

Reflections on Proust

Morris Berman

For a long time now, my life has run on two parallel tracks. One has been to make sense of that life; the other, to make sense of the world. I attempted to do these things, in part, through writing. Of the 16 books I have written, 14 fall into the latter category, and two into the former (one of these being a volume of poetry). This is to be expected. In the case of relatively unknown authors such as myself, the public can hardly be expected to be interested in the details of their lives, and publishing an autobiography would be grandiosity, a species of delusion. And yet, we have something like this in the case of Marcel Proust, when he was still relatively unknown. His semi-autobiographical novel, *In Search of Lost Time*, managed to make sense of both his life and the world at the same time. The profundity of his study of soul and society rendered it the greatest novel of the twentieth century.

I came to Proust early, and then late. In my thirties, I read the first two volumes of the work, then got distracted and moved on to other things. In my seventies, I turned to the *Search* in depth, wanting to learn more about my own life; really, to see if it made sense thus far. What follows, however, is not a study of myself, but of Proust, and what he ultimately concluded about the individual and the world. In a word, I see the *Search* as a guide for the soul, a road map of spiritual liberation, and thus of potential value to us all.

During the 1960s and 1970s, in the USA and elsewhere, many young people discovered LSD,

and it changed their lives for ever. The vision, as LSD-guru Timothy Leary explained it, was that of a spiritual life, as opposed to the one offered by mainstream America: the worship of money and power. This led many to believe that if everyone took the drug, it would change the entire country, and usher in the Age of Aquarius. Rumors were rife that there was a hippie plot afoot to put acid in the water supply, for example. In any case, the Summer of Love came and went, and America became even more materialistic and power-driven, taking most of the hippies along with it. Turns out, they were not all that averse to money and power.

Proust experienced something similar, but without drugs, and called it 'involuntary memory'. The paradigm example is by now quite famous: dipping a madeleine into a cup of tea, drinking the tea, and suddenly having a detailed vision of 'Combray' (Illiers, in Normandy), where he spent part of his childhood years. For the benefit of those who have not read Proust, I quote this section at some length:

...weary after a dull day with the prospect of a depressing morrow, I raised to my lips a spoonful of the tea in which I had soaked a morsel of the cake. No sooner had the warm liquid, and the crumbs with it, touched my palate, a shudder ran through my whole body, and I stopped, intent upon the extraordinary changes that were taking place. An exquisite pleasure had invaded my senses, but individual, detached, with no suggestion of its origin. And at once the vicissitudes of life had become indifferent to me, its disasters innocuous, its brevity illusory – this new sensation having had

on me the effect which love has of filling me with a precious essence; or rather this essence was not in me, it *was* myself. I had ceased now to feel mediocre, accidental, mortal. Whence could it have come to me, this all-powerful joy?....

And suddenly the memory returns. The taste was that of the little crumb of madeleine which on Sunday mornings at Combray (because on those mornings I did not go out before church-time), when I went to say good day to her in her bedroom, my aunt Léonie used to give me, dipping it first in her own cup of real or of lime-flower tea....

And once I had recognized the taste of the crumb of madeleine soaked in her decoction of lime-flowers which my aunt used to give me (although I did not yet know and must long postpone the discovery of why this memory made me so happy) immediately the old grey house upon the street, where her room was, rose up like the scenery of a theatre to attach itself to the little pavilion, opening on to the garden, which had been built out behind it for my parents (the isolated panel which until that moment had been all that I could see); and with the house the town, from morning to night and in all weathers, the Square where I was sent before luncheon, the streets along which I used to run errands, the country roads we took when it was fine. And just as the Japanese amuse themselves by filling a porcelain bowl with water and steeping in it little crumbs of paper which until then are without character or form, but, the moment they become wet, stretch themselves and bend, take on colour and distinctive shape, become flowers or houses or people, permanent and recognizable, so in that moment all the flowers in our garden and in M. Swann's park, and the water-lilies on the Vivonne and the good folk of the village and their little dwellings and the parish church and the whole of Combray and of its surroundings, taking their proper shapes and growing solid, sprang into being, town and gardens alike, all from my cup of tea.

If mysticism involves contact with some non-ordinary reality, if it is an altered state of consciousness, then Proust became a mystic at that moment. But then, there is mysticism and there is mysticism. The experience with the madeleine was not a transcendent one, Freud's 'oceanic experience', or what I have called elsewhere the 'ascent experience'. No, this was 'horizontal', a kind of Zen satori, that sees

reality for what it really is, without any filters. With this, says Malcolm Bowie (in *Proust Among the Stars*), Proust found 'the lost key to the nature of things'. And this, as Proust himself said, became the point of his book – namely, to illustrate involuntary memory, to demonstrate the sheer power of it. He also wanted to (metaphorically) put this 'acid' into the drinking water, so that everyone might stop wallowing in b.s., pursuing status, 'love', and art as a fetish – all of which he regarded as illusory – and instead see art and creativity as the 'true life'.

Our true nature, said Proust, is outside of time, and involuntary memory is the gateway to redemption. Roland Barthes said that *Search* was a gospel rather than a novel; the writer Maurice Rostand asserted that it was 'a soul in the guise of a book'. Proust was, in effect, offering his readers the divine without God or religion.

Of course, LSD didn't change the US, the *Search* didn't change France, and St Francis didn't change Italy. As one pope, a contemporary of the latter, wisely remarked, not everyone can be St Francis. Proust juxtaposed what he regarded as the 'true life' with the false one; and although he believed that the former was available to all, most are inevitably going to choose the latter. What, then, was the point of the exercise?

Good question. One answer is that truth is not a matter of majority vote. What LSD, the *Search* and St Francis revealed was the possibility of living a different type of life, whether it appealed to the masses or not. An ideal, if you will; a window on to another world, for those few who might wish to pursue it. 'True life' means true happiness; false life means chasing after substitute satisfactions, all the while having the haunting feeling that something is terribly wrong.

One thing that is wrong is what the Proust biographer Roger Shattuck called 'soul error'. Plainly put, most of us are not happy with who we are. We have this gnawing doubt, and believe that we are in some way inherently defective. 'I would never join a club that would accept me as a member', Groucho Marx famously quipped.

It's a kind of reverse Midas touch, that everything you put your hands on turns to shit. Friendships go sour, sexual relations get screwed up, my writing is inadequate, I am inadequate, etc. Proust (as narrator) states this belief about himself many times throughout the book until the very end, at which point, as many critics have observed, 'loser takes all'. With the aid of involuntary memory, he turns his life around.

Soul error is the belief that there is no inner worth in here; that only what is outside of me, that which I *can't* obtain, has value. This is what renders 95 per cent of social life a farce, a gigantic waste of time. Feeling deeply inadequate, we are driven, forever on edge, always out to impress others that we are special, better than everyone else. This renders the interaction sterile, a vapid charade. The same dynamic applies to friendship and 'love'. Involuntary memory, as far as Proust is concerned, is the only way out. It amounts to epiphany, revelation. It comes unbidden: suddenly, you are purely a body, purely kinesthetic awareness, existing outside of time. This is what feeds the soul; this is the soul's true need. At the end of the day, this is all we have. Tolstoy said much the same thing.

Can everyone choose this path, as Proust believed? The historical record would suggest not, and the word 'utopia' literally means 'nowhere'. Plato's assertion, that most people mistake illusion for reality, and are thus in effect sleepwalking through their lives, would seem to be the case. Sokei-An, the first Buddhist teacher to come to America (in 1945), finally observed that trying to turn Americans into Buddhists was like 'holding a lotus to a rock'. After ten years, say, you lift the lotus up off the rock and discover that its roots didn't penetrate the rock – not even slightly.

And so the charade of status and power and money will go on, and history will remain the nightmare that James Joyce said it was. We may wish to awaken from it, but somehow never manage to do so. Enlightenment is, at best, an individual quest, a private 'solution'.

Nuts.

References

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About the contributor



Morris Berman is a poet, novelist, essayist, social critic, and cultural historian. He has written 16 books and nearly 200 articles, and has taught at a number of universities in Europe, North and South America, and Mexico. He won the Governor's Writers Award for Washington State in 1990, and was the first recipient of the annual Rollo May Center Grant for Humanistic Studies in 1992. In 2000, *The Twilight of American Culture* was named a 'notable book' in a *New York Times* book review, and in 2013 Morris received the Neil Postman Award for Career Achievement in Public Intellectual Activity from the Media Ecology Association. His most recent book, a collection of short stories entitled *The Heart of the Matter*, was published in 2020.