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The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Cyclist: Cyclic Form in Frazer and Proust

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The digressive structure of some late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century multi-volume works makes demands upon the reader arguably unique in kind. The *magnum opus*, whose perusal requires not hours or days, but weeks if not months, forces upon us a concentration and flexibility of response akin to few other kinds of literary effort. It is like a solo bicycle ride to eternity since the destination proposed is forever dissolving, like the horizon itself. For such writers of fiction as Proust, as much as for discursive analysts such as Sir James Frazer, that destination is truth as the object of desire; it is essential to the whole conception that desire should constantly be sustained. For that reason, the structure of such works often corresponds to a kind of cyclic form in which alternatives are played out and then replayed. The cyclist proposes to himself a corner to be turned, yet once there the vista stretches out once more, equally tantalizing, equally compelling. For many such texts indeed, the last prospect is as evasive as the first, and the fulfilment or closure, if it is possible to speak of such a thing, depends upon a recognition that the termination of all readerly possibilities is in effect a vanishing point.

For Proust, texts are like jealousy. The compulsion to read, to assimilate, and to know resembles nothing so much as that inveterate desire to devour the being of another which leads the impassioned narrator of *La Prisonnière* and *Albertine disparue* first to entrap the beloved, then, once she has of necessity broken free, to pursue her across river and plain, to Venice and beyond even to the gates of death; finally to let her float, reassembled, into the contingency of art where she melts conclusively with his perceptions of her. For the beloved herself, needless to say, this process means nothing. Regarding him and his efforts with the supreme aloofness of one made inviolable through indifference, she goes on her way regardless, teasing him with intimations of intimacy, then escaping into the perverse freedom of her Sapphism, a place where she can mock him and then disappear, withholding in her last moments even the secret of her death. Maddening, the author is left with nothing, forced to reconstruct her endlessly from his memories of her, or rather to mould her in the absolute vacancy that she has become.

À la recherche du temps perdu behaves like this, for author and for reader alike. There is, for example, the sheer committed process of reading, a task made more complex since 1989 by the appearance of the apparently definitive,

four-volume Pléiade edition with its seemingly infinite series of ancillary drafts.¹ The question that immediately arises in the mind of the reader is this: where exactly do the drafts end, and the text begin? One is used to variorum editions, but in a variorum edition of a Shakespeare play it is normally possible to identify a posited general line from which the variations listed are departures, or at least conceded alternatives. Shakespearean scholars may well find this statement naïve, but the fact remains that in Proust the edge is so blurred that one wonders frequently precisely what text it is that one is reading. One has rather an infinite series of re-runs, each one slightly different from the last, and each apparently of equal value. From these revolutions of the fictive wheel, one must simply make one's choice.

Nor is this all. Within the various drafts, within each reconstruction of the tale, there are alternatives of interpretation as every episode, every flicker of subjective response (for what else is the adventure of *À la recherche du temps perdu* but a journey into such subjectivity?) is subjected to a bewildering array of multiple perspectives. No sooner is the cycle of one such perspective complete, than another turn of the wheel throws all into question. There is an episode in *La Prisonnière* which perfectly illustrates this process. Albertine, who is being kept under lock and key in the narrator's flat, proposes to attend a reception being given by Madame Verdurin, a social opportunity which he is anxious to forestall since it will give her access to precisely the Gomorrhan contacts he has determined to prevent. Instead he suggests that she pay a visit to the Trocadéro in the presence of her friend Andrée, who at this point in the proceedings he is prepared to regard as the perfect chaperone. But a chance reading in that day's *Figaro* of a notice announcing the appearance that evening at the Trocadéro theatre of the actress Léa, whose Lesbian proclivities are well known, throws his calculation into disarray; he promptly dispatches the servant Françoise to the theatre to fetch Albertine back, thus disturbing the very scenario he has so carefully set up (III, 652–57).

At one point, while he waits, he sits down at the piano and strums the sonata by Vinteuil, one motif of which has become associated in both the reader's mind and his own with Swann's earlier, equally obsessive guardianship of Odette de Crécy. The theme of this guardianship, and hence of the sonata, is from one point of view physical passion; from another the sort of restrictive jealousy that hollows such passion out. The form of the sonata is a species of late Romantic variation technique, a technique which at such moments the narrator seems determined to echo.

We can go further. The Vinteuil sonata has many antecedents, but the most credible is the violin sonata in D by César Franck, whose own style of variation on a theme is directly derived from the 'cyclic form' that the Belgian composer had studied in Beethoven. And, as the narrator plays, he

¹ *À la recherche du temps perdu*, ed. by Jean-Yves Tadié, 4 vols (Paris: Gallimard, 1987). All references are to this edition.

thinks of the parity between the music he is playing and that of the supreme cycle in musical literature: Wagner's *Ring*, the *leitmotif* technique of which also has much in common with Beethoven and hence with Vinteuil or Franck. At this juncture Proust's technique is cyclic too, since the narrator is turning over in his mind the diaphanous and ever shifting textures of his jealousy (iv, 177–82). Like a turning vase, or perhaps the spinning axle of a wheel, his possessive obsession with his mistress fluctuates endlessly as viewed in the variegated light. Nor does the wheel stop turning when the cycle is apparently complete: even when the episode of Albertine's expedition is brought to an apparently satisfactory conclusion by her return, retrospect will throw it once more into confusion when the narrator subsequently discovers that Andrée, the seemingly perfect chaperone, should in reality have been the primary source of his jealousy (iv, 177–82). The discovery subjects the whole of Albertine's history to another recital of endlessly reassembled re-interpretation. The whole of *Albertine disparue*, subsequent to her disappearance and death, consists of nothing but a set of variations on the theme of jealousy of the dead, all the more insistent in that the physical being that provoked it has now dissolved.

It is not simply the being and nature of the beloved that prove elusive: the text, too, constantly threatens to evaporate. The successive editions of Proust's book, the compiling of which represents an activity which itself corresponds to a kind of scholarly improvisation, has alerted us to the extent to which for Proust all writing is a kind of variation around an original whose essence lies in its refusal to settle down. The cause and circumstances of Albertine's decease, for example, depend crucially upon a reading of marginalia to the typescript: they cannot be laid to rest any more than can the narrator's doubts.²

And what kind of rest does the narrator/writer in any case desire? Will the irrefutable fact either of Albertine's infidelity or of her loyalty satisfy him? The answer is that both might, and also that neither will. At one point in the Trocadéro episode already alluded to, Proust encapsulates that uncertainty in a sentence. He is dwelling on the circumstances that might render infidelity permissible (small hope: he has just been dilating with equal fervour on the absolute imperative of indifference). Some men, he opines, are content to allow the beloved her erotic freedom provided it is exercised in a space that is under their absolute control: their own house or, in the narrator's case, apartment. Others may countenance such liberty provided it is realized in a country of which they are ignorant: in circumstances that they cannot even visualize and which therefore cause them no disquiet. Thus the assuaging of his pain may theoretically be met by two conditions opposite and equally extreme, both by knowing and by not knowing:

² *Recherche*, iv, 58, and 'Notes et variantes', p. 1062.

J'avais à l'égard d'Albertine ces deux sortes de manie calmante. Je n'aurais pas été jaloux si elle avait eu des plaisirs près de moi, encouragés par moi, que j'aurais tenus tout entiers sous ma surveillance, m'épargnant par là la crainte du mensonge; je ne l'aurais peut-être pas été non plus si elle était partie dans un pays assez inconnu de moi et éloigné pour que je ne puisse imaginer, ni avoir la possibilité et la tentation de connaître son genre de vie. Dans les deux cas le doute eût été supprimé par une connaissance ou une ignorance également complètes. (III, 539-40)³

But these pre-conditions for the alleviation of his suffering correspond exactly to the two situations which, as the text amply demonstrates, most assuredly provoke it. To the author's peace of mind, a tranquillity which never occurs since it would bring his subjective journeying to a point of repose, closure, and openness are equally detrimental and, in practice, equally shunned.

In his spinning of this affective wheel, the narrator has one companion: the reader who is obliged to re-construe the tale even as it is told. The continual positing and dismantling of successive observations is itself a process into which the reader is willingly drawn since the momentum of the novel (at many moments hardly rich in incident) depends crucially upon just such excited collusion. The fabric of the narrator's mind is something that is constantly read and read again (such is the meaning of memory), re-constructed as the reader, having agreed to certain provisional conclusions, is forced to reconsider them and think anew. The provisional processes of reading thus induced remind one of the ways in which a critic such as Stanley Fish describes the reading of a Milton sonnet, with the important difference that these are effects and ambiguities which are traced out over many pages and, in some cases, volumes. The whole demeanour of *La Prisonnière*, for example, its gestures towards emotional independence, are thrown into doubt by *Albertine disparue*, that extended palinode. A second reading of the earlier volume benefits from such reconstruction, in much the same way as in *Sodome et Gomorrhe 1* the homoerotic dalliance of M. de Charlus and Jupien,⁴ initially misread by the narrator's (assumedly heterosexual) eyes, gains in depth but also transparency after the prolonged dissertation on the homosexual condition represented by *Sodome et Gomorrhe 2*. For this purpose, in *Sodome et Gomorrhe 1* Proust employs the analogy of biological signalling, signalling whose semantics are constantly worked and re-worked in the successive verbalizations to which they are prone. This is a procedure intrinsic to the whole of *À la recherche*, in which the minute syntax of body

³ 'With respect to Albertine I harboured these two kinds of consoling mania. I would not have been jealous had she experienced pleasures close to me that I would have had entirely under my surveillance, assuaging fear by this means; nor would I perhaps have been so had she departed into a country more or less unknown to me and so far removed that I could not imagine it nor possess the possibility of being acquainted with her style of life. In the two cases my doubt would have been suppressed by a knowledge or an ignorance equally complete.'

⁴ III, 3-33.

language (Gilberte's opening gambit behind the hawthorn bush at Tansonville, for example)⁵ is constantly taken up into the text and revised through progressive verbalization. The process is unending; even in the culminating phase of *Le Temps retrouvé* the narrator and reader alike are forever being wrongfooted by something as simple as the jingling of ice in a glass; the slippage of uneven paving stones. The *recherche* is an endless process of research, research however on a subject whose proposed agenda is forever disappearing beyond view.

Proust's method is thus a kind of indeterminacy principle: the observer changes the observed. The progressive revisions of Proust's text are like memory itself, concentrated upon an object that will not, and must not, stay still. To freeze the text would be to freeze the object, something that one cannot do without raising the theoretical question of what it is in which the object consists, a question which neither Proust nor his narrator (who, for this purpose alone, behave identically) wishes to settle.

The indeterminacy of the researched subject is a phenomenon seemingly intrinsic to the *fin-de-siècle*, or of literary projects conceived within it. Sir James Frazer's *The Golden Bough* appeared in four editions in his lifetime.⁶ All four versions of this epic investigation into the roots of myth and ritual begin in a mood of apparently sanguine confidence that the truth is something that can be reached provided the inductive net is thrown sufficiently wide. The cult of Diana at Nemi is a mystery which rigorous research (*à la recherche du temps perdu?*) can avowedly clear up:

Accordingly if we can show that a barbarous custom, like that of the priesthood of Nemi, has existed elsewhere; if we can detect the motives that led to its institution; if we can prove that these motives operated widely, perhaps universally, in human society, producing in varied circumstances a variety of institutions specifically different but generically alike; if we can show, lastly, that the very motives, with some of their derivative institutions, were actually at work in classical antiquity; then we may fairly infer that at a remoter age the same motives gave birth to the priesthood at Nemi. Such an inference, in default of direct evidence as to how the priesthood did actually arise, can never amount to demonstration. But it will be more or less probable according to the degree of completeness with which it fulfils the conditions that I have indicated. The object of this book is, by meeting these conditions, to offer a fairly probable explanation of the priesthood of Nemi. (1, 10)

'Such an inference [. . .] can never amount to a demonstration'; in fact the pile-up of conditional clauses in this sentence betrays a two-fold epistemological insecurity, outer and inner. The outer insecurity is patently implicit in the comparative method of anthropological investigation: in the widening of prospects, the wilderness of instances, the centre eventually and inevitably gives. It is thus that in the preface to the final part of the Third Edition

⁵ Contrast the initial description of this gesture at *Recherche* 1, 139, and the narrator's response to it, with Gilberte's subsequent explanation of it at iv, 558–60.

⁶ First Edition: 1890; Second: 1900; Third: 1906–15; Abridged Edition: 1922. All references are to *The Golden Bough*, 3rd edn, 12 vols (London: Macmillan, 1906–15). It is to be understood that volume numbers, given here, and numbers of parts, into seven of which the Third Edition is divided, are distinct.

Frazer quite candidly concedes that this is so, and in a memorably disingenuous disclosure, concedes that the subject of his dissertation is not in fact its subject.⁷ The second instability is more cogent since it is essential both to the conception of the book and to its origins. The object of the exercise, it will be remembered, is to explain how early peoples attenuate the sacred life-force of kings on which the well-being of the community crucially depends. The means by which this purpose is achieved, however, are odd in the extreme, to the considered as much as to the casual glance: the kings are granted life by the expedient of slaying them. It is a paradoxical practice and a paradoxical insight worthy of Frazer's contemporary Oscar Wilde ('for each man kills the thing he loves'). It also introduces into the argument a lethal insecurity since most rituals, and most myths, come under its aegis to be construed in two different ways: as devices of elimination and as devices of nurturing. If the twin poles of the Proustean universe are jealousy and indifference, the twin poles of the Frazerian are reverence and abhorrence. This two-way reading of events and customs is what Frazer calls a taboo, the subject of the article from which the book first emerged and the subject of the second part of the great Third Edition, and it permeates every phase of the recital. Listen to Frazer on the not unProustean theme of sexual abstinence. Early peoples, he says, refrain from sexual intercourse for the very same reason that they indulge in it: namely to fructify the earth. This may appear a contradiction, but it is consonant with natural reason:

If we ask why it is that similar beliefs should logically lead, among different peoples, to such opposite modes of conduct as strict chastity and more or less open debauchery, the reason, as it presents itself to the primitive mind, is perhaps not very far to seek. If rude man identifies himself, in a manner, with nature; if he fails to distinguish the impulses and processes in himself from methods which nature adopts to ensure the multiplication of plants and animals, he may leap to one or two conclusions. Either he may infer that by yielding to his appetites he will thereby assist in the multiplication of plants and animals; or he may imagine that the vigour which he refuses to expend in reproducing his kind, will form as if were a store of energy whereby other creatures, whether vegetable or animal, will somehow benefit in propagating their species. Thus from the same crude philosophy, the same primitive notions of nature and life, the savage may derive by different channels a rule either of profligacy or of asceticism. (II, 117)

All sacred beings, as well as sacred purposes, are subject to the same double bind. Adonis, we learn in the fourth part, is annually mourned in Phoenicia and in Cyprus in the form of a vegetation god. But since totemic animals may be corn spirits, Adonis is also revered under the aspect of a pig: it is thus that, in the fifth part, we are instructed that peoples habituated to Adonis-worship will not eat swine. This prohibition, intended to preserve the life of the sacred one, however, takes the seemingly perverse form of regarding the revered animal as unclean. It is thus, for Frazer, that Semitic peoples have come

⁷ Frazer finally concedes that the Priest of Nemi, the 'nominal subject' of his dissertation, is 'merely a puppet' (x, vi).

unwittingly to look with loathing on what they once tended with love. The same contorted logic attends the slaying of all sacred animals, including the bear. A famous passage concerning the Ainu bear sacrifice in Japan comes to the perverse conclusion:

Thus the primitive worship of animals assumes two forms, which are in some respects the converse of one another. On the one hand, animals are worshipped, and are therefore neither killed nor eaten. On the other hand, animals are worshipped because they are habitually killed and eaten. In both forms of worship the animal is revered on account of some benefit, positive or negative, which the savage hopes to receive from it. In the former worship the benefit comes either in the positive form of protection, advice, and help which the animal affords to man, or in the negative one of abstinence from the injuries which it is in the power of the animal to inflict. In the latter worship the benefit takes the form of the animal's flesh and skin. The two forms of worship are in some measure antithetical: in the one, the animal is not eaten because it is revered; in the other, it is revered because it is eaten. (VIII, 311)

Thus Frazer's celebrants and worshippers hold, like Proust's narrator, two attitudes equally extreme yet basically opposed. Like Albertine, the sacred being, animal or human, is both adored and abhorred. For either reason, or for both, they kill it, just as Proust's narrator also kills off fictively the object of his affections in order, ineffectively, to resolve the conflicting feelings he cherishes towards her. Furthermore, as in Proust, the underlying instability of Frazer's logic threatens to topple the structure. So extreme are the divergences between the three full-scale editions of *The Golden Bough* that it is difficult to speak of them as the same book.

A touch of autobiography may not be out of place here. In 1991 I was invited by Oxford University Press to prepare for the general reader a portable edition of *The Golden Bough*.⁸ The invitation was made in all innocence: it was simply assumed by the Press that such a thing as a definitive *Golden Bough* existed which could reasonably be prepared in this way. Was not the so-called Abridged Edition of 1922 just such a text? But I had already devoted three years to the study of Frazer's work, and knew that when one spoke of the various editions of his masterpiece one was not speaking in the same register as when one referred to, say, different editions of Dickens or of Hardy. The three full-scale editions, those of 1890, 1900, and 1906–15, were in effect three different books. Should I ignore this fact and continue regardless, assuming that somehow in 1922 Frazer had drawn a line beneath the column of his additions and transformations, with a totalizing and totally accessible solution at the end? I had spent very little time on the generally accessible abridged version, but knew enough about it already to recognize the fact that it was in effect a different beast altogether, a shaggy monster smuggled in under the polite pretence of consensus and normalization. Misgiving turned to alarm when, looking up the correspondence for that year, I discovered that this hybrid had been concocted hastily

⁸ James George Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A New Abridgement from the Second and Third Editions*, ed. by Robert Fraser (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994).

in three weeks by Lady Frazer with the active connivance of her husband. Its chapter numberings, its shape, its balance of proposition and retrenchment were a matter of improvisation and of compromise. In preparing the work for a new generation of readers, what exactly was it that I was supposed to edit?

For, if in Proust the axle of the fictive wheel is forever turning, the same occurs in Frazer with the crucial difference that the radius and circumference are forever enlarging. Nor is this enlargement simply a matter, as it might at first seem, of the mere accumulation of evidence. It is not simply that Frazer is amplifying his argument, though he has a temperamental tendency to do so; it is also that the contradictory nature of the case compels him to write it out again and again, as if the writing will somehow absolve him of the absurdity of his point. The absurdity is innate in the primitive logic he is attempting, over and over again, both to construe, and historically to justify. Yet the fact is that he is drawn to it, it delimits his theme, constantly drawn back as he is, like a dog to an already dry bone, as is Marcel to the pickings of his feelings for Albertine. Thus forms of evidence are played and replayed: the exclusion of horses from the Arician shrine; the slaying of the king's son, and worked or reworked as the context and pressure of the argument dictate. Thus two different and sometimes mutually incompatible explanations of the same phenomenon are laid side by side: three different theories of totemism; three different theories of midsummer fires. The juxtaposition in the third edition is itself the product of the book's long gestation, since Frazer had often long ago lost faith in his earlier theories. Instead of eliminating what he has since come to feel is false, however, he recites each like a mantra and lays it dexterously in its place so that we may come across it in turn; that cycle of the argument meticulously though sometimes irrelevantly in place. In the thicket of his reasoning Frazer, like Proust, plays peek-a-boo with the reader: first hiding his anti-Christian agenda, then disclosing it, then disguising it once more. A controversial passage concerning the crucifixion of Christ appears, then is partially withdrawn, then, in the Abridged Edition of 1992 disappears altogether,⁹ less for reasons of space than because Christianity, for the conventional western reader, is the ultimate taboo subject, focus of reverence or of abhorrence. In the presence of a topic so charged, Frazer can no more resolve his reactions than we can: it is thus that the Holy of Holies appears fleetingly then disappears forever behind a curtain discreetly held, or like the iconostasis in Greek churches.

Frazer and Proust flirt with violation. Both are drawn to the forbidden, yet both shun it. The Barthian striptease that each enacts takes the form of endless extension, since the response to contradiction for each is to expand and to dilate. Both Frazer and Proust replay things. For Frazer there was the

⁹ The famous eliminated passage occurs originally in the Second Edition, 3 vols (London: Macmillan, 1900), III, 186–98. In the Third Edition it is relegated to an appendix (IX, 412–23). In the Oxford World's Classics edition I have replaced it (pp. 666–79).

progression through the Age of Magic to the Age of Religion to the Age of Science.¹⁰ For Proust, according to his letter to Jacques Copeau of 1913, there was a progression through an Age of Names, to an Age of Thoughts, and then an Age of Things (a thin residue of this programme is left in the sectional titles: 'Nom de Pays: le Nom'; 'Nom de Pays: le Pays').¹¹ Both men spin these schemes because they are interested in the processes of mystification and de-mystification, on the individual and on the cultural plane. The result is that they rehearse experiences: firstly as concepts, then as patterns of language, then as themselves. Gilberte is experienced as all three: the resort Balbec likewise; Oriane, Duchesse de Guermantes, as the subject of masturbatory fantasy, of speculation upon her pedigree, and then as the socially assuming self. In Frazer the sun is experienced first as a force to be used, then worshipped (named?) as Adonis/Attis/Osiris, then explained away as a fiery ball going cold. Similarly corn, similarly rain.

Frazer for one invites us into a labyrinth at the centre of which lies a reputed object: the truth about the cult of Diana Nemorensis which it is his express purpose to explore; once trapped within that labyrinth, however, a sense of direction is soon lost amid the twists and side-turnings. As the work in its various versions progresses, one is led towards a central enclosure from the vantage point of which, however, it becomes apparent that the maze itself has been the object of the quest: the minotaur, in fact, is the labyrinth.¹² In the culminating phases of the last version, the great Third Edition of 1906–15, he finally comes clean: the Priest of the shrine at Nemi, who has provided the pretext for this entire excursus is, and has never been more than, a puppet dangling on the strings of epistemological uncertainty.

At the very end of *The Golden Bough* Frazer plays a not untypical erudite trick. He is speaking of the relentless search for human knowledge, a search which must never end since certainty, like perfection, can never be found. 'The advance of knowledge is an infinite progression towards a goal that forever recedes', he says, and then quotes Dante:

Fatti non foste a viver come bruti
Ma per seguir virtute e conoscenza.¹³

The speaker is Ulysses in the *picciol* oration in which he beckons his fellow mariners beyond the Pillars of Hercules in search of a new world. In fact Frazer knows, and depends upon his readers knowing, that the voyage thus incited ended in disaster. It is as if he is reminding us that no journey has an ending, and that all destinations are in effect false turnings.

¹⁰ Most memorably expounded in *Golden Bough*, 1, 220–43.

¹¹ The letter is collected in *La correspondance de Marcel Proust*, ed. by Philip Kolb (Paris: Plon, 1970–), xii, 180. A further exposition of the parallelism between Proust's and Frazer's historiographical schemes will be found in Robert Fraser, *Proust and the Victorians* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1994), pp. 255–56.

¹² For a fuller account of Frazer's misgivings, see Robert Fraser, *The Making of the Golden Bough: The Origins and Growth of an Argument* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1990), pp. 203–12.

¹³ xi, 306. The reference is to the *Divina Commedia, Inferno*, xxvi, 119–20: 'You were not made to live like beasts | but to pursue virtue and understanding'.

Thus ultimately all reading, like all writing, is a form of desire. And just as it is meaningless, because too meaningful, to talk of desire frustrated, since it is in delay and in frustration that all desire consists, so it is meaningless, because too just, to speak of a thwarted reading of the text, for the very reason that thwarting is of the essence of the twin acts we know as writing and reading. We are all thwarted lovers: 'love satisfied', writes the poet, 'is love dead'. We are all thwarted readers, and insofar as we are so, become while reading the thwarted authors whom we read. Thus it is that the completion of all artistic manifestations must, and can only, consist in delay.