

Burt Kimmelman

Virginia Woolf and *la recherche du modernisme proustien*: Marcel Proust in *La Belle Époque*, the Great War, and After

Virginia Woolf frets as she drafts “Phases of Fiction” (her long essay published in 1929): “Directly we try to say what it is we get from *A La Recherche du Temps Perdu*, we break off in confusion.”[1] Seven years earlier, having just discovered Proust, she dispatches the news to E. M. Forster: “Everyone is reading Proust.” She’s nearly breathless. And she’s worried she’ll “go down and down and down and perhaps never come up again.” She had a point. Yet there’s also a hint of admiration. And her fiction blossomed.

Proust was her *bête noire*. The year he enters her life, she publishes the brilliant and uneven novel *Jacob’s Room*. That, along with “The Waste Land” and *Ulysses*, is enough for many literary aficionados to proclaim 1922, in the words of the *Oxford Research Encyclopedia*, the “*Annus Mirabilis* of Literary Modernism.” The Yale Books Blog’s editors—their headline is “The Year That Changed Everything in Literature”—add *Mrs. Dalloway* to the shortlist, which is a bit weird since the novel came out in 1925 (the plot is set three years before). That moment when Modernist writing achieved its giddy height is rather zealously bruted in the *New York Times* headline: “1922: The Year That Transformed English Literature,” under which there’s Eric Bennett’s review of *The World Broke in Two: Virginia Woolf, T.S. Eliot, D.H. Lawrence, E.M Forster, and the Year That Changed Literature*. And then there’s this crazy-eyed headline in *The Daily Beast*: “Best Year Ever: How 1922 Birthed Modernism.” (Where’s the exclamation point?)

I guess what I think of as literary Modernism is out of step with certain members of our chattering class. I’m now wondering why Proust’s three posthumous works, most of all *Le Temps retrouvé* that’s a masterpiece on its own, don’t figure in these people’s reckoning. (*Time Recaptured* appeared in 1927, *La Prisonnière* in 1923, and *Le Côté de Guermantes* in 1920/1921). Why hasn’t Proust gotten at least an honorable mention? The seven volumes making up *À la recherche du temps perdu* were undertaken a bit before 1910, his initial draft of the entirety completed in 1912. One difference is that the big three Modernist classics, the nature of them as literary works, were not enmeshed in Modernist art. *Mrs. Dalloway*, first conceived in 1923, is.

Might the distinction between Modernist literature and Modernist art be worth thinking about in this context? Even more so than a distinction between Anglophone

and Francophone writing? Yet a good deal of other Modernist literary works by other authors, along with Woolf and Proust, were intimately involved with art—such as Stéphane Mallarmé (preceding *Un Coup de des* in 1897, he'd published countless art reviews, volumes of poetry, and other related works) and Gertrude Stein (whose salon hosted Picasso and many other visual artists). Then there was William Carlos Williams and his transformation after visiting the 1913 Armory Show in New York. In 1926, Louis Zukofsky composes his game-changing “Poem beginning ‘The’,” which may have distantly had to do with projects Marcel Duchamp had launched much earlier.

Woolf couldn't let go of painting by the time of *Mrs. Dalloway*—or better to say it wouldn't let go of her. She glimpsed the possibility of artistic prose, which was somewhat feared among the Bloomsbury set. Proust, in her estimation, created description while advancing the narrative. His pictorialism, in which the art of painting is fundamental, could move things along, regardless of his never-ending sentences, while revealing a character's interior. Yet Woolf worried that Proust “expands sympathy so great that it almost defeats its own object.” [3] Design, on the other hand, couldn't guarantee a writer's ability to “[excite] human sympathy” in the reader, that which may “bring us into close touch with life” (Woolf, “Phases of Fiction” III, 411).

Whistler once lodged a complaint with Proust about Ruskin: “[Il] ne s'y connaissait absolument pas de tableaux.” Proust replied, simply: “C'est possible,” then noted a difference between “erreurs dépeignaient” and “merveilleux tableaux qu'il faut aimer en soi.”[4] C. J. Mares explains that, in Woolf's “struggle to incorporate into the novel the strengths she associated with painting without betraying the purposes of her own medium,” what should have come as no surprise is how Woolf “sought support in” Proust's achievements (327). By 1927 (the year *Le Temps retrouvé* was published) Woolf is telling her sister that he's “by far the greatest modern novelist.”[5]

With “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown,” which appeared in 1924, Woolf “tries to place her finger on the dividing line between one era and another.”[6] For Woolf that demarcation point along the Modernist trajectory, Casey M. Walker observes, was December 1910—the moment crucial, I'll say, to our understanding of Modernism. To suggest that 1910 was anything like 1922, Modernism's *Annus Mirabilis*, is irrelevant. It is, however, “when Woolf herself would have made her initial foray into the formal demands of novelistic character,” in other words when she begins, Walker believes, “her search for a new language to describe the modern character, having sensed, for her own writing, the inapplicability of the descriptive habits of certain of her novelistic forbears” (35).

Perhaps *Du côté de chez Swann* (the first of the seven parts of *À la recherche du temps perdu*), which was released just three years on, was an example of what Woolf sensed she was after. It was followed by the six books published from 1919, *À l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs* through *Le Temps retrouvé* in 1927 (including *Le Côté de Guermantes*, 1920/1921; *Sodome et Gomorrhe*, 1921/1922; *La Prisonnière*, 1923; and *Albertine disparue*, 1925). The seven works—once Proust had taken an apartment with cork-lined walls to keep out sound, in the Marais district of Paris following the deaths of his parents—were then conceived. Having inherited their wealth, he chose to write at night.

The sometimes reluctant nature of Woolf's sympathetic response to Proust's work was deeper than her connection with art. It also had to do with the writers' sense of comfort in a large urban center. It was more than just a casual relationship to London by the time Woolf was writing *Mrs. Dalloway*, in 1923, or his relationship to Paris starting well before he was drafting *In Search of Lost Time*. Walker points out not only that in Woolf's work there's "a consistent orientation toward the streets," but also that the writing of *Mrs. Dalloway* "is born, in Woolf of city observation" (38). As for Proust, he was able to take in the sensorium of Paris in consummate fashion, in his time with all its exquisite permutations and personalities.

The city as such, by 1910, had "exceeded the domain of classical perspective or the guidance of Renaissance planners" (Walker 35). The urban theorist Henri Lefebvre finds a certain inflection point in city life occurring then. A "certain space was shattered"—that which, he writes, comprised the realm

of common sense, of knowledge (*savoir*), of social practice, of political power, a space thitherto enshrined in everyday discourse, just as in abstract thought, as the environment of and channel for communications; the space, too, of classical perspective and geometry, developed from the Renaissance onward.[7]

Unlike natural landscape, London and Paris are constructed spaces. Woolf, among the great English writers, intuited the change they presented. English to the core, however, "in private" she felt the novelist's "formal unity should be an aesthetic absolute" (Mares 355)—no matter how much the London emerging after 1910 might have presented her with an alternative paradigm. Yet in cleaving "to a distinction between form in painting and form in the novel [she was] increasingly willing to experiment with looser forms." This turn of persuasion was a key element in her "struggle to integrate into the novel strengths she associated with painting" (356).

What city and canvas had in common was their constructed, designed space. Because

of *In Search of Lost Time*, Woolf came to approve of the “less shaped and controlled vehicle.” Alex Zwerdling notes that she appreciated its long, in her eyes ultimately necessary, digressions that could be “qualitatively superior to more finished works of art.”[8] The temporally driven literary work, proceeding directly from start to finish, in its structure discouraged pause or digression. She’d realized a truth implicit in visual art as well as architecture: that narrative *per se* could be less central to, less compatible with, the demands of syllogistic reasoning underlying a novel’s linear propensity. The time-based structure, a certain arrow of time, still governed in most novels as England was becoming aware of Proust. Woolf’s work was the exception. Space, the accentuated cognizance of it in a grand city like London (or Paris), offered a novelistic alternative.

Back in Paris, Walter Benjamin would strike a pose of deferential impatience, when writing his long essay “The Image of Proust” (1929), which in its ambiguity seems most similar to Woolf in her literary criticism and letters. The fact that Benjamin was busy writing about the city’s arcades, in celebrating the point of view of the flaneur, is a marvelous irony that discloses, in slow motion, the transformation of the novel form before everyone’s eyes but Proust’s. The reality was that Benjamin must have comprehended what he was gently mocking—which is that in Proust’s work there’s a certain “unconstruable synthesis.”[9] He then adds, almost as if he can’t help himself, that never was there “anyone else with Proust’s ability to show us things; Proust’s pointing finger is unequalled” (212). To be sure, like “all great works of literature,” his achievement is one of our “special cases.” Not only does it “transcend the norm”; Proust’s work is “the *actus purus* of recollection itself” (203).

It’s *not* either “the author or the plot.” Other novelists rely upon them to furnish “the unity of the text.” Quite perversely, in Proust “the intermittence of author and plot is only the reverse of the continuum of memory, the pattern on the back side of the tapestry,” Benjamin realizes. According to him, not quite believing it himself, Proust said he’d “prefer to see his entire work printed in one volume in two columns and without any paragraphs” (203). Space had been reinvented. And it was Proust who’d internalized this space, who’d brought its construction into the text itself (in a sense, then, turning the world inside out). “His true interest is in the passage of time in its most real—that is, space-bound—form.” Moreover, “this passage nowhere holds sway more openly,” Benjamin proclaims, “than in remembrance within and aging without” (211).

One’s sense of the built environment, an apprehension of the nature of space *per se*, however, came about because of profound technological transformation. The great historian and Oxford don, Alan Bullock, wrote a definitive, now canonical, essay on Modernism in the early seventies. The title of his essay comes from his juxtaposing of

two images. One is a 1904 cityscape photograph, the London stock exchange at its center; the other is Picasso's 1907 Cubist painting, *Les Femmes d'Alger*. Bullock's "The Double Image" presented the turn into the twentieth century as a new era albeit one yet to be understood, in which there would be even more technological, thereby social and economic, upheaval.[10]

I write about all this now from well past the turn of the twenty-first century. From my perspective, what I find most remarkable about Bullock's essay is that it doesn't even mention the emergence of the modern photograph. The extraordinary improvements in photography, which triggered the Impressionist painting so important to Proust particularly, go unnoticed. (In the late 1830s, for instance, a portable camera obscura with a bitumen-coated pewter plate had come into use. In the mid to late 1800s the Daguerreotype, emulsion plate, and wet plate were developed.) Bullock does mention the Lumière brothers' cinematograph of 1895, but only in passing, seeming not to grasp its significance to the arts and its wider psychological impact on the public.

Proust visited a friend's darkroom as early as 1892. Photography, Benjamin might have said, was woven into the fabric of Parisian life. Proust kept massive collections of photographs. He worked from them in his writing. He appears in a film made of a friend's marriage ceremony in 1904. The question of the advent of cinema, the resultant shifting sense of time and identity that people experienced, are manifest throughout his work. There's certainly a case to be made for the modern photograph as the most significant technological change in the nineteenth century. The fact of the photograph compelled a rethinking of the *real*—possibly an apprehension of *real* for the first time—arising from the photographic image's pronounced objectification over against the viewer. We might better appreciate what space and visibility—ultimately not only spatially imagined time but also *lost* time, that is to say time beyond the reach of memory—could mean when we think about Woolf's writing, and of course Proust's.

A recent, sort of unofficial, poll on Proust's standing in our present moment is preserved on a webpage titled "Six Writers on the Genius of Marcel Proust," at the Literary Hub website. (The six are Siri Hustvedt, Edmund White, Andre Aciman, Francine Prose, Aleksandar Hemon, and Daniel Mendelsohn.) These six novelists share their opinions of him—but of them only Siri Hustvedt captures what I feel was his worldview and methodology. She sees Proust, in quoting him, as being uninterested

in an art that was "a mere vain and tedious duplication of what our eyes see and our intellect records." He believed this kind of literature could only be false because it "severs" the present self from the past.

Proust sought to translate into words

a phenomenology of human experience, which necessarily meant describing a geography of absence because the past

exists only in our embodied minds and not as it was but rather as we imagine it to have been.

A "geography of absence"--*À la recherche du temps perdu* as translated by C. K. Scott Moncrieff is *Remembrance of Things Past*; D. J. Enright's translation became the more literal, and more accurate, *In Search of Lost Time*.^[11] Hustvedt's evocation is of what is *not* there. Perhaps, closer to the point I was making about Proust and photography—more largely about Proust and art, Proust and the modern city—her sense of "absence" has to do with what's there on the spatial plane, the photograph out of time.

There's something else at the heart of Proust's great work. It's the unrecoverable nature of the past, our experience of it as elusive—one's memory of it. We're left in a Beckett-like moment with the search itself. Beckett, like Proust, relied on photography in many ways, including using it metaphorically in his writing. His model was Proust whose powers of observation, as Beckett puts it in *Proust*, his 1930 treatise, "[functioned] with the cruel precision of a camera."^[12] What can lie behind the photograph's image? In *The Guermantes Way* Proust reflects upon the Modern condition typified by a situation in which the person has become "the spectator of one's own absence."^[13]

As important an artistic influence as Proust was for Beckett with respect to the photograph, Henri Bergson's intellectual influence on Proust with respect to time was its equal. Bergson's writings included, notably, his 1910 book *Matière et mémoire*, which Proust read then. (He was related to Bergson through marriage and served as the best man at his wedding.) Bergson's ideas, closer to the point his terminology, are everywhere in *In Search of Lost Time*. His 1889 *Essai sur les données immédiates de la conscience* was published in English as *Time and Free Will* in 1910.^[14] It's possible Woolf didn't read the book then. We know she attended a lecture by Bergson in London, in 1913.

Bergson strove to conceive of memory by likening it to photography, emphasizing its "capricious" nature, which "answers with difficulty to the summons of the will"—not dissimilar to what happens in "dreams."^[15] In other words, as the Bergson character opines in *Sodom and Gomorrah*, "We possess all our memories, but not the faculty to recall them" (ISLT IV, 520). We search in ourselves—Proust's exquisite evocation of transience. Storytelling, like logical operations, exists on the temporal plane. Art is timeless.

Proust is relentlessly visual. Roger Shattuck notes that *In Search of Lost Time* is filled with an array of optical devices and light refractors—a stained glass window, a prism or lens, the negative of a photograph, flickering candlelight, which precede cinematic contraptions like the magic lantern, X-rays, the light on the water from a moving train.[16] Proust imagines the work of the writer, in *Time Regained*, as “merely a kind of optical instrument which he offers to the reader to enable him to discern what, without this book [i.e., *Time Regained*], he would perhaps never have perceived in himself” (ISLT VI, 322). Is the search of the text itself? I suspect Proust’s *real* was not, as Woolf saw it, what many English novelists could render in an overly constrained narrative form. There’s oblivion in Proust.

And his futility should not be missed. Both transience and timelessness, each a form of oblivion, can be held in place by what Bergson had called *durée* (in *Essai sur les données immédiates de la conscience*). *Duration* is literally acted out in cinema: photographs shown across a span of time, creating a fiction of time in which a narrative seems magically to materialize. City and cinema are, in a sense, one and the same.

Proust compares cinema favorably with the literature of mere description (the very decorative quality Woolf could abjure). Of course, cinema and literature are not the same—the “difference” lying, as Patrick Bray points out, “in the nature of their images: film is composed of visual, and therefore spatial, images; the novel of mental images.” George Bluestone, in recognizing that both “novel and film are time arts,” distinguishes the two according to how they take shape. His study *Novels into Film* holds that “the formative principle” of the one is time, and of the other space. Thus, unlike in the novel, or at least the kind of novel Woolf was escaping, the city she knew could resemble nascent cinema; that experience, in turn, deepened the artifice of urban life, vitalizing it. A city, like a film, Bluestone says, “takes its time for granted and forms its narrative in arrangements of space.”[17]

Proust lived through the last years of *La Belle Époque*. It’s in this period that he begins his great opus, which realizes its reach and breadth by 1910. Paris, then, its cityscape, had undergone dramatic change. In London, too, there was an equally dramatic architectural transformation by the early twentieth century. Suffering with an iconic, debilitating illness, Proust worked on for another four years after the Great War. There’s something symbolic in his demise in 1922—which Peter Gay calls a “banner year.”[18] To explain what I mean by this I must return to Benjamin with his fairly back-handed praise, nearly a decade on.

He compares Proust’s “syntax of endless sentences” with “the Nile of language.” His

prose, he observes, “overflows and fructifies the regions of truth.” Even so, Benjamin failed to notice Proust, the harbinger of the Postmodern novel, gamboling over the genius of Joyce. And yet, Benjamin seems to protest, “[e]verything” in Proust “transcends the norm” (201).

In his “friends and companionship, in his works plot, unity of characters, the flow of the narration, the play of the imagination”—all have been “sacrificed” for the sake of “memory” (205). Even so, no one’s eye is a match for his (Beckett would intimate as much the following year). Proust’s revelations are before us without our ever quite knowing whence they came. It’s here, in saying this, that Benjamin finally lets down his mask of pique, allowing the poet in him to come forth:

Proust's most accurate, most convincing insights fasten on their objects as insects fasten on leaves, blossoms, branches,
betraying nothing of their existence until a leap, a beating of wings, a vault, show the startled observer that some
incalculable individual life has imperceptibly crept into an alien world. (208)

I read this evocation of urbanity and think of how something in Woolf drew her to the anomie and alienation of Modernist life as it was burgeoning—a life of forgetting, actually—typified by the city itself. There’s “another gesture in amicable togetherness, in conversation: physical contact,” Benjamin observes about Proust; alas, “[t]o no one is this gesture more alien than to Proust. He cannot touch his reader either; he could not do so for anything in the world” (212).

Woolf confides to her diary on July 26, 1922, in the splendor of her self-discovery: “I have found out how to begin (at 40) to say something in my own voice.” Gay remarks that somehow she’d learned “[to crack] her whip on her prose” and so to make “the most feral brute cringe” at her command. “She moved with ease from broken phrases to elegant formulations. She overrode rules and conventions when it suited her” (73).

Last words, though, go to Proust. On November 13, 1913, following the publication of *Swann’s Way*, an interview of Proust appeared in the Paris periodical *Le Temps* (conducted by Elie-Joseph Bois). In it Proust comments on *In Search of Lost Time* as follows.

Le style n'est nullement un enjolivement, comme croient certaines personnes, ce n'est même pas une question de technique,
c'est â?? comme la couleur chez les peintres â?? une qualité de la vision, la révélation de l'univers particulier que chacun de
nous voit, et que ne voient pas les autres. Le plaisir que nous donne un artiste, c'est

de nous faire connaître un univers de plus?

(Style is by no means an embellishment, as some people believe. It's not even a matter of technique—it's . . . what? A

painter's colors? A quality of vision? The revelation of the particular universe each of us sees, which others do not see?

The pleasure an artist gives us--is it so we come to know another universe?)[19]

NOTES

1. Virginia Woolf, final draft of "Phases of Fiction," Monk's House Papers B.7b, 72, University of Sussex, Brighton, Sussex, UK; in C. J. Mares, "Reading Proust: Woolf and the Painter's Perspective," *Comparative Literature* 41.4 (Autumn 1989): 354. Hereafter cited parenthetically.

2. Virginia Woolf Letter to E. M. Forster, 21 Jan. 1922; qtd. In Kevin Kopelson, "Finishing Proust," *Iowa Review* 31.2 (Fall 2001): p. 121. Woolf's letters to Forster are archived in the E. M. Forster collection of papers (1904-1969) at the New York Public Library.

3. Virginia Woolf, "Phases of Fiction" II, *The Bookman* (May 1929), p. 276. "Phases of Fiction" Parts I, II, and III appeared in *The Bookman* in respectively April, May and June 1929. A PDF of the three parts is online with free access, and is held at Harvard Canvas. Citations of "Phases of Fiction" hereafter will be parenthetically.

4. Marcel Proust, *Lettres à une amie (à Marie Nordlinger): 1899-1908*. Ed. Marie Riefstahl. Manchester: Édition du Calâme, 1942; p. 34. Qtd in Mares 331.

5. Letter to Vanessa Bell, April 1927, *Letters* III, 365). *The Letters of Virginia Woolf*, Ed. Nigel Nicolson and Joanne Trautman. 6 vols. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975-80. Hereafter cited parenthetically as *Letters*. In Mares 327.

6. Woolf, "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown." *The Hogarth Essays* no. 1. London: Hogarth Press, 1924. Casey M. Walker, "Marcel Proust Meets Mrs. Dalloway," *Raritan* 34.1 (Summer 2014), p. 35; hereafter cited parenthetically.

7. Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*. Trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith, London: Wiley-Blackwell, 1992; p. 25.

8. Alex Zwerdling, *Virginia Woolf and the Real World*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986; p. 268. In Mares 355.

9. Walter Benjamin. "The Image of Proust." 1929. *Illuminations: Essays and*

Reflections. 1955. New York: Schocken Books, 1968; p. 203. Hereafter cited parenthetically.

10. Alan Bullock. "The Double Image." *Modernism 1890-1930*. Eds. Malcolm Bradbury and James Walter McFarlane. New York: Penguin, 1976.

11. Marcel Proust, *Remembrance of Things Past*. Trans. C. K. Scott Moncrieff. 1922-30. *In Search of Lost Time*. Trans. D. J. Enright. New York: Modern Library, 1992.

12. Samuel Beckett. *Proust*. London, Chatto and Windus, 1931; p. 15.

13. Marcel Proust, *In Search of Lost Time III*, p. 183; *In Search of Lost Time 7* vol. in 6, Trans. C.K. Scott Moncrieff, Terence Kilmartin and Andreas Mayor, Revised by D. J. Enright, New York: Modern Library, 1998; hereafter cited parenthetically as ISLT. Cf. Ira Nadel, "Beckett, Proust, and the Darkroom," *Journal of Modern Literature* 40.4 (Summer 2017), p. 57.

14. Henri Bergson, *Essai sur les données immédiates de la conscience*, Paris: Librairie Germer Baillière, 1889. *Time and Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness (Essai sur les données immédiates de la conscience, 1889)*, London: Allen & Unwin, 1910.

15. Henri Bergson. *Matter and Memory* (1896). Trans. N. M. Paul and W. S. Palmer (1908). New York: Cosimo Classics, 2007; pp. 101-02. In Mary Bergstein. *In Looking Back One Learns to See: Marcel Proust and Photography*, Amsterdam: Brill, 2014, p. 29; hereafter cited parenthetically.

16. Roger Shattuck, *Proust's Way: A Field Guide to In Search of Lost Time*, New York: W. W. Norton, 2000; pp. 6-9. Cf. Bergstein, pp. 35-36.

17. Patrick M. Bray, "'The 'Debris of Experience': The Cinema of Marcel Proust and Raoul Ruix," *The Romanic Review* 101.3 (May 2010), p. 468. George Bluestone, *Novels into Film*, Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003, p. 61; in Bray p. 468.

18. Peter Gay, "Intermittences of the Heart," *The American Scholar* 73.4 (Autumn 2004), p. 73; hereafter cited parenthetically.

19. My translation. The French text of the interview is available online at *Le Parisienne*, 23 July 2015.

