

Proust and the Love of Longing

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In her heyday, she would like to think, she could have given winged Eros himself cause to pay earth a visit. Not because she was so much of a beauty but because she longed for the god(s) touch, longed until she ached, because in her longings, so unrequitable and therefore so comical when acted on, she might have promised a genuine taste of what was missing back home on Olympus. J.M. Coetzee Elizabeth Costello. New York: Penguin 2003. P.191.

Abstract

Freud chose Oedipus, Narcissus and other characters in both visual and verbal arts to

illustrate psychological concepts of motivation, character, and personality. Proust's novel *In Search of Lost Time* gives us another take on love and longing for love.

Proust denuded romantic love of its major illusion: the importance of possessing the object of love. In this Proust comes very close to Freud's idea that the object is the least fixed part of the wish. For Freud (1905), the source of the wish is more fixed and more stable than the choice of an object. Yet what distinguishes love from simple lust is the longing for the object and the fixity of that longing. As Proust shows us, a person comes to stand in the real world for the ideal because that person is unattainable. It is the longing that is prized, not the fulfillment. Longing is preferred because it protects from the dangers of humiliation and aggression that were provoked in childhood by winning the Oedipal person. This contrasts with Freud's emphasis on unconscious guilt as a sequel to Oedipal victory.

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What is love? What is longing? Are they the same, or are they different or overlapping? Erotic love combines tender affection with sensual excitement and a belief that the beloved is the only one who can satisfy. This kind of love includes idealization and a tendency to identify with the beloved, intensity, ecstasy, elation, euphoria and pain. Longing is the state of wanting but not having the remote or unattainable beloved. The relationship persists by force of a person's imagination. How can it be that Proust, like Coetzee believed that longing is such a prize? The Greek lyric poets (Carson 2005) call love bittersweet. Eros disorients the lover, creating an awareness of lack as the person in love cannot be satisfied by anyone other than the beloved. Proust would have been aware of this tradition, as was Freud. Each added to it in his own way.

Freud learned from reading plays and fiction (*The Interpretation of Dreams*, 1900 *Gradiva* 1907, *The Theme of the Three Caskets*, 1913, *Dostoyevsky and parricide* 1928, *A Childhood recollection from Dichtung and Wahrheit* 1917). We hope to follow Freud's lead in using literature to amplify psychoanalytic theory by looking at Proust's novel *In Search of Lost Time*. We also use the insights of literary critics who have focused on different themes in Proust's novel (Wilson 1931, 2004, Aciman 2004, Rose 1997) and psychoanalysts who have written about Proust (Poland 2003, Miller 1956, Kohut 1977, Kristeva 1993 and Halberstadt-Freud 1991).

In *In Search* Proust depicts the inner life of his narrator and the characters to expose varieties of human passions, fears, and agonies. At first the narrator is telling us about a young boy. The narrator, who will later on be called Marcel, describes the

young boy's journey over love's terrain. According to the narrator the young Marcel's passion for his mother was all pervasive. In a poignant scene he longs for his mother to come to his bedside and kiss him good night. When he gets the kiss and permission to have her stay the night, he hates it. His father had urged his mother to stay when he saw how much his son longed to have his mother. In this crucial scene the narrator hints that the father was seduced by his son's distress. What the young boy fantasizes would be a delicious experience, turns out to be a bitter humiliation that becomes a pattern for his life and for the lives of other characters in *The Search*. Fulfillment of the wish to possess the beloved leads to disappointment and regret.

The child Marcel believes that his father gave his mother to him out of pity, thus depriving him of the respect and equality that would be due to a rival. The father's willingness to step aside for his son is like a screen memory that organizes Marcel's experience of himself as weak, passive, and uncertain of his role with women. The gratification deprives him of the chance to master his conflict by finding his own solution to temper his frustration. His mother attempts to soothe him by reading to him. She chooses a novel *Francois le Champi* by George Sand (1850). The heroine of this book is named Madeline and the plot involves her nurturance of a little boy of six (near Marcel's age) and her eventual marriage to him when he grows up. Such a story would exacerbate Oedipal longing. Madeleine will turn out to be the name of the cookie that sets off the train of memory that is the novel. This repetition of names is the link between love and longing for the unattained beloved and this link is the key to what makes life worthwhile for Proust. The sensation of love is recaptured through the taste that invokes the involuntary memory that is associated with the name of the cookie

(Kristeva 1993), the character in the book and the mother of the time when she was still the unattained object of his erotic love.

What could match the anticipation he felt as a boy awaiting his mother(s kiss? Would he come to believe that he was entitled to have other men(s women? Would winning love be equated with weakness? Or would tender love be equated with the suffering prototype of the sadomasochist (Halberstadt Freud, 1991.)? Marcel as the little boy had the unfortunate experience of being an oedipal victor, doomed to suffer in love, but also was fortunate in that he had the prototype for alleviating the suffering through literature that allowed the narrator Marcel to emerge from the suffering of that boy.

Proust shows us a world in which love is longing, only sustainable when unfulfilled, only pleasurable insofar as one is able to enjoy pain. Proust elaborates the link between masochism and omnipotence: pleasure that depends on other people threatens the masochists need to control (Novick and Novick, 1996, Bond, 1981, Bach 1991). In this world satiety can only produce dullness and boredom. Envy and jealousy prevent the dullness and boredom of satiety. Thus, pleasure in inflicting and suffering pain is the inescapable dynamic of human existence. Sado-masochistic reversals of social status in which humiliation accompanies physical pain are the prototype of erotic excitement for Proust.

Proust understood society as organized pleasure attained by inflicting pain. Like love, he thought, a party can give pleasure only as the participants know that they might have been excluded, that they are privileged to be invited. Part of the pleasure in belonging to a social circle is the pleasure of excluding others. In an ironic turn, worthy of Proust himself, it is only now, over half a century after he finished his great

psychological novel, that psychoanalysts have attained a view of perversions that can intersect with his. Freud and Proust both depicted perversion as what Stoller (1975) would later call the erotic form of hatred as revenge takes on a role in perversion. Both Freud and Proust, saw transference and jealousy as necessary conditions of love.

In *Search* portrays characters yearning for love to be required. Proust shows us the complexity of object choice as he takes his heroes and heroines through their love lives: a French aristocrat(s drawing room in the late nineteenth century; seaside resorts on the North Atlantic coast; and to a house of sado-masochistic homosexual prostitution. Despite these exotic settings , his characters are driven by the same passions and conflicts that influence our patients. His vivid descriptions heighten our sensitivity to the links between the familiar and the new. He makes dramatic use of free association and depicts the bittersweet experience of appreciating that which was painful when it happened but treasured when lost. He uses the concept of time to illuminate transitory human relationships. Proust shows the power of sensory experience to awaken repressed affect and the connection to memory that is awakened by that affect. He tantalizes us with the idea that the experiences of earlier time could be regained and life could be continuous. He promises us that memory makes it possible to gain some control over the ephemeral nature of life. As memory preserves time it also makes us aware that time has passed, the tragic nature of life with its inevitable losses is balanced by the recreation through memory. Love and hate, and the many affective tones in between, are the glue that bind the themes of our repressed memories.

Love and Jealousy

Proust(s multi-dimensional characters provide variations of the vicissitudes of love

that expand the boundaries of Freud's ideas. Freud thought that lovers are brought together by memories of the earliest beloved (parents and early caretakers, or by wishes to be loved by images of oneself at early ages or what one dreamed of being in those early years or an image of what one is now. Proust shows how these images of the beloved are transformed as later experience shapes and distorts them. Love starts with jealousy. The child loves his mother, but suffers jealousy because she belongs to his father. He loves his father and suffers jealousy because he belongs to his mother. Love caused jealousy, but later loves are triggered by jealousy. What makes love exciting is the jealousy that keeps the lover in a state of anxiety. Proust himself asserted (Carter 2006) that both he and his narrator suffered from an incapacity for happiness. Cupid's arrow recalls the painful jealousy of infantile love which is always narcissistic and sadomasochistic. His characters also interface across social boundaries but what appear as insurmountable social barriers give way more easily than emotional ones. Here we will use Proust's cast of characters to flesh out our ideas about the dynamics that drive the choices made by some of his exciting lovers.

In Search of Lost Time

A wealthy aesthete; a young man who wants to be a famous writer; a courtesan; a man of the nobility who acts ignoble; as well as one who is brave; dotting parents, and a bourgeois couple; these are some of the characters who touch us emotionally as Proust's narrator Marcel unfolds their lives. His characters often are caught between yearning to have their love requited and struggling with love's vicissitudes. Longing is a major theme in Proust's work as it is in the life of some lonely people (Spira & Richards 2003). These people echo Brenner's (1974) view that loneliness is the longing for a

specific object to return. We believe that this mental object may be created out of images of the early caretakers commingled with images of oneself.

Swann and Odette: Lovers Who Long

Swann is the first adult lover depicted in the book. Swann is cherished by haute society for his charm, wit, sensitivity to art and for being very rich and very generous with his money. Odette lives on the borders of society somewhere between making her living as a courtesan and being a prostitute. Odette had never been accepted by society though she longed to be; what attracts her to Swann is his entree into that world. In this he eventually disappoints her. Despite all that Swann has and is, his place in society is not powerful enough to bring Odette along.

A courtesan would seem to need to keep her customer happy; yet throughout their affair Odette treats Swann badly. Odette seems to know that making him jealous is the only way to keep him. She behaves secretively, is openly seductive toward other men, and often unavailable to Swann. He knows that she uses his money to entertain his rivals, excluding him from events that he pays for. Odette had been genuinely attracted to Swann; she used these tactics to keep his passion alive.

Love Found and Lost

In *The Search* love evaporates or disappears. Did Swann's apparent devaluing and suspicious attitude toward Odette turn her against him? Was it his failure to bring her into society? Was it his jealousy? Or was it time that changes the lover's needs and wishes and alters the beloved (Beckett 1931/ 1999)? When he questioned and stalked her she saw that by mistreating him, she had captured him. That made her the object of his love but prevented him from being the object of hers. The theme is

established. Passionate love is longing; requited love is destroyed love.

Swann's passion for Odette was fueled by his belief that Odette was having sexual pleasure with someone else. She excited him only when he believed he could not control her; out of sight is not out of mind. The involuntary memory is like love; its power is derived from the impossibility of control and can result in pain. Pleasure is achieved only when one cannot exert control. It appears by serendipity. Only involuntary memories and experiences have power. Cupid's arrow hits a mark when the target is not grabbing it. Poland (2003) shows that how one uses a recovered memory is what counts; the capacity of a person to turn passive into active creates a new world for that person.

Swann collects Odette as one might collect a work of art; as he associates her with a woman in a Botticelli painting, she becomes desirable to him. He believes others would want her as they want the painting. Swann is willing to tolerate losing the esteem of the society ladies because he already enjoys that. He wants what he cannot have: Odette. What he has, he does not want: the esteem of high society. Socially as well as romantically, longing is more valued than satisfaction. This theme, begun with Marcel's longing for his mother, carries through the novel to other lovers and other loves.

Just as love is kindled by the idea that the beloved is unavailable, so membership in a social circle can give pleasure only as the participants are aware that they might have been excluded. It is the exclusion of others that makes membership a privilege. There is pleasure in excluding others, a situation that leaves those who wish for invitations pressing their noses to the window, like the child who observes the primal scene, feeling left out.

Love Among the Excluders

Swann and Odette bond as outsiders; each sees in the other an outsider who longs for acceptance. By contrast, the Duc and Duchess de Guermantes are insiders. He contains the sexuality in his love affairs; she is cultured. They function as one person, each supplying the missing part of the other. He prides himself on his wife's wit and exceptional taste. She uses his money and social position to exhibit her beauty and wit where it counts. Theirs is a Faustian bargain. He needs her wit. She needs his money and position. Love has nothing to do with it.

In the Duchess, Proust has created a character who believes that everything that she is, had been, does, or has, is the best. Self love prevails, she appears to long for nothing and no one. She is smug. With the Duc, she conducts a sado-masochistic erotic life. She complies when he insists that she invite his discarded women to her salon. Sadistic to servants as she is masochistic in relation to her husband, she has achieved displaced revenge.

If the Duchess has everything, how can she be envious or jealous? The Duchess creates longing in others: she even denies Swann his dying wish that she would invite his daughter Gilberte to her home. She had no daughter of her own. She might have envied Swann that. She was not the person Swann loved the most. She might have envied Gilberte that. Outsiders who envy the insiders assuage whatever envy the insiders have. Envy may be mollified by turning passive into active by creating it in others; jealousy longing to be a one and only love can be consoled by creating this longing in another.

Proust shows another twist to this scenario in his description of St. Loup(s

jealousy of his lover Rachel. He imagines Rachel longing for other men. But he himself later loves men. He has projected his desire onto her. By seeing it as her desire, he protects himself from the humiliation of appearing homosexual in a society that still despised gay men.

Same Sex Love

Proust introduces same sex love with a scene of sadistic love between lesbians. Mlle. Vinteuil encourages her lover to say that she will spit at the image of Mlle. Vinteuil's father, an act observed by Marcel, and one that he understood as a desecration. The narrator understands this act of cruelty as necessary for the overly scrupulous Mlle. Vinteuil to allow herself the pleasure of sex.

If the sadomasochistic aspect of Mlle. Vinteuil's character is in the service of separation (Bach 1991, Halberstadt Freud 1991), then Mlle. Vinteuil needs the sadism of her lover in order to dis-identify from her masochistic father. Evidence for this idea is that Mlle. Vinteuil and her lover spend their lives painstakingly resurrecting and promoting his music. They are responsible for his posthumous fame. Thus debasing him was a defensive maneuver aimed at freeing Mlle. Vinteuil both from her too close identification with him and from awareness of her longing to be his lover. The sadistic love scene masked her longing for her father. She pushed away her father's too exclusive love to avert the humiliation of being loved as if she were still a baby. Her denigration of him was a defense against humiliation.

Sado-Masochism and Erotic Love

The theme of sadism as a necessary precondition for love continues with the character Baron Charlus. A widower, he becomes effeminate (White 2004, Wilson

1931). M. de Charlus courts Morel, an angelic looking musician. Charlus sees in Morel the musician he might have become if his social position had not made it necessary to give up a career for scholarly appreciation of other people(s performances. In this Charlus is like Swann who gave up his art for social position. The Baron is longing to be loved by a lover who represents himself as he had been and would like to be. He makes a narcissistic object choice, one that Proust like Freud (1914) shows us to be usual for both men and women, homosexual and heterosexual as well.

Morel chooses Baron Charlus as Odette chose Swann: in hopes of being received by the aristocracy. Charlus and Morel(s relationship illustrates how object choice influences what goes on between a couple. Morel envies Charlus(social position; Charlus envies Morel(s youthful looks and potential. The envy each has toward the other, exacerbated by idealization, ends in sadomasochism. The Baron coerces Morel by arranging to fight a duel over him. Charlus knows that a duel would humiliate Morel by calling attention to the sexual nature of their relationship. But fear engenders hate. Morel leaves Charlus.

The narcissism of these characters is in their concern for their own aims and their disregard for the feelings of others, even the feelings of those they profess to love. This concern for the self arises from self hatred. The need for love from others motivates them. They need to be loved because they cannot love themselves. Charlus and Morel each have an antipathy for an aspect of the self which they try to hide. Both hate and fear their own homosexuality and their class origins. Both need reassurance of the kind that Kohut (1977) called the function of the self-object.

Morel expresses his self hatred by acting out his fantasy of causing pain to a lower

class young woman. The Baron has himself beaten by lower class men. Why does he seek pain? Is being beaten a punishment? Does he seek physical pain to counter the psychic pain of his loss? Is he angry at his drive to love men? Choosing lower class men preserves the aspect of Morel that he loved and Morel hated. Ironically, his social position is what caused him to lose his music, being lower class is valuable because it is what Charlus cannot have. Can being beaten be understood as a way to more like the powerless Morel allowing him to hold on to the lost beloved by feeling like him (Bach and Schwartz 1972). Unbearable longing becomes pleasure by being encapsulated in physical pain. Pain becomes pleasure, longing becomes having by being and the beating (Freud 1919) is sexual pleasure.

Longing: Pleasure, Pain and Resolution

The reader follows Marcel's life until he becomes a middle-aged man. Proust has taken us through aristocratic drawing rooms, the homes of the bourgeoisie, and houses of prostitution. He sees the dark underside of society everywhere. The narrator had gained entry into the world of the elite through the connections of his beloved grandmother. His intelligence, curiosity about life, and knowledge of the arts eventually made him welcome. He appeared pleased to be in these elegant surroundings and among prominent hosts and hostesses. Observing how others lived and got along, Marcel, like Proust, formed opinions about what he had observed.

Throughout the work, Marcel seemed hungry for love, admiration, or sexual excitement. His romantic interests were fleeting; jealousy, or an idea that his object of desire might be unattainable, as well as his need to gratify his sexual urges, led to his interest in many different women. We see him imagine how nice it would be if one of

them desired him. Marcel is excited by the fantasy of being desired by Gilberte, the Duchess de Guermantes, Madame Swann, a milkmaid, a fisher girl, and various members of the band of girls at the seashore. His love affairs exist mainly in fantasy.

Then he falls in love with Albertine, an athletic young cyclist. His sense of himself as sickly and weak makes her physical strength and toughness appealing. She is what he wishes himself to be. While he admires her, he is also ambivalent because she is not educated or sophisticated. Despite his ambivalence he persuades her to move in with him as his mistress. Once Albertine appears to love him, he spoils the relationship by jealousy.

Albertine feeds Marcel's suspiciousness by allowing him to catch her in lies. She had shown signs early on that she was sexually excited by women, yet Marcel believes that he could win her by showering her with gifts and keeping her under his watchful eyes. Albertine resents his constantly questioning her loyalty. By leaving Marcel, she rekindles his interest in her; once more he falls under the thrall of longing. He tries to regain her interest by having an affair with one of her friends. He hopes to make her jealous, so that she will want him. This fails when she dies in an accident.

By the end of *In Search* Marcel comes to realize that what he has learned about himself and others is worth preserving in the form of a novel. He sees that for him the sweetest pleasure is the anticipation of what might be(-the sensation of longing. The excitement that comes from unrequited love provides the juice that allows him to succeed in his goal of becoming a writer. At this moment Marcel, the hero of the book becomes the narrator who has been telling Marcel's story from the beginning of it. Proust needed to create his novel more than he needed to possess a lover or have a

family. This turn integrates the hero, the narrator and the author.

Discussion

Proust presents longing as exciting because it allows the fantasy of perfect gratification in the future. Does longing imply a wish for an idealized de-sexualized object (Leavy, 1990) or simply the idealized but still sexual object? Or is longing the consequence of failing to grieve the impossibility of fulfilling a wish Phillips (2001)? By granting the child Marcel(s wish his father deprived him of the opportunity to grieve the impossibility of ever having his mother(s exclusive love. The result, as Phillips sees it is a feedback loop in which the defenses of undoing and disavowal operate against the integration of the pain of the loss. But we believe that Proust sees humiliation not failure to mourn as engendering untamable aggression.

The crucial scene in Proust(s novel shows the little Marcel saddened by having his mother stay overnight with him because he realizes that his father allows this because he pities him. The object is attained at such a price to the lover(s self regard that winning the object is losing the sense of one(s self as an admirable person. In that case, the price for fulfillment is too high; longing is preferable to fulfillment.

Our contention that longing is what makes the object desirable for Proust is corroborated by Doubrovsky (1986) who sees the incident of the madeline as the core of the novel. Longing for the madeline makes the whole experience of the place where Marcel first tasted it come to vivid life. The madeline evokes the fantasy of longing, the delicious longing the little boy felt for his mother(s kiss.

If winning entails guilt and getting the mother without defeating the father entails pity, the better choice is to remain hopefully longing for what cannot be attained. Marcel

the little boy faces a nearly universal dilemma, Marcel the narrator finds the compromise that best fits him by narrating the longing, enshrining it in a work of art and Marcel Proust gives us a new understanding of why some people prefer longing to fulfillment and lead lives of lonely longing in preference to any fulfillment.

Proust's version of the Oedipal drama adds to Freud's view that Oedipal longing continues throughout life; Proust highlights the horror of a fulfillment that leaves the child humiliated as well as guilty. Our view of this differs from Kohut's. He thinks that a person is either guilty or (tragic) depending on whether he experiences himself as the Oedipal winner or experiences himself as a humiliated loser. Kohut denies that the (tragic man) has Oedipal conflict. What is new in our understanding from Proust is that the winner just as much as the loser can experience humiliation. Those humiliated patients who were especially beloved children, only children and/or children whose illnesses evoked more than the usual loving care from their parents may feel just as humiliated as those who suffer from denigration or neglect. Marcel got his mother by losing his father's respect. To avoid repeating this humiliation he goes back to the time before it happened. It is not the woman he has, but the woman he cannot have who excites him. In this defence against narcissistic injury, he wants the mother in the moment before his father gave her to him, not the mother given out of pity. This is a possible prototype for a patient's choice of remaining alone and in longing. An analyst's interest in a particular book, play, piece of music, movie or other cultural artifact may be helpful not only to a particular patient, but also to the development of psychoanalytic theory useful for other patients as well.

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