Through the ‘I’s’ of Lost Time: Proust’s Performative Fugue of *Temps Perdu*

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Abstract

Proust’s *À la recherche du temps perdu* is written as an extended narrative/speech-act of memory. The paper considers the fugue poetics of Proust’s act of writing transcendence performatively realised through multiple voices of selves in Lost Time, as manifestations of the musical and psychological meanings of fugue. The almost interchangeable mechanisms of time and space suggested by Bergson’s notions of time as *le temps* and *la durée* and his related notion of *élan vital*, are discussed in relation to the contrapuntal mechanisms – or textual counterpoint – of Proust’s novel contrasted to Deleuze’s reading of Proust’s Lost Time as “not simply ‘time past’; it is also time wasted, lost track of” (Deleuze 2000, 3). The paper concludes that *temps perdu* articulates the conceptual space of Proust’s writing contained and inscribed within the narrative text which is accessed, or capable of being accessed and set into motion by, and through, the writer’s and reader’s attention.

Key words

Proust, Bergson, writing transcendence, Lost Time, fugue poetics, involuntary memory
What is the Time of a Book, and what is writing time? Is the time of writing synonymous with the writing of Time, or is there a slippage so that the writer somehow writes out-of-time, and, if so, what time is this time in time with? Does Time exist in the memory-of-things or in the things-of-memory, such as a book or a poem or a person, and in the writing of things what kind of memory-time or time-memory, or self-time, is made or unmade? In this paper, I explore ideas of Time and the Self in the process of creative writing and literary art raised in the philosophical literary investigations of Marcel Proust’s multi-volumed novel, *À la recherche du temps perdu* (In Search of Lost Time), published in French in fifteen volumes between 1913 and 1927, which responded to his contemporary, the philosopher Henri Bergson’s works including *Essai sur les donnés immédiates de la conscience* (Time and Free Will: An essay on the immediate data of the conscience) (1889), *Matière et Mémoire* (Matter and Memory: An essay on the relation of body and spirit) (1898), and *L'Evolution créatrice* (Creative Evolution) (1907).

**Fugue poetics**

In critically analysing Proust’s work and complex writing style I evaluate the idea of the transcendent flight or fugue of the creative writing process particularly as this relates to processes of self transformation, and Bergsonian evolution of the self, in writing as creative art, and the Proustian idea that art literally creates and is reality. The approach of fugue poetics that I bring to Proust’s work draws on fugue’s two main meanings – as a polyphonic musical form; and as a psychological condition of temporary self amnesia coupled with a wandering journey away from home. These may appear at first glance to contradict each other, yet they are linked through fugue’s third meaning as flight (from the Latin *fuga*). I will discuss ways in which Proust’s act of writing transcendence is performatively realised. Firstly through his uses of techniques of musicalization associated with the fugue form that include development and variations on his subject themes, recurring motifs, and the subtle polyphony of multiple ‘Marcel’ narrative voices. Fugue is a circular musical form for many (usually four) ‘voices’ (instruments). Although it reached an apex of refinement in the mirror fugues and puzzle canon of Bach’s *Art of Fugue*, the form is based on a simple structure of a round. Fugue is a non-text based secular form that has its origins in the singing voice of antiquity, some may say in the
pre-semiotic chora (Kristeva 1986). Beginning with the articulation of a melody line fugue proceeds through the taking up of the ‘subject theme’ by different voices playing the theme in different (potentially infinite) variations using techniques of polyphonic counterpoint: embellishment, diminution, inversion, repetition, distortion, and elaboration. Fugue ceased to be an extant musical form in the early 19th century, when it morphed into literary form. Metaphorical mentions of fugue first appeared in Dante Alighieri’s Divine Comedy (1308-1321); in John Milton’s Paradise Lost (1650-1660), then Thomas de Quincey’s Dream Fugue published in Blackwood’s Magazine in 1849; subliminally influencing European modernist literature, significantly Proust’s work.

Secondly, I discuss how affective aspects of Proust’s characteristically metaphorical style suggest fugue’s second main meaning as the psychogenic fugue, a dissociative condition of temporary loss of awareness of self identity coupled with a wandering journey from home. According to medical science the psychogenic fugue is a response to shock or life stresses. The psychogenic fugue was first diagnosed as a medical condition in 1890s Bordeaux (Hacking 1998), the main era of Parisian society depicted in Proust’s novel. Fugue’s psychological meaning metaphorically suggests the ‘wandering search’ of the writing process of creative writing exemplified in Proust’s multi-volumed novel in which the narrator seeks to find truth in penetrating the meaning of his recurrent, sensation-based, involuntary memories whose significance he cannot remember. The whole work is structured around the acutely self-reflexive division between ‘the ‘I’ of the narrator who reflects on the empirical self living his life or rather his multiple empirical selves in Lost Time. Proust’s stylistic technique is expressed in the words of the narrator in the final volume: “truth – and life too – can be attained by us only when, by comparing a quality common to two sensations, we succeed in extracting their common essence and in reuniting them to each other, liberated from the contingencies of time, within a metaphor” (Time Regained, 246). Proust exemplifies Bergson’s belief that the subliminal riches of the inner mind can be accessed unconsciously through involuntary memory, and that the artist (re) creates a new reality through art, outside ‘time as duration’ (Nabokov 1983).
Through the ‘I’s’ of Temps perdu: Motif, Metaphor and Metonymy in Proustian Narrative Memory

How does fugal modality operate in Proust’s work? A fugue starts with one or two subject or melody lines, a simple theme played by the first voice. Proust’s vast and complex work opens with the simple statement “For a long time I used to go to bed early.” Vladimir Nabokov has commented that this “opening sentence is key to the theme, with its centre in a sensitive boy’s bedroom” (Nabokov 1983, 214). The melody line is then taken up by each successive ‘voice’ in turn. In Proust’s novel no less than seven narrative voices have been identified, each operating in different space-time registers that operate in the multi-
linear novel recalling into the consciousness of writing, events and emotional affects from different times of the narrator’s life.

Proust’s initial sensory motif that recurs throughout his multiple volumes is the taste of the madeleine, a small almond flavored teacake, which as a boy he was served with limeflower tea by his Aunt Leonie. The narrator Marcel’s memory of the taste of the madeleine dipped in limeflower tea, and its elusive significance and meaning that he struggles to recall, but cannot quite, is the trigger that sets off the spirals of involuntary memories constituted in metaphors in metaphors, adorned with similes that can continue over thirty pages. This manifests a defining characteristic of Proust’s performative writing style that has come to be known as ‘Proustian’ memory and that Proust himself termed ‘involuntary memory’.

The recurring motif of the madeleine in Du côté du chez Swann introduces the narrator into the text, and the reader into the vast and complex realm of Marcel’s mind/world which begins to open up in these pages, to use an analogy from Du côté du chez Swann, like Japanese ‘paper crumbs’ that unfold into character and form when floated in a porcelain water bowl (Swann’s Way, 18). But the musical motif, the refrain of Vinteuil’s little sonata – first introduced in Combray in Du côté du chez Swann – is the novel’s main recurring device.

In Proust’s continuous novel the motif of Vinteuil’s sonata works by linking affect, in the form of the narrator’s emotional reflections; and character, in the form of the vast cast of characters associated by Marcel with the Guermantes ‘way’ and the Méséglise ‘way’, the two ‘walks’ of his childhood holidays at his aunt’s house in Combray that come to represent two walks of life which run throughout the narrator’s life. This musicalized device functions as an alternative structuring device to the Aristotelian three-act structure of beginning middle and end, providing an overall, structurally thematic unity. Like the novel itself, the little phrase is a musicalized metaphor for itself. Hints are given throughout the work that the main, if not only, source of enduringly meaningful experience in the narrator’s difficult and complex social life, following the death of his parents and his grandmother, is the transmutation of life-
experience into Art (as symbolized by ‘the little sonata’ and expressed in ruminations which
surround and accompany its playing in the narrative). This is seen in a passage from *La
Prisonnière*. One afternoon as the narrator is alone in his apartment, awaiting the return of
Albertine, ruminating on the ‘anxiety’ his feelings for her cause him, “I sat down at the piano,
opened at random Vinteuil’s sonata which happened to be lying there, and began to play…”
(*The Captive*, 173). Concurrently, and by association, and this is how the device works, the
narrator begins.

…approaching the sonata from another point of view, regarding it in itself as the work of a
great artist, I was carried back on the tide of sound to the days at Combray – I do not mean
Montjouvain and the Méséglise way, but to my walks along the Guermantes way – when I
myself had longed to be an artist. In abandoning that ambition de facto, had I forfeited

In its ending, the novel reveals that the transmutation of life into art has after all and unknown
to the narrator been the performative ‘purpose’ and scope of a vast narrative work. Built from
first-person narrative memory and reflection, Proust’s work exemplifies the individuality of
modernist literary art.

**Proust and Bergson: Double Time**

Proust’s writing was subliminally or otherwise influenced by the ideas found in the works of
his contemporary, the highly regarded philosopher, Henri Bergson (1859-1941) with whom he
was very familiar. Proust “would very often” be compared to Bergson, although as Proust’s
biographer Tadie points out, their (possibly mutual) influence was not publicly acknowledged
by either of them (Tadie 2000, 128-129).

The almost interchangeable perspective on time or space suggested by Bergson can be used to
apply to the contrapuntal mechanisms, or literary counterpoint, of Proust’s fugal work. Two
fundamental beliefs central to Bergsonian thought can be seen to inform, and resonate
throughout Proust’s literary work. In *Time and Free Will* Bergson outlined these notions of
time, as *le temps* and *la durée*, and his celebrated related notion of *élan vital* (Bergson 1998),
a life force, or creative animating energy, which inhabits all matter. Bergson perceived of
consciousness as a flow, a theory that was strongly informed by the American philosopher and psychologist William James’ theory of consciousness as a “stream of thought” (Hamlyn 1988, 287), an idea that preceded modernist experiments in stream-of-consciousness writing. Proust, in part, incorporates the Bergsonian notion of *élan vital* into his writing by structuring his narrative on memories continuously triggered by, and including, sensory perceptions. Proust also frequently refers to objects in nature, to plants, trees, sunsets, the sea as if they are alive, in an animistic sense. This narrative sense of, and focus on, animation, the animated nature of nature, has the effect of animating the narrative, bringing his writing to life, by bringing life force to his writing. Benjamin suggests that the creation of modern subjectivity in Proust’s work is the result of Proust’s putting Bergson’s theory of the nature of experience to the test. “Proust’s work *À la recherche du temps perdu* may be regarded as an attempt to produce experience synthetically, as Bergson imagines it, under today’s conditions, for there is less and less hope that it will come into being naturally” (Benjamin 1989, 111).

In his theory of time, Bergson defines two types of time (functioning as two types of temporal modality): *le temps*, that is time as it exists in space, and which can thus be ‘lost’; and *la durée*, the time of consciousness, which involves duration. Bergson argued against what he saw to be the spatialization of time in physics, instead favouring a notion of the continuous flow of time as it appears to consciousness (Hamlyn 1988, 287). Inscribed in, and prefigured by, its very title, *À la recherche du temps perdu*, Proust’s life time’s work invokes a linguistic play on these dual concepts. It is his use, in writing, of two main temporal modalities: the past of *temps perdu*, and the time of duration in which the narrator is situated in the process of actively remembering (always an unknown deterritorialized position), that results in the labyrinthine folds and flows of the novel’s unique poetic form; the many-voiced echoes, repetitions, distortions and embellishments of its fugal music.

Proust’s inspiration, and climactic revelation, is that these two types of time in reality exist concurrently, and it is in the creation of works of art that one form of time, time lost, can be accessed and preserved – out of time – in time, the time of duration. Both kinds of time are accessed in the creative process of writing, a magical act of transcendence drawing together
memory, intellect, imagination, consciousness, unconsciousness and intuition. A process in which the author loses her/himself to find her/himself, as in a musical fugue the subject line is transformed.

Figure 2. Still from Ruth Skilbeck’s *Persephone’s Paradox: Rebirth of the Author*, 2004. Video, endless loop, photographs, drawings, animation, sound-track, 24 mins.

*Transcendence through the Proustian ‘writing-machine’*

In *Proust and Signs*, Deleuze hails Proust as a representation and embodiment of the ‘Antilogos’ in narrative action. Proust’s life-work is, in Deleuze’s view, a leading example of literary narrative emerging authentically during, and as a result of, a process of writing. The Antilogos can be interpreted as standing in opposition to the Logos (Greek for ‘word’) of the Stoics who equated it with the sort of God who is the supposed source of all the rationality in
the Universe. Logocentrism, therefore, is the notion of a pre-conceived rationality, an *uber-*ordering, which the existence of fugal writing – that is writing as a fugal psychic modality – disrupts and counters. The fundamental dualistic opposition between an ideal Platonic (or ‘God’) ordered utilitarian universe of ideal (unreal) forms and the deterritorialized, wild, disruptive, contradictory and for all these reasons paradoxical nature of art.

In accord with his theories of intentional machines (the desiring-machine; the war-machine), Deleuze conceptualises Proust’s writing process in very technical, inhuman, automatic terms, as mechanic, a writing-machine. He perceives the immaterial, intentional mechanics of Proust’s writing process, the interplay of imagination, memory and thought (which takes place in the conscious and unconscious mind, and which results in the production of textual narrative in the material world) as comprising two major ‘machines’, which are in effect the dual temporal modalities previously alluded to. These are, namely, *le temps*, Time remembered, the Lost Time of the narrator/Proust’s lived memory and *temps durée*, the time in which Marcel, the present-tense narrator, or Proust in the guise of the present tense narrator, is relating the narrative (Deleuze 2000, 101-116). Many temporal modalities, and selves in Lost Time, come into play as Marcel narrates his ‘story’: in this sense the narrative constitutes a type of first-person polyphony, incorporating a form of dissociation. However this is not pathological as in the case of supposed ‘multiple-personality syndrome’. Instead, it is that of the thinker to his thoughts, the reflector to the memory contents of his reflection. Many Marcels are reflected upon, dislocating and re locating Marcel in different eras and places in Lost Time, many aspects of his self, lost-selves, are evoked and re-called as the narrator loses, and ultimately finds himself, and the meaning of his writing, at the end of his fugal Search.
Proust and the Antilogs in and out of the Time of writing

What makes Proust’s narrative of the Antilogs is its sense of summoning up what was not previously there, in order to reflect upon it. A process of creating images which trigger associations, which trigger associations, and so on. These all, then, are expressed in further images; and sonic memories which recur in motifs which repeat in altered forms each time, in metaphors which expand outwards and onwards, in a use of metonymy in which associations are coded into a language of signs, the individual idiosyncratic interlanguage, or interlingua, of the book. The book, in the process of being written, finds and creates its own language in
practice. The book in the process of being written searches for its own form, in words. In the process of being written, the book finds and creates its own time.

In addition to the inhuman, machinic, automatic aspect of the creative process that results from, and reflects, the fact one can only express oneself linguistically in language that is given, and is thus pre-determined or automatic in a sense; two further essential factors constitute the operational, functional triad of the creative process of writing in Proust’s novel. These are the transcendent: (the impossible, the nothingness) to which the artist is driven by – and from – desire to aspire to reach, and the individual: human subjectivity which comprises the content, drawn from memory, sensory impression etc, of the text. Both these aspects can, also, clearly be seen to be driving Proust’s narrative, a search for what is longed for but not known (signifying the transcendent), through automatic processes of language (metaphor, metonymy, motif) which draw on, codify and transform the subjective impressions and memory content of the narrator/author’s experience.

Since Proust’s narrative is composed of multitudinous fragments and signs, associative chains of metaphors and motifs, which do not necessarily fit together, at least in a linear sense, Deleuze detects a quantum theory of Time at work, arguing that perhaps “this is what time is: the ultimate existence of parts, of different sizes and shapes, which cannot be adapted, which do not develop at the same rhythm, and which the stream of style does not sweep along at the same speed” (Deleuze 2000, 108). In this sense, the text has a high level of musicalization, its own fugal rhythms and melodies, its own counterpoint between consciousness and the unconscious, between time lost and time regained, between Marcel, the implied author and the ‘Marcels’ of his narrator (s). Proust’s genius is to create a work that is allowed to create itself, a self-generating language structure, in which, as an effect of the process, the past fugally comes back by itself. It is a vast text of signs, a chora of consciousness and unconsciousness, the Antilogos replete with hidden meanings, which it performatively realises, embodies and reveals within and through itself. The Book thereby becomes an artistic fugal force or power, producing its own world of meaning.
Through focusing on the textual and linguistic aspects of the writing, the text is understood as an object which has its own life and can be interpreted in infinite ways according to the perspective of the reader. Yet to forget that the text of literary art is the work of an individual artist would be to overlook the profound power of creative writing and literary art to transform experience and create meaning of the random occurrences of life and transmit sensations, affects and thoughts of the self, a main theme of Proust’s novel. In the creative zone of writing time Proust’s author–narrator reflexively recaptures himself in Lost Time suddenly perceiving at the end, his remembered selves in Lost Time as an ‘unbroken series’ \((Time Regained, 449)\). The narrator writes:

In the past the fear of being no longer myself was something that had terrified me, and this had made me dread the end of each new love that I had experienced (for Gilberte, for Albertine), because I could not bear the idea that the “I” who loved them would one day cease to exist, since this in itself would be a kind of death. But by dint of repetition this fear had gradually been transformed into a calm confidence \((Time Regained, 437)\).

That the search for Lost Time and the search to re-create the self in art are connected is symbolically suggested at the very end of the novel, in the succession of three shocks that jolt the narrator’s awareness; it is as if he has been asleep the whole time of the novel, a fugeur who finally awakes.

As Proust’s life was ending he wrote the ending to the novel, and he writes this knowledge of impending death into the last pages. There are many apparent parallels between Proust’s life and narrator Marcel’s fictional life and world, extensively documented by Proust’s biographers. But the work is far from an autobiography. \textit{In Search of Lost Time} is a fictional creation, a ‘machine’, that reflexively transforms empirical sensory perceptions, in infinite fugal variations: transforming the author’s, the narrator’s, and the readers’ perceptions of reading and writing from the sensations of life into the fictional reality and the space-time of the novelist’s self-based art, in the time of the Book. At the end of the narrator’s life as he reflects on the book he still longs to write and scarcely has the strength or time left to begin, the narrator realises that the book’s form will be that which “ordinarily, throughout our lives, is invisible to us: the form of Time” \((Time Regained, 447)\). And so, in a last brilliant stroke of elision, the narrator reflects – as the reader and the author near the end of over one and a half
million words of narrative – on how he would start out ‘writing Time.’ As Nabokov (Nabokov 1983, 211) has commented, what a book *that* would be.

According to Euclidean space perceptions, the universe has three dimensions of space and one dimension of time. Through performatively exploring the fourth dimension of the Self in ‘lost’ time, Marcel as narrator and Proust as author are transformed in the ‘timeless,’ enduring and impossible reality of Art.

**Bibliography**


