

## A Second Life: Notes on Adorno's Reading of Proust

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Twice Adorno published a short text in which he asserted the importance of Proust for his "intellectual economy," claiming that, over the decades, the French writer had exerted a consistent influence upon his philosophical efforts.<sup>1</sup> The text initially appeared in *Die Neue Zeitung*: It was written in answer to a survey that sought to establish the events that had had a significant impact on German public figures in 1953. Adorno welcomed the publication of a new translation of *Du côté de chez Swann* [The Way by Swann's], part of an ambitious project to have all the volumes of Proust's novel rendered into German for the first time. Four years later, the same text appeared again in *Dichten und Trachten*, an end of year review of Suhrkamp Verlag. This subsequent appearance intended to mark the German publication of the last volume of *A la recherche du temps perdu* [In Search of Lost Time]. Given that Walter Benjamin's and Franz Hessel's earlier attempt at translating the entire novel had failed and that its reception had been interrupted by the rise to power of National Socialism, Adorno hoped that with this new translation Proust would come back to life as if for the first time, and in doing so prompt the fruition of "something crucial" in a cultural environment that had otherwise remained "behind the times."

If, assuming that such a distinction could be shown to be pertinent, one wanted to establish the manifest rather than the secret or hidden presence of Proust in Adorno's thought, one would have to turn to the radio-essay "Short Commentaries on Proust," included in an issue of the literary journal *Akzente* and then in Adorno's second collection of essays on literature.<sup>2</sup> Just as the opportunity to publish the aforementioned general remarks had been presented by the new German edition of *Du côté de chez Swann*, so the completion of Eva Rechel-Mertens' translation of the *Recherche* provided the occasion for the writing of the radio-essay, together with the broadcasting at which the well-known actress Marianne Hoppe read the sentences of Proust quoted by the philosopher. But in this case Adorno's contribution proved to be more substantial, concerned as it was with demonstrating the unity of the work by a close reading of selected passages from the different volumes.

Adorno, in fact, refers to Proust as early as 1930, in an article for the *Frankfurter Zeitung* entitled "Note on Names." It seems likely that he had felt drawn to the author in the course of conversations with his friend Hermann Grab, a music critic and writer from Prague who had learnt parts of Proust's novel by heart, and with his teacher Walter Benjamin, whose essay "On the Image of Proust" dates from 1929.<sup>3</sup> In one of the first letters Benjamin addressed to Adorno, he appears to assume a shared interest in Proust's work, mentioning four volumes of the *Recherche* he had taken with him on a trip to Italy. Furthermore, Adorno must have come across Curtius' famous study on Proust, published in 1925, when reviewing, in 1940, a book by the Neokantian philosopher Heinrich Rickert. In his late essay on Beckett's *Endgame* he quotes extensively from those passages in Rickert's book which contain citations from Curtius' study. Benjamin and Curtius both draw the reader's attention to the relevance of proper names for Proust, an interest Roland Barthes revisited in the seventies. Some thirty-five years after referring to Proust in his newspaper article, Adorno once again focused on the force that, according to the French writer,

must be attributed to proper names. He did so in a section of “Meditations on Metaphysics,” the last chapter of his *Negative Dialectics*.

The name of a place can promise happiness, Adorno says in this section after appealing to Proust. For the promise to be kept, for happiness to come into existence, all that would seem to be required is a visit to the actual place. And yet when, attracted by the force inherent in the promise of happiness, one arrives at the place in question, one finds that happiness withdraws as if it were a rainbow. What has allowed then for an experience here is precisely the difference between the name and the named. Adorno does not wish to denounce the anticipation of the imagination as an illusion, just as he does not wish to reduce the experience to the discovery of an empirical truth. This is why he insists on the fact that the withdrawal of happiness at the point where one would expect to be happy does not amount to a disappointment. Rather, one realizes that, having arrived at the place itself by following the trail laid out by the name, one has been brought too close to the promised happiness for it to be experienced as such. Happiness, then, lies neither in the image emanating from the name nor in the reality of the place named, but in the space and in the time stretched out between the image and reality. It springs from seeing something from the inside. However, insofar as the inside is just the other side of the outside, it only appears truly when removed from the thing. What Adorno gives here is the exact definition of the *idea*, even if he does not employ the philosophical term. In his “Short Commentaries,” he characterizes Proust as a “Platonist” who dismissed opinion.<sup>4</sup> Could one summarize Adorno’s argument by asserting that happiness is linked to the disclosure of the idea? That happiness is to be found residing in neither the name nor the named may only be understood once one has undergone the experience of searching for it in the place or the reality towards which the name points. Happiness, in other words, would depend entirely on whether one reaches a limit at which a second life could begin; one that is not the imaginary life of the promise and yet does not merge with real life in the conventional sense. It is as if the fulfillment of the promise of happiness consisted in the preservation of its form instead of the actualization of its content, or as if keeping the promise meant returning to it so as to render the form a part of the content. Adorno speaks here of a “metaphysical experience,”<sup>5</sup> and not of experience in general, because he wants to highlight the distance that separates happiness from both a matter of fact and a state of mind. Metaphysics interpreted in this manner has something to do with one’s own comportment towards life, with a pursuit of happiness and the yielding of an insight that manifests itself in the form of a lack of disappointment. It thereby acquires a moral or ethical dimension. By protecting each other from dumbness and madness—from the necessity of the literal and the vacuity of the figurative, from the ontological “there is” and the psychological “as if”—the name and the named bestow happiness with the reality of a second life. What Adorno ultimately suggests is that the named is too real to be real in any morally relevant fashion while the name, on the contrary, is never real enough. Does Proust not write, in the last volume of the *Recherche*, that it is always the attachment to an object owned that provokes the death of the owner? In the wake of Adorno’s reading of Proust, one could claim that happiness is not an object to be owned, that it does not have the form of a real thing, and that in becoming attached to it one runs the danger of turning it into something that could be appropriated.

But the happy life must be understood as a second life in yet another sense. It must be understood as a second life because, having been achieved once, it can be achieved once again. Adorno partakes in the experience of which Proust writes. This is the

reason why the name as a promise of happiness leads Adorno to conceive of “the concept,” unsettling the opposition between the singularity of the name and conceptual universality. Inasmuch as conceptual universality reveals itself to have a moral or ethical dimension, and insofar as it cannot remain indifferent to the form of one’s own comportment towards life, it is the “concept of the concept” itself that is at stake in Adorno’s reflections on “metaphysical experience,” and not merely the concept of happiness: “Only in the face of the absolutely and indissolubly individuated can one hope that precisely this has existed already and will exist one more time.”<sup>6</sup> If the concept of happiness demands that happiness, which as such is bound to radical individuation, be more than a private experience—a fragment, as Adorno states elsewhere in his “Meditations on Metaphysics”—then this demand, based as it is on the experience that moral or ethical relevance cannot be extricated from the specificity of a lived situation without for that matter being less relevant, must extend to the concept of the concept. To put it otherwise, it is the name that calls for the concept in morals and ethics, so that no presupposed validity may be attributed to the concept prior to its being informed by the name. Clearly, when Adorno vindicates the importance of Proust for his “intellectual economy,” for what concerns him as a philosopher and what his philosophy endeavours to achieve, he is not just coining a phrase.

The passage from *Du côté de chez Swann* to which Adorno alludes in his meditation describes a dialectical relationship between the name and the named. There the proper names of the places listed by the narrator are said to have absorbed the very images with which they are associated, and this to the extent that on each and every occasion of a name’s being mentioned, the image accompanying it arises anew. The names constitute the archive of a voluntary memory. And yet this storage of images cannot leave them unaltered. The narrator of the *Recherche* understands the transformation undergone by the image through its relation to the name in terms of a perpetuation of the distance between the name and the named; or, more precisely, it is the named itself which comes to be split between the image which has been submitted to a transformation and the image which has not. The name is more than a label appended to an image, as it were, for it possesses its “*lois propres*” [own laws]<sup>7</sup> from which images cannot be exempted. Thus Adorno shares Proust’s experience of names only up to a point. If names are necessarily involved in a production of images, they do not simply function as abbreviations or as the keys to an archive in which images would be preserved intact. For Proust, however, the splitting and doubling of the named can only lead to disappointment. On the day the narrator visits the places whose names he cherishes as if they were more than a meaningless series of letters, confronting the images stored in these names with a reality that resembles the mere letter in that it is plainly what it is and nothing else, he cannot but feel disappointed. In *La prisonnière* [The Prisoner], the narrator compares the disappointment that awaits the insatiable curiosity of the lover with the disappointment that awaits the equally insatiable curiosity provoked by the names of places.<sup>8</sup> Hence in one case, the case of Proust, the “law” of the name is conceived of as fatal because it causes the distance between the name and the named to increase beyond the limit at which happiness would still be possible, while in the other, the case of Adorno, the transformation triggered by the name is not considered to have a blinding effect since it fosters an insight on which happiness hinges. Therefore what enables “metaphysical experience” is also that which, in the absence of a law or a rule controlling and regulating the relationship between happiness and disappointment, threatens to render it impossible. Everything seems to come down to comportment—as opposed to compulsion—or to whether names—the law, the

letter, necessity—allow for the possibility of comportment in the first place. And yet if for the narrator of *Le temps retrouvé* [Finding Time Again] converting sensations into their spiritual equivalent, ideas, constitutes the task for the artist,<sup>9</sup> then the artist who knows that an unbridgeable gap keeps the name and the named apart forever, must try to extract the idea from the memory of things, from the second life which the recovery of time lost confers on them.

If, having shed some light on the manifest presence of Proust in Adorno's thought, one now wanted to establish his secret or hidden presence, one could start by relating an enigmatic sentence in the monograph on Mahler that reads like an aphorism to a passage from *La fugitive* [The Fugitive]. Such a procedure would not aim at producing evidence of the dissimulation of an objective influence upon the philosopher by the artist but would contribute towards creating a constellation of similar intentions. "To the extent that every dead person resembles a person murdered by the living, she also resembles a person whom the living would have to rescue," Adorno affirms without explaining his claim any further.<sup>10</sup> However, the reader of Proust may hear an echo here that originates in a comparison introduced by the narrator of *La fugitive* between the death of his grandmother and the death of his beloved.<sup>11</sup> In both instances, the lack of suffering that the other's absence brings about, makes him feel ashamed of having survived the death of the other and, as a consequence, to consider his life as being henceforth besmirched by a double murder. Proust's skepticism concludes that only the world's baseness will forgive such a deed. Adorno detects an impulse to rescue the dead in precisely the realization of the murderous disruption of life. On the one hand, then, he seems to differ from Proust; and yet on the other, one could maintain that the very impulse Adorno detects in the perception of death as murder, the need to elevate life to a second life, is essentially an expression of the artistic accomplishment of the *Recherche*. To the one who loves others and things and is attentive to sense, to that which surfaces when the name and the named, the letter and the image diverge, reality as the domain of the inexorably literal, of dumb proper names, must appear as a fabrication, a falsification effected by the sceptic's reductionism. Whether this understanding is indicative of a delusion or an idea will show in the artist's and the philosopher's work, even though seeing what the work shows will not be tantamount to securing proof of its truth. If, as Proust writes in *La prisonnière*, the speed with which death catches up with the living before they die is so different in each case that one should not speak of death in general terms, if it is such that the attention directed at others and things cannot hope to catch up with reality,<sup>12</sup> leading this attention to fall prey to indifference and coldness long before it can resist them, and if, to express the same matter otherwise, the name is always already a "*nom écrit*" [written name],<sup>13</sup> and thus no longer something to which one may still respond, then the stakes for the artist and the philosopher could not be higher. The "remembrance of things past," Adorno stresses in his "Theses Upon Art and Religion Today" with reference to Proust, braves death by "breaking the power of oblivion engulfing every individual life."<sup>14</sup>

The motif of a second life in Adorno permeates all his thinking to the degree that, much more than being just one motif among others, it is synonymous with his "concept of the concept," with his very notion of philosophy. Philosophy's aim, from this perspective, is to produce a second life since whatever takes place generates an ideality of a quite specific kind. Art teaches philosophy to be attentive to such specificity. For while it can be argued that whatever takes place possesses a value of irreplaceable singularity or that, by definition, the general and the universal cannot

take place, the fact that something takes place also means that it must be repeatable. What Adorno understands with his reading of Proust is that art and philosophy are intertwined—it is always the unique that calls for repetition and repetition remains empty unless it affects in turn, the unique. Negative dialectics, an expression which, like iterability in Derrida, points to the tension between singularity and ideality as one arising from the mutual antagonism of each of the two poles, inherits the lesson of both art and philosophy. The *idea* is the concept used to name the repetition of the unique as such. It is the philosopher's task to develop this concept. The artist's task is to capture the experience of happiness for which only a second life can allow, the life that stems from art's touching upon the idea. On the whole, in spite of the commentaries, quotations and constant allusions that demonstrate Proust's manifest or hidden presence in his work, Adorno is perhaps in a similar position to the film director Luchino Visconti who never made the one film he wanted to make the most, a film based on the *Recherche*. But just as it has been suggested that Visconti did not make this one film because he made it in the guise of all his other films,<sup>15</sup> one could suggest that Adorno did not write a major text on Proust because the idea of the French writer's novel already informed the investments and flows at the heart of the philosopher's "intellectual economy."

A genealogy of the motif of a second life that Adorno appropriates for his thought would have to trace it back to at least two distinct sources. The affirmation, to be found in the "Meditations on Metaphysics," that nothing can be rescued without exposing itself to a transformation which sees it traverse the "portal of death," testifies to the biblical and dialectical origins of the motif of a second life.<sup>16</sup> The affirmation, to be found in the essay on the museum dedicated to the memory of Hermann Grab, that love dwells on a "second and already past life" of things rather than on their "first" life—since nothing may be said to last unless mediated by memory—testifies to the Proustian origins of the dominant motif.<sup>17</sup> In a rather sketchy interpretation of *A l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs* [In the Shadow of Young Girls in Flower], Adorno himself creates a link between speculative dialectics and Proust's novel, in which Hegel is mentioned only once, in a remark on the dialectical doctrine of becoming: "Thus in Proust, whom the French, with good reason, frequently experience as German, everything individual and transient becomes null, as in Hegelian philosophy. The polarity of happiness and transience directs him to memory. Undamaged experience is produced only in memory, far beyond immediacy, and through memory aging and death seem to be overcome in the aesthetic image. But this happiness achieved through the rescue of experience, a happiness that will not let anything be taken from it, represents an unconditional renunciation of consolation. Rather the whole life be sacrificed for complete happiness than one bit of it be accepted that does not meet the criterion of utmost fulfillment."<sup>18</sup> It is then the acknowledgment of the nullity of singularity—the recognition of the letter—that permits the singular—the image stored and engendered by the name—to pertain to a life which unfolds neither as the letter's mechanical reproduction nor as the imagination's deluding and ultimately vacuous exuberance but rather as the experience of the thing delivered from itself to itself, as it were, or of the thing that, having changed into the idea, fills the one who participates in this life with the intensity of happiness. In relation to things, Proust distinguishes the position of the image from that of the idea. First, the narrator of *Le temps retrouvé* says, we reach for the beauty of images that are situated behind things. Only when we have done so and the images' beauty has ceased to enthrall us, do we reach for the beauty of the idea which is placed not behind but in front of things. We

understand the idea in its beauty, that which is in a certain sense closer, when we have moved away from what is more distant, the image.<sup>19</sup>

The sight of a group of trees in the vicinity of Balbec makes such an impression on the narrator of the *Recherche* that, in *La prisonnière*, it is interpreted as a clue to the “construction d’une vie véritable” [construction of a true and real life].<sup>20</sup> According to Adorno, the ephemeral character of natural beauty provides the model for Proust’s intuition of transience.<sup>21</sup> It is thus not surprising to come upon the writer’s name at the beginning of the section on natural beauty in *Aesthetic Theory*.<sup>22</sup> Yet does this section not also supply a privileged example of a productive appropriation of the motif of a second life, all the more so as the revision to which the philosopher submits the dialectical critique of natural beauty does not simply revoke the role Hegel assigns to artistic beauty? Adorno tries to rescue natural beauty by inscribing it in a historical context: the context of art. He believes that the experience of art cannot be dissociated from an experience of natural beauty and that, conversely, the experience of natural beauty itself requires an experience of art. Nature is perceived as beautiful when, appearing in a fugitive moment, it turns into an image. Its appearance is a “free favour,” to use Kant’s notion. But this image into which nature turns when it ceases to be instrumentalized is not the image of some object. If Adorno warns against artists who relate to nature through a gesture of imitation, whereby art would be given over to the form of a crude realism or naturalism, it is precisely because nature, prior to any intervention on the part of the artist, is already an image; already it opens onto the domain of a second life in which the line of demarcation between art and nature is blurred. The literal reproduction of appearing nature amounts to a tautological doubling that erases the appearance with which this life here rests. It is a piece of kitsch, an empty and sentimental simulation. What is instead meant by the use Adorno makes of the concept of an image is that nature becomes expressive without expressing anything specific. Adorno contradicts the view Hegel presents in his lectures on the philosophy of art. Nature is not indifferent. On the contrary, it addresses its beholder, and it is only in this address that I become the one who beholds. I feel touched. Hence nature does not express a meaning or convey a content in an image. Rather, one could say that it entirely consists in its touching the one who looks upon it. And when touched, the beholder feels a particular kind of pleasure. He feels the relief that comes from the open into which he enters. The viewer to whom nature fleetingly appears is drawn into the openness for which nature in this case stands. And if art, too, is endowed with the capacity of touching, then paradoxically the works of art that turn away from nature prove to be those which show it the greatest fidelity. Nature can be seen only blindly, in a second life of blindness. Its enigmatic character, the fact that it is a pure image or a pure expression, is reflected in the hermetic character of art, in that ultimately art must forbid all usage. Art and nature communicate when they are no longer *of any interest*. Is this the reason why, in the end, the *Recherche* is fundamentally a novel of abstraction, an abstraction that cannot be opposed to concretion as if theory were a label which the writer had forgotten to remove? The idea of a second life is the idea of an abstraction ensuing from the concretion of the singular—of the name.

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York: Continuum 2007) and Visconti: Insights into Flesh and Blood (Stanford University Press: Stanford 2008).

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, "Meine stärksten Eindrücke 1953" [My Strongest Impressions in 1953], *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 20.2 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1986), 734.

<sup>2</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, "Short Commentaries on Proust," *Notes to Literature*, vol. 1, trans. S. Weber-Nicholsen (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991).

<sup>3</sup> While on a summer holiday in southern Germany in 1926, Adorno mentions Proust on the back of a postcard addressed to Siegfried Kracauer: "I read French *kitsch*, as usual, Marcel Proust and Franz Brentano." (Theodor W. Adorno and Siegfried Kracauer, *Correspondence* [Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2008], 123)

<sup>4</sup> Adorno, *Notes to Literature*, vol. 1, 180.

<sup>5</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973), 373.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 373 f. (translation modified).

<sup>7</sup> Marcel Proust, *Du côté de chez Swann, A la recherche du temps perdu*, vol. 1 (Paris: Gallimard [Bibliothèque de La Pléiade], 1987), 380; Marcel Proust, *The Way by Swann's*, trans. Lydia Davis, *In Search of Lost Time*, ed. C. Prendergast (London: The Penguin Press, 2002), 391.

<sup>8</sup> Marcel Proust, *La prisonnière, A la recherche du temps perdu*, vol. 3 (Paris: Gallimard [Bibliothèque de La Pléiade], 1988), 649; Marcel Proust, *The Prisoner*, trans. C. Clark, *In Search of Lost Time*, 128.

<sup>9</sup> Marcel Proust, *Le temps retrouvé, A la recherche du temps perdu*, vol. 4 (Paris: Gallimard [Bibliothèque de La Pléiade], 1989), 457; Marcel Proust, *Finding Time Again*, trans. I. Paterson, *In Search of Lost Time*, 187.

<sup>10</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Mahler*, trans. E. Jephcott (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 29 (translation modified).

<sup>11</sup> Marcel Proust, *La fugitive, A la recherche du temps perdu*, vol. 4, 78; Marcel Proust, *The Fugitive*, trans. P. Collier, *In Search of Lost Time*, 463.

<sup>12</sup> Proust, *La prisonnière*, 704; Proust, *The Prisoner*, 180.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 705 (French); *ibid.*, 182 (English).

<sup>14</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, "Theses Upon Art and Religion Today," *Notes to Literature*, vol. 2, trans. S. Weber-Nicholsen (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 298.

<sup>15</sup> Florence Colombani, *Proust—Visconti. Histoire d'une affinité élective* (Paris: Philippe Rey, 2006), 18 f.

<sup>16</sup> Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 392.

<sup>17</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, "Valéry Proust Museum," *Prisms*, trans. S. Weber and S. Weber-Nicholsen (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1983), 182 (translation modified).

<sup>18</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, "On Proust: II. *Within a Budding Grove*," *Notes to Literature*, vol. 2, 315.

<sup>19</sup> Proust, *Le temps retrouvé*, 510; Proust, *Finding Time Again*, 240.

<sup>20</sup> Proust, *La prisonnière*, 765; Proust, *The Prisoner*, 239 (translation modified).

<sup>21</sup> Adorno, "Valéry Proust Museum," 182.

<sup>22</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. R. Hullot-Kantor (London: Continuum, 2004), 63.