

IMPRESSIONIST-CLASSICIST TENSIONS

The problem of art is of paramount significance to Proust both as a man and as the hero of *A la recherche du temps perdu*. In Proust's novel, beside numerous esthetic comparisons and reminiscences, his conception of art and literature is distinctly expressed. The highest esthetic appreciation is given to the painting of Vermeer in whom Proust, as well as other late nineteenth century critics, saw a precursor of impressionism. What is it that Proust values in Vermeer, and which aspects of Vermeer's art are closest to him? For Proust, Vermeer is above all the creator of a unique world, in its own way just as inimitable as that of Dostoyevsky or Hardy. Shortly before his death, Proust, gravely ill, went to the exposition from The Hague to see Vermeer's «View of Delft», with the yellow wall that he admired so much. This excursion, which had a very bad effect on Proust's health, was reflected in *La Prisonnière*, in the famous episode of the writer Bergotte's death. Like Proust, Bergotte disregards mortal danger for the sake of «a small piece of wall, painted such a beautiful yellow.» He feels that his own works lack the completeness and intrinsic worth of Vermeer's technique.

In this acknowledgement of the quality of intrinsic worth in the highest attainment of artistic craftsmanship lies the key to the understanding of Proust's esthetic views. Proust underwent the influence of intuitivist esthetics, according to which the aim of art consists in the overcoming of «practical,» «conditioned» vision, and which contrasted art with the social behavior of people, the artistic representation of reality with scientific cognition, and proclaimed the intuitive character of creativity. Although Proust in principle does not oppose art to science, he considers, that the task of the artist is to see the world «directly,» «such as it is» (*A l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs*). According to Proust, there are discoveries in art just as in science. One of the heroes of *A la recherche*, the brilliant artist Elstir, discovers new, hitherto unknown aspects of reality. However, considerations of progress in art are clothed by Proust in the form of a subjective thesis that art «creates» reality; thus, Elstir's water colors bring to life inanimate objects (*A l'ombre*).

The idealistic opposition of art and life and the affirmation of the primacy of art over reality are caused by Proust's world outlook.

Not for nothing does Proust consider that the value of art is defined by the degree to which it reflects the artist's soul and his subjective vision of the world, and not by the extent to which the ideas in it are significant (*Le Temps retrouvé*). The world of every real artist, according to Proust, is his own, unique world, which reflects true reality only in so far as it is an excuse for self-expression. Thus, Dostoyevski's innovations consist for Proust mainly in the uniqueness and mysteriousness of his female characters, in the «new and terrible beauty» of Raskolnikov's or Rogozhin's house (*La Prisonnière*). In so far as art represents an artist's individual vision, every new and original work requires a certain effort in order to be perceived; as a result, the essence of that which is represented is attained; this relates the process of perception to the creative process. Art is the source of the highest delight, the only absolute and lasting joy. The apotheosis of art and the glorification of the immortality of its creators are embodied in the closing lines of the scene of Bergotte's death in *La Prisonnière*. which Rainer Maria Rilke considered among the most beautiful pages in world literature.

Only art can free man from the power of time and relativity; only art connects him with eternity. This conclusion brings us to the end of Marcel Proust's lengthy memoirs. After a long trip along the paths of life, the narrator succeeds in perceiving the true aim of life, which is artistic creation. Proust's hero

therefore decides to seek the time lost, to seek his own life in its «true and clear essence» (*Le Temps retrouvé*).

In this manner art is the acme of the symbolism of the system of being in Proust; it gives true meaning to human existence and is its sole justification. Only by evaluating this fact correctly is it possible to define accurately Proust's place in twentieth century French literature. The appeal to intuition and the preaching of art as the only escape from the senselessness of life are typical for writers of the so-called «neo-classical» school; the leading figures of this school, beside Proust, were André Gide, Paul Valéry, and, with certain reservations, Paul Claudel. «Neo-classicism» was an original rebirth of symbolism which had begun before the war, and which had realized itself in the atmosphere of temporary stability of post-Versailles France. The writers of the «neo-classical» school saw the solution of the contradictions of reality in the sphere of spiritual life, be it the Catholicism of Claudel, the cult of reason in Valéry, or the apology of art in Gide and Proust.

In the domain of form the «neo-classicists» tried to overcome the impressionism typical of the early symbolists; they wanted to adapt symbolism to the «French tradition,» to regulate it, to «make it efficient.» Proust's artistic method shows tendencies similar to those of the other «neo-classicists.» It is a complicated and contradictory method. One of its components is impressionism. Proust often states that the only criterion of truth for a writer is the impression; it is for him «what an experiment is to a scientist» (*Le Temps retrouvé*). For this impression to be authentic, the artist must make an effort to break away from all learned methods and concepts; he must, in the name of artistic honesty, forget his acquired knowledge; he must become an ignoramus. Proust carried over into *A la recherche* a number of the methods of impressionistic painting, and above all, the perception of nature within the limits of optical impressions. The mainly psychological landscape of nineteenth century classical realism is alien to Proust. In *A la recherche*, the landscape has an independent, almost self-sufficing meaning. Often the author's similes and metaphors transform the most ordinary phenomena of reality into colorful fairy tales which remind one of the canvases of Claude Monet or the music of Debussy; thus, for instance, the description of the restaurant in Rivebelle, near Balbec in *A l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs*. Sharply subjective associations of feelings relate Proust to the impressionistic lyrics of Verlaine and Rimbaud. By the early morning street sounds the narrator knows whether the weather is damp or freezing. The sounds of names of people and cities call forth in the narrator type most varied associations of color and meaning, reminiscent of Rimbaud's «Vowel» sonnet.

Never the less the impressionism of *A la recherche* is not limited to the adoption of the methods of outdoor painting or to the repetition of the themes of early symbolist poetry. The principles of construction of images, the peculiarities of psychological characterization, and several other traits of the style of *A la recherche* are connected with impressionism. The development of images in Proust's novel is usually given, not in logical sequence, but in the order of perception or recollection of the various traits of a character. Proust considers that he learned this from Dostoyevski's characters and from the «Letters» of Mme de Sévigné, in which she shows things in the order of their perception, «not explaining them first by a causal relationship» (*A l'ombre*). That is why Proust usually does not give an immediately developed portrait of his characters. Acquainting the reader with Swann, he limits himself to a light sketch. The morals, manners, and character of the dramatis personae appear gradually, usually through one principal external trait. Thus, when first mentioning Charlus, Proust mentions only casually the look of the protuberant eyes of a strange gentleman in a cotton tick suit. The narrator next notices this look several years later at Balbec, as he is walking past the casino. Marcel thinks that it is a swindler following him and his grandmother. However, some time later Mme de Villeparisis introduces them to her nephew Charlus, and Marcel recognizes the same stranger. Again his look pierces the narrator with lightning speed, but

lasts only an instant, and then there appears an intentional indifference and hypocrisy. The strangeness of Charlus' look is explained only much later, when the narrator observes his meeting with the tailor Jupien. But even after this, Proust often returns to Charlus' glance, comparing it on one occasion with the look of El Greco's «Grand Inquisitor.» Thus the characters of *A la recherche* represent an aggregate of external signs which are evidence of their inner essence. This is connected both with the general philosophical basis of *A la recherche* and with the impressionistic prevalence of detail in Proust's method.

There is still another aspect, beside impressionism, of Proust's method; it, too, is connected with his philosophical views. The composition of *A la recherche*, as well as the principle of image construction in the novel, are affected by symbolism. For Proust there is no «ordinary,» «practical» measurement of time; its flow must be felt through the evolution of the hero's consciousness. There are no dates in the novel; only the mention of events - MacMahon's retirement, the Dreyfus affair, the Russian ballet seasons, the World War - make it possible to relate the action approximately to generally accepted chronology. Proust purposely rejects plot and dramatic situations, which in his opinion oversimplify reality and reflect its «musical» variety as little as does a libretto its opera. Proust unhesitatingly breaks with all the customs and traditions of French literature to devote twenty pages to the story of a train trip, one hundred fifty pages to the description of a dinner at the Guermantes', etc. It is not surprising therefore that there is no development of action as such in *A la recherche*. Never the less, in accordance with Proust's views, his characters undergo constant evolution.

Their personality seems to multiply, and is presented in aspects which contradict each other and which logically do not agree. These transformations of character are the more surprising in that Proust as a rule consciously obscures the events that, from the point of view of plot, are the most important ones of their lives. Each new character aspect logically negates the preceding one; but by virtue of that negation, it must contain that aspect within itself, in so far as they are various embodiments of one and the same essence (*A l'ombre*). Swann's image is characteristic in this respect. In the first novel of Proust's cycle, we meet him as a friend of the narrator's family. Swann's father, a baptized Jewish stockbroker, left him a fortune of five million. An accomplished esthete and *arbiter elegantiarum* of Paris in the 1870's and 1880's, Swann is received in the most refined society. Marcel's family do not dream that their neighbor is a close friend of the Count of Paris and the Prince of Wales, and one of the pampered habitués of the Faubourg St. Germain. This is the first incarnation of Swann. Having married the onetime cocotte Odette, Swann appears in another aspect opposite to the first. He now rarely appears in society, rejects brilliant acquaintances. Knowing that his wife will never be received in «respectable» society, Swann is ready to fawn upon the bourgeois in order to get their approval of Odette. But the transformations of Swann are not yet over. When the Dreyfus affair splits France into two camps, Swann joins those who want the trial reviewed. In accordance with this, his sympathies change: the friend of the pretender to the French throne becomes an admirer of Clemenceau. Even his appearance becomes unrecognizable. Swann's death is mentioned casually; like his marriage, it remains obscure.

Almost all the characters of *A la recherche* undergo similar transformations. To a certain extent this is conditioned by the basis of Proust's creative method itself - impressionism. In addition, the changes in external aspect are intended to symbolically emphasize the relativity, the conditionality of our perception. Here Proust's method goes in essence beyond the limits of impressionism, and the idealism of his world outlook finds a symbolistic expression. This is connected with his general attempt to «overcome» impressionism, to create «classicism.»

Several investigators (among them E. R. Curtius and Leo Spitzer) have pointed out that Proust's method cannot be called impressionistic. However, each of these investigators considers Proust's «overcoming» of impressionism in a different way. While Spitzer discusses Proust's use of the heritage of the writers of the rationalist seventeenth century, Curtius emphasizes the «Platonism» of *A la recherche*. Curtius' conception is more convincing. In fact, although Proust did turn to the heritage of the classicists, he did this not so much to overcome impressionism as to provide a basis for it. According to N. Rykova's correct remark in her introduction to the third volume of the 1936 Leningrad edition of Proust, what attracts him to the prose of Mme de Sevigne and Saint-Simon are just those traits which are close to impressionism. This is not so much an attempt to overcome impressionism as an effort to make it «intellectual,» «traditional.» The overcoming of impressionism, in Proust, went by another path, which in philosophy would correspond to an appeal to objective idealism.

It is not difficult to notice that, in spite of the impressionistic basis of Proust's method, true reality in his works is not always limited to a subjective combination of sensations and perceptions. In *A l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs* we find a very interesting remark that the combination of sensations represents our consciousness of ourselves rather than a material body. For Proust, as an artist, the simple recording of «original,» «undistorted» impressions is not enough: he wants to reach their real essence, to rise above the one-sidedness of sensory perception. Proust does not reject typification. Overcoming impressionism and symbolism, Proust sometimes arrives at realistic generalizations. An inconsistent but never the less noticeable realistic tendency appears in the depiction of French reality, in the creation of characters like Françoise, Charlus, the Guermantes, and the Verdurins.

But stylistically the overcoming of impressionism mainly leads Proust to appropriate several traits of symbolism. Proust considers the metaphor the very basis and core of his style. According to Proust, reality can be expressed stylistically only by means of comparisons: the truth comes through when the writer takes two different objects, reveals their connection and encloses them in «the essential links of a beautiful style,» and connects them by an «indestructible» metaphor (*Le Temps retrouvé*). Proust's similes and metaphors (there are no essential difference between them for him) are typical of symbolism. Especially characteristic is the frequent likening of views of nature and characters to works of art, the comparison of people with plants or animals. Thus Combray by moonlight appears to the narrator as one of Hubert Robert's landscapes. The shouts of delivery boys echoing in the street in the morning are compared to the recitatives of «Boris Godounov» and to the vague, indefinite melancholy of «Pelléas et Mélisande.» When the narrator observes Charlus' and Jupien's first meeting in *Sodome et Gomorrhe*, their facial expression is at first incomprehensible but then suddenly becomes clear; the narrator compares the maneuvers of the baron and the tailor with the properties of plants which attract insects for the purpose of pollination, as described in Darwin's «The Power of Movement in Plants.»

The esthetic quality of Proust's similes and metaphors is uneven. Among delicate poetic images one can often find mannered and pretentious figures, whose artistic imperfection is explained mainly by the subjectivistic aspects of his world outlook.

The similes and metaphors attest of symbolism, which is a second source of Proust's creative method. Symbolism is also connected, as we have seen, with a number of other ideological and artistic peculiarities of *A la recherche*: content, plot, composition, development of images. All this does not permit one to consider Proust as an impressionist. His work is, to a certain extent, close to the attitude toward impressionism which appeared in French painting at the end of the nineteenth century. His attempt to create «classicism» is parallel to Cézanne's efforts to make of impressionism «something solid and long-lasting, like the art of museums,» to affirm the reality and weight of objects (which become a

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sort of Kantian «thing in itself»), «to return to nature through Poussin.» Both efforts – in painting as well as in literature - were destined to fail. Neither Cézanne nor Proust was able to create the ideal of harmony which attracted them: that of color and form for the first, that of feeling and reason for the second.

Proust's example (like that of Cézanne) undeniably shows that rejection of high social content in art inevitably leads to narrowness, one-sidedness, contradictoriness of craftsmanship, which can be overcome neither by the great gifts of the artist nor by his personal intentions to rise above subjectivism and create classicism.

[Tr. by Harold Beyerly]

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