

Cherchez... le bruit! Marcel Proust in Service of Modern Communication

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RESUMEN

Asumo que el abismo entre sí mismo interno y externo se muestra agudo en las anotaciones que Proust hace acerca de las existencias doméstica y pública en la modernidad, presentando el “ruido” como el mayor de los “beneficios” intrusivos. Por tanto, hay dos grandes preguntas que informan este ensayo: primero, ¿cuál es la relación entre la modernización y la percepción estética en escritura? Segundo, ¿cómo puede conceptualizarse tal relación comunicativa?

PALABRAS CLAVE: *Marcel Proust, ruido, sonido, comunicación y modernidad, percepción estética en la literatura.*

ABSTRACT

My assumption is that the chasm between inner and outer self is rendered acute in Proust's notations about domestic and public existence in the modern age, featuring noise as the main intrusive "benefit." Therefore, two main questions inform this essay: first, what is the relationship between modernization and writerly aesthetic perception? Second, how can this communicative relationship be conceptualized?

KEYWORDS: *Marcel Proust, noise, sound, communication and Modernity, aesthetic perception in Literature.*

Precisely at 1 am on the first day of 1909, Marcel Proust's new year's resolutions were about noise: "Je vous remercie de tout mon coeur de votre belle et bonne lettre et viens vous demander au contraire de laisser faire à partir de maintenant tout le bruit que vous pourrez" (Proust, p. 22). The quotation above is from *Lettres à sa voisine* (2013), which comprises the writer's recently discovered correspondence with Madame Williams, his upstairs neighbor on the third floor of 102 Boulevard Haussmann. She is the main culprit for Proust's anguish; his direct complaints to her become the pretext for his inexhaustible observations about Parisian life and its lack of auditory quality. The tiny volume abounds in details about acoustic phobia, a condition turning noise into an obnoxious character in its own right. In an otherwise unctuous epistolary manner, among bookish references to his own writing, Virgil, Victor Hugo, Gerard de Nerval, John Ruskin, Paul Verlaine, and a wide cohort of musicians, we read repeated complaints about various daily and nocturnal activities in Proust's upscale neighborhood. He self-ironically claims that permanent, continuous noise may be bearable while the sounds produced by construction workers, electricians and contractors, with their yellings, demolitions, repairs and ruckus, is profoundly disturbing. Since they are part of his routine noises, he claims, once they are gone, he would feel silence as abnormal and would regret them as some sort of lullaby (Proust, p. 39).

This serves as a prelude to the following argument about the manner in which the Proustian self in his magnum opus, *À la Recherche du temps perdu*, internalizes and maps areas of external world via sound. My assumption is that the chasm between inner and outer self is rendered acute in Proust's notations about domestic and public existence in the modern age, featuring noise as the main intrusive "benefit." Therefore, two main questions inform this essay: first, what is the relationship between modernization and writerly aesthetic perception? Second, how can this communicative relationship be conceptualized? Sounds have the role to circumscribe the Proustian universe to the noisy interfering attributes of an urban realm that could no longer be avoided by modernist fiction writers. As Stanley Boyd Link puts it, modernist aesthetic implied that sound and noise would now acquire an important function within the context of a work's otherwise isolated and self-constructed referential world (Boyd Link, 2001, p. 41). Nevertheless, unlike music, whose aesthetic value did not need any further validation, "...noise was to cast its lot with other modern objects, such as unresolved minor ninths, serialized dynamics, non-retrogradeable rhythms, etc. Paradoxically, noises were "liberated" only to serve a particular –perhaps even unique or disposable– purpose. (Boyd Link, p. 42)

The modernist aesthetics of perception that Marcel Proust illustrates is tightly connected to the modern machine culture, that is, to a gradual taking into account of technological matrices of perception. In *Discourse Networks* (1990), Friedrich Kittler articulates the relationship of technology to the mod-

ernist aesthetics via what he calls “Aufschreibesystem.” The adventures of the ear in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries feature exposure to, among other things, telephony, telegraphy, phonography, cinematography, and the technologies of speed, such as cars and trains. While the two main realms in *À la Recherche du temps perdu*, represented by the upper class (the Guermantes) and the bourgeois (the Verdurins), are distinct as to social status, milieu and even geographical placement, the new age of modernity engulfing both in the novel privileges none. In this context, external factors, such as aleatory sounds, are part of a newly created, free-for-all, deregulated public sphere, which belongs neither to aristocracy, nor to “les nouveaux riches”.

Sounds produced by means of communication and transportation mark modern life and they have the surreptitious intradiegetic function of inserting elements of popular culture in Proust’s saga. Unlike classical music to which characters listen all the time, such as Vinteuil’s famous violin sonata, the buzz of the phone, sound of the car engine or disconcerting roar of the tramway have no aura and no originality, to use Walter Benjamin’s terms. In fact, this reference is not random, since in his *Arcades Project* Benjamin views as decisive Proust’s comments about the “bowels of the city” regarding the loss of aura. This is specifically exemplified by the “marvelous” and “tragic” railway stations and the “solemn and tremendous act” of traveling by train in *À l’Ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs* (Benjamin, 1999, p. 560-561).

In these terms, noise could be regarded as the auditive suggestion of signification beneath something we generally take as a non-signifying agency. When we think about sound we hear by chance, we can say that noise ascribes style to distance –“a distance that can be meaningfully confused or exchanged with location, memory, presence, absence, temporality, and experience” (Boyd Link, p. 47). Metaphorically speaking, noise is what Michel Serres calls a parasite. This notion, in his words, an “intellectual operator,” has to do with any disturbances produced in a system. It coagulates itself at the crossroads among biology, anthropology, and communication theory (Serres, 1980, p. 18). Like parasites, random sounds always interrupt, distract, and are situated between order and disorder, as links in the chains of relations through which usable energy is spent. As such, noises are operators of irreversible time, the same lost time Proust laments, the time of burning resources, dissipation, expenditure, and death.

According to Jonathan Crary, from the mid-1800s on, our perception, by default historically constructed, is fundamentally characterized by experiences of fragmentation and dispersion that account for a progressive change in the norms and practices of our attention (Crary, 1999, p. 1). Proust wrote in an age that revealed a crisis of sensory approach, when categories of perceiving were on the verge of historical reconfiguration due to all devices that stored, transmitted and reproduced sense data or the new technologies of speed that artic-

ulated new epistemic realms. In the modernist period, the human sensorium came to be invoked as a touchstone for aesthetic gratification and experiential authenticity. As Sara Danius puts it, “An unsurpassed chronicle of the advent of modern technology, *Remembrance of Things Past* orchestrates a whole world of innovations that parade through the novel from beginning to end, from the telephone to the automobile.” (2002, p. 11)

At the very beginning of the novel, the first sense impression is an auditory one. Proust writes according to the notion that “...each individual is fractured both synchronically, into a set of faculties or drives, and diachronically, into a series of distinct organizations and orientations of those faculties or drives, varying according to the phase of life (or even the time of day”). (Landy, 2001, p. 91)

The repetitive whistle of trains in the night meddles with young Marcel’s bedtime routine and announces a brave new world of places and deeds. At the same time, the artificial noise of the “iron horse,” seen at that time by Luddites as merely a technological cut in the heart of nature, is here compared to the singing of a bird and thus integrated in the modernist landscape of the novel without any effort: “... j’entendais le sifflement des trains qui, plus ou moins éloigné, comme le chant d’un oiseau dans une forêt, relevant les distances, me décrivait l’étendue de la campagne déserte où le voyageur se hâte vers la station prochaine” (*Du Côté de chez Swann*, p.3)

The main character and his environment are in a relationship of contaminated interdependence; in other words, Marcel cannot abstract himself from the world that overwhelms his perceptions. For instance, the extraneous noise of the street functions as a point of contact, as a fine-tuned membrane that mediates between the writing self and the outer world. We do not find here the ethnographic descriptions of the famous “cris de Paris” from Balzac’s works, attending the beginnings of urban renewal. During a time of even more substantial alterations to the sonic environment, Proust establishes another type of intimate connection with the modern identity of the city. The peddlers and their individuated ritualistic vocalizing remind the narrator in *À la Recherche du temps perdu* of the old ecclesiastic France and its centuries-old rhythm. Unlike in Balzac though, the arbitrary and disorderly sequence of sounds in the street is not perceived here as discordant and annoyingly excessive, on the contrary: “Ce bruit du rideau de fer qu’on lève peut-être mon seul plaisir dans un quartier différent. Dans celui-ci cent autres faisaient ma joie, desquels je n’aurais pas voulu perdre un seul en restant trop tard endormi”. (*La Prisonnière*, p. 116)

As a matter of fact, the only noise that ever scares Marcel is the banging of the window of the room where Albertine sleeps, as it belongs to a violation of conventions of their common life (*La Prisonnière*, p. 402-403).

In all volumes, we are invited to observe, but we are simultaneously denied, an unobstructed perception. Noises both separate and connect the innerness

of Marcel's subjectivity to the most far-away otherness, to the life out there, creating a foundation for the give-and-take connection between him and what he calls "la vie extérieure":

Les premiers bruits de la rue me l'avaient appris, selon qu'ils me parvenaient amortis et devise par l'humidité ou vibrants come des flèches dans l'aire résonnante et vide d'un matin spécieux, glacial et pur; des le roulement du premier tramway, j'avais entendu s'il était morfondu dans la pluie ou en partance pour l'azur (*La Prisonnière*, p. 9)

Noise is inherently faithful to the circumstances of listening to all events. Perhaps most significant in this respect is that noise engenders listening strategies and acoustic associations. The intermittent noises and their jumble are connected in the narrator's mind to his fine perception of the change of seasons, which makes them acquire an inherent synaesthetic quality. The narrator derives gratification from the awareness that his room protects him like a cocoon from the intrusive external world. The underlying sense of other people's presence out there and the illusion of human performance are incontrovertibly broken by the main character's musings: "Et peut-être ces bruits avaient-ils été devancés eux-mêmes par quelque émanation plus rapide et plus pénétrante qui, glissée au travers de mon sommeil, y répandait une tristesse annonciatrice de la neige..." (*La Prisonnière*, p. 10).

Paradoxically, noise focuses Proust's attention away from itself and onto the non-noisy part, so to say, deep into his mind where he reconstructs or imagines things. Lapses in continuity from the noise of tramway passing to car horns blaring can be instantly and instinctively mended. Without any mention to either variety or intensity, the noise of the street is rendered translucent by its conceptual displacement, away from the underlying permanent object of Marcel's attention, which is always already his own mind in motion.

In *Le Côté de Guermantes*, for example, an almost involuntarily comic moment takes place in Robert de Saint-Loup's apartment in Place de la République. While waiting for his friend to return home, Marcel Proust attempts to focus on his thoughts at all costs while fighting with the audio distraction of Saint-Loup's watch:

Ce tic tac changeait de place à tout moment, car je ne voyais pas la montre; il me semblait venir de derrière moi, de devant, d'à droite, d'à gauche, parfois s'éteindre comme s'il était très loin. Tout d'un coup je découvris la montre sur la table. Alors j'entendis le tic tac en un lieu fixe d'où il ne bougea plus. Je croyais l'entendre à cet endroit-là; je ne l'y entendais pas, je l'y voyais, les sons n'ont pas de lieu. (*Le Côté de Guermantes*, p. 234)

We witness here the dichotomy between public and private time, as well as the dissonance between the temporality of the watch versus that of an

individual. The moment discloses a qualitative discontinuity irrevocably fragment-ing the apparently uniform fabric of perceptual experience. The shift back and forth between consciousness and this annoying sensory stimulation shows how the character's attention, as a form of "performative behavior" (Crary, 1999, p. 27), becomes displaceable and has a measurable status. Marcel wants an impossible attentive concentration to his own subjectivity, and a focused self-absorption that never loses the connection with its train of thoughts.

Proust's ensuing notations about a world depleted of noise show his attempt to see the other side of the coin. Like in his letters to Madame Williams, he imagines the total suppression of noises ("des suppressions de bruits qui ne sont pas momentanées"), this time for the deaf who cannot perceive the crackling of wood in the fireplace or the rambling of the tramways on the street at regular intervals. The deprivation of noise, what the author calls here the "chastity of silence," turns all objects into beings without a cause:

Comme le bruit était pour lui, avant sa surdité, la forme perceptible que revêtait la cause d'un mouvement, les objets remués sans bruit semblent l'être sans cause; dépouillés de toute qualité sonore, ils montrent une activité spontanée, ils semblent vivre; ils remuent, s'immobilisent, prennent feu d'eux-mêmes. (*Le Côté de Guermantes*, p. 237)

Some further observations about the purity of sound, and its advantages or disadvantages hereof, are made in the poignant episode of the phone conversation with Marcel's grandmother, which takes place while he is at Doncières. The disembodied, frail and abstract sound of the old woman's voice acquires a quality differently filtered in turns by the audio device and the hyper-sensitivity of the narrator. The return of this voice to his memory will account for the painful return of the repressed, like the ghost of Hamlet's father. The dissociative perception of the audio from the visual that the telephone offers is a deeply unsettling experience for Proust, now lost in the empire of signs without a name: "Et aussitôt que notre appel a retenti, dans la nuit pleine d'apparitions sur laquelle nos oreilles s'ouvrent seules, un bruit léger –un bruit abstrait– celui de la distance supprimée –et la voix de l'être cher s'adresse à nous". (*Le Côté de Guermantes*, p. 413)

Noise can thus trigger the simultaneous experience of both presence and absence. The conversation reveals Marcel's acute awareness of the inexorable passing of time. For the first time, his grandmother's voice is made available for narratorial analysis as vehicle of presence apart from any contingent status. The new form of audibility mediated by the phone, the separation of her voice from the mouth, face, eyes and other elements of her body meant to produce presence, offer Marcel a new insight into her character. Screening out everything he hears, he is able to read her past and future altogether in the uncensored "sweet-

ness and sadness" of her voice, in the grief she has accumulated throughout the years to the present point close to the end of her life. The experience of the encounter with a suspended "phantom voice" activates in Marcel the anxiety of separation and the anticipation of the inevitable breach called death: "Présence réelle que cette voix si proche –dans la séparation effective! Mais anticipation aussi d'une séparation éternelle!" (*Le Côté de Guermantes*, p. 416)

Moreover, this experience stimulates Marcel's further reflections about the production and reception of sounds via telephony in general, in yet another example that shows us how easily Proust captures and accommodates the spirit of modernity in his work. He talks about the sonorous "convulsions" of reception, the impersonal voice of the operator, the strange silences he has to bear before he can actually hear the voice of his grandmother, and makes comments upon neologisms, such as "interurbain." The passage accounts for the manner in which the old, implicit, human perception is forced to adjust to the new, explicit, imperatives of attentiveness.

On the other hand, this scene confirms Gilles Deleuze's view according to which the whole Proustian saga is a "récit d'apprentissage" (Deleuze, 1971, p. 8), a narrative about learning signs in general. In these terms, noises do not appear as markers related to socialite life or love, what Deleuze simply calls "impressions ou qualités sensibles" (Deleuze, p. 16). In this complex fictional world where for Proust every connection seems to be a necessary one, random sounds, such as, for instance, the hissing of the water pipe, do not lead to a narrative deciphering, unlike the madeleine that reminds of Combray, the paving-stone that recounts Venice or the steeples that make Marcel think about young girls. In his theory, Deleuze associates sounds in general with his third circle of signs, those that are out there in need for a reading key. However, I claim that in *À la Recherche du temps perdu* they do not trigger the remembrance of other objects or beings, but the very process of mental self-focalization, the author's and our own fleeting awareness of how involuntary memory functions. Therefore, I agree more with Joshua Landy's take of the water-pipe sound as a fading away hypotactic device for memory's remarkable capacity of regaining sensations by way of signs:

Although the first part of the sentence makes it clear that this sound is what provides the link to today's sensory experience (a similar noise, made by the plumbing in the Guermantes' residence), it recedes, in the second half, into the background. (...) for involuntary memory is only possible on condition that the sensation is eminently forgettable, so that the intellect overlooks it and fails to record a (voluntary accessible) memory. (Landy, 2004, p. 452)

Memory, obviously, lies at the heart of the French writer's project, and his sentence rhythms lie at the heart of memory itself: the evanescent rhymes sounding and dying within his prose mimic the ebb and flow of remembrance

and forgetting, which is the overall theme in Proust. As memory fleetingly inhabits the past tense through the grammatical rhymes of the narrative voice, the following passage about the hissing of the pipe documents the role of noise in constructing and deconstructing memory in the text:

Et au moment où je raisonnais ainsi, le bruit strident d'une conduite d'eau tout à fait pareil à ces longs cris que parfois l'été les navires de plaisance faisaient entendre le soir au large de Balbec, me fit éprouver (...) bien plus qu'une sensation simplement analogue à celle que j'avais à la fin de l'après-midi à Balbec (...) (*Le Côté de Guermantes*, p. 452)

The technological inserts in the novel are part of a modernity Proust is ready to grasp, which “makes the world writable again” (Danius, p. 95). We have a narrator who sketches out for us the marvels of his multidimensional perception capable of apprehending and creatively engaging the immanence of the past in present. In *À la Recherche du temps perdu*, sounds are emancipated dissonances in the service of individual expression and are subsumed to the larger stylistic value of the whole enterprise. Gradually, Marcel’s attitude changes from his awareness and acceptance of the external world of sounds into incorporating it in order to re-enchant his fictional universe anew.

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