"Pluralism in the System of Signs"

*Proust & Signs*

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Pluralism in the System of Signs

The search for lost time is presented as a system of signs. But this system is pluralistic. Not only because the classification of signs involves many criteria, but because we must combine two distinct viewpoints in the establishment of these criteria. On the one hand, we must consider the signs from the viewpoint of an apprenticeship in process. What is the power and effectiveness of each type of sign? In other words, to what degree does it help to prepare us for the final revelation? What does it make us understand, in and of itself and at the moment, according to a law of progression that varies according to types and refers to other types according to rules that are themselves variable? On the other hand, we must consider the signs from the viewpoint of the final revelation. This revelation is identified with Art, the highest kind of signs. But, in the work of art, all the other signs are included; they find a place according to the effectiveness they had in the course of the apprenticeship — find, even, an ultimate explanation of the characteristics they then afforded, which we experienced without being able to comprehend them fully.

Taking these viewpoints into account, the system involves seven criteria. The first five can be briefly reviewed; the last two have consequences that must be developed.

1. **The matter in which the sign is embodied.** These substances are more or less resistant and opaque, more or less dematerialized, more or less spiritualized. The worldly signs, though they function in a void, are only the more material for that. The signs of love are inseparable from the weight of a face, from the texture of a skin, from the width and color of a cheek — things that are spiritualized only when the beloved sleeps. The sensuous signs are still material qualities, above all odors and tastes. It is only in art that the sign becomes immaterial at the same time that its meaning becomes spiritual.

2. **The way in which something is emitted and apprehended as a sign, but also the consequent dangers of an interpretation that may be objectivist or subjectivist.** Each type of sign refers us to the object that emits it and also to the subject who apprehends and interprets it. We believe at first that we must see and hear; or else, in love, that we must avow our love (pay homage to the object); or else that we must observe and describe the sensuous phenomenon; that we must work, must think in order to grasp significations and objective values. Disappointed, we fall back into the play of subjective associations. But for each kind of sign, these two moments of the apprenticeship have a rhythm and specific relations.

3. **The effect of the sign upon us, the kind of emotion it produces.** Nervous exaltation is produced by the worldly signs; suffering and anguish by the signs of love; extraordinary joy by the sensuous signs (but in which anguish still appears as the subsisting contradiction of being and nothingness); pure joy by the signs of art.

4. **The nature of meaning, and the sign's relation to its meaning.** The worldly signs are empty; they take the place of action and thought; they try to stand for their meaning. The signs of love are deceptive; their meaning inheres in
the contradiction of what they reveal and try to conceal. The sensuous signs are truthful, but in them subsists the opposition of survival and nothingness, and their meaning is still material; it resides elsewhere. However, to the degree that we achieve art, the relation of sign and meaning becomes closer. Art is the splendid final unity of an immaterial sign and a spiritual meaning.

5. The principal faculty that explicates or interprets the sign, which develops its meaning. This faculty is intelligence, in the case of the worldly signs; intelligence, too, but in another fashion, in the case of the signs of love (the effort of intelligence is no longer supported by an exaltation that must be calmed, but by the sufferings of sensibility that must be transmuted into joy). In the case of the sensuous signs, it is involuntary memory and imagination as the latter is generated by desire. In the case of the signs of art, pure thought as the faculty of essences becomes the interpreter.

6. The temporal structures or lines of time implicated in the sign, and the corresponding type of truth. It always takes time to interpret a sign; all time is the time of an interpretation, that is, of a development. In the case of the worldly signs, we waste our time, for these signs are empty, and at the end of their development we find they are intact or identical. Like the monster, like the spiral, they are reborn from their metamorphoses. Nonetheless such wasted time has a truth: a kind of maturation of the interpreter who does not find himself to be identical. In the case of the signs of love, we are mainly within time lost: time that alters persons and things, that makes them pass. Here too there is a truth—or truths. But the truth of lost time is not only approximate and equivocal; we grasp it only when it has ceased to interest us, only when the interpreter’s Self that was in love has already disappeared. So it is with Gilberte, so it is with Albertine: in love, the truth always comes too late. Love’s time is a lost time because the sign develops only to the degree that the self corresponding to its meaning disappears. The sensuous signs offer us a new structure of time: time rediscovered at the heart of lost time: itself, an image of eternity. This is because the sensuous signs (unlike the signs of love) have the power either to awaken by desire and imagination or to reawaken by involuntary memory the Self that corresponds to their meaning. Lastly, the signs of art define time regained: an absolute primordial time, a veritable eternity that unites sign and meaning.

Time wasted, time lost, time rediscovered, and time regained are the four lines of time. But we must note that if each type of sign has its particular line, it participates in the other lines as well, encroaches on them as it develops. It is therefore on the lines of time that the signs intersect and multiply their combinations. Time wasted is extended in all the other signs except the signs of art. Conversely, time lost is already present in the worldly signs; it transforms and compromises them in their formal identity. It is also there, subjacent, in the sensuous signs, introducing a sense of nothingness even in the joys of sensibility. Time rediscovered, in its turn, is not alien to time lost; we encounter it at the very heart of time lost. Lastly, the time regained by art encompasses and comprehends all
the others, for it is only within time regained that each line of time finds its truth, its place, and its result from the viewpoint of truth.

From a certain viewpoint, each line of time is valid in itself ("all these different planes on which Time, now that I had just regained possession of it during this party, arranged my life..." [III, 1031]). These temporal structures are therefore like “different and parallel series” (II, 757). But this parallelism or autonomy of the various series does not exclude, from another viewpoint, a kind of hierarchy. From one line to another, the relation of sign and meaning becomes more intimate, more necessary, and more profound. In every instance, on the higher line, we recover what remained lost on the others. It is as if the lines of time broke off and fit into each other. Thus it is Time itself that is serial; each aspect of time is now itself a term of the absolute temporal series and refers to a Self that possesses an increasingly vast and increasingly individualized field of exploration. The primordial time of art imbricates all the different kinds of time; the absolute Self of art encompasses all the different kinds of Self.

7. Essence. From the worldly signs to the sensuous signs, the relation between the sign and its meaning is increasingly intimate. Thus there appears what the philosophers would call an “ascending dialectic.” But it is only at the profoundest level, on the level of art, that Essence is revealed: as the reason for this relation and for its variations. Then, starting from this final revelation, we can redescend the steps. Not that we would go back into life, into love, into worldliness, but we redescend the series of time by assigning to each temporal line, and to each species of signs, the truth appropriate to them. When we have reached the revelation of art, we learn that essence was already there, in the lowest steps and stages. It is essence that, in each case, determined the relation between sign and meaning. This relation was all the closer when essence was incarnated with more necessity and individuality; all the looser, on the contrary, when essence assumed a greater generality and was incarnated in more contingent data. Thus, in art, essence individualizes the subject in which it is incorporated, and absolutely determines the objects that express it. But in the sensuous signs, essence begins to assume a minimum of generality; its incarnation depends on contingent data and external determinations. Even more so in the case of the signs of love and the worldly signs: the generality of essence is then a generality of series or a generality of group; its choice refers increasingly to extrinsic objective determinations, to subjective mechanisms of association. This is why we could not understand, at the moment, that Essences already animated the worldly signs, signs of love, and sensuous signs. But once the signs of art have given us the revelation of essence in their own regard, we recognize its effect in the other realms. We can recognize the marks of its attenuated, loosened splendor. Then we are in a position to render essence its due, and to recover all the truths of time, and all the kinds of signs, in order to make them integral parts of the work of art itself.

Implication and explication, envelopment and development: such are the categories of the Search. First of all, meaning is implicated in the sign; it is like one thing
wrapped within another. The captive, the captive soul signify that there is always an involution, an involvement of the diverse. The signs emanate from objects that are like boxes or containers. The objects hold a captive soul, the soul of something else that tries to open the lid (I, 179). Proust favors the Celtic belief that the souls of those we have lost are imprisoned in some inferior being, in an animal, a plant, an inanimate thing; lost indeed to us until the day, which for many never comes, when we happen to approach the tree, to come into possession of the object that is their prison” (I, 44). But the metaphors of implication correspond further to the images of explication. For the sign develops, uncoils at the same time that it is interpreted. The jealous lover develops the possible worlds enclosed within the beloved. The sensitive man liberates the souls implicated in things, somewhat as we see the pieces of Japanese paper flower in the water, expanding or extending, forming blossoms, houses, and characters (I, 47). Meaning itself is identified with this development of the sign as the sign was identified with the involution of meaning. So that Essence is finally the third term that dominates the other two, that presides over their movement: essence complicates the sign and the meaning; it holds them in complication; it puts the one in the other. It measures in each case their relation, their degree of distance or proximity, the degree of their unity. Doubtless the sign itself is not reduced to the object, but the object still sheaths half of it. Doubtless the meaning by itself is not reduced to the subject, but it half depends on the subject, on subjective circumstances and associations. Beyond the sign and the meaning, there is Essence, like the sufficient reason for the other two terms and for their relation.

What is essential in the Search is not memory and time, but the sign and truth. What is essential is not to remember, but to learn. For memory is valid only as a faculty capable of interpreting certain signs; time is valid only as the substance or type of this or that truth. And memory, whether voluntary or involuntary, intervenes only at specific moments of the apprenticeship, in order to concentrate its effect or to open a new path. The notions of the Search are: sign, meaning, and essence; the continuity of apprenticeship and the abruptness of revelation. That Charlus is homosexual is an astonishment. But the interpreter's continuous and gradual maturation was required for the qualitative leap into a new knowledge, a new realm of signs. The leitmotifs of the Search are: I did not yet know, I was to understand later; and also, I was no longer interested once I ceased to learn. The characters of the Search have importance only insofar as they emit signs to be deciphered, according to a more or less profound rhythm of time. The grandmother, Françoise, Mme de Guermantes, Charlus, Albertine—each is valid only by what he or she teaches us. “The joy with which I ventured upon my first apprenticeship when Françoise. . . .” “From Albertine I had nothing more to learn. . . .”

There is a Proustian vision of the world. It is defined initially by what it excludes: crude matter, mental deliberation, physics, philosophy. Philosophy supposes direct declaration and explicit signification, proceeding from a mind seeking the truth. Physics supposes an objective and
unambiguous matter subject to the conditions of reality. We are wrong to believe in facts; there are only signs. We are wrong to believe in truth; there are only interpretations. The sign is an ever-equivocal, implicit, and implicated meaning. "I had followed in my existence a progress that was the converse of that of the races of the world, which employed phonetic writing only after having considered the characters as a series of symbols" (III, 88). What unites the scent of a flower and the spectacle of a salon, the taste of a madeleine and the emotion of love is the sign and the corresponding apprenticeship. The scent of a flower, when it constitutes a sign, transcends at once the laws of matter and the categories of mind. We are not physicists or metaphysicians; we must be Egyptologists. For there are no mechanical laws between things or voluntary communications between minds. Everything is implicated, everything is complicated, everything is sign, meaning, essence. Everything exists in those obscure zones that we penetrate as into crypts, in order to decipher hieroglyphs and secret languages. The Egyptologist, in all things, is the man who undergoes an initiation— the apprentice.

Neither things nor minds exist, there are only bodies: astral bodies, vegetal bodies. The biologists would be right if they knew that bodies in themselves are already a language. The linguists would be right if they knew that language is always the language of bodies. Every symptom is a word, but first of all every word is a symptom.

"Words themselves instructed me only if they were interpreted in the fashion of a rush of blood to the face of a person who is disturbed, or again in the fashion of a sudden silence" (III, 88). It will come as no surprise that the

hysteric makes his body speak. He rediscovers a primary language, the true language of symbols and hieroglyphs. His body is an Egypt. Mme Verdurin's gestures, her fear that her jaw will come unhinged, her artistic posturings that resemble those of sleep, her medicated nose, these constitute an alphabet for the initiated.