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The Lessons of the Living Dead: Marcel's Journey from Balbec to Douville-Féterne in Proust's Cities of the Plain: Part Two

Abstract

By analyzing the narrative of Marcel's journey by the "little train" from Balbec to Douville-Féterne the essay engages with the Proust criticism of Georges Poulet, Paul de Man, and Julia Kristeva to support Hayden White's claim that "it is legitimate to read Proust's narrative as an allegory of figuration itself." Like the Madeleine episode, this one serves as a point from which retrospection and prospection radiate. Central to the discussion is the description of Verdurins' dinner party guests as they stand ready to board the train on the platform at Graincourt: their vivacity, compared to a sort of extinction, suggests a chiasmus between life and death, past and present, experience and reading, and phenomenon and figuration that enriches and integrates Poulet's phenomenological glosses, de Man's rhetorical analysis, and the Kristevan approach to Proust's text. In close proximity to the Verdurins' guests, Marcel is struck chiefly by their remoteness, their pastness, their distance: the figural and phenomenal instability of space and time finally converge in Marcel himself as Proust effects a biblical joke.

Keywords

Marcel's journey, Proust, little train, Balbec, Douville-Féterne, Georges Poulet, criticism, Paul de Man, Julia Kristeva, Hayden White, allegory of figuration, allegory, Madeleine episode, Madeleine, retrospection, prospection, Verdurins, dinner party, Graincourt, train, extinction, Chiasmus, life, death, past, present, experience, reading, phenomenon, figuration, Poulet, phenomenological glosses, guests, remoteness, pastness, figural, instability of space and time, space, time, joke, Biblical joke

The Lessons of the Living Dead:
Marcel's Journey from Balbec to Douville-Féterne in
Proust's *Cities of the Plain: Part Two*

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In his *Allegories of Reading*, Paul de Man takes some pains to consider whether the scene of reading which he selects from Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past* serves, by virtue of its literal business, to tell us more about Proustian figuration than any other excerpt would. His conclusion is provisional. Perhaps in response to the anxiety Proust's massive text(s) seems to effect in even his most adept readers, de Man offers that his is merely a "naïve way" in (de Man 57). Before embarking on his path, he gestures at the many roads not taken: "We may well have to look elsewhere, in Marcel's erotic, political, medical, or worldly experiences, to discover the distinctive structures of reading, or we may have to go further afield still and use a principle of selection that is no longer thematic" (de Man 58). Indeed, a consideration of another Proustian passage does recall a number of observations which de Man draws out of the scene of reading (*Swann's Way* 82-88; "Combray") that he ponders. By placing interpretive weight on the narrative of Marcel's progress, via train, from Balbec to Douville-Féterne we note de Man's insoluble and instructive metaphoric alignments: Marcel actively journeys by passive means; in turn these passive means require constant active vigilance; Marcel is contained in a small compartment while, at the same moment, he is outside amid the broadest vistas he has yet seen; this breadth is defined only in contrast to the closure from which it is seen. These are only the passage's most literally evident binarisms. If Paul de Man's example has been instructive in the selection of a metaphorically telling passage, recollection of Georges Poulet's phenomenological glosses of Proust tends to validate an analysis of the train passage for it, like the *Remembrance's* estab-

lishing scene, is a textual moment of temporal and spatial anxiety. The train passage, as we shall see, leads back—for the process of interpretation is always a retrograde motion—not only to de Man’s conclusions about Proustian figuration, but to Poulet’s observations about the nature of Proustian consciousness. In these ways, this consideration of the Balbec-to-Douville-Féterne train trip will further support Hayden White’s claim that “it is legitimate to read Proust’s narrative as *an allegory of figuration* itself, with the modalities of figuration as he construed them serving as the basic units of his strategies for ‘emplotting’ the *drama of consciousness* which is its manifest subject-matter” (White 17, my emphases).

“[O]n the famous Wednesday, in that same little train which I had taken at Balbec” (CP 894), in acceptance of an enthusiastic invitation and telephoned instructions, Marcel embarks, deep in the second part of *Cities of the Plain*, upon a voyage to La Raspelière and the Verdurins. As the train progresses, the dinner party which waits in fragments on the train platforms between Balbec and their terminus, will gradually assemble on board. Marcel accepts this plan which places him on the little train without the knowledge of where to disembark to meet the Verdurins’ carriages; Dr. Cottard who will join Marcel and the little party further down the line carries this information. In this way, Marcel sets out on a journey with only a promised end, but without a defined one. His acceptance is an apparent gesture of faith. His readiness takes the form of an open promise and suggests a certain confidence in the surety of its execution. In this way, Marcel’s agreement to set out under such provisional circumstances is an optimistic one. As the narrative of the journey through space and time progresses, one finds that this gesture is neither so simple nor so certain as it first may seem. Indeed the notion of sure faith is always at issue and, with it, the very nature of space and time. The seemingly certain motion through concrete space and stable time is linked in Proust’s narrative to an increasingly flimsy faith which, in turn, recasts certainty as doubt, progress as regress, even the future as the past. This functional binarism, established by Marcel’s happy acceptance of his travel plans, informs the subsequent journey, rendering it a figural commentary on what Poulet identifies as the anxiety of Marcel’s phenomenological reality.

Marcel’s excitement is coupled, from the passage’s beginning, with extreme anxiety and fear. Mme Verdurin’s travel instructions, transmitted by a second telephone message—a possible afterthought—

somewhat refigure what had been a generous invitation as a less welcome call to panic. Marcel looks forward to the dinner party with enthusiasm, but comes to dread the prospect of his voyage because of the haphazardness of the travel arrangements. His energetic forethought is literally transformed into an effort of foresight. Instead of dwelling on the idea of the coming party as he is carried there, he must “[post] himself in readiness at the open window for fear of not seeing Cottard or of his not seeing me” (CP 895). The journey begins, in this way, as an exercise in the precise execution of somewhat random planning; further, thought and vision oscillate in vibrating binarism in which thought is passive and vision active. This arrangement is reversed almost instantly upon his encounter with the group on the platform as we shall see. Marcel's anxiety grows out of his new sentry duty: to rein in the forces of chance, to corral the other dinner party members and thus secure the information that will allow him to get to the Verdurins' at all.

Worse, the train will only stop at Graincourt for an instant. The sprawling fate of his plans depends on the success of a moment; the fullness of his future (the dinner party in this case) is focused on a single point of necessary contact with Cottard and his precious information. The structure of this passage, then, synecdochically recalls that of Proust's text as a whole. The journey and the *Remembrance* are both the spreading projections of a crucial moment. For the *Remembrance*, the sensationally evocative Madeleine precipitates a retrospective projection that takes the form of reminiscence or recollection. In the journey of the little train, the critical moment of contact pulls aside a curtain from the future; it effects a prospection. The two projections are identical structurally, though one reaches backwards and the other forwards. The process of retrospection is not really a journey backwards, but a sort of stasis in which all is recaptured in a moment, focussed in a point (de Man 68; Kristeva “Apologia”).¹ Similarly, the train journey is detailed less as a means to a known goal, a defined end point, than as a consideration of origins: as we shall see, the passage has its own Madeleine-like vanishing point in Cottard.

In an effort to defy anxiety, Marcel resorts to vision as an aid. He posts himself as lookout in his train compartment's window. The familiar stations through which the train rumbles are spied with novel probity. His passive transport assumes an unusually active dimension as he searches for Cottard. This crossing of the passive and the active—which de Man notes in the earlier scene of reading which he analyzes—

becomes more elaborate as the journey progresses. Upon seeing the first members of the party, however, his reliance on active vision is reconsidered.

When Marcel sees the first group of dinner party guests on the Graincourt platform his anxiety melts away. This is so not only because, having secured Cottard, he *no longer* needs to worry whether or not he will receive the second half of his travel instructions. In addition to the calming effect of this, Marcel is pacified retrospectively as well. That is, at the same instant that he discovers that he no longer needs to worry, he learns that he need not *have worried*. In failed fulfillment of Marcel's earlier anxiety, Cottard, Brichot, and Ski stand out from the "serried ranks of the common herd" (CP 895), "the troop of passengers" (CP 895), "what Brichot called the *pecus* [cattle]" (CP 895) on the Graincourt platform precisely by virtue of their brilliance, their sheer identifiability. They shine forth as a "brilliant patch" (CP 895)—a recurrent and profound Proustian motif—with the effect of rendering Marcel's active visual quest passive. There is another binarism at work here. The dinner guests are not merely passively seen. Rather, their noteworthiness imposes itself on the eye: they need to be sought out as much as does the noon-day sun. But if the active visual quest becomes a passive reception in this figural scheme, the text goes on to present an even more curious and radical conflation of activity and passivity.

Marcel's first sensation, after his relief at having secured—or having been secured by—his companions, is amazement. Marcel is:

astonished [*je m'étonnais*] to see [these men] continuing to dine out when many of them had already been doing so, according to the stories that I had heard, before my birth, at a period at once so distant and so vague that I was inclined to exaggerate its remoteness [*l'éloignement*]. (CP 895; SG 22)

In this way, Marcel's forethought, which has been translated into energetic foresight, is further modified into a profound retrospection which comes to vibrate intricately with thought, vision, pastness, absence, and prospection. The vibration begins suddenly, in this passage, as the little train arrives at Graincourt station. Marcel's consideration of the diners' vivid past is conceived in the spatial terms of remoteness and distance; time and space oscillate provocatively.²

Such a gesture of spatial/temporal orientation recalls Poulet's explanation of Proust's establishing crisis which is similarly sudden:

[Marcel's] first moment is neither a moment of fullness nor of birth. It is pregnant neither with its future possibilities nor with its present realities. And if it reveals a fundamental emptiness, that is not because it needs anything from "ahead" but because it lacks something from "behind": something which *is no longer*; not something which *is not yet*. . . . (Poulet 291)

Poulet's gloss of the crossing of time and space explains the chiasmus as an almost frantic epistemological spasm; Marcel, the awakening sleeper and the directionless traveller, plumbs the abyss of the unknown in search of an informative referrant, a datum. But, if we feel lead, in this way, to expect that Cottard will serve as such a helpful sign, we immediately rediscover, in the narration of Cottard's appearance, Kristeva's caveat on Proustian semiotics: "[b]eneath 'signs', beneath 'the image', the narrator 'feels' something irreducible. . . . Between the 'shadow' of what is felt and its 'spiritual equivalent', Proust's novel imprints the network of its metaphors . . ." (Kristeva, "Apologia"). In lieu of a definitively referential sign, Proust offers Cottard's longed-for arrival as an essentially irreducible metaphor. Indeed, instead of providing clear directions to the Verdurins' carriage, Cottard serves more to complicate the figural attainability of that goal.

The central problem of the literal employment of the little train trip, on which level Cottard serves as a distinct informative functionary, is apparently resolved by the doctor's arrival. However, Marcel's literal fear, of missing this contact and of subsequent aimlessness, is retrospectively translated at the instant of seeming success into metaphorical terms in which true contact is impossibly postponed (see note 2). Cottard remains instructive, but the information he comes to embody—for he is no mere courier of data, but the figural embodiment of a more ambiguous range of messages—leaps the bounds of spatial orientation. It is useful to consider Kristeva's analysis of Proustian character as tri-dimensional plastic statuary in connection with the narration of the group on the Graincourt platform:

since verbal figuration follows closely *res* which constrains it to envision the truth of a tridimensional space to which it remains correlated, one could, to take up Freud's sculptural metaphors, say

that the figure-vision is closer to *interpretation* which defines than to *phantasm* which clouds. If it is correct to assume that literature plays in either key and if it is correct to assume that, depending on genre and period, it sets the tone as much according to one pitch as to the other, then the classical aesthetics whose measure Proust finds in La Bruyère, Sévigné and Saint-Simon, and without knowing it finds in their forbearer, Scaliger, then this aesthetics exercises vision, less as a hallucination than as an incisive surprise, sharp spite, repartee, which by the end of its truth telling, hurts. (Kristeva, "Character")

Cottard's truth is not his message from Mme Verdurin but his, provocative and finally crumbling, embodiment. Cottard's communication—his truth telling, his expression, or "*dictio*" (Kristeva, "Character")—may seem to satisfy Marcel's literal lack, but it simultaneously indicates an irremediable aporia. The travellers, especially the Graincourt party of Cottard, Brichot, and Ski, are figured, from their first appearance in this passage, as Kristevan sculptural devices which transmit, as inexorably as the little train moves onward, the insurmountable paradoxes of recollection.

De Man's final remarks, in his reading of Proust, gesture at the problems which the travellers—indeed the journey itself—come to embody:

As a writer, Proust is the one who knows that the hour of truth, like the hour of death, never arrives on time, since what we call time is precisely truth's inability to coincide with itself. *A la recherche du temps perdu* narrates the flight of meaning, but this does not prevent its own meaning from being, incessantly, in flight. (de Man 78)

It is a savvy Proustian irony that these problems arise here on board a train. Stephen Kern has noted the immensely confusing schedules of late-nineteenth-century train travel as a chief impetus for the standardization of world time in 1884 at the Prime Meridian Conference in Washington:

Among the countries in Western Europe, France had the most chaotic situation, with some regions having four different times, none of which had a simple conversion to Greenwich time. Each

city had a local time taken from solar readings. About four minutes behind each local time was astronomical time taken from fixed stars. The railroads used Paris time, which was nine minutes and twenty-one seconds ahead of Greenwich. A law of 1891 made it the legal time of France, but the railroads actually ran five minutes behind it in order to give passengers extra time to board: thus the clocks inside the railway stations were five minutes ahead of those on the tracks. In 1913 a French journalist, L. Houlléviq, explained this “retrograde practice” as a function of national pride, expressed in the wording of a law of 1911 promoting the system that other countries of Europe had adopted twenty years earlier. (Kern 13)

It would seem, from this, that even the literal and figural levels of Proust's emplotment vibrate with instability. In other words, it is not only an outcome of narrative figuration that points to the problems of faith in time and space; history merits that we consider these categories of definition literally vexed as well. Despite Marcel's satisfaction at his apparent contact with Cottard and his doubled relief in knowing both that his panic is no longer necessary and had not been justified, we should note well what we learn soon afterwards: that this rendezvous was actually quite precarious. Cottard is completely breathless as he boards after having run to catch the little train at the last moment; but his panting is not a result of exertion but of astonishment. “ ‘Ah! That was a good one!’ he said when he had recovered himself. ‘A minute later! ‘Pon my soul, that's what they call arriving in the nick of time!’ . . .” (CP 898). Cottard revels in his triumph over the idiosyncrasies of French time as the accomplishment of a “merry prank” (CP 898). Proust's literal emplotment and figural programme enjoy an alignment here as Cottard—in his remarkable longevity and by his energetic display—cheats time on both levels. The force of this alignment endures as well: in the narration of the episode the figuration, which impels de Man, continually leaps the bounds of subtext and the linked status of experience, which captivates Poulet, is always in question.

Proust pointedly stresses the literal presence of the party on the Graincourt platform. The distinctness of the set is emphasized. Their chosen carriage is marked by the beacon of their occupation: Dr. Cottard's *Temps* (a narrative beacon itself which calls the name of time) and the sculptor Ski's elbow lean out of the window. But, in Proust's narration, their radical being is coupled with an equally compelling

non-being. Their mien, at first sight, communicates the impression that they have gathered sociably in this way since before Marcel's birth. Proust acknowledges their vivid activity by laying weight on its impressive pastness. The group's remarkable endurance distinguishes them. This does not seem particularly extraordinary until Marcel figures his sensation of their endurance:

The contrast between the continuance not only of their existence, but of the fullness of their powers, and the obliteration of so many friends whom I had already seen vanish here or there, gave me the same feeling that we experience when in the stop-press column of the newspapers we read the very announcement that we least expected, for instance that of an untimely death, which seems to us fortuitous because the causes that have led up to it have remained outside our knowledge. (CP 895-96)

In this way, the remarkable survival of the little dinner party group is received with the force of an annihilation. The fact of their existence is felt with the twinge of their having slipped away into an irretrievable past. In the most basic terms, Marcel experiences their life as a kind of death. We note that Proust has not offered their presence in the language of concrete physicality, but in the figuration of auras: of distinction initially, but later as the vague angelic halos of the spectral dead. Their sudden appearance is compared to the shock of the news of an untimely extinction. Their concrete presence dissolves into the figural impression of a grim annunciation; life reminds Marcel of reading about death. The ghostly dinner party is, moreover, clad in formal attire for the coming event at the Verdurins' La Raspelière retreat. Their attire further effects the conflation of life and death as their dress is equally appropriate for their funerary burial; they are the "fairies or spooks projected by the memories of the narrator" (Kristeva, "Character"). It is peculiarly unhelpful to learn of one of the faithful that "[t]he Future towards which he was travelling marked him out to the person on the seat opposite, who would say to himself 'He must be somebody' . . ." (CP 897) for the distinction of future and past, existence and non-existence, is as muddled as are the spreading clouds of the somebody's aura. The chiasmus proves pivotal for the episode. As the party's stunning animation is received with the amazement of an untimely demise, the Verdurins' parlour is a temple of uncertain faith and final sordidness, the train's journey forward is subsequently

seen as a voyage backwards. The very narrativity of recollection itself effects a chiasmus in which phenomenon and figure cross.

During the next leg of the journey, as the Harambouville, Saint-Pierre-des-Ifs, and Saint-Mars-le-Vieux stations are passed, the conversation turns to the prodigious etymologies of the blind Brichot. It would be useful, but the subject of another reflection, to consider the sufficiency of Kristeva's sculptural model of character in connection with the extremely myopic, and figuratively eyeless, Brichot.³ Cottard exclaims that they have been so swept up in their conversation that they have failed to note that they have passed Maineville and Renneville; they fail to note the stopping of the train because of the motion of their conversation (CP 921). Importantly, the subject of this distracting conversation has been the etymology of the place names of the towns they pass: as they move forwards, then, they converse fervently about the past with the effect of failing to note the motion, the stopping and starting of the train carriage. In this way, the uncovering of etymologies has its literal effect. Etymologies are not, after all, merely the histories of words. Current usage only provides the vanishing point of a vast subtext which remains immanent and still though under persistent revision (as Brichot's lectures prove).⁴ The engrossing consideration of these abysses desensitizes the group to the literal motion of the little train. In an ironic echo of Marcel's establishing anxiety, they miss the arrival of the Princess Sherbatoff who boards another compartment without seeing them. The other obvious binarism at work in this comic business is the juxtaposition of thought and experience: the active pursuit of the former seems to absent the latter. Upon realization of this, thought is abandoned and they all go off in active search for the Princess, who is discovered in the corner of an empty compartment reading *La Revue des Deux Mondes*. It is in her carriage that the train journey ends at Douville-Féterne, but not before Proust makes a crucial, though subtle, narrative joke.

In the Princess's company the consideration of etymologies continues until she intervenes:

Forgetting her attachment to her "corner," Mme Sherbatoff kindly offered to change places with me so that I might talk more easily with Brichot, whom I wanted to ask about other etymologies that interested me, and assured me that she did not mind in the least whether she travelled with her face or her back to the engine, standing, or seated, or anyhow. (CP 924)

Though the description is somewhat imprecise, it seems fair to conclude that the Princess has been riding with her back to the engine so that she might avoid the hazard of flying ash; that she first protests her flexibility by offering to face the engine supports this reading. The Princess, thus, reseats herself facing forwards and Marcel takes a seat, presumably opposite Brichot, looking backwards at the scene which recedes in the wake of the train's passage. This is more than a simple rearrangement. By reassigning seats in this way, Proust not only allows the literal rehearsal of the figural action: etymological analysis is linked to visual retrospection. He also begs the consideration of the fate of that other resident of Sodom and Gomorrah who allowed herself to look back. As God rains fire and brimstone down upon the cities of the plain, in Genesis 19:24-26, Lot flees with his wife who casts a glance back and is transformed into a pillar of salt. By reorienting himself in the compartment of the little train, Marcel is similarly refigured: he is also an instructive statue of necessarily crumbling salt. He breaks into fragments even as he is constructed.⁵ Marcel is not, however, a dumb sign of divine vengeance and mastery, but a living metaphoric nexus, an embodiment of time.⁶ He is the vanishing point in which the axes of time and space, figure and phenomenon, converge and vibrate, but are never resolved.

Notes

1. As de Man helpfully notes in reference to the figural projections of Marcel's earlier scene of reading:

The figure aims at the most demanding of reconciliations, that of motion and stasis, a synthesis that is also at stake in the model of narrative as the diachronic version of a single moment. The continuous flow ("jaillissement") of the narrative represents an identity that is beyond the senses and beyond time as something accessible to sight and sensation and therefore comprehensible and articulated, just as the unique and timeless fascination of reading can be divided into consecutive layers shaped like the concentric rings of a tree trunk. (de Man 68)

Kristeva calls this unity "the interface [which] brings together three elements: the felt, the thought, and the impression (which is also called 'hieroglyphic character' or 'cipher')" (Kristeva "Apologia").

2. Indeed, this point is even more provocatively evident in the original French. Proust's use of "*l'éloignement*" which is the noun form of the adjective "*éloigné*" (meaning "remote" or "far off") has a subtly distinct meaning of its own. The noun suggests not only distance, but removal, postponement, aversion, and estrangement (CR 246).

3. Antique statuary, of course, has come down to us devoid of its eyes which our classical predecessors traditionally painted on. The ravages of time have stripped away the paint and left us with seemingly sightless artifacts. Brichot is such a sightless creation. His huge spectacles, instead of really helping him to see, are compared to a throat specialists' mirrors "that . . . attach to their foreheads to see into their patients' larynxes, [and] seemed to have taken their life from the Professor's eyes, and, possibly because of the effort he made to adjust his sight to them, seemed themselves to be looking, even at the most trivial moments, with sustained attention and extraordinary fixity" (CP 903).

4. It is curious that despite Marcel's interest in the depths under or behind words, he receives the party with an image of surprise that casts ignorance of the past as good fortune. I quote the passage again:

in the stop-press column of the newspapers we read the very announcement that we least expected, for instance that of an untimely death, which seems to us fortuitous because the causes that have led up to it have remained outside our knowledge. (CP 895-96)

Just as words are the vanishing points of vast retrospective etymological projection, the death-like travellers are the consummation of their own peculiar convergence of historical coincidences; while the two systems are structurally similar, Marcel considers ignorance of the latter to be fortuitous. Clearly, this is because the history of a subsequent death will include the narration of pain and suffering. In this way, Marcel's suggestive interest in lexical history is a palliative substitute for the analogous, but ever-more-hurtful, human history. Nevertheless, in a textual economy of totalizing allusions, Marcel's sublimation is rendered figuratively as an enthusiastic embrace of that which he hopes to avoid. As we see in the passage's final joke, the appreciation of etymology is linked to the transfixed gaping of the most lurid of historical retrospectators.

5. I am grateful to François Lachance who first suggested the alignment of Lot's wife and Kristevan statuary character to me.

6. This is what Kristeva calls the "macro-metaphor of time open to sensation" (Kristeva, "Proustian Character").

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