

The Complications of Divergent Series: Deleuze on Proust

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It may seem obvious to suggest that Proust's In Search of Lost Time reaches a high degree of complexity. While the length of the work alone would not necessarily justify such a qualification, one might take as evidence the multiple clauses and imbricated syntax of Proust's sentences, or the layered nature of narrative viewpoints and voices, even if (excepting Swann) encompassed within the subjective perspective of its single narrator, or again the non-linear nature of the narrative, with its false starts and re-commencements, not to mention the intermittence of time and the temporal loops which connect past and present in the instances of involuntary memory. Such complexity tends to be diminished, however, in the interpretative frameworks which constitute the novel as a unified system or as a redemptive unity, in which the final volume Time Regained functions both as the final concluding revelation which binds everything together and as the articulation of a theory of time and of art of which the novel itself is the embodiment. Such an interpretation would on the contrary work towards simplification and linearity, according to a teleology and a logic of cause and effect, contradiction and resolution.

Gilles Deleuze's multi-phase volume *Proust and Signs*, published in three moments (1964, 1970, 1972), works in the opposite direction to the interpretative linearity and unification described above. The overall effect of *Proust and Signs*, taken as a whole, is that of relentless dividing, a powerful machine (to use a key term in the volume itself) for the production of the diverse, or of partial objects, wherein even the individual characters are provisional containers of sorts for multiplicities of individuated singularities. Despite being written in the epoch of "high structuralism," Deleuze's book eschews such straightforward binaries as signifier and signified or structure and process in favour of an overlapping and imbricated series of "levels," distinct operational motifs ("cells" or *boîtes*, and "vases," for example), or multiple modes of machinic production. One could object that there is a tendency towards systematisation, and redemption, in the first edition of the work, which describes the narrator's "apprenticeship" as an albeit intercalated movement through hierarchised competences in the decipherment of different signs, of the world, of love, of sensory impressions, of memory, towards the ultimate level of truth in the signs of art. Connections to Platonism are

also observed. However this structure and hierarchy, in keeping with the systematising tendencies of its moment (1964), is disrupted in the additions to the second and third editions of *Proust and Signs* where Deleuze increasingly emphasizes the "schizoid" dimensions of Proust's world, this inflection no doubt steered by his parallel collaboration with Félix Guattari and the composition of *Anti-Œdipus* (1972).

The internal poetics and thematics of Deleuze's writing, however, blur any clear-cut distinction between the first and the later editions of *Proust and Signs*, and my interest here is with a specific instance or mode of complexity which Deleuze discerns in the *Recherche*, and which also recurs in other works; it is an instance where complexity is thematised and theorised as such and which runs across *Proust and Signs* taken as a whole, making for a consistent thread. I'll refer to this for now, as the motif of *originary complication*, where this latter word signifies a condition of *enfoldedness*. This arguably counter-intuitive translation is intended; *Proust and Signs* features a consistent semantic layer clustered around the motif of the fold; the work as a whole is rhythmically punctuated by the phonemic particle

"-pli-". *Impliquer, expliquer, compliquer*, – in French, and *implicate, explicate, complicate* in the English translation –, sometimes used in the regular course of Deleuze's syntax, but significantly also explicitly thematized by the use of italics or inverted commas that constitute an important seam of Deleuze's interpretation of Proust's *Recherche*. It is important then to bring into relief the semantic force of the particle *pli/fold* in Deleuze's conception since it marks the difference of the gestural and topological incidence of folding inherent in all three of these words, which in etymological terms draw from the Latin verb *plicare*, to fold: *implicate* – to fold-in or in/en-fold; *complicate* – to fold-with; *explicate* – to fold out or to unfold. Although there is a common Indo-European root in *plek*, from which is derived *plexus*–braided, *complication* appears of a slightly different order from *complexity*, and I will insist on the operations of folding as opposed to those of braiding.

How is the motif of enfoldedness manifested in Proust's novel, according to Deleuze? At one level, the loved one, in the *Recherche*, contains a world, implicated within them, a world which it is the narrator's task to unfold:

*"The beloved appears as a sign, a 'soul'; the beloved expresses a possible world unknown to us, implying, enveloping, imprisoning a world that must be deciphered, that is, interpreted."*¹

This is not just one world but a plurality of worlds:

*"What is involved, here, is a plurality of worlds; the pluralism of love does not concern only the multiplicity of loved beings, but the multiplicity of souls or worlds in each of them. To love is to try to explicate, to develop these unknown worlds that remain enveloped within the beloved."*²

Moreover, these plural worlds are intricately folded around each other, "complicated," and folded with series of impressions linked to the contingencies of time and place; *Albertine* contains the worlds of a plurality of young girls, and a "maritime" world of impressions:

"For instance, Albertine has both aspects; on the one hand, she complicates many

*characters in herself, many girls of whom it seems that each is seen by means of a different optical instrument that must be selected according to the circumstances and nuances of desire; on the other hand, she implicates or envelops the beach and the waves, she holds together 'all the impressions of a maritime series' that must be unfolded and developed as one might uncoil a cable."*³

The task of the lover, however, is not straightforward, and is even structurally and existentially impossible; the unfolding or "explication" of the world of the other is complicated by the fact of the plurality of worlds, but more profoundly by the fact that the world(s) in and of the other is (are) fundamentally incompatible with mine, and because the world of the other is a "point of view" which implicates me, an absolutely foreign and infinitely distant viewpoint which attracts me and demands explication just as it expels and repulses me. Deleuze describes:

*"a curious torsion by which we are ourselves caught in the unknown world expressed by the beloved, emptied of ourselves, taken up into this other universe"*⁴

This explains, Deleuze goes on to develop, the law of love in the *Recherche*: the narrator-lover must "sequester, observe and profane" the loved one in order to carry out the (impossible and tragic) operation of "emptying out" (*vidage*)⁵ which consists of reducing and hollowing out the world(s) of the other, in which he is captured, in order to return to himself.

The ontology which underlies this vision of a plurality of incompatible worlds, in *Proust and Signs*, is profoundly Leibnizian in its postulation of monadic and non-communicating points of view; Deleuze's *Recherche* as I suggested above proposes a relentless fragmenting of false or pseudo-unities, a powerful multiplication of partial objects or singularities. The worlds of the *Recherche* are compartmentalised, *cloisonné*, and the movement of the text is towards greater and greater divisions, "worlds are partitioned off" (*se cloisonnent*)⁶. In Deleuze's tabulation of the different levels

(niveaux) of signs, the intelligence of which the narrator must progressively gain through a process of apprenticeship (*apprentissage*), the highest and purest level is that of signs of art, and the signs of art are “essences” which, although immaterial, are embedded and embodied in the material of art. Different from Platonic ideas, these essences are akin to Leibnizian monads insofar as they express the absolute difference of their point of view: “In this regard, Proust is Leibnizian: the essences are veritable monads, each defined by the viewpoint to which it expresses the world, each viewpoint itself referring to an ultimate quality at the heart of the monad.”⁷ The world of the *Recherche* is thus one of radical disconnection, and the writing itself an operation of transversality which establishes “aberrant” communications between these worlds.⁸ The essences of art, moreover, express a radical temporality: each is (like) the beginning of the world; Deleuze recurrently cites an expression from the narrator’s description of listening to the Vinteuil sonata: “It was like the beginning of the world...”⁹ If the signs of art are an instance of “time in the pure state,” it is because temporality is not measured here by movement, by the passing of time, but by time as a pure potentiality: “[...] so defined, essence is the birth of Time itself. Not that time is already deployed: it does not yet have the distinct dimensions according to which it can unfold, nor even the separate series in which it is distributed according to different rhythms.”¹⁰

In this light we can see that Deleuze’s account of the ways in which the loved one “implicates” a world, which must be “explicated” by the narrator, a world which is moreover folded amidst, or complicated with, a plurality of other worlds, is in effect an extension of a philosophical vision of the “originary complication” of time, which Deleuze accounts for as follows in a crucial paragraph:

“Certain Neoplatonists used a profound word to designate the original state that precedes any development, any deployment, any ‘explication’: complication, which envelops the many in the One and affirms the unity of the multiple. Eternity did

not seem to them the absence of change, nor even the extension of a limitless existence, but the complicated state of time itself (*uno ictu mutations tuas complectitur*). The Word, *omnia complicans*, containing all essences, was defined as the supreme complication, the complication of contraries, the unstable opposition. From this they derived the notion of an essentially expressive universe, organized according to degrees of immanent complications and following an order of descending explications.”¹¹

The “certain Neoplatonists” to whom Deleuze refers here, without naming them, are likely to have been Giordano Bruno and Nicholas of Cusa, by way of Boethius’ *Consolations of Philosophy*, from which the expression *uno ictu mutations tuas complectitur* (in the constancy of which all your changes are included), is taken. What is at stake is a philosophy or even a cosmogony of expressiveness from an originary state of “enfoldedness,” for which Deleuze also uses the verb “coiled” (*enroulé*) (“the artist-subject has the revelation of an original time, coiled, complicated within essence itself.”¹²) Time “in the pure state” is coiled around essence, or is at its origin “coiled” around itself, awaiting the unfolding that is the passage of time, and organised as a “descending” series of lesser “complications” or “emanations”. Originary complication, then, captures an initial state of complexity or enfoldedness; the apparent paradox of “originality” and complexity, where the notion of origin might tend towards unification and thus simplification, expresses the epistemological challenge of Deleuze’s thought: to think multiplicity as origin, to interweave the “One” and the “Many”.

In this light Deleuze outlines a vision of an art of enfoldedness wherein the work weaves or knots together a multiplicity of distinct lines which do not communicate or unify but “resonate” with each other. Bruno’s notion of originary complication has its correlates in the literary work which aims at a maximum of resonating monadic lines or series folded around each other. It resurfaces in Deleuze’s *Difference and Repetition* (1968), this time in relation to James Joyce:

“Each series tells a story: not different points of view on the same story, like the different points of view on the town we find in Leibniz, but completely distinct stories which unfold simultaneously. The basic series are divergent: not relatively, in the sense that one could retrace one’s path and find a point of convergence, but absolutely divergent in the sense that the point or horizon of convergence lies in a chaos or is constantly displaced within that chaos. This chaos is itself the most positive, just as the divergence is the object of affirmation. It is indistinguishable from the great work which contains all the complicated series, which affirms and complicates all the series at once. (It is not surprising that Joyce should have been so interested in Bruno, the theoretician of complication.) The trinity complication-explication-implication accounts for the totality of the system – in other words, the chaos which contains all, the divergent series which lead out and back in, and the differentiator which relates them one to another. Each series explicates or develops itself, but in its difference from the other series which it implicates and which implicate it, which it envelops and which envelop it; in this chaos which complicates everything.”¹³

The work is thus a form in which, as Deleuze expresses it, “chaos=cosmos” (*chaosmos*)¹⁴, a complication-explication-implication machine “converging” on a horizon of “positive” chaos in which difference and disjunction are thought affirmatively rather than as absence or lack of unity.

Later, in *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque*, Deleuze will wrestle further with the problem of how to think the relation of the One and the Many, the multiplicity of points of view. Noting that Leibniz took the name “monad” from the Neoplatonists, he points to Leibniz’s “stabilization” of the concept of harmony, the “accord of singular points of view,” which wards off the dangers of relativism and immanence, while also resisting the postulation of a Universal Spirit.¹⁵ But as Deleuze notes in *Proust and Signs*, this pre-established harmony “can no longer be the case for Proust,”¹⁶ for whom the unity of the work does not result from nor

express nor recover a pre-established “stock,” but (like Balzac’s *Comédie humaine*) is an effect of the work, considered as a machine or series of machines. Reading *Proust and Signs with Difference and Repetition* and *The Fold*, we are invited to consider the *Recherche* as a “implicating-explicating-complicating” machine which produces and interlaces divergent series or lines, and thus as akin to those other modern works which “overtake ‘monadology’ with ‘nomadology’” and which “open [...] on a trajectory or a spiral in expansion that moves further and further away from a centre.”¹⁷

Deleuze’s vision of the enfoldedness of things, and the activity of “folding, unfolding, refolding” which he says is our task and is one way in which we “remain Leibnizian,” thus extends beyond his consideration of Proust, and yet has a substantial place in *Proust and Signs*.¹⁸ It outlines a version of complexity on the basis of the fold, which in this light might take on the character of the “conceptual persona” in which, in *What is Philosophy?*, Deleuze and Guattari find the essence of inventiveness and newness in thought.¹⁹ As a species of complexity the fold and its variations look different from the motif of the line, the connection, the intersection, and appear different too, in ways which would need to be developed further, from the *braiding* implied etymologically speaking by the word complexity itself. To enfold, unfold, and refold thus sketch the programme of a theory of complexity to come.

¹ G. DELEUZE, *Proust and Signs: The Complete Text*, trans. R. HOWARD, London, Athlone, 2000, 7.

² *Ibidem*, emphasis in original.

³ *Ibid.*, 117-118, emphasis in original.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 120.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 121.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 41.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 136.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 44.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*, 46.

¹³ G. DELEUZE, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. P. PATTON, New York, Columbia University Press, 1994, 123-124.

¹⁴ Deleuze uses the term “chaosmos” (borrowed from Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake!* on two occasions in *The Fold* to designate a world in which rather than converging in or arising from harmony: “In a same chaotic world divergent series are endlessly tracing bifurcating paths.” See G. DELEUZE, *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque*, trans. T. CONLEY, London, Athlone, 1993, 81. See also F. GUATTARI, *Chaosmosis: an ethico-aesthetic paradigm*, trans. J. PEFANIS, Indianapolis and Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1995.

¹⁵ “Giordano Bruno will bring the system of monads to the level of this universal complication: the Soul of the world that complicates everything. Hence Neo-Platonic emanations give way to a large zone of immanence, even if the rights of a transcendent God or an even higher Unity are formally respected. Explication-implication-complication form the triad of the fold, following the variations of the relation of the One-Multiple. But if we ask why the name “monad” has been associated with Leibniz, it is because of the two ways that Leibniz was going to stabilize the concept. On the one hand, the mathematics of inflection allowed him to posit the enveloping series of multiples as a convergent infinite series. On the other hand, the metaphysics

of inclusion allowed him to posit enveloping unity as an irreducible individual unity. In effect, as long as series remained finite or undefined, individuals risked being relative, called upon to melt into a universal spirit or a soul of the world that could complicate all series. But if the world is an infinite series, it then constitutes the logical comprehension of a notion or of a concept that can now only be individual. It is therefore enveloped by an infinity of individuated souls of which each retains its irreducible point of view. It is the accord of singular points of view, or harmony, that will replace universal complication and ward off the dangers of pantheism or immanence: whence Leibniz’s insistence upon denouncing the hypothesis, or rather the hypostasis, of a Universal Spirit that would tum complication into an abstract operation in which individuals would be swallowed up.” See G. DELEUZE, *The Fold*, *op. cit.*, 24.

¹⁶ G. DELEUZE, *Proust and Signs*, *op. cit.*, 164.

¹⁷ G. DELEUZE, *The Fold*, *op. cit.*, 137.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*.

¹⁹ G. DELEUZE & F. GUATTARI, *What is Philosophy?* trans. H. TOMLINSON and G. BURCHELL, New York, Columbia University Press, 1994, 2.

Proust confiné

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Au printemps 2020, à l’occasion du (premier) confinement, Marcel Proust a souvent été cité dans les journaux. On a ainsi rappelé que son père, le docteur Adrien Proust, fut l’un des spécialistes de la lutte contre les épidémies, et, partant, l’un des défenseurs des mesures de quarantaine imposées aux équipages des navires arrivant à Marseille en provenance de pays où sévissait le choléra. Et l’on a également présenté l’écrivain comme le modèle du reclus volontaire, de l’artiste qui s’impose un retrait du monde pour se consacrer uniquement à son œuvre. Pour autant, les raisons qui incitèrent Proust à renoncer à toute vie sociale, ou presque, sont un peu plus complexes. Sa correspondance, et bien sûr son œuvre, en offrent différents reflets.

Proust, héros du confinement ? Durant les singulières périodes que l’épidémie nous fait traverser en 2020, le nom de l’écrivain est, en tout cas, souvent cité. Puisque, soudainement, une bonne partie de la population se retrouvait avec du temps libre qu’il fallait bien occuper, la lecture du million et demi de mots que comprend *À la recherche du temps perdu* devenait le symbole de ces défis intellectuels dont la réalisation était tout d’un coup rendue possible. Afin d’occuper pleinement son temps, il fallait partir à la recherche de celui que Proust croyait avoir perdu.

À un deuxième niveau, le nom de Proust a accompagné notre confinement, mais avec un autre prénom cette fois : celui d’Adrien, le père de l’écrivain. Spécialiste des épidémies, celui-ci a écrit un ouvrage sur les vertus de la quarantaine : il y évoquait, déjà, l’opposition entre ceux qui avaient une vision très protectrice où la santé était placée avant toute autre considération, et ceux qui souhaitaient que le commerce reprenne au plus vite. Certaines pages de son *Traité d’hygiène internationale* (1873) résonnent comme si elles avaient été écrites aujourd’hui :

« On a vu des observateurs du plus grand mérite s’élever d’une manière générale contre la doctrine de la contagion et les conséquences pratiques que l’on prétendait en tirer. La suppression des quarantaines, l’abolition de toutes les entraves qui peuvent gêner le commerce, et la libre circulation des voyageurs et des marchandises : tels sont les résultats les plus

immédiats de cette opinion nouvelle. On comprend dès lors la faveur dont elle a naturellement joui chez les peuples mercantiles, et l’on n’a guère été surpris, dans la conférence sanitaire de Constantinople, de voir le représentant de l’Angleterre s’élever au nom de l’humanité contre des mesures destinées à restreindre la liberté des échanges et gêner les transactions commerciales¹. »

On le voit, dans le débat santé publique *versus* croissance économique, le Professeur Adrien Proust prenait clairement partie en faveur de la première, ce qui lui valut, près de 150 ans plus tard, de connaître un petit regain de popularité dans les journaux.

Quittant maintenant Adrien pour Marcel, on peut distinguer trois raisons pour lesquelles l’auteur de la *Recherche* est entré en écho avec la délicate période que nous avons vécue. Après la mort de ses parents (Adrien décède en 1903, Jeanne, la mère, en 1905), Proust tombe dans une sorte de dépression qui le conduit quelques semaines dans une clinique. À partir de 1908, il commence à rédiger les premiers extraits de ce qui deviendra son œuvre majeure, et se confîne, en quelque sorte, dans un nouvel appartement, au 102 boulevard Haussmann, qu’il occupera jusqu’en 1919. Certes, il ne s’agira pas d’un « confinement » total : il passera plusieurs étés à Cabourg jusqu’en 1914, et acceptera de rares invitations à dîner. Mais sinon, il passera l’essentiel de son temps chez lui, écrivant allongé sur son lit, avec sa gouvernante Céleste Albaret comme seule