« Cette ignorance si envahissante »: Oblivion, Posterity, Art

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Abstract

In *Le Temps retrouvé* the narrator writes dramatically of an « ignorance si envahissante » which he sees as characterizing a modern world undergoing radical change. The often ludic incongruities which this throws up feed into the social comedy of the novel. Yet Proust also generates a more sober reflection on the precariousness of knowledge-forms. The decline of conservative societies may accelerate knowledge-loss but the same societies also place obstacles in the way of artistic innovation. The reception given to art by successive generations exercises Proust’s narrator and he speculates on the conditions that allow for complex, initially rejected, work to become understood and appreciated. The article concludes by considering the dimension of scale in Proust’s reflection on ignorance and knowing.

In October 1921, Proust received a letter from a certain André Lang who was hoping to interview the novelist. Although not giving an interview, Proust provided written answers to questions that Lang put to him on two subjects: firstly, the existence of literary movements or schools; and secondly, the distinction between the « roman d’analyse » and « le roman d’aventures » (*Corr.* xx, 496–497). In his letter to Lang, Proust expressed misgivings about the « roman d’analyse » label. In his view, it risked conveying the sense of an unhealthily individualistic focus when what he was seeking to draw out were general laws. In this connection, he expressed a preference for the term « roman d’introspection ». At the same time, Proust makes the point that as medical science shows, the « infinitely small » can be deeply significant. He goes on to comment that the « roman d’aventures » is as valuable as the « roman introspectif », saying that « il est bien certain qu’il y a dans la vie, dans la vie extérieure, de grandes lois aussi » and that the « roman d’aventures » may be able to deliver these. But whether it be the novel of introspection or the adventure novel, « tout ce qui peut aider à découvrir des lois, à projeter de la lumière sur l’inconnu, à faire connaître plus profondément la vie est également valable » (*Corr.* ibid.).
A Little Knowledge

« [P]rojeter de la lumière sur l’inconnu »: Proust’s purposeful formulation appears categorical. Throwing light on what is unknown suggests a confidence at the level of cognition and there are numerous examples at the diegetic level in the novel where the bringing into the light of knowledge is practised and celebrated in relation to self and others. Charlus’s psychosexual behaviour comes to be understood; and aristocratic anti-semitism, Bloch’s snobbery, the sensation caused by the madeleine cake and the workings of delayed mourning, to take other random examples, all have light thrown on them. Yet the novelist’s use of the partitive in « de la lumière », set against the use of the definite article in « l’inconnu », shows Proust setting limits in the field of the human capacity to know. He was not alone among his contemporaries in this regard. Bertrand Russell, writing in The Analysis of Mind in 1921, cautioned that “all thinking is vague to some extent, and complete accuracy is a theoretical ideal not practically attainable” (Russell 1921, 180). The citation from the Recherche in my title dramatizes the sense of knowledge-loss as invasive and suggests a culture grounded in error and oblivion. Proust’s melodramatic formulation occurs in Le Temps retrouvé where a shocked narrator concludes that in modern culture, collective knowledge of certain historical developments is alarmingly ephemeral. The final volume of the novel highlights the transient nature of specific aggressions and prejudices (thus former Dreyfusards have become staunch nationalists and lead the way in Germanophobia in the new political and social conjuncture thrown up by the First World War). Knowledge is thus closely tied to memory, or as Russell puts it, “memory, in some form, is presupposed in almost all knowledge” (Russell 1921, 157).

At the level of high society which enjoys so much exposure in the Recherche, the Paris of the war is ideal terrain for Proust’s narrator to illustrate the workings of « cette ignorance si envahissante ». Here evoked in alarmist terms, the phenomenon is also exploited for its comic potential. Thus an American socialite, one of the most elegant women of her day who has married the Comte de Farcy, gets so many of the genealogical connections wrong. She believes, for example, that Gilberte is the daughter of M. de Forcheville and from this error, others flow: « Les dîners, les fêtes mondaines, étaient pour l’Américaine une sorte d’École Berlitz. Elle entendait les noms et les répétait sans avoir connu préalablement leur valeur, leur portée exacte » (R2 iv, 539).1 The new Comtesse de Farcy may be spectacularly ill-informed but the narrator is quick to relativize

1 The first Berlitz language school opened in Providence, Rhode Island in 1878.