in which he also styles himself after Proust, both embarking on their great works of fiction after the loss of their beloved mothers, and both realizing in the wake of these losses—'pain's *onset*' (4)—that their own deaths were at once contingent ('for who could calculate it in advance?' (3)) and necessary. Old age, Barthes realises, must not be a 'running aground, [a] slow entrenchment in the quicksand' (5); one must 'enter death alive'.⁸

Barthes compares his own (relatively) late-life 'literary conversion' (7) to the spiritual conversion of the Abbot Rancé after Rancé's own bereavement (the death by decapitation of his mistress), referring back to his earlier engagement with Chateaubriand's biography of this theological figure. Barthes's preface to this work does not connect his thinking on old age explicitly to Proust, but his meditation there on the ethics and aesthetics of writing about old age raise questions highly pertinent to Proust's depiction of ageing and end of life. The preface anticipates the concern with lifewriting and subjectivity to be found in Barthes's later preparations for a turn to fiction, as well as his appreciation of Proust, and also foreshadows the search there for models for a new creative life. He takes up the passing and often parenthetical comments made by the ageing Chateaubriand about himself and inserted in fragmentary fashion into his life of Rancé, and reflects on the way in which the author patterns his own old age as a writer on Rancé's withdrawal into religious seclusion. The piece considers the uneasy balance Chateaubriand strikes in writing of his last years between a willed embrace of reclusion (modelled on but lacking the spiritual purpose of that of Rancé) and an existential feeling of abandonment. Chateaubriand's 'vocation', as Proust described his own,⁹ was secular literary writing rather than religion. Barthes's essay, correspondingly, considers what purpose literature might serve in relation to the experience of being old, and how it might be shaped by it. It asks whether writing might serve to mitigate the suffering

ageing entails and considers Chateaubriand's practice of approaching the condition through metaphor—an enquiry with relevance to Proust's own extravagant metaphor-making and its uneasy relationship to what Barthes calls the 'time of real miseries' that old age can be.

Proust is not explicitly named in Barthes's preface but he is, as Malcolm Bowie sees him being throughout Barthes's work, a 'tantalising presence'.¹⁰ Barthes writes of old age that it can be 'a disease like love' (42). Chateaubriand 'made a sickness of his old age': in him 'old age has a consistency of its own, it exists as a foreign body, awkward, painful, and the old man sustains certain magical relations with it' (42-43). This feels uncannily like Proust's description of the illness of his ageing grandmother in *The Guermantes Way*, which prompts him to observe that in such illness we encounter 'a being from a different realm, worlds apart from us, with no knowledge of us and by whom it is impossible to make ourselves understood: our body'.¹¹ Our own form becomes a 'foreign body' in old age, and even as we live it, as Barthes suggests of Chateaubriand, this period is a paradoxical experience which language can never reach. The ageing woman writer in Chateaubriand's text is similarly a 'nighttime traveller' in the period of old age, no longer able to see the earth but only the sky; Rancé as an old man travels in 'the region of pure silence'.¹² These depictions of old age are reminiscent of what Barthes later calls Proust's 'inversions',¹³ the most dominant the 'complete inversion of day and night' (237), perhaps, Barthes suggests, the 'real inversion Proust effected', a stylistic pattern closely connected to the way in which the whole novel seems to take place in the twilight world of bed and half-sleep. Barthes' suggestion in the preface that adolescence and old age are alike in feeling to the subject like a period of abandonment is also given an oblique reprise through the ghost of Proust's famous opening line ('For a long time I used to go to bed early') in the quotation Barthes makes of Madame de Rambouillet on growing old: 'For a long time now she had no longer existed, barring the days which bore' (43). An adolescent fear of extinction, of the darkness swallowing one up, found at the beginning of *A la recherche*—'the ray of light that was under his door has disappeared'¹⁴—is mirrored, Barthes suggests, in the existential crisis of getting old, having seclusion forced upon you, and a final darkness opening up ahead of you. Later he responds to the latter with a manifesto, quoting Proust's enjoinder to 'Work while you still have the light';¹⁵ the *Rancé* preface, however, is more ambivalent about old age and how literature might serve it.

The suggestion in Barthes's writing on old age is that the seclusion that one might seek at that period—as Rancé withdraws from society to found the Trappist religious order,

in Barthes's account¹⁶—is comparable to, if it is not synonymous with the seclusion that might be forced upon one by infirmity or isolation: 'for one who voluntarily abandons the world can readily identify himself with one whom the world abandons: the dream, without which there would be no writing, abolishes any distinction between active and passive voices: abandoner and abandoned are here merely the same man' (43). Proust takes care in his last volume, however, to distinguish his own deliberate withdrawal from society from the fate of 'non-reality' he had himself earlier bestowed upon his dying grandmother, 'who tomorrow perhaps would no longer exist'.¹⁷ Despite her efforts to continue to talk about their shared social world, he sees her as a 'non-being—incapable of making references [to this world]'. Her attempts at conversation, unremarkable as they are in themselves, seem 'baseless, random, outlandish' from her lips: she is already starting to move into that 'different realm' of conspicuous and obtuse mortality with which one can have only 'magical' relations. Yet what will protect his own words from becoming 'baseless, random, outlandish' at the end of his last volume, *Finding Time Again*, when he is similarly close to death, feels that death has 'established itself permanently within me' (352)? Indeed, when he shows people some sketches of his projected book: 'Nobody understood anything' (350). Is it simply the fact that he, as writer, can keep control of the subject position that determines the authority of this final perspective over any other, the superiority of this point of view over the more worldly ones around him? Barthes asks in his preface about the status of the voice of the writer in old age, who is in excess [*de trop*] in relation to his own existence (43)—as Shakespeare's Lear has become 'unnecessary' in his old age. Barthes sees his ageing writer as being able to make their existence into a destiny (44) by means of this retrospective gaze, but in so doing it stops being an existence. In Chateaubriand's work, like that of Proust's projected book in *Finding Time Again*, 'memory appears as a complete system of representations' (43), an order of pure time. God can be a convenient 'cover' for the appropriation of this extra-temporal perspective but for Barthes, 'God is [simply] a convenient means for speaking of nothingness' (43). By the time of *The Preparation of the Novel*, Barthes has embraced the idea of a last phase beyond life, even suggesting the retrospective necessity of Proust's death after finishing *A la recherche*: he 'could do nothing but die' given that he could have written nothing new, but only kept 'adding more oil to the mayonnaise' (149). Reading Proust's last volume alongside Barthes's earlier meditation on old age, however, raises some uncomfortable questions about the status of its revelations, positioned almost but not quite outside of Proust's own mortal time.

Ageing, Death and Narrative

Taking a few steps back from the question of whether proximity to death is disordering to or bestows authority on one's words, it might be instructive to see how Proust's work deals with the very fact of the hardwired contingency of our biological ends, a contingency which determines in the most decisive way the work's own shape. There is at some moments a frank and open-faced acknowledgement of death's resistance to control or understanding. Proust's narrator turns abruptly, for instance, and with disarming simplicity, in the fifth volume of the work, *The Prisoner*, to talk about the place of Swann's death in his own emotional life and in his narrative: 'Swann's death had been a great shock to me at the time'.¹⁸ Immediately, however, he takes issue with this declarative language:

Swann's death! The word Swann's, in this phrase, is not a simple genitive. I mean by it the particular death, the death sent by fate to release Swann. For we say "death" for the sake of simplicity, but there are almost as many deaths as there are people.

The particularity of each individual death is dizzying; we cannot fathom 'the mystery of their functioning, the colour of their fatal draperies'. Part of this mystery is the unpredictable temporality of the biological processes at work:

Sometimes they are deaths which will not have fully accomplished their task until two or three years later. They fly to implant a cancer in the side of someone like Swann, then go off to do other work, and only return when, after the surgeons have operated, the cancer needs to be put back in position.

One might read about Swann's improvement, and the expectation of a full recovery, only for him to die suddenly soon afterwards. Swann's death is 'expected yet sudden'; the grandmother's death is half-achieved by her stroke, and takes agonizing days, running to weeks, to be accomplished. Is death in such cases an event or a process? There is also a question about what can be learned from one death. Swann's death is both unique and exemplary, the special gift of fate and the result of a cancer that is simply seen from time to time to visit itself upon 'someone like Swann'. There are *almost* as many deaths as people—but each death has an aetiology if not a trajectory that is knowable and (if only by the impersonal agent of biology) reproducible.

The arch amalgam of mystification and science in Proust's description of Swann's cancer finds an echo and a form of explanation in an essay by Sigmund Freud published a year after this volume. Freud writes in 'The economic problem of masochism' (1924) of death as a manifestation of the superego in old age: 'the last figure in the series that began with the parents is the dark power of Destiny which only the fewest of us are able to look upon as impersonal'.¹⁹ Proust also offers us instances in which the trajectory of death's accomplishment is taken within the boundaries of and made subject to the observing self, albeit a self that cannot fully control the process. This tendency to resist the impersonality of death is illustrated, of course, in the story of the narrator's grandmother's death, an event that does not 'fully accomplish its task' until the moment, 'more than a year after her funeral', when the narrator is seized by an involuntary memory of her tender care and finally 'learn[s] she was dead'.²⁰ This revelation has of course its own contingency, the accidental convergence of place, bodily posture, and the sensitivity occasioned by the narrator's own intermittent illness (his 'cardiac fatigue'), but there is a story to be told about this emotional history, however little the 'calendar' of feelings correspond to that of facts. There is, if only retrospectively, a narrating self that can unite the discontinuous selves of the past and present. More than this, there is a self—or non-self—that has come to its own rescue, a body that contains such buried memories, a minimal self to which can be imputed some vestige of control and some hope of self-salvation.

There is, however, a reading of Proust's novel that sees the 'intermittence' of this operation of the heart as offsetting the more joyful effects of this and other involuntary memories: almost at once the narrator feels the happiness at re-encountering his grandmother 'traversed by the certainty, springing up like a repeated physical pain, of a nothingness that erased my image of that tenderness, which had destroyed that existence, abolished retrospectively our mutual predestination' (160). Time can hold within it the capacity to restore lost time, past memory, but it can also rip away the objects of our attachment and consequently damage our image of ourselves. He finds his grandmother again, consistently a maternal substitute in the novel, 'as if in a mirror' but she is a mirage, lost to him, and the image of himself that her adoring gaze has offered back to him is also erased. He observes that she is simply someone whom 'chance has led to spend a few years with me, as it might have been with anyone at all, but for whom, before and after, I was nothing, would be nothing' (160). Time can, in Proust's lovely phrase attached to this realization, '[abolish] retrospectively our mutual predestination'. We personify our good as well as our bad luck,

the source of our happiness as well as our suffering, and it is as disturbing to realise that our past good luck has been accidental and without meaning beyond our personal narrative as it is to be aware that future suffering is also an entirely arbitrary matter.

In the *Bildung* of the putative novelist, these episodes of involuntary memory are turning points: they make the narrator a writer; they constitute the key insight of his work; they reveal to him the simultaneous contact the human subject has with different periods of time. In his life, however, they change nothing. Time offers method but not message, structure but not content, to his enquiry. In his investigation of what literature ‘is for’ (53) in relation to old age in ‘Life of Rancé’, Barthes considers one rhetorical function, that of *antithesis*, that might make an account of old age meaningful. This figure is not only an instrument of ‘demonstrative design’ but can give a writer, for Barthes, ‘a veritable “renewal right” [*droit de reprise*] ... over time’ (50), can divide time into a *before* and an *after* (a worldly life before, a solitary one after, in the case of Rancé) and give it, in Proust’s terms, a retrospective predestination. This is a standard trope of biography and autobiography—the ‘turning point’ to which the narrative builds. The fact that there are several potential turning points in Proust’s work—the tasting of the madeleine in *The Way by Swann’s*, this realization of the ‘intermittences du coeur’ in *Sodom and Gomorrah*, the discovery about old age (‘what it all means’) and its centrality to his book in *Finding Time Again*, to name but a few—complicates that ‘before’ and ‘after’ structure, as it must in a book of this length and complexity (and in a work faithful to the ‘colossal’ beings occupying such an extensive place in time that we are). What is striking, however, is that as many of these moments of revelation involve the evaporation of a stable self as involve the discovery of one. The mirror that the grandmother provided to the fragile sense of self is snatched away in the above episode; even the madeleine in *The Way by Swann’s* creates the ‘grave uncertainty’ felt ‘whenever the mind feels overtaken by itself’, prompting a reflection on what a ‘obscure country’ one’s own mind is in which to go seeking.²¹ They give the narrator momentarily a ‘renewal right’ over time, but it is less certain that they are part of a demonstrative design that does or ever could reveal ‘what it all means’.

This uncertainty also applies to the moment of revelation constituted by the *bal de têtes* in *Finding Time Again*, the mirror offered to the narrator by his ageing contemporaries, a veritable second mirror stage ‘of old age’ in Kathleen Woodward’s peerless reading.²² This revelation is, further, different in kind to those earlier ‘madeleines’. The narrator shows us or tells us little of himself in this scene, and he never articulates its meaning. He reports that

there has been a revelation, but not in what it consists, and ends the paragraph disappointing the expectations that he has raised. He proposes to include truths ‘related to’ and implicitly revealed by ‘time’ in his scheme, widening its scope beyond those impressions encountered beyond time (and in memory), and assures us that it would not simply be physical changes to appearance that time would disclose: he is ‘not concerned only to find a place for the alterations the features of human beings undergo’. This is not, however, because more profound revelations await so much as because time ‘did not show itself in the same way’ (241) for all of them. Was this all that we were hoping for or that he was offering about old age? The narrator may, in Barthes’s terms in his lecture on Proust, ‘discover *what he must write*’²³ in arriving at the Guermites party—presumably about the effects of linear time in this instance rather than the effects of its suspension—but we do not see the subsequent fruits of this discovery, the novel ending famously as it does on the brink of the ‘real’ book to be written.

Malcolm Bowie pointed to an ‘invariant substratum’ (4), recognised at last in the final episode of involuntary memory (prompted by the ‘uneven paving stone’ at the entrance to the Hôtel de Guermites), underneath the fluid selves that arise and ‘die’ in the various phases of the narrator’s life. This image of the moment of ‘pure time’, encountered in the ‘optical illusion’ (181) of being momentarily outside time, provides a compelling if paradoxical epiphany. It is less clear, however, what the significance of ageing is in relation to this substratum, this architecture of the self, beyond the (calendar) time it has taken for the narrator to realise that what he seeks is in sensory experience, assisted by the imagination, rather than in intellectual life. It is central to their nature that these moments of involuntary memory might never occur; that learning, suffering, and living bear no causal relationship to their appearance. The fact that the pageant of old age comes after these revelations at the entrance to the same party suggests their insufficiency; the subsequent encounter with old age—back in society, beholden to other people—is presented as offering the ‘beauty of ideas’, words ‘yielding up their full meaning’ (240), rather than the beauty of images or, still less, sensations. It is not clear what these ideas might be, however. Old age, unlike youth or beauty or perhaps grief, cannot be discovered on our own, using the ingenious ‘optical illusion’ of our own mind, in Proust’s image. There is no perspective outside of age: the abolishing of time would abolish our knowledge of it. In addition, our resistance to our ageing is perhaps too great. The narrator remains an eye in this scene rather than an ageing body.²⁴ The distinction between the realm of the body and that of the mind, dismantled by the

sensory plenitude of involuntary memory as it is by our experience of pleasurable sexual feeling or painful grief, persists stubbornly in this one instance. Old age must be central to his work, as Proust comments, but it never becomes clear what part it plays in its scheme.

The Science of Ageing

The *bal de têtes* scene, this array of ageing faces and bodies that the narrator encounters at the Princesse de Guermantes's party, in one sense demonstrates as much knowledge as any episode in Proust's vast novel. The sheer density of allusions to the natural world and its processes in describing old age is dizzying. If the body is felt to be foreign in illness and old age, why not, indeed, push this estrangement further and observe it with the naturalist's eye, as a completely different species? This episode raises the question posed by Barthes of what style is *for* in relation to a theme such as old age more acutely than does any other. How can an ageing narrator's promised insights into his condition be fulfilled by this satirical excess of scientific analogy? After *antithesis*, the second rhetorical figure that Barthes discusses in his preface to Chateaubriand's work is *anacoluthon*, an unexpected discontinuity in the expression of ideas which Barthes sees as taking place through Chateaubriand's extravagant metaphors, which represent not only the 'contiguity but also the incommunication of two worlds' (49). Via these analogies (between the smile of a dying monk and birdsong in Kashmir, between one's own perishable identity and the undecipherable inscriptions on Norwegian funerary urns) the literal elements of the narrative are 'snatched up, carried off, severed, separated, then abandoned ... while the new word ... presents an irreducible *elsewhere*' (49). Proust's analogies are not literally outlandish—geographically remote—as are Chateaubriand's, but they too can be seen to practice a 'poetics of distance' (48), in Barthes's phrase. Proust's narrator seems to justify this new form of analogy early in the account of the party, in observing the 'complete change' in some of his subjects effected by the 'destructive action of Time': its 'gradual replacement, achieved in my absence, of each cell by new ones' (239). This is one of several references in his novel to the nineteenth-century discovery in human biology of the molecular processes of apoptosis or cell death, at the time believed to contribute to, and confirm the necessity of, ageing by destroying essential cells. As Stephen Katz has observed, in the wake of this discovery the living body became in the social imagination perforce 'the dying body'.²⁵ These are then, literally, new beings, but in their newness (for Proust and his contemporaries at least) also resides their

perishing. This commonplace mystery, this everyday metamorphosis, perhaps calls for a violent, disruptive language such as Proust employs here. Proust's terms are what Barthes describes in his essay in Chateaubriand's style: an 'enormous and sumptuous debris ... words, overfed on colour, on shape, in short on *qualities* and not on ideas' (47-48). It is, however, ideas that we have been promised and this dearth of insight seems an unfathomable part of Proust's cruel joke.

The appeal of scientific idiom may seem self-evident, if not edifying: it allows the narrator to remain (artificially) detached from the scene and unmarked by its implications. But he has never been able to resist working his own feelings into his frequent scientific descriptions, showing us the relationship, as Nicola Luckhurst has it, between the self, the 'now authoritative, now brilliant, now needy utterer of maxims' that Proust is, and the sententious mode he adopts.²⁶ This practice of showing both equation and working, as it were, has, indeed, been a key part of his method, but it is one which has an uneasy role in this episode, where he has more invested perhaps than anywhere else in keeping himself aloof from what he is seeing. Even his ability to draw laws from what he is observing, as has been suggested, deserts him. Metaphor definitively prevails over maxim and scientific categories overlap and fall into one another as the object of study shimmers phantasmagorically before him, now plant life, now sea life, now animal, now mineral. Scientific method is defeated by the heterogeneity of the analogies necessary to describe what he is seeing: 'In the cheeks of the Duchesse de Guermantes, still very recognizable but now as variegated as nougat, I could make out a trace of Verdigris, a small pink patch of crushed shell, and a little lump, hard / to define, smaller than a mistletoe berry and less transparent than a glass pearl' (245-46). This is seeing without seeing. Even the processes he can identify contradict one another. Indeed, these subjects become inhuman in two specific and opposing ways in his analogies: they either become mineral as does La Berma, her face a 'terrible ossified mask', or, alternatively, they become still more organic in being identified with the 'infusoria' or microscopic organisms that decompose organic matter (307, 252). Through this analysis Proust also displaces the act of 'othering' from himself. He describes one method by which one might still believe in these people's youth, that is, looking through a lens which would make the figures smaller; but takes the opposite tack: by seeing them in intense close-up, he can also deny exactly what they are, or at least that what they are is comparable to what he is. The affective charge that Barthes sees triggered by the grandmother's greying locks or withered skin—commonplace as they are—is suspended by these overblown analogies. Helen Small

has suggested that this particularity ‘return[s] a perverse kind of individuality’²⁷ to the old, but an individuality that completely obscures their past, as the narrator repeatedly insists is the case here, is one that for Proust removes the possibility of finding a ‘true’ self.

This scene with its excessive attention to the parts of the body, and skin in particular, of these ageing socialites is anticipated by the narrator’s descriptions of the terminally ill Swann in an earlier volume. He recollects a moment in which he cannot bring himself to part from Swann, whose illness and impending death is beginning to isolate him from others in their social group, but this solidarity is couched in ambivalent terms: the compromised tone of the French ‘[j]e ne pouvais me décider de quitter Swann’, rendered in the Moncrieff translation as the warmer ‘I could not bring myself to leave Swann’, returns in John Sturrock’s cooler version: ‘I could not make up my mind to leave Swann’.²⁸ The narrator goes on to describe the sick man’s face in relation to the chemistry of paint—‘marked with small specks of Prussian blue’—and to liken his body to a chemistry experiment: ‘a retort in which chemical reactions are to be observed’ (103). The impression of disinterested enquiry that such vocabulary creates might already seem callous in relation to descriptions of the narrator’s friend and his suffering; in fact the narrator goes further, here as elsewhere, demonstrating the estranging effects of illness to which he himself is witness: ‘[his face] gave off that kind of smell which, at school, after ‘experiments’, makes it so unpleasant to remain in a ‘Science’ classroom’. The narrator’s relationship to science, here and elsewhere, is arguably a childlike one—what do these phenomena look like, what do they smell like, even at times what might they taste like? It is subjective sensation, and its attendant affect, which really tell us about the world, and all laws in Proust’s treatment retain their relationship to these first principles. There is naturally a cost, scientific and otherwise, to this approach, however. The ‘science’ on display here is the remembered science of childhood, paint colours, ‘experiments’ that play at being real science, for demonstration only, as the quotation marks in Proust’s original and the translations indicate. Furthermore, and relatedly, there is something improper, childishly cruel even, about the detail given. As is the case with the descriptions of ageing in the final volume, scientific language fosters in Proust’s register not objectivity and restraint, but discomforting excess. In offering too many parallels with other kinds of organic and inorganic matter, the human body is not sufficiently itself and becomes less, rather than more knowable. Malcolm Bowie writes in *Proust Among the Stars* of the ‘alien force ... seen to be shaping the familiar features of trusted seniors and mentors’ such as Swann, ‘turning their lively countenances into the mineral waste-matter of which mere

heavenly bodies are made' (279).²⁹ This process of distancing is particularly uncomfortable in connection with Swann, who has been the pattern for the narrator in love and indeed in jealousy. There is a kind of revulsion here against the uncanny power of the double who represents one's future self. Swann in this scene seems like a kind of portrait in the attic for the narrator, whose paralysis might be seen to be fed by a particularly personal discomfort: he cannot leave Swann but also feels repelled by this image of his own inevitable fate and his own future erasure from the social world. As Bowie writes of the prefiguring of the Albertine story in that of Swann and Odette: 'There is no need to wait for the future, for the future is already here' (58). Proust's language is 'overfed on qualities', in Barthes's terms, at the expense of extractable, abstractable ideas, at once too close to the contingencies of death and ageing and burying them under the debris of analogy.

Irony, Ageing and the Work of Art

There is a relationship, then, between the style of these descriptions and their tinge of malice. Barthes's article expresses a mild form of the disquiet we might feel at Proust's coldly gleeful account of the ageing partygoers, in suggesting that 'we may never escape' the '(social) incongruity' of ostentatious literary style being employed in an account of old age. For Barthes, the 'group of operations, the *technique*' of literary style might, however, 'serve this purpose: *to suffer less*' (54). The 'shock of distance' in relation to the 'real miseries' of growing old might, he suggests, 'renew the pathetic' attitude [*renover la pathétique*] and at least find a new relation to the trials of age. The outlandish analogy of the *bal de têtes* passage is far, however, from those 'visceral ... intractable'³⁰ Moments of Truth, the details about the grandmother's age and suffering, which are proffered as the basis for a new 'pathetic criticism' (108) in Barthes's later argument. The distance that Barthes argues for in the preface to *Life of Rancé*, 'should have only one name (if we could dispense with its harsh connotation): *irony*' (54). Yet it is hard to rid the word of its harsh connotations in applying it to Proust's satirical treatment of old age in the Hôtel de Guermantes passage. Indeed, a gentler irony is found only in relation to the narrator himself: the glimpses of the reactions of those around him to his obliviousness, or slow-dawning realization, of his own qualifications to belong in this company. What Nicola Luckhurst has called a 'cruel and caricatural'³¹ passage of Proust's novel is unlikely to renew the concept of the 'pathetic' or offer a great deal of solace on the topic of ageing. Even in the last section of *Finding Time Again*, when

the narrator acknowledges his own frailty and vulnerability to time's contingency, there is an odd disconnection between the physical peril menacing the completion of his book (as well as Proust's own), and the confidence which he places in this book to be finished in timely fashion, and to offer meaning to his hitherto unproductive life. It is hard to see this disjunction as a comforting one.

One critical mobilization of the idea of irony that offers a more positive view of Proust's writing on old age is that of Richard Rorty in his contentious work of philosophy, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*. Rorty uses the term in a more conceptual sense than Barthes, but also proffers the hope that a literary ironist might cause his or her readers to 'suffer less'. His novelist is, specifically, supposed to increase our 'sensitivity to the pain and humiliation of others' and therefore to mitigate the sum of suffering in the world.³² Rorty's argument is that it is a positive and productive thing that considerations of absolute value are subsumed in Proust's outlook by those of subjective relation (and ultimately personal taste). The work of art is not trying to 'surmount time, chance and self-redescription by discovering something more powerful' (99), or indeed more permanent, than these. What Rorty calls "redescription", the power to name and define oneself and others, is inevitably negatively determined by the contingent factor of one's death (or, as he says somewhat blithely, presumably in this invoking Nietzsche, the eventuality of 'go[ing] mad'). Implicitly, too, the horizon for the reception of these (re)descriptions will change and others will redefine the terms on which such figurations are judged. Neither of these facts, Rorty argues, is of consequence to the Proustian artist—the ironist par excellence, in Rorty's terms—who has no faith in the 'right' (99) description as such, but simply strives in the 'time he [or she] has' for a better one.

What literature, or at least the novel, might be *for* in Rorty's account is to express one's recognition of the relativity and contingency of authority figures. Novels are 'usually about people—things which are, unlike general ideas ... quite evidently time-bound, embedded in a web of contingencies' (107). It is the fact that 'characters in novels age and die', that they 'obviously share the finitude of the books in which they occur' that stops us thinking that our attitudes towards them are 'attitude[s] toward every possible sort of person' (107). They keep both novelist's and reader's opinions provisional, relative and open to revision, and in so doing, hold off ideological positions that the liberal Rorty would see as unwelcome. Rorty's celebratory account of Proust sees him mastering contingency by recognizing it, a position that echoes that of Phillips: by 'drawing people from lots of

different points in time', he 'demonstrated that no one occupies a privileged standpoint' and so he turned 'judges into fellow sufferers' (102-3).

Elsewhere in his study, although not in relation to Proust, Rorty also addresses the question of cruelty, suggesting that the levelling irony of writers such as Nabokov and Orwell (unlikely bedfellows!) allows them to attack the premises for cruelty and in particular the authority that it demands. Rorty does not, however, tackle what might be the principal concern in relation to Proust (as well as Nietzsche, another exemplar): the extent to which these ironists' descriptions of others might have the potential to hurt them or encourage false judgements of them (underscored by the inevitable inequities governing the capacity and opportunity of these different parties to wield the tools of description and find an audience for themselves). The place of ageing within Rorty's scheme is arguably a case in point. He observes of the *bal de têtes* episode that: 'At the end of his life and his novel, by showing what time had done to these other people, Proust showed what he had done with the time he had' (102). Proust has developed and put into practice his ability to describe those who he once feared might describe him, and in so doing has exploded the notion of a privileged position from which to describe—and so define—others, an act Rorty paints as liberating and even egalitarian.

There are several objections to this reading, even setting aside whether or not one accepts the candidly liberal viewpoint on which Rorty's thinking rests. Firstly, and most obviously, Proust's narrator makes many value judgements, as well as needlessly cruel (re)descriptions, that preserve very clear lines of privilege and hierarchy. Secondly, the writer does not, in one sense, confine his 'desire for autonomy' to an act of self-creation 'in the private sphere' (65), something critical to Rorty's argument for Proust's immunity to sweeping ideological or dogmatic attitudes or positions. Proust is a writer rather than a political theorist or philosopher, it is true. He writes novels, rather than political treatises. Within the fictional world of his novel, however—a world indisputably close to Proust's own, if in no way identical to it—his narrator cannot disentangle his private judgements from his snobbery or lingering aspirations to social approval and success. It is as significant a feature of Time as any other that it makes people ignorant of others' social standing—that they do not know that 'M. de Charlus had held the highest social position in Paris ... that Swann ... had been treated with the greatest friendship by the Prince of Wales'.³³ The narrator's 'redescriptions' apparently seek to restore such lost knowledge, prejudicial as it is

to an egalitarian stance, as earnestly as they want to reconnect with lost loves or recover the memories of the dead.

Certain questions that have been raised in this article over Proust's treatment of ageing—over its democratic credentials and its openness to the condition of contingency—converge in the consideration of one aspect of his novel: the centrality of certain families and genealogical relationships within those families to its narrative. The fascination with certain families (the Guermantes, the Swanns, the Verdurins, to name but a few) and in particular the repetition of characteristics between their generations is approached in a spirit of enquiry that hovers somewhere between genetic science, anthropology and a kind of Social Darwinism. Old age can expose this lineage, as Barthes comments in relation to photography and how its own species of scientific 'revelation' ('in the chemical sense of the term'³⁴) lays bare family likeness and genetic inheritance. Barthes writes, 'The Photograph is like old age: even in its splendour, it disincarnates the face, manifests its genetic essence', noting Proust's observation of Charles Haas (the model for Swann) that his 'Jewish nose' because more discernible in old age, his skin turned to 'parchment' (105). In Proust's novel, however, the enquiry is not conclusive. This is again connected to the thoroughgoing nature of Proust's irony, which extends to the authority of the discourse of science in a manner as unsettling as it is liberating. Proust has a profound belief in physiological determinism, the force of heredity, to circumscribe to some degree the contingency of our maturation and indeed our ageing and death. But this very heredity is a source of mystery. The narrator speaks of meeting Swann in *The Guermantes Way* after a long absence, the character ill with the same disease and at the same age as his mother died. Yet such knowledge of heredity does not make our existence explicable so much as 'full of cabalistic ciphers and horoscopic forecasts as if sorcerers really existed' (578). We could make predictions based on this powerful but unverifiable information, this observation seems to suggest, but in fact we bury such knowledge and wait for it to surprise us (as Swann's death is both expected and sudden for the narrator).

The social organism is, like the biological one, both subject to time and resistant to it. The position of families in society can wax and wane, time's 'chemistry' working in the larger social unit as well as in the organism, but by and large privilege will maintain itself and constrain the contingencies of one's existence in a manner with which the narrator can only be seen to collude. Even the ultimate contingency of death submits to social hierarchy to some degree. The discussion of the uniqueness of any individual death in relation to Swann's

end in *The Prisoner*, considered earlier, shifts away as it closes from a reflection on the creative ingenuity of the operations of death in each case, a universal principle, to the particularity bestowed by privilege:

...unless one is 'someone', the lack of a recognised title accelerates the decomposition of death. Certainly it is only in an anonymous fashion, without any marks of individuality, that one continues to be the Duc d'Uzès. But the ducal coronet keeps the elements of one's individuality together for a while.³⁵

The names of the undecorated, on the other hand, even if 'ultra-fashionable ... melt and disintegrate' as soon as death arrives. The narrator is ironic in a local as well as a general sense here, as Rorty would no doubt contend, but the idea that one's identity 'decomposes' once one stops being talked about (an occurrence that can potentially befall one, by this logic, before as well as after death) is all too consistent with the reader's experience of the ends of the various characters who die in the novel, who are grieved, if at all, in a belated manner, and whose illness often isolates them from society as 'marked' men or women before they are ready to retire. The degree to which contingency is seen to be managed or mitigated by the social environment in Proust's novel, in other words, is anything but egalitarian, and the narrator's descriptions of its prominent families—both satirical and reverent—are complicit with the authority of their Name.

Afterlife

In the episode just quoted, the narrator famously reaches beyond the frame of the novel to suggest that Swann's life will 'perhaps live on' because 'someone whom you must have considered a little idiot has made you the hero of one of his novels'. How far does a work of art itself escape the contingency with which Proust's characters contend? Proust had argued in *The Guermantes Way* that a work of art, if it does not age in the same way as a body or a face, is nonetheless vulnerable to the depredations of time, creating a universe that is both 'new and perishable'³⁶—perishable because (once) new. Theodor Adorno took up this contention in his essay 'Valéry Proust Museum' to argue that it is the afterlife of the work in the reader that is the life of the work that Proust really cared about, but that this afterlife is one necessarily subject to the work of history which 'reigns within [it] like a process of disintegration'.³⁷ Richard Rorty suggests similarly that these redescriptions are finite and

replaceable, and that this is their value. History can dismantle, but it can also rewrite such a work. Chateaubriand writes in *Life of Rancé*, ‘I know perfectly well that I shall not exceed my own life. There have been unearthed, on Norwegian isles, some urns engraved with undecipherable characters. To whom do these ashes belong? The winds tell nothing’ (49-50). As Barthes comments, in fact he ‘knows he will exceed his life’ through his writing but it is not given to him to know what exactly will exceed or succeed him: ‘in short, *something other* than oblivion’; perhaps only ashes. Literature is only ‘a certain obliquity *in which we* [the writers] *get lost*’—or transformed. The readers of Proust’s account of his suffering, as he says in *Finding Time Again*, will not be his readers but readers of themselves, and it will be a matter of chance as to whether the words they read ‘within themselves’ correspond to those he wrote, or whether they have eyes suitable for his book (343). This contingent set of readings is the afterlife into which his book will disintegrate and Proust—for all his jealous and sometimes violent arrogation of the laws of science to his own emotional truths—understands that this is a necessary process. A process that transforms the contingency of individual ageing into the law of universal change.

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- ¹ Adam Phillips, *On Flirtation* (London: Faber & Faber, 1995), p. 12.
- ² Marcel Proust, *In Search of Lost Time, Volume 1: The Way by Swann's*, trans. Lydia Davis (London: Penguin, 2002), p. 47.
- ³ Phillips, p. 16.
- ⁴ Malcolm Bowie, *Proust among the Stars* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), p. 273. All subsequent page references will appear in parenthesis in the main text.
- ⁵ Samuel Beckett, *Proust* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1931), p. 8.
- ⁶ The epigraph of Barthes's essay, a line from Chateaubriand's *Life*. See Roland Barthes, 'Chateaubriand: Life of Rancé', *New Critical Essays*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1980), p. 41. All subsequent page references will appear in parenthesis in the main text.
- ⁷ Roland Barthes, *The Preparation of the Novel: Lecture Courses and Seminars at the Collège de France (1978-1979 and 1979-1980)*, trans. Kate Briggs (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), pp. 4-5
- ⁸ This phrase appears in quotation marks in Barthes's work, and might seem to come from the work of Russian writer Sigizmund Krzhizhanovsky, discovered in the late 1970s just before Barthes was writing, in whose story 'The Collector of Cracks', written in the 1920s and published posthumously in *Autobiography of a Corpse*, the phrase is found next to a reference to Dante (Barthes's other model for an age-inspired turn to literature in *The Preparation*) in a passage about a new phase of thought occasioned by the anticipation of death. The first French edition of Krzhizhanovsky's work does not appear, however, until the early 1990s, leaving this apparent connection, compelling as it is on several counts, something of a mystery—or perhaps just a coincidence.
- ⁹ Marcel Proust, *In Search of Lost Time, Volume 6: Finding Time Again*, trans. Ian Patterson (London: Penguin, 2003), p. 208. All subsequent page references will appear in parenthesis in the main text.
- ¹⁰ Malcolm Bowie, 'Barthes on Proust', *Yale Journal of Criticism*, 14: 2 (2001), 513-518 (p. 513).
- ¹¹ Marcel Proust, *In Search of Lost Time, Volume 3: The Guermantes Way*, trans. Mark Treharne (London: Penguin, 2003), p. 294.
- ¹² François-René de Chateaubriand, *Vie de Rancé* (Paris: H.-L. Delloye, 1844), pp. 33, 153. See Barthes, p. 43, for these translations.
- ¹³ Barthes, *The Preparation of the Novel*, pp. 138-39, 237-39.
- ¹⁴ Proust, *The Way by Swann's*, p. 8.
- ¹⁵ 'Session of December 2, 1978', *The Preparation of the Novel*, p. 4.
- ¹⁶ As Nathalie Léger observes in her notes to *The Preparation of the Novel*, Rancé was not in fact the founder of Trappist Monastery, but did reform the order and return it to fundamental Benedictine and Cistercian practices (409).
- ¹⁷ Proust, *The Guermantes Way*, p. 311.
- ¹⁸ Marcel Proust, *In Search of Lost Time, Volume 5: The Prisoner and the Fugitive*, trans. Carol Clark (London: Penguin, 2002), p. 180.
- ¹⁹ Sigmund Freud, 'The Economic Problem of Masochism', *Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XIX: The Ego and the Id and Other Works*, trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1923-1925, 155-170 (p. 168)).
- ²⁰ Marcel Proust, *In Search of Lost Time, Volume 4: Sodom and Gomorrah*, trans. John Sturrock (London: Penguin, 2003), p. 158. All subsequent page references will appear in parenthesis in the main text.
- ²¹ Proust, *The Way by Swann's*, p. 48.
- ²² See Kathleen Woodward, *Aging and Its Discontents: Freud and Other Fictions* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), pp. 53-61.
- ²³ Roland Barthes, 'Longtemps je me suis couché de bonne heure', *The Rustle of Language*, trans. Richard Howard (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), 277-288; p. 283.
- ²⁴ There are a few momentary exceptions to this, when a narrative irony operates against the narrator in the scene. Those around him laugh when he suggests that Gilberte might require a chaperone to dine with a 'young man' such as himself (139-40); his request that she introduce him to some 'very young girls, preferably poor' is met suspiciously coolly by her—and with palpable unease by the reader (297); finally, the idea that the actress reciting poetry might be 'giving him the eye' gives way to the realization that she expects him to recognise her (310-11). The realizations that he is seen as old and confuses the generations of families because of his obliviousness to his age also accumulate (236-37). But these are errors at the level of cognition and lack the visceral bodily apprehension of age we encounter in relation to other people.
- ²⁵ Stephen Katz, *Disciplining Old Age: The Formation of Gerontological Knowledge*, London: University Press of Virginia, 1996, p. 43.
- ²⁶ Nicola Luckhurst, *Science and Structure in Marcel Proust's A la Recherche du temps perdu* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 4.

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- ²⁷ Helen Small, *The Long Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 166.
- ²⁸ Proust, *Sodom and Gomorrah*, p. 103. See also Marcel Proust, *A la Recherche du temps perdu*, 3 vols. (Paris: Gallimard, 1954), vol. 3, p. 138; Marcel Proust, *Remembrance of Things Past*, 3 vols., trans. C. K. Moncrieff (London: Penguin, 2016), vol. 2, p. 737.
- ²⁹ Early in *Sodom and Gomorrah*, Swann's face is described as like a 'waning moon' (94), and the writer Bergotte's entire person is seen in *The Prisoner* to cool down in the manner of a 'little planet' (166).
- ³⁰ Barthes, *The Preparation of the Novel*, pp. 106-7.
- ³¹ Luckhurst, *Science and Structure*, p. 222.
- ³² Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. xvi, 198. All subsequent page references will appear in parenthesis in the main text.
- ³³ Proust, *Finding Time Again*, p. 273.
- ³⁴ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, trans. Richard Howard (London: Vintage, 1993), p. 105.
- ³⁵ Proust, *The Prisoner*, pp. 181-82.
- ³⁶ Proust, *The Guermantes Way*, p. 325.
- ³⁷ Theodor Adorno, *Prisms*, trans. Samuel and Sherry Weber (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1988), p. 181.