Exploring Names: Notes on Onomastics and Fictionality in Marcel Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*

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The relationships between names and the literary imagination in Marcel Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past* are considered. In *Remembrance*, names are explored and interpreted by Proust, and the very process of this "deciphering" unfolds spectacular fictional worlds. Names are endowed with a "geological" dimension which the narrator scrutinizes. Starting from the external, phonetic aspect of proper names, he projects, spins off an entire universe. Challenging basic principles of lexicography, Proust deliberately "confuses" proper names' basic property and makes them generate rich, luxuriant fictitious worlds. Characteristically, names open the Proustian gate of imagination.

In his essay on Proust's "rhetoric of interpretation," Hayden White points out that

> interpretive discourse tells a story in which the interpreter is both the protagonist and the narrator and whose characteristic themes are the process of search, discovery, loss and retrieval of meaning, recognition and misrecognition, identification and misidentification, naming and misnaming, explanation and obfuscation, illumination and mystification, and so on. (1988, 270)

The "interpretive discourse" in *Remembrance of Things Past* brings to the fore, as White's quoted remarks themselves suggest, the crucial issue of the proper name. As Roland Barthes maintains in one of his analyses of *Remembrance*, "the proper name is a sign itself," not just an "index," and, "as a sign, the proper name avails itself to exploration, to deciphering" (1967, 161).

Of course, Proust's novel also employs proper names to convey
(name) a personal experience, to flesh out, locate, circumscribe it
according to realistic conventions. In this case, proper names make
up a "denominative code" that bears mainly an instrumental value.
But this code itself can become an object of the narrator's interro-
gation, a true "hermeneutic object," in Jean-Pierre Richard's
terminology (1974, 155-180). This interrogation aims at an interpre-
tation of names and focuses on their referential substance, the
signifier-signified (name-named) relationships, etymological and
other aspects. The fictional exploration of denominative worlds may
even precede the narrative contact with the reality supposedly
designated by the corresponding names. It thus questions the
traditionally mimetic relation between the object and its sign, the
named and the name, reality and its textual analogon, respectively.
Accordingly, the name creates reality, generates a fictive universe by
its sole recollection, through the impact of its own phonetic body. In
other words, the name doubles its re-productive, denominative
function by a productive, literary one.

Critics have repeatedly tried to pin down this complex function-
ing of Proust's *rêverie nominale* 'denominative reverie' (Genette
1976, 320). From J. Vendryes (1952) to Georges Poulet (1963),
Gilles Deleuze (1964), Roland Barthes (1967), Gérard Genette
(1976), and Antoine Compagnon (1992), there has been an insistent
attempt to reconstruct Proust's onomastics, to determine the
literary and linguistic status of names in *Remembrance*. Part of this
critical tradition, this essay aims at opening up a discussion of the
relations between Proust's fashion of interpreting, responding to
names and the spinning out of fictional worlds in *Remembrance*. Such
a debate will inevitably involve literary criticism, semiotics, linguis-
tics, and onomastics.

As we shall see, the semiotic and the hermeneutic drives of
Proust's novel are to be considered together, simply because the
Proustian reading of names, the explorations of nominal signifiers,
serves as a means to carry and shape complex cultural information.
Here I will try to decipher in the very *problematica decifratoria* 'the
issue of deciphering' (Bertini 1981, 47) gathered around the
Proustian theme of the name a specific attitude toward the structure,
functioning and symbolic values of names and naming, briefly, the
expression of a particular denominative ethos.

The discussion around Proustian "Cratylism" provides an appropriate starting point in this respect. As is well known, there has been a vivid dispute on the narrator's *conscience cratyléenne* 'Cratylian consciousness' (Barthes 1967, 169); that is, on his espousing (or not) the view advocated by Cratylus — as opposed to that shared by Hermogenes — in the Platonic dialogue bearing the former's name. According to Cratylus, each object has received its "right" *onoma*, nonconventional, naturally *(physei)* motivated. Barthes calls this mimetic perspective "realism" (in a scholastic sense), seizing it as an argument for critics' attempt "to read literature from the mythic perspective that constitutes its language, and to decipher the literary word (which is not the common word at all) not as the dictionary defines it but as the writer constructs it" (169). However, Genette maintains, Proust's text supports both Cratylian (mimetic or mimologic) and Hermogenic (conventional, Saussurean) definitions of the relations between the sign's components:

> Consequently, there are, in *A la recherche du temps perdu*, at the same time, a very accurate testimony about the mimological reverie and a critique, sometimes explicit, sometimes implicit, but always vigorous, of this form of imagination, a form that is doubly denounced as a realist illusion, that is, as a conviction that the signified (the "image") and the referent (the country) are identical — which one might nowadays dub *referential fallacy* — as well as a belief in a natural relation between the signified and the signifier — what one might appropriately call *semantic fallacy*. (1976, 328; my translation)

Indeed, one can find both Hermogenic and Cratylian passages in *Remembrance*. The real problem, I believe, is to determine the creative, fictional impact of the storyteller's scrutinizing the semantic depth of the name, its "geological," vertical dimension (the signified-signifier relation) or syntactic functioning (the interaction with other proper names), its relevance to human or geographical referents, and so on. It seems clear to me that the narrator proposes through his "reading" of particular names an interpretation of the beings or places bearing those names, an interpretation, I would add, that elicits a specific response from the reader — that is, another interpretation.

Let us consider, as a first example, the famous analysis of "nominative motivation" Proust effects in the first pages of *The Guermantes Way*. The narrator draws here a very important distinction that also argues in favor of Genette's conclusion, a distinction between different "onomastic ages." Surprisingly enough, these ages are not separated chronologically. Rather they set forth certain attitudes toward names and the persons designated by them, attitudes that may vary according to a sort of "referential testing" of the names. The narrator acknowledges mainly two (st)ages of human understanding depending on two (st)ages of the proper name itself, one before and the other after the individual has established a direct contact with the object or person bearing that name:

> At the age when Names, offering us an image of the unknowable which we have poured into their mould, while at the same moment connoting for us also a real place, force us accordingly to identify one with the other to such a point that we set out to seek in a city for a soul which it cannot enshrine but which we have no longer the power to expel from its name, it is not only to towns and rivers that they give an individuality, as do allegorical paintings, it is not only the physical universe which they speckle with differences, people with marvels, it is the social universe also; and so every historic house, in town or country, has its lady or its fairy, as every forest has its genie, every stream its deity. Sometimes, hidden in the heart of its name, the fairy is transformed to suit the life of our imagination, by which she lives; thus it was the atmosphere in which Mme de Guermantes existed in me, after having been for years no more than the reflection of a magic lantern[1] slide and of a stained glass window, began to lose its colors when quite other dreams impregnated it with the bubbling coolness of swift-flowing streams. (Proust 1982, 2: 4-5)

The original phase, described in this fragment, is characterized by a strictly individual, mythic and phantasmal "pre-signification" of names, which will orient one's experiencing of the concrete reality designated by these names. To put it otherwise, the narrator posits the preeminence of the initially imagined, approximated meaning of the place-name over the latter's "referential" impact, impact that is retroactively adapted to "fit" the primary onomastic phantasies and projections. One could recall here, of course, the famed post-structuralist theories of the signifier's "autonomy," of its capacity of *secreting* — in both senses, I would say — its own

signified, before, beyond and beside any "referential test." In fact, Proust's writings abundantly illustrate the quasi-symbolist faith in the evocative, creative power of names' phonetic being. Discussing Gérard de Nerval's novella *Sylvie*, for instance, Proust comments on the character's "name itself, purpled by its two *is* [the *y* being for Proust, in this case, an alteration of the only actual *i* of the name]: Sylvie, the true Daughter of Fire" (1988, 30). This type of "phonetic motivation" (Barthes 1971, 165) applies both to surnames and place-names. "The colored space of their syllables"[2] (also mentioned in *Against Sainte-Beuve*) serves as a major source of "Cratylian" infer-ences. One of the most celebrated considerations of this kind is to be found in *Swann's Way* where the narrator recalls

> Bayeux, so lofty in its noble coronet of russet lacework, whose pinnacle was illuminated by the old gold of its second syllable; Vitré, whose acute accent barred its ancient glass with wooden lozenges; gentle Lamballe, whose whiteness ranged from egg-shell yellow to pearl grey; Coutances, a Norman cathedral with its final consonants, rich and yellowing, crowned with a tower of butter; Lanion with the rumbling noise, in the silence of its village street, of a coach with a fly buzzing after it. (Proust 1982, 1: 422)

Genette's important observation quoted above addresses, as Plato scholars themselves have acknowledged, the Proustian refinement of Cratylian logic (Gaudin 1990, 134), which is to say, the same Socratic doctrine of "eponymy." According to this theory, "even in an unimportant word, one has to look for hidden names, those which give the arbitrary name of a city the symbolic profusion Proust uncovers in it" (Gaudin 1990,134). In both *Cratylus* and *Remembrance*, I would argue, names are treated as "surnames," as "proper-names." As Gaudin suggested, they become "forms," in Henri Focillon's sense proposed in *La vie des formes*, "for the semantic exigency which makes them signs couples with the symbolic exigency which makes them reveal the very nature of things" (1990, 134). It is true, in *Swann's Way* Proust establishes the distinction between words and names:

> Words present to us a little picture of things, clear and familiar, like the pictures hung on the walls of schoolrooms to give children an illustration

of what is meant by a carpenter's bench, a bird, an anthill, things
chosen as typical of everything else of the same sort. But names present
to us — of persons, and of towns which they accustom us to regard as
individual, as unique, like persons — a confused picture, which draws
from them, from the brightness or darkness of their tone, the colour in
which it is uniformly painted, like one of those posters, entirely blue or
entirely red, in which, on account of the limitations imposed by the
process used in their reproduction or by a whim on the designer's part,
not only the sky and the sea are blue or red, but the ships and the
church and the people in the streets. (Proust 1982, 1: 421)

From the vantage point of the discussion I am proposing, this is
another key passage. It sets out a specifically *creative* perspective on
vocabulary. This view could be grasped as a challenge to common
assumptions and linguistic behavior insofar as it simultaneously gives
us a univocal (monoreferential, semantically flat) image of ordinary
words and a more puzzling, suggestive *image confuse* 'confused
picture' (Proust 1954, 1: 389) of proper names.

There is another symbolic opposition which underlies the surface
dichotomy word-name throughout this fragment: the symbolic
tension between the *dictionary* and the *book*. The narrator plays with
these two distinct modes of defining and incorporating names so that
the novel might even be read as the spectacular outcome of this play.
In a way, he contrasts two lexicological models, two conceptions of
lexicology: a scientific, objective, personally noninvolved one, and
another, artistic, creative, extremely subjective. To use a more
fashionable terminology, I would say that he actually deconstructs
this paradigmatic tension by presenting (and, in fact, writing)
Remembrance, his *book*, as a kind of revised dictionary, based on a
personal (literary) lexicographic principle. One could argue that the
word-name relation is, in common dictionaries, roughly speaking, the
reverse of the link Proust envisions in the fragment above: it is the
ordinary word that is given a more complex definition, which may
include a very rich series of connotations and denotations, and which
functions in the language system that informs our life precisely on
the basis of its manifold signification. In such a list of meanings —
and also in the current speech acts that perform this list in various
fashions in different contexts — the ordinary word is usually the
ambiguous, multisemic one, while the name is clear, because it is

referentially determined. Of course, these two nominal categories may overlap in multifarious ways. There exist common words that could lose their semantic wealth by lexical conversion, and vice versa. In fact, the examples Proust offers situate themselves near or even on the border that separates usual words and proper names: the carpenter's bench might be a specific piece of furniture, the bird *is* a determined species of the volatile class, the anthill is a very peculiar, exotic type of animal. But, in general, most words, which commonly belong to larger, more abstract lexical categories, cover a broader semantic area than proper names do, and thus are, in Proust's own terms, more "confused." On the contrary, Parma or Florence, not to speak of the Norman towns the narrator immediately enumerates, possess a "clear," precise meaning. Any encyclopaedic dictionary, whether a *Webster* or *Robert*, is likely to prove this status of the lexis: in its first part it offers mostly complex definitions of common words, whereas its last section usually furnishes short and specific explanations of (famous) proper names.

But, alas, *Remembrance* reads as an odd dictionary: a sort of monstrous lexical/lexicographical project which deliberately "confuses" the *proper* name's fundamental *property* (that of drawing a nonambiguous picture of the meaning), and which, conversely, restricts the usual word definitions to "little pictures." However, the enlargement of the lexical picture, a sort of fundamentally impressionist (we remember of course Proust's character Elstir, the impressionist painter) attitude toward words, toward words-as-names, takes place sometimes in cases that involve ordinary words as well. The narrator's demiurgic, logothetic[3] capabilities seem to embrace a larger lexical spectrum, simply because in Proust *words*, in general, tend to be transformed in *names*, to be renamed. Proust masters a fascinating technique of celebrating and consecrating words, a technique that confers uniqueness, individuality to ordinary words and to the things named by them. In a more general sense, remembrance is tantamount, in this view, to the renaming of things past: fiction renames, baptizes, and thereby brings to life a vanished reality by "capitalizing" it, so to speak. But, maintaining the distinction made by the narrator, the essence of this renaming appears to consist of a literary challenge to the "principle of the list" (of a given list,

prescribing more or less rigid already-made definitions of words) through a sui generis "principle of the book." The latter replaces canonical definitions of words by new semantic descriptions. It ceases to reproduce existing significations and compensatorily invents new ones. It substitutes, so to speak, book words for dictionary words and book names for dictionary names. Or, to put it otherwise, it supplants words in general by names, the logic of the dictionary by the logic of the book, literality by literarity, confined semantic spaces by boundless worlds of fictional liberty. This reconfirms critics' views of *Remembrance* as a global challenge to language, as a creative reply to linguistic restrictions as well as to the ontological constrictions these restrictions impose on our being. Redefining words in literary terms, that is, as Barthes puts it (1971, 160), writing the novel is at the same time renaming reality, giving new names to persons and places. Remembrance and the imagination of the inherited names engender through the novelistic discourse new signifiers for the created (recalled, imagined, etc.) fictional world. Coining new names for past realities, the novel expresses the author's power, his ability to challenge the arbitrariness of the names designating remote things and events. The deceptive experiencing of the language of signs depicted by Deleuze (1974, 100), the perpetual deferral of truth of names and realities in *Remembrance*, based on the so-called "hieroglyphic" structure of the Proustian sign (Deleuze 1974, 167), are real, effective and important to a global assessment of the novel's treatment of names. Nonetheless, as I have tried to show, Proust's novel simultaneously sets out a somewhat mystical conviction that proper names are gateways to an otherwise inaccessible, faded-away universe. And, once entered into this universe of memory, the narrator renames it, assigns it those names (the words of his novel) through which common objects and facts become peerless, immortal, time regained.

At this point, I would like to stress the significations of two different utopias suggested, denounced or nourished by the novel. The first one concerns the narrator's attempt to recover/regain his past, to accomplish a "transcription of things" (Proust 1982, 3: 1103). This is an unattainable goal because, as Deleuze points out, "there is no truth except a betrayed truth" (1974, 100) beyond the things contained by the narrator's memory. Yet memory is not just

recollection, but also reading, interpretation. Unfortunately, the past stands for the unreadable object par excellence. It is dominated by what Hans Robert Jauss (1970) has called "[die] apriorische Unkenntlichkeit des Andern" 'the a priori incomprehensibility of the Other' (135), and it is this incomprehensibility of the _character's_ previous life that makes the _narrator_ perceive himself (_his_ self) as an(/)other, as the Other. The utopia of recollection seizes only metaphors of truth, "lies," in Nietzsche's and de Man's sense.[4] In Margaret Gray's words, truth is in Proust a "cover" for "failure" (1992, 64). One can contend that "the dream and involuntary memory allow the subject to retrieve an original, primitive vision, to reexperience the genuine perception through which all reality has revealed itself" (De Agostini 1984, 202). However, the emphasis should be laid on the phenomenological authenticity of the perception that is supposed to seize that reality, and _not_ on the genuineness of the reality thus "revealed," on its original "truth." As far as the latter is concerned, Vincent Descombes rightly specifies, "Proust... contrasts the futility of novelistic reverie with the true work of literary creation" (1992, 57), that is, he questions exactly the metaphysical function De Agostini assigns to the reverie in the passage quoted above. To put it differently, the author himself undermines the first utopia I have mentioned, the unattainable, essentially mimetic project of recollection grounded in the logic of the dictionary and consisting of simply reiterating, "translating" canonical definitions of words. He replaces this semantic obsequiousness to the world, so to speak, with a somewhat more ambitious but also more productive utopia, which would be able, this time, to institute a more effective contact with reality. This is the utopia of writing (as opposed to the already mentioned "translation"). Writing means renaming, invention of names, that is, creation of reality, giving up the "list," the "nomenclature." The "already-named" yields to a "denominative initiative," which is at the core of Proustian poetics, as Barthes notes (160). If Marcel, Proust's character, lived in a world of pre-existing names, Proust's narrator brings into being that past world by giving it a name: _Remembrance_. The semantic dynamics of proper names (or of renaming) _is_ a principle of creativity in Proust's novel indeed, as clearly indicated

in the last part of the Proustian fragment quoted above (1982, 1: 421): this dynamic of semantic production is described in terms of plastic perspectivism. The name's "picture" (the set of meanings it contains) is based on the same "poetics" as Elstir's impressionist painting, which is one of the countless metaphors whereby the novel denudes its laws of composition.[5] Naming and renaming thus reveal themselves as fundamental components of Proustian creativity.

Notes

1. Among the many studies on Proust's "magic lantern" Riffaterre's essay deserves, I believe, a special mention. Its analysis goes in a direction different from Howard Moss's *The Magic Lantern of Marcel Proust* (1962).

2. Quoted by Pauline Newman-Gordon (1968, 377).

3. Rijlaardsam is among the many commentators who have discussed the implications of such a quality in Plato's *Cratylus*. His observations on the "creation" of names in this dialogue apply also to Proust, who can be viewed as a literary "logothetes," as a "Namenschöpfer," too (1978, 104).

4. "As a writer, Proust is the one who knows that the hour of truth, like the hour of death, never arrives on time, since what we call time is precisely truth's inability to coincide with itself. *A la recherche du temps perdu* narrates the flight of meaning, but this does not prevent its own meaning from being, incessantly, in flight" (de Man 1979, 78). For Nietzsche's conception of lie, see especially the fundamental essay "Ueber Wahrheit und Lüge im aussermoralischen Sinne" 'On Truth and Lies in an Extramoral Sense' (1976, 603-622). Actually, de Man has erected a sort of hermeneutic bridge between this text and Proust through his essays on both authors, essays included in his *Allegories of Reading. Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust* (1979, 57-78; 79-130). James H. Reid (1988) is one of the critics who has crossed this bridge, in his article "Lying, Irony, and Deconstruction: Nietzsche and Proust." In the French-speaking world, Jacques Derrida and especially his followers Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy have contributed to a better understanding of the decisive issue raised by Nietzsche (Lacoue-Labarthe, 1971; Nietzsche, 1971).

5. See, for a convincing approach to this issue, Mavrakis (1993, especially 176-178).

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