

Proust, Against Narrative

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Perhaps no other literary work has shaped our idea about the character of narrative more than Marcel Proust's «À la recherche du temps perdu». Since Gérard Genette's «Narrative Discourse», the field of narratology, at least, develops its conceptual apparatus regularly along the study of the «Recherche». With a particular eye on one of its most famous parts, the episode «Un amour de Swann», this presentation discusses at first how the narrative order strives – as can already be shown by the sheer length of the novel – towards a problematic type of infinity, an infinity that almost made it impossible for Proust himself to finish the project. Here, ever new events, ever new «names» and «places», but also (such as in the symptomatic case of jealous love) ever new «pains and torments» are being literally produced by narrative itself. Much of this, thereby, has to do with what, at least according to a classic concept of narrative, is being defined as metonymic order (R. Jakobson, J. Lacan, P. Brooks) – an order tending towards a version of, speaking with Hegel, «bad infinity». Building on the one hand on Proust's treatment of narrative as what can also be seen as an engine of truthlessness (this becomes particularly apparent in the link between narrative and the «infinity of successive loves, of different jealousies»), this presentation follows on the other hand how the «Recherche» also meditates about breaking with the »bad« scheme of endless metonymic extension. In this sense, Proust's novel can, in fact, also be understood as a contribution to a critique of a very specific type of ideology (remember L. Althusser: «l'idéologie est éternelle.»). Following thereby how Proust works – when, in «Le Temps retrouvé», Marcel stumbles over «two uneven paving-stones» in what is called «a presentment that may save us» – towards an aesthetic program of metaphor, it can be shown how this program stands contrary to the threat of endless metonymic extension. Here, it becomes legible how – certainly surprising in our times where we are used to believe that everyone and everything is supposed to have a narrative – the «Recherche» can (and perhaps must) ironically be read as this: a work against narrative.