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At the Heart of the Impossible. Walter Benjamin, Marcel Proust and *La Recherche*

En el corazón de lo imposible. Walter Benjamin, Marcel Proust y *La Recherche*

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Abstract

This article explores the centrality of Marcel Proust's novel *À la Recherche du temps perdu* in the literary criticism of Walter Benjamin. In the context of the 100th anniversary of the Institute for Social Research, it reevaluates how he engaged with Proust's work and highlights the importance of art and literature for a radical Critical Theory. For Benjamin, Proust is a subversive writer who surpasses the novel as a genre and subverts the relationship between the novel and time through recollection. *La Recherche* is also a powerful force for Benjamin's critical theory. Therefore, the article also addresses the presence of Proustian themes in his reflections on history and revolution.

Keywords: Marcel Proust, Walter Benjamin, critical theory, literary criticism.

Resumen

Este artículo explora la centralidad de la novela de Marcel Proust *À la Recherche du temps perdu* en la crítica literaria de Walter Benjamin. Celebrando el centenario del Instituto de Investigación Social, reevalúa cómo Benjamin se relacionó con la obra de Proust y destaca la importancia del arte y la literatura para una Teoría Crítica radical. Para Benjamin, Proust es un escritor subversivo que trasciende la novela como género y subvierte la relación entre la novela y el tiempo a través del recuerdo. *La Recherche* también es una fuerza poderosa para la teoría crítica de Benjamin. Por lo tanto, el artículo aborda además la presencia de temas proustianos en sus reflexiones sobre la historia y la revolución.

Palabras clave: Marcel Proust, Walter Benjamin, teoría crítica, crítica literaria.

«Wie alles sich zum Ganzen webt,
Eins in dem andern wirkt und lebt!»

FAUST, JOHANN WOLFGANG VON GOETHE

Introduction

The celebration of the centenary of the Institute for Social Research in 2023 gave rise to a critical reassessment of the legacy of the Frankfurt School.[1] After all, for a historically oriented critical theory, this celebration could not do without the question of its relevance a hundred years after its foundation. There is an extensive debate on how the Institute, after the death of Theodor W. Adorno and under the direction of Jürgen Habermas, distanced itself from the radicalism that characterized the first generation of this tradition in favor of a more positive and normative philosophy of communication and empiricist sociology.[2] The usual explanation for this turn refers to the abandonment of Marxism that, as some authors argue, was already happening within the first generation of critical theorists.[3] In contrast, others point to a public crisis related to the political climate in Germany in the 1960s.[4] Even though this is a point well taken, this radicalism was not only related to the Marxist roots of the project of Critical Theory, with which it is usually associated, but also with theoretical and scientific experimentalism, cultural criticism, and an intrinsic relationship with art present in the works of the first generation of the Frankfurt School–the essay form being its most significant expression.[5]

Interestingly, this endeavor reached its most radical expression, particularly in the realm of aesthetics and the essay, in the work of an author who, while not an official member of the Institute, played a significant role in its intellectual history. The revolutionary character of his oeuvre firmly anchored him within the trajectory of Critical Theory, of which he emerged as one of its most prominent figures.

This article discusses aspects of Walter Benjamin's interpretation of Marcel Proust's novel *À la Recherche du temps perdu*. The aim is to demonstrate how Proustian literature

1 The IfS presented a new research program that reassesses critical theory's distance from Marxism and its central concepts, such as crisis and contradiction (see Institut für Sozialforschung). This collectively written document–in which Horkheimer's idea of «Social Philosophy» resonates–marks a rupture with the IfS's theoretical, scientific, and political orientation over the last fifty years.

2 See Habermas (*Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns*).

3 See Kouvélakis (*La Critique défaite*).

4 Später (*Adornos Erben*).

5 Elisabeth Lenk, for instance, Adorno's advisee, observed that «from an aesthetic perspective, German intellectuals, regardless of their theoretical sophistication, remain regrettably underdeveloped» (206-7), despite efforts by figures like Friedrich Schiller and Adorno to promote aesthetic education of German society. According to her, this shortcoming has hindered the reception of both Surrealism and Adorno's Critical Theory in Germany.

constitutes a fundamental moment in his literary criticism and an internal element within his philosophy. Thus, this article aims to reclaim the significance of a Critical Theory and a Marxism that actively engages with and is concomitantly transformed by literature–standing in opposition to the prevailing tendency toward resignation, which, under the guise of resisting elitism, increasingly reduces critical practice to mere commentary on the products of the culture industry.

Moreover, this essay highlights the importance of a critical and Marxist reading of Proust in the wake of the centenary of his death and the 150th anniversary of his birth, as the writer has become both a mere symbol of distinction and aristocratic nostalgia and a coveted brand of the culture industry as his work is reduced to a comfort escort for the mid-life crisis of the European elites and a logo for French bookstores, where products such as *La cuisine retrouvée* are sold besides trinkets for tourists. To this day, Proust is a writer haunted by the snobbery he so meticulously investigated. He is portrayed by his admirers as a sophisticated and hermetic writer (i.e., accessible to few), and his memoir is still regarded as an apolitical literary exercise. Indeed, the form of his novel is claimed by the contemporary best-seller autobiographic fever from Annie Ernaux to Didier Eribon, who perhaps are closer to Pierre Bourdieu than Proust. Be that as it may, the depiction in *À la Recherche du Temps Perdu* of salons, art in the French Third Republic, aristocracy, and the upper bourgeoisie, as well as the writer's insertion into these circles, made his legacy suspect before a left-wing literary criticism. However, it was in his work that Benjamin's critical theory found a revolutionary form.

For Benjamin, the Marxist interpretation of literary works extends beyond the appreciation of the economic and political context of a period and is independent of the immediate political engagement of their creators. Form, in that sense, above all literary technicalities, has to do with revealing the unique power that a work possesses to condense the history and social tensions of an era and, in doing so, to oppose it, even if such opposition was not originally intended by its author. This is why, in his famous essay «Zum Bilde Prousts», Benjamin claims that the author takes the risk of «shattering [the world] into pieces, before which he himself breaks down in tears» (*Gesamtausgabe: Sämtliche Werke* 65). What I will try to demonstrate, finally, is that if Benjamin is a partisan of form, he is also the greatest abolitionist in terms of disciplinary boundaries in the history of Critical Theory.

A Tortuous Reception

Proust's novel was a central element in Benjamin's literary criticism from the mid-1920s onward. As Howard Eiland and Michael Jennings pointed out (1), Benjamin aspired to be the foremost literary critic in Germany of his time. He was one of the first German intellectuals to read Proust (alongside figures such as Rainer Maria Rilke, Erich Auerbach, Hugo von Hofmannsthal, and Robert Curtius) and played a unique role in introducing

modernist French literary production into Germany, from Charles Baudelaire to the Surrealists, not only as a critic but also as a translator. Hence, his work also occupies a special place in the history of comparative literature.

When the first volume of Proust's novel was published in 1913, Benjamin traveled to Paris for the first time. His initial reading of Proust dates to 1919. During World War I, the novel's publication was interrupted due to war-related editorial issues, and Proust decided to expand his work, initially planned for only three volumes. After the war, *À l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs* (1919), *Le Côté de Guermantes* (1920/21), and *Sodome et Gomorrhe* (1921/22) came out. *La Prisonnière* (1923), *Albertine disparue* (1925), and *Le Temps retrouvé* (1927) were released posthumously. In 1927, chronicles and articles written by Proust for newspapers were also published, including his texts on Gustave Flaubert and Baudelaire.[6]

Benjamin made several trips to Paris in the 1920s and 1930s, which allowed his reading of Proust to coincide almost directly with the original publications, thus enabling him to read Proust not as the classic we have come to know but as a contemporary. Benjamin even experienced Paris through Proust's novel; he would search for people he thought inspired the characters in the novel, such as Monsieur Albert (Albertine), and go to the same salons and brothels where Proust was an *assidu*. Alongside Franz Hessel, Benjamin translated *À l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs* (1926) and *Le Côté de Guermantes* (1930) to German and started the translation of *La Prisonnière*, which remained unpublished. He also translated *Sodome et Gomorrhe*,[7] though the manuscript was unfortunately lost. During this period, Benjamin also translated an excerpt of a preface called *Sur la Lecture*, written by Proust in 1905, for his translation of John Ruskin's *Sesame and Lilies*, published in *Die Literarische Welt* in 1930.

During the years of these various forays into French literary culture, Benjamin wrote for *Frankfurter Zeitung* and *Die Literarische Welt* about French cultural life. His well-known text on Proust–the aforementioned *The Image of Proust*–was published in the latter in two parts, on June 21 and July 5, 1929. This text, which was initially to be titled *En traduisant Marcel Proust*, had been commissioned as a commentary on Benjamin's translation of Proust during this period, but it eventually became an essay on Proust and his novel – perhaps the best analysis of the novel up to this day. From that point on, Proust would be revisited by Benjamin in his reflections on the *Passagen-Werk* and on Baudelaire in the 1930s, in his entire correspondence, and other texts such as «Berliner Kindheit um neunzehnhundert» where not only the themes but also the form emerge

6 See Tadié.

7 According to Jennings and Eiland (238), «Benjamin took on several translation and editing projects. The most difficult and time-consuming of these–and finally the most rewarding–was his immersion in the world of Marcel Proust. He undertook the translation of the three-volume section of *In Search of Lost Time* called «Sodom and Gomorrah» despite his sense that the pay was «by no means good; but it is good enough for me to believe that I had to take on this enormous task». He would ultimately receive 2,300 marks for his work (about $550 in 1925 currency), payable in smaller sums throughout the contract, which ran until March 1926».

from his reading of Proust. Proust accompanied him throughout the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s and is cited in both the *Pariser* and the *Moskauer Tagebuch*.

Benjamin once confessed to Adorno («Ad Proust» 59-60) that he could no longer read another word of Proust because he was utterly addicted to his work to the point of feeling that he could no longer write anything of value. However, with the rise of Nazism, Benjamin's project was entirely interrupted. With the abandonment of some of his works and the disappearance of others, the reception of Proust in Germany was hindered, as was the publication and organization of Benjamin's work and, consequently, the investigation of the relationship between the two authors.

One of the first to highlight the fundamental nature of Proust for Benjamin's work, besides Adorno, was Peter Szondi, in the essay «Hoffnung im Vergangenen. Über Walter Benjamin», published only in the 1960s.[8] From that point onward, a new phase of the reception of the relationship between the works of Proust and Benjamin began. Benjamin, the translator and literary critic, was himself rediscovered during this period. An edition of Benjamin's complete works was released, contextualizing Benjamin's essay on Proust, now presented alongside other writings, including a talk about Proust delivered on his 40th birthday.

The centrality of Proust's novel in Benjamin's intellectual experience has gained traction in Benjaminian scholarship over the past 50 years.[9] However, it remains a subtopic among his commentators, who tend to emphasize his relationships with Baudelaire and Surrealism more frequently. This scholarship mainly focuses on the question of image, experience, and the subjectivist influence of Proust in «Berliner Kindheit um neunzehnhundert». Few have explored the extent to which Benjamin regarded *La Recherche* as a revolutionary work in numerous respects.[10]

Benjamin recognized from the beginning a subversive author in Proust. *The Image of Proust* can be read as a recommendation for reading the author. In this essay, Benjamin contradicts, on the one hand, the prevailing interpretations in France at

8 One reason for this phenomenon is the difficulty in organizing Benjamin's work after the war's end. Since a large part of his library was destroyed by the Nazis and his manuscripts were left with friends in various places, the compilation of his complete works in Germany, undertaken by Theodor and Gretel Adorno, was lengthy and laborious. Benjamin's fate continued to be associated with that of Proust, as in the 1950s, the complete translation of Proust into German was also published. However, even so, this reception was limited to the text «The Image of Proust». As Ursula Link-Heer points out, both Proust's novel and the interpretation proposed by Benjamin were met with suspicion by that generation, as Proust was still viewed as a novelist of the aristocracy. The scenario began to change with Szondi's essay and the reading that the 1968 generation would make of these texts. See Link-Heer.

9 See, for example, Kahn (*Images, Passages: Marcel Proust et Walter Benjamin* and «Benjamin Leitor de Proust»); Douek; Clarínval; Morrison; Jacobs; Teschke; Oliveira; and Finkelde.

10 In 1981, Krista R. Greffrath associates the first four volumes of Benjamin's *Collected Writings* and the sections «k» («City of Dreams and Dream Residence, Dreams of the Future, Anthropological Nihilism, Jung») and «n» («Theory of Knowledge, Theory of Progress») of Passagen-Werk with the «dialectical image» and the theory of wakefulness tied to Proust's concept of «involuntary memory». She demonstrates how Proust's work permeates Benjamin's intellectual experience from beginning to end, highlighting the similarity in importance between him and Goethe. Robert Kahn went even further, claiming that there is an «intertextuality» between Benjamin and Proust that cannot be reduced to a mere thematic influence of Proust on Benjamin and that this writer may be a more important figure than Goethe or Baudelaire in Benjamin's work. See Geffrath, and Kahn (*Images, Passages*).

the time, which were centered on «psychological» and «autobiographical» questions, and, on the other hand, the antipathy from part of the German left towards Proust's depiction of snobbery.

As for the German reception, Benjamin noted in a letter to Max Rychner on January 15, 1929, that the publication of separate volumes in Germany greatly thwarted Proust's reception in the country:

> One feels ashamed for Germany, for the circumstances that led to this matter being placed from the start in the hands of people who were both well-meaning and clueless (and even now, although new hands have taken over, they do not bring better minds). You understand, I am speaking of the publishers. The public can hardly be blamed. They have not yet had any real exposure to the work. First, there was the volume translated by Schottländer, a ridiculous debut. Then came the volume that Hessel and I translated in quite a different, not necessarily skillful, format. So, two volumes that, as translations, lacked both external and internal continuity, followed by a complete cessation. Recently, as you may know, a new publisher has appeared, but, like his predecessor, he cannot bring himself to the realization that Proust must be published in Germany as a complete *œuvre*, not in individual volumes. If you consider that the work up to *Sodom and Gomorrah* has been ready in our translation for years, you will understand how deeply we share your frustration and how grateful we are to you for having opened, through your review, practically the only venue where Proust has been repeatedly referenced. Naturally, there remains an infinite amount of work to do.[11] Equally naturally, I have also considered contributing something to the interpretation of Proust. But I still stand too close to the whole thing; it looms too large before me. I am waiting until I can see the details, through which I will try to climb, like scaling the rough edges of a wall. Surely, our German Proust scholarship will look very different from the French. In Proust, after all, there is so much more significant and more important than the «psychologist» that, as far as I can see, is almost exclusively discussed in France. If we are patient, I am confident that one day, in some way or another, you will receive and publish a comparative work on German and French Proust commentaries, which will be just as well received as it will be welcome to present (Benjamin, *Gesammelte Briefe* 431-432).

The work of Proust, especially his portrayal of snobbery, could only be fully understood, according to Benjamin, through a complete reading of the novel. As I mentioned above, like many modernist authors, Proust had his work, initially planned as three

11 Adorno sketches a very instigating analysis in a lecture after the war. He said that even though nobody knew Proust in Germany and even though he was not a political writer in the immediate sense, he had the impression that the Third Reich's project to destroy and prohibit everything was a direct response to what Proust's novel provoked, to its inner explosive force and its internal nonconformity that «has triggered a shock from which people have never fully recovered» 56-57).

volumes, interrupted by the war, which contradictorily transformed and expanded it. The first volumes, set against the bucolic landscapes of Combray and Balbec and the most fashionable Parisian salons filled with teas, ice creams, and madeleines–which are usually the favorite among his touristic readers–give way in the last book to a city under siege, bombed by German airplanes, a landscape that includes a visit by Baron de Charlus to a second-rate brothel, debates about war and the Napoleonic military strategies of Paul von Hindenburg, and a decadent party in the newly reconfigured Guermantes salon.

Proust financed the publication of his first book, and as is well known, the novel was rejected by many editors, including Andre Gide, who later regretted it. And when the book came out, the reviews of 1913/1914 pointed out that it lacked a plot, that it was chaotic; they complained about Proust's language, the long sentences–Benjamin spoke of a syntax that imitated the rhythm of asphyxiation crises (*Gesamtausgabe* 963)– in this sense, his French seems like German, sometimes you may catch yourself searching where the verb is. The first book was read primarily as a childhood memoir with no significant formal innovations in France.

Proust gained greater recognition only through the scandal of the Prix Goncourt in 1919. He won the prize with *A l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs* and was criticized for being friends with one of the jury members and for being too old of an author–48 years old.[12] With a trip to the beach, a group of pretty girls, and a love-struck young man, Proust overshadowed the virile heroes of the warfront portrayed in *Les Croix de Bois*, by Roland Dorgelès, the favorite for the prize at the end of World War I, which had prematurely claimed almost a million and a half lives.[13] This is what caused the most scandal, even more than the sexual episodes present in the novel. Though homoerotic themes are explored more explicitly from the fourth book onward, that is, after the prize, there were already erotic dreams and the theme of adolescent masturbation in the first book, during a time when people thought it led to mental illness. The narrator also hints that he has an orgasm while play-fighting with Gilberte in the Champs-Élysées. All of this went unnoticed. Only Benjamin highlights, quoting Jean Cocteau, that Proust's narrative follows the rhythm of the laws of night and honey (*Gesamtausgabe* 613).

For a long time, Proust was known as a novelist of the aristocracy, of the Belle Époque, of peace–the writer furthest removed from war and class struggle. Despite his stance on the Dreyfus affair, Proust entered history as the antithesis of the engaged intellectual, whose model was Émile Zola. This contributed to his reputation as an aristocratic novelist, distant from political issues, and an «effeminate» writer (a discriminatory image that hovered above his work because of his homosexuality) – which, one could argue, was a part of the prejudice against it. Benjamin contests

12 See Laget.

13 See Laget.

this image of Proust as a frivolous, superficial writer and highlights his modernism and his connection with his own time.[14]

Beyond the Novel? The Subversive Writer

One of Benjamin's preoccupations in the 1930s was the crisis of the novel, a literary form that, in his view, epitomized the decline of narrative under bourgeois domination. In this context, he opens his essay on Proust by emphasizing the inherent difficulty in categorizing *La Recherche*, considering Proust's oeuvre as an exceptional case. Notably, Benjamin refers to it as a novel only once throughout the essay, underscoring his ambivalence toward conventional literary classifications in Proust's case. Benjamin notes that Proust transcends the boundaries of autobiography, creating a hybrid form that merges memoir, poetry, and philosophical commentary (*Gesamtausgabe* 612). By the time we reach the final volume, we also encounter a profound meditation on the nature of art. That is why Benjamin highlights that,

> unhealthy in the highest degree were the conditions on which [Proust's work] was based. An unusual suffering, tremendous wealth, and an abnormal temperament. Not everything about this life is prototypical, but everything is exemplary. It places the supreme literary achievement of these days at the heart of impossibility, at the center, and, yet, at the same time, at the point of indifference to all dangers, and marks this great realization of the «life's work» as the ultimate in the long term. Proust's image is the highest physiognomic expression that the inexorably growing discrepancy between poetry and life could achieve (*Gesamtausgabe* 612).

The assertion that *La Recherche* lies at the point of indifference amid all perils means two things. First, it tries to surpass the abyss between the poetry of life and the prose of capitalism–Benjamin refers here to the long-term debate in German aesthetics from Friedrich Schiller to Georg Lukács. Furthermore, it crosses all genres and disciplinary boundaries as, at every turn, the text dissolves familiar structures. This is perhaps why it is so hard to interpret Proust's work until today. The narrative's freedom from conventional plot lends credence to the French jest that the entire novel can be summarized as «Marcel becomes a writer», though it spans thousands of pages to reach this point. Time and space are radically reconfigured, and the characters become hypotheses in retrospect, evolving not only with time but also in response to the narrator's shifting perceptions. Proust's inquiry extends beyond the development of characters; it envelops

14 Even Jameson, who analyses his modernism, states that what emerges from his narrative is a vast salon monologue: «Proust is also a kind of commodity producer, insofar as his social success in the *haut monde* will be judged on the consumption of a steady stream of anecdotes, traits d'esprit, "astute" perceptions, and the witty repartee indispensable to the life of any salon» («Joyce or Proust?» 182).

the transformation of places as well–Combray, as remembered from childhood, and Combray, as revisited in adulthood, are worlds apart.

The novel also inscribes itself at the crossroads of the 19th and 20th centuries and represents the transition from the *Belle Époque* to a modernity painfully brought forth by war, which Proust diligently studied over the years, and which appears as a subterranean theme in the novel. Something that has been recognized by Proustian scholarship only in the last years.[15] As Benjamin emphasizes,

> If not only people but also eras have such a chaste way, that is, such a sly and frivolous way of communicating their most personal things to anyone, then for the nineteenth century, it is not Zola or Anatole France but the young Proust, the insignificant snob, the kittenish socialite, who grasped the most astonishing confidences in flight from the aging course of time (as from another, equally weary Swann). Proust was the first to make the nineteenth century suitable for memoirs (*Gesamtausgabe* 614).

Therefore, Proust transformed what a «previously a tensionless epoch [...] into a force field, in which emerged the most diverse currents, represented by subsequent authors» (*Gesamtausgabe* 614). This force field is simultaneously a social and a literary one. Besides the novel's crisis as a form produced by Proust, this crossroads –not explicitly stated but suggested by Benjamin, and, therefore, his reminder of the necessity of reading the whole novel– has to do with the transformations arising from the First World War. The open and self-referential Proustian work can be rediscovered, in a sense, as this powerful condensation of the tensions of an epoch.

Proust penned over 200 letters on the war. In *Le Côté de Guermantes*, for instance, this topic emerges most prominently on two occasions. The first occurs when the narrator accompanies his friend Saint-Loup to Doncières, where an extensive conversation unfolds on military strategy between Saint-Loup and several of his officer companions. Proust, a keen student of military tactics, brings this knowledge to bear later in *Le Temps retrouvé*, where the war is depicted in detail. Here, discussions revolve around Napoleon's strategy, which Proust had delved into, as Hindenburg, on the German side, employed Napoleonic principles and tactics during the conflict. What is remarkable is how the memorialist tone, so characteristic of Proust, merges in this final volume with a distinctly different register: the destruction of an era. In *Le Temps retrouvé*, we witness the annihilation of Marcel's childhood landscapes, including the church at Combray and the familiar paths of his youth, conveyed through letters from Gilberte to the narrator. While Proust does indeed address the war, he refrains from doing so through the lens of one who witnessed the front lines firsthand, as Dorgelès. Nevertheless, the war subtly permeates various moments in the novel. We accompany the narrator through Paris under bombardment, notably in the episode where Marcel goes to the brothel visited by Baron de Charlus.

15 See Mahuzier.

Proust portrays the war and weaves it into his novel, but he steadfastly refuses to craft a work of patriotic art. In the last book, posthumously edited by Robert Proust from his brother's notebooks,[16] we also follow the aging of the characters who have accompanied us from the beginning. The senility of Baron de Charlus, the ossified mask of Berma, and the red spots covering Mr. de Cambremer's cheeks are not merely marks that time has inscribed on the bodies and faces that were once familiar to the narrator and to us but signs of the decay and decrepitude of an era and with it the class that dominated it, which takes the form of snakes sleeping among stones:

> La Berma avait, comme dit le peuple, la mort sur le visage. Cette fois c'était bien d'um marbre de l'Erechtéion qu'elle avait l'air. Ses artères durcies étant déjà à demi pétrifiées, on voyait de longs rubans sculpturaux parcourir les joues, avec une rigidité minérale. Les yeux mourants vivaient relativement, par contraste avec ce terrible masque ossifié, et brillaient faiblement comme un serpent endormi au milieu des pierres (*La Recherche* 998).[17]

It is also in this final book that Proust addresses the assimilation of the bourgeoisie by the nobility, which had previously despised them, and shocks us with the second marriage of the ridiculous Madame Verdurin, finally granting her the surname Guermantes. In this macabre party (in which Marcel finally answers his call as a writer), the origins of old surnames become confused and dissipated, turbans replace structured hairstyles, antisemites are now Dreyfusards, and courtesans become guests of honor. What might seem like the overcoming of the order is, in reality, the reconfigured survival of the old domination.

As Benjamin emphasizes, Proust deals with the constitution of a class that will only reveal its true physiognomy in the final struggle. In the mimicry of the upper classes, in the portrayal of their «vegetative life» (*Gesamtausgabe* 615), in the study of bourgeois social climbing and the codes of noble domination, and in the faithful description of their gestures lies, according to Benjamin, the pinnacle of Proustian social criticism. Snobbery (which from then on would be a topic of Benjamin's work), whether as a bourgeois aspiration or aristocratic way of life, thus presents itself as the attitude of the «pure consumer» (615), concealing the real existence of this class, that of «pure exploitation» (615). Their «feudal» attitude, which is nothing but an attempt to escape towards the past, has no corresponding economic significance. Therefore, says Benjamin, Proust is not in the service of the classes he describes: «The upper ten thousand were, for him, a clan of criminals, a band of conspirators unmatched by any other: the Camorra of consumers» (615).

16 When Proust died, it wasn't even typed, and Robert edited it based on the six notebooks that contained the manuscript (he omitted passages about the war and homosexuality).

17 «Berma had, as the common people say, death written on her face. This time, she truly resembled a marble figure from the Erechtheion. With her hardened arteries already half petrified, sculptural ribbons seemed to run along her cheeks with a mineral rigidity. Her dying eyes, by contrast with this terrible ossified mask, appeared relatively alive, faintly gleaming like a snake asleep among stones».

If Proust is not a snob, neither is he, in Benjamin's reading, a novelist of the unconscious, as part of his French reception claimed. The well-known and nearly overused episode of the madeleine led to a hypostasis of the *mémoire involontaire*, which long dominated readings of the novel. Even other similar episodes are less commented upon. There is a stunning passage in *Sodome et Gomorrhe*, where the narrator returns to Balbec a year after his grandmother's funeral. As he bends down to remove his shoes, he is overwhelmed by a disturbance. The image of his grandmother, who had created infinite spaces when the narrator feared falling asleep in a strange room, reemerges. She had removed his boots when he first visited the city:

> Mais à peine eus-je touché le premier bouton de ma bottine, ma poitrine s'enfla, remplie d'une présence inconnue, divine, des sanglots me secouèrent, des larmes ruisselèrent de mes yeux. L 'être qui venait à mon secours, qui me sauvait de la sécheresse de l'âme, c'était celui qui, plusieurs années auparavant, dans un moment de détresse et de solitude identiques, dans un moment où je n'avais plus rien de moi, était entré, et qui m'avait rendu à moi-même, car il était moi et plus que moi [...]. Je venais d'apercevoir, dans ma mémoire, penché sur ma fatigue, le visage tendre, préoccupé et déçu de ma grand'mère, telle qu'elle avait été ce premier soir d'arrivée; le visage de ma grand'mère [...] Je me rappelais comme, une heure avant le moment où ma grand'mère s'était penchée ainsi dans sa robe de chambre vers mes bottines, errant dans la rue étouffante de chaleur, devant le pâtissier, j'avais cru que je ne pourrais jamais, dans le besoin que j'avais de l'embrasser, attendre l'heure qu'il me fallait encore passer sans elle. Et maintenant que ce même besoin renaissait, je savais que je pouvais attendre des heures après des heures, qu'elle ne serait plus jamais auprès de moi, je ne faisais que de le découvrir parce que je venais, en la sentant, pour la première fois, vivante, véritable, gonflant mon Je me rappelais comme, une heure avant le moment où ma grand'mère s'était penchée ainsi dans sa robe de chambre vers mes bottines, errant dans la rue étouffante de chaleur, devant le pâtissier, j'avais cru que je ne pourrais jamais, dans le besoin que j'avais de l'embrasser, attendre l'heure qu'il me fallait encore passer sans elle. Et maintenant que ce même besoin renaissait, je savais que je pouvais attendre des heures après des heures, qu'elle ne serait plus jamais auprès de moi, je ne faisais que de le découvrir parce que je venais, en la sentant, pour la première fois, vivante, véritable, gonflant mon cœur à le briser, en la retrouvant enfin, d'apprendre que je l'avais perdue pour toujours. Perdue pour toujours (Proust 758).[18]

18 «But barely had I touched the first button of my boot when my chest swelled, filled with an unknown, divine presence, and sobs shook me, tears streaming from my eyes. The being who came to my aid, who saved me from the dryness of my soul, was the same one who, several years earlier, in a moment of identical distress and solitude, a moment when I had nothing left of myself, had entered and restored me to myself, for it was both me and more than me. I had just glimpsed, in my memory, bent over my weariness, the tender, concerned, and disappointed face of my grandmother, as she had been that first evening of arrival; my grandmother's face [...] I remembered how, an hour before the moment when my grandmother had bent down in her dressing gown towards my boots, wandering in the sweltering street in front of the pastry shop, I had thought that I could never, in my need to embrace her, bear the time I still had to wait without her. And now that the same need reawakened, I knew I could wait hour after hour, that she would never be

The moment in which the grandmother's death and the pain of her loss are finally felt erase the year that had passed between the two events. Proust shows that mourning, like dreams, often manifests when least expected–that is why Benjamin also addresses Proust's affinities with Surrealism.

It is undeniable that the famous episode of the madeleine, soaked in tea, resonates universally, evoking a complex web of memories and sensations, much like other similar moments in life. However, what one makes of such an experience is a different matter entirely. The emphasis of Benjamin in the open unity of Proust's novel and his discussion of the dialectics between involuntary memory and recollection is his contribution to Proustian scholarship, and not only in literary criticism.

Therefore, a word on the novel's structure must be said. Proust's novel follows an orbicular path. We encounter a series of flashes of «involuntary memories» that foreshadow a revelation we only fully uncover at the end of the book when the narrator decides to write his work. Upon stumbling over a set of uneven stones while entering the courtyard of the Guermantes' mansion at the final volume, overwhelmed by sorrowful thoughts, the narrator is suddenly overcome by a sensation of happiness:

> Comme au moment où je goûtais la madeleine, toute inquiétude sur l'avenir, tout doute intellectuel étaient dissipés. Ceux qui m'assaillaient tout à l'heure au sujet de la réalité de mes dons littéraires, et même de la réalité de la littérature, se trouvaient levés comme par enchantement. Cette fois je me promettais bien de ne pas me résigner à ignorer pourquoi, sans que j'eusse fait aucun raisonnement nouveau, trouvé aucun argument décisif, les difficultés, insolubles tout à l'heure, avaient perdu toute importance, comme je l'avais fait le jour où j'avais goûté d'une madeleine trempée dans une infusion. La félicité que je venais d'éprouver était bien, en effet, la même que celle que j'avais éprouvée en mangeant la madeleine et dont j'avais alors ajourné de rechercher les causes profondes (Proust 866-867).[19]

The beginning is only made possible by this kind of discovery, this moment of awareness that we encounter at the conclusion of the book we are reading. This, in fact, is a hallmark of modernism–its self-referential nature. The narrator, now an adult, reveals here the foreshadowing of something in the madeleine episode, when Combray and its surroundings emerged, town and gardens alike, from the cup of tea where he imbibed the little cake:

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with me again. I was only just realizing this because I had, for the first time, felt her alive, real, swelling my heart to the point of breaking, in finding her again, only to learn that I had lost her forever. Lost forever».

19 «Just as in the moment when I tasted the madeleine, all anxiety about the future and all intellectual doubt was dissipated. That which had besieged me just moments ago regarding the reality of my literary talents and even the reality of literature itself vanished as if by enchantment. This time, I promised myself not to resign to ignoring why, without having formulated any new reason or discovering any decisive argument, the previously insoluble difficulties had lost all significance, just as they had on the day I tasted a madeleine emerged in the tea. The bliss I had just experienced was indeed the same as the one I had felt when eating the madeleine, the causes of which I had postponed investigating at that time».

> Mais à l'instant même où la gorgée mêlée des miettes du gâteau toucha mon palais, je tressaillis, attentif à ce qui se passait d'extraordinaire en moi. Un plaisir délicieux m'avait envahi, isolé, sans la notion de sa cause. [...] D'où avait pu me venir cette puissante joie ? Je sentais qu'elle était liée au goût du thé et du gâteau, mais qu'elle le dépassait infiniment, ne devait pas être de même nature. D'où venait-elle ? Que signifiait-elle ? Où l'appréhender ? [...] Et dès que j'eus reconnu le goût du morceau de madeleine trempé dans le tilleul que me donnait ma tante (quoique je ne susse pas encore et dusse remettre à bien plus tard de découvrir pourquoi ce souvenir me rendait si heureux), aussitôt la vieille maison grise sur la rue, où était sa chambre, vint comme un décor de théâtre s'appliquer au petit pavillon donnant sur le jardin, qu'on avait construit pour mes parents sur ses derrières (ce pan tronqué que seul j'avais revu jusque-là) ; et avec la maison, la ville, la Place où on m'envoyait avant déjeuner, les rues où j'allais faire des courses depuis le matin jusqu'au soir et par tous les temps, les chemins qu'on prenait si le temps était beau (Proust 45).[20]

We only discover this revelation at the end of the last book, when the narrator stumbles and hears a kind of calling: «*Saisis-moi au passage si tu en as la force, et tâche à résoudre l'énigme de bonheur que je te propose*» (Proust 662).[21] As in the case of the madeleine, the narrator is transported by «involuntary memory» (triggered by the imbalance) to St. Mark's Square in Venice, where he had once stepped on two uneven tiles in the baptistery of St. Mark's. Following this, a series of events unfolds: he hears the clinking of a spoon against dishes (which reminds him of the bell that announced Swann's departure during his childhood, signaling that his mother would come up to say goodnight); he comes across the book *François le Champi* by George Sand in the Guermantes' library (which his mother had read to him during his childhood), and so on.[22] The culmination of the narrative, that which had been foreshadowed, is tied

20 «But at the very moment when the sip mixed with the crumbs of the cake touched my palate, I shuddered, attentive to the extraordinary thing happening within me. A delicious pleasure had overwhelmed me, isolated, without any notion of its cause. [...] Where could this powerful joy have come from? I felt it was associated with the taste of the tea and the cake, but because it infinitely surpassed them, it must not be of the same nature. Where did it come from? What did it mean? How to grasp it? [...] And as soon as I recognized the taste of the piece of madeleine dipped in the lime-blossom tea that my aunt used to give me (though I did not yet know and would have to wait much longer to discover why this memory made me so happy), immediately the old grey house on the street, where her room was, appeared like a stage scenario, joining the little pavilion overlooking the garden, which had been built for my parents at the back (that truncated part that was all I had seen until then); and with the house, the town, the square where I was sent before lunch, the streets where I ran errands from morning till night in all weathers, the paths we took if the weather was fine».

21 «Seize me as I pass, if you have the strength, and try to solve the enigma of happiness I propose».

22 Samuel Beckett, one of Proust's finest interpreters, gathers some of these significant moments, which he refers to as «miracles», something he describes as «successive annunciations» that run throughout Proust's work: 1. The madeleine steeped in an infusion of tea; 2. The steeples of Martinville, seen from Dr. Percepied's trap; 3. A musty smell in a public lavatory in the Champs Élyssés; 4. The three trees, seen near Balbec from the carriage of Mme. de Villeparisis; 5. The hedge of hawthorn near Balbec; 6. He stoops to unbutton his boots on the occasion of his second visit to the Grand Hotel at Balbec; 7. Uneven cobbles in the courtyard of the Guermantes Hotel; 8. The noise of a spoon against a plate; 9. He wipes his mouth with a napkin; 10. The noise of water in the pipes; George Sand's *François le Champi* (23).

to his decision that he must write his work, bringing together in that experience both the embodied and the elapsed time:

> J'éprouvais un sentiment de fatigue profonde à sentir que tout ce temps si long non seulement avait sans une interruption été vécu, pensé, sécrété par moi, qu'il était ma vie, qu'il était moi-même, mais encore que j'avais à toute minute à le maintenir attaché à moi, qu'il me supportait, que j'étais juché à son sommet vertigineux, que je ne pouvais me mouvoir sans le déplacer avec moi. [...] La date à laquelle j'entendais le bruit de la sonnette du jardin de Combray, si distant et pourtant intérieur, était un point de repère dans cette dimension énorme que je ne savais pas avoir. J'avais le vertige de voir au-dessous de moi et en moi pourtant, comme si j'avais des lieues de hauteur, tant d'années (Proust 1.047).[23]

Analogous episodes to that of the madeleine repeat themselves several times. One of the most important aspects of these events is the sudden shift in the narrator's consciousness of the time that separates him from the recalled period. That is, the past invades the present as if there were no distance between these two moments as if Proust's work contained a synchronic dimension. The reminiscences that appear throughout the novel are presented to both the narrator and the reader as isolated episodes. However, everything changes when, by the end of the text, we realize that we have been reading the result of the gathering of these reminiscences, which culminates in the experience formalized in the narrative. In the end, the memory triggered by the stumble is accompanied by an interpretative moment in which the recollection of time is restored, allowing the narrator to reinterpret his life's journey. This interpretative moment ensures the great surprise of the book: it is a reconfiguration not only of the narrator's life, for whom all the reminiscences now make sense, but of the novel itself, which begins to be written at this point. If the narrator hears a voice that challenges him to «solve the enigma of happiness», it is because the experience of the past is not immediate, not handed to us in advance–it must be reconstructed. The image evoked by involuntary memory–which must be seized–eliminates the distance between the past and the future. It suppresses the time that has passed from point «a» to point «b» and, for this reason, brings with it a new conception of time.[24]

In other words, this experience does not exist as something given, and its apprehension depends on our ability to appropriate that past. In a provocative essay that discusses Proust's contemporary relevance, Jameson suggests that the interest of Proust's

23 «I felt a deep sense of fatigue in realizing that all this long stretch of time had not only been uninterruptedly lived, thought, and secreted by me, that it was my life, that it was myself, but also that I had to keep it attached to me every minute, that it supported me, that I was perched atop its dizzying height, and that I could not move without displacing it with me. […] The moment when I heard the sound of the bell from the garden in Combray, so distant and nevertheless internal, was a reference point in this vast dimension I hadn't known I possessed. I was dizzy from seeing beneath and within me, as if I were at a great height, so many years».

24 See Kristeva.

work lies precisely in this movement of «reconstruction» and not in the hypostasis of the concept of «involuntary memory». In Jameson's words,

> this is why the traditional reception of Proust, in terms of the past and of memory, as well as of the latter's triumphant recovery by way of the aesthetic vocation, is so singularly misplaced and inconsequential: it is in Bergson rather than in Proust that the past exists somehow outside of time, serenely surviving all the latter's vicissitudes. In Proust, however, the moments of involuntary memory are mere transitional devices and organizational hinges: far from opening up the past all over again, they make it present «for the first time», like an alternate space opening up within the space of the current present. However much Proust himself participated in the mystification, we must therefore insist on the presence in his work of a different conception of time that coexists uneasily with this memory-obsessed past-oriented one, and that is to be found in the notion of experience that runs throughout the length of the novel, namely that there is no immediacy, that we never experience anything for the first time, but that it is in the present of writing and only then that we come really to experience it. The present is this second time of the writing of the sentence, and the past experience, whether it happened just now, or in some much earlier decade, does not happen until that present (which may to be sure in its turn never come into being) («Joyce or Proust» 185-186).

In other words, it would be possible to argue how Proust's narrative technique evokes a utopian aspect, as it opens, as Jameson states, a time within a time like a space within a space; that is, it opens up another dimension. The rejuvenating power of *mémoire involontaire* does not reside merely in the potential for its occurrence but rather only in the impulse to grasp and fix, within that moment, the past as it crystallizes. In that sense, Adorno also underlines the difference between Proust and Bergson:

> Perhaps I may say that there is a decisive difference between Proust and Bergson, who was Proust's relative in both the literal and superficial senses. Both are concerned with the restoration of life and experience in the face of reification, in the face of the world of convention. Bergson, however, sees the way to this in an unfettered self-adaptation to changing situations, in blind conformity, if you like, whereas Proust sees it precisely in evading this adaptation and keeping the organs of childhood intact. This is why Bergson trusts in intuition as a pure passivity and really resists any active «effort of the concept», while Proust demands the endless stiffness of a fencer for intuition and, moreover, he fills and cushions his work throughout with an extraordinary contingent of rationality, I would say, of healthy common sense and real psychological knowledge, and it is only on the basis of this fund of healthy common sense and real world experience that the power of intuition arises, that is, the power of restoring what has been forgotten through recollection, which really constitute his work. He therefore faces the problem of ratio and intuition [Anschauung] or of rationality and

> unconscious memory in a far less straightforward way than Bergson; he has a much more dialectical standpoint in relation to all of this in the very spirit of his work («Ad Proust» 68-69).

This means that to capture the past, a particular disposition is necessary. As Benjamin states in «Denkbilder», one must understand «the language in which fortune makes its pact with us» (*Gesamtausgabe* 1.659). The madeleine is only the first eruption of *mémoire involontaire* that runs throughout the book, with many more following, and the narrative itself, in one way or another, results from the conscious apprehension of these multiple instances by the narrator. Benjamin asserts that Proust seeks to «charge an entire life with the highest presence of mind. Not reflection–recollection is Proust's process» (617). An unapprehended eruption of the past into the present is, therefore, a missed opportunity to capture the past. This novel, according to Benjamin, «is permeated by the truth that none of us have the time to live the true dramas of existence destined for us. That makes us age. Nothing else. The wrinkles and creases on our faces are the inscriptions of the great passions, the burdens, the realizations that called on us–but we, the masters, were not at home» (617).

In Proust's world, the only truly lived life is the one transfigured by literature. It is through literature that one can achieve a reunion with time, redeeming moments of unclaimed happiness, glimpsing unacknowledged desires, and triumphing over grief and even death. In a way, Benjamin's reading of Proust demonstrates that literature does not cease where life walls in, where memory is reified, where the paths of existence narrow and dreams falter. By transcending these boundaries, it has the power to redeem suffering and unhappiness. Only literature can lay bare life, making it comprehensible. The artist, as the unrivaled conqueror of experience–one that mirrors our own–presents us with the utopia of a past fully reclaimed, of time rediscovered in its entirety and in the name of happiness. Jameson's assertion on the academic, the commentator, and the artist come together in Benjamin's reading of Proust: «The scholar longs for a tiger's leap into the past; the book reviewer for flashes of the present. The novel, meanwhile, is time's relief map, its furrows and spurs marking the intrusion of history into individual lives or else its tell-tale silences» (*The Inventions of a Present* 1).

Proust and the Marxist remaking of History

All of this might sound idealistic. But what if, one day, we could reconfigure life as literature does? To hear the voice that challenges us to solve the enigma of happiness? On that day, Marx and Proust would reunite. The great utopia of Proustian literature hides, for those who know where to look, another one: that of a society entirely aware of itself. This conjunction inspires one of the most luminous moments in Benjamin's work.

His theses «*Über den Begriff der Geschichte*» are imbued with Proust. Written in 1940, in the light of the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact and the defeat of German social democracy, the theses were saved by Hannah Arendt and handed over to Theodor W. Adorno for later publication. Benjamin would commit suicide shortly after, following an unsuccessful escape from the French collaborationist forces. Benjamin opposes, on the one hand, a progressive view of history sustained by social democracy, which saw revolution as the inevitable result of the unfolding contradiction between productive forces and capitalist relations of production and, on the other hand, the positivist perspective of bourgeois historiography, which produces a history based on identification with the victors and the erasure and annihilation of the oppressed, including those who are already dead.

A few years earlier, in a letter to Scholem, Benjamin stressed how closely Proust's philosophical outlook resonated with his. He adds: «I always felt a deep connection whenever I read any of his works» (*Gesammelte Briefe* 59). This proximity is condensed in the theses. Benjamin's concept of history involves precisely the idea that it is possible to transform the past and reappropriate it through remembrance. As Jeanne-Marie Gagnebin underlined, Benjamin recognizes how the «method of the materialist historian» owes much to the «Proustian aesthetic» (Gagnebin 16). This method is the method of «open history», which allows the past to be saved from oblivion and to bring to life what it contained as a promise. It puts in motion what was otherwise ossified. However, it is not only a conception of history that is at stake in the theses; what is at stake is a conception of revolution. In Thesis V, Benjamin states that

> The true image of the past flits by. The past can only be seized as an image that flashes for never to be seen again at the moment of its recognizability. «The truth will not run away from us»–this declaration, which comes from Gottfried Keller, describes in the historical image of historicism precisely the point where it is pierced by historical materialism. For it is an irretrievable image of the past that threatens to disappear with every present that does not recognize itself as intended in it (Benjamin, *Gesamtausgabe* 617).

How, then, can one capture an image of the past as it unexpectedly reveals itself to the historical subject in moments of danger, as Benjamin suggests in Thesis VI? The answer can be found in Thesis XVIIa. The power that grants involuntary memory–the flash–its ability to unlock a previously sealed chamber of history is political action. Benjamin transposes the movement central to Proust's work (and the role of literature) into his theory of revolution, imbuing it with a collective dimension. It is not a coincidence that a writer like Proust, who sought to transform art into architecture, a novel into a cathedral, should find in Benjamin–a thinker who aspired to turn literature into revolution–his most incisive critic. For Benjamin, the very impulse that enables the aesthetic configuration in Proust–deciphering the enigma of involuntary memory–must similarly guide the collective consciousness and action in radical transformation.

Thus, as with Proust, we must resist interpreting Benjamin's work as a mere hypostasis of the fleeting moment. Benjamin draws from the active, non-conformist stance in Proust's writing to propose a model for Marxism, one that remains particularly urgent in our own time. Today, when faith in progress, in the supposed stability of bourgeois democracy, and in the triumph of the long march through institutions has allowed fascist forces to resurface across various parts of the globe, Benjamin's insights carry renewed significance.

Beyond the affinities between Proustian aesthetics and Benjamin's conception of revolution, Proust is invoked to remind us that revolution must also be made in the name of happiness. According to Benjamin, this impulse–little noticed by his readers–runs explosively and painfully through Proust's work. Theodor W. Adorno once said of Proust that he was a martyr of happiness («Ad Proust 76). In Thesis IV, Benjamin asserts that while class struggle is a fight for «crude and material» things, there are also present in it «refined and spiritual» things, such as trust, humor, and perseverance. An image of happiness is transmitted, along with class struggle, from one generation to the next. In Thesis II, Benjamin writes that there is a fateful meeting scheduled between past generations and our own.

> the image of happiness that we cherish is thoroughly tinged by the time in which the course of our own existence has directed us. Happiness, which could arouse envy in us, exists only in the air that we have breathed with people to whom we could have spoken, women who could have given themselves to us. In other words, the representation of happiness inalienably resonates with that of redemption. It behaves the same way with the representation of the past, which history makes its concern. The past carries with it a secret index through which it is referred to redemption. Does not a breath of the air that was around those who came before us brush us? Is there not an echo of those who have now fallen silent in the voices to which we lend our ears? Do the women we court not have sisters they no longer knew? If that is the case, then there is a secret settlement between the past generations and our own. Then we were expected on earth (*Gesamtausgabe* 617).

Just as Marcel's love for Gilberte and Albertine was already inscribed in Swann's love for Odette, the image of happiness is the link that binds one generation to the next. Just as the Proustian narrative is capable of reconfiguring the entire world by rejecting any mode of apprehending reality other than the subjective, and by extracting from an object the essence of earthly existence, revolutionary action, for Benjamin, appears able to reconstruct all of history, not by drawing from an object, but from a spark, the essence of that reconstruction. In this sense, it seems that history has no existence beyond its immanent meaning, that nothing exists outside of it; only then can it be reconfigured. This is why this conception of history can challenge the notion of the «happened». That is, it is not just the way we look at history that would be transformed in the wake of a

revolution, but history itself; all the failed uprisings of the past would be transformed, says Benjamin, into rehearsals for the victory of the oppressed. Thus, Benjamin finds in the entirety of Proust's work, but especially in its conclusion, not merely a theory of art and literature, as Proust himself announces, but a theory of history that Benjamin transforms, detonating its subversive content into revolutionary content.

This impulse in Proust's work is no small matter. Today, more than ever, it is clear that the unhappiness we suffer is socially produced. Combating it is our political duty to both our own generation and those that came before us. Benjamin is anything but a pessimist. What he said about Proust applies equally to him: happiness is present in his work as an elegy.

Finally, a few more words about Benjamin's concept of «experience» [*Erfahrung*], in which both Proust and Marx converge. Experience is the substance of narrative, understood by Benjamin as the collective praxis of transmitting wisdom from one generation to the next (*Gesamtausgabe* 686). The historian, says Benjamin, writes history, while the chronicler narrates it. The latter does not differentiate between major and minor events, these ones being lost to history. Following Max Unold's commentary, Benjamin notes that Proust himself was a chronicler, as he made «coachman stories» enjoyable. His erudition, sarcasm, philosophy, and memoirs all serve this attempt to recover experience and a narrative that is no longer possible. Therefore, Benjamin utters that Proust's work is «at the center and at the same time at the point of indifference to all dangers» (617). It sacrifices its genre, the novel, to preserve its substance, the experience on the verge of dissolution. Benjamin does the same. His writing blurs and unites the boundaries of art, history, politics, and criticism. He sacrifices philosophy to preserve it.

Our atmosphere today is the same as Proust's: permeated and haunted by death, suffocation by pandemics and polluted air arising from the wrenching of the Earth, and the mass destruction of experience. It also resembles Benjamin's epoch in the face of fascism. As Virginia Woolf (42) noticed, «the thing about Proust is his combination of the utmost sensibility with the utmost tenacity. He searches out these butterfly shades to the last grain. He is as tough as catgut and as evanescent as a butterfly's bloom». Here is a Benjaminian-like disposition for critical theory in the century to come.

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