

Proust's Innovative Vision of Literature As Seen Through his Correspondence

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“Avez-vous remarqué que souvent les lettres d'un écrivain sont supérieures au reste de son œuvre?” (II 779) ‘Have you noticed how often a writer's letters are superior to the rest of his work?’ (II 508), the comtesse d'Arpajon asks the guests of a dinner party in Marcel Proust's *Le Côté de Guermantes*, *The Guermantes Way*. It is a remark that certainly does not apply to the author. His monumental correspondence, almost always hurriedly written and with no stylistic concern whatsoever, is filled with information about the man Proust and his daily life, but reveals surprisingly little about his ideas on art and literature or his novel *A la recherche du temps perdu*, *Remembrance of Things Past*. When it mentions his writing, it is usually in connection with practical questions or information he is seeking. Yet, it includes a handful of letters in which Proust does discuss his literary project or his novel in some detail or in which, trying to convince a publisher or else correcting misreadings or misunderstandings, he clearly states his novelistic intentions and explains his innovative vision of literature.

Philip Kolb, the late American scholar who dedicated his life to the publication of Proust's correspondence, estimated that the latter had written over one hundred thousand letters in his lifetime. Out of those, some 5,400, meaning about five percent, have been published. The vast majority of the others have disappeared forever, even though some new ones surface every year. A *Correspondance générale* of Proust was published in six volumes from 1930 to 1936, but one had to wait until the years 1970-93 to see the complete result of Kolb's monumental work and the publication of the *Cor-*

respondance that comprises twenty-one volumes and includes, in chronological order, all the then known letters of Proust. Finally, in 2004, under the title *Lettres*, an anthology of Proust's correspondence came out: it contains in one volume of over one thousand pages 627 letters that count among the most notable ones.

If Proust's letters seem at first to be of limited interest from a literary standpoint, it is because they chiefly reveal the concerns of a man who appears to care mainly about his social life, his health, and his finances. Moreover, they reflect such an eagerness to please and contain so many compliments, apologies and expressions of politeness directed toward their addressees that they are borderline obsequious and may weary, unless they amuse them, those who read them today. Clearly, except maybe at the end of his life, Proust did not imagine his correspondence would some day be published and therefore did not have posterity in mind when he was writing it. Nevertheless, his letters, despite or perhaps because of their faults, constitute precious documents for what they reveal about the man, his personality and his life, as well as, occasionally, about his ideas in general and his writings. Indeed, since Proust never kept a diary, unlike André Gide for instance, and since he never wrote his autobiography or his memoirs, his correspondence is the main source of information about him. It is much more useful than his novel, of which he always said that it was not an autobiographical work, and than the recollections or testimonies of his family, friends, and acquaintances, inevitably subjective, incomplete, and sometimes unreliable, especially those written or obtained years after his death.

Snob, frivolous, scheming, calculating, always polite, excessively flattering, extremely sensitive, curious about everything, sometimes hypochondriac and sometimes really ill, apologizing constantly, especially about his inability to see his correspondent: that is the way Proust appears to the person who bothers to read his entire correspondence. These first lines of an October 1903 letter to Anna de Noailles are typical:

Madame, Vous êtes infiniment gentille. Je serais ravi de dîner mercredi. Mais je dois sortir jeudi (et ne peux guères faire autrement, c'est une chose déjà remise quatre fois parce que j'ai toujours été malade). Et je ne peux pas sortir deux jours de suite, étant malade plusieurs jours après chaque sortie. (III 132; 132)¹

Madame, You are infinitely kind. I should be delighted to dine with you on Wednesday. But I'm obliged to go out on Thursday, an engagement that has already been put off four times because I've always been ill. And I can't go out two evenings in a row, because every time I go out it takes me several days to recover. (I 257)²

In another letter, in 1920, he does not hesitate to write to Natalie Clifford Barney, the author of a book entitled *Pensées d'une amazone* 'Thoughts of an Amazon': "votre livre est ravissant 'et profond' et fait honte aux miens" 'your book is lovely "and deep" and puts mine to shame,' adding that he would like, "dans de meilleurs jours" 'in better days,' to "causer" 'chat' with her (XIX 114; 516).

As one can expect, Proust's letters to his mother reflect both his extreme sensitivity and his immense love for her while other letters show his generosity (he is always ready to do a favor) or his sense of humor, especially prevalent in his correspondence to the musician Reynaldo Hahn. About the latter, it is mainly because of the letters he sent him, and his other lovers, that one cannot doubt Proust was a homosexual, even if, in that respect, the most compromising documents have been destroyed or never made public. His correspondence also provides a great deal of information about his daily life. It reveals how he lived and occupied himself, whom he saw and what trips he took, and allows us to know, at specific times of his life, not only the state of his health, but also his state of mind and, mainly through his letters to Lionel Hauser, his financial adviser, the state of his finances. His correspondence from 1908 to 1922, the years of the writing of the *Recherche*, is especially useful as it describes his "état général et le genre de vie absurde qu'il a engendré" (XVI 136; 453) 'general state and the kind of absurd life it has engendered,' to quote what he writes to René Boylesve in 1917, at a time when he leads a semi-recluse life. Likewise, his letters are helpful to understand his reaction to the major events, joys, and sorrows of his life. To mention the latter only, the letters he sends to Madame Straus the day his mother died (when he still hopes she will survive) and to Anna de Noailles the next day, are particularly moving, as are those he addresses to his former lover Alfred Agostinelli the very day Agostinelli died and to his friend Émile Straus and to Gide the

following days.

In addition, even if, in his letters, Proust rarely discusses the major themes of his novel, he gives his opinion about a great deal of literary and artistic works as well as about the major issues of his time, such as the Dreyfus Affair or World War I. Maybe more importantly, Proust's correspondence also brings precious information about the genesis and the history of the writing of the *Recherche*. His novel is alluded to for the first time in May 1908 in a letter to his friend Louis d'Albufera to whom he writes that he has "en train" 'in hand': "une étude sur la noblesse [,] un roman parisien [,] un essai sur Sainte-Beuve et Flaubert [,] un essai sur les Femmes [,] un essai sur la Pédérastie (pas facile à publier) [,] une étude sur les vitraux [,] une étude sur les pierres tombales [,] une étude sur le roman (VIII 53; 239)" 'a study on the nobility [,] a Parisian novel [,] an essay on Sainte-Beuve and Flaubert [,] an essay on women [,] an essay on pederasty (not easy to publish) [,] a study on stained-glass windows [,] a study on tombstones [,] a study on the novel' (II 281). Indeed, the *Recherche* is going to come out of several of those projects, especially the essay on Sainte-Beuve that led directly to the novel.

There is a number of other important letters in which Proust reveals interesting insights about his novel, such as the one he wrote to Jacques de Lacretelle in April 1918 in which he explains that the church in Combray has several models and that the Vinteuil sonata is inspired by various pieces by Camille Saint-Saëns, Richard Wagner, César Franck, Franz Schubert, and Gabriel Fauré. However, the most extraordinary letter maybe the one to Agostinelli mentioned earlier. He had left Proust a few months earlier and had settled in Southern France. Fascinated by airplanes, he drowned in the bay of Antibes when his plane fell into the Mediterranean sea on May 30, 1914. In the letter written that day to his former lover, in which he tries to convince him to come back, Proust mentions a plane he has ordered for him and alludes to another extravagant purchase, maybe, according to Kolb, a Rolls-Royce, both of which Agostinelli seems to have rejected. Incredibly, parts of that letter are used almost literally in *Albertine disparue*, *The Fugitive*, in the letter the hero writes to Albertine after she has left him, the only difference being that, understandably, the plane has become a yacht. Thus Proust has used not only his life's events but also his correspondence

to compose his novel.

If Proust's correspondence has obviously been invaluable to his biographers, a number of critics have studied it in relation to the novel and all have reached the same conclusion, namely, to quote Pierre Raphaël who did so as early as 1938,

... la Correspondance ... ne diffère pas du *Temps perdu*. Dans le roman et dans les lettres, nous avons trouvé la même pensée. L'attitude de l'épistolier et du romancier est la même. Nous ne pouvons conseiller la correspondance de Proust comme un "seuil" du *Temps perdu*, elle en forme le supplément, issu d'une même pensée, issue d'un même besoin d'écrire. (27-28)

... the Correspondence ... does not differ from the *Recherche*. In the novel and in the letters, we have found the same thought. The attitude of the letter writer and of the novelist is the same. We cannot recommend Proust's correspondence as a "threshold" of the *Recherche*, it constitutes its supplement, born of the same thought, born of the same need to write.

Likewise, Alfred Kazin remarks that "The letters from the cork-lined room bring us near the Proust of the novel . . . the Proust who was interested not in doing a self-portrait but in 'general laws'" (27). In fact, some critics went even further and found very intriguing links between the correspondence and the novel. For example, since the *Recherche* evolved into a novel from an essay on Sainte-Beuve in which the narrator discussed literature with his mother, several of those critics, Alain Buisine and Martin Robitaille among them, have especially been interested in the letters to Jeanne Proust and discovered unexpected connections with the *Recherche*, the former even concluding his essay by stating that Proust's novel is nothing but a long letter to his mother.

That being said, another valuable aspect of Proust's correspondence has been neglected, even in Luc Fraisse's very comprehensive *Proust au miroir de sa correspondance* 'Proust in the mirror of his correspondence': the fact that it contains few but interesting remarks that, put together, constitute some kind of *Art poétique*, a set of ideas that promise a completely original work and announce some of the revolutionary ideas that appear in *Le Temps retrouvé*, *Time Regained*.

Indeed, in a small number of letters, Proust explains in what way the novel he is writing is different from what is published at the time, even though, because he is always publicly humble and prudent, he constantly describes the book he is working on as *modeste*.

However, when Proust initially discusses the innovative aspect of his book, he mentions its indecent side and the significant role that a homosexual character plays in it, the one who will later become Charlus. Thus, in 1909, in a letter to a potential publisher, Alfred Vallette, it is the first subject he brings up:

Je termine un livre qui malgré son titre provisoire : *Contre Sainte-Beuve, Souvenir d'une Matinée* est un véritable roman et un roman extrêmement impudique en certaines parties. Un des principaux personnages est un homosexuel. Et ceci je compte que, tout à fait à la lettre, vous m'en garderez le secret. Si la chose était sue avant le livre paru, nombre d'amis dévoués et craintifs me demanderaient d'y renoncer. (IX 78; 273)

I am finishing a book which in spite of its provisional title: *Contre Sainte-Beuve, souvenir d'une matinée*, is a genuine novel and an extremely indecent one in places. One of the principal characters is a homosexual. And this I count on you to keep strictly secret. If the fact were known before the book appeared, a number of devoted and apprehensive friends would ask me to abandon it. (II 341)

When he writes that he is finishing his book, he of course means the first version of a novel that will eventually have two, three and then more volumes. In any case, as he explains in 1912 to another publisher, Gaston Gallimard, the innovation resides less in the fact that he grants a central role to a homosexual character than in the latter's personality: "C'est un caractère que je crois assez neuf, le pédéraste viril, épris de virilité, détestant les jeunes gens efféminés, détestant à vrai dire tous les jeunes gens comme sont misogynes les hommes qui ont souffert par les femmes" (XI 146; 332) 'I think the character is fairly original, the virile pederast, in love with virility, loathing effeminate young men, in fact loathing all young men, just as men who have suffered at the hands of women become misogynists' (III 75).

If it is typically the first subject Proust mentions when he writes potential publishers, because he thinks that could be a reason why they would not be interested, he immediately adds that his book contains several other innovations, in the letter to Vallette, for instance: “De plus je m’imagine qu’il y a dans tout cela des choses neuves (pardonnez-moi!) et je ne voudrais pas être dépouillé par d’autres” ‘Moreover I fancy it contains some new things (forgive me!) and I shouldn’t like to be robbed by others.’ Likewise, in 1913 in a letter to René Blum, a friend of Bernard Grasset who will end up publishing *Du côté de chez Swann*, *Swann’s Way*, after stating that his novel includes “des pages très indécentes” ‘some very indecent pages,’ he describes it as “**un tout très composé, quoique d’une composition si complexe que je crains que personne ne le perçoive et qu’il apparaisse comme une suite de digressions. C’est tout le contraire**” (XII 26; 342) ‘on the contrary a carefully composed whole, though so complex in structure that I’m afraid no one will notice and it will seem like a series of digressions’ (III 91). In fact, in a letter written that same month to the same person, as if he wanted to emphasize the uniqueness of his book, he even hesitates to call it a novel: “Je ne sais pas si je vous ai dit que ce livre était un roman. Du moins, c’est encore du roman que cela s’écarte le moins” (XII 30; 343) ‘I don’t know whether I told you that this book is a novel. At least it’s from the novel form that it departs least’ (III 94).

In other letters, he explains more precisely the nature of those new things he brings to literature. For example, here is how he describes his book, which he now calls a novel, to his friend Antoine Bibesco in October 1912:

L’ouvrage est un roman ; si la liberté du ton l’apparente semble-t-il à des Mémoires, en réalité une composition très stricte (mais à ordre trop complexe pour être d’abord perceptible) le différencie au contraire extrêmement des Mémoires: il n’y a dedans de contingent que ce qui est nécessaire pour exprimer la part du contingent dans la vie. Et par conséquent dans le livre, ce n’est plus contingent. D’ailleurs rien que par mes articles tu peux voir que si personnelles qu’aient pu être mes impressions, je ne les considère que comme la manière d’entrer plus avant dans la connaissance de l’objet. . . . Mais mon impression approfondie, éclaircie, possé-

dée, je la cache à côté de quinze autres sous un style uni où j'ai foi qu'un jour des yeux pénétrants la découvriront. Et d'heures exaltées il ne reste qu'une phrase, parfois qu'une épithète, et calmes. Il m'est impossible de t'expliquer dans une lettre ce que j'ai voulu faire dans mon livre. (XI 127; 328)

The work is a novel; if its freedom of tone seems to give it something of the appearance of an autobiography, in reality a very strict composition (too complex to be immediately perceptible) differentiates it profoundly there from: the element of the contingent in it is no more than is necessary to express the part played by the contingent in real life. And consequently, in the book, it's no longer contingent. Besides, from my articles alone you can see that however personal my impressions may have been, I regard them only as a way of penetrating further into the quintessence of the object. . . . But my deep-down, thought-out, innermost impression I'm careful to conceal among a dozen others in a non-emphatic style beneath which, I feel sure, discerning eyes will one day discover it. And from impassioned hours there remains only a phrase, sometimes only an epithet, and the whole quite calm. It's impossible to explain in a letter what I've tried to do in this book. (III 63)

However, he tries to do it partially one year later, in a letter to Louis de Robert:

Ce que je fais, je l'ignore, mais je sais ce que je veux faire; or, j'omets . . . tout détail, tout fait, je ne m'attache qu'à ce qui me semble . . . déceler quelque loi générale. Or comme cela ne nous est jamais révélé par l'intelligence, que nous devons le pêcher en quelque sorte dans les profondeurs de notre inconscient, c'est en effet imperceptible, parce que c'est éloigné, c'est difficile à percevoir, mais ce n'est nullement un détail minutieux. Une cime dans les nuages peut cependant, quoique toute petite, être plus haute qu'une usine voisine. Par exemple, c'est une chose imperceptible si vous voulez que cette saveur de thé que je ne reconnais pas d'abord et dans laquelle je retrouve les jardins de Combray. Mais ce n'est nullement un détail minutieusement observé, c'est toute

une théorie de la mémoire et de la connaissance . . . non promulguée directement en termes logiques . . . (XII 103; 357)

What I do, I have no idea, but I know what I want to do; the fact is that . . . I omit every detail, every fact, and fasten on whatever seems to me . . . to reveal some general law. Now, since this is never revealed to us through the intellect, since we have to fish for it so to speak in the depths of our unconscious, it is indeed imperceptible, because it's far down, it's difficult to detect, but it's not in the least a minute detail. A hilltop in the clouds may nonetheless, although it appears tiny, be higher than a nearby factory. Something you could call imperceptible is for instance that taste of tea which I don't recognize at first and in which I rediscover the gardens of Combray. But it's in no sense a minutely observed detail, it's a whole theory of memory and perception . . . not formulated directly in logical terms . . . (III 115)

To give another example on the same subject that is particularly noteworthy because it deals with the manner he writes, with what he seeks to accomplish in his work and with the way he distinguishes himself from other writers, here is how Proust answers a critique of *Du côté de chez Swann*, explaining to its author, Henri Ghéon, in January 1914:

Vous croyez que je parle de Madame Sazerat parce que je n'ose pas omettre que je l'ai vue ce jour-là. Mais je ne l'ai jamais vue ! Je considère les heures où j'ai ressenti une certaine exaltation devant la nature ou les œuvres d'art, comme celles où j'étais en état de «connaissance» un peu profonde. Mais m'oubliant entièrement et ne pensant qu'à l'objet que je veux connaître, je ne fais pas avec cette connaissance partielle ce que feraient tels de vos amis . . ., je ne raconte pas que j'ai éprouvé cela, je n'entoure pas de lyrisme ce petit morceau de vérité. Mais quand j'ai trouvé d'autres petits morceaux de vérité je les mets bout à bout pour tâcher de reconstituer, de restaurer l'objet, fût-ce un vitrail. Avec des heures passionnées et clairvoyantes que, au cours d'années différentes, il m'a été donné de passer à la Sainte-Chapelle, à Pont-Audemer, à Caen, à Évreux, j'ai en mettant bout à bout les petites impressions

qui m'avaient été données, reconstitué *le vitrail*. J'ai mis devant lui M^e Sazerat pour accentuer l'impression humaine de l'église à telle heure. Mais tous mes personnages, toutes les circonstances de mon livre sont inventés dans un but de signification. Je n'ai jamais entendu raconter l'histoire de Swann, j'ai voulu montrer (mais cela m'entraînerait trop loin). (XIII 3; 371)

You believe that I speak of Madame Sazerat because I don't dare to omit that I saw her that day. But I never saw her! I consider the hours when I felt certain exaltation in front of nature or works of art, as those when I was in a state of somewhat deep "knowledge." But forgetting myself entirely and only thinking of the *object* I want to know, I don't do with that partial knowledge what some of your friends would do . . . I don't say that I felt that, I don't surround that small piece of truth with lyricism. But when I have found other small pieces of truth I put them together to attempt to reconstitute, to restore the object, even if it were just a stained glass window. With impassioned and clear-sighted hours, which, in the course of different years, I was able to spend at the Sainte-Chapelle, in Pont-Audemer, in Caen, in Évreux, I have, by putting together the small impressions that had been given to me, reconstituted *the stained glass window*. I put M^e Sazerat in front of it to emphasize the human impression of the church at such hour. But all my characters, all the circumstances of my book are invented toward a meaningful goal. I never heard Swann's story being told, I wanted to show (but that would take me too far).

Later in the same letter he focuses on another side of the work that differentiates it from everything that had been published until then: "mon livre est dépouillé de ce qui occupe la majeure partie des romans: à moins que ce ne soit pour faire signifier à ces actes quelque chose d'intérieur, jamais un de mes personnages ne se lève, ne ferme une fenêtre, ne passe un pardessus etc." (XIII 3; 371) 'my book is devoid of what occupies most novels: except to give these acts some interior meaning, my characters never get up, close a window, put on a coat etc.'

Seven years later, Proust explains to André Lang what characterizes the analytical novel and thus his own, even if he claims that he

would prefer to call it “le roman d’introspection” ‘the introspective novel’: “ce ne doit être nullement un roman de l’intelligence pure, selon moi. Il s’agit de tirer hors de l’inconscient pour la faire entrer dans le domaine de l’intelligence, mais en tâchant de lui garder sa vie, de [ne pas] la mutiler, de lui faire subir le moins de déperdition possible, une réalité que la seule lumière de l’intelligence suffirait à détruire semble-t-il” (XX 292; 567) ‘it certainly ought not to be a purely intellectual novel, in my opinion. It’s a matter of wrestling from the subconscious to bring it within the domain of the intelligence, while trying not to mutilate it but to keep it alive by preserving it as far as possible from degradation, a truth which, seemingly, the pure light of intelligence would be enough to destroy’ (IV 134).

Elsewhere in his correspondence, Proust deals with the construction of his novel and explains how it is innovative, for example in the famous February 1914 letter to Jacques Rivière in which he reveals the outline of his work at a time when only the first volume had been published and when most readers could not see that the truths contained in the first volume are not necessarily the truths of the novel and that one could understand that volume only after reading the last one, which, because of the war and Proust’s death, will not come out until 1927:

Enfin je trouve un lecteur qui *devine* que mon livre est un ouvrage dogmatique et une construction! . . .

J’ai trouvé plus probe et plus délicat comme artiste de ne pas laisser voir, de ne pas annoncer que c’était justement à la recherche de la Vérité que je parlais, “ni” en quoi elle consistait pour moi.... Ce n’est qu’à la fin du livre, et une fois les leçons de la vie comprises, que ma pensée se dévoilera. Celle que j’exprime à la fin du premier volume . . . est *le contraire* de ma conclusion. . . .

Dans ce premier volume vous avez vu le plaisir que me cause la sensation de la madeleine trempée dans le thé, je dis que je cesse de me sentir mortel etc. et que je ne comprends pas pourquoi. Je ne l’expliquerai qu’à la fin du troisième volume. Tout est ainsi construit. (XIII 43; 377)

At last I find a reader who has *grasped* that my book is a dogmatic work with a structure . . .

I thought it more honorable and tactful as an artist not to let it be seen, not to proclaim, that I was setting out precisely in search of the Truth, nor to say what it consisted in for me. . . . It's only at the end of the book, when the lessons of life have been grasped, that my design will become clear. The thought I express at the end of the first volume . . . is the *opposite* of my conclusion. . . .

In this first volume you have seen the pleasurable sensation the madeleine soaked in tea gives me—as I say, I cease to feel mortal etc and I can't understand why. I'll explain it only at the end of the third volume. The whole thing is constructed in this way. (III, 144)

Then he sums up his argument with these words: “cette évolution d'une pensée, je n'ai pas voulu l'analyser abstraitement mais la recréer, la faire vivre” ‘I didn't want to analyse this philosophical evolution abstractly, I wanted to recreate it, to make it live,’ adding: “Je suis donc forcé de peindre les erreurs, sans croire devoir dire que je les tiens pour des erreurs; tant pis pour moi si le lecteur croit que je les tiens pour la vérité” ‘I'm therefore obliged to depict errors, without feeling it necessary to explain that I regard them as errors; so much the worse for me if the reader thinks I regard them as the truth.’

Later, he explains even more precisely what he attempts to do with his novel and thereby offers his vision of literature. For instance, in 1919, in another letter to Rivière, he insists on the complexity of his characters' psychology, implying it is another way he differentiates himself from other novelists: “Une des choses que je cherche en écrivant . . . c'est de travailler sur plusieurs plans, de manière à éviter la psychologie plane. Les Cottard etc. ne sont donc pas rappelés ici pour insérer de la variété dans l'étendue, mais pour donner . . . un aperçu des substructions et des étagements divers” (XVIII 81; 488) ‘One of the things I look for when I write . . . is to work on several levels, so as to avoid plane psychology. The Cottards etc. are therefore not recalled here to insert variety in the expanse, but to give . . . a glimpse of the various substructions and layers.’ He develops that same idea a few months later, in a letter to Jean de Pierrefeu, first stating that in his novel “l'analyse psychologique . . . aboutit toujours à la vérité objective, à cette vérité sans laquelle il n'y a pas d'action

possible, et qui sera plus nécessaire demain que jamais" (XIX 22; 507) 'psychological analysis ... always leads to objective truth, to that truth without which there is no possible action, and which will be more necessary tomorrow than ever.' Then, about Rivière's famous article titled "Marcel Proust et la tradition classique" 'Marcel Proust and the Classical Tradition,' he adds:

Malgré tant d'éloges je ne trouve pas entièrement juste l'article de Jacques Rivière qui donne trop l'impression que ma psychologie . . . a quelque chose d'immobile. . . . Mais je ne vois pas dans ses pages magnifiques, le mouvement de vie qui fait qu'on ne connaît dans mes livres les personnages que comme on le fait dans la vie, c'est-à-dire qu'on se trompe d'abord sur eux, mouvement au cours duquel une autre révolution s'accomplit, celle du personnage autour de lui-même. (XIX 22; 507)

Despite so many praises I don't find completely right Jacques Rivière's article that gives too much the impression that my psychology . . . has something immobile. . . . But I don't see in his magnificent pages, the movement of life that makes us know the characters of my book as we do in life, meaning that we are first wrong about them, movement in the course of which another revolution takes place, that of the character around himself.

In fact, he had first discussed that literary innovation in 1914, in the letter to Ghéon mentioned earlier, in which he states that his novel "a pour objet de montrer les positions diverses que prennent par rapport à une autre un certain nombre de personnes au cours de la vie, de faire pour la psychologie, ce que ferait un géomètre qui passerait de la géométrie plane à la géométrie dans l'espace, de faire veux-je dire de la psychologie dans le Temps" (XIII 3; 371) 'has for object to show the various positions that a number of people take in relation to one another in the course of their lives, to do for psychology what a geometer would do by going from plane geometry to geometry in space, to do, I mean, psychology in Time.'

About another topic he particularly takes to heart, Proust briefly offers to Émile Henriot, in December 1920, his conception of

“l’art véritable,” presenting ideas that were first outlined in *Du côté de chez Swann* and then developed in *Le Temps retrouvé*:

Je crois que tout art véritable est classique, mais les lois de l’esprit permettent rarement qu’il soit, à son apparition, reconnu pour tel. Il en est à ce point de l’art comme de la vie. Le langage de l’amant malheureux, du partisan politique, des parents raisonnables, semble, à ceux qui le tiennent, porter avec soi une irrésistible évidence. On ne voit pas pourtant qu’il persuade ceux auxquels il s’adresse: une vérité ne s’impose pas du dehors à des esprits qu’elle doit préalablement rendre semblables à celui où elle est née. (XIX 351; 527)

I believe that all art is classical but that the laws of the mind often prevent it from being recognized as such at its first appearance. Art, in this respect, is like life. The language of unhappy lovers, party politicians, sensible parents, automatically carries an irresistible authority. Yet those to whom their words are addressed are not noticeably convinced: if a truth is to impose itself on minds from outside, it must first have molded them to a likeness of the mind wherein it originated. (IV 81)

Elsewhere, to Camille Vettard in March 1922, he sums up two essential ideas that characterize his novel. He first deals with the new and particular role that time and memory play in it:

Ce que je voudrais que l’on vît dans mon livre, c’est qu’il est sorti tout entier de l’application d’un sens spécial . . . qu’il est bien difficile de décrire . . . à ceux qui ne l’ont jamais exercé. Mais ce n’est pas votre cas et vous me comprendrez . . . si je vous dis que l’image . . . qui me paraît la meilleure . . . pour faire comprendre ce qu’est ce sens spécial, c’est peut-être celle d’un télescope qui serait braqué sur le temps, car le télescope fait apparaître des étoiles qui sont invisibles à l’œil nu, et j’ai tâché . . . de faire apparaître à la conscience des phénomènes inconscients qui, complètement oubliés, sont quelquefois situés très loin dans le passé. (XXI 44; 581)

What I would like people to understand about my book is that it emerged fully fledged as a result of the application of a special sense . . . almost impossible to describe . . . to those who have never exercised it. But that not being so in your case, you'll grasp my meaning . . . when I say that . . . the . . . image which seems to give the best idea of this special sense is that of a telescope trained on time, for a telescope brings into focus stars invisible to the naked eye, and I have tried . . . to make visible to the conscious mind those unconscious phenomena which, completely forgotten, are sometimes located in the distant past. (IV 162)

As for the second idea, it summarizes in a few words the conception of style which Proust develops over many pages in *Le Temps retrouvé* and which finds itself at the heart of his personal philosophy: "Quant au style, je me suis efforcé de rejeter tout ce que dicte l'intelligence pure, tout ce qui est rhétorique, enjolivement et à peu près, images voulues et cherchées . . . pour exprimer mes impressions profondes et authentiques et respecter la marche naturelle de ma pensée" 'As for style, I've deliberately rejected anything dictated purely by the intellect, anything imprecise, rhetorical, prettyfying, images that are forced, used for effect . . . so as to give expression to my deep and authentic sensations and respect the natural progression of my ideas.' In fact, that sentence also summarizes several other remarks on linguistic and stylistic matters that appear in various letters and that have been studied by Stephen Ullmann, one of the first critics to show interest in that aspect of Proust's correspondence, who demonstrated how much it reveals "his keen interest in these problems, his extraordinary powers of observation, his encyclopaedic knowledge, his sensitivity to stylistic nuances" (238).

Since Proust's correspondence was written by a man who looks very much like his novel's hero and who is a potential writer, and since it contains, scattered about, most of the materials that will make up the novel, Luc Fraisse was right to consider it as some kind of "laboratoire de l'œuvre" 'laboratory of the work' (*La Correspondance* 12). However, it is even more than that. The few letters in which Proust explains his project and discusses his vision of literature make up some sort of brief aesthetic treatise that not only complements the theories he offers in his earlier writings, gathered in *Contre Sainte-Beuve*, and the revelations that strike his hero in *Le*

Temps retrouvé, but also, partly because the ideas expressed in those letters are usually presented in a simplified manner, helps us understand them better and as a result, sheds new light on *A la recherche du temps perdu*.

Notes

1 The first reference is to the volume and the letter number in the Kolb edition, the second to the letter number in the Leriche one.

2 The English translations of the letters come from the Kolb edition in four volumes. The references are to the volume and the letter number. Unattributed translations are mine.

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