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Marcel Proust: Nietzschean (*Künstler*)-*Übermensch*

Kimberly Carter-Cram

Only as an æsthetic phenomenon are the world and the being of man eternally justified.

—Friedrich Nietzsche

I believe that there exist striking coincidences in Nietzsche's ideal of the *Übermensch* as one who is able to overcome the malaise of the modern man—nihilism, and in Marcel Proust, author, creator and philosopher. I propose that Marcel Proust is in fact an example of a Nietzschean *Übermensch* who overcomes not only the malaise of nihilism, but also the terror of the *fin de siècle* which accompanies the sickness. Proust, as author and creator, fills the role of Nietzsche's absent God and takes it upon himself to harness the 'will to power' to create not only art, but a deeply personal reality for himself and his characters through his writing.

Nietzsche's *Übermensch* is one who is able to master himself and control this 'will to power' as Art. Art, for Nietzsche, is not an expression of culture but of what Heidegger calls "eine Gestaltung des Willens zur Macht," a manifestation of the will to power. The will to power is not a thing nor is it a power over others. It is, however, both conscious *and* unconscious and is reserved for the domain of Being and Becoming with which we are most familiar, that is, the domain of life. It is the *essence* of being itself, that is, a manifestation of being as a whole. The will to power is thus not objective, it is *subjective* and as such, *existential*. The will to power is a sort of energy in motion, an activity which continually tries to master and put a certain order on ideas as *interpretation* of those ideas.

According to Nietzsche, no ideas, no things in and of themselves can exist independently of the interpretations applied to them by an individual acting as interpreter. In the *Will to Power* he writes:

One would like to know what things-in-themselves are; but behold, there are no things-in-themselves! . . . In short, the essence of a thing is only an *opinion* about the "thing," . . . The origin of "things" is wholly the work of that which imagines, thinks, wills, feels. . . . Even "the subject" is such a created entity . . . (#555 & #556)

To the extent that there can be no things-in-themselves (ideas, self [as subject], etc.) it becomes necessary, therefore, to have one who *interprets* in order to *impose* meaning upon things. These interpreted 'truths' can be expanded into multiple interpretations, but they are all made by a subject who exists grammatically as subject to the action of interpretation.

This interpretation must in turn be made *pragmatically* according to the interpreter's needs. In other words, the interpretation must have some sort of value for life in an *existential* sense, that is, for the life of the individual making and using the interpretation. The interpretation or attempt to shape or impose unity on phenomena which previously had none is a manifestation of the will to power and potential solution to the modern malaise known as nihilism.

However, few are actually able to harness the will to power and use it to interpret (or, in other words, to impose meaning upon) the things which surround them, and fewer still are able to use it to interpret ideas or the subject as self. Thus, those who *are* able to use the will to power are exceptional, are 'super' people, that is, *Übermenschen*. Nietzsche proposes that the artist is the prime example of this *Übermensch*. (However, it must be noted that not all artists qualify as *Übermenschen*: Wagner does, but *none* of the Parnassians, the poets who believed in *l'art pour l'art* ['art for art's sake'] are eligible).¹ Henceforth, art is known as "the *expression of being itself*, no longer grasped by abstractions and pure reason, but by what we sense and feel" (Pfeffer 206, my emphasis).

The artist as *Übermensch* becomes the first to offer hope of a solution out of the nihilistic malaise. Art is offered as the "counter-movement" (WP #794) to nihilism: Nietzsche would like "art and nothing but art! *It is the great means of making life possible, the great seduction to life, the great stimulant of life*" (WP #853:II, my emphasis). Art becomes known as the expression of "a *victorious will*" (WP #800). What is left is the *Übermensch* as maker of images: in his aesthetic creativeness alone lies the essence of man.

Consequently, in Nietzsche's view it is the *artist* who is thrust into the God-like role of making life "possible," and of "stimulating" life. The artist as *Übermensch* becomes an interpreter in an existentially pragmatic sense: "A new pride my ego taught me, and this I teach men: no longer to bury one's head in the sand of heavenly things, but to bear it freely, an earthly head, which *creates meaning for the earth*" (TZ 32, my emphasis). The *Übermensch* uses the will to power *as Art* to interpret, or impose meaning on 'things' which will affect him personally, in particular, the subject, his own 'Self.' Indeed, Man becomes the creator-god who in his productive activity experiences a oneness with being itself. "In art a certain absoluteness of existence is in fact arrived at by man" (Hofstadter 606).

When Nietzsche declares God "dead," the path is opened for the *Übermensch* to become *self-creating*, indeed *life-creating*. Nietzsche proposes that if man is to do without God, he will have to replace Him by somehow becoming the creator of himself. According to Duncan Large in his article on the necessity of the literary self, "man's will to creativity is embarrassed by the existence of any God" (54). Large quotes Nietzsche as saying:

"Wir aber wollen die werden, die wir sind—die Neuen, die Einmaligen, die Unvergleichbaren, die Sich-selber-Gesetzgebenden, die Sich-selber-Schaffenden!" Nietzsche writes: "als Interpreten unserer Erlebnisse": artist is both mother and child, and the world a self-creating work of art by the hand of man (54).²

This process of 'becoming' involves an *artistic* ideal, one which, for my purposes, will involve only literary paradigms. Consequently, the 'Künstler-Übermensch' (my term) uses the will to power to make a work of art of *himself*. J.P. Stern highlights:

[t]he totality which, for [Nietzsche], justifies that art is Life [sic]. To prevent this undefinable, ineffable notion of "Life" from turning into the static pre-Socratic idea of "Being" or *Sein*, he characterizes "Life" as an eternal process of change, of "Becoming," or "Werden." Its agent . . . is "the Will to Power." (150)

This god-like position of the author as creator has been much discussed in the 20th century and Nietzsche himself admits to the specialized necessity of author as God-figure in the 1886 preface of *Die Geburt der Tragödie*: "In der Tat, das ganze Buch kennt nur einen Künstler-Sinn und—Hintersinn hinter allem Geschehen,—einen 'Gott,' wenn man will" ("Versuch einer Selbstkritik" 5).³ It is obvious that first and foremost, the author does indeed function as a sometimes omniscient, typically omnipotent creator. He is an inventor of the Other: of characters, situations, and ideas. However, in spite of the author's best efforts to the contrary, the reader is only too aware of the fact that the characters of the novel (who function as multifaceted, 'real' people within plots and story-lines) are contingent upon the author's whim and will.

The author has a second godly function in the world of Nietzsche's philosophy of the *Übermensch*: that is, the realization of the will to power as power to create beauty through art. The creation of beauty is a sign of the strength of the artist. It is a proof of the artist's ability to fuse the Apollonian (the visual) and the Dionysian (the "orgiastic") conditions of art together into one clear unity resulting in Nietzschean 'pleasure,' 'intoxication' or 'an exalted feeling of power' at his creation. Richard Bales suggests that it is Marcel, the narrator of *Le temps retrouvé*, who, "après avoir reçu l'impulsion définitive offerte par la grande série de moments bienheureux, s'est résolu à transmuier sa vie en *action artistique*" (12).

The artist's third and perhaps most significant role as *Künstler-Übermensch* is to create *himself* through the will to power: he must interpret or impose meaning on the thing which is the closest to him: his *own Being*. The artist must constantly re-interpret himself; his life is an unending metamorphosis. Thus, the interpreted meaning will *necessarily* be in continual flux. If a state of stability is reached, the artist will no longer be in control of the will to power, no longer 'be' becoming. He will stagnate and no longer be considered an *Übermensch*.

I intend to examine the work of Marcel Proust through the Nietzschean philosophical lens I have just described. As both artist and creator, Proust harnesses the will to power and uses this strength to impose a sense upon the fictional world of his massive novel, thus creating a meaning for his narrator, Marcel, whose fictional life mirrors the meaning Proust imposes upon his own life.

At the same time, Proust imposes meaning upon his own selfhood, thus creating a very personal reality of his own.

The relationship between Marcel the narrator and Proust the author is indeed problematic. One can never know for certain an author's intentions in writing, and, if we accept conventional wisdom, we accept that Marcel Proust did not intend his 'Marcel' to be an autobiographical character. However, insofar as Proust did create a narrator (Marcel) whose role within the novel is as interpreter of meaning, and insofar as it is Marcel's function to make life possible both for himself as well as for the other characters of the story, I believe that the narrator and Proust serve a common artistic goal. Both function within Nietzsche's concept of the *Übermensch* as writers, thus, as creators, who write in an effort to impose meaning upon themselves and upon the world which surrounds them. Therefore, in my interpretation of Proust's *œuvre*, I view Proust himself as artist and philosopher and Marcel as both artist and *porte-parole* for Proust's philosophy on literature, memory and art.

Art, for Proust, re-creates the *essence* of the individual. This essence is constantly in a forward motion and is never stable. Proust's philosophy on memory supports the idea that it is through art alone that we are able to emerge from ourselves. His entire philosophy involves creating a present 'self' through the past, accessed through memory, which is either *volontaire* or *involontaire*.

The *mémoire volontaire* describes the exercise of actively recalling events from one's past, thus *actively* bringing the past into the present, whereas the *mémoire involontaire* characterizes a more spiritual, subjective, and almost metaphysical means of remembering. The *mémoire involontaire* is not a chosen act of remembering; rather, it is an involuntary 'leap' in the mind's time brought upon the individual as the result of external stimuli. Those familiar with Proust's work and the concept of the *mémoire involontaire* will immediately draw to mind some of the most well-known examples of this phenomenon: the madeleine cake, the *pavé* of the streets, the sonnet by Vinteuil. All of these stimuli (tasting the cake, feeling the *pavé* beneath his feet, and hearing the sonnet) serve to throw Marcel's mind and thoughts back in time to a previous encounter with those objects:

Mais tout à coup ce fut comme si elle était entrée, et cette apparition lui fut une si déchirante souffrance qu'il dut

porter la main à son cœur. C'est que le violon était monté à des notes hautes où il restait comme pour une attente . . . et avant que Swann eût le temps de se dire: "C'est la petite phrase de la sonate de Vinteuil, n'écoutons pas!" tous ses souvenirs du temps où Odette était éprise de lui . . . s'étaient réveillés et . . . remontés lui chanter éperdument, sans pitié pour son infortune présente, les refrains oubliés du bonheur . . . il revit tout . . . [et] . . . à ce moment là, il satisfaisait une curiosité voluptueuse en connaissant les plaisirs des gens qui vivent par l'amour. (AS 208)

It is the narrator's opinion that he can capture the turmoil of emotions which accompany the re-living of a past love. Through *writing*, the event can be captured *as reality* and therefore *create* a (present) reality from past experiences in the mind of the perceiver. It is an attempt at the artistic creation of an ordered world *for oneself* from the disorderly everyday world. Nietzsche believes that the artist:

cannot endure (the present) reality, he looks away from it, back: he seriously believes that the value of a thing resides in that shadowy residue one derives from colors, form, sound, ideas; he believes that the more subtilized, attenuated, transient a thing or a man is, the more valuable he becomes. (WP #572)

We have seen through Marcel that art, indeed the art of writing past emotions and sensations to create reality, holds a deeply personal meaning according to and for Proust. It must impose a sense upon 'things' and upon the 'subject' by creating them from past experiences. This creation of reality, indeed, creation of Self, is a manifestation of the Nietzschean will to power as art; it is a manifestation of the creation of a deeply personal reality *for oneself* which is, at the same time, both *pragmatic* and *existential*.

In taking a closer look at Proust's *œuvre* we can see that the artist wants to attest to the superiority of the mind and to the individual's potential to overcome the constraints imposed upon him by space and time. There are three major recurrent themes throughout this seven volume work: the first is the notion of time and of memory (a faculty Proust calls "la génératrice féconde") (AS 237) and of how to 'create' one's life through remembrance and memory. The second is the structure of the novel itself, which, in its

expansion and contraction, can be compared to the crescendos and decrescendos of a piece of music. Finally, the concept of love, which, as Proust explains it, can exist only as a creation in one's mind.

According to Nietzsche, the *Übermensch* must 'interpret' all [three] ideas *as art* in order for them to hold any meaning whatsoever. This interpretation *must* in the end be pragmatic, having some practical and personal use for the interpreter. In other words, the interpretation must be subjective, and thus, as previously mentioned, existential.

Such is the case with *A la recherche du temps perdu*. All of these themes (time and memory, structure of the novel and love) are in fact interpreted by Proust in order for them *to hold meaning for him personally*. The artist's interpretation creates a reality which is distinctly his own. And, these interpretations are *created* solely through the art of literature, which, as art, imposes beauty and pragmatic meaning upon phenomena which would otherwise hold no meanings-in-themselves.

The concept of love as it is treated and interpreted by Proust is an incurable malady which reveals to us, layer after layer, the material of which we are made. Love in Proust's novels figures in many ways: the love of a small boy for his mother, the love between women, between men, between men and women. However in nearly all cases, love is an obstacle to the creation of reality. Nietzsche calls love "a kind of sport [which] furnishes an obstacle and a provocation" (WP #120). It becomes a convenient excuse for the lover to be in love; he substitutes love for his search for reality, for truth. Thus, love becomes that which blinds the characters to reality and sets them upon a quest for possession of the Other, as is the case with Swann's pursuit of Odette in *Un amour de Swann*: "[un simple croquis] bouleversait Swann parce qu'il lui faisait tout d'un coup apercevoir qu'Odette avait une vie qui n'était pas tout entière à lui . . ." (76).

However, as is always the case with Proust, *Künstler-Übermensch*, love is also always in the memory of the characters in love. Thus, it is only through writing that love that it (and the characters who live it) can become "their" reality:

A cette époque de la vie, on a déjà été atteint plusieurs fois par l'amour; il n'évolue plus seul suivant ses propres lois

inconnues et fatales, devant notre cœur étonné et passif. Nous venons à son aide, nous le faussons par la mémoire, par la suggestion. En reconnaissant un de ses symptômes, nous nous rappelons, nous faisons renaître les autres. (AS 18)

Accordingly, it is "la terrible puissance créatrice de (la) mémoire" (AS 237) which recalls love, *imposes meaning* upon love and creates it as reality through the art of literature. Nietzsche's artist-creator takes "chaotic matter that is full of tension and Dionysian ["orgiastic"] excess and shapes it into an artistic unity" (Pfeffer 205). This is exactly what is meant by the will to power *as art*.

One of the most striking examples of this phenomenon is found in *Sodome et Gomorrhe* when the narrator recalls his grandmother:

En tous cas si elles restent en nous, c'est la plupart du temps dans un domaine inconnu où elles ne sont de nul service pour nous, et où même les plus usuelles sont refoulées par des souvenirs de l'ordre différent et qui excluent toute simultanéité avec elles dans la conscience. Mais si le cadre de sensations où elles sont conservées est ressaisi, elles ont à leur tour ce même pouvoir d'expulser tout ce qui leur est incompatible, d'installer seul en nous, le moi qui les vécut. Or comme celui que je venais subitement de redevenir n'avait pas existé depuis ce soir lointain où ma grand-mère m'avait déshabillé à mon arrivée à Balbec, ce fut tout naturellement, non pas après le premier soir d'autrefois, que j'adhérai à la minute où ma grand-mère s'était penchée vers moi. Le moi que j'étais alors et qui avait disparu si longtemps, était de nouveau si près de moi qu'il me semblait . . . que je n'étais plus que cet être qui cherchait à se réfugier dans les bras de sa grand-mère. . . . (154)

As art, the structure of the novel itself is a manifestation of the will to power. It is only by going beyond the *loi causale* in his work of art that Marcel can restore to his life a sense of organic continuity. Large writes that it is metaphor which "bridges the gap which separates present from past, synthesizing the two in an experience of joyful simultaneity, and the victory over Time is completed by Proust with the recursive structure of the *Recherche* itself" (59).

For Proust (and thus, as *porte-parole* of Proust's ideas, for Marcel as well) the fundamental task at hand in writing is the search

for a 'reality.' The lifeline for which they search is simply an order, a meaning to a seemingly disordered, godless world. The order is found in the creation of Self through art, that is, through literature. This process of creating (of *self*-creating) is entirely personal and unique to the *Übermensch*. There can be no God upon whom to rely in Nietzsche's philosophy. Proust himself writes that:

quant au livre intérieur de signes inconnus . . . , pour la lecture desquels personne ne pouvait m'aider d'aucune règle, cette lecture consistait en un acte de création où nul ne peut nous suppléer ni même collaborer avec nous. (TR IV, 458, qtd. in Large)

Thus, Proust argues that the artist must take full responsibility for his work and for himself. This is equally true of Marcel, the narrator of Proust's novel. It is a singular situation: that the author (Proust) should, in his effort to create *himself* through the creation of a work of art, create in that work of art a character who, although 'fictitious,' nearly exactly mirrors his own life experiences, desires and needs. It is as though the author needed to create a companion, an imaginary friend of sorts, who would serve as the memory for the theory that memory creates present reality.

Let us examine more closely a striking example of the creation of a personal reality for oneself through memory. As has already been suggested, Marcel and Proust both are able to use the involuntary memory and art to their advantage to create a sense of self. Through the involuntary memory given to Marcel by Proust, the narrator is able to re-experience the sensations of moments of the past as an intangible reality. As he reflects on this identity of past and present sensations, he penetrates to the *essence*: Reality, he sees, is the imposed spiritual *significance* of all that we experience in life. For example, it is only through memory that Marcel is able to live the reality of his grandmother's death:

Je retrouvais dans un souvenir involontaire et complet la réalité vivante. Cette réalité n'existe pas pour nous tant qu'elle n'a pas été recréée par notre pensée (sans cela les hommes qui ont été mêlés à un combat gigantesque seraient tous de grands poètes épiques); et ainsi, dans un désir fou de me précipiter dans ses bras, ce n'était qu'à l'instant—plus d'une année après son enterrement, à cause de cet

anachronisme qui empêche si souvent le calendrier des faits de coïncider avec celui des sentiments—que je venais d'apprendre qu'elle était morte. (SG 153)

Thus, events, emotions, human contacts and our relations to them, are successive, that is, diachronic, but reality, which can be disengaged from them all, transcends time and is universal, or synchronic.

Marcel further realizes that this essence awaits the expression that only the writer can give and that writing is the vocation for which his whole life has been in preparation. He must now seek, in the depths of his consciousness, the *vraie vérité* of his life and convert it by writing into its spiritual equivalent.

Through writing his life Proust begins to realize that human normalcy is *langagière*, that human life is language as the meaning that language imposes upon life. Eventually, for Marcel, and therefore for Proust as well, reality becomes only that which is able to be interpreted, that is, 'named' through the art of language. Thus, according to Proust's philosophy as it is communicated through Marcel, we are only that which the art of language imposes upon us. In order for us to exist at all, there must be language, indeed, there must be creation of man through language, that is, through literature.

However, in Proust's situation, any existence created through literature is fiction. What can that say of the life that he has chosen to create for himself? Is it all a lie? Has he thus 'nihilated' himself? We must remember that given the philosophy revealed through Marcel, in writing *A la recherche du temps perdu*, Proust created a sense of self, imposing a meaning upon himself for himself through art, and specifically through literature. But, as this literature is fiction, can we say that the 'Self' he creates is also a fictional text? a lie?

According to Nietzsche, the *Übermensch* is permitted certain untruths insofar as he remains true to himself. Therefore, while it is true that what Proust has finally created is indeed a lie, a fiction, that does not necessarily mean that he is false to himself. That is to say:

for Nietzsche, the apparent world is the only world that there is, and the idea that there is a Real fixed eternal world he called a lie, or, to put it in Nietzsche's sometimes more tactful terminology, their intellect is an instrument but what it

produces are fictions. So he wrote: 'Untruth is a condition of life'. (Chessick 72)

As stated earlier, Nietzsche rejects the possibility of an absolute truth. There are no 'things-in-themselves,' that is, *nothing* has any meaning until meaning has been imposed upon that thing by an interpreter. This definition *includes* the Self or the subject. What we are left with then, is a possibility for an individual truth, for a 'relativity of truth' if one will. Truth becomes subjective *as long as* it is utilitarian and meets the needs of the interpreter.

Is this not exactly what Proust has done? About *A la recherche du temps perdu* Large writes that "there is not a single incident which is not fictitious, not a single character who is a real person in disguise . . . everything has been invented by him *in accordance with the requirements of his theme*" (52). In *Sodome et Gomorrhe*, Proust himself writes that "à n'importe quel moment que nous la considérons, notre âme totale n'a qu'une valeur presque fictive . . ." (153). Therefore, the lie, for Proust, is the most necessary means of self-preservation, it is one of the few things in the world that can open windows for us on to what is new and unknown about ourselves.

Is Marcel Proust an example of the *Übermensch*? He is able to harness the will to power and impose meaning on things which otherwise would have no sense for and of themselves. Through the art of writing, he is able to create meaning not only for his own life, but for the lives of the characters of his novels. Proust is an *Übermensch* in that he is able to overcome the 'modern malaise' of nihilism, the sickness which allows nothing of value outside that which is imposed upon it by an exterior force.

While it is true that what he creates would seem to destroy itself in that it is only *one of many possible interpretations*, and that as such, it can never be 'true'; it is also the *very condition* of life that it be untrue and have no value other than that imposed by an interpreter. We can therefore categorize the force behind his language as *subject*; Proust *does* achieve his existential goal of creating reality and Self through writing. It is *his* reality, indeed, a deeply *personal* reality. Indeed, it is the *nature* of all things that their meaning be conditional, and it is only the (Künstler)-*Übermensch* who has the power to create things and to create *Self* by imposing a meaning upon them through the exercise of the will to power.

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Notes

1. Artists who believe in the idea of *l'art pour l'art* cannot be called *Übermenschen* as their art is not practiced with the intent of creating a pragmatic and existential meaning for themselves as individuals but rather for the creation of beauty through art.

2. "But we want to become who we are—the new, the unique, the unrivaled, the self-ruling, the self-creators! . . . as interpreters of our own experience . . ." (Qtd. in Large, my translation).

3. "Indeed, the whole book knows only one artistic mind—a motivating force behind all that happens—a "God" if you will" (my translation).

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Rabelais, *Le Quart Livre*

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