

PROUST'S NARRATIVE I

Aco Peroski
Independent researcher, Skopje
aco_peroski@yahoo.com

This text considers the problem of Self in literature through analysis of the position of the “narrative I” in Marcel Proust’s novel *In Search of Lost Time*. This novel unites the fictional with the autobiographical discourse and directly addresses the problem of the fictional representation of the Self. This article thus examines the aesthetics of simultaneity and supplementing, which in the case of Proust represents the initial and the final point of the artwork. Through simultaneity in the narration, Proust creates a rather specific relationship with temporality, which in turn, dismisses time as a constant present, but also initiates a collision of the positions of the “narrative I”, and by that, propels a dissemination of identity. These narrative strategies of Proust provide a systematic abolition of the borders between the fictional and the autobiographical discourse. Thus, with Proust, autobiography gains the status of interpreter, which affords an interpretative recovery of life (the documentary) within the novel (the fictional). One of the key objectives of this article is to emphasize the transformation of this interpretative tendency in terms of time and selfhood in an aesthetic act. These complex and multilayered relations in the novel *In Search of Lost Time* reveal that Proust’s “journey into the depths of selfhood” in fact represents an evocation of a certain loss of selfhood and of temporality which is neither given nor regained, but in which time is continuously lost or forgotten..

Keywords: narratology, fictionalized autobiographic discourse, Self in literature

НАРАТИВНОТО „ЈАС“ НА ПРУСТ

Ацо Пероски
Независен истражувач, Скопје
aco_peroski@yahoo.com

Овој текст се осврнува на проблемот на себството во литературата преку разгледување на позицијата на наративното „јас“ во романот *Во ѝоџраѓа ѝо заѓубеноѝо време* од Марсел Пруст. Овој роман ги обединува фикционалниот и автобиографскиот дискурс и директно го допира проблемот на фикционалната презентација на себството. Во таа насока, овој текст ја разгледува естетиката на симултаноста и надоместувањето, која кај Пруст претставува почетна и крајна точка на уметничкото дело. Преку симултаноста во нарацијата, Пруст гради еден специфичен однос спрема темпоралноста, со кој се укинува времето во постојана презентност, но исто така доаѓа и до колизија на позициите на наративното „јас“ и, со тоа, до детериторијализирање на идентитетот. Врз оваа наративна стратегија на Пруст се остварува систематското укинување на границите помеѓу фикционалниот и автобиографскиот дискурс. На тој начин, автобиографијата кај Пруст добива статус на толкување со кое се врши интерпретативно надоместување на животот (документарното) во романот (фикцијата). Една од клучните цели на овој текст е да се потенцира трансформацијата на таа интерпретативна тенденција во поглед на времето и себството во естетски чин. Овие сложени и повеќеслојни односи во романот *Во ѝоџраѓа ѝо заѓубеноѝо време* откриваат дека „патувањето“ на Пруст во „длабочините на себството“ всушност претставува евокација на одредена загуба на себството и на темпоралноста која не е дадена или одново пронајдена туку во која времето постојано се губи или се заборава.

Клучни зборови: наратологија, фикционализиран автобиографски дискурс, себството во литературата

In the theory of autobiography certain tendencies exist which point out the relationship between the autobiographical and the fictional discourses, respectively, through the position of the narrator and the first-person singular narration. The attempts to distinguish between these two types of discourse are reduced to several formal markings. Likewise, the difference is supported by the fact that in fiction the subjective narrative position, and all of the implications of the “narrative I” are tied to the functions of literature, namely, its aesthetic, social, cognitive character. However, if we put aside the formal divisions and examine more closely the theoretical specificities of fiction and autobiography, while taking into account the character of the representation and the referentiality of these discourses, then it becomes quite apparent that a strict polarization between the two is virtually impossible. Or, as Paul de Man would conclude, autobiography “is not a genre or a mode, but a figure of reading or of understanding that occurs, to some degree, in all texts” (de Man 1979: 921). Such a stance does not propose that autobiography should become synonymous with fiction, or that all fictional texts are in fact autobiographies; rather, it means that there is certain impossibility to separate the fictional layer from what should represent an unproblematized and truthful representation of life in autobiography. In fact, the same element used to trace the verisimilitude and the bond between these two types of discourse – and that is “the I-position” in narration – is the element which implies the impossibility for distancing in the narration, and with that, an impossibility for an objectivity in representation. The use of the so-called “I-speech” in narration presupposes a strong subjective position, limited by the knowledge, context and specificities of the one who narrates. However, apart from these narratological and theoretical claims, we can examine an additional aspect of the same issue, according to which the inevitable interlacing between autobiography and fiction is the result of that very fact which states that autobiographical speech is always a self-description, a self-representation, with which the subjective position of the auto-reflection directly determines the content, the meaning, and the sense of the narrated.

One of the most frequently mentioned examples in the ‘debate’ on the relation between autobiography and fiction is the novel *In Search of Lost Time* by Marcel Proust. In this novel, not only is the collision between the autobiographical and the fictional discourse quite pronounced, but this very collision is a part of the structure, and even more importantly, a part of the semantics of the work itself. In Proust, this collision has been intentionally pronounced and used as a basis for the construction and creation of this lengthy novel, so that the subjective position in the narration gets involved during the plot, and a link between reminiscence and aesthetics is established. Therefore, the uncertainty of the distinction between fiction and autobiography in the work of Proust becomes a strategy of the narration, or a segment of poetics. To depict this specificity, we are to start with the implications of the characterization of autobiography as self-description.

Autobiography is a particular kind of description: self-description, self-expression, auto-narration. According to Niklas Luhmann, self-description can be viewed as a “mode of operation”, through which the one who describes (the narrator), “becomes his own theme; he claims an identity of his own” (Luhmann 2000: 248).

Henceforth, we could conclude that on the one hand self-description represents a narrative act of self-expressing, whence a certain internal core of identity of the one who expresses himself is manifested, presented and shared. However, on the other hand, we could conclude that even self-expressing, the very speech about the Self generates, forms the identity of the one who is expressing himself. Both conclusions, which at first may appear antagonistic, are valid, since self-description is at the same time a representational but also a creative act: the very act of self-expressing does generate the Self and is a part of it. Finally, expression itself as a linguistic structure implies the creation of certain (new) meanings which additionally become a constitutive part of self-knowledge.

Self-description in autobiographical discourse is a process of simultaneous creation, manifestation and affirmation of the identity of the narrator. It is a kind of interpretation of the Self, which as with any interpretation, produces meanings and inclines towards sense. Through self-expression the semantically empty spaces are filled out, the different contradictions are interpreted, and that which in reality may appear senseless or absurd is given meaning. In autobiography, this interpretative tendency, which is specific to fiction, is equally dominating and present, as is the tendency for objective referentiality, for a clear positioning in a historical and spatial context, and for reliable self-knowledge. The autobiographical discourse is a kind of (re)modeling of life and reality, which showcases an immanent tendency for self-conceptualization. Based on this, the identity cannot be ascertained (only) as “the internal essence” of the Self which is manifested through language as a medium, but we can conclude that self-description, or “the speech about one’s self”, constitutes the fragments of identity and, with that, strives to grant them sense. This conclusion leads to two significant characteristics of the Self which are directly linked to autobiography as a genre. Firstly, that the Self is not merely an archive and thus cannot be memorized; rather it must be narrated. This implies that it needs to seek out a medium, a language as a mode of constituting the Self through the fragments of experience which are (re)modeled in language. Secondly, that self-description is a supplementation of the Self and its re-affirmation and further conceptualization, which presuppose an interpretation of life from a universal position that needs to be produced, created by the “I-position” of the narrative speech about one’s self. Such a creative interpretation, which has a character of a signifying process since it generates or ascribes meanings that constitute identity, is a fictional type of a discourse. The fictional in autobiography (and in the speech about one’s self, in general) is essential, constitutive and unavoidable. This is confirmed also by the very need for a (retroactive and memory-based) completion of a kind of totality of life or reality that can never be fully realized due to its fictional and supplemental character (immanently implying the inability for closure and totalization), and which stands in a constant dynamic and is continuously regenerated. In part, the same has also been conditioned by language itself, by the linguistic structure of autobiography, since it presupposes the semiotic functions of language and the tendency for arbitrary understanding. According to Paul de Man, “what we are deprived of is not life, but the shape and the sense of a world assemble only in the private way of understanding“ (de Man 1979: 930), and autobiography as “a

speech about one's self" is exactly that kind of understanding, that is to say, self-understanding.

As mentioned previously, the novel *In Search of Lost Time* is one of the most frequent and most discussed examples of the collision between the autobiographical and fictional discourses, since this collision is the basis for aesthetic effect and aesthetic function of this novel, thus creating a link between memory, temporality, narration, identity and aesthetics, i.e., the artistic work as it is. This link starts with the opposition *loss-search*, or *amnesia-memory*. If we are to start with the previously outlined thesis, that the Self is not a memory archive, then we come to the distinction that amnesia itself is the initial impetus for "the search for one's self", which in Proust's novel is realized through autobiographical narration. Thus, in this novel, the amnesia generates the particular "I-position" of the narration, with which Proust realizes two key strategies in constructing his novel, which in turn, are tied to simultaneity. Namely, instead of a classic report of the events, the narrator in this novel insists that here memory-contents are being recollected. The expression of memory, which is accomplished through the potentials of the sensory experience, and which has as its goal self-description and identity-formation, is realized as fragmentary, in series of a kind of "apocalyptic epiphanies". These "apocalyptic epiphanies" in the novel, in fact, are narrative sequences and episodes in the plot, which are mutually exclusive, oppositional and contradictory, while the "new" episode leads to a revelation that admonishes all meanings, conditions and conclusions from the "preceding" episode. That way, the plot is constantly moving backwards and forwards along the temporal axis, the events and the episodes (and all that is tied to them: the characters, the atmosphere, the meanings) entwine and the structure of the novel slowly grows complex in multiple symmetrical fragments. This structural characteristic in the narration brings about a temporal collision which we can describe also as a unity of the "I-positions" from various chronological points and segments, with which the inclination towards a "living present" (that should be established during the entire work) has been intensified. Therefore, by connecting the different positions of the narrator from the different episodes in the novel, specific links are formed, to connect and unify different chronological points in the plot. This means that there comes a point when time is abolished into induced present and a condition of temporal simultaneity. This way the second strategy of constructing the novel is created, with which the simultaneity in time through the unity of the narrative positions is reflected into an obsessive and universal *I* that constantly dominates the narration. The repetition of the first-person singular in the narration throughout the whole work, at the same time, points also to a (egotistical) dominance of the subjective position, but it also relativizes the same position, which seems to disappear in the sweeping course of the events, conditions and atmosphere, given through the narration. With that, at the level of identity, the Self is practically abolished so that it can be regained, similarly to how previously time had been abolished in order to be regained. Through this kind of analysis of the structuring of the novel *In Search of Lost Time*, it can be concluded that the opposition *amnesia-memory* establishes the link between temporality and identity, but also it can be seen that these complex webs and the hidden desire for meaning

which lurks in their midst are the basis for the key subversion in terms of the Self that dominates in Proust's work.

The induced motivation may also be specified through certain segments, whence the desire of the narrator has been directly borrowed from some of the other characters. For example, in a scene from the novel, the narrator experiences an intense desire to see Berma, the famous actress. Berma becomes the object of this desire and passes through a series of concretizations and transformations within Marcel's imagination. However, he had never, prior to this, met the actress, nor seen any of her performances, which means that the desire does not hold an experiential or a memory-based foundation. Due to this, there is in fact no object present in this desire. Which does not mean that the actress is a fictitious character within Marcel's consciousness, namely, its desire-based fiction; quite the contrary, she exists in the real world, outside of the Self who desires her. As a matter of fact, as an object of the narrator's desire, she will be called upon by a third party. "Marcel knows that Bergotte admires the great actress. In his eyes Bergotte enjoys an immense prestige. The slightest word of the master becomes a law for him" (Girard 1976: 30). From the moment Marcel "borrows" Bergotte's desire, the object of this desire is transformed several times, in various directions and under different influences, since it does not carry within it any direct experiential basis. The desire grows fluid, so that even at the moment when Marcel finally attends one of Berma's performances, his experiences are again borrowed from those of others. "Not only does the Other and only the Other set desire in motion, but his testimony easily overcomes actual experience when the latter contradicts it" (Girard 1976: 30).

Finally, the fluidity of the impressions and the brittle foundation of the motivation bring about a particular effect in this novel which refers to the construction of the characters. Namely, the constant fluctuations of the narrator's position not only lead to contradictory findings and antagonistic episodes, but they also cause certain doubts in terms of the identity of the characters. This is particularly apparent in the descriptions of Albertine, but also in the relationships Marcel constructs with her. As a character, Albertine is only a summation of contradictory impressions, of fantasies and delusions, of Marcel's jealous suspicion and blind desire, so that instead of being given a character, who throughout the course of the novel is slowly constructed, by becoming more "visible" and "clearer", in fact, we are presented a character who fades away and disappears ever more so, until the point it becomes just an empty marker within Marcel's narration. Albertine is just one of the absent objects of Marcel's desire, and she initially dies, in the emotional sense, in the narrator's consciousness, so that later her physical death is to be reported through the short, prosaic and even ironically absurd telegram. From this perspective, Marcel's jealousy can also be decoded as a kind of a distorted love projection of the absent object, which reduces to imagining and an obsessive interpretation of the fantasies. "The jealous lover *imagines* because he wishes to possess his imaginary gallery, something precious that his perspicacity has already destroyed...Once the incisive imaginary is awakened, love becomes lethal, and jealousy becomes fiction" (Kristeva 1996: 26). The relationship which the narrator initiates with the imaginary Other, in fact, cannot be reduced to anything else but jealousy, since all that Marcel has in store in this relationship are illusions, projected into an empty marker, which

cannot for certain identify the object of his desire as present. Certainly, this problematic identity, up to a point, is characteristic of the other characters in the novel, ultimately culminating in a scene from *Time Regained*, where the narrator notices how “the giant faces” are slowly deformed and decomposed under the touch of time. Thus, the problematic identity ends with erasing the contours of all which can be supposed for a clear “content” or “essence” of the Self.

From these examples, we can clearly see how in this novel, when identity is concerned, the formula “I am all that I am not” is slowly constituted and becomes functional. In Proust's narration, there is an alternating withdrawal from others and a triumph over self-centeredness, by establishing a more intensive contact with others. Such an oscillation, in fact, is a kind of opposition to the obsessive insistence of the subjective “I-position” in narration, so that a specific dynamic is actualized, which allows for a more substantial understanding of the Self. “Victory over self-centeredness allows us to probe deeply into the Self and at the same time yields a better knowledge of Others... Everything is revealed to the novelist when he penetrates this Self, a truer Self than that which each of us displays... This profound Self is also a universal Self” (Girard 1976: 298). The emptying of the Self from its contents and the erasing of its contours leads to a specific Self, deprived of concrete traits and contextual markings, and, due to this, a universal Self that can only exist through its relationship with Others. In such a state, the obsessively repeated “I-position” in the narration gains a higher sense as the mediating positions, or stop-along-the-way, in the search for one's self. Henceforth, the Proustian formula can be extended with a claim by Lyotard, who, in an entirely different context, while examining St. Augustine's *Confessions*, concludes: “I am that which I am not yet” (75). Such a stance affirms the character of the search and views in self-description *a process* of self-knowing. The constant transformations, the absence of objects, the inconsistency in the motivations – these are mere fragments of the contents of identity, which in fact function as signs of the dislocation, or – more aptly put – of the absence of the Self. Therefore, we can point out that universalization is the erasing of the Self in the name of the search, in the name of “the speech about one's self”. Through this very specificity we can identify and explain the forsaking of the relevant autobiographical tendencies and their replacement with the principles of fiction. The representation has been transformed into an infinite (re)invention, since this process generates sense. The voids in the self-description and the absence of relevance are just an opening to the possibility for generating meanings and conceiving sense.

From the previous explorations and analyses and from the presented conclusions, we can sublimate a certain theoretical supposition in Proust, which gives rise to the novel's construction and to the specific narrator's position and technique, and which is directly related to the Self. Namely, identity – or “the content of the Self” – is not a cumulative phenomenon, meaning, “a summation” or “a whole” or “an archive”; rather, it is a dispersed, differential, disseminative and dissipative phenomenon. Identity is a shattered non-unity of fragments, which are mutually incompatible, contradictory and disconnected. The only distinction which can identify such non-unity refers to the principle of its constant spiraling out, of the impossibility for its transformation into a complete totality. “The content of identity” is present only

as a non-presence, as a prolongation of the absence. The constituting of identity stems from a loss, from amnesia, and continues through a series of losses, but it is this series of losses which slowly becomes the content of memory and a fragment of the identity of the narrator. The supplementation of this loss is realized through the narration, which at the same time constitutes the Self and the literary work. The main element through which this concept of Proust's is realized is exactly the potential of "the speech about one's self", i.e., the self-descriptive autobiographical discourse which functions according to the principles of fiction.

We had mentioned previously that self-description as a process of cognition is based on the principles of fiction. However, starting with the very need to choose fiction when discussing one's self, we come to the conclusion that self-description has a paradoxical character. In order to examine this paradoxical nature, we need to go back to the very character of self-description. Namely, if identity is constituted through the fragments of the narration of the Self, then this self-narration stands as a kind of an autopoietic process, which as with all other autopoietic structures, strives for certain autonomy. This implies that self-description exhibits a tendency for independence from the context and the objective parameters which would verify its reversible bond with reality, because only in this way, from those broken and contradictory narrative fragments, can a certain kind of a "whole" be ascertained, or at least (pre)suppose a kind of an idea about a whole, like the Self. This means that the expressive and cognitive tendency of self-description leads immanently towards a closeness with fiction, that is to say, towards the implementation of elements which – provisionally put – are alien to the narrative Self. Thus, accordingly, the autopoietic autonomy of self-description includes also self-negation. Hence, we are directly faced with the question which depicts the paradox of auto-description: is self-negation also a self-description? The answer to this question can be linked to the previously stated claim that the fictional elements that are implemented in the self-description – bearing in mind that the speech about one's self constitutes identity – are also fragments of the Self. Therefore, even the negation of certain aspects of the Self produces the "discursive contents" of identity. In a similar way, in Proust too, the "narrative I" takes over those aspects and elements which initially are not a part of it, while later it starts the process of dual modification – it modifies those elements and aspects in accordance with its own perspective, and at the same time, it is modifying itself in accordance with the adopted traits.

These paradoxical specificities of the self-description can be explained by the fact that in this process the difference and the borderlines between describing and the described are cancelled. "Observation and description presuppose a difference between the observer/describer and his object, whereas the intent of *self-description* is to negate precisely this difference" (Luhmann 2000: 302). However, this does not mean that everything in self-description and in the process of generating identity is arbitrary and senseless. Quite the contrary, this paradox demonstrates how self-description helps the Self which talks about itself adapting and integrating in the course of the historic and social evolution, while safekeeping its autopoietic autonomy. In other words, through the paradoxical process of self-description, which unities the fictional and the relevant autobiographical elements, a certain whole from the fragments of identity is completed, or a certain kind of order is

generated out of the chaos which we may term as the Self. Such an outgrowing of the paradoxical nature requires a use of a specific medium through/within which the same can be accomplished, and – as Proust's search verifies – such a medium is art. “Art always demonstrates the arbitrary generation of nonarbitrariness or the emergence of order from chance” (Luhmann 2000: 315). Art as a system possesses the potential for a collision among the discourses, which in turn opens up the possibility and the way to narrate the Self. Such a conclusion can show us that the poietic and artistic principles and specificities of Marcel Proust are directly connected with the very elements of the novel *In Search of Lost Time* to achieve the aesthetic effect. While the aesthetic effect, on the other hand, reversibly determines the conditions of the narration and the development of the novel's plot. This forms a kind of a circle of mutual conditionality, where the central slot is kept for the work of art, which is why at the center of the novel, as a main thematic problem, stands the very question about the work, i.e., the novel which the narrator Marcel tries to write. Thus, the poietic, technical and thematic aspects of the novel *In Search of Lost Time* are conjoined into a complex and multi-layered open whole, which, bottom line, is nothing other than a pure reflection of the Self that tries to articulate itself.

Such theoretical determinants of autobiography and of the aspects of the Self can be viewed in Proust in connection to the term *experience* - namely, in connection to that which the criticism calls “Proust's experience”. In her book *Time and Sense*, Julia Kristeva defines “Proust's experience” as an experience of the imaginary. According to Kristeva, the transformation of reality and of “the reality of an experience” in a literary work presupposes that the author perceives the real as imaginary. Hence, the literary experience for every author is an experience of the imaginary. As far as Proust is concerned, in his novel “*the experience of the imaginary is none other than the experience of time regained*. This strange and new experience of time regained resides in the dynamic of subject and meaning” (Kristeva 1996: 195–196). In the time regained, a new code is formed, a new syntax according to which the sensations and the signs are set and put to use, and with that, they acquire new, deeper meanings. Such a re-coding of reality is typical for the sphere of the imaginary, so this is exactly where we may see the link between the experience of the imaginary and the time regained. Apart from that, Kristeva underlines that in Proust experience can be defined also at the experience of limits, since Marcel, due to his illness, lives his social life on the cusp, turned away from others – at a constant distance and always under a mask. Thus, “Proust's experience” is a product of the Self, or a kind of “an internal transformation” of experiencing and enlivening the world and life. These two claims of Kristeva's lead towards the same conclusion, that all which encompasses “Proust's experience” is in fact an experience of fiction, or the experience of the fictional: it is an experience which can be re-shaped, i.e., re-conceived and formed only in the novel, through the narration and interpretation of the “narrative I”. “Hence, we should try to read Proust's novel in order to read Proust's *experience*” (Kristeva 1996: 197). Kristeva completes this brief analysis of Proust's experience with the claim that experience leads to *jouissance*, because only through it can we establish a relationship with the world and realize ourselves in the world. “Experience is the unique configuration by which we attain *jouissance*” (Kristeva 1996: 198). Yet, the questions about experience, in

particular about experience as a link to pleasure, may be connected also with the previously laid out theoretical implications and aspects of the Self, which are, in fact, the basis of Proust's work. Hence, we face the key question – what kind of experience are these aspects of the Self, how are they experienced and enlivened? How are self-description, disidentification, aesthetization of the Self, self-conceptualization through fictionalization, experienced?

If we start with the defining of the Self as an endless differentiation and separation from a kind of a finite, final distinction, then we easily come to Kristeva's realization that Proust's experience is the experience of the imaginary, of the fictional re-modeling and re-semanticization of reality. However, the question of how this process is experienced and if it indeed leads towards the bliss and the pleasure of establishing relationships with the world is another matter altogether. If we take into account that in this process, as a kind of auto-referential tendency, it is discovered that these very relations with the world have been compromised by fiction, by the desires of the ego, by the all too human need to compensate the emptiness of living, then at the same time, the senselessness and the absurdity of reality is revealed. In this process, almost running parallel, it is discovered that the additional sense is a construct, that the aesthetization of the Self in an artistic whole is also a construct – falsifying and repainting landscapes over the waste land of the Self. And all these interventions and additions, all fictional "falsifications" stand as mere decorum against the only certainty of reality and life: death. Henceforth, the experiencing of the aspects of the Self, or – more aptly put – of each speech about one's self, with which its own identity is articulated as a self-expression, is an immanently traumatic and devastating experience. Every confrontation with one's self is traumatic, since it represents a confrontation with the fictions we construct so as to please our needs and ego-projections, even when those needs – as is the case with Marcel Proust – are artistic works. The destructiveness of this experience in Proust is usually interpreted as "the destructiveness of time"; however, such a statement is incomplete since the key element in this case is the Self and its sense and perception - namely, its sensitivity for those traumas and destructions. The destructiveness in the experience of one's self is a reflection of the devastation of life, of reality, of the Others, of one's own body, of one's ideas. Hence, we come to the conclusion that the experience of the Self, or the self-experiencing, is an experience of one's own dying. Certainly, this too is one of the approaches through which the work of Proust can be read and the "Proust's experience" can be interpreted. In the novel *In Search of Lost Time* the experiencing of one's own dying is just one more fragment of identity, re-modeled as an aesthetic element, in which life and fiction are bound as a totality of sense.

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