

Proust e gli oggetti
Giuseppe Girimonti Greco, Sabrina Martina,
Marco Piazza eds.

Le Cáríti Editore, “Logos” n. 25, Florence, 2012

John Rogove

Modernity, philosophical, literary and political, is rightly thought to have effected a sort of Copernican revolution, putting the subject at the centre of its considerations. And the figure of Marcel Proust is often taken as emblematic of this re-centring in literature, making the narrative subject itself its ‘subject’ (in the pre-modern sense), and *A la recherche du temps perdu* as a monument to literary modernist navel-gazing solipsism. No sooner however, did Modernity give birth to the omnivorous ‘subject’ than was this subject, in its relation to its Other, the object, rendered problematic, opening a crisis that is far from closed. Whether this crisis manifests itself in the economic and literary consequences of the capitalist mode of object-production (resulting from the ascendancy of the liberal bourgeois ‘subject-centred’ regime) and the advent of mass democratic man, in the psychoanalytic troubling of the superego’s quietude through the shocks of involuntary memory provoked by certain objects, or in the phenomenological discovery of intentionality and thus of a subject defined by its relation more to the objects it constitutes than to itself, Proust, as the heir of the Balzacian ‘positivistic’ realism which seemed at first sight so typical of Modernity’s unproblematic relation to objects, is in fact an endlessly fascinating and fruitful site of these crises, and objects in the *Recherche* are revelatory of class distinction and alienation, sexual perversion, and the paradoxes of personal identity.

Which is why the collective volume *Proust e gli oggetti*, a rhapsodic literary-philosophical catalogue of various objects and their place in the *Recherche*, published by Le Cáríti Editore (Florence) and itself a beautiful object, is so welcome and interesting. Edited by three eminent Italian Proustians, Giuseppe Girimonti Greco, Sabrina Martina and Marco Piazza, *Proust e gli oggetti* is situated somewhere between a “dictionary” format and a collection of papers, in both French and Italian. The unevenness in the length of the entries is not too troublesome, and expresses a variety of interpretive approaches and thematic scopes, arranged into two

sections, “Spatio-temporal objects” and “Objects of expression and representation”. The first is subdivided into parts on objects having to do with “movement”, “communication”, “vision” and “memory”; the second, into parts on “narrative” objects and objects of “artistic representation”.

As is apparent from the sectioning, the “catalogue” builds from the most seemingly straightforward to more obviously complex and subjectively sedimented types of objects, from tools of everyday use, often technological innovations, to artistic products, such as books, themselves heavily invested with the subjective structures that nevertheless, this volume convincingly shows, invest even the simplest and most utilitarian object. The new tools of spatial mobility, trains, automobiles, elevators and bicycles, are vectors of social mobility but also of anxiety, being associated in the case of trains (M. Sandras), elevators (V. Agostini-Ouafi), and bicycles (H. Sakamoto) with the disruption of social codes – and with social liberation in the case of the latter two, as the figure of the bicycle-riding woman was seen as a moral and social threat, blurring gender and class lines at once, making the *bourgeoise* indistinguishable from the supposedly more sexually available proletarian or prostitute while at the same time turning her into a physically fleeing and newly autonomous object. The telephone (Ch. Deroy) is a tool of magical transportation of the beloved – a sort of “fairy” whose calls become as anticipated as the actual presence of the beloved, but which becomes for this very reason the site of the lover’s near imprisonment, chaining him as it were in expectation to this little mechanical object. The telegraph plays a central dramatic role between the intimate immediacy of the telephone and the slowness of the letter; but together with the telephone, it represents technological modernity which Th. Barège presents as just as characteristic of 19th century positivism as of literary modernism. Not that Proust adopts any naïvely realist scientific objectivism – these objects are presented precisely as more than just supplementary – however marvellous – ways of mastering objective space and time: they fundamentally alter the subjective, descriptive, narrative faculty itself. The depiction of the automobile (J.-Ch. Valtat), moreover, is typical of modernism in that the experience of the machine does as much to alter spatial movement as it does the relation of narrative time to that space, forcing the lived body into greater impressionistic passivity just as it seems to enable its physical mastery of distance. This dynamic is generative of the epiphanies typical of modernism, since it is *my motion* which gives to banal objects we pass in a car their “aura”, the “transcendent status” that helps reveal to me the temporal constituting activity of my own subject. Modernism is the

subjective re-appropriation of what had first seemed the dehumanizing brutality of technology, whose mechanical “shocks”, which Benjamin showed to be signs of Baudelaire’s epochal modernity, are among the most powerful triggers of “involuntary memory”.

According to Agamben (*Stanze*, 1977, Einaudi, Turin, pp. 39-54), Baudelaire is more radical than Marx about objects as having been irrevocably transformed by modernity into fetishes, and he thus recovers an even more fundamental dimension of the object, beyond even its mere use-value (from which, for Marx, it has been alienated by its exchange-value) – the originary stage at which it is indistinguishable from and therefore constitutive of the ego; and only the artist is able to recall and exorcise this preconscious dynamic responsible for our fetishistic investment in objects – objects being first described and thematised as such – naturalistically – in the literary realism that accompanied, as if by accident, the development of precisely the bourgeois industrial societies that transformed the meaning of everyday objects. These and other Benjaminian themes which Piazza explores in his dense introduction provide one of the theoretical threads to the volume. He shows objects to be the lever by which it is possible to leave the “grey halo” of everyday routine into which their functionality is inscribed, precisely through their “dysfunctionalisation” – their breaking down, reduced from their use-value to their simple, radical, theretofore unnoticed *presence*. They become thereby vectors of desire or instruments for the interpenetration of those desires which are part of a dynamic distinct from the system of use and its accompanying, constitutive system of sign-instruments. In this sense the object, once thematised in its signal presence and extracted from its pre-constitutive web of instrumentality, can either open onto liberating creativity or trap one in debilitating neurosis and dysfunctionality. Proust, like Baudelaire, is able to restore to the object its proper “aura” – which is, unlike the object of Marx’s nostalgia, beyond not only its exchange-value, but even its use-value and the properties that make it valuable for human life *qua* its specificity as a particular object. Like Heidegger’s *vorhanden* object – whose absence from these analyses is slightly surprising – it reveals itself in all its in-habitual strangeness and turns the “what”-question back from itself to us, to the life of the constituting subject, when its use-value breaks down or we start to see it free from the sign-system by which it was defined always in reference to its use. But, unlike Heidegger’s, this “restitution” or recovery of the object beyond use- or exchange-value is not a grasping of the object in its originary presence but rather a “dialectical reconciliation” of the inorganic matter

and organic life such as they are present in the object as fetish in *both* the Marxist *and* the Freudian senses – i.e., as repository of the diffuse aestheticisation of all objects through their commercial merchandisation especially as vehiculated through advertising and as the repository of blocked and displaced sexual impulses as they fixate metonymically on an inorganic object in a closed circuit, and concomitantly reify the body of the organic, living beloved.

Thus objects, such as fruit, in one of a triptych by Th.-V. Ton-That that are among the most purely literary, associated with aristocracy and laden with such translucent lyrical clarity as to rival and outstrip the still-lives of a Chardin or a Monet, are laden too with the forbidden eroticism of maidens in flower, focusing for example the narrator's gaze synecdochally on Albertine's rosy cheek – cheeks which, S. Guidani shows, are the Proustian site of the fleeting possibility of a fantasised hypostatic union between two otherwise inaccessibly sealed off bodies and souls each with its own autonomously functioning erotic economy. The intelligibility and impenetrability of the desired bodily surface, resulting from the automatic distance between subject and object that is established by ocular intentionality, is challenged by the searching presence of all the senses behind the sense of sight when sight is the intentional ray by which erotic desire sets itself on an object, in a way analogous to how we look upon fruit. This subjective capacity has its objective counterpart in that of cheeks to transmit and translate onto the skin the deepest inner workings of the desire of another subject – they become flushed, with desire or shame, signs by which the (other) subject indicates her self-constitution through repression of and resistance to desire. Cheeks are a part that gives access to the whole, a partial object onto which the gaze fetishistically latches on as the indicator of both the presence and the absence of alienated impulses.

Ton-That adds to her literary sensitivity to the multifaceted presence of objects that does no unnecessary conceptual violence to their place and significance a surprising treatment of the meta-object that is the madeleine that does full justice to the too-often overlooked echoes of Descartes' *Meditations* in the *Recherche*. The focus on the madeleine as object in the narration but also as epistemic condition of possibility of the narration itself pulls the focus once again, like in the Husserlian transcendental reduction prefigured by Descartes, back up from the object to the intentional structure of its constituting subjectivity – a structure which, *qua* intentional, is revealed not through any direct introspection into a substantialised subject, but precisely rather through its objects,

not in the naïve realist sense, but taking these objects to be signs revelatory of a subjective charge, the explorations of whose inevitable constituting through perspectival and temporal adumbrations are themselves constitutive of a narrative subjectivity.

Piazza's contribution on photographic instruments shows their role not so much as physical objects as constantly employed metaphor for the sort of altered perception that allows for a simultaneous superimposition of several concrete exemplary images of one and the same or similar objects throughout time and space in such a way as to give them subjective relief. In this way, it is no longer a banal, "real" object that is under consideration, but rather the *essence* of the object, which is to take into account its universal and peculiar quality of being subjectively constituted and so bring ultimately into view something like the essence of the narrative, desiring subject itself.

In a very similar vein, M. Bal's paper-length entry on optical instruments seeks to show how these latter are a "recurrent structuring metaphor" that serves to hinge together what she calls the "great truths" the author wants to "engrave in his temple" and the minute details of everyday life and objects that he uses to reveal them, often by bringing thematic structural attention to the "focalising subject" itself. And not only, as Piazza points out, that of the narrator, but also that of the reader, with the writing functioning not only as focusing lens but also mirror.

The Husserlian themes treated by Martina in her introduction obviously provide the other philosophical thread, and lead naturally into a Deleuzian treatment of virtuality. In her entry on lamps, she examines the presence of light in its various declensions. The lamp moreover being the mythical object with which one penetrates into a cave, she reveals a Proustian reversal of the Platonic myth: Proust is faithful to the modern project, beginning with Galileo and extending through positivism to Marx and Freud, in which the truth-seeker does not ascend from the cave to contemplate the eternal sun of changeless idealities but rather descends, lantern in hand, in order to explore the historically contingent shadows projected by the artificial light of the hypothetical-deductive method, illuminating in this way not the superlunary ideally unified sense beyond the contingent but rather the subterranean workings of nature and history, the lower more basic truths generative of the supposedly higher. Which leads to the other theme present in the Proustian lamp, the Leibnizian reality-possibility polarity which she also associates with the Deleuzian taxonomy of temporal syntheses (which in turn mobilises the phenomenological notion of the dialectical retentional-protensional ob-

ject-constituting flux) and which, from the first pages of the *Recherche*, plays a foundational role in the narrator's ability to reconstitute "the original traits of [his] ego", his *moi*, through the hypothetical projection of those contingent historical possibilities, those "places...where I had lived or where I could have been". The same dialectic between immediate retention and memory proper that allows for the constitution of hypothetical and virtual objects is what allows the narrative "I" to regain itself.

The remainder of the book includes a series on the book as object, following an upward spiral of greater self-referentiality and narrative *mise-en-abîme* through a problematisation of the distinction between the narrator's subjectivity or the unfolding and structure of the *Recherche* itself and the objects represented in and by it. The book as mere social capital or merchandise, indicative of the narrator's alienation from his vocation, is the theme of B. Brun's entry, and A. Lushenkova shows that the book in the library, being associated with "etymology and aristocracy", the "erudite and *mondaine* conceptions of the book" – two ideas that are dangerous for the artistic vocation" – makes the book *qua* object in Proust both an aspiration and a potential source of alienation. Other entries include the meta-entry by M. Scotti on an Italian edition of the *Recherche* itself as an object, or by J. Brami on the coat-rack as a sign both of crypto-judaism and of artistic vocation; and several excellent entries on various complex artistic or fashion objects which each deserve a fuller treatment than here. The erudition, sensitivity and wide-ranging theoretical resources mobilised by the various authors throughout the collection make it a riveting read, plunging the reader into the fine grained Proustian minutiae with the asymmetrical grace and strange familiarity of the objects themselves.