

POSTMODERNISM AND *LE PETIT TORTILLARD* OF MARCEL PROUST

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Among the many criteria which have been proposed for distinguishing the postmodern from the modern, three in particular seem to have achieved a certain currency: Jean-François Lyotard has characterized the postmodern condition as one which is radically sceptical of legitimizing or justifying meta-discourse, in which the old governing paradigms no longer obtain. Ihab Hassan has spoken of the “technologism” of postmodernity, its use of technological innovations as a source of structures and metaphors. Perhaps most interestingly of all, Brian McHale has suggested that “postmodernist fiction differs from modernist just as a poetics dominated by ontological issues differs from one dominated by epistemological issues.”¹ Although McHale acknowledges Proust as a “great precursor” of postmodernism in a number of important respects, the general tendency among theorists of postmodernity has been to rank Proust among the classic modernists. Lyotard himself has contrasted Proust’s modernism with the postmodernism of Joyce.² But as the case of Joyce reminds us—since he is hailed both as the Great Modernist of *Ulysses* and as the Great Postmodernist of *Finnegan’s Wake*—it is not necessary, or even possible, to define all of an author’s work as necessarily one or the other. Nor is it necessary (or possible) to take a particular work in its entirety as a defining example: McHale has argued, for example, that Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!* moves from modernism to postmodernism (from epistemology to ontology) when Quentin stops playing detective and begins to “project a world” with the help of his room-mate Shreve. Similarly, certain episodes of *A la recherche du temps perdu* can be shown to offer particularly good examples of postmodern characteristics. Let us examine one such episode, the *petit tortillard* passages near the end of *Sodome et Gomorrhe*, in terms of these three aspects of postmodernism: the lack of a governing paradigm, technologism, and the shift from epistemological to ontological concerns.

A number of critics have commented on the strangeness of this episode in the context of the larger framework of the *A la recherche*: J.P. Houston has noted how "instead of telling the varied episodes of the season in chronological or thematic order, Proust ingeniously attaches each one to a station on the local railway and arranges the whole late summer as an imperfect trip to the Verdurins for dinner (the account of the dinner being characteristically omitted) and the return afterwards." Houston tries to explain this technique by suggesting that "the mechanical, regular cyclic movement of the train epitomizes the futile agitation of society."³ But as I hope to demonstrate, the movement of the train, at least as represented in the novel, is anything but mechanical, regular, or cyclic; and its lack of apparent order has far-reaching implications precisely *because* it is taken by the narrator as an image of the state of society at large.

G rard Genette has described this episode as one of only a few genuinely "achronic" structures in the novel, in which the events are narrated in a sequence that has nothing to do with chronological order, but is based solely on associations and memories generated by the names of the various station-stops on the little railway: time, as an organizing paradigm, is replaced here by the spatial markers of geography: the names listed on the time-table.⁴ Both Houston and Genette have recognized that this episode repeats and modifies a similar "geographic" ordering which governs the final pages of *Combray* and involves the opposition between Swann's way and the Guermantes' way. But what they have not noticed is that in a sense, the episode of the *petit tortillard* also anticipates the merging of the two ways in the final volume of the *A la recherche*, since, whether the narrator is riding the little train to dine with the Verdurins at La Raspeli re or to visit the Cambremers at F terne, the Verdurin way and the Cambremer way are by train necessarily the same.

Sodome et Gomorrhe is the centrepiece of the *A la recherche*, the arch of the cathedral with which Proust compared his work, and it bridges the gap between the two major movements of paradigms which organize the rest of the narrative: the narrator's ambitious conquest of the Faubourg Saint-Germain by rising up through the hierarchy of salons to the summit represented by the Prince de Guermantes, and his decline into and through an obsessively private involvement with Albertine. The *petit tortillard* episode fits into

neither scheme. The narrator at this point has not yet decided to "imprison" Albertine; indeed, the final words of the episode echo those of Swann at the end of *Un amour de Swann*: «Le mariage avec Albertine m'apparaissait comme une folie» (II, 1112/1149).⁵ At the same time, the social hierarchy has been thrown into chaos by the narrator's discovery of the secret power of sexual inversion: among the anecdotes generated by the names of the station-stops is the story of encounters between Morel and the Prince de Guermantes at a splendid new bordello erected at Maineville (*media villa*) the central point on the line. Another paradigm of sorts can be found in the difference between social customs in Paris, where doors are rigorously closed to the uninvited, and the freer customs of the coast, where it is possible for a young *bourgeois* like the narrator to make the acquaintance of a Saint-Loup solely on the strength of an old school friendship of his grandmother. Vacation relationships are always "looser" and less tightly regulated than those in Paris, and this "looseness" reaches its peak in the episode of the *petit tortillard*, since, unlike the narrator's first visit to Balbec, which is described in terms of specific locations like the narrator's room in the Grand Hôtel, this second visit seems to take place largely in transit, in motion, in endless and incomplete journeys which offer no fixed point of orientation.

This disorientation is all the more unsettling because of the lack of stability in the names and sequences of the station-stops themselves. To begin with, the little train—which is formally known as the «Transatlantique» although there is nothing transatlantic about it, and we are told repeatedly that it is of purely "local" interest—goes by as many as *nine* different names or nicknames or acronyms, of which *le tortillard* is merely the most frequent. The names of the stations undergo similar transformations: Hermenonville (I, 661/711) becomes Hermonville (II, *passim*), gaining a syllable, while Arambouville (I, 661) adds an initial *h aspiré* and is spelled sometimes with an *a* and sometimes with an *e*. Other names resemble each other to the point of confusion: there are a Doville and a Douville, an Egreville and an Egleville, Grattevast and Grallevast, Saint-Mars and Saint-Martin-les-Vieux and les-Vêtus respectively. We might wish to recall in this connection Roland Barthes' suggestion that the *A la recherche* grew out of Proust's discovery of a network of infinitely suggestive proper names: Combray, Guermantes, Balbec.⁶ The stations of the *petit tortillard* constitute in miniature a kind of

secondary onomastic reservoir, a lumber-room of names and variations (and, thanks to Brichot, etymologies as well) which generate only the most local and disconnected associations. The local nature of these suggestions is perhaps best epitomized by the episode connected with Saint-Pierre-des-Iffs, where a "splendid young girl" boards the train. «Je ne pouvais détacher mes yeux de sa chair de magnolia, de ses yeux noirs, de la construction admirable et haute de ses formes.» After lighting a cigarette, and occupying half a page of the narration, she simply gets off at the third station, to be lost forever: «Je n'ai jamais retrouvé ni identifié la belle jeune fille à la cigarette» (II, 883/912).

One might wish to argue that an itinerary of train-stations could constitute a workable form of order for this section of the *A la recherche*, albeit spatial rather than temporal, or temporal only in the crossing of its spaces; but this section of *Sodome et Gomorrhe* is composed not of a complete train journey, but of fragments from a number of separate journeys (in the "iterative" mode favoured by Proust), none of which is complete in itself. Moreover, the sequences of stations described in these various fragmentary journeys cannot be used to draw a consistent map of the line, or to reproduce the schedule, since the various lists of station-names and allusions occur in contradictory sequences, out of order and with many names missing; there is no master-list, and the narrator feels no compulsion to list the names of the stations in the order in which a traveller would pass through them. At best we know that Balbec is at one end, La Raspelière and Féterne at the other, and Maineville with its great *maison de passe* always roughly somewhere in the middle. Neither in time, nor in space, nor in terms of the other grand movements within the *A la recherche* is it possible to identify a paradigm governing the narrative structure of this episode, which remains unique, isolated, and arbitrary in its references.

Of course it is by no means the only section dealing with travel by train; trains are invoked as early as the opening paragraph of the novel, where the waking sleeper, trying to locate himself in time and space, uses the whistle of a passing train not only to measure the countryside, but even to enter into the memories and expectations of an imaginary and lonely voyager. Trains, in the world of Proust, are not so much settings as conditions: metaphorically, the narrator is of course himself «le malade qui a été obligé de partir en

voyage» (I, 4/5). This emphasis on pathology, with its heavy burden of sorrow and fatigue, is particularly strong in *Sodome et Gomorrhe*: in the descriptive heading of Part II, Chapter III, the *petit tortillard* episode, under its formal title of *Les stations du «Transatlantique»*, is included as one of a series of four episodes beginning with the *Tristesses de M. de Charlus* and ending with an episode entitled *Fatigué d'Albertine, je veux rompre avec elle* (II, 979/viii). In this context, train-travel appears almost as a kind of neurosis, a permanent transference and displacement of the guilt-ridden subject in quest, literally, of an alibi. As against the stable, monumental, leisurely presentation of the rising sequence of salons through which the narrator has passed in the course of the previous volumes, where each salon occasions a close description often running to several hundred pages in length, here the salons themselves are displaced by the requirements of arrival and departure, by voyages out and back which ultimately come to constitute in themselves a new kind of salon, without a host or a hostess (without the embodiment of a social paradigm), ruled only by the accidents of travel and the suggestive names of the stations. And like the earlier salons, this one also grows larger and less exclusive, so that by the end of the episode, the narrator complains that the countryside of Balbec has become so overpopulated with acquaintances that the activities of travelling and visiting, in this "too social" valley, become indistinguishable. In the end, the names of the stations listed on the page of the time-table devoted to «Balbec-Douville par Doncières» can be read "with the same happy tranquility as an address-book" (II, 1112/1148).

Of course this tranquility cannot last long in the world of Proust, and immediately afterwards, on the last of the train-rides to be described, the narrator discovers the disturbing friendship between Albertine and Vinteuil's daughter. But it may be clear by now that in this novel the train is far more than just a setting or a means of transporting characters: the broken sequences of stations provide a narrative structure for a fallen social order, an image of disjunction and futile motion that bears comparison, as a postmodern technique, with Pynchon's use of rocket trajectories in *Gravity's Rainbow*. Perhaps it is not accidental that this section of the novel also contains many references to other means of travel, from horseback to automobiles and airplanes, with sketches of the unimaginable syntheses of experience made possible by these new technologies. The pilot whose

airplane startles the narrator's horse is described in quasi-mythological terms, and the narrator celebrates his limitless vision: «Je sentais ouvertes devant lui — devant moi, si l'habitude ne m'avait pas fait prisonnier — toutes les routes de l'espace, de la vie» (II, 1029/1062).

The breakdown of the old social order and the arrival of new technologies pose problems not only of knowledge but also of being. The narrator posits the world of his novel not as a thing to be understood, but as a process to be undergone; and the questions posed by McHale as characteristically ontological and postmodern — "Which world is this? What is to be done in it? Which of my selves is to do it?" — are precisely the questions which motivate the narrator's quest for a self and a vocation. The ontological status of the narrative itself, which is always and simultaneously a record of events in the past, a memory of those events, and an inscription of those memories, repeats and confirms the ontological concerns of the narrator's discourse.

It is not difficult to show that Proust is postmodern, that he trafficks in broken or untenable paradigms, develops metaphors and structures from technological materials, and analyses not only the nature of our knowledge of the world but also of our being in it. But beyond these particular characteristics, I submit that his postmodernity could be confirmed regardless of the specific ways in which one chooses to define postmodernism, because no matter how one defines it, postmodernism is not something to be found in the text; it exists rather in us, the readers. It is not an essence or a set of textual features so much as a style or attitude of reading. Postmodernism is *our* condition, and if we read texts with postmodern questions inevitably in our minds (concerning, for example, the lack of ethical or moral or aesthetic standards or paradigms, the expanding role of technologies, or the crisis of our own sense of being), then it is not surprising that by reading postmodern questions into the text — any text — we can then read postmodern responses back out of it. Postmodern features can be found in the works of Proust and Henry James, in Cervantes and Rabelais, in Homer and the Bible, because they are features of our needs as readers. And this process loses none of its value for being circular; some texts will still give us better answers than others, and if our texts were not concerned with the issues which trouble us most, we would have no need to read them at all. But I think much of the

circularity and confusion in current theories of postmodernism could be avoided if, instead of seeking to erect a canon of incontrovertibly postmodernist texts "out there", we were to recognize that postmodernism is simply one of the names we give to the way we read.



NOTES

¹Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* (New York and London: Methuen, 1987), p. xii.

²Jean-François Lyotard, *Le Postmoderne expliqué aux enfants: Correspondance 1982-1985* (Paris: Editions Galilée, 1986), pp. 31ff.

³J.P. Houston, "Temporal Patterns in *A la recherche du temps perdu*," *French Studies*, 16:1 (January 1962), p. 42.

⁴Gérard Genette, *Figures III* (Paris: Seuil, 1972, pp. 119ff.; tr. by Jane E. Lewin as *Narrative Discourse* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980), p. 84.

⁵Volume and page references to *A la recherche du temps perdu* indicate first the 1954 *Pléiade* edition, followed by corresponding pages in the 1981 revised English translation.

⁶Roland Barthes, «Proust et les noms,» in *Le Degré zéro de l'écriture suivi de Nouveaux essais critiques* (Paris: Seuil "Points", 1972), p. 125.

