

6-1-1997

Narrative and Simultaneity: Benjamin's Image of Proust

Louis Simon

Loyola University, Chicago

Follow this and additional works at: <https://newprairiepress.org/sttcl>



Part of the [German Literature Commons](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0 License](#).

Recommended Citation

Simon, Louis (1997) "Narrative and Simultaneity: Benjamin's Image of Proust," *Studies in 20th Century Literature*: Vol. 21: Iss. 2, Article 4. <https://doi.org/10.4148/2334-4415.1423>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by New Prairie Press. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Studies in 20th Century Literature* by an authorized administrator of New Prairie Press. For more information, please contact cads@k-state.edu.

Narrative and Simultaneity: Benjamin's Image of Proust

Abstract

We can better understand Proust's approach to literary activity in *A la recherche du temps perdu* and Walter Benjamin's reading of the novel in his essay "The Image of Proust" by recognizing how the experience and concept of simultaneity, as opposed to linearity or narrative progression, underlies these texts. Though Proust's novel represents a linear narrative, the writer's activity, which Benjamin characterizes as "the attempt to charge an entire lifetime with the utmost awareness," engages a supralinear dimension of lived experience that binds literary activity to the present moment. Readings of the Benjamin-Proust relationship that focus on an exclusively linear understanding of Proust restrict the possibility of viewing both authors as actively concerned with the impact of literary experience on the present moment. A reading of this relationship that foregrounds the notion of simultaneity, however, allows for a richer appreciation of affinities between the two writers and their attitudes toward experience, action, and consciousness.

Keywords

Walter Benjamin, Proust, *A la recherche du temps perdu*, The Image of Proust, linearity, narrative progression, linear narrative, writer's activity, supralinear dimension, supralinear, lived experience, literary activity, present, moment, restrict, impact, experience, present moment, relationship, simultaneity, time, experience, action, consciousness

Narrative and Simultaneity Benjamin and the Image of Proust

Louis Simon
Loyola University, Chicago

Reversal is the direction of learning which
transforms existence into writing.

—Walter Benjamin, *Franz Kafka*
On the Tenth Anniversary of His Death

Walter Benjamin's 1929 essay, "The Image of Proust," reveals a deep affinity between the two thinkers. Contrary to the view that Proust's work constitutes a massive attempt to escape from time into a high modernist, mystical, ahistorical cathedral of art, Proust's work, much like Benjamin's, investigates contemporary issues of class, proto-fascist thought, personal and historical memory, and the relevance of esoteric states of consciousness to an individual's actions in the present. In addition, both writers saw writing as an action both rooted in and having a significant impact on the present moment.

While approaches to Proust that issue from an exclusively *linear* interpretation of narrative and subjective experience may deepen our understanding of the novel's complex narrative structure (Gérard Genette's work comes to mind), Benjamin's essay evinces an approach to Proust that goes beyond received notions of temporality. What happens in *A la recherche du temps perdu*, he writes, belongs to "the world distorted in a state of resemblance, a world in which the true surrealist face of existence breaks through" (205).¹ A conceptual framework emphasizing simultaneity and nonlinearity, therefore, may help to expose some of the ties that link the philosophical attitudes toward reading, writing, memory, and alternative states of consciousness we find in Proust's novel and in sev-

eral of Benjamin's essays. A focus on simultaneity reminds us that *time regained* (*Le temps retrouvé*) in the Proustian sense does not mean that one escapes the present moment and retreats into the past or into memory, but rather that the past/passed state—a state including mental and bodily experiences—comes into or comes to inhabit and inform the present. Proustian mysticism, to whatever extent such a term might be helpful, can be read not as a retreat into contemplative inaction but as a method of informing and inspiring activity in the *now*.

Readings that emphasize linearity privilege Marcel's realizations concerning involuntary memory and his calling as a writer toward the end of *Time Regained* as the novel's climax and then read the novel as a linear narrative leading up to this moment of triumph over and escape from time. John McCole, for example, who draws on the work of Peter Szondi in the Proust-Benjamin chapter of his insightful study, *Walter Benjamin and the Antinomies of Tradition*, states, "The culmination of *A la recherche du temps perdu* comes with the narrator's decision to compose the novel; only art can hope to capture and stabilize the fleeting epiphanies of involuntary memory" (264). He also observes, following Szondi, "Proust did not so much capture time as annihilate it, attempting to flee from the consequences of transience" (261). This type of reading, however, which speaks of a culmination of the work and sees its author's aim as an escape or retreat into pleasant childhood memories, tends to obscure the connections between involuntary memory and the act of writing that Benjamin's essay emphasizes. Obviously, the linear temporality of the reading experience seems to impose a linear interpretive structure, a structure traceable to the linearity of the sentence and of human experience as widely understood. Proust and Benjamin, though, challenge this structure.

Certainly on the level of narrative, Marcel's epiphanies, which span some 60 pages (897-957), function as the climactic moment of the work. But the length, nature, and subject matter of Proust's work question and problematize the very notion of narrative linearity and the supremacy of its role in our understanding the structure of his text (and of memory and experience). Considering that Proust spent at least 14 years writing and revising his book—the revisions were unfinished at the time of his death in 1922—and the length of time it takes a reader to get through the entire work, to attribute supreme importance to a single moment that "defines" the "aim" of

the work seems to miss some of the more subtle points it makes concerning time and textuality. Proust's text, with its labyrinthine sentences, its foregrounded self-reflexivity, and its emphasis on change, contingency, intermittency, and nonlinearity, requires the mobilization of a critical paradigm unbound by traditional notions of plot (without, of course, denying the existence of plot and narrative). Before attempting such a reading, though, we must first examine Benjamin's reading of Proust.

Unlike most commentators, Benjamin does not dwell on Marcel's epiphanies in *Time Regained*. Instead, he notes that "*A la recherche du temps perdu* is the constant attempt to charge an entire lifetime with the utmost awareness. Proust's method is actualization, not reflection" ("Proust" 211). Proust's attempting to charge an entire lifetime with the utmost awareness suggests two interpretations: one that functions within the text and another that surrounds the creation of the text. To what "lifetime" does Benjamin refer, Proust's life or the life of his fictional stand-in, Marcel? On the level of narrative we can apply the "charging with utmost awareness" to the life of Marcel as presented in the text, that is, we can understand the text to represent the life of a character utterly aware, utterly alive to experience. Or, on the level of Proust's creation of the work, we can apply this charging with awareness to Proust's own creative activity. Writing then becomes the medium for charging the writer's life with the utmost awareness; in fact, writing becomes for Proust a more-than religious vocation, combining as it does the worldly with the spiritual. Since Benjamin makes little distinction between Proust, Marcel, and Proust's text—in fact, he seems intent on blurring these boundaries—we can interpret his statement as applying potentially in both senses.²

To see Proust's method as encompassing both the recounting of a life charged with the utmost awareness and the writer's activity itself as charging his own life with such awareness is to see beyond the linear surface of the text, beyond the series of events placed along a time continuum, and into a text that bristles with simultaneity. Put another way, to read Proust for plot is to miss the point. Readings that foreground plot tend to suppress the experiential and mystical aspirations of the text and to see Marcel's realizations at the end of the novel as the point toward which the text has been "aiming." As Szondi puts it:

The meaning of Proust's search for time past is explicitly stated at the end of his novel. The moment when its autobiographical hero, Marcel, recognizes this meaning is the high point of the work; for the point is simultaneously that toward which the book has been aiming and that from which it issues. . . . For Proust, the goal of the search for time past is the disappearance of time as such. For Benjamin it is different. (496-97)

Szondi's reading functions adequately at the level of linearity, but such a reading, which sees the "point" of involuntary memory to lie in its ability to effect an escape from time, to make time disappear, forecloses the exploration of another, nonlinear level of the text. Szondi approaches a nonlinear reading of the text when he says that the point of the work "is simultaneously that toward which the book has been aiming and that from which it issues," but in following this with the observation that the goal of Proust's search is the disappearance of time, he reveals his reading to be tied to a linear paradigm that sees the text as partaking of circularity rather than simultaneity. Circularity is the replaying of the time-line; it suggests iteration in the simplest sense (a keystone of Genette's reading). Simultaneity, on the other hand, suggests the interpenetration of distinct temporal experiences and the convolution of the *individually* woven fabric of time (*my* time is clearly not *your* time, just as my *time* in the dentist's chair is not the same as my *time* playing tennis; on the one side is the "objective" experience/observation of time—we both look at the same clock—and on the other side is the subjective experience of temporality, an experience in which the sense of time expands, contracts, overlaps, and so on).

Involuntary memory illuminates the existence and experience of simultaneity, which we might refer to as an alternative level of temporal consciousness. From the viewpoint of simultaneity, linearity—the continuum of temporal existence—means nothing, or at most, simply another possible way of experiencing time. Involuntary memory, for Marcel, means contact with a level of his being, as he puts it, for whom time does not matter. Access to this realm of being gives Marcel a feeling of immortality, for in stumbling on the pavement stones in the Guermantes's courtyard he seems to have stumbled into the direct experience of the timeless and eternal. This experience, however, does not necessarily constitute a retreat or escape from the present (or an ascetic/aesthetic avoidance of future possibility). Rather, the Proustian mystical

illumination cuts across temporal boundaries—the past, the present, and the future—in the locus of the *now*. Commenting on the impact of involuntary memory on the Proustian creative process, Julia Kristeva remarks that “The process of composition, for the person in whom it ‘creates new powers’ . . . never loses its anchoring in the senses; music becomes a world, writing a form of transsubstantiation [sic]” (77).

Linear readings of *A la recherche du temps perdu*, which view “the goal” for Marcel (and Proust) as the *retreat* into the mystical state, decline the text’s invitation to investigate the ways in which mystical consciousness connects with and permeates everyday (supposedly nonmystical) life; that is, such interpretations sidestep the issue of how the experience of simultaneity relates to the present (temporal) moment. Because their readings see involuntary memory as a mystical retreat, a goal in itself, both Szondi and McCole, for example, strive to differentiate between Proust’s understanding and Benjamin’s understanding of involuntary memory; both critics contrast what they view as Proust’s denial of time with Benjamin’s need to reconcile his allegiance to (what these critics see as) a nonhistorical Proust and his own historicist agenda. In contrast, I propose that Benjamin’s affinity to Proust might instead be explained in terms of their shared belief that the experience of involuntary memory has enormous ramifications for revitalizing present experience.³

Benjamin makes the important and subtle distinction that “the eternity which Proust opens to view is convoluted [*verschränkt*] time, not boundless time” (“Proust” 211).⁴ Benjamin contrasts a mystical state unbound by and floating free from time with an experience of convoluted time, that is, an experience of time in which each moment somehow touches, one might say superimposes or overlaps, upon every other moment.⁵ Webster defines *convoluted* as “rolled or wound together with one part upon another,” and in this light Benjamin’s statement echoes closely a statement about time by Vladimir Nabokov, another great admirer of Proust.⁶ In his autobiography, *Speak, Memory* (rev. 1966), Nabokov states that “I confess that I do not believe in time. I like to fold my magic carpet, after use, in such a way as to superimpose one part of the pattern upon another” (139). Nabokov’s magic carpet is his (narrated) life, a carpet printed with patterns whose existence becomes apparent through experiences of heightened consciousness such as involuntary memory and constellations of coincidences—signs and

symbols whose proliferation could lead to states of intoxication or madness, such as the "referential mania" experienced by the suicidal boy in his story "Signs and Symbols" or the malevolent solipsism of *Lolita's* Humbert Humbert. This belief in the existence of patterns—a belief that cannot be explained rationally—is shared by Nabokov, Proust, and Benjamin, and appears in surrealist writings such as André Breton's *Nadja*. In all these cases there is the acknowledgment of the dimension of simultaneity, a dimension in which the linear continuum of life experience—either through a moment of involuntary memory or a series of coincidences—folds upon itself, revealing at once the existence of a nontemporal "pattern" of experience and the existence of a dimension of consciousness capable of recognizing and partaking of such experiences.⁷

For Marcel in *Time Regained*, these "life patterns" constitute a text that one must seek to decipher or *read*. More importantly, he considers this task of decipherment to be none other than the creation of a work of art:

Whether I was concerned with impressions like the one which I had received from the steeples of Martinville or with reminiscences like that of the unevenness of the two steps or the taste of the madeleine, the task was to interpret the given sensations as signs of so many laws and ideas, by trying to think—that is to say, to draw forth from the shadow—what I had merely felt, by trying to convert it into its spiritual equivalent. And this method, which seemed to me the sole method, what was it but the creation of a work of art? (912)

Marcel clearly sees the experience of involuntary memory not as an escape from time (or old age, as some critics believe) but as that which ignites, infuses, and makes possible the creation, in the present moment, of meaningful art. He comes to believe that every moment contains the "secret meaning" of existence, but in normal states of consciousness we are unable to read this meaning.

Following his realization that the task of decipherment is none other than the creation of art, he notes, "As for the inner book of unknown symbols . . . if I tried to read them no one could help me with any rules, for to read them was an act of creation in which no one can do our work for us or even collaborate with us. How many for this reason turn aside from writing!" (913). Benjamin's concurrence with this notion of what artistic creation, specifically *writing*, is

tied to the activity of creative reading informs and helps make sense of his remark concerning Proust's endless interpolations into his galley proofs: Benjamin says that "the laws of remembrance were operative even within the confines of the work." Because Proust explores convoluted, not boundless, time, each moment of creation, which is for Proust a moment of memory, touches upon all other moments by participating in atemporal simultaneity. As Benjamin puts it:

An experienced event is finite—at any rate, confined to one sphere of experience; a remembered event is infinite, because it is only a key to everything that happened before and after it. . . . Only the *actus purus* of recollection itself, not the author or the plot, constitutes the unity of the text. One may even say that the intermittence of author and plot is only the reverse of the continuum of memory, the pattern on the back side of the tapestry. This is what Proust meant, and this is how he must be understood, when he said that he would prefer to see his entire work printed in one volume in two columns and without any paragraphs. ("Proust" 203)

What Proust meant, as I understand Benjamin, is that printed thus his work would literally and physically more closely resemble the tapestry of his life. Closed and unread, the volume, its pages of text touching one another, embodies the notion of atemporal simultaneity; only the reader's temporal experience of reading the volume turns it into a linear, temporal narrative. Again, the similarity to Nabokov's statement about time as a patterned magic carpet is striking. Elsewhere in *Speak, Memory* Nabokov employs a similar Proustian metaphor, with similar connotations: "Neither in environment nor in heredity can I find the exact instrument that fashioned me, the anonymous roller that pressed upon my life a certain intricate watermark whose unique design becomes visible only when the lamp of art is made to shine through life's foolscap" (25).

What the notion of simultaneity means for *A la recherche du temps perdu* is that the text is linear only to the extent that sentences and books must be linear; each moment of the narrative, charged with "the utmost awareness," represents and enacts the fulfillment of Proust's method. In this light, every moment in Proust's text embodies the "climax" of the work. Though we can speak of the novel's climax in the traditional sense—Marcel's

epiphanies in *Time Regained*—we should not do so to the exclusion of the notion of simultaneity and of an awareness of how Marcel's realizations and recognitions allow him to charge his life "with the utmost awareness." An acknowledgment, rather than a denial or repudiation, of Benjamin's significant agreement with Proust on this point allows for a deeper understanding and contextualization of his thoughts on Proust, especially in regard to the use of language.

In a discussion concerning similarities in attitudes toward language in Hölderlin and Benjamin, Michael Jennings proposes that Benjamin's use of Hölderlin "suggests that Benjamin's understanding of language as a cognitive medium was early centered upon the notion that truth and knowledge reside in language in the form of discrete images and not in the form of a narrative continuity" (100). According to Jennings, "Benjamin chronicles the fall of language from the status of medium to mere means" (101). I suggest that, in Proust, Benjamin saw the attempt to restore or at least indicate the potential of language to approach the status of medium, of mode of cognition as opposed to narrative tool. In light of Jennings's comment that for Benjamin "truth and knowledge reside in language in the form of discrete images," we can attribute a double meaning to the title of Benjamin's essay, "The Image of Proust": (1) what interests Benjamin foremost in Proust is the discrete image, that which each page of Proust's work evokes, and (2) Benjamin is interested in the image of Proust the writer, in what it meant for Proust to "charge" his creative moments with the utmost awareness. In one sense, Benjamin refers to the substance of Proust's work, the vivid images that memory—involuntary and voluntary—and language retrieve from the depths of lost time. But in addition, he refers to the image that inhabits the conclusion of his essay, where he compares Michelangelo's scaffold in the Sistine Chapel to "the sickbed on which Marcel Proust consecrates the countless pages which he covered with his handwriting" ("Proust" 215). Neither discrete image nor creative activity can be separated one from the other; recalling and realizing the image is an act of decipherment that surfaces fully only in the act of writing.

Both in terms of the discrete, momentary image and in that of the writer immersed in the act of creation, we might also interpret Benjamin's comments on the Jews, remembrance, and the Torah in the last of his "Theses on the Philosophy of History." He concludes: "The Torah and the prayers instruct them in remembrance. . . . This

does not imply, however, that for the Jews the future turned into homogeneous, empty time. For every second of time was the strait gate through which the Messiah might enter" (264). Similarly, any object or moment of recollection, for Proust, contains the potential to incite the experience of involuntary memory and open new dimensions of knowledge and experience, dimensions to be explored, specifically, through the act of writing.

The narrative of *A la recherche du temps perdu* leads to Marcel's realization that to find happiness, to give meaning to his life, he must write a book. Though we may likely attribute Marcel's insights to Proust, the latter participates in time and memory in ways that the former cannot. Proust's experience of composing the work, for example—what I refer to as his method—stands, quite obviously, outside the protagonist's experience. Some critics, however, have assumed that Marcel's book is in fact Proust's novel. As Szondi puts it, "In the last volume, the hero decides to write the novel that the reader holds in his hands, allowing the book, as it were, to catch up with itself" (494).⁸ In this view, Proust's work enacts a hermetic, paradoxical circularity: the entire work is seen as leading up to the climax that will lead to the author's decision to start the work, whose climax will be the author's decision, and so on (an M.C. Escher-like view of the book). But Marcel's decision to write merely replicates a "real life" decision made by Proust many years prior to the moment of Marcel's realization in the text (to whatever extent we can equate the two). Proust's decision, like Marcel's, were he to write his book, informs the entire work.⁹ *A la recherche du temps perdu* is not the book Marcel will write, though it is undoubtedly similar to such a hypothetical work. We must not forget that Marcel's book does not yet exist; Proust's novel leaves off at the point where its protagonist decides to dedicate the remaining years of his life to writing. The book thus culminates not in an escape from time but in the affirmation of a commitment to artistic creation in the present, a commitment that infuses and animates Proust's novel throughout. As Barthes states, "What Proust *recounts*, what he puts into narration, is not his life but his *desire to write*" (283, emphases in original). Similarly, Gilles Deleuze observes that "L'œuvre de Proust n'est pas tournée vers le passé et les découvertes de la mémoire, mais vers le futur et les progrès de l'apprentissage" 'Proust's work is not a journey toward the past and uncovering of memory, but toward the future and the progress of an apprenticeship' (22; my translation).¹⁰

The phenomenon of involuntary memory underlies and inspires Proust's work—rather than seeing it as an end in itself, he puts involuntary memory at the service of his creative project. As outlined above, involuntary memory can be seen as a state in which one gains immediate access to memories and sensations unreachable by conscious intellection; it can also be understood as an atemporal dimension of individual experience becoming temporarily, and temporally, accessible or manifest. The majority of Proust's novel consists not of involuntary memories but of a synthesis of voluntary (actual) memories and willful fabrication. Proust utilized the insights and knowledge gained from his experiences of involuntary memory to activate and energize his ongoing creative project. Involuntary memory is the spark that ignites Proust's writing and that keeps it burning through the years of his work on the novel. In a passage reminiscent of Benjamin's concept of the profane illumination or the surrealist experience of intoxication, Marcel describes the moment of involuntary memory as "a moment brief as a flash of lightning . . . a fragment of time in the pure state" (905).

Proust and Benjamin share the trope of the spark, the flash, the moment of illumination. This trope points to similarities in their attitudes toward the image, the historical function of remembrance, and the connecting of language and language activities to alternative states of consciousness. In his discussion of Benjamin's theory of language and its relevance to his understanding of reading, Jennings finds that the act of reading for Benjamin links "his philosophy of language and his theory of the dialectical image"; reading provides the potential for a brief "flashing up" of the "nonsensuous similarities" residing in language. Jennings observes that:

Only in reading does an otherwise inaccessible connection—between things, between persons, between historical eras—flash up to us in a mystical "now of recognizability" when we encounter and intuit the meaning of those few intensely charged elements of language. . . . Reading is for Benjamin at once a secular and a mystical activity. (117-18)

This last statement parallels another made by Gershom Scholem in his 1972 essay, "Walter Benjamin and His Angel." Scholem states bluntly that "reading is for him [Benjamin] an occult event, although

the philosophers [Marxists, Scholem might have said] do not like to admit this" (80).

Scholem analyzes Benjamin's relationship to his most prized possession, the Paul Klee painting *Angelus Novus*. He contends, "In the phantasmagoria of his imagination, the picture of the *Angelus Novus* becomes for Benjamin a picture of his [personal] angel as the occult reality of the self" (80). This occult reality of the self, as Scholem makes clear, was based on Benjamin's understanding of his experience in terms of patterns of signification surrounding various attempts over time to "read" connections between the painting and concurrent life experiences. In his relationship over time to this particular object, the Klee painting, Benjamin sought and found evidence of atemporal interconnections and patterns similar to those discovered by Marcel in his investigations of his past (see Scholem 59-80).

Scholem relates the notion of profane illumination to the idea of reading as an occult experience by examining the following quote from Benjamin's "Surrealism" essay:

We penetrate the mystery only to the extent that we recognize it in the everyday world, by virtue of a dialectical optic that perceives the everyday as impenetrable, the impenetrable as everyday. The most passionate investigation of telepathic phenomena, for example, will not teach us half as much about reading (which is an eminently telepathic process), as the profane illumination of reading about telepathic phenomena. And the most passionate investigation of the hashish trance will not teach us half as much about thinking (which is eminently narcotic) as the profane illumination of thinking about the hashish trance. (190)

Scholem interprets this as meaning that "out of the experience of daily life . . . there leaps the mystical experience, the occult event still hidden in it." Reading, according to Benjamin, teaches us more about paranormal experience than any investigation of paranormal experience can teach us about reading. Ordinarily, one would not investigate the activity of reading in order to better understand telepathy, but this is only because reading is not ordinarily understood as a telepathic (or potentially telepathic) experience. Hence the notion of penetrating the mystery of the everyday: reading, Benjamin says, is treated as an everyday experience, when in fact

reading, seen from the viewpoint of profane illumination, reveals the mysterious and impenetrable. He does not bother to explain what he means in claiming that reading is a telepathic process; instead, this gnomic statement seems to come directly from his own intuitive understanding of reading. He suggests that those who understand reading as he does, in terms of the dialectical optic that perceives the mysterious in the everyday, will come to see how reading is indeed telepathic.

Benjamin's example concerning knowledge of the hashish trance, following as closely as it does his example concerning reading and telepathy, suggests an association between the alteration of consciousness made possible through reading and one effected by psychoactive substances. We can apply Benjamin's description of the hashish trance to what Proust saw as the method of decipherment that itself constitutes the creative act. Benjamin writes in "Hashish in Marseilles":

To begin to solve the riddle of the ecstasy of trance, one ought to meditate on Aridane's thread. What joy in the mere act of unrolling a ball of thread. And this joy is very deeply related to the joy of trance, as to that of creation.

We go forward; but in so doing we not only discover the twists and turns of the cave, but also enjoy this pleasure of discovery against the background of the other, rhythmical bliss of the activity of unwinding the thread. The certainty of unrolling an artfully wound skein—is that not the joy of all productivity, at least in prose? And under hashish we are enraptured prose-beings in the highest power. (142)

Here we might compare the metaphor of the artfully wound skein to those of the patterned tapestry and to Nabokov's "magic carpet" noted above; the act of writing is seen as the rhythmical pleasure of exploring the Ariadne's labyrinth of convoluted time—writing is simultaneously the act of discovery and creation. Reading and writing are acts of decipherment and actualization.

Because decipherment and creativity go hand in hand in the Proustian understanding of artistic creation, a dynamic, symbiotic relationship obtains between acts of reading and acts of writing. Robert Scholes interprets Proustian involuntary memory—a bodily memory different from the voluntary memory available to the con-

[Marcel's] body, by connecting the feeling of these stones under foot to those other stones or the taste of this herb tea to that other herb tea, begins for him what we can now understand as the process of reading, connecting one time to another, one place to another, one text to another through the figures of memory, which are the same as the figures of speech. (18)

Involuntary memory thus also points to the existence of bodily memory, a phenomenon familiar to dancers, musicians, painters, weavers, and anyone who knows how to type. Benjamin notes Proust's "sensitivity to smells" and describes Proust's sentences as "the entire muscular activity of the intelligible body" (214). Reading texts, Proust reminds us, contains a dimension of bodily experience. Involuntary memory accesses this dimension, suggesting ways of reading that are not only a matter of the intellect but matters of physical and historical experience.¹¹

Involuntary memory, as both Proust and Benjamin understood it, provides the flash that allows us to see the impenetrable in the everyday. Marcel states this perhaps most clearly in his observation that:

The slightest word we have said, the most insignificant action that we have performed at any one epoch of our life was surrounded by, and coloured by the reflection of, things which logically had no connexion with it and which later have been separated from it by our intellect which could make nothing of them for our rational purposes, things, however, in the midst of which . . . the simplest act or gesture remains immured as within a thousand sealed vessels, each of them filled with things of a colour, a scent, a temperature that are absolutely different one from another . . . (902-03)

It is the writer's task, according to Marcel, to open these sealed vessels: involuntary memory provides the writer with the means to do so by permitting access to another, lost dimension of experience. Having gained access to this dimension, the writer then strives to read, to decipher, to make clear the meanings yielded up by the contents of the suddenly opened vessels. The literary work of art is the product (and byproduct) of this attempt. This activity permeates Proust's entire text. A reading that insists that "Proust did not so much capture time as annihilate it, attempting to flee from the

consequences of transience" and that "what Proust made of involuntary memory was . . . unacceptable to Benjamin" (McCole 261), thus tends to overlook an important point made by Benjamin and Proust: mystical experience is not opposed to the everyday, but is inseparable from it. An insistence on involuntary memory or mystical consciousness as an escape or retreat from the world limits the full import of simultaneity in Proust's narrative.

McCole, for instance, states that "The moment that is missing from Proust's restorative conception of memory . . . is the present moment" (263). According to this reading, Benjamin, concerned with action in the present moment, must willfully misread Proust in order to square Proustian notions with his own. The resultant analysis of Benjamin's self-sophistry begins by noting that Proust, according to Benjamin, ultimately sought happiness, and then goes on to associate this happiness with the desire to repeat pleasant childhood experiences (see McCole 260-61). Neither Proust nor Benjamin, though, explicitly (or even implicitly) endorses an acceptance of the equation between "happiness" and the desire to repeat pleasant childhood experiences. Indeed, given that so many of Marcel's childhood memories are memories of disappointment, emotional and physical pain, and, most importantly, disillusionment, it is difficult to understand why he should seek above all else to repeat them infinitely. Marcel's involuntary memories reach back to childhood moments, but they are not limited to these moments—for example, the uneven paving stones at the Guermantes remind him of an adult sensation of uneven stones in Venice. What Marcel experiences through involuntary memory is not simple repetition, replaying of past sensations, but an expanded re-living made possible by bodily memory.

What I find missing from the linear interpretation of Proust is precisely the most important point in Benjamin's reading of Proust: namely, the manner in which memory (both voluntary and involuntary) informs and animates what Benjamin sees as Proust's creative activity *in the present moment*. Regardless of what happens to the fictional Marcel, Proust's actual experience of involuntary memory informed his project, a project similar to that which his protagonist decides to embark upon as the text ends. We can assume, Benjamin seems to be saying (even without consulting Proust's biography), that, like Marcel, Proust came to see the meaning and purpose of his remaining years in writing his book. In a

passage similar to that quoted above concerning the sealed vessels, Marcel realizes, in a prolonged flash of illumination that:

An image presented to us by life brings with it, in a single moment sensations which are in fact multiple and heterogeneous. The sight, for instance, of the binding of a book once read may weave into the characters of its title the moonlight of a distant summer night. . . . An hour is not merely an hour, it is a vase full of scents and sounds and projects and climates, and what we call reality is a certain connexion between these immediate sensations and the memories which envelop us simultaneously with them . . . a unique connexion which the writer has to rediscover in order to link for ever in his phrase the two sets of phenomena which reality joins together. (924)

The emphasis here on the importance of writing—as opposed to a mere desire to repeat childhood happiness—is quite explicit. And in fact, Marcel goes on to claim that “Real life, life at last laid bare and illuminated—the only life in consequence which can be said to be really lived—is literature” (931).

Literature in this sense means much more than the reading of narratives; it means going beyond linear narrativity and into the atemporal dimension of simultaneity, a dimension in which reading accesses nonordinary states of consciousness and inspires the creative process.¹² Benjamin's dual emphasis on the Proustian image and the image of Proust the creator, the former being the inspiration and the product of artistic effort and the latter being the image of that activity itself, attests to his appreciation of this dimension of Proust's work.

Notes

1. I wish to thank Joyce Wexler, Jean Petrolle, Jeffrey Librett, and the *STCL* readers for their comments and suggestions on earlier versions of this essay. Although I quote from the Scott Moncrieff, Kilmartin, and Mayor translation, *Remembrance of Things Past*, I prefer to refer to Proust's work by the title he gave it, *A la recherche du temps perdu*, literally, “In Search of Lost Time.”

2. Gérard Genette's more rigorously objective analysis of the Proustian narrative offers a striking contrast to Benjamin's Proust essay. Genette is

careful to distinguish and examine separately Proust, the novel's narrator, and the hero, Marcel. Early in *Narrative Discourse* he states: "As to the narrating that produced the narrative, the act of Marcel's recounting his past life, we will be careful from this point on not to confuse it with the act of Proust writing the *Recherche du temps perdu*" (28). Though Benjamin appears to blur these distinctions, he does not commit the error of equating *A la recherche du temps perdu* with the as-yet (and forever) unwritten book Marcel envisions at the end of Proust's narrative—an error that leads commentators to refer to the book's structure as circular and to conflate entirely Proust, the narrator, and the hero, Marcel. What is the difference between such conflation and Benjamin's blurring of these distinctions? The conflation inadvertently collapses the three and thus produces a reading that fails to account for their interrelation. I read Benjamin's blurring as strategic, functioning to intentionally highlight and complicate these relations. The ease with which the critical conflation is made, however—a traditional application of textuality to a nontraditional text—perhaps flows from the unique position of Proust's text, near the threshold and inauguration of modernity.

3. Benjamin's tendency to link temporal awareness with action in the present finds a parallel in what Peter Osborne sees happening in the essay on surrealism (1929). According to Osborne, in that essay Benjamin "redefines the political, neither as a particular kind nor a particular sphere of action, but rather as a particular *temporal mode of experience*: an action-generating, as opposed to a contemplative, orientation towards the past" (68). I would make a similar claim for involuntary memory as Benjamin appears to understand it; it is an "action-generating, as opposed to a contemplative, orientation towards the past."

4. McCole states that Benjamin's "emended doctrine of involuntary remembrance . . . preserved the moment of eternity. But it was a different eternity than that intended by Proust, an eternity of 'convoluted, not boundless time' " (262). He then observes that, following Benjamin's "emended doctrine" of involuntary memory, "True eternity resulted not from lifting an event out of time but from tracing its entwinement with other events" (262). But neither of these statements seems to be in any way in disagreement with Proust's work—they do not issue from an "emended doctrine" of involuntary memory but directly from Proust, and from Benjamin's extremely perceptive reading of Proust. This connection becomes apparent when one abandons an investment in the notion of involuntary memory as an escape into a boundless, ahistorical time.

5. The experience of accessing a convoluted state of time (the word "time" here becomes problematic) can be shared between two people, resulting in what is generally known as telepathic experience. For example, skilled ensemble musicians sometimes find themselves simultaneously improvis-

ing an exactly identical extended rhythmic passage with another musician, a phenomenon I have noticed most frequently in small jazz groups or in performances of Indian classical music. Because rhythm is inseparable from time, the players' ability to know in "advance" (the unit of time in such cases would be a matter of microseconds) what the other will do next demonstrates that their intense concentration on rhythm/timing has resulted in a transpersonal experience of the music. Certainly some of these felicitous synchronicities can be attributed to the unconscious absorption of genre conventions (e.g., conventional blues progressions), but the following or replaying of conventions differs markedly from the spontaneous eruption of simultaneous improvised performance, just as the supposed "circularity" of involuntary memory differs from its role as a catalyst for vitalizing present experience.

6. A comparison of statements regarding time and memory in *A la recherche du temps perdu* and in Nabokov's *Speak, Memory* shows both authors arriving at nearly identical conclusions concerning time and personal experience. Nabokov greatly admired *A la recherche du temps perdu*; by the age of 31 (1930) he boasted of having read the entire work twice, and later in life he considered it one of the four greatest novels of the century (Boyd 354, 149). *A la recherche du temps perdu* is also an important subtext in his late novel, *Ada, or Ardor: A Family Chronicle* (1969).

7. Simultaneity as a nonordinary state of consciousness, and its impact on the literary experience, impinges even on Genette's "scientific" objectivist structural analysis. In his discussion of anachrony he notes the "retrospectively synthetic character of the Proustian narrative, which is totally present in the narrator's mind at every moment . . . he never ceases to hold all of its threads simultaneously, to apprehend simultaneously all of its places and all of its moments, to be capable of establishing a multitude of 'telescopic' relationships amongst them" (78). Later, discussing metalepsis, he observes that the "most troubling thing about" it "lies in this unacceptable and insistent hypothesis, that the extradiegetic is perhaps always diegetic, and that the narrator and his narratees—you and I—perhaps belong to some narrative" (236). (This is a primary concern in Nabokov's fiction.) In a similar vein, he notes that "Paris and Balbec are at the same level, although one is real and the other fictive, and every day we are subjects of a narrative, if not heroes of a novel" (230). For a fascinating and disturbing personal account of the phenomenon I am here calling simultaneity, see Joel Agee, "A Fury of Symbols: How the Sixties Erupted in One Man's Life" (*Harpers* Jan., 1989: 49ff).

8. Genette rightly cautions against such a reading when he points out that "the book Marcel then [following the Guermentes soirée] begins to write *in the story* cannot legitimately be identified with the one Marcel has then almost finished writing *as narrative*—and which is the *Recherche* itself" (224).

9. I am not suggesting any kind of simple, one-to-one correspondence here. We cannot presume to know or posit that a flash (or several flashes) of inspiration like that found in *Time Regained* actually occurred in Proust's life—though we know, for instance, the real-life origin of the madeleine incident from his account in *Contre Sainte-Beuve*. We know from the biographical evidence that *A la recherche du temps perdu* is a synthesis of years of thoughts, sensations, imaginings, and experiences. But we can assume, along with Benjamin, that the undertaking of the writing of Proust's novel presupposes a commitment with life-defining implications and consequences. At any rate, the search for an antecedent is not the issue here: Proust's novel is itself proof that *writing* made it real.

10. Deleuze describes *A la recherche du temps perdu* as the apprenticeship of a man of letters: "It is a question, not of an exposition of involuntary memory, but of the tale of an apprenticeship. More precisely, the apprenticeship of a man of letters" (1-2). Deleuze discusses the novel as an illustration of a method of reading signs, and thus a method of reading the world based on a model of deciphering art and experience over time. Beryl Schlossman also examines the notion of writing as vocation in Proust and in Benjamin's Proust essay. See Beryl Schlossman, "Proust and Benjamin: The Invisible Image" in *Benjamin's Ground: New Readings of Walter Benjamin*, ed. Rainer Nägele (Detroit: Wayne State UP, 1988; originally published in *Studies in Twentieth Century Literature* 11:1 [Fall 1986]). Schlossman's close reading of Benjamin's essay explores how "Through an unfolding of Proust's relationship to images, Benjamin inscribes his own constellation of allegory, ecstasy (or mystical conversion), and autobiography" (106).

11. Burton Pike, in his essay, "Robert Musil: Literature as Experience" (*Studies in Twentieth Century Literature* 18:2 [Summer 1994]: 221-36), makes a similar point about the experiential dimension of literary activity. He characterizes Musil's approach as one in which "The writer seeks to engage the reader in the experience by creating verbal images that attempt to re-evoked the perceptual and sensory aura of the experience for the reader. Writers as ambitious as Proust or Musil will further seek ways to raise experience, understood in this fashion, to the level of the generally representative, so that it might serve a socially representative function as well—become cultural experience, as it were. The overwhelming focus of literary theory on language as discourse in recent times has not been very helpful in comprehending this notion" (224).

12. "Nonordinary states of consciousness" is an inevitably vague umbrella under which to shelter a number of linguistic choices concerning various conceptualizations of such states. One might, for instance, speak of "alternative states of consciousness," thus implying that a mode or level of consciousness has been chosen. See Andrew Weil, *The Natural Way to Health* (New York: Bantam, 1987), 102-103.

ral Mind: An Investigation of Drugs and the Higher Consciousness (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1986), ix-xi.

Works Cited

- Barthes, Roland. "Longtemps, je me suis couché de bonne heure." *The Rustle of Language*. Trans. Richard Howard. Berkeley: U of California P, 1989. 277-90.
- Benjamin, Walter. "Hashish in Marseilles." *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*. Ed. Peter Demetz. Trans. Edmund Jephcott. New York: Schocken, 1978. 137-45.
- . "The Image of Proust." *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*. Ed. Hannah Arendt. Trans. Harry Zohn. New York: Schocken, 1969. 201-16.
- . "Theses on the Philosophy of History." *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*. Ed. Hannah Arendt. Trans. Harry Zohn. New York: Schocken, 1969. 253-64.
- Boyd, Brian. *Vladimir Nabokov: The Russian Years*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1990.
- Deleuze, Gilles. *Marcel Proust et les signes*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1964.
- Genette, Gérard. *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*. Trans. Jane E. Lewin. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1980.
- Jennings, Michael W. *Dialectical Images: Walter Benjamin's Theory of Literary Criticism*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1987.
- Kristeva, Julia. *Proust and the Sense of Time*. Trans. Stephen Bann. New York: Columbia UP, 1993.
- McCole, John. *Walter Benjamin and the Antinomies of Tradition*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1993.
- Nabokov, Vladimir. *Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited*. New York: Putnam's, 1966.
- Osborne, Peter. "Small-scale Victories, Large-scale Defeats: Walter Benjamin's Politics of Time." *Walter Benjamin's Philosophy: Destruction and Experience*. Ed. Andrew Benjamin and Peter Osborne. New York: Routledge, 1994. 59-109.
- Proust, Marcel. *Remembrance of Things Past*, Vol. III. Trans. C.K. Scott Moncrieff, Terence Kilmartin, and Andreas Mayor. New York: Random House, 1981.

Scholem, Gershom. "Walter Benjamin and His Angel." *On Walter Benjamin: Critical Essays and Recollections*. Ed. Gary Smith. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1988. 51-89.

Scholes, Robert. *Protocols of Reading*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1989.

Szondi, Peter. "Hope in the Past: On Walter Benjamin." *Critical Inquiry* 4 (Spring 1978): 491-506.