

The Types of Signs

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Proust & Signs

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What constitutes the unity of *In Search of Lost Time*? We know, at least, what does not. It is not recollection, memory, even involuntary memory. What is essential to the Search is not in the madeleine or the cobblestones. On the one hand, the Search is not simply an effort of recall, an exploration of memory: search, *recherche*, is to be taken in the strong sense of the term, as we say "the search for truth." On the other hand, Lost Time is not simply "time past"; it is also time wasted, lost track of. Consequently, memory intervenes as a means of search, of investigation, but not the most profound means; and time past intervenes as a structure of time, but not the most profound structure. In Proust, the steeples of Martinville and Vinteuil's little phrase, which cause no memory, no resurrection of the past to intervene, will always prevail over the madeleine and the cobblestones of Venice, which depend on memory and thereby still refer to a "material explanation" (III, 375).

What is involved is not an exposition of involuntary memory, but the narrative of an apprenticeship: more precisely, the apprenticeship of a man of letters. (III, 907). The Méséglise Way and the Guermantes Way are not so much the sources of memory as the raw materials, the lines of an apprenticeship. They are the two ways of a "formation." Proust constantly insists on this: at one moment or another, the hero does not yet know this or that; he will

learn it later on. He is under a certain illusion, which he will ultimately discard. Whence the movement of disappointments and revelations, which imparts its rhythm to the Search as a whole. One might invoke Proust's Platonism: to learn is still to remember. But however important its role, memory intervenes only as the means of an apprenticeship that transcends recollection both by its goals and by its principles. The Search is oriented to the future, not to the past.

Learning is essentially concerned with *signs*. Signs are the object of a temporal apprenticeship, not of an abstract knowledge. To learn is first of all to consider a substance, an object, a being as if it emitted signs to be deciphered, interpreted. There is no apprentice who is not "the Egyptologist" of something. One becomes a carpenter only by becoming sensitive to the signs of wood, a physician by becoming sensitive to the signs of disease. Vocation is always predestination with regard to signs. Everything that teaches us something emits signs; every act of learning is an interpretation of signs or hieroglyphs. Proust's work is based not on the exposition of memory, but on the apprenticeship to signs.

From them it derives its unity and also its astonishing pluralism. The word sign, *signe*, is one of the most frequent in the work, notably in the final systematization that constitutes Time Regained (*Le Temps Retrouvé*). The Search is presented as the exploration of different worlds of signs that are organized in circles and intersect at certain points, for the signs are specific and constitute the substance of one world or another. We see this at once in the secondary characters: Norpois and the diplomatic code,

Saint-Loup and the signs of strategy, Cottard and medical symptoms. A man can be skillful at deciphering the signs of one realm but remain a fool in every other case: thus Cottard, a great clinician. Further, in a shared realm, the worlds are partitioned off: the Verdurin signs have no currency among the Guermantes; conversely Swann's style or Charlus's hieroglyphs do not pass among the Verdurins. The worlds are unified by their formation of sign systems emitted by persons, objects, substances; we discover no truth, we learn nothing except by deciphering and interpreting. But the plurality of worlds is such that these signs are not of the same kind, do not have the same way of appearing, do not allow themselves to be deciphered in the same manner, do not have an identical relation with their meaning. The hypothesis that the signs form both the unity and the plurality of the Search must be verified by considering the worlds in which the hero participates directly.

The first world of the Search is the world of, precisely, worldliness. There is no milieu that emits and concentrates so many signs, in such reduced space, at so great a rate. It is true that these signs themselves are not homogeneous. At one and the same moment they are differentiated, not only according to classes but according to even more fundamental "families of mind." From one moment to the next, they evolve, crystallize, or give way to other signs. Thus the apprentice's task is to understand why someone is "received" in a certain world, why someone ceases to be so, what signs do the worlds obey, which signs are legislators, and which high priests. In Proust's work,

Charlus is the most prodigious emitter of signs, by his worldly power, his pride, his sense of theater, his face, and his voice. But Charlus, driven by love, is nothing at the Verdurins', and even in his own world he will end by being nothing when its implicit laws have changed. What then is the unity of the worldly signs? A greeting from the Duc de Guermantes is to be interpreted, and the risks of error are as great in such an interpretation as in a diagnosis. The same is true of a gesture of Mme Verdurin.

The worldly sign appears as the replacement of an action or a thought. It stands for action and for thought. It is therefore a sign that does not refer to something else, to a transcendent signification or to an ideal content, but has usurped the supposed value of its meaning. This is why worldliness, judged from the viewpoint of actions, appears to be disappointing and cruel, and from the viewpoint of thought, it appears stupid. One does not think and one does not act, but one makes signs. Nothing funny is said at the Verdurins', and Mme Verdurin does not laugh; but Cottard makes a sign that he is saying something funny, Mme Verdurin makes a sign that she is laughing, and her sign is so perfectly emitted that M. Verdurin, not to be outdone, seeks in his turn for an appropriate mimicry. Mme de Guermantes has a heart that is often hard, a mind that is often weak, but she always has charming signs. She does not act for her friends, she does not think with them, she makes signs to them. The worldly sign does not refer to something, it "stands for" it, claims to be equivalent to its meaning. It anticipates action as it does thought, annuls thought as it does action, and declares itself adequate: whence its stereotyped aspect and its vacu-

ity. We must not thereby conclude that such signs are negligible. The apprenticeship would be imperfect and even impossible if it did not pass through them. These signs are empty, but this emptiness confers upon them a ritual perfection, a kind of formalism we do not encounter elsewhere. The worldly signs are the only ones capable of causing a kind of nervous exaltation, expressing the effect upon us of the persons who are capable of producing them (II, 547-52).

The second circle is that of love. The Charlus-Jupien encounter makes the reader a party to the most prodigious exchange of signs. To fall in love is to individualize someone by the signs he bears or emits. It is to become sensitive to these signs, to undergo an apprenticeship to them (thus the slow individualization of Albertine in the group of young girls). It may be that friendship is nourished on observation and conversation, but love is born from and nourished on silent interpretation. The beloved appears as a sign, a "soul"; the beloved expresses a possible world unknown to us, implying, enveloping, imprisoning a world that must be deciphered, that is, interpreted. What is involved, here, is a plurality of worlds; the pluralism of love does not concern only the multiplicity of loved beings, but the multiplicity of souls or worlds in each of them. To love is to try to *explicate*, to *develop* these unknown worlds that remain enveloped within the beloved. This is why it is so easy for us to fall in love with women who are not of our "world" nor even our type. It is also why the loved women are often linked to landscapes that we know sufficiently to long for their reflection in a woman's eyes but

are then reflected from a viewpoint so mysterious that they become virtually inaccessible, unknown landscapes: Albertine envelops, incorporates, amalgamates "the beach and the breaking waves." How can we gain access to a landscape that is no longer the one we see, but on the contrary the one in which we are seen? "If she had seen me, what could I have meant to her? From what universe did she select me?" (I, 794).

There is, then, a contradiction of love. We cannot interpret the signs of a loved person without proceeding into worlds that have not waited for us in order to take form, that formed themselves with other persons, and in which we are at first only an object among the rest. The lover wants his beloved to devote to him her preferences, her gestures, her caresses. But the beloved's gestures, at the very moment they are addressed to us, still express that unknown world that excludes us. The beloved gives us signs of preference; but because these signs are the same as those that express worlds to which we do not belong, each preference by which we profit draws the image of the *possible world* in which others might be or are preferred. "All at once his jealousy, as if it were the shadow of his love, was completed by the double of this new smile that she had given him that very evening and that, conversely now, mocked Swann and was filled with love for someone else. . . . So he came to regret each pleasure he enjoyed with her, each caress they devised whose delight he had been so indiscreet as to reveal to her, each grace he discerned in her, for he knew that a moment later they would constitute new instruments of his torment" (I, 276). The contradiction of love consists of this: the means we

count on to preserve us from jealousy are the very means that develop that jealousy, giving it a kind of autonomy, of independence with regard to our love.

The first law of love is subjective: subjectively, jealousy is deeper than love, it contains love's truth. This is because jealousy goes further in the apprehension and interpretation of signs. It is the destination of love, its finality. Indeed, it is inevitable that the signs of a loved person, once we "explicate" them, should be revealed as deceptive: addressed to us, applied to us, they nonetheless express worlds that exclude us and that the beloved will not and cannot make us know. Not by virtue of any particular ill will on the beloved's part, but of a deeper contradiction, which inheres in the nature of love and in the general situation of the beloved. Love's signs are not like the signs of worldliness; they are not empty signs, standing for thought and action. They are deceptive signs that can be addressed to us only by concealing what they express: the origin of unknown worlds, of unknown actions and thoughts that give them a meaning. They do not excite a superficial, nervous exaltation, but the suffering of a deeper exploration. The beloved's lies are the hieroglyphics of love. The interpreter of love's signs is necessarily the interpreter of lies. His fate is expressed in the motto To love without being loved.

What does the lie conceal in love's signs? All the deceptive signs emitted by a loved woman converge upon the same secret world: the world of Gomorrah, which itself no longer depends on this or that woman (though one woman can incarnate it better than another) but is the feminine possibility par excellence, a kind of a priori that

jealousy discovers. This is because the world expressed by the loved woman is always a world that excludes us, even when she gives us a mark of preference. But, of all the worlds, which one is the most excluding, the most exclusive? "It was a terrible terra incognita on which I had just landed, a new phase of unsuspected sufferings that was beginning. And yet this deluge of reality that submerges us, if it is real in relation to our timid presuppositions, was nonetheless anticipated by them. . . . The rival was not like me, the rival's weapons were different; I could not join battle on the same terrain, give Albertine the same pleasures, nor even conceive just what they might be" (II, 1115-20). We interpret all the signs of the loved woman, but, at the end of this painful decipherment, we come up against the sign of Gomorrah as though against the deepest expression of an original feminine reality.

The second law of Proustian love is linked with the first: objectively, heterosexual loves are less profound than homosexual ones; they find their truth in homosexuality. For if it is true that the loved woman's secret is the secret of Gomorrah, the lover's secret is that of Sodom. In analogous circumstances, the hero of the Search surprises Mlle Vinteuil and surprises Charlus (II, 608). But Mlle Vinteuil explicates all loved women, as Charlus implicates all lovers. At the infinity of our loves, there is the original Hermaphrodite. But the Hermaphrodite is not a being capable of reproducing itself. Far from uniting the sexes, it separates them, it is the source from which there continually proceed the two divergent homosexual series, that of Sodom and that of Gomorrah. It is the Hermaphrodite that possesses the key to Samson's prophecy: "The two

sexes shall die, each in a place apart" (II, 616). To the point where heterosexual loves are merely the appearance that covers the destination of each sex, concealing the accursed depth where everything is elaborated. And if the two homosexual series are the most profound, it is still in terms of signs. The characters of Sodom, the characters of Gomorrah compensate by the intensity of the sign for the secret to which they are bound. Of a woman looking at Albertine, Proust writes: "One would have said that she was making signs to her as though with a beacon" (II, 851). The entire world of love extends from the signs revealing deception to the concealed signs of Sodom and of Gomorrah.

The third world is that of sensuous impressions or qualities. It may happen that a sensuous quality gives us a strange joy at the same time that it transmits a kind of imperative. Thus experienced, the quality no longer appears as a property of the object that now possesses it, but as the sign of an *altogether different* object that we must try to decipher, at the cost of an effort that always risks failure. It is as if the quality enveloped, imprisoned the soul of an object other than the one it now designates. We "develop" this quality, this sensuous impression, like a tiny Japanese paper that opens under water and releases the captive form (I, 47). Examples of this kind are the most famous in the Search and accelerate at its end (the final revelation of "time regained" is announced by a multiplication of signs). But whatever the examples—madeleine, steeples, trees, cobblestones, napkin, noise of a spoon or a pipe—we witness the same procedure. First a prodigious

joy, so that these signs are already distinguished from the preceding ones by their immediate effect. Further, a kind of obligation is felt, the necessity of a mental effort to seek the sign's meaning (yet we may evade this imperative, out of laziness, or else our investigations may fail out of impotence or bad luck, as in the case of the trees). Then, the sign's meaning appears, yielding to us the concealed object—Combray for the madeleine, young girls for the steeples, Venice for the cobblestones....

It is doubtful that the effort of interpretation ends there. For it remains to be explained why, by the solicitation of the madeleine, Combray is not content to rise up again as it was once present (simple association of ideas), but rises up absolutely, in a form that was never experienced, in its "essence" or its eternity. Or, what amounts to the same thing, it remains to be explained why we experience so intense and so particular a joy. In an important text, Proust cites the madeleine as a case of failure: "I had then postponed seeking the profound causes" (III, 867). Yet, the madeleine looked like a real success, from a certain viewpoint: the interpreter had found its meaning, not without difficulty, in the unconscious memory of Combray. The three trees, on the contrary, are a real failure because their meaning is not elucidated. We must then assume that in choosing the madeleine as an example of inadequacy, Proust is aiming at a new stage of interpretation, an ultimate stage.

This is because the sensuous qualities or impressions, even properly interpreted, are not yet in themselves adequate signs. But they are no longer empty signs, giving us a factitious exaltation like the worldly signs. They are

no longer deceptive signs that make us suffer, like the signs of love whose real meaning prepares an ever greater pain. These are true signs that immediately give us an extraordinary joy, signs that are fulfilled, affirmative, and joyous. *But they are material signs.* Not simply by their sensuous origin. But their meaning, as it is developed, signifies Combray, young girls, Venice, or Balbec. It is not only their origin, it is their explanation, their development that remains material (III, 375). We feel that this Balbec, that this Venice... do not rise up as the product of an association of ideas, but in person and in their essence. Yet we are not ready to understand what this ideal essence is, nor why we feel so much joy. "The taste of the little madeleine had reminded me of Combray. But why had the images of Combray and of Venice, at the one moment and at the other, given such a certainty of joy, adequate, with no further proofs, to make death itself a matter of indifference to me?" (III, 867).

At the end of the Search, the interpreter understands what had escaped him in the case of the madeleine or even of the steeples: that the material meaning is nothing without an ideal essence that it incarnates. The mistake is to suppose that the hieroglyphs represent "only material objects" (III, 878). But what now permits the interpreter to go further is that meanwhile the problem of art has been raised and has received a solution. Now the world of art is the ultimate world of signs, and these signs, as though *dematerialized*, find their meaning in an ideal essence. Henceforth, the world revealed by art reacts on all the others and notably on the sensuous signs; it integrates

them, colors them with an aesthetic meaning, and imbues what was still opaque about them. Then we understand that the sensuous signs *already* referred to an ideal essence that was incarnated in their material meaning. But without art we should not have understood this, nor transcended the law of interpretation that corresponded to the analysis of the madeleine. This is why all the signs converge upon art; all apprenticeships, by the most diverse paths, are already unconscious apprenticeships to art itself. At the deepest level, the essential is in the signs of art.

We have not yet defined them. We ask only the reader's concurrence that Proust's problem is the problem of signs in general and that the signs constitute different worlds, worldly signs, empty signs, deceptive signs of love, sensuous material signs, and lastly the essential signs of art (which transform all the others).