

7. The Subjective Ground of Differentiation in Kant, Proust and Mamardashvili: Topology of Fiction

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Abstract: This paper focuses on the concept of the subjective ground of differentiation, which is first found in Kant and later re-elaborated in the works of the French novelist Marcel Proust and the Soviet-Georgian philosopher Merab Mamardashvili. Through this constellation of thinkers, we approach what can be called a “topology of fiction,” which concerns itself with determining the primordial place of artistic creation, just as it does for the act of thinking. In this sense, the work of art appears as a work of deciphering signs dispersed through heterogeneous strata of lived time and space. These lines of argument are complemented by the analyses of Gilles Deleuze in *Proust and Signs* (1964).

Keywords: subjective ground, feeling, differentiation, topology, sign, thought, creation

I. Introduction

As it happens, Kant was Mamardashvili’s favorite philosopher and Proust his favorite novelist. Across this convergence, through different times and spaces, we have a configuration of figures who show a heightened awareness of what has been called a subjective ground of differentiation, which appears foremost as a necessity in the act of thinking. This necessity, which has, perhaps rather paradoxically, a spontaneous character (a felt sense), calls for the opening of an inner space that is indispensable for thinking just as it is for the creation of fiction.

Proust might not have been a philosopher, but he certainly considered writing a philosophical treatise. He wrote in 1908 in his notebook: “Should it be a novel, a philosophical study, am I a novelist?”¹ Ulti-

¹ Annick Bouillaguet and Brian G. Rogers, eds., *Dictionnaire Marcel Proust* (Paris: Champion, 2020), 764.

mately, *In Search of Lost Time* turned out to be a peculiar fiction: the seven-volume work is, in essence, about how the narrator (Marcel) becomes a writer. The theoretical reflections about art, life, and philosophy are intricately woven with the narrative. It is in this way that the background itself, upon which the characters are drawn, comes into play and starts posing questions about its motifs and motivations, or more precisely – about its beginning and its place.

We will thus talk about the topology of this fiction, which seems to begin in a primordial place – in a dark room deep in the night where the awakened sleeper (the narrator) is struggling to reconstitute his place in the world. Topology is an important concept for Mamardashvili and, seen from a retrospective point of view, for Kant as well, who is no less concerned about our orientation in the world. A beginning must be found, and this beginning appears only after the arduous work of elucidation, a work that belongs to the artist just as to the philosopher, as we will see in the pages that follow.

II. Subjective Ground of Differentiation in Kant

In 1786, when Immanuel Kant was asked to resolve the debate between faith and reason, he composed a short piece – *What does it mean to orient oneself in thinking?* – in order to mediate the unnecessary tension between the two sides. To illuminate the inner dynamics of rational thought, Kant takes up the metaphor of spatial orientation. In fact, even though it might seem to us that we orient ourselves by purely external means (e.g., the position of the sun in the sky), we also need to be able to carry out – parallel to the external orientation – an internal differentiation. Kant writes:

I also need the feeling of a difference in my own subject, namely, the difference between my right and left hands. I call this a feeling because these two sides outwardly display no designatable difference in intuition.²

And Kant offers another example, too – that of a dark room:

In the dark I orient myself in a room that is familiar to me if I can take hold of even one single object whose position I remember. But [...] if someone as a joke had moved all the objects around so that

² Immanuel Kant, *Religion and Rational Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 8.

what was previously on the right was now on the left, I would be quite unable to find anything in a room whose walls were otherwise wholly identical. But I can soon orient myself through the mere feeling of a difference between my two sides, the right and left.³

As we see, Kant insists that orientation – in space and in thought, too – emerges out of a feeling of difference. Here, the difference is not something “designatable.” Yet, why exactly a feeling? This focus becomes more understandable in the light of Kant’s much earlier writing, *Concerning the Ultimate Ground of the Differentiation of Directions in Space* (1768), where he gives us the example of incongruent counterparts: two hands, even though they are identical in shape and size, cannot be exchanged (swapped), precisely because they are the mirror image of each other. Kant thereby sought to refute Leibnizian relative space (seen as constituted by merely external relations) in favour of the Newtonian notion of space as absolute (even though, later, Kant would view space rather as a form of intuition).

What is crucial here is to understand that the difference, even though internal, is nevertheless non-conceptual, as Gilles Deleuze also points out in *Difference and Repetition*.⁴ It is no longer about the external difference between two objects, e.g., a horse and a man (which are conceptually different), but about a difference that does not let itself be represented, and which dramatizes or even creates a point of view. If orientation is to be sought in the subjective ground of differentiation (hence the intricate nature of Kant’s Copernican revolution), it is because representation is continuously brought to the ground (thus, grounded), towards a center of gravity which is both discovered and created. This is also why, as Kant stresses, freedom in thinking signifies the subjection of reason to no laws except those which it gives itself.⁵

It is this autonomous nature of reason which calls for a feeling; it is, at the same time, a curious imperative: that I should know what I am searching for, that I should respond to a feeling summoning me.

³ Ibid., 9.

⁴ “It is because a difference can be internal, yet not conceptual (as the paradox of symmetrical objects shows). A dynamic space must be defined from the point of view of an observer tied to that space, not from an external position. There are internal differences which dramatise an Idea before representing an object.” Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), 31.

⁵ Kant, *Religion and Rational Theology*, 16.

III. Deciphering Signs: The Emergence of Fiction in Proust

If Kantian transcendental philosophy is to be understood as a search for and elaboration of the subjective ground of differentiation (which escapes a conceptual designation and puts us in touch with a feeling), we can see the same kind of motif in Marcel Proust's grand novel, *In Search of Lost Time*. In fact, here, the search takes place in more than one dimension.

First of all, the author does not yet know what the material (subject) should be for his novel. As we know, Proust finally settles on a fictionalized account of his own life, inasmuch as he comes to the decision: the lost truths of lived life should be retrieved from the oblivion of time past. Secondly, there is a search for the subject – for a writer who can, who will write the novel. Paradoxically, the novel is about Marcel (the narrator) becoming a writer. Towards the end, we, the readers, learn of his ultimate decision to set himself to work, to finally dedicate his time to the work of his life. Thus, the turning point appears, but also the novel ends – a closure calling for a bewildered reflection.

The Proustian novel creates a vastness of suspense, which is less about plot twists (though we observe the becoming-in-time of characters, a becoming that has mostly a decadent allure) than about the time the writer gives himself – by writing and by deciding to write. Out of this time arises a gigantic (and yet unfinished) architecture of the novel with its vertiginous perspectives. Right on the final page, Proust famously draws a parallel between the “restricted place” which men occupy in space and the much bigger place which they take up in time, which makes them resemble “giants plunged into years”; or, as he puts it in a perhaps even more telling metaphor, it is as if these men were perched on living stilts which never cease to grow until sometimes they become taller than church steeples.⁶

Yet, to cut directly to the point, what motivates the author to dedicate so much of his time (in fact, his last days) to producing this strange fiction? In other words, how does he find the desire to immerse himself in such a work? And if “eternal duration is promised no more to men's works than to

⁶ Marcel Proust, *In Search of Lost Time*, Vol. 6, *Time Regained* (London: Vintage Classics, 1996), 534.

men,”⁷ then why should one give the last of his energy to it?

Here we face the deep nature of desire which becomes constitutive for the work of fiction. This desire seems to be, for the most part, psychological: the novel is abundant in love stories that resonate with each other. Thus, for example, the love of Swann for Odette gets reflected and to some degree repeated in the love of Marcel for Gilberte or Albertine. Yet, seen from a purely psychological point of view, the series of loves in the social world seems to be mere metaphors or replicas of each other. They vary, but they are easily exhausted and quickly lose their essence as objects of desire. But there can also be another kind of motif. Laurent Jenny offers us an insightful differentiation between variation and what he calls variance:

Variation revolves around a motif (called a theme in music) that serves as its structural key, secretly – or sometimes explicitly – governing its deviations as a principle of constancy. Variation eventually saturates the motif’s possibilities for differentiation and thus has limited development. Variance, on the other hand, links together a series of recurrences that come to lose all shared properties with the initial motif, and is virtually endless.⁸

This inexhaustibility of variance expresses itself just as much in Marcel’s desire for Albertine (in his love, but more importantly in his jealousy, which outlives even her death) as it does in the desire to write: going beyond a mere documentation of life towards a fiction. For if our intellect only keeps lifeless copies of lived moments and thus has no access to the truth (this is what Proust famously reproaches the so-called voluntary memories for), then we also need an impulse that starts from a different place than the apparent order of things.

As we know, the starting place of the novel is a dark room where the awakened sleeper is trying to recompose his identity, to find his place in the world again. This is a dark place, traversed by intermittent fulgurations. Here, thought, searching for the recognizable features of the thinker himself, plunges into immense depths of primordial darkness. Proust writes:

⁷ The entire passage reads: “No doubt my books too, like my fleshly being, would in the end one day die. But death is a thing that we must resign ourselves to. We accept the thought that in ten years we ourselves, in a hundred years our books, will have ceased to exist. Eternal duration is promised no more to men’s works than to men.” Ibid., 514.

⁸ Laurent Jenny, “L’effet Albertine,” *Poétique*, no. 142 (2005): 205–18 (my translation).

I had only, in its original simplicity, the sense of existence as it may quiver in the depths of an animal; I was more destitute than a cave dweller; but then the memory – not yet of the place where I was, but of several of those where I had lived and where I might have been – would come to me like help from on high to pull me out of the void from which I could not have got out on my own; I crossed centuries of civilization in one second, and the image confusedly glimpsed of oil lamps, then of wing-collar shirts, gradually recomposed my self's original features.⁹

Reading this passage, disclosing the extraordinary depths of the human psyche where animal nakedness shines forth, it becomes clear why Proust as an author and creator has to invoke the help of memories. These can resemble quiet reflections, emerging from the deep murmur of interior sounds and images, but they can come forth also as sudden jolts and fulgurations. Proust places a great deal of emphasis on involuntary memories, which are not contrivances of our intellect, but – in the truest sense – signs of life.

The narrator makes clear that he has not searched for these memories – for these resurrections of the past. They come from mundane episodes (the famous episode of the Madeleine in the first volume or the uneven cobblestones in the seventh); that is to say, they are not symbols of something deeper. They are born of chance.¹⁰

This is why the personal inner work has to be done, so that these memories can be salvaged from oblivion, from the untruthfulness of wasted time. Thus, it becomes the task of a writer – a task that has to be done urgently, while one still has time – to decipher the signs that were given to him (through chance or through the grace of fate). For it is clear that our lives are populated with useless copies or doubles which heap themselves on our true impressions and hinder their feeling. These impressions should be deciphered and even translated into the true language of art – into the true language of the author himself:

This work of the artist, this struggle to discern beneath matter, beneath experience, beneath words, something that is different from them, is a process exactly the reverse of that which, in those everyday lives which we live with our gaze averted from ourselves, is at every moment

⁹ Marcel Proust, *Swann's Way*, trans. Lydia Davis (London: Penguin Books, 2002), 26.

¹⁰ Proust writes: "There is a great deal of chance in all this, and a second sort of chance event, that of our own death, often does not allow us to wait long for the favors of the first." *Ibid.* 58.

being accomplished by vanity and passion and the intellect, and habit too, when they smother our true impressions, so as entirely to conceal them from us, beneath a whole heap of verbal concepts and practical goals which we falsely call life. In short, this art which is so complicated is in fact the only living art. It alone expresses for others and renders visible to ourselves that life of ours which cannot effectually observe itself and of which the observable manifestations need to be translated and, often, to be read backwards and laboriously deciphered.¹¹

Yet, in what sense is art a superior language for expressing truths? How exactly does it avoid being a mere gloss (however beautiful) of our reality? First of all, as Gilles Deleuze notes, art liberates signs (through which we learn new or even secret things) from their dependence on materiality (and thus from their dependence on pure chance, too).¹² The materiality of signs is not negated, but one extracts from them pure resonances, which can bring together the fragmentary, discrete perspectives and transpose them onto the plane of the novel – into a fiction. What is created thereby is a point of view, which is no longer something relative (dependent on the external difference between two things, even if these two things are to be understood as subject and object), but becomes a “qualitative difference” which shows “the uniqueness of the fashion in which the world appears to each one of us”; and it is through art alone are we able to emerge from ourselves, to know what another person sees of a universe which is not the same as our own.¹³

Thus, for Proust, the only possibility of intersubjective understanding lies in art.

Furthermore, what the signs of art disclose is an Essence that holds the possible developments in a complex state. According to the Deleuzian reading, an essence is always a beginning, nay, a “radical beginning.”¹⁴ The same goes for the characters of the novel. For example, Charlus “retain[s] all the souls that compose him in the ‘complicated’ state”; and it is in this

¹¹ Proust, *In Search of Lost Time*, Vol. 6, *Time Regained*, 279.

¹² “As long as we discover a sign’s meaning in something else, matter still subsists, refractory to spirit. On the contrary, art gives us the true unity: unity of an immaterial sign and of an entirely spiritual meaning.” Gilles Deleuze, *Proust and Signs*, trans. Richard Howard (London: Continuum, 2008), 40.

¹³ Proust, *In Search of Lost Time*, Vol. 6, *Time Regained*, 540.

¹⁴ “The world enveloped by essence is always a beginning of the World in general, a beginning of the universe, an absolute, radical beginning.” Deleuze, *Proust and Signs*, 44.

way that he carries the “freshness of the world just created.”¹⁵

To sum up, it is this complication of the Essence which calls for a radical beginning. In the same way, it can be said that the Proustian novel itself is looking for its own beginning, its own starting place in a universe where complication and multiplicity (of points of view, of souls) rule. The variance (Jenny), which I invoked earlier, is in some sense a method to deal with this kind of universe, to find a foothold, or, as Kant would say, a subjective ground of differentiation. Let us now move on to another reading of Proust – a reading from a different time and different place.

IV. Awakening from Bad Infinity: Mamardashvili’s Proust

Proust was an important author for the Soviet-Georgian philosopher Merab Mamardashvili, who saw in him not only a novelist but also a thinker elaborating philosophical problems with painstaking clarity. For this reason, Proustian aesthetic concepts are intricately woven into the philosophical lectures of Mamardashvili, who does not hesitate to improvise before his audiences and to bring together philosophy, art, and even mundane aspects of everyday life well known to Soviet citizens.

Obviously, the context in which Mamardashvili finds himself influences his reading of Proust. Soviet intellectual discourse, and also the consciousness of the ordinary citizen, was saturated by ideological thinking: e.g., the idea that the right path has already been chosen and somewhere down the line there will be salvation, while in the meantime we are helpless, dependent on a vague hope that help will come from somewhere, from the outside.

For Mamardashvili, the Proustian novel is about discarding the illusions which haunt us; it is about discovering the distorted, lifeless copies (doubles) which take up our own place in the world, occupying the place of our own thoughts and words. More importantly, *In Search of Lost Time* is about awakening, or if one wants to use a more religious term, about resurrection¹⁶, which should take place in this very life.

¹⁵ Ibid., 45.

¹⁶ “The resurrection that takes place when we wake up – after that beneficent attack of mental derangement we call sleep – must in the end be similar to what happens when we recall a name, a line of poetry, or a refrain we had forgotten. And perhaps the resurrection of the soul after death is to be thought of as a phenomenon of memory.” Marcel Proust, *The Guermantes Way*, trans. Mark Treharne (London: Penguin Books, 2003), 222.

The means for this awakening or resurrection cannot be found in past (historically grounded) events or in the spiritual instructions of written texts (be they religious texts or literature). Rather, the novel should forge its own means to this end. Nothing can be copied. For – and this is the constant in Mamardashvili’s thinking – there is always something in our perception or thinking which seems self-evident and, precisely by seeming so, hinders us from thinking our thoughts to the end. Here is what he says in his Lectures on Proust:

There is such a law: the field of our vision is infinite, and in this field we see everything that our eye sees. But imagine the wall of an aquarium, in which its water is reflected endlessly. A fish does not see the walls, it sees only water. [...] But reality bursts into the aquarium, or into the world of the fish, or the world of the one who is in love (who is on this side of the glass partition and remains ignorant about what he loves) like a human hand that appears in an actual aquarium and takes a fish from the water [...]. Water was everywhere, and suddenly a hand appeared and pulled it from the aquarium.¹⁷ (Italics mine)

This endless reflection, which seems to confirm our existing thoughts and feelings (love) and thus encloses us in a representation repeating itself ad infinitum, is what Mamardashvili calls a “bad infinity.”¹⁸ When we are immersed in this element (water), we cannot see or describe our finite situation.

There are many examples of these kinds of situations in the novel, and one of the most famous is certainly that of Robert Saint-Loup (an aristocrat) who falls in love with Rachel – a woman of questionable morals who is first seen by Robert on the stage of a theater. Marcel, Robert’s friend, knows about Rachel’s background, but he feels that it would be very difficult to transmit this knowledge to his friend, who is haunted by the very first impression his future lover makes on him. Proust writes in one of the most breathtaking passages of the novel:

The immobility of that thin face, like that of a sheet of paper subjected to the colossal pressure of two atmospheres, seemed to me

¹⁷ Merab Mamardashvili, *A Spy for an Unknown Country: Essays and Lectures by Merab Mamardashvili*, ed. Julia Sushytska and Alisa Slaughter (Stuttgart: ibidem-Verlag, 2020), 75–76.

¹⁸ Ibid., 78. In Russian, the term is *durnaya beskonechnost'* (Дурная бесконечность), which can also be rendered as “foolish endlessness”. It is safe to assume that Mamardashvili derives this term from Hegel’s *schlechte Unendlichkeit*.

to be held in balance by two infinities which converged on her without meeting, for she held them apart. And indeed, as we looked at her, Robert and I, neither of us saw her from the same side of the mystery.¹⁹ (*Italics mine*)

This is why, so often, there has to be an abrupt awakening (like a hand grabbing a fish out of the aquarium) that disrupts the habitual flow of our consciousness.

Only after this kind of disruption does an opening appear, a space where one can take his or her own stance – in the presence of an instantaneous impression. The work cannot be postponed.²⁰ The urgency of this opening dictates its accomplishment.

Sense (or meaning) should be drawn from an experience, just as a thought should think itself to the end – it should be fully expressed. In his lectures on the Aesthetics of Thinking (*Эстетика мышления*), Mamardashvili notes that – perhaps with a certain irony – the only thing that can be joyful in a misfortune is the fact that one thinks (*мыслит*), draws a thought from what he sees. Thinking is tied, for Mamardashvili, to aesthetics essentially inasmuch as it causes joy. As he states, “joy is the feeling of the irreversible fulfillment of meaning.”²¹ Thus, there can arise – through a philosophical or artistic effort – a kind of thought which resists disintegration (into chaos or a bad infinity) and produces a point of no return, an irreversible or rather irrevocable seeing and understanding (thinking).

Just as for Proust, for Mamardashvili art – and by art one can also understand the aesthetics of thinking – is the “most cruel school of life,”

¹⁹ Proust, *The Guermantes Way*, 154.

²⁰ In connection with this motif of non-postponement, Mamardashvili likes to invoke a symptomatic error of Proust, who quotes a passage from the *Gospel of St. John* (12:35-36) with a slight but significant deviation: “InVoluntarily, unconsciously, Proust quotes this text twice with a mistake: ‘Yet a little while is the light with you. Work, while there is light.’ Travailler, he writes. Involuntary mistake, but characteristic, because we’re talking about the time of working, the sign of which is an instant, a split second. The space of truth can be expanded only through work, but in itself it is an instant. If you let it escape you, that’s it. There will be chaos and disintegration; nothing will come back, and the world will cease to be, devolving into the infinite repetition of hell.” Mamardashvili, *A Spy for an Unknown Country: Essays and Lectures by Merab Mamardashvili*, 84.

²¹ My translation. In Russian: “Значит, радостью является чувство необратимой исполненности смысла.” Merab K. Mamardashvili, *Estetika myshleniya* [Aesthetics of Thinking] (Moscow: Moskovskaya shkola politicheskikh issledovaniy, 2000), 11.

since in art “excuses have no place [...] and intentions count for nothing.” There is no substitute for the work that has to be done:

The impression is for the writer what experiment is for the scientist, with the difference that in the scientist the work of the intelligence precedes the experiment whereas in the writer it comes after the impression. What we have not had to decipher, to elucidate by our own efforts, what was clear before we looked at it, is not ours.²²

V. Conclusion

If we read Kant’s transcendental philosophy nowadays, we might wonder at the insistence on overcoming empirical experience or supplementing it with a transcendental one (which Kant tries to delineate through the elaboration of the synthetic a priori). For us, so many ideas, once held in high esteem, have already been brought to the ground, or dispersed in the vastness of the cosmic dark discovered since then – since Kant’s time. In other words, there is an ongoing prevalence of brute, empirical facts.

Nevertheless, the necessity for a transcendental (or metaphysical) experience arises from the insight that, besides the things that we encounter in the world (that is, besides the facts that for us constitute the world), there is also a knowing – an act of knowing which is not exactly knowledge (that is, an assertion about a fact). And it is hard to know where this knowing takes place, since it does not seem to belong to the mundane plane of reality. This is why Kant has to elaborate the metaphor of spatial orientation in order to make the dynamics of thinking palpable – at least, to some degree. As we saw above, there comes forth a subjective ground of differentiation, a feeling of difference, which is not conceptual and cannot be immediately known as such. In other words, the elaboration of this feeling would require a sustained effort in time (on the part of the subject, the thinker).

The Kantian elaboration of felt spatiality is equally important to Mamardashvili, for whom one must pose not only the question “Who am I?” but also “Where am I?” In other words: Where, among which spatial or sense (existential) orientation points, do I find myself? His lectures on Proust are, in fact, titled *Topology of a Path*. Proust’s novel is indeed about a path, a hero’s journey, or, as Gilles Deleuze puts it, a

²² Proust, *In Search of Lost Time*, Vol. 6, *Time Regained*, 220.

novel of apprenticeship (roman d'apprentissage):²³ the narrator learns to read signs he initially failed to read, which became dispersed through time and space.

This is why one needs the structure of a novel, or the topology of a path, in order to come to terms with the strange dispersal which takes place in one's own life. As Mamardashvili writes:

Topology is a set or configuration of points along which the current of life and communication passes (or not) (the relative positions of these points are changed by effort or its lack, and because life is effort in time... heterogeneous fragments of space are time "turned into space").²⁴

This is where life merges with fiction, with the essential variability (variance) which requires the work of an artist. This kind of work has its own dangers, precisely because it stands on the subjective ground of differentiation, which might quickly disintegrate and engulf the thinker himself. There one finds oneself on the verge of the abyss. Not because there is a lack of words or possible descriptions, but because it is not clear what dictates our choice when we write and create, since creation is also always a beginning. To put it in the words of Proust himself and to conclude: "truth can only begin in the moment when the writer takes two different objects, states the connexion between them – a connexion analogous in the world of art to the unique connexion which in the world of science is provided by the law of causality – and encloses them in the necessary links of a well-wrought style; truth – and life too – can be attained by us only when, by comparing a quality common to two sensations, we succeed in extracting their common essence and in re-uniting them to each other, liberated from the contingencies of time, within a metaphor."²⁵

²³ Deleuze, *Proust and Signs*, 26.

²⁴ Mamardashvili, *A Spy for an Unknown Country: Essays and Lectures by Merab Mamardashvili*, 21-22.

²⁵ Proust, *In Search of Lost Time*, Vol. 6, *Time Regained*, 230.

