Memory According to Proust and Freud

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For a long time I believed that literature and psychoanalysis were two very different disciplines. Now I know that these two ways of telling a story: literature - language in freedom- and psychoanalysis - language in search of freedom – are interrelated, and can learn much from each other.

Today I would like to ascertain the parallelism between literature and psychoanalysis, by showing how Freud on one side and Proust, the most significant French novelist of the last century, on the other, speak about memory. Memory is the origin and the core of the human mind, of language. It is difficult to overestimate that primordial mental function, which conditions all the others: memory, the beginning of all imagination, and of all thinking. Therefore Proust - I now start with him - discovers memory as the secret and the aim of literature. Most of us know his story regarding the Madeleine-biscuit from which, as he tells us, his whole novel Remembrance of Things Past ‘springs into being’. Here is a less known example of such a special memory-experience, from the last part of Proust’s novel, the ‘Matinée of the Princess de Guermantes’:

‘A butler […] brought to me in the library a small plate of petits fours and a glass of orangeade. I wiped my mouth with the napkin he had given me; but immediately […] a fresh vision of azure blue passed before my eyes […]. The impression was so vivid that […] I thought the servant had just opened the window toward the beach and everything called me to go down and stroll along the embankment at high tide; the napkin which I had taken to wipe my mouth had precisely the same sort of starchy stiffness as the
towel with which I had had so much trouble drying myself before the window the first day of my stay in Balbec. And now, in this library of the Guermantes mansion, it spread out in its various folds and creases, like a peacock’s tail, the plumage of a green and blue ocean. [It] filled me with joy.

For Proust, memory can become an event, something that happens to us, unexpectedly, when an innocuous experience of one of the senses - seeing a colour, touching a napkin, making a wrong step on a pavement, tasting a cup of tea - suddenly wakens in our mind an analogous experience of long ago, often from our youth. Such a memory opens a door, stirs up a past, a ‘building of recollection’ of which it turns out to be a keystone. Two aspects of such ‘involuntary memory’ - as Proust calls it - seem essential: firstly, that we are dealing here with a bodily, ‘material’ experience, memory and imagination surging from memory forming the crossroads where bodily and mental functions meet and are in fact indistinguishable. There, mental activity involves a rehabilitation, and a ‘lifting’, a ‘sublimation’ of sensory perceptions. Secondly, this experience which simultaneously takes place, both now and in the past, puts us above time, out of time, is something like an encounter with eternity, there where, according to Proust, we experience the essence of things, and no longer only their appearances. Hence the feeling of total joy, for being beyond the reach of time means being beyond the reach of death. Proust considers these privileged moments of memory as the beginning of art. Each work of art has something timeless, and as such is also a sublime gift from the gods. He describes his discoveries about memory in that library as an epiphany on the ‘most beautiful day of my life […] when a great light suddenly shone, not only on the old gropings of my thoughts, but even on the purpose of my life and, perhaps, of art itself.²

I would like to maintain here that this eminently positive Proustian experience of ‘involuntary memory’ finds its counterpart in another ‘involuntary memory’ which Freud was discovering at nearly the same moment in another part of Europe, I mean ‘transference’, that mainly negative intrusion of the past in our daily life. In Freud’s view, the involuntary mechanisms of memory work in an opposite

² Remembrance of Things Past II, 1007
direction than those of Proust. Proust’s memory projects, in an illumination, the present on the past, and his victory over time provides him with a feeling of exaltation. Conversely, the Freudian transference projects the past on the present, while the subject has to deal with feelings of malaise or even unhappiness, the Proustian illumination being replaced by the inner darkness and uneasiness of the unconscious. According to Freud ‘the patient does not remember anything of the forgotten or repressed material, but he acts it out. He does not reproduce it as a memory, but as an activity, he repeats it, without knowing of course that he is repeating’.

The contrast - positive versus negative - between these two forms of ‘involuntary memory’ is indeed striking, but also their complementary character, two faces - diurnal and nocturnal, healing and disturbing - of memory, and therefore of desire. For memory is the vehicle of desire, and as such, a necessary condition of human life. [Proust and Freud both make their main discoveries in the foundations of the human mind: focusing on memory, on our capacity to repeat images and words, and to build an imaginary inner world of desire and future achievement. But the two writers operate from a different point of view, and have different temperaments: Proust believes that in spite of everything he is in this world to build a work of art, and in doing so, to experience moments of happiness. Freud would not disagree but nevertheless sees the positive achievements of the human mind as the result of a long process of renouncement and denial of the animal that we remain in essence. Proust’s spiritual values may be precious. According to Freud, they are also a source of deficiency or even an illusion.]

This does not mean that these two explorers of the human mind ignore the other face of memory: Freud the diurnal one, and Proust the nocturnal. Proust’s famous involuntary memory, 

3 ‘Wir dürfen sagen, der Analysierte erinnere überhaupt nichts von dem Vergessenen und Verdrängten, sondern er agiere es. Er reproduziert es nicht als Erinnerung, sondern als Tat, er wiederholt es, ohne natürlich zu wissen, dass er wiederholt’, Erinnern, Wiederholen und Durcharbeiten (1914), S.E. XII, 145-146; Studienausg., Ergänzungsband, 209. And he continues : ‘Zum Beispiel : […] Er erinnert nicht, dass er in seiner infantilen Sexualforschung rat- und hilflos stecken geblieben ist, sondern er bringt einen Haufen verworrerner Träume und Einfälle vor, jammert, dass ihm nichts gelinge, und stellt es als sein Schicksal hin, niemals eine Unternehmung zu Ende zu führen. Er erinnert nicht, dass er sich gewisser Sexualbetätigungen intensiv geschämt und ihre Entdeckung gefürchtet hat, sondern er zeigt, dass er sich der Behandlung schämte, der er sich jetzt unterzogen hat, und sucht diese vor allen geheimzuhalten usw.’.
though one of the summits of his novel, is only referred to a few times, at the beginning of the book, and at the end. It is not only an ideal but might also appear as an incongruity, a kind of Mont Blanc in the Low Countries. In the rest of the book the reader feels in fact much more the presence of that other memory, of Freud’s transference, the repetition of painful scenarios of frustrated and jealous love from the author’s youth. For instance, in the part of the novel entitled The Guermantes Way, we read the story of the narrator visiting his friend Robert de Saint-Loup in his military barracks:

The door opened and Saint-Loup, dropping his eyeglass, dashed in.

‘Ah, my dear Robert, you make yourself very comfortable here’, I said to him, ‘how jolly it would be if one were allowed to dine and sleep here’.

[...]

‘So you’d rather stay with me and sleep here, would you, than to go to the hotel by yourself?’ Saint-Loup asked me, smiling.

‘Oh, Robert, it is cruel of you to be sarcastic about it’, I pleaded; ‘you know it’s not possible, and you know how wretched I shall be over there’.

‘Good! You flatter me!’, he replied. ‘It occurred to me just now that you would rather stay here to-night. And that is precisely what I stopped to ask the Captain’.

‘And he has given you leave?’ I cried.

‘He hadn’t the slightest objection’.

‘Oh! I adore him!’

‘No; that would be going too far. But now, let me just get hold of my batman and tell him to see about dinner,’ he went on, while I turned away to hide my tears⁴.

In this scene we are not, as one might think, dealing with homosexual seduction. Proust, as we know, has different ideas, of that kind of scene. Besides the narrator has informed us that these two young

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⁴ Remembrance of Things Past vol. I, 769 (Le côté de Guermantes I, Pléiade, II, 377-378)
men are very much interested in mistresses or at least in ‘young girls in blossom’. Of course the homosexual connotation cannot be totally lacking, but - all the commentators of the text\(^5\) agree on this point - what the narrator is doing here, perhaps even without knowing it, is to remember and repeat, that is: to transfer the famous scene of his childhood where the little boy, who could not do without the presence of his mother, very unexpectedly got his father’s permission for the mother to stay with him overnight in his room. According to the narrator himself, this scene has been decisive for the rest of his existence. Once more, he is reviving it here.

In operating this transference, he makes the necessary changes: the mother is replaced by a friend. Saint-Loup turns out to be a maternal figure providing his friend not only with his presence, but also with a table and a bed. Rather unexpectedly, the captain of the barracks, as an indulgent father, grants his subordinate an unusual permission. The story ends up in tears which complete the process of regression, of negative memory, we are witnessing. Elsewhere in his novel, Proust has this beautiful comment on such a Freudian process: ‘So many of our memories, our humours, our ideas set out to travel far away from us, until they are lost to sight! […] But they know of secret paths by which to return to us \(^6\)’ Like all important novels, Proust’s *Remembrance of Things Past* originates to a great extent in that negative, mostly unconscious material of the beginning, more than in the happy involuntary memories we just saw.

Thus Proust knows and practises involuntary memory in both ways. As for Freud, the same thing must be true, but, to my knowledge, he never evoked such a Proustian ‘happy’ memory, so near to the ‘oceanic’ religious experience he would not acknowledge either. We sense his uneasiness every time he has to justify such a process of sublimation - for that is what it is - in the human mind. We could think here of one of the most known and most quoted interpretations of Freud, that of the game ‘Fort – Da’, played by the rather happy little boy who is imitating his mother’s departure and her return\(^7\). Here as in most of his studies, memory becomes a conquest: as such it represents the

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\(^5\) For instance, Luc Fraisse, *Proust au miroir de sa correspondance*, 52

\(^6\) *Remembrance of Things Past*, II, 725. ‘Tant de nos souvenirs, de nos humeurs, de nos idées partent faire des voyages loin de nous-même, où nous les perdons de vue ! […] Mais ils ont des chemins secrets pour rentrer en nous’, *Albertine disparue*, IV, 70
origin of art and culture. Cultural achievement is everywhere, and is in fact highly appreciated by 
Freud, but his positivistic background does not allow him to give these cultural conquests on nature a 
genuine place in his theoretical ideas. For Freud memory will always remain affected by the negative 
connotation of repression, and culture - sublimation - by a feeling of ‘Unbehagen’: malaise, 
uneasiness. For human beings remain, first of all, animals, and the fact that they are speaking animals 
does not change that perspective:

To many of us, it may be hard to give up their belief that the instinct to 
bring life to perfection is living in each human being, that this instinct has 
brought him to his present height of spiritual achievement and ethical 
sublimation, and that thanks to this same instinct we may expect him to 
develop into a Superman [Übermensch]. However I cannot believe in such an 
instinct and I do not see the way to save this beneficial illusion. To me the 
present development of mankind does not seem to need any other 
 explanation than the one we have for animals. That which we observe in a 
minority of individuals as a restless drive to more perfection can be easily 
understood as a consequence of the repression of instincts which brought 
along the construction of the most valuable in human culture8 (my translation).

The effect of happy memories, the ‘sublimation’ - getting out of time and space - they produce in us, 
are not relevant for Freud. The human capacity to interpret memory, at which Proust marvels - ‘to 
think, that is to say, bring out of the obscurity what [we feel] and convert it into a spiritual equivalent’9

7 Jenseits des Lustprinzips, Studienausgabe VI, 224-226
8 Vielen von uns mag es auch schwer werden, auf den Glauben zu verzichten, dass im Menschen selbst ein 
Trieb zur Vervollkommnung wohnt, der ihn auf seine gegenwärtige Höhe geistiger Leistung und ethischer 
Sublimierung gebracht hat und von dem man erwarten darf, dass er seine Entwicklung zum Übermenschen 
besorgen wird. Allein ich glaube nicht an einen solchen inneren Trieb und sehe keinen Weg, diese wohltuende 
Illusion zu schonen. Die bisherige Entwicklung des Menschen scheint mir keiner anderen Erklärung zu bedürfen 
as die der Tiere, und was man an einer Minderzahl von menschlichen Individuen als rastlosen Drang zu 
weiterer Vervollkommnung beobachtet, lässt sich ungezwungen als Folge der Triebverdrängung verstehen, auf 
welche das Wertvollsts an der menschlichen Kultur aufgebaut ist’ (Jenseits des Lustprinzips, Studienausgabe, III, 
251).
9 Albertine disparue, II,457; Remembrance of Things Past II, 1000-1001
- is seen by Freud as nature going astray. Wanting to keep our animal nature intact he cannot consider that cultural needs are also a specific and integral part of that same nature. That’s why the idea of sublimation is on the one hand necessary but on the other contradictory. It cannot exist without repression and lack. Freud wants to preserve our natural instincts as the only positive value. He does not consider that ‘sublimation’ and culture can also result from other sources, especially from human imagination and emotion, which often function without a direct link with our instincts of self-preservation and procreation.

My final point is this: In 2004, we realize that, a century ago, Freud could not sufficiently acknowledge the role of language in our functioning as human beings - and in the functioning of memory. Human memory, be it positive or negative, is only possible due to language. We are animals who speak, and this fact changes everything, because language, the most mysterious product of the human body, made of sounds and rhythms, establishes distance between us and the world it represents. It memorizes that world in a very special way, and on many different levels, of which the self-reflecting level is the most intriguing and the most revolutionary. Freud did not see that language takes over from the body, from ‘nature’, and that as such it is already in itself ‘sublimation’. That’s also why he did not believe in an instinct for ‘spiritual achievement and ethical sublimation’. It evolves that such an instinct does exist in us, from the very beginning, in our capacity to formulate words, to speak a language, and - above all - to reflect upon it. Psychoanalysts often tend to forget that the mystery of our minds is not to find in the obscure spaces of the unconscious but in the mere existence of human consciousness, that is: in language. In self-reflecting language we are dealing with the most sublime and the most mysterious manifestation of memory, and even of life. Whereas nature and history are amoral, language makes moral beings out of us, people who acknowledge that they are sharing the same nature and making history - collective memory - together. These typically twentieth-century insights are something of a blind spot in Freud’s nineteenth-century mind. It explains the lack of a coherent theory about sublimation and culture. Lacan, acknowledging the essential part of the other in the making of our mind would go much further in this field. As a writer and novelist, Proust’s ideas about memory and his views on culture, ultimately seem more complete and less contradictory.
than those of Freud. In this field psychoanalysis can indeed learn much from literature.