

Marcel Proust: The sedentary adventurer*

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Essay

If Marcel Proust had not been born, nobody would have been able to invent him. His work, unusual, immeasurable, and perhaps even interminable has attracted the study and reflection of many authors and critics. His personality and way of working are still enigmatic and puzzling. Some of the ideas he expressed in terms of his method to remember and capture memories are still widely discussed today. The work of Edward Bizub: "Marcel Proust and the divided 'I'. *In Search of Lost Time: Crucible of Experimental Psychology (1874-1914)*",¹ is one of the most intelligent and original attempts to understand Proust's work, at least in part. Bizub has written a surprising book to study the inexhaustible work of Proust, and translation and notes by Héctor Pérez-Rincón add a surprising source of reflection. The book begins by describing the medical environment and psychological ideas that were prevalent at the time Marcel Proust was alive; a chapter in time almost forgotten by medical and experimental psychology. Hypnosis appeared as a surprising psychological phenomenon that it was possible to study and which was performed by neurologists and psychiatrists; in Paris, by Jean-Martin Charcot and in Nancy, by Bernheim. The obscure concepts of Mesmer and animal magnetism are long outdated and there is a scientific approach to study these unusual phenomena. Although this was a period before Freud, the concept of the unconscious was already being developed in the magnificent work of Pierre Janet. Janet's uncle and Proust's father, Adrian Proust, were also interested in phenomena such as hypnosis, in which the conscience or the 'I' is divided and the individual does not remember anything that happened during the hypnotic state. The phenomenon of suggestion was also studied with great interest. Jean-Martin Charcot was interested in the dissociative phenomenon in hysteria and his favorite patient, Blanche Whitman, served to demonstrate dissociation in front of a stunned audience. Experimental psychologists such as Alfred Binet also appeared, who were interested in creating tests to measure intelligence and other aspects of personality. Edward Bizub's book also describes the first fascinating clinical cases of people with dissociated or dual personalities. These cases were almost

forgotten, and their renewed study is one of the great merits of this work. A group of patients with multiple personalities is paraded before our eyes. It starts with the case of Félicité and continues with other equally disconcerting cases. There is also an analysis of "The strange case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde". This marvelous novel by Robert Louis Stevenson is all the more enigmatic when you appreciate that the author dreamed it, which is another form of dissociation. Finally, Bizub concentrates on the mystery of the creative personality of Proust. Some interesting facts about his personality: 1. Proust was chronically ill; he had asthma from nine years of age and he suffered numerous attacks throughout his life which left him a semi-invalid with what would technically be referred to today as Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease. 2. Proust had a genuine interest in hypnosis, hysteria, dreams, and cases of split personality. He discussed these subjects with his father, Doctor Adrien Proust, who was also very interested in these types of phenomena. Adrien Proust attended the famous Tuesday lectures by the Parisian neurologist and teacher of Freud, Jean-Martin Charcot, who was the first professor of neurology in France; 3. Proust became a recluse during the last 17 years of his life and covered the walls of his room with cork to dull or block the noise from the street and other parts of the house. He did not receive visitors, and was only attended to by his wife Celeste, who was his maid, cook, and carer, taking care of his every need. I see this reclusion as enigmatic; similar to the Christian hermits of medieval times; 4. On many occasions, Proust felt that he was someone other than his normal 'I' which was written by him. In this, he was no different to other writers who invoke a Muse or other being to dictate their works. It is similar to the automatic writing of the surrealists, self-hypnosis, and the phenomenon of writing under the influence of certain drugs; 5. Proust conceived the idea that "involuntary memory", that which is imposed automatically, as if someone dictated it was the true "fertile moment" of his literature. The pursuit of these moments characterizes his work, and may truly be the source of all literature; 6. Under the neuropsychiatrist Paul Sollier, he was admitted for six months in a psychiatric hospital, thinking that his illness

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had a psychic origin and that this type of treatment would be useful for him. It is not known whether he admitted himself to improve his health, or simply to keep writing.

From the beginning, Edward Bizub's book provoked more questions than it did answers, and this has always happened to me with books I have come to treasure.

Bizub starts with the description of various cases of split or divided personality; people who have a habitual personality that everyone around them knows, but who are completely different when they have their double or different personality. During episodes where the 'I' is split, they are sociopaths or criminals, immersed in this distinct personality, like Mr Hyde. There are people who assume this personality completely and who do not come back to their previous habitual personality, preferring to stay with the new one. Such is the case in the novel by Swiss author Max Frisch, "I am not Stiller". Stiller denies being who he was before, in spite of speaking Swiss German and being recognized by his wife and friends. He insists that he is a North American who has lived in Mexico and in the Bowery neighborhood of New York. Bizub reviews cases reported at the end of the 19th century and evokes the presence of the doctors who studied these patients. Overall, he gives a detailed account of the people who were studied with split or dual personality disorder. The great psychiatrists, neurologists, and psychologists appear. Marcel Proust was an avid student of this type of case, and he never tired of exploring advances in the experimental psychology of his time. The information given is extremely interesting to understand the creative personality of Proust from a different angle than usual.

I would like to mention some things that have intrigued me about Proust for many years. The subjects I want to refer to are, first, his voluntary reclusion and second, a phrase from "Pleasures and Days" that I used as an epigraph in a book of stories I wrote several years ago.

Why did Proust become a recluse? Many possibilities have been put forward but none are satisfactory: the first is that he withdrew for the same reasons as many who suffered chronic illnesses; whether due to social phobia or another intense phobia such as agoraphobia, or perhaps out of fear of having an asthma attack in the street; these would be psychological explanations. Another such explanation is that he had developed an addiction to writing: graphomania or hypergraphia. This addiction is probably more common than is believed, as described by the Harvard neurologist Alice Flaherty about herself in her book "The Midnight Disease".² In the case of addiction, this type of person can only find pleasure in practicing the object of their addiction: writing. The third explanation is neurological or medical: a severe sleep disorder. Proust slept during the day and wrote at night. During the day he could not go anywhere. His meeting with Joyce in a restaurant at midnight is very telling. Joyce arrives at midnight, a little drunk, and sleeps on the table. Nobody speaks. Proust said: "it's logical, he is

ending his day and I am just starting mine". Neither of the two had read the other's work. Sleep disorder is obviously a disorder of the sleep cycle, but Proust could also have had obstructive sleep apnea. This is common in patients with Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease who have diurnal hypersomnia and sleep in the daytime. Proust always wrote lying down. It seems that another writer who did this was Juan Carlos Onetti, the great Uruguayan storyteller, in contrast to those who always wrote standing up, like Ernest Hemingway. The fourth explanation is more human and has to do with literature and the literary vocation as an incurable one, with the enormous desire to create a lasting work. On various occasions, Proust asked himself, "Am I a novelist?" Considering himself a novelist and suffering a chronic illness, he shut himself away to finish a novel of great dimensions, spurred on by the fear of dying before he had finished. I prefer this explanation to others, although I am not certain of it. Whatever the reason, reclusion probably helped Proust to realize his extensive narrative work. It also shows that tolerance of loneliness is a personality trait of creative people. However, this almost absolute solitude implies a huge sacrifice and a rejection of many things: friendships, romantic relationships, travel, food, etc., in order to complete this work to which he felt prisoner.

Prisoner? Did Proust really want to remember his life, reconstruct his life "in mente"? It is worth mentioning that there are different types of memory: the first is the memory of procedures, such as how to play an instrument, drive a car, or ride a bike. Another is explicit or declarative memory, which depends on language to express itself and which has been separated into semantic or concept memory and episodic or biographical memory. Episodic or biographical memory is what Borges refers to in "Funes the Memorios": a human being able to remember every moment in his life. The case of a person called JC was recently published about a woman who can remember every moment of her life (Parker).³ This clinical case is similar to Borges' "Funes the Memorios", but very different from the river novel by Marcel Proust. Perhaps it tells us that there are cases of prodigious autobiographical memory. It does not tell us much about the involuntary memory at which Proust was so adept, nor about those with memory for words and perhaps remembering stories. Perhaps there are people with the memory to tell stories like the oral narrators of "A thousand and one Arabian nights", and people with the memory for words, like Borges, or people with the memory for numbers and musical notes, like Mozart. Declarative memory can have other properties besides the semantic or concept memory of philosophers or physiologists, and the autobiographical memory discovered by Borges. Proust did not wish to remember every moment in his life; rather, those that he considered significant for him, generally, emotionally significant. This emotion is maybe what keeps the reader attentive to the narration of his tales. His first memory was

of the kiss his mother gave him every night and for which he waited anxiously as a child. This memory comes to him while taking tea with a madeleine. This separation anxiety may be the mark of all of Proust's works.

The phrase by Proust that most interested me for several years was published in one of his first books, "Pleasures and Days", and was prefaced by the satirical author who wrote "Penguin island". I included it in my first book of stories⁴ - it goes like this:

"Ambition intoxicates more than fame. Desire makes all things blossom; and possession makes them wither away. It is better to dream life than to live it; even though living it is still dreaming it, like the dream diffused by the awareness of ruminating beasts". The key phrase: "It is better to dream life than to live it" reminds us of the fact that we are reading a work of fiction and not an autobiographical memory transformed by words and declarative memory. "To live life is also to dream it" takes us back to Calderón and to an extensive literature. If Proust had not died, he would have

continued writing, because ambition intoxicated more than fame and possession makes everything wither away. Literature, and indeed all artistic activity has no end in the true creator. Perhaps all of *La Recherche* was dreamed or invented more than remembered. It is recognized that the majority of Proust's characters are camouflaged or distorted.

Through dream and imagination, a new life has been created, and at the same time, he has become a truly great writer.

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