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"O SOLE MIO!"

THE SUN IN PROUST'S "SÉJOUR À VENISE".



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Paul de Man (1979: 69) speaks of a "solar myth" in *A la recherche du temps perdu*.¹ Solar images are often involved in rhetorical displacements bearing on some of the novel's central subjects, such as love, desire, memory, and identity. The solar passage from Proust's novel I want to examine here is perhaps the most extraordinary of all, and the most complex. It comes at the end of the "Séjour à Venise."² This section is presented as the third stage in Marcel's "nearing total indifference with regard to Albertine" after her death (F4:1108; E3:637; this sentence is relegated to a footnote in the new Pléiade edition). Marcel's account of his visit to Venice has a complex three-dimensional existence. It is complicated both in the sequence of its episodes and in the layers of previous drafts that underlie each episode. It has that three-dimensional depth in space and time that Marcel says, in a passage from "Le temps retrouvé," he wants for the novel he is going to write. That passage (F4:608; E3:1087) uses a figure of planetary revolution to describe the way Marcel is related to his past self and to the various characters who have figured in his life.

The intricate structure of final text, variants, and drafts is also a good example of the usefulness a hypertext version of the *Recherche* would have. Even with its appendices of notes, variants, and drafts, the Pléiade edition preserves the illusion that the ideal for a printed book is a single line of words leading from the first word to the last, to be read in that order. The

variants and drafts were steps toward the achievement of a final univocal, linear order. They can be jettisoned now that order has been achieved. On the contrary, what we have, particularly in the posthumous volumes, is a construction of the editors, with many arbitrary editorial decisions hidden under the apparent coherence of the finished product. A hypertext version would suggest more truthfully that the *Recherche* exists only factitiously as a completed whole. It is actually a vast mobile unfinished assemblage of words. This assemblage is not even adequately imaged as a spatial movement like that of planets around the sun, since words are not things and are not related to one another as things are related. A hypertext version of the *Recherche* would allow the reader to move by a series of mouseclicks back through the layer of drafts that accumulated through time, like layers of snow on a glacier, from the earliest existing version down to the "finished" text. Or the reader could move sideways through the drafts of the various episodes that existed at a given moment in time. Or the variants of a given phrase or word could be called up instantly on the screen, rather than laboriously searched for in the notes. A multi-dimensionality like that Marcel wanted for his novel could be realized in a new technological model of which Proust could have had no inkling. He lived rather in the now distant era of the telephone, the telegraph, and the typewriter, of "aerial navigation and wireless telegraphy" (F4:239; E3:676). Nevertheless, what he produced calls out for translation into the new electronic medium and already anticipates it.

The "séjour à Venise" is in its episodic form a fractal miniature of the whole novel. It treats of love, gastronomy, diplomacy, landscape, or rather urbanscape, art, the magic of names, Marcel's relation to his mother, memories of Combray, Marcel's fading recollections of Albertine, the law of substitution that governs desire, and so on. Its roots go deep in Proust's creative life. The trip to Venice already figures in the notebooks that became *Contre Sainte-Beuve*, written before *À la recherche du temps perdu* was even conceived. Each episode and theme of the Venice visit would merit a long analysis—the opening comparison of morning sunlight in Combray and in Venice; sightseeing with his mother or alone; visits to Saint Mark's, full of Ruskinian echoes; Marcel's solitary walks and gondola excursions in Venice; his discovery at night of a vast moonlit *campo*, hidden in the labyrinth of Venetian streets and canals, a magic place that he can never find again by daylight; the wonderfully comic episode of Norpois's meeting with Prince Foggi and Norpois's magic speech act that creates a new Prime Minister of Italy: "And has no one mentioned the name of Signor Giolitti?" (F4:214; E3:650); Marcel's visit to the Arena Chapel at Padua, already discussed; the episode of the telegram from Gilberte mistakenly read as coming from an

Albertine brought back from the dead; Marcel's pursuit of Venetian women as substitutes for Albertine; the climactic episode of his refusal to join his mother on her departure from Venice; the final scene in the train when Marcel and his mother read the last letters they received in Venice and Marcel discovers that his telegram was not from a resurrected Albertine but from Gilberte announcing her forthcoming marriage to Robert de Saint Loup. The Venice sojourn forms a miniature version of the whole novel. It is a small masterpiece within the greater one that cunningly mirrors the whole.

One curious feature of the trip to Venice is more or less invisible in the finished novel. Proust worked during a considerable period, in five different notebooks, on an episode that was in the end excluded: the story of his assignation at Padua with the Baroness Putbus's chambermaid. "Putbus" was "Picpus" in the early drafts, an even more grotesque name. The suppressed story remains covertly present in the way Marcel's reading in the register of guests expected at his hotel the notation "Mme Putbus and attendants" triggers his refusal to join his mother for the train trip back to Paris. Nothing, in the final version, tells the reader that one of those attendants would have been Mme Putbus's chambermaid. As a result, the intensity of Marcel's refusal to leave Venice in the final version seems more than a little unmotivated. If the affair with the chambermaid had been included, his desire to stay would have been explicable. What can one say about the relevance to our reading of an episode that was almost, but not quite, suppressed?

The Pléiade editors compare this episode to a scaffolding that is necessary for the construction of a building but is then removed when the edifice is complete (F4:710). A literary work, however, is not made of wood, bricks, and plaster, but of words. A better comparison might be with those secrets that Albertine eternally keeps from Marcel, sealed ultimately with the silence of death, an enclosure like those Piombi, or leadlined prison cells, that incarcerated Venetian political prisoners and that Marcel imagines imprison his memories of the dead Albertine deep within him.³ Marcel, too, it would appear, has secrets he keeps from his readers. A better way to put this would be to say that Proust attempted to keep this episode secret from readers. In any case, the final text of the novel has its secrets. These secrets are true secrets. They are impenetrable. They can never be revealed, but in a peculiar sense in this case. Just as it is impossible ever to know whether the coin the protagonist of Baudelaire's "La fausse monnaie" gives the beggar was or was not counterfeit,⁴ so it is impossible ever to know whether the reader should or should not use fortuitous knowledge of the omitted episode about Baroness Putbus's chambermaid. If it was left out, it was left out. The novel has closed seamlessly over the effaced secret, like a door over a lead-

lined prison cell. To take it into consideration is illicit, impertinent, unwarranted. The episode is not part of the finished book. On the other hand, all those drafts of the omitted episode have now been exposed, the door of the prison-cell opened. What use should the reader make of those drafts? No answer other than an arbitrary one can be given. What might justify a choice remains secret.

My chief interest here, however, is in the solar resonances of the Venice sojourn's final episode. As the reader will see, this episode too has something to do with secrets. After his mother, accompanied by all his belongings as well as hers, sets off for the train station, Marcel, now a guilty and disobedient child, impelled by "that old desire to rebel against an imaginary plot woven against me by my parents" (F4:230; E3:666), stays behind. He orders a drink to be brought to him on the hotel terrace overlooking the canal and settles down there to watch the sunset. From a boat that has stopped in front of the hotel a musician sings "O sole mio." Marcel's misery at causing his mother trouble and his sense of solitude bring about a curious transformation in his perception of his surroundings. Just as he is alienated from himself, torn between his desire to go and his desire to remain, his fidelity to his mother and the imaginary pleasures of staying, so he is alienated from his surroundings. The link between person and scene that is so important a presupposition of the *Recherche* is broken. The result is a disintegration of the scene. The word "Venice" is detached from Venice. Venice is detached from the mendacious dream of the magical city that has motivated so many of Marcel's desires to travel. Before Marcel's eyes Venice is dismantled, or, as one might even dare to say, "deconstructed." Marcel recognizes that "Venice" has been no more than a fiction imposed by will or habit on a meaningless substratum. Venice is reduced to its material base. It becomes no more than hydrogen and oxygen fortuitously combined to make water and adjacent heaps of stones, "the stones of Venice" in a sense not absolutely different from the meaning Ruskin gave that phrase. All the elements that are usually combined in one inextricable whole, the person, the name, and the place, are separated from one another and lie side by side in alien proximity:

The town that I saw before me had ceased to be Venice. Its personality, its name, seemed to me to be mendacious fictions [*fictions mensongères*] which I no longer had the will to impress upon its stones [*le courage d'inculquer aux pierres*]. I saw the palaces reduced to their basic elements, lifeless heaps of marble with nothing to choose between them, and the water as a combination of hydrogen and oxygen, eternal, blind, anterior and exterior to

Venice, oblivious of the Dogues and of Turner. And yet this unremarkable place [*ce lieu quelconque*] was as strange as a place at which one had just arrived, which does not yet know one, or a place which one has left and which has forgotten one already. I could no longer tell it anything about myself, I could leave nothing of myself imprinted upon it [*se poser sur lui*]; it contracted me into myself until I was no more than a throbbing heart and an attention strained to follow the development of "O sole mio." (F4:231; E3:667; trans. slightly altered)

This disintegration of elements that are normally held together in a unit joining figure to scene in an act of intimate inculcation or superposition causes a radical paralysis of will. It is as though Marcel were hypnotized. Though he knows that if he waits much longer he will miss all chance to join his mother and catch the train, he can do nothing but listen to the singer repeat once more and yet again the banal words of "O sole mio." These have now come to be identified with his paralysis. The song almost seems to be causing his delay and his suffering. It even seems to be causing the disintegration of Venice into a heap of stones:

And it was perhaps this melancholy [*cette tristesse*], like a sort of numbing cold, that constituted the despairing but hypnotic [*fascinateur*] charm of the song. Each note that the singer's voice uttered with a force and ostentation that were almost muscular stabbed me to the heart. When the phrase was completed down below and the song seemed to be at an end, the singer had still not had enough and resumed at the top as though he needed to proclaim once more my solitude and despair. (F4:233; E3:669)

Why "O sole mio"? Why did Proust choose just this song to have Marcel listen with fascinated attention as he sits hypnotized on the terrace watching the sun sink toward the horizon? "O sole mio" is a popular Italian love song in Neapolitan dialect. It is the "Your Are My Sunshine" of Italy. Anyone who has listened to a Luciano Pavarotti concert will, most likely, have heard him "bellow" (Proust's word) the song, not unlike the way the reader imagines Proust's Venetian boatsinger to have sung it. In the song the sovereignty usually ascribed to the sun is transferred to the beloved. Her face becomes the source of radiance for all the world. Here are the words in dialect, followed by an approximate translation: "Che bella cosa 'na iurnata'e sole, n'aria serena dopo 'na tempesta! pe' ll'aria fresca pare già 'na festa... Che bella cosa 'na iurnata'e sole. Ma n'atu sole cchiù bello, ohi ne', 'o sole mio sta nfronte a te! O sole, sole mio sta nfronte a te, sta nfronte a te! (What

a beautiful thing a sunny day [is], calm air after a storm! Because of [or: in] the fresh air it already looks like a feast... What a beautiful thing a sunny day [is]. But another sun, a more beautiful one, my sun, is in your face! My sun, my sun, is in your face, is in your face!).⁵

"O sole mio," the reader can see, is, like the passage from Baudelaire Saint Loup quotes,⁶ another version of Proust's "solar myth." Here the power usually ascribed to the sun is transferred to a substitute, according to the Proustian law of substitute desire I have identified. Since Marcel's hearing of the song comes at a moment when he has finally forgotten or has almost forgotten his love for Albertine and is shifting rapidly from one substitute to another, to various Venetian working girls, to various other women, mostly from Austria, he meets at the hotel, and since the conflict between these momentary infatuations and his abiding love for his mother has been brought into the open by his refusal to join her in leaving Venice, he is, for the moment, demystified. He can see all these objects of desire as factitious substitutes for one another and all these as replacements for a personified sun that now no longer has the power to dominate everything with its light. The sun stands amazed as it listens to a song that now is explicitly said to dismantle Venice. The song also deprives the sun, verse by verse, of its kingship. Marcel's experience comes to a climax in another of those solar sentences that is impossible because in it the referential and the allegorical separate out, just as all the other usually combined elements of the scene have been detached from one another. In this case the shift of the sun's power so that it now "stands (*sta*)" in the face of the beloved paralyzes the sun, as Marcel is paralyzed. This defiance of the sun causes it to stand still in the sky, as the sun stood still when Joshua commanded it to do so, against all naturalistic probability (Josh. 10:12-3).⁷ The sun watches in amazement, by the light of its own fading, the disintegration of the scene. This disintegration is figured, at the end of the passage, in the way the elements of the once golden Venetian scene have now become an "equivocal" alloy of baser metals artificially combined. If the sun remains fixed in the sky it will never be able to set. Therefore it will never be able again to bathe itself in those profound gulfs where lies that lost homeland the sun gives fresh news of every day:

I was gripped by an anguish that was caused me by the sight of the Canal which had become diminutive now that the soul of Venice had fled from it, of that commonplace [*banal*] Rialto which was no longer the Rialto, and by the song of despair which "O sole mio" had become and which, bellowed [*clamé*] thus beside the insubstantial [*inconsistents*] palaces, finally reduced them to dust and ashes and completed the ruin of Venice; I looked on at the slow realiza-

tion of my distress, built up artistically, without haste, note by note, by the singer as he stood beneath the astonished gaze of the sun arrested in its course beyond San Giorgio Maggiore [*par le chanteur que regardait avec étonnement le soleil arrêté derrière Saint-Georges-le-Majeur*], with the result that the fading light was to combine for ever in my memory with the throb of my emotion and the bronze voice of the singer in an equivocal, unalterable and poignant alloy [*alliage*]. (F4:233; E3:669)

This passage is a nadir in all Proust's work, a low point beneath which it is impossible to sink. The self, for once, confronts what is "really there," something wholly inimical to continued human life. Everything that is normally integrated is separated out into disconnected regions. The external world becomes a heap of stones. The self, deprived of all the usual fictions that have constituted it, is without will to impose its ordering power on the external world, on other people, and on itself. Time stops. All contact with the hidden homeland of otherness is lost. Even the sun will no longer go to those depths on its diurnal rounds.

At that prolonged lowest moment, a moment that might, it seems, continue for an eternity, suddenly, out of nowhere, what Proust here calls "habit" reasserts itself. Time begins again, the will to action is restored, the power to impose fictions returns, the sun moves again, Venice is once more Venice, and everything returns to normal:

But suddenly, from caverns [*antres*] darker than those from which flashes the comet that we can predict—thanks to the unsuspected defensive power of inveterate habit [*de l'habitude invétérée*], thanks to hidden reserves which by a sudden impulse it hurls at the last moment into the fray—my will to action [*mon action*] arose at last; I set off in hot haste [*je pris mes jambes à mon cou*] and arrived, when the carriage doors were already shut, but in time to find my mother flushed with emotion and with the effort to restrain her tears, for she thought that I was not coming. (F4:233-4; E3:670)


The reader will see what is extraordinary and unexpected about this passage. Marcel's recovery of an active will is ascribed to habit. "Habit [*habitude*]" here names all those superficial and baseless fictions that give the self and its environment a semblance of interconnected wholeness. Marcel asserts that the break in his paralysis is caused by "l'insoupçonnable puissance défensive de l'habitude invétérée." Habit has a power to defend us from the vision of what is "really there," in this case a senseless heap of stones with much hydrogen and oxygen in chemical combinations sloshing around them.

For Pater, whose dictum about our failure being to form habits is cited as an epigraph for this chapter, habit is a barrier against living, as we should do, in proximity to that eternal moment of unique sensation that is all there is. For Proust, on the contrary, in a way more Nietzschean than Paterian, it is impossible to live with a clear vision of what is really there, so Proust's definition of habit is quite different from Pater's. "Habitue" is a key word in Proust's vocabulary. A search by way of the Internet database of French texts called ARTFL brings up fifty uses of the word in "Albertine disparue" alone, many of great interest, but this passage gives the clue to its Proustian meaning.

Habit for Proust, surprisingly, has its source in those same dark depths, that same lost and unknown homeland, unique to each person, that gives its force to to lies and to works of art like Vinteuil's septet. Habit is grounded in the realm of otherness the sun visits when it sinks into the sea. Just as each great artist, Elstir or Vinteuil, Vermeer or Hardy, has his or her own unique accent, nostalgic echo of each artist's singular lost homeland, and just as each person, Albertine for example, has his or her own special way of lying, a way that gives us unique access to "unknown worlds," so "habit" is Marcel's name for the special way each person, artist and non-artist alike, organizes himself and the circumambient world in perdurable patterns that make continued life possible. "Habit" names both the power and what the power makes. No doubt there is much irony in calling this constructive and constructed energy "habit," since the word admits what is superficial and factitious about what holds each human life together. Habit, however, or rather the will to action, habit's "hidden reserves" that form habits, is not baseless. It comes "from caverns darker than those from which flashes the comet which we can predict."

Proust perhaps knew that there are two kinds of comets, parabolic and hyperbolic ones. Parabolic comets, for example Halley's comet, return in predictable periods in their rotation around two centers, far distant from one another, one the sun, the other, perhaps virtual, a point in space. Hyperbolic comets flash once around the sun and then speed off forever, never to return. In either case, however, the comet's trajectory is lawful and predictable. The comet's trajectory, here negatively compared to the will to action, makes it analogous to the sun in its regularity and in its swinging into unsoundable gulfs. Moreover, a comet is governed by the sun. This passage is another oblique version of Proust's "solar myth."

Marcel's will to action, however, the defensive power of inveterate habit, comes from caverns darker than those gulfs from which a comet comes and into which it plunges again. They are darker in the sense of being wholly

unknown and unknowable. This means that the return of the power of action is entirely unpredictable, in its form and in its time of coming, even though, when the will to action has asserted itself again, it can be seen to take patterns that are characteristic of the person's whole life. 

NOTES

* This essay is drawn from a forthcoming book entitled *Black Holes*, copyright Stanford University Press.

1. Marcel Proust, *A la recherche du temps perdu*. Ed. Jean-Yves Tadié, éd. de la Pléiade, 4 vols. (Paris: Gallimard, 1989); *Remembrance of Things Past*, trans. C. K. Scott Moncrieff and Terence Kilmartin, 3 vols. (New York: Vintage, 1982). Further reference will be to these texts, indicated by "F" and "E" respectively.

2. This segment is printed in the new Pléiade edition as chapter three of "Albertine disparue," the new name for the fifth section of *À la recherche du temps perdu*. The fifth section was called "La fugitive" in the old Pléiade edition, "The Fugitive" in the Moncrieff/Kilmartin translation.

3. "Sometimes at dusk as I returned to the hotel I felt that the Albertine of long ago, invisible to my eyes, was nevertheless enclosed within me as in the *Piombi* of an earlier Venice, the tight lid of which some incident occasionally lifted to give me a glimpse of that past [*une ouverture sur ce passé*]" (F4:218; E3:654).

4. See Jacques Derrida's admirable discussion of "La fausse monnaie" (1991: 95-217). Derrida makes this particular secret the emblem of a universal connection of literature to unfathomable secrets.

5. I am grateful to Anna Pfeiffer for providing a copy of the words and music, to Georgia Albert for the translation and to Wendy Hester for help with "Piombi" and other details of Marcel's Venice sojourn. The music for "O sole mio" is by Eduardo di Capua (d.1917), from an original melody by Alfredo Mazzucchi (1879-1972). The words are by Giovanni Capurro (d. 1930). Ms Albert says she does not know what to do with "ohi ne'," except to assume that it is probably an interjection. If she, who has fluent Italian, does not know, neither do I.

6. "...du gouffre interdit à nos sondes / Comme montent au ciel les soleils rajeunis / Après s'être lavés au fond des mers profondes?" (F4:340; E3:782). The citation comes from Baudelaire's "Le balcon" (1954: 110-11), slightly altered at the beginning.

7. An earlier reference to Joshua's miracle appears thousands of pages earlier, at the beginning of "Du côté de chez Swann," in an odd passage about the strange psychological ef-

fects of insomnia and the way it puts time out of joint when sleep comes at odd hours: "Suppose that, towards morning, after a night of insomnia, sleep descends upon him while he is reading, in quite a different position from that in which he normally goes to sleep, he has only to lift his arm to arrest the sun and turn it back on its course [il suffit de son bras soulevé pour arrêter et faire reculer le soleil]" (F1:5; E1:5).

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- . 1989. *A la recherche du temps perdu*. Ed. Jean-Yves Tadié (Bibliothèque de la Pléiade). 4 vols. Paris: Gallimard.



RICHARD MULCASTER'S ALLEGORY:

A HUMANIST VIEW OF LANGUAGE AND STATE



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In *The Elementarie*,¹ written in 1582 by Richard Mulcaster, a prominent pedagogue and spelling reformer, the case is put against the radical overhauling of the English spelling system. His was a lone voice in an age clamouring for a phonemic spelling as the sole path out of the marshlands of uncertainty in which the language had become mired.

Mulcaster prefaces his suggestions as to how and on what basis English spelling is to be reformed with a political allegory which traces the development of writing from its inception, democracy, through oligarchy to his own time, represented by monarchy. The importation of the political metaphor into a discussion of an orthographic and linguistic nature highlights the humanist concept of language as a social institution, based on an act of consent, shaped by and for man. It also provides a crucial insight into the theory of language behind Mulcaster's spelling policy, based on the twin pillars of custom and change. Finally, the relation established between the commonweal and spelling allows Mulcaster to resoundingly denounce the attempts of the phonemic reformers as subversive acts which upset the process of natural evolution.

Mulcaster was not the first to place language and politics in a direct relationship. His vision of good government is influenced by his predecessors, Sir Thomas Elyot and Thomas Starkey. Mulcaster had read *The Book Named the Governor* (1531), which became a manual of political and educational