

MONTAIGNE AND PROUST: ARCHITECTS OF MEMORY¹

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Une oeuvre où il y a des théories est comme un objet sur lequel on laisse la marque du prix.—Proust (3: 916)

The absence of Montaigne's name in *A la recherche du temps perdu* must be explained by Proust's theory as it appears in *Le Temps retrouvé*: the 'price tag' of a work should not be visible. Although John Ruskin's influence on Proust has been established, Ruskin's name appears in the body of the *Recherche* but a few times, and even then the references are casual and misleading. The covert references to Ruskin play a much more important role (Macksey xv–xvi). According to Michèle M. Macgill, 'les grands absents' of *A la recherche du temps perdu* are Montaigne and Rousseau. Montaigne numbered among those authors from whose works Proust could cite entire passages. Macgill argues that the *Recherche* owes many of its themes to Montaigne, and that, on the whole, scholarship has not investigated to what extent Montaigne was a precursor of Proust. Proust wrote under the façade of an amateur writer, like Montaigne, and the importance of travel and of illness to the generation and content of both *oeuvres* bears witness to Montaigne's presence in the *Recherche* despite his apparent absence (15–17). By thinking of the *Recherche* in its cathedral form at least one other dimension of the literary kinship between Montaigne and Proust becomes clear. The mnemonic architecture which underlies both the *Essais* and the *Recherche* is the stamp of their modernity as well as their debt to the Middle Ages.

According to Macgill, movement incites both Montaigne and the narrator of the *Recherche* to write (18). She cites the voyages of Montaigne and the steeples of Martinville as examples of the role movement plays in their literary productions. Alain-Marc Rieu goes further by proposing that Montaigne's journeys also provide him with the "matériau brut," his memory, for the *Essais*. Rieu contends that Montaigne's *Journal du voyage* serves as an mnemonic exercise in which he makes note of the places he visits in all the particular detail which makes them unique (61). In reference to Montaigne's travels in general, Paul Bonnefon calls the journal "un recueil de photographies instantanées, saisies sur le vif par l'oeil le plus amoureux du détail qui fut jamais" (5). Montaigne will take this "matériau brut," his "recueil de photographies," digest it, and transform it into the matter which forms his book, words which, as we shall see, also apply to Proust.

The classical art of memory, as discussed by Frances Yates in her book, *The Art of Memory*, makes use of memorized loci such as are found in Montaigne's travel journal, by mentally placing images in them in order to remember names, logical arguments, or speeches. Each part of the façade of a building, for example, can hold an image. The images should somehow recall what one

wants to remember by virtue of the meaning assigned to it. The more particular and striking the image, the greater potential for artificial memory it holds. Then later, by retracing the details of the architecture in a certain order, one finds the images one by one in their respective places, and is reminded of what they represent.

Mary Carruthers, who calls Frances Yates's "art of memory" "locational memory," argues that the principles of medieval memory inspired the medieval interpretation of texts, be they visual or verbal, as well as the creation of such texts. Memory in a medieval context, she maintains, is not to be understood according to our modern ideas of it, that is, memory as rote memorization, but rather as a self-constructed malleable structure with which to organize, associate, juxtapose, and contemplate one's knowledge:

The real power of the mnemonic structure is not as a device for repetition (rote), but as a collecting and recollecting mechanism with which to *construct* one's own education. (888; Carruthers's emphasis)

Reading under this system is then, in part, a process of recalling other texts; writing, by the same token, encodes the texts found in the writer's "memory structure" with which the reader will index in his or her own, adding texts as well as meditating on them.²

Medieval creators invoked a passage of St. Paul in which he compares himself to a "wise master-builder" (I Cor. 3:10–17) as the authority which gave rise to a well-developed mnemonic and exegetical technique based on architecture (Carruthers 890–91). According to this model, the mental plans for a text resemble the blueprints of a building, the building blocks of which are movable structures of texts and information that support the mnemonic "building" of the imagination, stimulated by constant construction and reconstruction. Carruthers asserts that

¹I would like to acknowledge the influence of Diane R. Leonard's work on my view of the Proustian text, especially with regard to Proust's study of Ruskin. The basic assumptions I make about the relationship of Proust to Ruskin are, in large part, a result of her instruction.

²Cf. Carruthers (882–87) where she examines the functions of texts in relation to mnemonic practices in Dante and Chaucer. On this point of reading and writing she notes: "We tend to make a firm division between reading and creativity now, but it is clear that medieval scholars did not. Especially in the minds of monastic writers, every verse of the Bible becomes a gathering place for other texts, into which even the most remote and unlikely matters are collected as the associational memory of the author draws them in" (892).

this is the express intent of such a compositional schema for the creation of texts:

The earlier usage of the trope indicates that the compositional schema that utilized a church building was not treated as having a fixed content or one specific task, in the manner of a mathematical theorem, but rather as a heuristic device for “finding” out meanings, rather than one that “imparts” knowledge or (worse yet) information. (891)

Carruthers’s claim rebukes that of Yates who maintains, “the necessity to remember everything in this static way, in the built-up memory, naturally impeded the free movement of the mind” (Yates, “Architecture and the Art of Memory” 7).

An example of this may be found in Dante’s movement through the spheres of his memory. Both Carruthers and Yates cite the *Divine Comedy* as an example of a textual mnemonic. The author/narrator journeys in symbolic spheres constructed to organize ancient as well as contemporary history. Yet Dante claims in his “L’epistola a Cangrande” that he records exactly what he saw on his journey, making for an interesting combination of natural and artificial memory; as if the constructed memory were conflated with the natural, i.e., life of the mind imposed on to the world, if the mind and the world can be distinguished. Indeed, memory, either retentive or creative, blurs that very distinction—the artist and the pilgrim blend into each other; each records in images. To take Dante at his word, his remembrances cannot be distinguished from his text.

Daniel Martin addresses the concerns of both Carruthers and Yates in his latest book, *L’Architecture des Essais de Montaigne*. Martin applies the principles of Yates’s art of memory to the *Essais* not as they relate to a building *per se*, but in terms of a blueprint based on mythological relationships which he sees as connecting the *Essais*. Although Martin does not contest the thought-impeding fixity of Yates’s artificial memory, in an earlier article, he refers to the essays as a whole by Montaigne’s term “marqueterie mal jointe,” a structure to which Montaigne could always add (51). According to Martin, then, the structure of the *Essais* suggests a model based on the principles of artificial memory which, though fixed, allows additions, a main tenet of Carruthers’s later argument. This paradoxical freedom within a closed space gives new meaning to Montaigne’s statement, “J’adjouste, mais je ne corrige pas” (3: 177).

Montaigne himself refers to some hidden structure in his chapter “De la vanité” when he says, “Les noms de mes chapitres n’en embrassent pas toujours la matiere; souvent ils la denotent seulement par quelque marque” (3: 207). He later continues:

C’est l’indiligent lecteur qui pert mon subject, non pas moy; il s’en trouvera tousjours en un coing quelque mot qui ne laisse pas d’estre bastant, quoy qu’il soit serré. . . . Mon stile et mon esprit vont vagabondant de mesmes. (3: 208)

The signs by which the reader can follow Montaigne’s thought, though not necessarily obvious, can be read. The use of the word “coing” in itself suggests a three-dimensional conception of writing in space and corroborates the notion that some form of architecture underlies the *Essais*. Although Yates speaks a great deal of the usefulness of artificial memory in memorizing texts before and during manuscript culture, Montaigne’s *Essais* seem to have been conceived in the opposite direction, as in Carruthers’s scheme. Instead of beginning with the word and then moving to image, the visual mnemonic plan preceded the writing of the text (Martin, *L’Architecture des Essais de Montaigne* 170).

The discernment of these hidden structures requires that, while reading the text, the reader also construct a blueprint of the visual images or parallels which, according to Martin, convey meaning not immediately evident without attempting to create such a blueprint. A reader accustomed to the practices of a compositional technique afforded by the principles of medieval memory would attempt to perceive this “hypertext” (*L’Architecture des Essais de Montaigne* 171) as a matter of course and consider the relationships and juxtapositions which appear as part and parcel of the agreed upon rules of interpretation. Natural memory allows the reader to perceive the hidden structure of a text by making comparisons and remembering similarities which occur in other places. Once the general structure has been perceived, however, a familiarity with the conventions of trained memories and the compositional technique which informs the texts would encourage interpretation and meditation on the juxtapositions and associations for what they in themselves suggest. According to Carruthers, viewing the imaginary structure at a distance is a standard element of memory technique (886). The *re-reader*, then, who through natural memory begins to visualize the text as a whole, is able to observe the relationships which Martin sees in the underlying mythology of the *Essais*.

If one accepts Rieu’s analysis of the *Journal du voyage* as a record of places which later serve as a mental grid for memory, it is possible to find a model for the overall structure of the *Essais* in the grotto Montaigne discovers on the way to Florence from Scarperia in a house called Pratolino:

Il y a de miraculeus une grotte à plusieurs demures et pieces: ceste partie surpasse tout ce que nous ayons jamais veu ailleurs. Elle est encroutée et formée partout de certene matiere qu’ils disent estre apportée de quelques montagnes, et l’ont cousue à tout des clous imperceptiblemant. Il y a non-sulemant de la musicque et harmonie qui se fait par le mouvemant de l’eau, mais encore le mouvemant de plusieurs statues et portes à divers actes, que l’eau esbranle, plusieurs animaux qui s’y plongent pour boire, et choses samblables. A un sul mouvemant toute la grotte est pleine d’eau, tous les sieges vous rejallissent l’eau aus fesses; et, fuiant de la grotte, montant contremont les eschaliers du chateau, il sort d’eus

en deux degrés de cet escalier, qui veut donner ce plaisir, mille filets d'eau qui vous vont baignant jusques au haut du logis. (83)

Although the complete structure of this grotto remains unknown to the reader of the *Journal*, the terminology of the description allows the grotto to serve as a model for a mnemonic understanding of the *Essais*. The cells and the rooms make up the different sections of the text, places into which mnemonic images are set. The encrusted texture of the supporting structures imply both the incorporation of foreign material, analogous to the copious citations of other authors within the body of the *Essais*, and the layering of material which defines the space and the structure of rooms—the piling up of allusions, anecdotes and thoughts under a certain heading of the essay which are nailed together invisibly by Montaigne's vision of the whole. The twofold order of the *Essais* becomes most apparent, however, in this very relationship of the encrustation in the wall to the wall itself. Like an insect crawling over the surface of a building, the line by line reading of the text exposes every detail of the encrusted material. At a distance, however, the entire structure, or here, the order of the *Essais* materializes, permitting the analysis of relationships which arise from a “non-linear” reading of the *Essais*. The architecture of the *Essais*, like that of a building, has no true beginning or end, and the eye, or the mind, glides from one sculpture to another, taking note of how each part serves to create the effect of the whole.

With this relationship in mind, the water within the grotto evinces the style in which Montaigne writes. Water reappears time and time again as a metaphor for writing: “Nous n'allons pas; on nous emporte, comme les choses qui flottent, ores doucement, ores avecques violence, selon que l'eau est ireuse ou bonasse” (2: 6). Water provides a model for the undulating, unpredictable nature of the *Essais*, “sans certaine figure, n'ayants ordre, suite ny proportion que fortuite” (1: 231). Montaigne's writing itself washes to and fro randomly within the grotto around the statues and doors, which, also mobile, recall the mnemonic images and patterns forming, paradoxically, “solid” figures out of the desultory style of the *Essais*.

In this “marqueterie mal jointe,” the classical and the modern intersect. The grotto epitomizes the convergence of the past, present, and future in Montaigne's *Essais* insofar as the underlying structure has its roots in the classical tradition and the style of the *Essais* itself prefigures writing organized by the author's stream of thought, creating the quintessentially modern genre of the essay:

Montaigne, ce n'est pas un moment, relativement court de la pensée, c'est au contraire une somme de pensée. J'irai même plus loin: je dirai que c'est toute la pensée. En effet, la synthèse des *Essais* résume et fond la pensée gréco-romaine, la pensée chrétienne et la pensée moderne. Montaigne représente donc, à mes yeux, toute la civilisation. (Borel 3)

Proust, too, is in a position to emulate Montaigne, being himself both on the verge of similar future and past liter-

ary traditions. In using the Gothic cathedral to model his hypertext, Proust invokes medieval traditions, yet gives us, at the same time, reason to look to his work for a prototype of the modern novel. His copious quotations and pastiches of other authors remind us of Montaigne's quoting of Latin sources and their subsequent integration and revision in the *Essais*. These incorporations and encrustations, of which John Ruskin's work is a prime example, stand out in relief on the cathedral structure of the *Recherche* and attest to the presence of invisible sources.

The narrator's realization of his vocation coincides with his involuntary memory of himself standing in the baptistry of St. Mark's cathedral. His involuntary memory comes to him as revelation and inspiration in the spatial form of the cathedral-novel—the instantaneous view of the novel as it appears not in its temporal, linear form, but in its extratemporal, simultaneous form of a cathedral. There, for the first time, inside his mental St. Mark's, the narrator sees the structure of the church around him, that is to say, the shape his novel will take. As the source of inspiration, however, it is significant that the cathedral structure once served the narrator as an object of study because of the experiences which cling to the symbol of St. Mark's. In *La Bible d'Amiens* Proust describes Ruskin's thought as something embodied in an object:

la pensée de Ruskin n'est pas comme la pensée d'un Emerson par exemple qui est contenue tout entière dans un livre, c'est-à-dire un quelque chose d'abstrait, un pur signe d'elle-même. L'objet auquel s'applique une pensée comme celle de Ruskin et dont elle est inséparable, n'est pas immatériel, il est répandu ça et là où il se trouve, à Pise, à Florence, à Venise, à la National Gallery, à Rouen, à Amiens, dans les montagnes de la Suisse. (90–91)

Being one site of Ruskin's thought, the narrator's visual involuntary memory of St. Mark's functions, for the narrator, as both a retentive and creative image. It symbolizes the authority of the writers whose works Proust had committed to memory, but whose influence reveals itself in an original text of the narrator's own. In plotting Ruskin's thought in geographical terms, Proust commands the techniques artificial memory: conceiving of Ruskin's thought as a site exploits the associative power of objects or images in a pre-modern constructed memory. In Carruthers's terms, the citation of authors in the narrator's own cathedral bears witness to their full appropriation into the narrator's operative body of knowledge and learning, demonstrating the mastery *and* imagination of a constructed memory.

In discussing the anti-intellectual element in Proust's theory of reading, Antoine Compagnon explains that Proust conceives of the ideal book as “un livre à images” (3: 887) in order to reconcile the gap between life and reading. Reading, by this account, lulls the reader into passivity and idolatry thereby precluding lived experience. Compagnon contends, “la chose à lire idéale ne serait pas un livre mais une illustration” (241), an illustration which

must be read much like the mnemonic images at work in the architecture of Montaigne's *Essais*. At odds with each other, the passive, idolatrous artist competes with the pilgrim. Yet it would seem, in the end, that his life and reading do meet, given that the cathedral represents other memories and texts in the narrator's natural and artificial memory. Two metaphors complement the concept "livre à images" to which Compagnon refers, "bibles historiées" and "livres d'heures," with which the narrator claims he would furnish his library. Both synonyms for the cathedral, the former invokes the medieval cathedral as a Bible for the illiterate, while the latter suggests Proust's own conception of the cathedral, a structure existing in four dimensions, the fourth being that of time.³ Time and memory converge in the cathedral. That is to say, straight narrative represents linear time summarized by a series of narrative cues, or mnemonic images. The narrative, then, represented by the cathedral, is tantamount to a site inscribed with various thoughts—the hallmark of artificial memory.

The texts the narrator would collect bridge the gap between life and reading inasmuch as the concepts "bibles historiées" and "livres d'heures" unite textual and autobiographical recall under the one mnemonic plan of the cathedral. As a "livre à images," the cathedral contains both the associations implied by a "bible historiée," i.e., memories of texts, and those implied by a "livre d'heures," since these record autobiographical remembrances. Images encode both sorts of memory which overlap in the narrator's mind. The images resurrected by a text, for example, are not just those of the reading, but also out of life which adhere to the memory of reading the text. Like a constructed memory, autobiographical memory, chronicling not each moment in sequence but cues to the narrative, organizes personal experience by imitating the same process by which images, consciously and expressly created for facilitating recall, fill the architecture of an artificial memory. In this sense, what Yates calls "natural memory," that is to say, memory which is not consciously constructed, is also artificial.

The narrator encapsulates the paradox of autobiographical memory, which can be thought as a strict time line or as a series of narrative cues, when reflecting on the nature of his novel:

Ce livre, le plus pénible de tous à déchiffrer, est aussi le seul que nous ait dicté la réalité, le seul dont "l'impression" ait été fait en nous par la réalité même. (3: 880)

³ "Tout cela faisait d'elle [l'église] pour moi quelque chose d'entièrement différent du reste de la ville: un édifice occupant, si l'on peut dire, un espace à quatre dimensions—la quatrième étant celle du Temps—, déployant à travers les siècles son vaisseau qui, de travée en travée, de chapelle en chapelle, semblait vaincre et franchir non pas seulement quelques mètres, mais des époques successives d'où il sortait victorieux" (1: 61).

Even the book dictated by reality must be interpreted. Indeed, according to the narrator, it is the most difficult to interpret. In other words, one's memory of reality, the events of one's life, for example, cannot be read without ambiguity, the images which resurface must be reinterpreted; the task of the artist is to translate the experience of the pilgrim. Remembering is thus a creative, interpretive act. Therefore, whether reading the illustrations of other authors or those of one's own memory, deciphering the images leads to the understanding of both life and art, the journey and its symbol.

Montaigne, too, employs reading as a means to perceive oneself and the world, asserting in "De l'institution des enfants" that he would have the Book of Nature be his student's textbook:

qui se presente, comme dans un tableau, cette grande image de nostre mere nature en son entiere magesté; qui lit en son visage une si generale et constante variété; qui se remarque là dedans, et non soy, mais tout un royaume, comme un traict d'une pointe très-delicat: celui-là seul estime les choses selon leur juste grandeur. Ce grande monde, . . . c'est le miroüer où il nous faut regarder pour nous connoistre de bon biais. Somme, je veux que ce soit le livre de mon escolier. (1: 205)

Montaigne's tableau of Nature contains the entire kingdom of being. In reading it, observing it, one finds the proper aspect of oneself. Using this angle as a point of departure, the self and the world are mutually constructed. The self is discovered as a projection on the mirror of the world around it. Montaigne reads the Book of Nature as he moves, and in each new sight there is a new truth to be discovered, a new symbol to be interpreted in which mirror the self is continually sighted.

Proust's snapshots of Venice and Montaigne's *Journal du voyage*, figuratively the journeys of life, coalesce and become fluctuating mnemonic monuments of their experience. "Il n'est personne," writes Montaigne, "s'il escoute, qui ne descouvre en soy une forme sienne, une forme maistresse, qui luitte contre l'institution, et contre la tempeste des passions qui luy sont contraires" (3: 26). The patterns which rise from the text, as the book of symbols which must be deciphered, engrave the authors' work with signs of their inner mnemonic architecture, records of their autobiographical and mental journeys. Readers of Montaigne and Proust decipher the signs and reconstruct them in assimilating the texts into their own systems of knowledge. In response to those who would criticize his work on Ruskin by saying that he should be concerned with developing his own ideas and not with Ruskin's, Proust replies:

Il n'y pas de meilleure manière d'arriver à prendre conscience de ce qu'on sent sou-même que d'essayer de recréer en soi ce qu'a senti un maître. Dans cet effort profond c'est notre pensée elle-même que nous mettons, avec la sienne, au jour. Nous sommes libres

dans la vie, mais en ayant des buts. . . . C'est à un sophisme tout aussi naïf qu'obéissent sans le savoir les écrivains qui font à tout moment le vide dans leur esprit, croyant le débarrasser de toute influence extérieure, pour être bien sûrs de rester personnels. En réalité les seuls cas où nous disposons vraiment de toute notre puissance d'esprit sont ceux où nous ne croyons pas faire oeuvre d'indépendance, où nous ne choisissons pas arbitrairement le but de notre effort. . . . Le sujet de romancier, la vision du poète, la vérité du philosophe s'imposent à eux d'une façon presque nécessaire, extérieure pour ainsi dire à leur pensée. Et c'est en soumettant son esprit à rendre cette vision, à approcher de cette vérité, que l'artiste devient vraiment lui-même. (*Contre Sainte-Beuve* 140)

Only when under the influence of a master can the reader begin to create his own mnemonic images, write his own essays, his own novel. Proust writes, "Grâce à l'art, au lieu de voir un seul monde, le nôtre, nous le voyons se multiplier, et, autant qu'il y a d'artistes originaux (3: 895-96). Each book contains different symbols, found within its author, which, having been inscribed into constructed and by natural memory, provide the key to the world as each author has known it and the "matériau brut" for the readers' own creations.

Thus the tradition of the 'wise master-builder' which Carruthers documents gives way to one master after another. From Dante's log of celestial travels to Montaigne's *Journal de voyage*, to the memory cathedral of Proust, the record of experience, autobiographical, or fictional, consists of the reproduction of images as well as their composition. Memory retains and creates. The Book of Memory, as it appears in Montaigne and in Proust, is in essence imagination, of which the authors are the architects and builders. As a text, a constructed artificial memory sets forth an interpretation of the world cast of the author's own life, reading, and context, which in turn holds up the mirror by which readers discover, orient, and interpret themselves. Literary inheritance relies on this function of all texts; history itself is a hall of such mirrors. Proust's and Montaigne's literary kinship thus rests upon this concept of imagination as memory which can indeed build castles in the sky, or rather, in the mind.

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