

Proust's Deadline



Christine M. Cano

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In fond memory of
Anthony R. Pugh
(1931–2004)

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This book is dedicated to the memory of Anthony R. Pugh, devoted Proust scholar and extraordinary friend.

A Note on Quotations

Quotations from Proust's letters are taken from Philip Kolb's twenty-one-volume edition of the *Correspondance* (referenced as *Corr.*, followed by volume and page numbers)—with the exception of a handful of letters to Gaston Gallimard not included in the *Correspondance*. In those instances, I have quoted from Pascal Fouché's edition of Proust's correspondence with Gallimard. English translations, when followed by volume and page numbers, are from Kolb's four-volume *Selected Letters* (translated by Terence Kilmartin, Joanna Kilmartin, and Ralph Manheim; referenced as *SL*). When quoting from *À la recherche du temps perdu*, I cite the four-volume Pléiade edition directed by Jean-Yves Tadié (referenced as *RTP*, followed by volume and page numbers). I then quote from Terence Kilmartin and Andreas Mayor's revision of C. K. Scott Moncrieff's three-volume *Remembrance of Things Past*—the English translation most likely to be found in university libraries.

All translations of French sources not followed by a page number are my own. On occasion, I have taken the liberty of translating very brief phrases from the French directly into English, without citing the original, for the sake of simplicity.

PROUST'S DEADLINE

Introduction

"Life is too short and Proust is too long":¹ Anatole France's wry remark has long made the rounds as a humorous summing-up, and an implicit casting-off, of one of the most important and most difficult literary works of the twentieth century, the 3,000-page *À la recherche du temps perdu*. France's sharp assessment, whose repetition is always greeted with delight, reveals something about the famous readerly ambivalence that haunts Proust's novel even as its canonical status grows ever more secure. What it reveals is the extent to which all reading, but perhaps paradigmatically the reading of Proust, is defined by an extra-textual temporality that is quite simply the time a text "takes" to read—time taken away, France implies, from living itself. *Life is too short*: this banal adage inscribes every reader's mortality into the project of reading Proust, conjuring up an image of the page-turning reader's lifeblood seeping away as she makes her way to the end of yet another complex Proustian sentence. *Proust is too long*: now almost an axiom itself, this tautological formula seems either to sanction the blithe abandonment of our reading efforts, or to call for a remedy to the excess—abridgment, condensation, omitting a volume here and there.² Either way, the brevity of life and the length of Proust remain fatally pitted against one another, underscoring the inevitable implication of actual lived temporality in the reading process.

I begin with Anatole France's pithy gloss on reading Proust because I want to make the point that Proust knew it better than any of us. That life was too short—too short, he feared, to complete his writing project, too short to finish correcting his proofs, too short to see the next volume through the publication process; and that his novel was too long—too long for the current book market, too long to be held in the reader's mind over several volumes, too long especially to be grasped all at one go. Although Proust's writing process was accompanied from the start by a sense that time was running out, it was principally through the publication process that he was confronted with the pragmatic and theoretical problem of his novel's extraordinary length. Pragmatic, because in 1912 the average length of books published by the *Nouvelle Revue Française*, his preferred publisher, was 230 pages (Assouline, *Gaston Gallimard*, 59); theoretical, because the necessity of fragmenting the work into successive volumes introduced into the reading experience a duration, and a set of intervals, foreign to the temporality at play in the text itself.³ The scope of that duration is dramatic: Proust's multivolume novel was published over a period of fourteen years, from 1913 (*Du côté de chez Swann*) to 1927 (*Le Temps retrouvé*, the last of three posthumous volumes). Much of that period was concomitant with the writing process itself, which arguably spanned the years between 1908 and Proust's death in 1922.

Proust's Deadline is concerned with the temporality of the writing and publishing processes (and, by implication, that of the reading process), especially as Proust articulated it in his correspondence with publishers, potential readers, and critics. Although much attention has been given to Proust's celebrated reflections on the redemption of time through aesthetic form—staged in the pages of *Le Temps retrouvé* as the hero-narrator's discovery of his literary vocation—another significant construction of temporality emerges from Proust's correspondence, less decidedly triumphant in its articulations. This extratextual construction of temporality unfolds largely as a preoccupation with the duration of an extended creative process, a duration conceived by Proust as a constant threat to the putative unity of his meticulously constructed *œuvre*. His repeated insistence on the "rigorous" structure of the *Recherche* appears in

this context as a symbolic effort to guard the work's integrity against the eventual discontinuities of passing time: an incomplete or fragmented publication, an interrupted reading process, a premature death.

Offered as a contribution to our understanding of Proustian temporality, *Proust's Deadline* also means to intervene in a long-standing critical discussion of metaphor and metonymy in relationship to *À la recherche du temps perdu*. Metaphor and metonymy, the focus of a series of now canonical critical readings of the *Recherche*, have been consecrated as key modes for apprehending both the rhetorical tissue of Proust's novel and the functioning of the text as a whole. From Leo Spitzer's 1961 study of Proust's style to Paul de Man's landmark analysis in *Allegories of Reading* and beyond, metaphor has long been promoted as the dominant figure of Proustian expression (notwithstanding de Man's familiar conclusion that metaphor in Proust actually functions as a kind of metonymy; see de Man, "Reading (Proust)"). Often invoked as textual support for this critical privileging of metaphor is a significant passage from *Le Temps retrouvé* where Proust's narrator posits metaphor as a foundational trope for the entire writing project, trumpeting the fixture of the past in the "necessary rings" of metaphor as a victory over contingency—the redemption of experience from the annihilating flight of time.⁴

I recall this critical focus on metaphor and metonymy because it captures much of what is at stake in my discussion of extratextual temporality. Metaphor, the figure of necessity, has come to be identified with the totalization offered by aesthetic form; metonymy, the figure of contingency, connotes fragmentation and rupture. As the vehicles of an opposition based largely on totality and fragmentariness, metaphor and metonymy—in parallel with the Romantic opposition between symbol and allegory—present fundamental ways of thinking about the structure and coherence of literary works. (In his well-known essay "The Metaphoric and Metonymic Poles," Roman Jakobson characterizes as "metaphoric" and "metonymic" entire modes of thought. "The development of a discourse may take place along two different semantic lines: one topic may lead to another either through their similarity or through their contiguity. The metaphoric way would

be the most appropriate term for the first case and the metonymic way for the second, since they find their most condensed expression in metaphor and metonymy respectively" [*Fundamentals of Language*, 76]). The claims made by Proust's narrator in favor of the redemptive power of metaphor, often considered to be at the heart of the aesthetic doctrine developed in *Le Temps retrouvé*, are also at work outside the text, and most markedly in the context of Proust's encounter with the publication process. But whereas the novel ends on the apparent triumph of such claims, I suggest here that it is a metonymical mode that dominates Proust's conception and representations of his writing experience. His repeated use of metaphor to assert the preliminary unity of the *Recherche*, and later to convey what he thought of as its impeccable coherence, should be understood in the context of his preoccupation with the threat of fragmentation and discontinuity—possibilities that he evoked most frequently in two guises, editorial intervention and death. In short, *Proust's Deadline* can be inscribed among a number of critical studies that have asserted, following de Man, that the text's primary mode is metonymical or allegorical;⁵ but I reach my conclusions through readings of extratextual materials concerning the production, the publication, and the reception history of Proust's novel.

The tension between wholeness and fragmentation implied in the historical oppositions of organic theory—symbol versus allegory, metaphor versus metonymy—runs through Proust's correspondence like a leitmotif during the last thirteen-odd years of his life.⁶ I focus on the correspondence in the first two chapters of this book because it serves as a passageway between Proust's formal and theoretical considerations during the writing process and his representation of his work for the public eye. It is in his correspondence that Proust begins to announce a work-in-progress to prospective readers, sketching out the shape of the book to come long before all is written—much as his publishers Grasset and Gallimard will later announce future volumes of the *Recherche*, as phantasmatic projections that create engagement and suspense but do not guarantee production. It is also in his correspondence that Proust begins to formulate a literary strategy for the marketing of his book, preparing it for its transformation into an object of

public consumption (in the palpable anxiety of relinquishing control over the reading process once it passes into the public realm).

Chapter 1, "Forthcoming," treats Proust's announcements of the work to come and his articulation of a literary strategy as expressions of a consistent effort to maintain the symbolic coherence of the whole over the indeterminate duration of the writing and publication processes. It opens with a reading of one of Proust's earliest and most famous expressions of that symbolic coherence: a 1909 letter to Geneviève Straus in which he first suggests that the beginning and end of his novel were simultaneously conceived and drafted in tandem. Let me add that although I evoke Proust's narrative of the genesis of his novel, my approach to the correspondence is not that of a genetician. I am interested, rather, in representations and symbolic constructs that become apparent as Proust is called upon to define the structural unity and the import of his project to his correspondents—privileged readers, publishers, reviewers.

These constructs reflect a certain notion of organic form that receives its fullest articulation in classical aesthetic theory. Chapter 2, "The Dream of Simultaneous Publication," is supported by this concept of organic form, a concept that calls for contextualization and further definition. Although a number of different ideas are often roped together under the name of organicism, Proust's formulations of the *Recherche* as an indivisible whole governed by an immanent logic specifically echo two basic tenets of organic theory: the idea that an internal purposiveness or finality regulates the "growth" of the work of art from within; and the theoretical suppression of difference between conception and execution, between the idea expressed and its outward form. ("Internal purposiveness" is Immanuel Kant's reformulation of Aristotle's concept of immanent logic [*Poetics*, Chapters 7–10]. As Murray Krieger suggested in *A Reopening of Closure*, the idea of an internal purposiveness explains the organicist elevation of symbol over allegory, since the valorization of symbol is "the elevation of the internally self-sufficient over the dependence on external entities" [6]). At the heart of Proust's claims to have constructed an indivisible whole are the temporal concerns of organic theory that were fundamental to nineteenth-century organicism.⁷