

PROUST'S CONCEPTION OF NATURE

by Eva Maria Gerstel

Proust's conception of nature is based entirely upon the fact that physical realities can represent psychic realities. His is a nature assimilated into the innermost being of an observer and made part of his personality, rather than perceived merely from the outside by the intelligence of that observer. Nature for Proust depends entirely upon the observer and his inner reality; it is not an outer reality fixed and determined.

If one wishes to distinguish Proust's treatment of nature from that of the French Romantics, one may say that Proust does not seek to decipher nature as a whole, but rather the mysteries of the self through a penetration of specific objects in nature. He does not present us with a grandiose picture of nature such as that of Chateaubriand's *Atala*, but is quite capable of imparting through a microscopic study a certain type of grandeur to a hedge of hawthorn. While the Romantic artist sought through his emotional being to comprehend nature as a whole, Proust, in the tradition of the Symbolists, applies his rational faculties in order to comprehend a small portion of nature.¹ This oriental technique of analyzing the most minute detail of a certain aspect of nature serves to obscure the dividing line between time and space, and hence lends to nature a four dimensional quality. On reading Proust we no longer have the impression that nature is used as a part of the décor, but rather that it is another personnage of the work. Marcel, the protagonist of the novel, conceives a true physical love for the hawthorn; he wants to penetrate the essence of the flowers as if they were human beings; he talks to them as if, in effect, they could answer him. Proust no longer cares as the Romantic did *what* he experiences in respect to nature, but rather *how* he experiences nature itself. No longer does the author receive consolation from nature, nor does he suffer from nature's indifference toward his fate, but considers it as an extension of his own being.

Ortega y Gasset refers to Proust as "the inventor of a new distance between ourselves and the world of things."² For instance, the sea and Albertine's face drift together to form a whole; Marcel would transform

himself gladly into a bee in order to collect honey from the *jeunes-filles-en-fleurs*. There has come to exist a new physical rapport between author and nature. The moon, which suggested an orange to Victor Hugo, becomes for Proust an orange peeled and melting in his mouth. This orange is no longer a beautiful image, but a reality; Proust comprehends the moon by his sense of taste and assimilates it into his body. Nature becomes an organic part of his physical and affective life.

Because of this new role which Proust has bestowed upon nature, he can transform it into a very effective symbol. Events of inner reality are exteriorized through outer occurrences. Emotional distances can thus be rendered through geographic distances. The surrounding country of the childhood paradise, Combray, is divided into two distinct parts: Swann's way, also called Méséglise, and Guermantes' way, or the country of the Vivonne River. When the family of the narrator takes a walk, they take either the road along the Vivonne or that which passes past the property of Swann, but never does one afternoon walk take them along both roads. Young Marcel receives the impression that the two ways are geographically separated and can never be united. But in reality, geographically speaking, they form a circle, and one can start from the country house of the family, go along the Vivonne, pass Swann's house and return in time for tea. This separation is linked closely to those who live along these walks, mysterious and magic beings, who people the young boy's imagination. But, just as their abodes seem spatially divorced, so has Marcel's imagination erected an insurmountable barrier between the lives of these magic inhabitants. Gilberte Swann personifies the "Méséglise way" sealed off from and unaware of the existence of the Duchesse de Guermantes, who is intrinsically bound to the landscape along the Vivonne River. The duchess is endowed, in Marcel's mind, with an existence as abstract and mysterious as the source of the Vivonne, which the family never reaches. The boy receives from these separate walks a strong impression of the impregnability of the countryside, as well as of the magic life that the duchess and Gilberte may lead.

Combray is the portal of the whole *Recherche*. In the tradition of the romanesque village churches, all the figures and themes to be met later are represented there. The two half-circles which enclose Combray introduce the patterns to be found in the rest of the novel: on the one hand the upper bourgeoisie as represented by Swann and his family, on the other the aristocratic circle as typified by Oriane de Guermantes.

Only in "Le Temps Retrouvé" is the well ordered world of Combray completely destroyed. The outside world has already been destroyed by the Dreyfus case and the first World War, social barriers have fallen or have been altered, but the separate ways around Combray have remained fixed for Marcel. But one day, many years later, the now mature Marcel

takes a walk with Gilberte, by now the wife of St. Loup, nephew of Oriane de Guermantes, and comes to realize that the barriers between Swann's way and Guermantes' way have crumbled also. Gilberte herself unites within her person the two walks; she is the only one in the novel who can take him to the source of the Vivonne, to the Guermantes' property, and past her father's former house, all on one afternoon walk. She shows Marcel the final breakdown of those values which he has known and clung to. ". . . Gilberte me dit: 'Si vous voulez, nous pourrons tout de même sortir un après-midi et nous pourrons alors aller à Guermantes, en prenant par Méséglise, c'est la plus jolie façon,' phrase qui en bouleversant toutes les idées de mon enfance m'apprit que les deux côtés n'étaient pas aussi inconciliables que j'avais cru. Mais ce qui me frappa le plus, ce fut combien peu, pendant ce séjour, je revécus mes années d'autrefois, désirai peu revoir Combray, trouvai mince et laide la Vivonne."³ All the mystery of his childhood is dissipated and only banal reality remains. Marcel has become at last free of all illusion and ready to commence his long work.

The narrator's final realization that these two walks are not irreconcilable foretells the *bouleversement* of the pre-war social order as seen at the *matinée* given by the Guermantes. The different strata of society have merged to form a new kind of snobbism. The circle around Combray has been completed geographically, socially and mentally. His odyssey has ended, and his work will begin.

The geography serves Proust as an encircling band around his work. It is linked to the disillusionment which the narrator has to undergo in order to become worthy of art. To create, the artist must throw off the shackles of the world and become free.

Within this circle around Combray occur two of the most interesting nature scenes of the whole *Recherche*: the boy's encounter with the hawthorn blossoms and later his contact with the lilacs.⁴ The important hawthorn scene is prepared in the church St. André des Champs.⁵ Marcel begins to love the hawthorn blossoms in May, the month of Mary. The verb "love" here has all the connotations of the love for a woman; the month of Mary lends it a peculiarly virginal aspect. Marcel is in church and contemplates the altar decorated with white hawthorn blossoms. The imagery of the scene is first dominated by a sense of movement: there is life in these flowers; they "prenaient part"; they "font courir," they seem to escape from Marcel by their very life, just as Albertine will be in continual flight. The associations partake of a whole series of sensations: from religious mystery plays, we pass to the scene of a young bride in the prime of life. By an extraordinary effort Marcel tries to enter into the stamen of the flowers, into their graceful movement, which reminds him of the coquetry of a young girl. And suddenly the image of Mlle Vinteuil imposes itself on the fore-

ground as the hawthorn blossoms fade away. What seems at first a digression on Mlle Vinteuil follows, but in reality she is linked with the flowers in a very intricate way. For on leaving the church, Marcel is stopped by a strong almond scent which he places in the little blond parts of the flowers. This slightly bitter fragrance awakens in him not only the taste of a frangipani, but also that which the skin of Mlle Vinteuil would have underneath her freckles. On reading the passage closely one realizes that the taste of Mlle Vinteuil's skin is not only awakened in the boy by the odor, but also by the physical place which he assigns to that odor and which resembles a freckle in color and size. It seems that one can become part of things, can possess and know them by consuming them (cf. Sartre).⁶ But Mlle Vinteuil's relation to the flowers goes still one step further and prepares the association of Sodom and Gomorrah with botany, implying a certain unity in the reign of nature. Indeed, the musician's perverted daughter will be Marcel's first contact with the world of the *maudits*.

The first passage about the hawthorn blossoms introduces a number of themes on the subject of love: it conveys the awakening of passion with its excitement and restlessness preparing the reader for Marcel's eventual love for Gilberte and Albertine; it shows love as a desire to possess and to know the object loved; it portrays the sense of loss which the lover feels, wanting to penetrate and to know the *être de fuite* which he loves; and finally it introduces the theme of perversion which lurks under the apparent purity of the white hawthorn.

Before examining the grandiose scene of the hawthorn, we should look at the lilacs of Tansonville. "Le temps des lilas approchait de sa fin; quelques-uns effusaient encore en hauts lustres mauves les bulles délicates de leurs fleurs, mais dans bien des parties du feuillage où déferlait, il y avait seulement une semaine, leur mousse embaumée, se flétrissait, diminuée et noircie, une écume creuse, sèche et sans parfum."⁷ There is a double movement in this scene; Proust the author has accomplished what Marcel the boy was unable to do; on the one hand he penetrates, through his style, the essence of the flowers, and on the other he succeeds in drawing the flowers into his own being. In other words author and flowers penetrate each other, become intertwined. The actual growth of the trees is rendered by the word *effusaient*, which suggests a rocket; the flowers themselves are thrust forth once the rocket has exploded and turn out to be purple chandeliers; now that the flowers have come forth we are allowed to descend into their interior; under close scrutiny each petal transforms itself into a bubble. This last word finishes the image of the fireworks suggested by the verb *effuser* and introduces a new metaphor, namely that of a liquid on whose surface little bubbles are formed; the liquid in its turn brings to mind the sea and waves—*écume, déferler, mousse*.⁸ This imagery is not only

ingenious, but it also introduces the theme of time; the eternal sea lifts the flowers outside of ordinary time and transports them into duration. But the scene ends on a theme of decay: ". . . une écume creuse, sèche et sans parfum." His childhood, and its innocence, is also approaching its end; he is about to embark on his journey of disillusionment. The note on which the scene ends impresses upon us the extreme fragility of his childhood paradise and eventually the fragility of life itself.

Proust, however, merely suggests the disenchantment of all dreams and quickly passes on to a new group of hawthorn in full bloom.⁹ The white hawthorns of the road bring with them all the associations which their "sisters" have awakened in the church. The hedge forms a group of chapels, leading to a street-altar composed entirely of strewn flowers, the rays of the sun outline the pattern of a stained glass window on the ground, and the whole is enveloped in a soothing perfume recalling incense. The vein structure of each flower plays its part in the flamboyant altar architecture. It is possible to say here that the hawthorn has grown to such proportions in the mind of young Marcel that it has overtaken the actual structure of St. André des Champs in order to become the church itself.

Marcel remains spellbound before the hawthorn, he tries to mingle with their rhythm, their odor, their color, but the time is not yet ripe, and they resist his efforts. Their resistance is so strong that the boy has to turn away in order to summon up more strength to face them again. Their haunting power draws him back, yet the secret which he knows they contain will not yet be his. ". . . le sentiment qu'elles éveillaient en moi restait obscur et vague, cherchant en vain à se dégager, à venir adhérer à leurs fleurs. Elles ne m'aidaient pas à l'éclaircir, et je ne pouvais demander à d'autres fleurs de le satisfaire."¹⁰ But suddenly when he sees a pink hawthorn the anguished joy which Marcel experiences because of the white hawthorns is transposed into the exuberant joy that one would feel upon seeing the finished work of art seen hitherto only in its preliminary stages, or upon hearing the orchestrated piece of music known previously only on the piano: "En effet c'était une épine, mais rose, plus belle encore que les blanches."¹¹ It is the *color* of the pink hawthorn which gives rise to this joy and to the relief, for white in its purity is a difficult, austere color and the hardest to comprehend.

The mention of painting and music, two mediums of art, introduces them as means of perceiving nature and as themes important to the book, where they are personified by Elstir, the painter, and Vinteuil, the musician. The former teaches the young boy in Balbec to perceive nature as it really is, merely through his senses so as not to obstruct it with his intellect full of prejudices, while the latter's music plays an important role in the love-relationships. The septet will liberate Marcel from those bounds that Swann cannot break; the joy which Marcel experiences upon seeing the pink haw-

thorn is an early indication of those liberating powers that art will have for him. Here the joy is still linked to the childish pleasures of eating cream cheese with strawberries, but a certain note of irony on the part of the author is present in the realization that pink is, in truth, a very banal color and that this image of cream cheese is rather juvenile. To be sure, it is only in the provincial aesthetics of Combray that pink was considered superior to white since it was "colored." Nevertheless, the naïveté of the tender provincial pink is touching and accentuates the simple sincerity of those who adhere to its beauty. The excitement of the boy is such, however, that he quickly moves on to metamorphose the hawthorn buds into a young girl dressed to go to a feast. And as the odor of the white hawthorn brought us to Mlle Vinteuil, so the pink young-girl-flowers lead us to Gilberte Swann. The love of the hawthorn blossoms comes to a pinnacle in his love for Gilberte. Henceforth, all the love and desire of the boy will be concentrated on the girl whose name partakes of as much mystery as the movement of the stamen, for this is the "age of names." Marcel has now mentally entered upon the way of *Méséglise*.

The whole theme of the hawthorn reaches its grand finale in the splendid scene of good-byes. ". . . après m'avoir cherché partout, ma mère me trouva en larmes dans le petit raidillon contigu à Tansonville, en train de dire adieu aux aubépines, entourant de mes bras les branches piquantes, et, comme une princesse de tragédie à qui pèseraient ces vains ornements, ingrat envers l'importune main qui en formant tous ces noeuds avait pris soin sur mon front d'assembler mes cheveux foulant aux pieds mes papillotes arrachées et mon chapeau neuf."¹² All the themes of Marcel's affective nature are resumed once more in these pages. He embraces the flowers as he had wanted to embrace the lilacs before; the theme of adolescent love ends here in that act of possession and introduces the love of the young man. His clothes are torn, and the denouement of his passion is lifted to the height of a classic tragedy. Marcel feels the same outbreak of emotions as the tragic heroine, "comme une princesse de tragédie à qui pèseraient ces vains ornements . . ." This princess is of course *Phèdre*,¹³ and her mention brings into focus the suffering and anguish of mature love.

The lilacs and the hawthorns have thus become the symbol of Marcel's first love, a succinct means to express the complex emotional state; their mention, like a Wagnerian theme, will forever call to mind the youthful love motive.

The numerous walks which Marcel undertakes with his family do not reveal to him a countryside static and inert, but rather one which invites him to come and merge with it. ". . . tout d'un coup un toit, un reflet de soleil sur une pierre, l'odeur d'un chemin me faisaient arrêter par un plaisir particulier qu'ils me donnaient, et aussi parce qu'ils avaient l'air de

cache, au delà de ce que je voyais, quelque chose qu'ils invitaient à venir prendre et que malgré mes efforts je n'arrivais pas à découvrir."¹⁴ Proust considers nature as a mere extension of his "moi-successifs," hence the metamorphosis of flowers into young girls, which after all represent but a moment in the flux of his being. As he stresses the subjective quality of love, he emphasizes it in nature, which exists merely because he is there to give it life and meaning. He transforms it and raises it to the level of art. He no longer needs to travel widely in order to give the nature in his work that grandiose, exotic aspect, for each corner of the countryside around Combray and Balbec will change with the modifications that will take place within the narrator. Interior seasons matter more than exterior seasons. Nature has become the creation of the artist and not that of God, as it had been for the Romantics.

Because of his conception of nature, Proust is able to view mankind in metaphors drawn from botany. Hence the striking title of the section: "A l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs." Curtius describes this title with the expression "human flora."¹⁵ He goes on to say that the identification of human beings with botanical terms neutralizes them morally and aesthetically, for the true plant life is pure and beyond good and evil. Curtius even suggests that one could divide all French authors into two categories according to their concepts of society either as fauna or as flora. Proust conceives of society in botanical terms; he sees it as a living, changing organism and puts the accent on the earth and its plants, not only on freely growing flowers and trees, but also on the luxurious hot-house plants: chrysanthemums, catleyas, orchids — flowers which suggest the refinement of French taste, the luxurious articles produced by French industry catering to the connoisseur. Swann, for example, sends the Princesse de Parme a basket of carefully chosen fruits which a cousin of Marcel's mother selects, not from one shop, but from different shops each specializing in one particular fruit. This emphasis on the products of the French soil suggests France's close ties to the nourishing earth which adds to Proust's writing additional historical validity.

Marcel's last important encounter with nature occurs during a carriage ride in Balbec and is announced by a profound feeling of joy. This is the joy connected with Combray, the same joy felt upon discovering the pink hawthorn. Now a young man, he is literally enchanted by three trees which seem to remind him that he owes them a service. They beckon him and beg him to come to their aid. "Je regardais les trois arbres, je les voyais bien, mais mon esprit sentait qu'ils recouvriraient quelque chose sur quoi il n'avait pas prise, comme sur ces objets placés trop loin dont nos doigts, allongés au bout de notre bras tendu, effleurent seulement par instant l'enveloppe sans arriver à rien saisir."¹⁶ This scene contains a double movement: that

of the carriage of the Marquise de Villeparisis and that of the trees themselves. Marcel recognizes the pleasure which fills him as that connected with certain creative processes; he now knows that it is his duty to deliver the trees of their secret, but as with the hawthorn, the time is not yet ripe. The trees gesture, they want to communicate with him, but he is incapable of replying. The experience marks him deeply and advances him one step further on his road toward creation. The trees are assigned an active role here; they convey their wish to communicate, while the pink hawthorn seemed rather coquettish, wanting to keep its secret from the young boy, unwilling even to let him suspect its existence.

Proust gives this moment almost religious implication. When he realizes his failure to come to the aid of the trees the young man experiences a feeling of betrayal as if he had denied his God. The religious overtone is important, for it lifts art to the plane of religion, implying that Marcel's guilt can be redeemed only through art itself. The theme is taken up later in the death scene of Bergotte, who achieves eternity through his works. It is obvious that this experience of the trees is an aborted involuntary memory; to Proust, involuntary memory behaves as grace does according to Christian thought. Involuntary memory is an inexplicable phenomenon which touches man without warning, reason, or explanation. At this particular moment Marcel should find an expression comparable to his impression, he should raise the impression of his senses to an artistic expression. It is precisely this search for an expression which occurs in the creation of a symbol, for a symbol exists only when an exterior object is consciously set as an equal to an inner experience. The artist is the liberator of the objects around him, just as Marcel, had he reached his maturity at this point, would liberate the trees. He who is predestined as a creator of the world should find the secret name hidden under the appearance of the objects, the name which in turn expresses the essence of the object. Nature is an object divested of any essence until it has been called to life by the artist. This is, as Marcel realizes, not an easy task, for it demands the concentration of all his faculties.

Artistic creativity in its most elementary stage, as Proust shows it here, is a strained observation by the poet of a particular object around him, a search for its true name which consists, to be sure, of the union of the outer and inner reality. Observation is a key word, for the artist has to *know* the object, possess it to its most minute detail. Had Marcel been able to unveil the secret of the trees, he would have found that symbol which of course is much more than a mere image, and which partakes of the language of the absolute. Hence Marcel's feeling of guilt and despair at the end of the scene, for he knows that unless he acts now he will lose the secret of the trees forever.

It is important to note that Marcel is in the carriage of the Marquise de Villeparisis, whose presence prevents him from concentrating on the trees entirely. It will be the marquise who introduces him to the Guermantes' clan, the clan and the society which will distract him from his work for so many years, and which he will have to deny before he can give full expression to his art.

In conclusion, it can be said that Proust's treatment of nature in the first volume of the *Recherche*, and thus throughout the rest of the novel, can be divided into several categories: (1) His is not an intellectual approach, which would obscure the essence of nature; in the true impressionistic manner, he perceives it only through his senses and then assimilates it to his own being in order to make it part of himself. (2) The scenery around Combray is used to portray the mental states of the young Marcel, spatial distances being equal to mental distances. (3) The minute study of the lilacs and the hawthorn is also a minute study of the affective nature of a young boy on the threshold of adolescence, about to embark on his first experience of love. (4) Finally, nature is present in the work to convey an aesthetic theory: the trees of Tansonville attempt to awaken the slumbering artist within the young man. Nature for Proust is never an isolated factor of the novel; it is integrated into all the themes of the work. Since Proust does not believe in a discontinuity between life in the outside world and that in the mental world, he is able to integrate nature into his being so as to make it a part of his "moi-successifs" and to portray spiritual realities. Nature has become a means to know and penetrate the self.

NOTES

1. Heinrich Henel, "Erlebnisdichtung und Symbolismus," *Deutsche Vierteljahresschrift*, XXXII, 1958, p. 82.
2. As quoted by Martin Turnell, *The Novel in France* (New York, 1958), p. 329.
3. Marcel Proust, *A la Recherche du Temps Perdu*, ed. de La Pléiade, Vol. III (Paris, 1954), p. 693.
4. In *Jean Santeuil* we already find Jean attracted to the lilacs and the hawthorn. The significance of these flowers is sketched out in this work of the very young Proust. See *Jean Santeuil* (Paris, 1952), Vol. I, pp. 136, 203-210.
5. Proust, *op. cit.*, Vol. I, p. 112.
6. For Sartre things receive their meaning from man. The most primitive way of knowing a thing, the not-self, is by consuming it. Through this act the object becomes part of the subject and receives its existence from the latter. "Connaître, c'est manger des yeux. . . . Dans le connaître la conscience attire à soi son objet et se l'incorpore; la connaissance est assimilation; . . . Ainsi y-a-t-il un mouvement de dissolution qui va de l'objet au sujet connaissant. Le connu se transforme en moi, devient ma pensée et par là même accepte de recevoir son existence de moi seul." Jean-Paul Sartre, *L'Être et le Néant*, (Paris, 1943), p. 667.
7. Proust, *op. cit.*, Vol. I, p. 136.

8. Ernst Robert Curtius, *Französische Literatur im Zwanigzsten Jahrhundert* (Bern, 1952), p. 303.
9. Proust, *op. cit.*, Vol. I, pp. 138-140.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 139.
11. *Loc. cit.*
12. *Ibid.*, p. 145.
13. Racine, *Phèdre*, vs. 158.
14. Proust, *op. cit.*, Vol. I, p. 178.
15. Curtius, *op. cit.*, p. 328.
16. Proust, *op. cit.*, Vol. I, p. 717.