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## Faithfully Submitted: The Logic of the Signature in Marcel Proust's A LA RECHERCHE

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# Faithfully Submitted: The Logic of the in Marcel Proust's *A la recherche*

Proust, known for having handwritten most of the 4,000 pages of his *A la recherche du temps perdu*, an essential work of modernist narrative prose, lying in bed on loose pieces of paper, had terrible handwriting. Small, densely written on any scrap of paper that he could lay his hands on, full of corrections, the augustly named ‘manuscripts’ make the task of putting these scraps in printed form a daunting one. The editors of the two successive Pléiade editions, one in three volumes in 1954 and one in four volumes with ample editorial notes in 1987-89, have accomplished a seemingly impossible task, monumentalizing what once threatened to disappear for want of takers.

It is not as if, oblivious of posterity, Proust was indifferent or oblivious to the adventure of the lines and curves produced by pen on paper miraculously becoming ‘language’ and, in the best case scenario, literature. At a few key points, this handwritten novel ponders the status of handwriting: its aesthetics, its readability, its delayed arrival. Together, these three aspects of handwriting – the way it looks, its capacity to communicate, and the time it actually takes to be read – which Proust explores in his musings on the signature of a friend, lie at the heart of narrative’s extraordinary ability to create visual images. This ability constitutes more than the contested area between poetry and painting. Under Proust’s hands, it becomes an emblem of what matters in the artistic endeavor beyond such rivalry. In this paper, I will briefly outline these stakes by attending to the signature that the Proustian narrator reads, misreads, and retrospectively incarnates.

Proust’s work loosely centers around the relationship with two would-be lovers, the love of his young years, Gilberte, daughter of Charles Swann and Odette,

and later, the somewhat vulgar beach girl, Albertine, who lived with him as a virtual prisoner, until she ran away and died in a riding accident. In no other passage of Proust's novel are the paradoxical implications of the literary image made clearer than in the repeated *mise en abyme* in which the signature of a childhood friend of the hero of *La recherche*, Gilberte, is described graphically. What is a written image, how can it be read? This paper is dedicated to this question of method, which is developed by means of a 'visual' reading of handwriting in Proust. I will explore the relations between text and image in this author's work through a key image of their complexity; yet, there will be no reduction of the gulf separating the properly visual domain from the domain of language.

The first feature of the signature of the narrator's childhood sweetheart Gilberte – herself the image of the taboo placed on the name in that she rejects and changes her own – is an aesthetic one. Gilberte writes both badly, in other words illegibly, and well, since she creates a beautiful form. Emblematic of the difficulty of seeing, which only grows with desire and closer inspection, the first description of this signature suggests an extreme illegibility due to an excess of pen strokes. The effect of this signature is characterized by a delayed action, an incomprehensible *Nachträglichkeit* where the joy that the narrator should have felt in receiving a note from his dear friend is not instantaneous. Much later, when the narrator is in Venice with his mother, the same signature leads him to think that Albertine, whom he knows to be dead, has been resuscitated. All of this would come close to being incoherent if it were not precisely for the question of what is involved in image-writing, that is, in a 'flat' writing. This is a writing that neither carves nor scratches, as in etching, nor obeys the modernist norms of aesthetics, readability, and temporal delay mentioned above. Instead, flat writing is something that Proust appears to envision as placed between writing proper and abstract visual expression, detached from the writer's intention and inaccessible to its addressee.

Gilberte's signature – or is it Albertine's? – is the emblematic instance of flat writing. It is, indeed, its exemplary representation. The hero has just recently come back into contact with Gilberte, having brushed against her, watched her, and then been introduced to her without having recognized her as his childhood friend. When he receives the telegram in Venice, logically speaking he does not see the signature of his correspondent, as is the case with all telegrams. He first attributes the telegram to Albertine, his long-term obsessive love object and focus of jealousy who, at that point, is already dead. Again, *Nachträglichkeit* intervenes and it takes him some time to 'recognize' the telegram as coming from Gilberte. Nevertheless, and despite his earlier failure to recognize her face, he is able to describe Gilberte's signature, which he saw once as a child, without seeing it, and in such minute detail that all concerns for plausibility are suspended (3.671/IV 235).<sup>1</sup>

With a keen sense of the primary property of writing, he acknowledges in this passage that the signature is the paradoxical sign that guarantees the authenticity and the originality of the subject by virtues of the latter's *absence*. In this respect, it is the most characteristic index, seductive as this type of sign tends to be. The signature is one of those 'traces' of a human individual that sets in motion the desire to trace. This desire is the motor of narrative, but one that also informs the persistent

presence of narrative in sciences such as history, medicine, and psychoanalysis. Thus, a signature is in and of itself a *mise en abyme* of narrative.

Carlo Ginzburg's seminal article on clues remains key to our understanding of how the kind of thinking based on a narrativity that is informed by the index, and of which the authenticating value of handwriting is a significant instance, has been a long-standing presence in the world of the sciences and the humanities alike (1983). In this article, the historian analyzes the kind of reasoning that underlies the notion of the signature itself, and in its wake, the discourse of the 'hand' that continues to predominate in art historical connoisseurship. Quoting from the 17th-century medical doctor and art collector Giulio Mancini, Ginzburg establishes a parallel between painting and writing:

And these parts of a painting are like strokes of the pen and flourishes in handwriting, which need the master's sure and resolute touch. The same care should be taken to look for particularly bold or brilliant strokes, which the master throws off with an assurance that cannot be matched; for instance in the folds and glints of drapes, which may have more to do with the master's bold imagination than with the truth of how they actually hung. (Mancini, 1956-57, 134, quoted in Ginzburg, 1983, 96)

And Ginzburg develops this parallel between painting and writing into a persuasive theory of reasoning by way of the symptom or involuntary index. Thus, the detail is more decisive than the overall content. Mancini focused on ears, fingernails, and other anatomical details that could easily be overlooked when copying a painting because a certain automatism is in operation. Reading in detail becomes reading 'flat writing' when this automatism comes to stand between the reader and comprehension, and the written text becomes an (abstract) visual image, rather than a readable message.

Yet the signature, like all handwriting and painting, is also capable of being falsified. This turns the index into an icon. This possibility is in the nature of the sign, and distinguishes signs from their referents. By first attributing the telegram erroneously to the dead Albertine, Proust foregrounds that inherent capacity to deceive. By means of the graphic signature of Gilberte/Albertine, the imaginary graphics and the image of *grammè*, the importance of the visual for Proustian poetics is sketched out and 'signs itself'. To sum this up briefly: handwriting possesses the virtue of *flatness*.

To understand the significance of flatness, we must look at what is said about the effect of Gilberte's name, which is invested with all the charges associated with naming. Gilberte's signature transforms into a dis-figure of writing. By extension, the name itself, so heavily invested with memory in Proust's universe, transforms from the label of the person into the latter's breezing presence-absence in transitory, fleeting, ungraspable alterity. In the following passage, this function of the name is quite clearly evoked:

The name of Gilberte passed close by me, evoking all the more forcefully the girl whom it labelled in that it did not merely refer to her, as one speaks of someone in his absence, but was directly addressed to her; it passed thus close by me, in action so to speak, with a force that increased with the curve of its trajectory and the proximity of its target... (1.428/I 387)

In the first part, the description of the name resembles a pragmatic theory of the sign in general; when 'in action' the name becomes a projectile, a weapon, the relevant characteristic of which is its curved flight. But a projectile presupposes a distance, 'a depth'. The object projected comes from the inside out, propelled with force. If Gilberte's name stemmed from the inside, this dimension of the name would place in peril the whole delicate enterprise in which the text is involved. But as signature – authenticated through the flourishes and excess of pen strokes that escape legibility – the name can serve the philosophy of flatness lying over the literary work.

The narrator of *La recherche* 'explains' the philosophical implications of this poetic in an often-quoted passage: 'How often, when driving, do we not come upon a bright street beginning a few feet away from us, when what we have actually before our eyes is merely a patch of wall glaringly lit which has given us the mirage of depth!' (2.435/II 712). If depth is a mirage, the visual image, with its two dimensions, which make it in one sense 'flat', holds a truth of a quite different depth. It is worth exploring the consequences of such a paradoxical vision of *A la recherche du temps perdu*. Such a reading is based upon the hypothesis that the references to visual images, the frequency and the importance of which for this text have been pointed out many a time, suggest a significance of particularly rich, even fundamental value for the poetics of this work, without, of course, this being thereby the only possible meaning.

The motivation for this significance is not a simple aesthetic preference, nor does it suggest a simple exploration of a particularly rich domain of perception and sensation. The 'flat' image combines multiple stances, multiple needs of not only an affective order, but also a perceptual, epistemological and poetic order. All aspects of Proust's poetics of flatness, such as the scopic pulsion, the obsessional voyeurism, the recurrent interest in visual art, the numerous and frequent metaphors borrowed from the domains of optics and photography, the practice of narrative ambiguity in the descriptions, the visual fantasies, the fascination with flatness and the absence of volume, all these well-known aspects of Proust's work come together within a homogeneous framework.

The term *flatness* sums up and conceptualizes handwriting in Proust in its insistent and ambiguous quality. On the one hand, it designates by inference the absence of volume and of a third dimension. Thus it emphasizes the disappointing and deceptive nature of fiction as well as of the humanistic illusion: 'mirage of depth'. A literal and concrete flatness is the price paid for a visualization of the diegetic universe of the novel; but it is also the pay-off that buys almost total freedom for the imagination. On the other hand, far from being systematically associated with the exalted aesthetics of art, flatness also tends towards a sense of platitude or banality,

such as is found in Charles Bovary's conversation which is 'flat like a sidewalk', and in the salons of Mme. Verdurin and the Duchesse de Guermantes where the conversation is also flat in the metaphorical sense of the term.

This particular flatness is the other side of the poetics of the work, which would otherwise suffer irrevocably from 'elevated language'. The principal point is, then, that the tension and the inharmonious resolution of the two meanings of the word 'flatness' constitute a central impulse to Proust's literary project. Handwriting, in its quintessential image of the signature, embodies this project. It is, in the terms of Jean-François Lyotard, an emblematic case of the production, *in situ*, of the concept of the *wordimage*, or the *figural*: a force that 'erodes the distinction between letter and line' (Rodowick 2001, 1)

But literature is a verbal art. The visual domain can only be present within it by means of different subterfuges. The principal means of visualization is, of course, metaphor, which causes something 'to be seen' in a way not revealed by the literal meaning, but only accessible through visualization. Furthermore, represented space is very often depicted by using visual images. The narrator describes what he sees or what he saw when he was younger, and this gives a particular importance to the subject of the gaze, which I refer to as the focalizer.<sup>2</sup> But, in a doubling of this visualization, that which is described is often not a space or a vision but a visual representation: an image, a painting, an engraving or a photograph. On other occasions, the visualization is not doubled, but, instead, is underlined or intensified. The thing seen is described as if it were seen through a magnifying glass or a telescope, or as a projection from a magic lantern, or the framing of a shot seen through the lens of a camera.

My particular concern is one specific aspect of this composition. It involves a visual image, artistic or banal, explicit or implicit, that becomes the mechanism around which the writing will form or deform itself, such that we can think of this writing as properly visual writing. Rather than endorsing the Lyotardian term of the *figural*, I wish to foreground the generating aspect of the novel more than the kind of signification or the type of sign itself. This generating aspect that stems from the visual, I call *figuration*.

While I thus approach *La recherche* first and foremost as a visual novel, it is also a novel in which the subject is threatened with failure. The signature's vagaries embody the connection between these two aspects. And it is through the bond between visibility and the failure of the subject to sustain itself that, I contend, Proust's text lays out the relevance of the reflections on handwriting to which this volume is devoted. The variability, the pluralization and the breaking-up of the subject leads, as Hubert Damisch would say, to a situation in which 'the subject hangs only by one thread' (1987, 354). It is to this thread that the limbs of Proust's puppet-like characters are attached. The novel is written in the first person, but, as we know, *je est un autre*, 'I is an other'. And by way of a rejoinder to this otherness, it quickly becomes clear that the other is 'I'. The narrator's identification with the three key figures of different masculinities – Charles Swann, an epitome of heterosexual obsession and a model of jealousy, Robert de Saint-Loup whom the narrator invests with idealization, and the often ridiculed yet closest to the 'out' homo-

sexual, Baron de Charlus – is of the same order as the strange ‘flatness’ of the character Albertine, who moves on the waves of the hero’s desire without ever expressing the slightest will. Like them, she is a projection of the narrator, which remains nonetheless unknowable to him. For although the other is ‘I’, I remains irreducibly other.

The subject is, then, constantly in danger of being absorbed into the other. Here is where figuration comes to do its work. This threatening of the subject is *figured*, is given form, in the flat image that the narrator, as focalizer, can both contemplate fully and never know. Reduced to being a flat surface, the image confronts the subject at the limits of vision. From a distance, the spectacle loses all life, the colors disappear and the movement of the sea is stilled. Close up, everything becomes muddled. When the hero leans to kiss the cheek he so desires, he is unable to feel any pleasure in it because he can no longer see it. As Bachelard has already said, in the visual domain, there is a rift between minute detail and clarity.

Flatness is given philosophical ‘depth’ in its bond with the signature, simultaneously unique and imitable. The problem for the subject is that he wants to develop *himself* by brushing up against the other, represented in both the external world and human beings. But the other in Proust’s work always flees, thus creating a conflict that possesses and defines the subject. This existential predicament is figured in the near-obsessive ponderings of the difficulty of vision. Sometimes shade is a better guarantee of visibility; sometimes volume cannot be grasped, while a flat, even banal, surface has more substance and thus offers a more solid base for the narrator’s sensualist epistemology. Philippe Hamon’s fundamental work on the notion of exhibition (1989), conceived as a sort of textual architecture, traces this epistemology to the 19th century. He writes notably:

The world of Michelet’s ‘brilliant trinkets’, of paper, signs, advertisement was also a place where objects were beginning to lose volume and depth. In such a world the great projects of historical and philosophical synthesis and of the collation of the document and the monument no longer seem capable of deploying their principle of all-embracing legibility. Before Marx and Benjamin, Baudelaire... equated this incapacity with the loss of memory’s or culture’s ‘halo’ or ‘aura’. (125)

Proust, as Antoine Compagnon has felicitously phrased it, is situated ‘between two centuries’ (1989). At both ends of the dialectical movement, which is itself fleeting, lies the two-dimensional image, the flatness of which appears as a permanent temptation to the subject who desires the total ‘possession’ of his prisoner, a representation of the subject-desiring-knowledge. But at the same time, in figuring the bond between figuration as writing and the tenuousness of the subject, he can also be read as (proto-)postmodernist.

Thus, Proustian flatness and its figuration in descriptions of signatures has a ‘deep’ philosophical meaning. More can be made of this; let me spell it out. The two-dimensional image is also, simply, flat; it is also a platitude. I call this characteristic of the image its ‘flatness’, but constantly keeping in mind the conjunction

between visuality and banality, which Proust will reveal in all its sublimity. As such, 'flatness' is an image of writing. And it is, at the same time, a model for writing, not as an aesthetics of visual art, but as a literary aesthetics based on 'flatness'. It is also the major issue at stake in writing, its principal difficulty and an inextricable interweaving of affectivity and epistemology. The central desire in this novel, which tells of a coming-to-writing, is to ground the subject. The question is, then, how to resolve the insoluble conflict that makes 'I' other, while all the time rooting, as if in a transplantation, the other in the 'I'. Lastly, 'flatness' is also the metaphor for writing as a graphic art.

Armed with this insight, I return to the detail, since that is what first triggered reflection on the signature. The type of detail that emanates from Proustian flatness, and of which the illegible and detached signature is an emblem, can quite simply be called a *dis-figure*. It is disfiguring as a result of an excess of form, and as such it is related to denial that is absolutely not necessary and is, therefore, excessive: effective negative surplus, the effect of which is proven by the theorist's insistence upon non-sense. A dis-figure is the visual equivalent of a Freudian denial in that it is a figure of negativity produced by excess. The dis-figure is diametrically opposed to what Georges Didi-Huberman has termed *pan* or patch (1990). With this term, the French art historian refers to blots in painting that elude form, such as the confused patch of red spilling out of a cushion on the bottom left in Vermeer's *Lacemaker*.

For Didi-Huberman, the *pan* is a self-reflexive detail. But, as I have proposed elsewhere, self-reflexivity is not the unified phenomenon Didi-Huberman seems to make it out to be (1991). Lest it remains handicapped by the generalization of that term, my analysis cannot endorse this term without proposing its opposite as well. Hence, I propose to reserve the term patch for more restrictive use on the occasions when self-reflexivity effectively takes on a formless form, as opposed to an excess form. Both of these possibilities are deforming, both are no doubt self-reflexive, but the hypothesis creeping in here is that Proust's text, which is after all an irreducibly literary text, even though it is charged with visuality, needs dis-figures more than it needs patches. Moreover, these needs are over-determined in visual terms.

Hence, now is the moment to reconsider the notion of 'literary visuality'. Figuration is clearly distinguished from figurativeness, which is the usage of tropes and which has been so well analyzed by others. I am attempting, quite differently, to ignore as much as possible the distinction between 'literal' and 'figurative'. Sometimes it is in metaphors or comparisons that figuration begins, and this is the case when a visual image is invested with the figuring function or the power to give form, that is, visual form, to that which follows. But it is not because it is a trope that a word, an evocation or the representation of a thing, will serve as a blueprint for the writing. So where is the visual situated in a literary text, an allographic work that is supposedly independent from its material shape as either handwritten, typed, or printed? How can we read 'visually'? Proust's description of the signature and all the misunderstandings caused by its lack of readability, together



with its excess of 'beauty' and erratic temporality, entails the need to take this question seriously on the level of literature itself, handwriting's seeming opposite. I am considering Proust's text in this respect under the sign of the Wittgensteinian idea of 'language games'. The concept of image – which implies generally, but not always, an idea of likeness, of resemblance, or of similitude – has in the past been analyzed according to its use in five domains (Mitchell 1985, 9-31). The graphic domain is that of painting, most frequently alleged when Proust's novel is considered in relation to visuality, and photography, which I contend is much more crucial for an understanding of Proustian (dis-)figuration. The optical domain is that of mirrors, projections, lenses, and glasses, the recurrence of which in Proust is utterly significant. A third domain is that of sense data or appearances, which are related to perception. Then there are mental images that are encountered in dreams, memories, ideas and fantasies. Finally, at the other end of the spectrum, is the verbal domain, related to which is the domain of metaphors and descriptions. These domains could be broken down even further. It is a 'family' of concepts.

These five domains are not only strongly represented in Proust, they are also thematized in his work, both as part of the theoretical reflection, the essayistic dimension of the novel, and in the collection of fictional representations that constitute the novelistic dimension of the novel, which I contend to be essentially figuration-based. Their presence is at once strong, constant, and confused. The graphic domain alone 'fills' the work: it causes it to 'swell up' with all the descriptions, evocations, references and allusions related to visual art. But this domain is not only relevant in terms of this semantic or thematic network. Its importance is transformed from being semantic to being syntactic, so to speak, when the images, which are visual objects in this domain, *figure* the text, informing and forming it by imposing upon it certain developments that, without this link to the visual, would lose much, if not all, of their meaning and their richness. These are the images on which the dis-figure superimposes a self-reflexive dimension.

Gilberte's signature is a *mise en abyme* of the poetics of flatness. As a condensation of the notion of handwriting, this dis-figure is over-determined by the overwhelming bond with another figuration of handwriting, another instance of Ginzburgian trace as narrative. This emblem is 'inflated with meaning' through the mediation of a category of detail that circulates throughout the whole work, namely allusions to the biblical text, recycled through Racine's play about Esther. The presence of the Book of Esther in *La recherche* is almost obsessive, and with good reason. It can be explained principally by the insistence upon writing in this particular biblical text. As we know from the Bible, Esther manages to prevent the catastrophe that threatens her people by first concealing her identity, then by revealing it at the right moment, and finally by making the most of the delay implied by writing in order to 'countersign' the death sentence with a decree that nullifies the effectiveness of the time bomb that was Aman's first decree.

In her first appearance in Proust's text, Esther is the figure of yellow, which is the color of her dress in the stained glass in the church at Combray ('the yellow of her dress was spread so unctuously, so thickly...' 1.63/I 60). We know the signifi-

cance of yellow, especially in this buttery incarnation, since it is the painterly substance that kills the writer Bergotte. But in addition to being a life-saving writer, this mythical figure derives her primacy from the bond between writing and the tenuousness of the subject. For Esther is also the figure who keeps secret the fact of belonging to a particular group, and Proust will develop this in his notion of 'being of them' (*en être*) which serves as a principle of selection for the elite of the 'accursed race', be it of Jews, artists, or homosexuals. Esther is the figure in the closet that signifies a combination of secrecy and choice (Sedgwick 1990). The third dimension of 'Esther', text and character, but also character-text, is the less well-known but equally relevant dimension introduced by her being the incarnation of the signature as speech act that 'does things with words'. Writing, in this case, is words with a power to initiate action, but the action is delayed. The signature is the word of a specific person 'put down in writing'.

It is because of this aspect of Esther that Proust is able to use this character-author-text in order to integrate aspects of his own literary enterprise with the visual mechanism that underpins it. The poetics of his work must be understood and appreciated in the effects produced by the integration of epistemology with affectivity, sexuality with aesthetics, sensuality with poetics. Writing integrates these elements, and it can do so because of the belatedness that it entails. Significantly, visibility is again key to this insight. In the episode of the 'dance breast to breast', where the narrator is confronted with Albertine's potential lesbianism, the poison, the delayed action of which is related specifically to writing in the Book of Esther, is generated by a problematic of vision that is embodied in failing eyesight.

Proust is, here, a preposterous student of Ginzburg. The almost artificially drawn-out slowness requires that the medical knowledge of the focalizer – the doctor Cottard, both an expert and stupid – from whom the narrator is to learn, is also shortsighted, in all senses of the term. Having forgotten his pince-nez, and being less of an expert on feminine beauty than Marcel, he asks 'Are they pretty, at least? I can't make out their features'. He is, however, the professional of medical clichés that enable him to *know*, rather than see, that 'they are *certainly* at the climax of their pleasure'. He underlines that his conclusion is based upon prior knowledge and not upon perception when he adds: 'It is not sufficiently known that women derive most excitement from their breasts.' In the gap between perception, for which the necessary optical instrument is missing, and knowledge, which allows a certain deduction, lies the hesitancy upon which the epistemology of jealousy depends, like a parasite. The details of Odette's account of her activities also play within this gap.

One of the narrator's role models, Charles Swann, who does not believe himself to be duped by the poison administered by his mistress, also does not see the semiotic implications of Odette's speech. Neither true nor false – and is that not the essential characteristic of aesthetic discourse? – Swann accepts it nonetheless in his heart of hearts, and hence becomes more and more worried, uttering the vague statement that grounds truth in coherence when he says: 'that doesn't fit with the fact that she didn't let me in'. But this acceptance fails to acknowledge the force of

the ‘surplus matter and the unfilled gaps’, words that echo back in poetic terms to the glass jars in the Vivonne when the surplus itself filled in the gaps (1.183/I 166). These glass jars are very clearly presented as poetic: they are a *mise en abyme* of the poetics of to-ing and fro-ing associated with what I termed in my book on the subject, the poetics of ‘mottling’. They oscillate between being container/signifier/point-of-comparison and content/signified/thing-compared, which already reveals the distinctions between epistemology, semiotics and poetics, all of which are implied in the scene with the glass jars, as they are in that with Swann and Odette. The text only mentions the first aspect *verbatim* – the aspect of container/content – and makes allusion to the third aspect with the use of the word ‘image’. But the poetic aspect of the glass jars is definitely the one that projects its trace in what follows. As the text continues, the subject, like Rousseau in the *Reveries*, is substituted for the glass jars. He puts to the test the poetic potential of drifting: ‘How often have I watched and longed to imitate... a rower who had shipped his oars and lay flat on his back in the bottom of his boat, letting it drift with the current, seeing nothing but the sky gliding slowly by above him, his face aglow with a foretaste of happiness and peace’ (1.186/ I 168). This is the poetic potential of the detail that neither Odette nor Swann can see. Having neither the choice, nor the imagination to do otherwise, the latter can only play the same game as his mistress, pitting the same weapons against her:

and making opportune use of some detail – insignificant but true – which he had accidentally learned, as though it were the sole fragment which he had involuntarily let slip of a complete reconstruction of her daily life which he carried secretly in his mind, he led her to suppose that he was perfectly informed upon matters which in reality he neither knew nor suspected... (1.391/I 353).

‘Accidentally learned’ is here equal to the unfilled gaps elsewhere. Swann thinks he can do battle with Odette’s surplus matter using the complete life that she supposes him to know. Brilliantly playing out their interchangeable and disconcerting roles of author and reader, Swann and Odette reveal the impossibility of finding a resolution by means of details.

The semiotic battle between Swann and Odette will later provide a model for Marcel’s jealousy concerning Albertine. The difference is, however, that the latter is a much less substantial character than Odette. From the beginning, long before her escape and her death, this ‘fleeting being’ is truly in flight. Consequently, the search for details becomes a caricature of Swann’s actions. Marcel, who depends upon others’ help as he hardly ever leaves his house, embarks upon an interminable to and fro between a suspected detail and a confirmed certitude, only to lose that certitude, and thus have to set off on another expedition. The source of the Nile remains always beyond reach.

And that is all for the better. For, as Doubrovsky puts it, this is how the narrator writes: the writing does not ‘reflect’ nor does it ‘wed’ jealousy’s movements; it

is jealous (1974, 90). It follows, then, that in order to understand the poetics of the detail in this novel, it is necessary to see which detail determines this jealous quest, this voyage of discovery in search of female pleasure that is always hidden and resistant. The gap that must be filled during this quest is, in fact, that gaping hole, those 'huge blanks' (3.93/III 605) that leave a truth without any leftover fragments, without any kernels hidden deep down, from which the narrator could reconstruct something. The huge blanks are like those on a map that designate uncharted land. Archeology is not a helpful model because the fragment cannot come to the rescue of the detail.

The signature thus traced contains the secret of the hidden identity of the self that is projected onto all the others in whom this 'I' discovers himself. Hence, also, the taboo placed on the firstname of the 'I'. The navel of dreams points towards the outside, towards the future of writing, as opposed to the inside of the maternal body and the time passed by the child in this inside. To write, by drops – of ink, milk, sperm, oysters, sweat, and blood – is an act that introduces 'flatness', an act of 'pressing together', of applying the essence of the self onto a flat leaf base.

The trace of writing is, thus, constantly associated with vital forces, the essence of the self, the spurting outwards that make this male, individuated subject; one who writes the reversible surface onto which he applies himself in successive layers. It leads to the infinite spreading-out of this immense work, the base of which is provided by the book. This book is flat, but it is inflated with meaning by means of these residues of observation.

Thinking back to the illegible writing, the unformed form, the figure-figuration that resembles the idea of the dis-figure most closely, despite radical differences, we keep being reminded of Gilberte's signature, that dis-figurer of all figurations. As a name 'put down in writing', with its delayed impact and its capacity to visualize text, this dis-figured signature forms the trace of the visual conflict posed by the detail. Seen from close-up, it is broken into letters, which are in turn fragmented into different strokes. Seen from afar, scattered throughout the work and contained within the illegible name of Marcel's two great loves, now both dead, this signature remains irreducibly broken. It is a tenacious dis-figure, and, as such, like a *mise en abyme* it inscribes the needs of the novel.

In order that the detail function in a way other than by detailing; in order that it help enlarge or insert – rather than detach – the infinitely small into general laws, there must also be a certain delicacy of form and quivering of flatness and mobility, of light and fragility. It is visual, it is an image, but it is also something else. This something else we find in the realm of photography, an art that is both flat and banal, that is able to enlarge the detail, to capture the past, and to figure movement.

In the scene from the Duchess of Guermantes's *salon* in 'La fugitive/Albertine disparue', at the moment when the narrator, suffering from amnesia, is to be introduced to the very person who was the great love of his youth, he reflects on the deceptive and disappointing nature of both writing and photography. In the 1954 Pléiade edition of *La recherche*, the sentence is as follows:

Our mistake is to present things as they are, names as they are written, people as photography and psychology give an unalterable notion of them. (III 573)

Or according to the Tadié edition:

Our mistake lies in supposing that things present themselves habitually as they really are, names as they are written, people as photography and psychology give an unalterable notion of them. (3.585/IV 153; translation adapted)<sup>3</sup>

This reflection is offered as an explanation for the bizarre fact that the narrator had ‘mis-corrected’ the name that the *concierge* had already misheard and written incorrectly. The fact that Gilberte had stared at him, and that he had brushed up against her, taking her to be a tart without recognizing her, appears in no way strange to him. For this reflection to take place, it is forgetfulness, rather than the contrary, that is necessary.

Unexpectedly, the deciphering efforts of the successive generations of editors of Proust’s challenging handwriting received profound philosophical relevance. In the first *Pléiade* edition, the verb ‘*présenter*’ was not reflexive, making it a question of presentation, that is, of photography as a means, as a medium of communication. In the Tadié edition it becomes a question of the belief that the frequent use of the medium has been established as a routine element of culture. Between these two versions we can see the difference between a behavioral pattern and a conviction, between a culture and a religion.

The patch that in-forms is superimposed in this work with the dis-figure that de-forms. The way in which invisibility also becomes a *mise en abyme* in Gilberte’s signature, which is illegible because it is too detailed, is explained by the fact that this signature signifies too much at one time. It provides too many forms and thereby shields the sign from the desperate search for meaning. In this, the signature, far from authenticating a subject who has no substance and lives only off the rubbing against alterity, dis-figures subjectivity through excess as denial – through a post-modern dis-belief in authenticity that pre-posterously confirms Derrida’s critique of the signature. Rather than inscription of uniqueness, then, the signature signals a flatness that, in turn, gives shape to the fabric of the culture in which it occurs.

If, then, Ginzburg ends his article on the conceptual metaphor of inquiry as fabric, he inevitably arrives at a critique of the *politics* of that kind of tracing that handwriting stands for. He describes the protection of civil society by means of securing individual uniqueness and its recognizability, that, I may add, is today re-invigorated by the US’s fingerprinting practice that polices all foreigners. On the final page, he mentions Proust as ‘a rigorous example of the application of this conjectural paradigm’ (109). What he does not seem aware of is how Proust applies the paradigm without illusions of individuation. Instead, the signature, and the enter-

prise of jealousy for whose failure it stands, is firmly illegible – in all senses: as name, as authenticity, and as depth. Flatness, instead, lays out a sociality beyond these traps of humanism.

Mieke Bal

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**SIGN HERE!**

## Notes

1. I am quoting from the four-volume French edition of *A la recherche du temps perdu*, edited under the direction of Jean-Yves Tadié. Paris: Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1987-89. (Trans. by C.K. Scott-Moncrieff and Terence Kilmartin as *Remembrance of Things Past*. London: Penguin Books, 1981).

2. See Bal (1997) for this term, which refers to the perceptual or interpretive relation between subject-seeing and what is seen.

3. The Tadié edition, which has incorporated new manuscripts, appeared after the English translation.

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