

## Proust's Grandmother

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I would like to begin with a well-known scene in 20<sup>th</sup> century literature, the passage early in Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu* where the narrator first recalls his mother's goodnight kiss. This encounter between the narrator and his mother, an encounter that *should* be consummated by a kiss on the cheek, is marked by a dialectics of desire, unfulfillment, and conjecture, what Barthes calls "assumption," since the third stage in this dialectic originates from within the failed fulfillment of desire. In Proust's novel, this last stage manifests itself as theory, and this dialectics is at the core of Proust's writing as theory of the novel. In other words, the scene of the missed kiss reveals the tension between writing and its impossibility, a tension that Proust explores over thousands of pages of similar encounters and remembrances, all scarred by loss and the attempt, always unsuccessful, to regain what has been lost.

As the narrator tells us, the goodnight kiss is a routine event, a habit that puts his young heart and mind at ease and thus allows him to sleep. "Habit," we read, is a "skillful but slow-moving arranger who begins by letting our minds suffer for weeks on end in temporary quarters, but whom our minds are none the less only too happy to discover at last, for without it, reduced to their own devices, they would be powerless to make any room seem habitable" (1 – 31). Habit, then, is at once the tortuous messenger of uneasiness and homelessness, but it is also that which makes one comfortable in and present to one's own environment. The temporal structure of habit, as Proust describes it, is to be taken into consideration, for there is a delay in the return home, as it were, of the mind; a deferral of the mind's coming-home-to-itself.

In this sense the routine of the goodnight kiss is marred by its own identity of loss as deferred presence. On the one hand, the mother's kiss is what allows dream and memory to operate; the physical encounter as a catalyst for the world "remembered" by Proust in his novel. On the other hand however the kiss, as catalyst, is cursed for it is, as the narrator explains, "a moment of the utmost pain; for it heralded the moment which was to follow it, when [my mother] would have left me and gone downstairs again" (1 – 35).

On the particular evening in question however, this habit is broken. Let us briefly summarize the passage: Sent to bed early during a dinner party, the young narrator is forced to forgo the nightly ritual of his mother's kiss. This first trauma, this rift between desire and reality, points to an inner otherness, or the internal strangeness to one's self that will persist throughout the novel: by denying him the kiss, his mother "had not," says the narrator, "given my heart leave to accompany me [up to my room]" (1 – 49). Once in his room, the narrator "dig[s] his own grave" in his bed (1 – 50). From this space of anticipation of and preparation for one's own death, the young narrator decides to write a note to his mother begging her to come for an important reason that "could not [be] put in writing" (1 – 50). The domestic Françoise is asked to deliver to note to the mother. With this plan in place the narrator's "anxiety subsided [...] since [the] little note [...] would at least admit [him], invisible and enraptured, into the same room as [his mother]" (1 – 51). Desire will soon become reality; inner otherness will soon give

way to comfort with one's self. Yet the narrator's presence as prosthesis – his presence via the prosthesis of the written note – will not be transformed into a *de facto* encounter. The mother does not come and instead sends a message of her own, via Françoise, that “there is no answer” (1 – 53).

Fluctuating waves of anxiety and happiness overcome the narrator: at first anxiety because by writing the note, by “approaching [...] so near” to his mother, he realized would not be able to sleep until he could see her. Thus what is a failed attempt at actual contact – since the mother did not come – *and* a successful attempt at virtual contact via the surrogate of the note, becomes its opposite: absolute loss. In the space of this loss, another feeling of happiness, in the form of anticipation, triumphs when the narrator decides that he will meet his mother in the hall on her way to bed.

This second attempt to fulfill the desire of the encounter is successful, but perhaps too successful: “When I had just committed an offence for which I expected to be banished from the household,” the narrator says, “my parents gave me a far greater concession than I could ever have won as the reward for a good deed” (1 – 58-9). The offense, of course, is the act of leaving his room to go meet his mother in the hall. Unexpectedly, he is not punished for his act; rather as a “reward” for this offense, the narrator's mother is to spend the night in his room. Yet this second attempt is too successful because the narrator's so-called victory is wrought with guilt: “I felt,” he says, “that I had with an impious and secret finger traced a first wrinkle upon her soul and brought out a first white hair on her head” (1 – 60). Again, waves of anxiety flow through the narrator's mind, followed by feelings of happiness when his mother takes out the books his grandmother had given him, and begins to read George Sand's *François le Champi*.

This passage has been commented on and analyzed at length. What I want to highlight are three themes that will accompany us for the rest of this essay: i) the kiss as catalyst to the realm of thought, or in a more general sense the relationship between the objective world and the mind as it is explored by Proust in his novel; ii) what I call the inner otherness of the individual, or a strangeness to one's self which is nevertheless dependent on and irrevocably tied to encounters with the Other; and iii) the role and function of writing, here represented by the narrator's note to his mother.

Although I began with a passage about the narrator and the mother, I will, as my title suggests, focus on the character of the grandmother in Proust's novel, a character that will help us flesh out the themes mentioned above. The grandmother's death is an important “event” in the novel. I use the term “event” cautiously, for events in Proust are not singular occurrences with precise and unique spatio-temporal identities. Rather they are repeating and recurring in the mind of the subject, in the web of consciousness spun by memory and forgetting, a consciousness that becomes manifest in writing. As Walter Benjamin writes in his essay on Proust, “an experienced event is finite – at any rate confined to one sphere of experience; a remembered event is infinite, because it is only a key to everything that happened before it and after it” (“The Image of Proust” 202). The finitude of experience has its counterpart, or what

Benjamin might call its potential for redemption, in remembrance. Proust's "search," via written remembrance, shares a similar temporal structure to Benjamin's concept of redemption in the way that the former's novelistic "thesis" is grounded in the idea that it is only through remembrance that consciousness becomes aware, after the fact, of experience; the desire for experience is a desire already unfulfilled and unfulfillable.

Thus we read in the last volume of the novel, after the *actual* death of the grandmother, that "it is only a clumsy and erroneous form of perception which places everything in the objet, when really everything is in the mind. I had lost my grandmother in reality," says the narrator "many months after I had lost her in fact" (6 – 227). This lapse between the narrator's loss in reality and the *de facto* loss of the grandmother – what one could call a period of mourning – forces one to rethink the old and tired division between living one's experiences in the so-called physical and visceral present, and living one's experiences through written remembrance. As we know for Proust the question of experience is inseparable from the question of time and remembering. As a writer, he gives himself a task: the task of writing, of showing the *form* of time, a form that is inassimilable for immediate experience. As Proust suggests, "everything exist in the mind," and this reality, our reality, is both deferred *and* premature ("a key to everything that happened before it and after it" as Benjamin writes). Deferred in that it only exists, *de jure*, after what did "actually" exist *de facto*, to wit: the narrator loses his grandmother "in reality" *after* he had lost her "in fact." Yet it also reveals the prematurity of the so-called objective world; a world that always comes too soon and never coincides with either perception or experience. This *de facto* prematurity only manifests itself as *de jure* loss. This is similar what Benjamin suggests when he writes that "every epoch, in fact, not only dreams the one to follow but, in dreaming, precipitates its awakening" ("Paris" 13). Material culture, in its "pure" objective state, is always ahead of its time and because ahead of its time, the reality of experience always comes too late. Proust's novel is an attempt to reconcile the always-too-earliness of objective existence with the always-too-lateness of experienced reality. With Proust, writing becomes the sole means by which such a reconciliation is possible.

Given this experiential lapse – the mourning inherent in all of experience – the finite object – such as the kiss – is only a catalyst for the infinite time of remembering and forgetting. It is in this infinite time that the search for the lost object can be realized, and even when the narrator "regains" what he lost on that fateful evening of the dinner party – precisely his mother's presence – it is already wrought through with its own loss. In other words the encounter with the exterior world prefigures that world's disappearance such that it is already in a sense lost. As Adorno suggests, for Proust objects "stand outside the framework of conventional pragmatic activity, and [...] are bearers of a death symbolism [...] Proust returns again and again to the mortality of artefacts. What seems eternal [...] contains within itself the impulse of its own destruction" (177). Loss, therefore, is inscribed in every experience with the exterior world; the work of internal memory is the attempt to not only compensate for this loss, but it becomes the only possible way to live meaningfully.

This is why, in the economy of loss, forgetting, and remembering – an economy bound together, as we will see, by the act of writing – "everything is in the mind." This Proustian

disregard for the material world is not a complete rejection of exteriority but rather an attempt to regain experience in a material world where experience itself seems no longer possible, or not possible without the temporal mediation of memory and writing. "Because nothing has substance for [Proust] but what has already been mediated by memory, his love dwells on the second life, the one which is already over, rather than on the first" (Adorno 181).

As I have suggested above, Proust's entire novel is structured according to this life that is already over. We have briefly examined two relationships that exhibit the desire and loss at the heart of the dialectic between this second life and the "one which is already over." The narrator-mother relationship revolves around a game of desire, around attempts to fulfill desire and the willingness or unwillingness of the Other to allow for such a fulfillment. In the narrator-grandmother relationship loss in reality, mediated by remembrance, is precipitated by the *de facto* loss as premature death. The narrator describes a third relationship between the mother and the grandmother, as follows: "My mother, in the past, would not only not have hesitated for a second to die for my grandmother, but would have suffered horribly if anyone had prevented her from doing so. Nevertheless, I cannot retrospectively imagine on her lips any such phrase as 'I would give my life for my mother'" (6 – 58).

This passage highlights the themes we mentioned above, but with a subtle shift in the temporal structure of desire. In the narrator-mother relationship desire is at first fraught with an anxiety for the impending loss that is an irrevocable and essential part of desire's fulfillment: the desire for the kiss already projects itself into a lost future because it foreshadows the moment when the mother will go back downstairs. Even when desire is fulfilled, when the mother spends the night in the narrator's room, loss as death is also present in the form of wrinkles and white hair. In the mother-grandmother relationship as it was described in the passage above, desire retroactively seeks to prevent the loss of the Other at the expense of one's own ultimate loss, at the expense of one's own death. The mother's desire or will to sacrifice herself for the grandmother bears witness to the internal otherness, the chiasmus within one's self, initiated by the encounter with the Other.

It is helpful here to recall that for Proust, despite all the rhetoric about "everything existing in the mind," exterior social reality and the encounters therewith are constitutive of one's identity. "Even in the most insignificant details of our daily life," he writes, "none of us can be said to constitute a material whole [...] our social personality is a creation of the thoughts of other people" (1 – 41). Thus in wanting to sacrifice herself for the grandmother, the mother enacts her own posthumous existence in the presence of desire. Because, as Proust writes, we are the construct of the thoughts of others, the mother's desire to sacrifice herself in order to save the Other – the other whom she is dependent on for her social identity – is a desire that projects her, prematurely, into the space and time of remembrance, such that she lives as her own unfulfilled posthumous self.

The second part of this quote adds yet another dimension to the chiasmus of desire, for the narrator cannot recall his mother's admission of desire for self-sacrifice. There is a curious lapse in the *de facto* memory of the narrator that is compensated by the retroactive desire of the

mother. Her identity and her relationship with the grandmother are built around a desire projected into a past where it only existed in the past-future, that is in the presence of a desire that seeks to annul the very idea of a present self. These three relationships that we have explored thus far all involve the character of the grandmother, for even the narrator-mother relationship scene that we began with ends with books gifted to the narrator by the grandmother. In this sense the grandmother is present via the novels that same way the narrator is present at the dinner table via the note sent to his mother: as surrogate or as literary prosthesis.

I would now like to examine some of the grandmother's views that set her apart from other characters in the novel. As readers we are first introduced to the grandmother as a somewhat contemptuous but gentle character who cares little for the pomp and culture explored in minutia by Proust throughout his novel. Early in the first volume the grandmother is described as having as a "noble character" (1 – 43) and "moral distinction" (1 – 63). Yet on rainy days when the rest of the Combray clan stays indoors, she prefers to walk through the gardens and fields, letting the rain splash her face and the mud dirty her dress. Her noble character and moral distinction seem to be grounded in her socially unacceptable celebration and respect for nature that is all too unfamiliar to the rest of her family. She is described as having "a natural air and an air of distinction" (1 – 83), in contrast to the rest of the family, especially her sisters, those "elderly spinsters who shared her nobility of character but lacked her intelligence" (1 – 43).

In remembering his grandmother in this way, the narrator seems to correlate her intelligence with a love of the outdoors and its corresponding disdain for the stuffy interior of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, or what Benjamin calls the "phantasmagoria of the interior." Furthermore, thanks to her "intelligence" the grandmother lives free of anxiety (1 – 32-3). There is however an ambivalence on behalf of the narrator towards his grandmother: "in a confused way," we read, "my grandmother found in the steeple of Combray what she prized above anything else in the world" (1 – 83) and further on, "worldly ambition was a thing which my grandmother was so little capable of feeling, or indeed understanding" (1 – 87). Thus in spite of the redeeming prosaic qualities bestowed onto the grandmother, she is nonetheless "confused" and "incapable of understanding" certain realities.

Indeed the playful, almost childlike behaviour of the grandmother, especially in light of her confusion and incapacity to understand, could be read as the simple and matter of fact consequences of age, a dismissal of the old woman as senile and not worth one's attention. This interpretation finds support when the narrator talks about his love and says that "I now no longer thought of anything [...] (so much so that once, when my grandmother had not come home by dinner-time I could not resist the instinctive reflection that if she had been run over in the street and killed, I should not for some time be allowed to play in the Champs-Élysées; when one is in love one has no love left for anyone)" (1 – 404). Yet throughout the novel attention *is* paid to the grandmother, and she occupies an important place in Proust's theory of memory and writing. If at the beginning of the novel the narrator is ambivalent towards and dismissive of his grandmother, in the final volume he states that "at a time when I was still

living, in a rather less disinterested fashion, for love of one kind or another, a dream would come to me, bringing strangely close, across vast distances of lost time, my grandmother, [...] whom briefly I began to love [...]" (6 – 203).

These two different attitudes towards the grandmother – one where the narrator couldn't care less if she were to be run over in the street, another where he begins to love her despite loss and distance – highlight the transformative power of remembrance that is at the core of Proust's novel. Here we have the transformation of the grandmother's somewhat contradictory character of "natural air and air of distinction" – a character trait that the narrator seems to scorn at the beginning of the novel – into the uncanny "strangely close" love that he feels for her in the final volume. This transformation can only take place with temporal distance, the mediation of memory, and most significantly, the incorporative power of writing: the psychological *and physical* effect of writing as remembrance.

This subjective and changing disposition towards the grandmother hints at Proust's aesthetic theory. As Adorno suggests,

Proust's subjectivism looks to art for the ideal, the salvation of the living. In opposition to culture and through culture, he represents negativity, criticism, the spontaneous act that is not content with mere existence. Thus he does justice to works of art, which can be called art only by virtue of the fact that they embody the quintessence of this spontaneity. Proust holds on to culture for the sake of objective happiness (182).

By subjectively transforming the grandmother – who herself seems to reject culture and embrace spontaneity – the novel reveals its own objective goal: becoming that through which encounters with the Other are opened to possibility. We can see this in the curious transformation from a singular, exclusive love to a multiple, open love: a love that in the first quote leaves no room for others, but in the second quote becomes open and inviting.

So what does all this have to do with Proust's theory of the novel? Let us recall that the narrator's grandmother gave him novels, which his mother read to him on that fateful night with which I began. This gift is of consequence because the grandmother considered "light reading as unwholesome as sweets and cakes" (1 – 41). In contrast to reading as *gourmandise* or consumption for pleasure, the novels that the grandmother gives to the narrator are "redolent of that generosity and moral distinction which Mamma had learned from my grandmother to place above all other qualities in life, and which I was not to teach her until much later to refrain from placing above all other qualities in literature too" (1 – 63). If generosity and moral distinction are not to be valued above all in literature, what then is the function or role of the novel? If there are certain qualities that are to be praised in life but not in prose, how does the novel function in relation to life?

Proust offers answers to these questions in the last volume of the novel. Before we read two rather lengthy passages from this last section it will be helpful to recall two ideas that I brought up at the beginning of my paper. The first idea is the unfulfillable desire for the encounter with the Other, unfulfillable because in Proust's novel the encounter is always marked by prematurity or delay. The second idea to recall is the dialectic of desire, failure, and assumption that structures the novel. Because Proust's novel is really a novel about writing, this dialectic could be described as follows: the beginning and first sections of the novel represent the will to write (desire). What follows, and what constitutes the majority of the novel, represents the impossibility to write. In other words a good chunk of the novel deals with the narrator's inability to write, his failed search for the will and the desire to write. Finally in the last section the narrator *begins to write* and it is in this section, where the narrator begins to write, that Proust offers some of his most insightful passages on his theory of the novel. *A la recherche* is therefore a novel about writing where, as Richard Howard suggests, at the end of the novel "the Narrator [...] discovers what it is that he has to write (time regained) and thereby realizes, indeed reassures himself, that he will be able to write, though as well all like to discover when we close the last volume, it is already written" (Howard 14).

With this in mind let us read what Proust himself says about the Other and the role and function of writing. "Since we live at a great distance from other human beings," he writes,

since even our strongest feelings [...] at the end of a few years have vanished from our hearts and become for us merely a word which we do not understand [...] surely then, if there exists a method by which we can learn to understand these forgotten words once more, is it not our duty to make use of it, even if this means transcribing them first into a language which is universal but which for that very reason will at least be permanent, a language which may make out of those who are no more, in their true essence, a lasting acquisition for the minds of all mankind? (6 – 219-20).

It is interesting to note that despite our great distance from other human beings and despite the loss of our strongest feelings towards them, what does persist, according to Proust, is language. As the passage suggests however, we are not able to understand this language of the Other; we are incapable of comprehending the word that stands in for the feelings we once felt. Yet it is the duty, the duty of the novelist perhaps, to try to understand this language anew. This new understanding, the novelistic manipulation of the language *that is now the Other*, is transformational in the sense that it brings out the Other's "true essence" which is a "lasting acquisition." The encounter with the Other, to use Benjamin's terms again, takes leave of the finite space of objects and becomes open to what has come before and what is to come after. In the encounter then, inner consciousness is exteriorized as the imprint of time, the before and after of the Other. As Rebecca Comay suggests, in Proust's novel "the most intimate encounter with the other [is] essentially a missed encounter [that] involves a moment of identification that fissures the self-identity of both parties concerned" (87).

This fissuring of self-identity is described by the narrator, who is also now a writer, in the last volume of the novel when he revisits the scene I began my paper with:

Was not that the evening when my mother had abdicated her authority, the evening from which dated, together with the slow death of my grandmother, the decline of my health and will? All these things had been decided in that moment when, no longer able to bear the prospect of waiting till morning to place my lips upon my mother's face, I had made up my mind and jumped out of bed [...] (6 – 362).

If at first it was only the mother's death that was prefigured by the wrinkles and white hair, now, at the end of the novel – which is also the beginning of the *process* of the novel because it is at this point that the narrator begins to write – now we learn that that moment bears the burden of prefiguring the narrator's death as well. Not just his physical death, but also the death of his will to write, the loss of the desire to write, the end of remembrance, and therefore the end of experience as such.

The narrator continues his reflections and writes that

while I was asking myself these questions, it occurred to me suddenly that, if I still had the strength to accomplish my work, this afternoon – like certain days long ago at Combray which had influenced me – which in its brief compass had given me both the idea of my work and the fear of being unable to bring it to fruition, would certainly impress upon it that form [...] which ordinarily, throughout our lives, is invisible to us: the form of Time." (6 – 362).

Thus while remembering the missed encounter that is prematurely scarred by the impending losses-as-death-to-come, the narrator "suddenly" realizes what it is he is writing: the form of time, which, up to this point, that is for some 2,500 pages, had been invisible to him. In this sense the last section of the novel is a moment of revelation, revelation as the redemption of lost time. However this final section also shows how Proust's novel is at once the greatest achievement – regaining lost time – and the most tragic failure. In other words it is at this point that the narrator begins to write, but also the point where the novel, that is the narrative of memory, and therefore time itself, ends. "Proust's reflections [...] are never mere observations on the material presented. They are bound up with it through subterranean associations, and hence fall, like the narrative itself [...]" (Adorno 177). Proust's response to the aesthetics of modernity and his answer to the question of the possibility of experiencing the encounter with the Other is similar to although much lengthier than mother's answer to the young narrator: Sorry dear, the only answer is that there is no answer.



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