

## Memory as a Counterstatement Against Time in the Novels of Marcel Proust

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### Abstract

The basic texture and structure of the world around us, in which we live is such that nothing is stable.. French author Marcel Proust was obsessed with the idea of time and its queer presence in our lives. In his mammoth novel *Remembrance of Things Past* he presented the idea of time as a disintegrating phenomenon. No other European writer has ever dealt with this theme more profoundly than Marcel Proust. His six part autobiographical novel articulates and deliberates upon the theme of Time's destructive power, which culminates in the gradual elopement of everything that is beautiful and dear to us in human life. Primarily the notion of time in our lives situates us in a very precarious place, since we can never remain assured of anything in a permanent manner. The only respite one can find and posit against the decay caused by the machinery of time is memory..

**Keywords:** Time, Memory, Involuntary, Voluntary, Split self, Transience, Recollection, Soul searching

### Introduction

When we speak in terms of a literary Construct, the idea of time is an essential element to it. Without this preliminary thought, no narrative discourse is possible. Ever since the time of Greek philosopher Aristotle, the three unities of time, place and action are considered to be the fundamental aspect of a literary work. Out of these three unities, the most vital and basic unity is the unity of time. One can say it is the most stubborn one as well. You can take liberty with the unities of place or action but not with the time. An author is always a slave to the historical necessities of his plot structure, whether he is dealing with a basic framework of past events or not. Even in a storyline narrated in terms of first person present tense, one needs to be extremely conscious about the concept of time. The superstructure of all sorts of novels, be it historical, romantic or psychological must be raised, keeping in mind its significance in the larger context of time as such.

## The role of time in literary construction

How to counter this existential problem posed by time through the threat of transience that encompasses our presence in this world. Everyone is bound to follow the rules of the game which time selects and dictates for us. Marcel Proust provides an answer to this perennial question. He offers in his novels, an anathema to the ailment that time creates in everyone's life. This antidote according to Proust is memory. Only the resurgent power of memory can save us from the onslaught of time. The two prime modes of operation of memory namely; the Involuntary memory and the voluntary memory are enough to rescue us from the drowning shipwreck of our existence. If we have the ability to recollect our past experience in a soothing and reflective manner the threat posed by time and its devious machinery can be countered effectively. The sting of time is nullified and turned inert, if the surge of memory is taken seriously and disseminated through proper channels to revivify the withering garden - that is our life. This is what the seeming narrative Marcel Proust's novels teaches us poignantly and effectively. The radical statement which comes out from his literary creation is this: Hold the memory intact, if you wish to stand against the devouring power of time.

For a short story, time is not a big factor as compared to the novel. The Compass of time is more elementary and decisive if we are dealing with the types of narration like a novel or an epic. Once you enter into the domain of multilayered plot structure, the notion of time becomes more and more pivotal as well as prominent. The web of time is a prime leitmotif of any literary creation, except poetry which is more Humble and open to the idea of transcending the barrier of time. Otherwise all other modes of narration are susceptible and cognizant of this temporal reality. Any work of fiction is prone to the demands offered by the factuality of time and its mammoth presence. Any author while dealing with a fictional narrative is conditioned this fundamental fact. In a way ,time is Something that brings a deterministic fervor and a shadow to all the modes of they our expression, if they are articulated through the medium of a literary construct. The narrative of a historical novel is most deterministic in this sense, since it is completely driven by the factuality of time. One can not take any sort of liberty in a novel like *Kenilworth* or *Rob Roy* by sir Walter Scott. Even a more experimental novel like *Hundred years of Solitude* by Gabriel Garcia Marques is conditioned by the exigencies of time period. Although it was a work of magical realism, the plot structure was such that a generational shift could only be brought to the fore through the idea of time. Without this gross recognition or the consciousness of temporal significance, the entire work would have lost its charm and validity. Any literary work must be attuned properly through the basic realization of time and its contingent presence in our lives. Noted critic George Lukacs expounds his opinion in his book *The Theory of the Novel* :

Time can become constitutive only when the bond with the transcendental home has been severed. Just as ecstasy elevates the mystic into a sphere where all duration and all passing of time have ceased and from which he must fall back into the world of time only because of his creaturely, organic limitations, so any close and visible connection with

the essence creates a cosmos which is a priori exempt from this necessity. Only in the novel, whose very matter is seeking and failing to find the essence, is time posited together with the form: time is the resistance of the organic-which possesses a mere semblance of life to the present meaning, the will of life to remain within its own completely enclosed immanence. In the epic the life-immanence of meaning is so strong that it abolishes time: life enters eternity as life, the organic retains nothing of time except the phase of blossoming; fading and dying are forgotten and left entirely behind. In the novel, meaning is separated from life, and hence the essential from the temporal; we might almost say that the entire inner action of the novel is nothing but a struggle against the power of time(p.122).

As one can clearly understand from this piece written by Lukacs, that epic and novel form of writing are most vulnerable to the constraints placed before them by the peculiarities of time. Yet as the commentator says the novel through its inner form struggles to overcome this challenge offered by the mighty presence of time. We have an excerpt from the novel *Death in Spring* by Spanish author Merce Rodoreda in which the narrator states about the reality of time as experienced by his stepmother who accompanies him as he matures from childhood to a grown up boy :

She said she would be Time. She stood very still, casting the edge of her shadow between two hours. Slowly, the shadow moved. Later, as the young men were leaving the village for the stables and the eldest for the slaughterhouse, her shadow rested on an hour before inching away. Once more, it came to a halt between two hours. I asked her if she knew what time was, and she said, Time is me and you.(p.45).

In this excerpt, the characters of the novel are speaking about the concept of time as they have understood it during their own lives. One can perceive a discernible felt life here in such an expression which is more attuned to the emotive aspect. However a much more critical view point is presented by well Known theorist Michael Foucault in his non-fiction book *The order of Things*. He discusses at length the direct factual contact of time with the finite presence of human being. Here is an excerpt :

Time - the me that he himself is - cuts him off not only from the dawn from which he sprang but also from that other dawn promised him as still to come. It is clear how this fundamental time this time on the basis of which time can be given to experience- is different from that which was active in the philosophy of representation: then, time dispersed representation, since it imposed the form of a linear sequence upon it; but representation was able to reconstitute itself for itself in imagination, and thus to duplicate itself perfectly and to subjugate time; the image made it possible to re-apprehend time in its entirety, to recover what had been conceded to succession, and to construct a knowledge as true as that of an eternal understanding. In the modern experience, on the contrary, the retreat of the origin is more fundamental than all experience, since it is in it that experience shines and manifests its positivity; it is because man is not contemporaneous with his being that things are presented to him with a time that is proper to them. And here we meet once again the initial theme of finitude. But this

finitude, which was expressed first of all by the weight of things upon man by the fact that he was dominated by life, history, and language now appears at a more fundamental level: it is the insurmountable relation of man's being with time.(p.335).

This idea of temporal validity and its ramification is further discussed in another critical work of Italian author Julius Evola in his book *The Revolt against the Modern world*. In a section of this work under the heading Space, Time and Earth the changing form of perception of time is presented with some interesting observations:

The traditional experience of time was of a very different kind; time was not regarded quantitatively but rather qualitatively; not as a series, but as rhythm. It did not flow uniformly and indefinitely, but was broken down into cycles and periods in which every moment had its own meaning and specific value in relation to all others, as well as a lively individuality and functionality. Each of these cycles or periods represented a complete development forming closed and perfect units that were identical to each other, although they reoccurred they did not change nor did they multiply, but rather followed each other, according to Hubert-Mauss's fitting expression, as a "series of eternities." Since this wholeness was not quantitative but organic, the chronological duration of the saeculum was ephemeral. Quantitatively different periods of time were regarded as equal, provided that each of them contained and reproduced all the typical phases of a cycle. And so, certain numbers such as seven, nine, twelve, and one thousand were traditionally employed not to express quantities, but rather typical structures of rhythm; thus they had different durations though they remained symbolically equivalent.(p.144).

### The specific temporal narrative of Proust

The relevance of time as a qualitative rather than quantitative entity is quite magnificently shown by renowned French author from last Century Marcel Proust in his novel called *In Search of Lost Time* or *Remembrance of Things Past* This magnum opus is divided in Six parts. The third person narrator of Proust's novel is the author himself mysteriously named as M, who in a small French town remembers his past with a very emotive gesture full of empathy. He intensely observes the phenomenon of time and its influence upon our lives He meditates upon his past friendships, associations, interactions with high flung Parisian society in the vicinity of early decades of last century. He recollects about his family friend called Charles Swan who has a split self, metaphorically depicted by the author as two ways of life; The swan's way and The Guermerites way.The author delineates the disintegrating impact of time in his friends life. Here is an Excerpt from his novel *The Way by Swan*:

I contrived at every turn to make my parents say the name Swans; of course I repeated it to myself in my own mind incessantly, but I also needed to hear the delicious sound of it and to have someone else play me this music the silent reading of which was not enough. The name Swann, which I had known for such a long time, was for me also, now, as can happen with the most everyday words for certain aphasics, a new name. It was always present in my mind and yet my mind could not grow accustomed to it. I took it apart, I

spelled it, its orthography was a surprise to me. And at the same time that it had ceased to be familiar, it had ceased to appear innocent (p.416).

If Time holds an upper hand in peoples life, we have to accept it willingly or unwillingly. Human destiny is interwoven under the Captivating presence of time. We are bound to lose our near and dear ones sooner or later. The destructive power of time engulfs us from all the sides. The only rescue possible for us from this menace is our ability to recollect and fix the vital images of our lives in the stable form of memory. This is the only solution that Proust offers in his novels. We can witness this observation from this excerpt from his novel part titled *The Captive. The Fugitive*:

One looks round, the carriage continues on its way, and one does not go back. I did not simply contemplate this foliage with the eyes of memory; it interested me, touched me, like those purely descriptive pages into which an artist, to make them more complete, introduces a fiction, a whole romance; and this work of nature thus assumed the sole charm melancholy which was capable of reaching my heart. The reason for this charm seemed to me to be that I still loved Albertine as much as ever, whereas the true reason was on the contrary that oblivion was continuing to make such head- way in me that the memory of Albertine was no longer painful to me, that is to say had changed; but however clearly we may discern our impressions, as I then thought that I could discern the reason for my melancholy, we are unable to trace them back to their more distant meaning.(p.461)

According to Marcel Proust, what memory does in a man's life is a kind of perceptive transformation. One no longer looks at his past life as a dead end or the experience which is mummified, rather the dint of memory illuminates and brings into coherence all our past interactions with the world. The surge of memory beautifies and turns everything around us that was once forgotten under the influence of time, into a concrete and significant shape. We can see this transformative power of memory in Proust's novel called *Time Regained* :

Before the hour at which the afternoon tea-parties came to an end, at the close of the day, in the still light sky one saw, far off, little brown dots which one might have taken, in the blue evening, for midges or birds. In the same way, when one sees a mountain at a great distance one can imagine it to be a cloud. But because one knows that this "cloud" is huge, solid and resistant one's emotions are stirred. And I too was moved by the thought that the brown dot in the summer sky was neither midge nor bird but an aeroplane with a crew of men keeping guard over Paris. (The memory of the aeroplanes which I had seen with Albertine on our last drive, near Ver- sailles, played no part in this emotion, for the memory of that drive had become indifferent to me.( p.53-54).

Commenting upon the methodology of Proust's narrative technique, noted critic Eric Auerbach has made very interesting observation in his book *Time, History and Literature*. He calls Proust's narrator as a biographer of the soul. According to him the author while dealing with the subject of Time and memory is in fact making a passage way back and forth within his own self. He writes:

A fantastical object, almost like a vine, it shoots up, entirely on its own; the hand of its author remains nearly imperceptible. If other great poets, disdainful of description and analysis, have, with just a few words, made a character captured in his moment of tragedy unforgettable for the ages, this perhaps more sublime approach certainly does not befit Proust's novel. Next to it, almost all the novels that we know seem to be no more than novellas. Remembrance of Things Past is a chronicle from memory. In it, the secret and often disregarded links between events take the place of the empirical sequentiality of time. Looking back and also deeply into himself, Proust's biographer of the soul perceives these links to be the real ones. The events that lie in the past no longer have any power over him, and he never acts as if things that happened long ago have yet to happen, or that decisions made long ago still remain to be made. It is for this reason that there is no narrative tension, no peripeteia, no raging and looming of events that then find resolution and peace. This chronicle of the inner life flows along with a kind of epic uniformity, for it is only memory and self-examination. The novel is the authentic epic of the soul: truth itself ensnares the reader in a long, sweet dream in which he suffers a great deal, to be sure, but in which he also enjoys a release and a sense of calm.(p.162).

This critical comment of Eric Auerbach beautifully captures and depicts the theme of Marcel Proust's major work. He signifies the role of time in Proust's novels with utmost sincerity and critical acumen.

## Conclusion

One can easily understand that although the notion of time may be frightening for us in reality, there is a counter narrative of memory inherent in our nature that can redeem us from any crisis in our lives. The transience of time is a continuous threat which looms large in our thought process. We are terribly affected by this persisting phenomenon upon which we have no control or any idea that may help us in the hard fought battle against time and its destructive power. However one can always be rest assured that nature has provided us with a marvelous gift, which is memory. All our desperate attempts to stand before the might of time are useless until we tend to realize that this crucial mechanism of involuntary and voluntary memory is a wonderful apparatus, with the help of which we can surmount every possible challenge that is offered to us by the gigantic presence of time.

Many European authors have understood this phenomenon and depicted its various dimensions in their works. The tallest among them was Marcel Proust with his uncanny sense of temporal significance and its counter narrative which is-memory.

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