

Proustian Perspectives

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Looking back at the history of European literature, there are only a few works that have given rise to a body of interpretation that, steadily increasing year by year, continues to grow even today. While all works have this potential, it is a key feature of those which we consider to be ‘great works of world literature’ — and a feature that, alongside Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, Goethe’s *Faust*, and Plato’s *Timaeus*, has come to characterize Marcel Proust’s *In Search of Lost Time*.

Despite the shorter distance in time that separates us from its composition, Proust’s *chef d’œuvre* has given rise to almost as many interpretative texts as these other more venerable titles. There are so many texts about Proust that they must be divided into various currents and movements, categorized by their trends, clichés, blind spots, and taboos. Proust can be studied from a phenomenological, psychoanalytic, existential, structural, even formalist perspective, and from a purely stylistic, sociological, historiographical, or economic point of view. Proust has become the norm and standard subject matter of some of the more specialized literary disciplines, including textual genetics, close reading, queer studies, feminist criticism, and transmedia theory. This list is far from complete, and we have not yet mentioned those texts which have played a fundamental role in the history of literary criticism: Gerard Genette’s *Discours de récit*, Gilles Deleuze’s *Proust et les signes*, Leo Spitzer’s *Études de style*, etc. Like Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, Kafka’s *The Metamorphosis*, and Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, *In Search of Lost Time* would be an ideal text for teaching different interpretive approaches — if only it weren’t so long. It therefore tends to serve more often as a *sine qua non* for literary experts and aspiring scholars, the *shibboleth* that gives entry into the community of savants.

Yet Proust’s text continues to offer an authentic reading experience, perhaps not so much through the radical openness of the text, but rather through a certain timelessness of the themes it addresses. In the same way that Flaubert’s works are once more the subject of thematic readings after decades of work-centric approaches (*Madame Bovary* is seen again, from a different angle, as the drama of a woman in debt), interdisciplinary and strongly historiographical approaches to Proust open up the possibility of seeing his text as a marvellous document of the times or mysterious product of financial hardship. The book can thus be approached through the lens of, for example, how many foreskins Proust’s grandfather cut off during his career



(Antoine Compagnon), or how Marcel decided to divide his banking portfolio. Reading the book then begins with the age-old question of time and its documentation, but continues, dare I say, along lines of the time-honoured *plaisir du texte*. The result is then an account of time that — strangely — has not been lost.

In a situation of such multiplicity, any Proustian anthology can only be partial. This set of articles is the result of a meeting of scholars in Prague in March 2023 on the occasion of the conference *Perspectives proustiennes / Proustian Perspectives*, co-organized by the Department of Czech and Comparative Literature and Department of Romance Studies, Faculty of Arts, Charles University, with the collaboration of CEFRES Prague. The papers presented show the possibilities, but also the limits of interpretive deep dives which — precisely because of their depth — tend to leave much unsaid.

In the first article, a look by Eva Voldřichová Beránková at the work of Quebec filmmaker Claude Jutra allows us to discover the same approach to both the idea of autofiction and fundamental shape of a polyphonic, multiperspectival work playing with multiple identities. In this way, Jutra seems to overcome Proust's own disdain for film and proves the transferability of the most important elements of Proust's novel to another medium.

Petr Kylaoušek makes a comparison with the Quebec playwright and prose writer Michel Tremblay and reveals structural similarities and specific inspiration from Proust in his first novel, the hexalogy *Chronique du Plateau Mont-Royal* (1978–1998), whose basic setting of the chronicle of the family of the 'little boy', and overall culmination in the motif of choosing art as a life path, points not so much to Proustian inspiration as to a cleverly incorporated Proustian allusion.

In an ambitious exploration, Alena Roreitnerová attempts to grasp Proust's notion of simultaneous temporality and successive temporality together in the motif of time as constellation, proposing an answer to the important question on the intersubjectivity of love in Proust's novel.

Adopting the approach of 'nano-reading', Catherine Ébert-Zeminová explores the *Search* for tropes that speak to the relationship between 'art' and 'non-art'. In a deep and concentrated interpretation of one simile, 'blue porphyry' (*porphyre bleu*) and 'foaming jade' (*jade écumant*), she unravels the principle of Proust's understanding through the mutual mirroring of everything.

In the last article, Jonas Thobias da Silva Dias Martini explores the connection between the historical time of Proust's work and inner time of the work, and proposes a reading in which Proust's 'time lost' and 'time regained' is an optimistic view of the decline of History.

The ensemble of texts presented here to readers is thus one of many voices in the unceasing stream of interpretations in Proustian scholarship.