

The Proustian Inflection of Time and Inflection of Historical Time



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SYNOPSIS

This article proposes a comparative analysis between the hypothesis of an inflection of historical time contemporary to the First World War (1914–1918) and the inflection of time in the cleavage of lost time and regained time in Proust’s work. It thus aims to contribute to a line of thought on the ‘Proustian conception of History’, and to reflections on a Proust who would be simultaneously critical of time and opposed to an absolute ‘decline’. These considerations go beyond the Proustian case, touching on the relationship between literary narrative and philosophy of History, as well as that between literature and historical theory.

KEYWORDS

Proust; History; time; literature; historical theory.

DOI

<https://doi.org/10.14712/23366680.2024.2.11>

*My imagination brooded over that tiny world,
which soon afterwards acquired another form.*
Goethe, *Meister*

It is not only the title of Marcel Proust’s novel, *In Search of Lost Time*, that encourages the questioning of time proposed here, but — looking back much further in literary history — the ancient poets who declared that the questions already say everything and that, faced with the riddle of the Sphinx, it is not the answer that matters but the question. Oedipus’ response that silenced the Sphinx, ‘It’s Man!’, would thus present much more than the result of shrewd reasoning, but, being himself a man, the manifestation of an inalienable mystery. If we follow Sophocles’ tragedy closely, Oedipus’ answer to the Sphinx is indeed based on ‘wits rather than relying on birds’. Yet, strangely enough, he claims in the same breath that he ‘knows nothing’.¹

1 ‘But then I came, Oedipus, who knew nothing. Yet I finished her off, using my wits rather than relying on birds’ (Sophocles 2014, 476–478, pp. 396–398).



It is also due to Proust's spiritual strength that I feel compelled to trace the history of the inflection in which I believe he found himself and which, outlining his own, was able to provide some clues for reflection. With this word, *inflection*, I want to present and to deal with the problem of historical time from the point of view of the novel, which is to say, as something that has ceased working. At the same time, the idea of inflection I wish to evoke does not only trace a movement of descent or decline, but also a recovery in other possible directions, manifesting more a reorientation than a rupture in the face of an aporia. This, in any case, is how I see the relationship between 'lost time' and 'time regained' in Proust, and how I read the historical time of Proust's day, marked by the end of one centuries-long period and beginning of a new one — a juncture that saw considerable change in historical experience and thought.

We may turn first to the inflection in historical time that Proust lived through. It is important to consider that the serious relationship between time and History only emerged about three hundred years ago (see Koselleck 2002). While, in ancient Greece, the conception of time in the field of *praxis* may have been part of the foundation of the historical genre, it did not involve a temporalization of History with regard to the meaning of historical becoming over time. Herodotus wanted to preserve 'from decay the remembrance of what men have done' (Herodotus 2013, vol I, p. 1); and in Cicero *Historia* appears as the 'existence guide'² that teaches the present the mistakes and successes of the past. Since antiquity, therefore, to formulate 'a history' is to safeguard the ancients from oblivion and to learn from their example, thus offering posterity a certain resistance to the inevitable passage of time.

It is only in the modern era that the connection between time and History became more pronounced. The critical revision of 'salvation history', the approach accepted during the Middle Ages, gradually borrowed the notion of the process of *historia naturalis* in its justification of secular history, which had hitherto been subject to divine will. The idea of process thus became imperative for the understanding of History (see Arendt 1961, pp. 41–90). Rather than deploying history as a way to safeguard the ancients from oblivion or learn from their examples, 18th-century philosophers of History sought to reveal what Voltaire called the '*fil conducteur*', manifested in the set of events that make up History with a capital 'H' — i.e. the teleological conception of history. The image of time connected with this conception of History appears par excellence in Condorcet's *Outlines of an Historical View of the Progress of the Human Mind* (1795): 'From these observations on what man has heretofore been, and what he is at present, we shall be led to the means of securing and of accelerating the still further progress, of which, from his nature, we may indulge the hope' (Condorcet 1795, p. 4). The past then became a time to let pass, the present a time of work projected towards the future, and the future, optimistically, a world to be conquered through the work of reason.

The evolution of historical events over time is an essential aspect of the teleological conception of History. At the same time, human action in the face of the

2 'And as History, which bears witness to the passing of the ages, sheds light upon reality, gives life to recollection and guidance to human existence, and brings tidings of ancient days, whose voice, but the orator's, can entrust her to immortality?' (Cicero 1967, vol. II: 36, p. 224).

course of History becomes decisive. The prognosis of a prosperous future to be left to posterity, the fruits of which can be enjoyed by generations ever closer to the present, is at the heart of modern human action. From the recognition of the path of History, the idea of accelerating time and reducing distances reveals new technologies and directs scientific development, the results of which can certainly be enjoyed today. Nevertheless, nowadays, the rapprochement between time and History does not seem to demonstrate the same character as the optimism of the 18th century, nor of the progressive ideas of the 19th century. This can be exemplified by the absence, despite the evolutions of science and technology, of a *telos* in History recognizable by reason, one that would be able to orient, apart from individual experience, the direction of historical events. Especially with the advent of the 21st century, historical time, its meaning and significance, becomes something difficult to grasp by reason.

Even if the critique of the modern-age conception of History was contemporaneous with the idea of historical time as a rising line towards the future, even if the 19th century was deeply inspired by the Schopenhauerian philosophy of the will which presented the most significant refusal of progress in History, it is in the experience of the 20th century where we can find the first symptoms of an inflection in historical time and in the capacity of modern humans to recognize themselves in History. If we ask today, in these first decades of the 21st century, the meaning not simply of historical knowledge, but of the events in which we are immersed, we inevitably find ourselves in an embarrassing situation. Historically, we could attribute this difficulty to an inflection in our ability to identify the historical time of progress, the first signs of which revolve around the shock of the First World War, unleashed within Western civilization and unexpected from the point of view of its evolution.

Already in 1908, the French thinker Georges Sorel, criticizing the perspective of progress as a bourgeois ideology, drew attention to the *Illusions du progrès*, and after the Great War, the Irishman John Bagnell Bury presented one of the first histories of the idea of progress by investigating its presence or absence since Antiquity (Sorel 1911; Bury 1955). In the middle, Sigmund Freud, before naming the famous ‘malaise in civilization’, was able to affirm in 1915 that the war ‘in which we had refused to believe broke out and it brought — disillusionment’ (Freud 1957, p. 278). Tracing the evolution of conflict, Freud asks how this brutal war had come about, notwithstanding the years of civilizational development by which humankind was supposed to have overcome the violence, circumscribing it in the civil code — a war, indeed, that seemed to have invalidated the long championed notion of progress itself.

Walter Benjamin, writing during the Interwar period, seeks to give expression to this feeling of a dramatic change: ‘For what is the value of all our culture if it is divorced from experience?’ (Benjamin 1999, ‘Experience and Poverty’, p. 732). Stefan Zweig similarly writes of a ‘world of yesterday’, and proceeds to speak even more clearly to the idea of an inflection of historical time: ‘All the bridges between our today and our yesterday and our yesteryears have been burnt’ (Zweig 1943, p. 5). In its evolution, this inflection seems to take on the image of a tension, as in the figure borrowed from Kafka by Hannah Arendt to speak of modern man as pressured by the past which pushes him towards the future while the future threatens him by block-





ing his path (Arendt 1961, p. 7). Under this pressure, modern man can only count as a temporal dimension on the present. Ideas like those of ‘presentism’ or ‘ample present’ come to meet these images, and we are already questioning the validity of historical time as a condition for the possibility of apprehending our experience (see Hartog 2003; Gumbrecht 2010).

With Marcel Proust, who was writing at the beginning of this process, the idea of an inflection in time first presents itself through the idea of ‘lost time’. What this designates, to use Luc Fraisse’s formulation, is ‘from the point of view of memory [...] a time that has disappeared, and from the point of view of a vocation, a wasted time’ (Fraisse 2013, p. 397). To this disappearance, marked by oblivion, as well as by time wasted to the ‘monde’ of social life and to jealousy, is added a distinction between the nature of Proustian lost time and that of historical past time.³ The relationship between this lost time and the past is more one of interdependence than of confusion: lost time needs the past to make itself manifest, yet exceeds it in its implications. Through the work of involuntary memory, the Narrator of the *In Search of Lost Time* first comes to realize that the past is introduced into the present ‘without modification’ (Proust 2016, p. 2659) yet, from the point of view of its contemplation, this time resulting from involuntary memory, the time which rebounds from the inflection of lost time with the time regained, is ‘tasted as for the first time’ (Bensusan 2020, p. 135).

The consequences of this difference between historical time and Proustian time are at the heart of the chronological complexity of the novel. Anyone who has ever tried to arrange the events of Proust’s work into a chronology of historical events, as Willy Hachez did in his articles, in this way aiming to demonstrate that there is a relation between the novel of Proust and the ‘inescapable historical facts’ (cf. Hachez 1985), will arrive at the thesis, as Jean-Yves Tadié in *Proust et le roman*, that Proust’s books are governed by two chronologies: an internal and fictional chronology superimposed on another that is external and historical.⁴ However, when it comes to bringing together historical time and Proustian time, Tadié, like Saint Augustine placing the time of secular events in the eternal present of the divine, considers the historical time of the present in relation to the spring of involuntary memory.⁵

3 Cf. Anne Henry: ‘Temps’ in *Dictionnaire Marcel Proust*, Bouillaguet — Rogers 2004, p. 992: ‘this so poetic title of *In Search of Lost Time*, aims well beyond the nostalgia of the past or the regret of its waste, the condition of the whole life which will be enlightened only in the outcome’. In the dictionary *Proust et le temps*, recently directed by Isabelle Serça (2002), the entry ‘Temps perdu’ considers that this tense arises by a request for juxtaposition to the ‘Temps retrouvé’ in the organization of the work (ibid., pp. 240–241).

4 ‘[T]he novelist adds an inner barometer to the chronometer’ (Tadié 1971, p. 300).

5 ‘[...] all the narrator’s effort is not to take refuge in the past, as we still too often believe, but to transform this past into the present. This is what these ecstasies of memory mean, which have existed since the beginning of the story, but will only be usable in Time Regained, because only then the narrator will have understood what they bring to him for the present and for the future coming’; the assertion is repeated recently in *Proust et la société*, p. 200: ‘we affirm that, for Proust, there is no historical past, there is only present’ (ibid., p. 305).



It is at this moment that the inflection of Proustian time in the relation of 'lost time' and 'time regained' becomes more pronounced. If the nature of lost time should not be confused with the historical past, what becomes of time regained in relation to present time? The inflection of time in Proust then manifests a much more serious loss: Proustian time only 'wants' what is common between the past and present because the loss of time can only be remedied by their entanglement.⁶ This encounter between a moment of the past and moment of the present does not therefore represent an image of time anchored exclusively in either past or present time. The 'lost time' of the work's title refers less to an inflexible past no longer coming to the present than the loss of time itself, at least in its historical dimensions of past, present, and future.

Taking the most famous example, the taste of a madeleine soaked in tea, given to the Narrator by his mother in the present of the narrative, involuntarily recalls another madeleine from the past given to him by his aunt Léonie. One might naturally consider both instances as historical events, since they correspond to concrete facts in the stream of ordinary time. Yet the joy of this meeting between the two madeleines 'transcended those savours, could not, indeed, be of the same nature as theirs' (Proust 2016, p. 43). It is neither one madeleine nor the other, neither past nor present, that dominates. In the experience of involuntary memory evoked by Proust, both the 'unmodified' past and the present invaded by this past give way to the '*adoration perpétuelle*' of rediscovered time, which upsets and modifies the temporal state of the Narrator:

I passed rapidly over all these things, being summoned more urgently to seek the cause of that happiness with its peculiar character of insistent certainty, the search for which I had formerly adjourned. And I began to discover the cause by comparing those varying happy impressions which had the common quality of being felt simultaneously at the actual moment and at a distance in time, because of which common quality the noise of the spoon upon the plate, the unevenness of the paving-stones, the taste of the madeleine, imposed the past upon the present and made me hesitate as to which time I was existing in. Of a truth, the being within me which sensed this impression, sensed what it had in common in former days and now, sensed its extra-temporal character, a being which only appeared when through the medium of the identity of present and past, it found itself in the only setting in which it could exist and enjoy the essence of things, that is, outside Time (ibid., p. 2534).

This 'extra-temporal' 'being', whose past has already been introduced into the present, contemplates his happiness in a state quite different from this past and, of course, from this present in which he finds himself. Likewise, the future seems indifferently to him: 'even if the mere taste of a madeleine does not logically seem to justify it; we understand that the name of death is meaningless to him for, placed beyond Time, how can he fear the future?' (ibid., 2535–2536). Nevertheless, this extra-temporality does not exactly mean an absolute absence of Time. As Paul Ricoeur

6 To use Walter Benjamin's term [*verschränkte*] in his commentary on Proust (Benjamin 2015, p. 55).



has pointed out, the extratemporality of which Proust speaks ‘is only a point of passage’ (Ricœur 2020, p. 151). Proust’s effort does not present a kind of nihilism of time, but its rediscovery, as the title of the last volume of *In Search of Lost Time* indicates. In this contemplation of man ‘liberated from the order of time’ (Proust 2016, p. 2535) it is not exactly the Time that is left behind, but the historical dimensions of past, present, and future. When the Proustian Narrator claims to leave time, he is in fact leaving History.

Does this mean denying the possibility of rethinking History with Proust? We have already tried to compare the procedure of the Narrator of the *In Search of Lost Time* to that of the historian, in the first place because, like Proustian lost time, the time of the historical past is also lost to the historian. In spite of their differences, these two figures, Narrator and historian, share a common disposition to confront their losses. We have also already noticed the difference between the involuntary procedure of the Proustian Narrator as well as his circumscription in individual life, which would not correspond to the voluntary and collective research of the historian. This consideration seems to exclude the historical approach to time in Proust in favour of the inflection of the time of History. As Proustian scholar Anne Henry writes:

Because the time is a structure of individual consciousness and what is called the world is only made up of these particular universes that each person’s perspective constitutes, there can be no collective time, no becoming of History accomplishing secretly through men [...]. The Proustian novel thus puts an end without fuss to the historicity dear to the previous century. Becoming is not History.⁷

However, recent efforts have offered more than an implementation of the already much-discussed relationship of Proust’s novel to the historical events present in it, such as the rise of the bourgeoisie against the aristocracy, the Dreyfus Affair, and the First World War. At the end of the 20th century, Robert Kahn already questioned the possibility of a Proustian perspective of History: ‘Critics have been very interested in Proust’s relationship with his time, with this “Proust between two centuries”, to use Antoine Compagnon’s expression. But the question of the existence and relevance of a possible Proustian conception of History has rarely been raised’ (Kahn 1998, p. 186).

The first challenge in formulating such a conception would be to overcome a key distinction made by Anne Henry, namely between the ‘individual conscience’ and collective ‘world’. For this, it should be noted, as Jeffrey Barash recently did in his study on collective memory, that ‘Proust’s reflections on the role of involuntary memory are not limited to the sphere of individual experience’, which would otherwise correspond to the Bergsonian conception of memory. The notion of Proustian involuntary

7 Bouillaguet — Rogers 2004, p. 993. Admittedly, as Anne Henry evokes in this passage, Proust’s work causes a crack in the historicity of the 19th century — which shows his participation in the inflection of historical time — but this does not simply seem caused by the ‘particular universes’ in the making, nor represent an end to the possibility of rethinking History with the spring of involuntary memory.



memory might thus be extended to shared experiences, because ‘the unwilling resurgence of these memories at the same time resuscitates a network of interrelations with others’ (Barash 2016, p. 65). From the image of Combray to that of the Basilica of San Marco in Venice, it is the image of a collective world that is formed and that has consequences in the historical world.

Following the inflection of Proustian time in the cleavage of lost time and time regained, what image of historical time would it be possible to imagine through the image of Time resulting from involuntary memory? This poses a challenge to thinking about History not only because historical time deals with concrete facts in the actual reality of the lived world, but because Proustian time represents a time that History has not yet learned to be circumscribed: that of an ‘optical view of the years’, which considers change as a permanent aspect not only of the flow of time, as it is considered by philosophers of History, but of the very formulation of the historical fact and its placement within time.

The first difficulty of the task lies in overcoming a certain resistance to associating ‘History’ with ‘image’, combining the concrete fact of experience with the sensitive projection of real images. The awareness that the verbalization of time is only done through metaphors shows that the problem of the meaning of History is a participation of an image of time in the reconstitution of historical events, which, in turn, disseminates very real and concrete consequences in historical experience. This understanding is shared by Reinhart Koselleck when he thinks about the ‘meaning’ and ‘non-meaning’ of History (Koselleck 2010). Thus, the idea of a meaning of History, or even of its purpose, rather represents the projection of an image of time and, as such, it would rather be a question of defining this image in the stakes of language, those for which the work of Proust is particularly attentive.⁸

When the meaning of History as progressive assumes an inflexible position, especially from the point of view of the experience of the 20th century, the affirmation of the impossibility of exact access to the past by the present takes the place of the consideration of historical fact. The striking difference between the inflection of the time of History and that of Proustian time is that while the first represents the loss of orientation in time, the other involves casting off of historical dimensions. However, this does not mean a complete renunciation of History. The question that I wanted to present corresponds to this referral of Proustian Time, *a priori* taken outside of History, again, in historical time, the time of humans. In this sense, perhaps the riddle of the Sphinx would not only confirm the characters of the novel, but also the men anchored in their historical experience as ‘monsters’ placed ‘immeasurably... in Time’ (Proust 2016, p. 2671).

⁸ According to Robert Kahn (1998, p. 186), ‘it is clear that what interests Proust at the highest point... are the modifications that the historical event causes language to undergo’.



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