

“In that black or luminous square”: Windows as Sites of Imagination in the Writings of Proust and Beckett

Saba Ahmed

Abstract

This paper looks at Proust’s À la recherche du temps perdu and Beckett’s Malone Dies, investigating the figure of the diseased writer persona, confined and localised within the bed space, who gazes out the window as a way of telling stories. Looking at Walter Benjamin’s essay on Proust and life-writing, I examine representations of windows in Proust’s novel as a way of framing the distance and proximity between fact and fiction, self (who narrates) and other (who is narrated). Beckett’s narrator, on the other hand, unearths the anxiety of death implicit in Proust’s project of life-writing, threatening to silence speech and leave the author’s work incomplete. Here, windows are markers of blockage, calling to mind Lacan’s conception of the mirror stage, whereby Malone regresses and submits to a claustrophobic, bed-ridden existence, aligned by his narcissism. I argue, then, that both writers distend the narrative form of the novel, but whereas Proust’s narrator-I sees writing as a way of recovering life, Beckett’s post-modern narrative is haunted by an urgency to encode absence, negation and death.

Keywords: literature, narrator, Marcel Proust, Samuel Beckett

Looking from outside into an open window one never sees as much as when one looks through a closed window [...] In that black or luminous square life lives, life dreams, life suffers.

– Charles Baudelaire, 'Windows', *Paris Spleen*

In his prose poem, 'Windows', Baudelaire invites us to consider the way we occupy and observe interior and exterior spaces, positing windows as boundaries and passageways which demarcate these two spheres. If the space of the private home signifies dwelling and fixity, then the poet's engagement with other urban living spaces reflects a modernist preoccupation with how to write about other lives. Here, a window frames the imagined existence of a stranger, but it is also a pane of glass, a transmitter of experience which elides and merges poet and subject, deleting the distance between them. Baudelaire's poetic persona concludes the day in "bed proud to have lived and to have suffered in some one beside myself" (Baudelaire, 1970: 77), the bed space bearing undertones of an intimate, almost physical, union, a proximity which has been negotiated through the poet's redemptive, fictive retelling of another's life. Baudelaire's figure of the *flâneur* offers a compelling framework for considering the limits of personal and private spaces in the novels of Marcel Proust and Samuel Beckett. Drawing on aspects of the work of Walter Benjamin and Jacques Lacan, this paper will examine how windows mediate and frame distances and proximities between self and other, and between life and art in Proust's *Swann's Way* and Beckett's *Malone Dies*.

Indeed, there are striking echoes of Baudelaire's *flâneur* in Proust's representation of the lovelorn Charles Swann. In one particular episode, as Swann wanders through the street where Odette lives, he sights amid 'the glittering blackness of the row of windows' (Proust, 2005a: 328) the lit window he mistakenly presumes to be hers. This light which on other evenings is a symbol of warm reception for Swann, a clandestine code shared only between the two lovers, is here inserted into an imaginary narrative of a liaison between Odette and another. As the author of his own misery, Swann's suffering and jealousy is inextricably linked with, and augments, his desire for Odette. It is 'the shadow of his love' (*ibid.*: 332), enacted by both light and dark, fact and fiction. Much of Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* engages with exactly such spatial metaphors, where windows operate as markers of liminality, destabilising the binaries of lived experience and art, and the generic codes of life-writing and fiction. More specifically, in *Swann's Way*, windows frame theatrical sets where characters locate themselves on opposing sides, performing acts of voyeurism, sadism and cruelty, often made explicit in metaphors of sexual exchange, as I will explore below.

In *Malone Dies*, which constitutes part of a trilogy consisting of *Molloy*, *Malone Dies* and *The Unnamable*, Beckett brings into play several allusions to these Proustian metaphors, as a much more disjunctive marker of the loss of subjectivity. Unlike the free-flowing vacillation between spaces in Proust's work, there is a manifest sense of claustrophobia in Beckett's novel, as the physical body disintegrates to a bed-ridden existence. One is reminded, in fact, of mythologised portraits of the much-afflicted Proust, composing *In Search of Lost Time* during the shadowy hours of night in his cork-lined room

on the Boulevard Haussmann. For Beckett's protagonist, it appears, windows are markers of blockage: reflective, specular and ghostly. Here, I will consider the Lacanian notion of the mirror stage in order to further investigate the limits of personal and private spaces, examining how both Proust and Beckett engage with the window motif to tease out modernist and post-modernist conceptions of art and subjectivity.

Walter Benjamin's essay on 'The Image of Proust' is a fascinating exploration of *In Search of Lost Time* as an exercise in life-writing, and can be used as a springboard to examine some of the divergences between Proust's life and his art. Benjamin explores the physicality of the writing process for Proust, as his asthmatic body became like a pane of glass, diffusing in 'his sentences [...] the entire muscular activity of the intelligible body' (Benjamin, 1999: 210). In another romanticist metaphor, he likens Proust's sickbed, from which emerged a voluminous output of scribbled sheets, to Michelangelo's scaffold from which the artist painted the entire ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. It is a vision of malady far removed from the one depicted of Aunt Leonie, a comic figure in the text, whose bed is hemmed in by a window. Here, literature and life are temporarily conflated as she 'would while away the time by reading in it from morning to night ... the daily and immemorial chronicles of Combray' (Proust, 2005a: 61). Her engagement with creative narratives is grounded within the humdrum details of habit and daily life, where the window frames the text of life in Combray, later discussed with Françoise as gossip, as further noted by the great importance which she confers on the identity of a stray dog. Indeed, though Benjamin's somatic and spatial metaphors offer a rich evocation of Proust's immense fortitude of spirit in the face of illness and pain, I want to use these as a framework to look back from Proust's life to the textures of life represented in his writing. I see passages employing the metaphor of the window as self-conscious, stylised reflections which frame questions of art and subjectivity. Windows become sites of experimentation for modes of self-inscription and autobiography, opening spatial dimensions between levels of narration, and between author and reader.

Perhaps one of the most suggestive interior spaces that Proust's narrator recalls from childhood is his room in the Grand Hôtel de la Plage at Balbec, a holiday site which evokes notions of transience, yet another space to which the narrator must become habituated. It 'enclosed, like the polished sides of a bathing-pool in which the water glows blue, a finer air, pure, azure-tinted, saline' (*ibid.*: 461). The simile of liquid submersion is an indication of healing, baptismal waters of rebirth, but it also alludes to the loss or death of other selves in other spaces and times. The narrator further describes a

series of low book-cases with glass fronts, in which, according to where they stood ... was reflected this or that section of the ever-changing view of the sea, so that the walls were lined with a frieze of sea-scapes, interrupted only by the polished mahogany of the actual shelves. (*ibid.*)

Proust fuses fragments of natural landscapes with suggestions of literary works of art, the glittering, 'ever-changing' sea with the solidity of 'polished mahogany' bookshelves, to create a space which exists almost by chance, by 'a law of nature' which the Bavarian upholsterer 'had not perhaps foreseen' (*ibid.*). The effect is dizzying and beautiful. Indeed, the window operates as a frame which partitions

interior and exterior spaces, and fuses parts of both to create another kind of space, utterly different from both 'the real Balbec' and 'that other Balbec' of romantic stormy seas which the young narrator dreams of (*ibid.*) As a metaphor, it replicates the processes implicated in involuntary memory; forgetting and then remembering fragments of the past, projected onto the present, in an instant where time and space is recovered. The young narrator is 'curious and eager to know only what I believed to be more real than myself', a 'fragment of the mind of a great genius, or the force or the grace of nature as it appeared when left entirely to itself, without human interference' (*ibid.*: 462). This small moment, therefore, functions as a perfect symbol of exactly the kind of art he longs to see and create, one which dances between the fault lines of nature and craft, life and art, the real and the imagined, accessed entirely by chance.

It may be helpful here to refer to Georges Poulet's conception of Proustian space in terms of the dichotomous arrangements of juxtaposition and superposition. While the former implies an accretion of images, placed side by side, the 'resurrection of the past in spite of the present', the latter means 'to act like the reality of time does', to 'hide away what no longer is, in order to make place for what is coming to be' (Poulet, 1977: 92). Poulet cites another description of the room at Balbec from *Within a Budding Grove* to further develop his hypothesis. Here, the narrator observes

the different parts of the western sky exposed in the glass fronts of the low mahogany bookcases that ran along the walls ... [which] seemed like those different scenes executed long ago on a reliquary where separate panels are now exhibited side by side in a gallery, so that the visitor's imagination alone can restore them to their place on the *predella* of the *reredos*. (Proust, 2005b: 442).

Poulet, logically, sees this passage as central to Proust's artistic vision of juxtaposition of spatial images, a form of unification through multiplicity. But reading this passage in relation to the first, quoted from *Swann's Way*, offers a more interesting interpretation of Proust's conception of art. If the first quotation demonstrates an accidental superposition of images, one on top of the other, it is the viewer who must adjust his gaze, as if looking through a kaleidoscope, to render his own meaning. In the second passage, again, Proust draws focus to the 'visitor's imagination' which must enact the restoration of wholeness. More interesting, for Proust, than this wholeness, ultimately, is the process of putting fragments together in different types of creative arrangements, not necessarily side by side, but by patterns which emerge fortuitously. These modes of creative perception are enacted in different ways by different characters throughout the novel, and function as a key to the way we think about imagination.

Certainly, Swann's relationship with Odette is delineated within the sphere of the aesthetic, which ejects him from the quotidian particulars of life, locating him outside the window, looking in, as suggested by the passage quoted in my introduction. Again and again, he frames Odette as one of Botticelli's figures: 'and when he had finished her portrait in tempera, in the fifteenth century, on the wall of Sistine, the idea that she was none the less in the room with him still' (*ibid.*, 2005a: 286) induces him to kiss and bite her. Like Baudelaire's poetic persona, Swann wishes to fix life within the semantics of art,

imprisoning Odette by his gaze, as the narrator will literally imprison Albertine later in the novel. In his formative essay *Proust*, Beckett explores this dialectic of 'a mobile subject before an ideal object, immutable and incorruptible' (Beckett, 1999: 17). Beckett's essay becomes an incisive meditation on his own engagement with Proust as a writer, as he invokes an extended metaphor of disease where the 'observer infects the observed with his own mobility' (*ibid.*). For Beckett, 'Memory and Habit are attributes of the Time cancer', a fatal tumour to be removed with 'a scalpel and a compress' (*ibid.*: 18). Proust seems to be focusing on the darker underside of imagination when it predicates a fundamental gap between the self and the other, the gap between 'me' and 'not-me', as suggested in the closing lines of Baudelaire's poem:

Perhaps you will say "Are you sure that your story is the real one?"
But what does it matter what reality is outside myself, so long as it has
helped me to live, to feel that I am, and what I am? (Baudelaire, 1970:
77).

Here, Baudelaire's implied tone of scepticism is striking, and reproduced by the poet's own question mark, revealing the uncertainties and anxieties of telling fiction as lies, transforming mobile lives into the fixity of art. The poet persona is himself misplaced, vanished, as grammatical clauses dissolve into a stream of solipsism.

For the narrating 'I' in *Swann's Way*, on the other hand, windows become a way of framing memories, a way of deleting or forgetting elements of the past, only to remember, reflect and superimpose parts of these memories on to the present, much like Benjamin's conception of the Penelopian work of weaving in the day, and un-weaving at night. Indeed, windows are thresholds between the inner and the outer, in the same way that the pale vision of dawn traced above the narrator's window-curtains, is a threshold between day and night, a moment of crystallisation, where 'the dwelling place which I had built up for myself in the darkness would have gone to join all those other dwelling places glimpsed in the whirlpool of awakening' (Proust, 2005a: 224). It is within these gaps between the binaries of light and dark, that the narrating 'I' eye sees totality and a vision of unicity which binds life with writing, the past with the present, the internal with the external. He vacillates between these interior and exterior spaces, between life and art, from childhood as suggested by his engagement with a magic lantern. Though temporarily charmed by the fantastical, other-worldly tales of the Merovingian past projected onto his walls and curtains in iridescent lights, at the bell at dinner time he hurries back to the familiar 'big hanging lamp, ignorant of Golo and Bluebeard but well acquainted with my family and the dish of stewed beef' and which 'shed the same light as on every other evening' (*ibid.*: 10). Just as 'either a ray of sunlight' or the narrator's own 'own shifting glance' illuminates random sections of the stained-glass windows of the church at Combray to narrate a particular part of the wider narrative they tell (*ibid.*:70), so the narrator recounts the stories of others, and their encounters with creative and imaginative perception, in order to tell a larger narrative of his own metamorphosis as an artist. Benjamin quotes Jacques Rivière's brusque words:

Marcel Proust died of the same inexperience which permitted him to

write his works. He died of ignorance of the world and because he did not know how to change the conditions of his life which had begun to crush him. He died because he did not know how to make a fire or open a window. (Benjamin, 1977: 208-209).

Yet Proust's novel, ultimately, is a work full of great pathos for the foibles of others, a vision of generosity which opens up windows between different spaces, modalities of time, and between the self and the other.

The characters in Beckett's *Three Novels*, on the other hand, are wanderers without directions, for unlike in Proust's novel, no signposts are made available to them. They are also increasingly removed from the outside world and contained within, dismembered and disembodied. Beckett's engagement with Proust lies in the impulse to continue narrating life, "to the threshold of my story" (Beckett, 2009: 407) and further on, to spin tales despite the pervasive anxiety of death which underpins the text, threatening to silence speech. In *Time Regained*, Proust suggests that "a book is a huge cemetery in which on the majority of the tombs the names are effaced and can no longer be read" (Proust, 2000: 263). Beckett plays with this deletion and elision as Molloy becomes Moran, becomes Malone, the authorial persona transcribing his own name, only to efface it, until he becomes unnamable. Malone reflects sardonically, "When I have completed my inventory, if my death is not ready for me then, I shall write my memoirs. That's funny, I have made a joke" (Beckett, 2009: 178). Beckett disarms the reader with the suggestion that autobiography is inevitably an incomplete and futile exercise, since the writer can never write his own death. Of course, the joke is on us, as Malone stages and performs his own death, through a discourse which teeters between a factual list of the objects which surround him ("inventory"), and fragments of his past life ("memoirs"), fused together by fictional stories or thinly veiled lies. I focus on *Malone Dies* as a transitional narrative poised between the motifs of perambulation in *Molloy* and total dismemberment in *The Unnamable*. It is a window of sorts where the protagonist most self-consciously reflects on life and writing, creating a locus from where the external world can be reorganised through imaginative play.

Like Aunt Leonie, Malone's bed is positioned so as to offer him a partial view of the external world:

I lie turned towards it most of the time. I see roofs and sky [...] I can see into a room of the house across the way [...] They must see me too, my big shaggy head up against the window-pane [...] But at night they do not see me, for I never have a light. (*ibid.*: 178).

It is also a fraction of external life which stimulates his conception of larger landscapes, as he feels the nearness of fields and hills, is able to hear the sea at high tide, and in an instant sees himself transported to London. Here, the window operates as the only systematic structure in Malone's life, imposing a sense of ordered time, illuminating the room: "it brings me sunset and it brings me sunrise" (*ibid.*: 203). This ordered time becomes a way of navigating authorial control by ejecting oneself outside the schematised time of one's own life, as Malone reveals: "I used to count ... for the sake of counting, and then I divided, by sixty. That passed the time, I was time, I devoured the world" (*ibid.*:196). But the window becomes a site of blockage and misrecognition as

Malone confuses the light of dusk for the light of dawn, immersed in a kind of darkness which cannot be defined in binary structures relating to the light that lies outside the window. The room becomes a spatialised state of non-existence:

the light is against my window, but it does not come through. So that here all light bathes, I will not say in shadow, nor even in half-shadow, but in a kind of leaden light that makes no shadow ... it seems to come from all directions at once, and with equal force. (*ibid.*: 214).

For Beckett, the Proustian metaphor of the window as transversal between different spaces is a shortcut, a crossing which merely papers over the ineffaceable fissures and distances between the subject and the object. We may recall Lacan's conception of the mirror stage, in which a child sees in his reflection the primordial exemplary self, or the Ideal-I, denying his own clumsy gestures. The "jubilant assumption" of the child's specular self is disparate from his actual "motor incapacity and nursling dependence" (Lacan, 2001: 2). Lacan's theories bear striking parallels to Beckett's characters, trapped within the regressive stage of childhood, where disjointed limbs and the mutilated body are inextricably linked to the project of narcissism, in which the other in one's reflection both submits to, and scorns, the self. Lacan stresses:

But the important point is that this form situates the agency of the ego, before its social determination, in a fictional direction, which will only rejoin the coming-into-being (*le devenir*) of the subject asymptotically, whatever the success of the dialectical syntheses by which he must resolve as *I* his discordance with his own reality. (*ibid.*)

I want to draw attention specifically to the possibilities of *jouissance* implicit in Lacan's "fictional direction" in the Imaginary order. It opens up in a textual space made concrete in Malone's exercise-book, of the type used by children, a space for "play with myself" (Beckett, 2009: 175). Here, the masturbatory impulse for pleasure is clear, further invoked by repetition. The story Malone tells of Sapo, for instance, functions tellingly as a mirror for his own anxieties as he tries to "reflect on the beginning of my story" (*ibid.*: 183). Sapo's act of rebellion in throwing his teacher's cane out of the window is a mimetic expression of Malone's own desire to escape the confines of his room, that is, his body: "if I had the use of my body I would throw it out of the window" (*ibid.*: 212). Indeed, the window is merely an "umbilicus" (*ibid.*: 217), a tenuous scar, a mark of trauma, from Malone's previous connection to the exterior world, aligning his room within the secure realm of the interior.

Yet there are also slippages in his narrative, characters who claim their own agency, as he ponders and questions plot details such as Sapo's circumvention of expulsion from school, despite having snatched a master's cane as he was being disciplined. Moreover, it is telling that the cane is thrown at a closed window. Here, expulsion is literally impossible, inconceivable. Lemuel's capacity for a more violent exit from his room, located on the fourth or fifth floor unlike the spatial limbo which constitutes Malone's, marks a kind of possibility for rupture made by the robust, authorial body. Indeed, it is pertinent that at the close of Malone's story, Lemuel's bloody hatchet is conflated with "his hammer", "his stick", "his fist", "his pencil" (*ibid.*: 281), his name itself

being a partial contraction of Beckett's first name, Samuel. Richard Begam offers a fascinating insight into the way Beckett plays with textual and narrative boundaries, suggesting that "instead of working within an aesthetic of failure ... [*Malone Dies*] celebrates its representational insufficiencies", inventing ways of "carrying the afterimage of the not-I into a new domain" (Begam, 1996: 148). In fact, it seems to me that Beckett invokes a far more pessimistic model of reading and writing the self. Far from seeing *Malone Dies* as an enactment of the death of the author, Beckett seems to view it as an exercise in authorial annihilation. Language becomes a phallogocentric arena where the vigorous body becomes a writing implement, ultimately displacing the diseased, impotent one.

It is pertinent, at this point, to re-examine Baudelaire's 'Windows' and its poetic form, as an initial ripple which sustains the larger narratives of Proust and Beckett. Indeed, Proust breathes life into the symbolist icon of the window. For him, the function of art is circumscribed as "real without being actual, ideal without being abstract", ideals defined in terms of oppositions between which the artist must fluctuate (Proust, 2000: 263). Art is the crystallisation of life; it preserves and recovers moments of the everyday. Windows, therefore, operate as points of transition between life and art, and vice versa, as suggested by the writer-narrator's engagement with both readerly and writerly roles. Through the frame of memory, he narrates but is also narrated.

Beckett's reading of Proust, on the other hand, unearths the crisis implicit in the anxiety that death looms close, jeopardising the totality and completion of the author's project. Indeed, Beckett's characters are often physically repulsive, yet they too claim the agency of inscribing their selves within the text, only to be erased by obliterating the specular window-mirror, without which they are unable to locate selfhood. Ultimately, if Proust's character asserts a recovery of life, Beckett's protagonists assert the right to narrate their own death. Both writers distend their narratives, pushing the boundaries of generic distinction, as a way of playing out this perpetual tension.

Works cited

Baudelaire, Charles. *Paris Spleen*. trans. Louise Varèse. New York: New Directions, 1970.

Beckett, Samuel. *Proust*. London: John Calder, 1999.

———. *Three Novels: Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable*. New York: Grove Press, 2009.

Begam, Richard. *Samuel Beckett and the End of Modernity*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996.

Benjamin, Walter. 'The Image of Proust'. *Illuminations*. trans. Harry Zorn. London: Pimlico, 1999.

Lacan, Jacques. 'The Mirror Stage'. *Ecrits: A Selection*. trans. Alan Sheridan. London: Routledge Classics, 2001.

Poulet, Georges. *Proustian Space*. trans. Elliott Coleman. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977.

Proust, Marcel. *Swann's Way*. trans. C.K. Scott Montcrieff and Terence Kilmartin. London: Vintage, 2005.

———. *Within a Budding Grove*. trans. Montcrieff and Kilmartin. London: Vintage, 2005.

———. *Time Regained*. trans. Montcrieff, Kilmartin and D.J. Enright. London: Vintage, 2000.

Biography

Saba Ahmed spent her childhood years in Islamabad, and has studied comparative literature in Oxford and London. She is particularly preoccupied by psychoanalysis, life-writing, and reading in bed, and hopes to someday write a doctoral thesis combining these interests. She works at a literary agency in Notting Hill.