

to each one of us' (V, 212/250) [*vrai pour nous tous et dissemblable pour chacun* (III, 694)], 'true' here must be understood not in the sense of correspondence to outside fact but instead as denoting a purely internal coherence, a set of immutable laws governing each particular perspective so that precisely the same modifications are always made, in comparable circumstances, on similar material.

What the focalisation in the *Recherche* conveys, then, is not just the structure of subjectivity but the structure of a subjectivity, a particular one, that of Proust's Narrator-Protagonist. It is above all to be found in metaphor, since metaphor, by bringing together two objects from different realms, exemplifies the very activity of synthesis which is that of perspective. And indeed the metaphors in the novel (which must not, of course, be taken as unmediatedly Proust's) show a remarkable degree of consistency. Young girls are incessantly assimilated to flowers (as most famously in the title of the second volume) and flowers to young girls.<sup>12</sup>

Proust has, however, a more subtle procedure for indicating the 'world' in which his character lives. We have seen that some of the maxims carry absolute truths (subscribed to, we have to assume, by Proust), and that others are hypotheses provisionally concocted by the Narrator; but there still remain those which, while they do not vary, are also not presented as absolute, and these are the ones which delineate the character's moral universe. We would be ill advised, for example, to imagine that all of the sweeping statements we read about love are supposed to apply to everyone without distinction. The Narrator acknowledges not only that people in general love in different ways (II, 188; II, 476/562) but also that he himself diverges from Swann (who is surely more than the artistically impotent *alter ego* he is usually taken to be) over *la jalousie de l'escalier*, Swann being far quicker to lose interest in the infidelities of a woman he no longer holds dear (IV, 132; V, 630/743). All of the Narrator's apparently categorical claims on the subject (e.g. IV, 72; V, 561/662) must therefore be taken to obtain only for his own experience. And so, in and among the faculties which the Narrator holds in common with all humanity, and subtending his innumerable selves which multiply by the moment, the maxims and metaphors he produces hint at an abiding and identifying perspective, something he can never see for the very good reason that it is always doing the seeing (IV, 48; V, 532/628); something *through* which, and never *at* which, he gazes.

#### Sentence structure

Chronology may be complicated and viewpoint variable, but if there is one single factor preventing us from reading more than six pages in a sitting then

it is, as Jacques Normand was well aware, the notorious structure of the Proustian sentence. Although Proust is perfectly capable of being more concise when he so chooses, the longer periods are so numerous, and their combined effect so powerful, that one has the overwhelming impression of a novel written entirely in distended, convoluted, barely legible blocks. It is not just that they stretch to improbable lengths (a little under three *Piéjade* pages on one occasion: III, 17-19; IV, 18-21/21-4) but also, and especially, that they tend to grow from the middle,<sup>13</sup> so that in a sense their true dimension is rather one of *depth*. Just as at the macroscopic level, so at the microscopic the external boundaries in Proust are always predetermined – if some of the sentences and indeed the novel as a whole remain 'unfinished', it is not because they lack satisfactory resolutions but because discrepancies and lacunae linger amid the minor clauses – yet in the interstices, dividing a subject from its verb, a cause from its effect or a sub-plot from its dénouement, new material may at any moment muscle its way in, clad in a convenient pair of commas.

When the Narrator, to take a relatively brief example, wishes to describe his physical attraction to Albertine as unabating, he only reaches the second word before having to interrupt the thought to explain why it is of interest, namely that it marks a point of divergence from the Gilberte scenario [1]. But he now has to explain what exactly has changed, which means prefacing the contrast with [2] a general statement and [3] a detail or two about the specific mode of association with Albertine. The sentence may now continue, but it cannot yet end. Three words before the full stop, the Narrator as it were draws himself up short, remembering two very important restrictions: first, that his way of loving may not be universal (he interjects the quasi-ubiquitous 'pour moi', and appends a parenthetical disclaimer for good measure [4,5]); second, that the revelation is occurring to him, like almost all knowledge, after the event [6]. The result reads as follows:

Pour Albertine, [2] grâce à une vie toute différente ensemble [3] et où n'avait pu se glisser, dans un bloc de pensées où une douloureuse préoccupation maintenait une cohésion permanente, aucune fissure de distraction et d'oubli, son corps vivant n'avait point, [1] comme celui de Gilberte, cessé un jour d'être celui où je trouvais ce que je reconnaissais [6] après coup être [4] pour moi ([5] et qui n'était pas été pour d'autres) les traits féminins. (IV, 84)

[In Albertine's case, thanks to a wholly different life shared with me where no fissure of distraction or obliviousness had been able to penetrate a block of thoughts in which a painful preoccupation maintained a permanent cohesion, her living body had not, like Gilberte's, ceased one day to be that in which I found what I subsequently recognised as being to me (what they would not have been to other men) the attributes of feminine charm.] (V, 574/677-8)

A sentence like this one is not a marathon but a Zenonian hundred-yard dash,<sup>14</sup> in which writer and reader alike could easily reach the finish line were it not for the necessity to reach the half-way mark, and before that all the half-way marks in between.

One reason for the unusual intricacy is, of course, that the reality Proust is talking about is unusually intricate, given his remarkable sensitivity for subtle nuances. Not all the sentences, however, are content simply to mirror that reality; instead, some actively attempt to reduce its complexity,<sup>15</sup> and do so by the time-honoured method of collection and division, bringing a pair of items together ('just as . . . so') or marking a line of fissure within what looks like a single item ('sometimes . . . sometimes', 'on the one hand . . . on the other'). The active stance reaches a higher degree of intensity when simplification becomes falsification, when the divided items in question turn out to be more or less continuous (as most famously in the case of the two *côtés*), the collected items radically heterogeneous (as when, to cite a minor example, the servants set themselves to 'regarder tomber la poussière et l'é-motion' (I, 88) ['watch the dust . . . and the excitement . . . subside' (I, 105/123)]. Even the proliferating paradoxes which, on the one hand, are an apt reflection of life's enigmas, function, on the other, to scale those enigmas down from a multi-dimensional conundrum to a set of straightforward binary oppositions (III, 421-2; IV, 500-1/588-9). At its limit, style forces an obdurately chaotic material into the merest semblance of order, whether sound pattern as rich as 'petit, trapu, étêté et têtù' (I, 414) – a double-binary permutation of consonants (pr/tt) and vowels (u/-) – or a chiasmic construction of the form 'opposées et complémentaires, c'est-à-dire propres à satisfaire nos sens et à faire souffrir notre cœur' (II, 248) ['our opposite and our complement, apt, that is to say, to gratify our senses and to wring our hearts' (II, 548/647)].<sup>16</sup> Occasionally, and most often at moments of the greatest tension for the character, the Narrator's prose even ends up in an alexandrine or a perfect octosyllabic couplet (complete, in the following instance, with internal rhyme):

J'ouvris la fenêtre sans bruit  
et m'assis au pied de mon lit . . .

(I, 32.)

[Noiselessly I opened the window

and sat down on the foot of my bed . . .]

(I, 36/42.)

Inevitably perhaps, one central reality the sentences both reflect and shape is that of the self. In addition to the linguistic reflex 'pour moi', several of the layered qualifiers (*peut-être*, *sans doute*) and associated locutions (*comme si*, *semblait*, *paraissait*) evoke the monadic isolation of a psyche which, when confronted with a potential object of knowledge, is continually thrown back

on conjecture. Even when the object concerned is his own interiority, the Narrator finds the predicament equally intractable, so that he is reduced at one stage to reporting, rather hesitantly, that he acted 'soit par duplicité, soit par un surcroît véritable de tendresse' (II, 401) ['perhaps out of duplicity, perhaps in a genuine access of affection' (III, 110/130)]. Such starkly opposed hypotheses also point to another predicament, namely to the existence of twin and rival sources of speculation within the mind, each designed less to track the truth than to exaggerate in its own way. And perhaps the various oppositions, exclusions and concessives which control so many clauses and even developments spanning several pages ('granted *a* . . . but *b*', 'if not *a* . . . then at least *b*', 'not only *a* . . . but also *b*') represent efforts to steer a path between the two extremes. In some cases, furthermore, the hypotheses testify in another way altogether to the synchronic division of personality: there is good reason to suspect that the possibilities listed are not mutually exclusive – that the Protagonist, for example, is sincerely tender and guileful at one and the same time – especially since the Narrator believes that individual actions have multiple, sometimes even contradictory, motivations (I, 599; II, 214/253).

Analogously, we often feel the presence of multiple *sequential* selves coursing through the complex prose. Occasionally a group of narrators gathers in a single paragraph, all using different tenses to discuss the Protagonist and each other (III, 185; IV, 218/255-6). Or a sentence describing an act of recollection may contain a present-tense narrator describing the scene today, a past-tense character – such as the 'intermediary subject' who stays up late remembering rooms – and as it were a pluperfect character, object of the latter's memory. 'Puis rennaissait [unfocalised narration] le souvenir d'une nouvelle attitude; le mur flait [focalisation through the intermediary subject] dans une autre direction: j'étais dans ma chambre chez Mme de Saint-Loup, à la campagne; mon Dieu! il est [focalisation through the Tansonville-era self] au moins dix heures, on doit avoir fini de dîner!' (I, 6-7) ['Then the memory of a new position would spring up, and the wall would slide away in another direction; I was in my room in Mme de Saint-Loup's house in the country; good heavens, it must be ten o'clock, they will have finished dinner!' (I, 5/6)].<sup>17</sup>

Such moments, in which the entire disposition of a former self returns to a position of dominance within the current self to the point of usurping the latter's voice, do more in fact than just juxtapose diverse geological strata. For when any given pair of sequential selves is brought together, 'notre vrai moi', that *petit personnage intérieur* which feeds on extratemporal essences, eagerly awakens (IV, 451; VI, 224/264). As in involuntary memory, so in certain sentences – a glorious example being the very last of 'Combray I' –

three successive events are implied to take place: a moment of contraction by analogy, in which a dimensionless point of intersection between two temporally distinct sensory impressions, such as the taste of a madeleine soaked in tea, indicates the existence of an unchanging perspective subtending both; a moment of dilation by contiguity, in which everything connected with the first instance of the impression gradually emerges and the entire plane of a previous self is restored, complete with the desires and dreams of its era (IV, 453-4; VI, 228/268); and finally a moment in which the true self, measuring the distance between the two selves thus disclosed – that is, the vast areas of disparity surrounding the tiny vertex of correspondence – glimpses ‘a fragment of time in the pure state’ (VI, 224/264) [‘un peu de temps à l’état pur’ (IV, 451)].

It is, presumably, this true self which is ultimately responsible for bringing order into the myriad motley *moi* of which the total self is composed. What Vinteuil’s septet teaches the Protagonist is not only that his life is made up of a series of love affairs, with every affair going through its own diverse stages, and any given stage incorporating multiple two-dimensional time-bound selves, but also that events which were, at the time, of great significance to him – a first touch, a first attempted kiss, a first kiss – now serve as mere ‘raw material’ (IV:608) [‘matière industrielle’ (VI, 428/504)] for the artwork which is his overall being. It is as if the Narrator were taking all the love letters he had ever received, ordering them by size and colour, and making a beautiful sculpture out of them. And nothing could more perfectly render the ‘complex musical ‘orchestration’ of the total self (II, 691; III, 458/543), combining melody (the diachronic division) and harmony (the synchronic), than the Proustian sentence with its multi-layered hypotaxis.<sup>18</sup> Far from being a repository for vast quantities of unruly and heterogeneous material each sentence already begins to suggest the relative positions of the items listed, intimating (rather as the anticipations, omissions and belated revelations do) that *a* is more important than *b*, that all *c*’s are governed by *d*.

It almost goes without saying that the relations which hold among the various constituents of the total self, brought together under the complex set of hierarchies, are not always logical in nature. Since each sequential self is an isolated entity, not causally linked to any other sequential self, it is impossible to subsume all such selves under a neat narrative leading towards an end; the Gilberte interlude is taken not to cause but merely to ‘prepare’ the Albertine episode, as if, even from the Protagonist’s point of view, one merely foreshadowed the other. What is more, since ‘rien ne se perd’ (III, 27) [‘nothing is ever lost’ (IV, 29/34)], there is always a part of the Protagonist which is still in love with (the image of) Gilberte even when, to all intents

and purposes, he has ‘cured’ himself of the attachment (IV, 568; VI, 376/443), and a part which is still, at some level, enthralled by the Guermantes name no matter how many times it has been disenchanting.<sup>19</sup> Even strictly theoretical views are likely to be affected: if the Narrator presents all his maxims, abandoned positions included, in the present tense, it is perhaps because he recognises that in a sense they are all believed in at once, just as opposite hypotheses are simultaneously entertained by disparate parts of the soul. And so the total self will have to incorporate ostensibly abandoned positions, just as Vinteuil incorporates fragments of his earlier works, however weak they are by comparison, into the glorious septet (III, 756; V, 284/335); the several components will be justified not logically but aesthetically, according to their place within the whole which they constitute (II, 826; III, 621/737).<sup>20</sup>

Not least among the seemingly impossible challenges Proust set himself when writing the *Recherche* was that of conveying, in a more or less seamless narrative flow, a vision of the world that is true for all, one which is true only for his Narrator-Protagonist, and one which is true for himself alone. We have seen how sentence structure indicates or reinforces a universally applicable notion of subjectivity (‘form’, here, being attuned to ‘content’), and how the Narrator-Protagonist’s individual perspective comes through in the metaphors (form, here, being itself content-laden), as well as in some of the maxims. Now since Proust is left, above all, with the domain of plot, we may speculate that the laws of his unique fictional universe – such as the law of double irony, which states that situations shall in general be as bad as possible, but not *reliably* so, since it is even more cruel to live in hope – are what centrally reflect his own point of view on experience.

However this may be, there is, I propose, still a fourth level of communication at work in the novel. Like the first, it is a type of didacticism, but its function is training, not teaching, its vehicle a set of purely structural features, not a body of accurate doctrine. This level, on which form asserts its maximal autonomy from content, serves two main ends. One is to encourage co-operation among the faculties: since readers possess many different types of attention (III, 210; IV, 246/290), all of which may be deployed simultaneously (I, 83; I, 98-9/115), writing may be so layered as to involve several at once, necessitating an active and multi-tiered engagement with the text. If we are to perform the act of deliberate and conscious self-deception required to see our inner volume as a coherent whole, we need to train our faculties – the intellect which produces pleasing pictures, the will which acts as if they were true, the instinct which senses they are not – to work together. As for the other mission of the Proustian spiritual exercise, it is to impart, as

it were, the virtue of patience. By continually forcing us to go back and reread, the narrative repeatedly reminds us — in the foreshadowings and anticipations of the complex chronology, the twists and turns of the syntax — that we cannot know anything (even our own lives) all at once, that enlightenment is always retrospective and often long in coming, if it comes at all.

At times we receive more overt encouragement to retrace our steps, as when the Narrator himself structures an episode (such as the description of Swann's visits, I, 13–23; I, 13–26/16–30) in such a way that he, and we, keep returning to earlier motifs, or structures a sentence to comparable effect. When, for example, the Protagonist suspects Albertine of having been with another woman on his second arrival in Balbec but decides not to confront her just yet, the Narrator tries quite hard to explain:

*Peut-être l'habitude* que j'avais prise de garder au fond de moi certains désirs, *désir* d'une jeune fille du monde comme celles que je voyais passer de ma fenêtre suivies de leur institutrice, et plus particulièrement de celle dont m'avait parlé Saint-Loup, qui allait dans les maisons de passe, *désir* de belles femmes de chambre et particulièrement de celle de Mme Putbus, *désir* d'aller à la campagne au début du printemps revoir des aubépines, des pommiers en fleur, des tempêtes, *désir* de Venise, *désir* de me mettre au travail, *désir* de mener la vie de tout le monde, *peut-être l'habitude* de conserver en moi, sans assouvissement, tous ces désirs, en me contentant de la promesse faite à moi-même de ne pas oublier de les satisfaire un jour, *peut-être cette habitude* vieille de tant d'années, de l'ajournement perpétuel, de ce que M. de Charlus flétrissait sous le nom de procrastination, était-elle devenue si générale en moi qu'elle s'emparait aussi de mes soupçons jaloux et, tout en me faisant prendre mentalement note que je ne manquerais pas un jour d'avoir une explication avec Albertine au sujet de la jeune fille (peut-être des jeunes filles, cette partie du récit était confuse, effacée, autant dire indéchiffrable, dans ma mémoire) avec laquelle — ou lesquelles — Aimé l'avait rencontrée, me faisait retarder cette explication.

(II, 594)

[*Perhaps the habit* that I had acquired of nursing within me certain desires, *the desire* for a young girl of good family such as those I used to see pass beneath my window escorted by their governesses, and especially for the girl whom Saint-Loup had mentioned to me, the one who frequented houses of ill fame, *the desire* for handsome lady's-maids, and especially for Mme Putbus's, *the desire* to go to the country in early spring to see once again hawthorns, apple-trees in blossom, storms, *the desire* for Venice, *the desire* to settle down to work, *the desire* to live like other people — *perhaps the habit* of storing up all these desires, without assuaging any of them, contenting myself with a promise to myself not to forget to satisfy them one day — *perhaps this habit*, so many years old already, of perpetual postponement, of what M. de Charlus used to castigate under the name of procrastination, had become so prevalent in me

that it took hold of my jealous suspicions also and, while encouraging me to make a mental note that I would not fail, some day, to have things out with Albertine as regards the girl, or possibly girls (this part of the story was confused and blurred in my memory and to all intents and purposes indecipherable) with whom Aimé had met her, made me also postpone this inquest.]

(V, 90–1/106–7).

This one sentence encapsulates the full range of effects produced by the deliciously exasperating Proustian texture. Insistence on point of view emerges in the triply-repeated 'in me', as well as in the cautious 'perhaps' for speculation about Albertine's activities; and speculation extends, here as elsewhere, to the Narrator-Protagonist's own behaviour. The relentlessly repeated *désirs* . . . *désirs* . . . *désirs* perfectly captures the multiplicity of simultaneous drives, some of which, it should be noted, are sediments of old sequential selves (the desire for hawthorns dates from Combray, the lure of the Putbus' chambermaid only since Doncières); at the same time we sense a beginning of order, as a partial hypotaxis divides the groups (women, places, activities) into sub-groups (chambermaids, daughters of aristocrats) and these in turn into specific cases (Mlle de l'Orgeville). Above all, however, the Narrator perfectly matches the Protagonist for tactics of deferral, twice interrupting and returning to the main line, qualifying his qualifiers. One has the impression that sentences, in Proust, hardly dare to reach their conclusion, as if they were all too aware that new facts and re-interpretations of existing data can, at any moment, upset their delicate balance. The total self is always incomplete, contingent, subject to infinite revision and, to that extent, fictional; though we need to believe, at least with one part of ourselves, in the fiction.<sup>21</sup>

#### NOTES

- 1 Henri Bonnet, 'Le "Rapport" de Jacques Madeleine', *Le Figaro littéraire*, 8 December 1966, p.15; translation mine. Normand wrote the piece under his pseudonym, Jacques Madeleine.
- 2 For these three present moments, see I, 414; I, 506/598. IV, 622; VI, 447/526. IV, 383; VI, 141/167 respectively.
- 3 All italics within quotations are mine.
- 4 See Georges Poulet, *L'Espace proustien* (Paris: Gallimard, 1963), pp.117–35.
- 5 See III, 139–40; IV, 164/192 and III, 577; V, 70/83 respectively.
- 6 See Marcel Proust et Jacques Rivière, ed. Philip Kolb, *Correspondance* (Paris: Plon, 1955), pp.2–3.
- 7 See successively II, 200; II, 489/578. II, 228; II, 524/618. II, 232; II, 529/624–5.
- 8 See Malcolm Bowie, *Friend, Proust and Lacan: Theory as Fiction* (Cambridge University Press, 1987) p.54.