

**Miguel de Beistegui**

*Proust as Philosopher: The Art of Metaphor.*

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While clearly an admirer of Proust the novelist, Miguel de Beistegui, in his book *Proust As Philosopher: the Art of Metaphor*, also considers Proust to be a man with some serious philosophical ideas. The task of this elegant and thoughtful book is to explain what these ideas are.

In the very first footnote, Miguel de Beistegui declares his book Schopenhauerian. This is apt. There is, for one thing, the question of Proustian desire. We seek satisfactions we cannot possibly enjoy, and so waver between desire and disappointment. ‘My desire, as the desire of the other,’ writes de Beistegui, ‘is fuelled by its structural dissatisfaction, by its inability to reach the presence of the object.’ (7) A Proustian lover like Swann, for instance, does not so much want to know what is beneath his mistress’ clothes; he wants to know what she is looking forward to doing when, tomorrow morning, shortly after ten, they will be apart. This impossible, indeed fantastical knowledge claim awakens the narrator’s virulent jealousy, namely the ‘passion—the illness or madness—for that impossible possession.’ Possessing the woman in this sense would mean to ‘take hold of what is ungraspable within her.’ (7)

But another, arguably more significant Schopenhauerian crux pervades the book. Put roughly, we perceive the world under the pressure of certain narrow interests; this would be the world described by concepts, the intellect’s tools of extraction and synthesis. As a result, there is a difference, a distance, between the conceptually-mediated world of representation and what gets left out—for Schopenhauer this would be the will, the thing-in-itself. Rather than the pathos of never-to-be-satisfied desire, then, this is the Schopenhauerian tale of our estrangement from life, and its brief, intermittent recuperation.

‘At the end of the day,’ de Beistegui writes, ‘the present is where I am farthest from myself, and as it were alienated from myself.’ (91) This is because the present involves an unavoidable structural doubling. The present moment is ‘split in two’: an existing present and a virtual one, or, as de Beistegui finds in Walter Benjamin, ‘the un-lived dimension that always doubles and accompanies the lived one.’ (56) A life closed to its hidden register can only be a life of frustration, shallowness and disappointment. And this, at least for most of the very long novel, is basically the plight of the narrator ‘Marcel’. In the end, his task is revealed to be the task of every writer: to get at, to set loose, that still un-lived remainder. This is Proust’s ‘most radical discovery: that fact that time is always divided in two, into present and past, just as life’s always divided into lived and un-lived experience. And it’s the latter, this *un-lived* experience, that’s the concern of literature.’ (45)

How would it work? The young Samuel Beckett had this Schopenhauerian crux explicitly in mind when, in his early study of Proust, he argued that Proustian involuntary memory might

overcome the abstractions of conceptual consciousness. Of course, the workings of involuntary memory are haphazard. They depend neither upon what we might have noticed nor upon any attempt to summon up remembrance of things past. After all, it was entirely by chance that one chilly day ‘Marcel’ was handed the tray with tea and madeleines. These alone, to his astonishment, soon hoisted from the depths the sunken world of Combray. But de Beistegui insists this is not a question of remembering events. Though it is the narrator’s past, it is a past that, paradoxically, he has not yet experienced. We can hardly even call it an event. ‘It’s not the past the involuntary memories bring back to me, then, but that part of the past that hasn’t yet passed. And it’s not yet passed because it’s never been present, at least in the sense that we’d ordinarily understand it.’ (45) This remainder is nothing less than truth: the hidden truth of our lives. This amounts to a radical alteration of the Platonic picture, where truth is ‘innate’, permanently available, yet occluded owing to deficiencies of the perceiving intellect. In Proust, by contrast, truth sticks very close to us. Indeed, truth is caught up in the texture of our lives. Taking his bearings from Deleuze’s book *Proust and Signs*, de Beistegui argues that these truths have no independence outside ‘the world’s being, [...] its contingency and sensible exteriority.’ (50) Thus the truth is not ‘there from the start’, but ‘always in the making’. (50)

We come now to what is perhaps the most important move in his argument. It is only through metaphor, Miguel de Beistegui insists, that we may in the Proustian example recover the still un-lived remainder of our lives. Yet this is not metaphor after any traditional conception. In Aristotle, for instance, but more recently even in Paul Ricoeur, metaphor is bound up with resemblance, of identifying the same within the different. Metaphors, then, would be inherently analytic in the sense that they depend upon pre-existing commonalities to draw domains together. ‘This sort of unity,’ de Beistegui writes, ‘is that of logos.’ So the metaphor-maker merely points out what in theory anyone else would be able to recognize. Proustian metaphor, however, is different. Rather than resemblance or contiguity, Proustian metaphor depends upon difference—which is to say: rather than some impersonal Platonic logos, Proustian metaphor depends upon the lived specificity of each individual life. ‘Making successful metaphors doesn’t actually have anything to do with having an eye for resemblances [...] instead, it discloses another level of the real, another state of matter, one that moves beneath the fixed world of genres and species.’ (76–77) And this is how we might reconstitute what we have ignored and excluded in concept-based perception.

The power of the Proustian metaphor, then, is not merely rhetorical; it really amounts to an ‘onto-poetics.’ One is reminded of Nietzsche’s ‘solution’ of the Schopenhauerian problem: rather than a Platonic ascension to the ideas, he invokes instead the powers of the Dionysian, creative energies that are unaligned with, even downright hostile to, the clarity of concepts. Because they do not depend on the abstractions of the intelligence, they afford us a renewed intimacy with existence. As de Beistegui writes, sounding, by the way, very much like the young Nietzsche: ‘if, beneath the world of completed and individuated forms, there’s the chaotic world of the formless, which nonetheless gives birth to forms, then metaphor is its schema.’ (81) Metaphor working along a tangent of differentiation rather than resemblance gives us access to a parallel expressive economy that does not suffer from conceptual pre-organization. Bringing these metaphors to term requires us to dwell *poetically*, which means, ‘capturing the world as it’s born, before it’s overtaken by utilitarian perception and objective intelligence.’ Interestingly, the formation of these metaphors is often couched in the passive—de Beistegui seems to be invoking

expressive energies that are not just transformative, but are, as it were, at large in the world, or anyway beyond the ambit of the deliberative intellect. We become subject to the world and its 'transformative power': 'taking in all its virtualities, letting ourselves be snatched up by this universe before any demarcation and any finite individuation.' (81) This raises the question of his last chapter: exactly what sort of unity might such a work have? Here again he draws from Deleuze's *Proust and Signs*, but the words serve just as well as a helpful reminder to any Apollonian trying to make sense of the Dionysian's mysterious work. 'There is no pure closure. The vessels can't be opened by the narrator, or synthesized, of course. That is because the mode of openness and disclosure of those systems is not one of unfolding, but of transversal and subterranean communication, linking or stringing fragments together, not in an organic totality, but a motley necklace, or a patchwork.' (106)

This sketch of the key argument leaves unmentioned much of interest that de Beistegui has to say on memory, imagination, and other writers contemporary with Proust. In short, his is a valuable study, incorporating what has been done before while at the same time moving things in a fresh direction. Best of all, it sends the reader back, with renewed wonder, to Proust's giant and magnificent novel.

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