

Marcel's fragmented je

MARGARET GRAY'S essay, dealing with Proust, postmodernism, criticism, and life, is itself wilfully postmodern: clear-headed and enigmatic, beautifully crafted into the art of being difficult, wittily brief and annoyingly repetitious, wide-ranging and eclectically tangential.

Postmodernism can best be defined as Lyotard's "incredulity towards metanarratives": a scepticism towards any attempt to sum up or organise knowledge, any formal unity in literature or criticism, or any coherent chronology, instance of narration, or even metaphorisation.

In this "condition", communication is fraught with difficulty, circularity and repetition inescapable, and the self persistently undermined by doubt and deconstruction. Objectivity and separation of practice and theory prove impossible. Nowhere is there a bottom-line.

Gray claims that to be merely modern is now "obsolete"; and that *A la recherche du temps perdu* escapes that fate because of its inherently fractured nature. Some of her best passages paraphrase approved postmodernists – occasionally themselves re-

BY WILLIAM BUTCHER

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interpreting Gilles Deleuze, whose most gnomic statements are devotedly reported here. Her own approach is variously narratorial, feminist, psychoanalytic, and "interdisciplinary" – a neat compartment for everything else. Gray is not ashamed to bring in the biographical, relating Proust's terrible fibs, the fate of his stocks and shares, and what he said on his deathbed.

Her basic method, though, is to take the "pre-postmodern" vision of Proust offered by a Jacques Rivière, Maurice Blanchot, Gérard Genette, or Philippe Lejeune, and show it as essentially flawed.

In traditional thinking, the unity of *A la recherche* comes from Marcel's final decision to be a Writer, which not only gives him a reason to live, but draws together Everything He Has Done. Gray points

out, however, that he may not be up to it. And in any case, it isn't clear *when* the transition actually happens or *when* Marcel tries to dash off his thousand pages. The unity, then, is illusory.

In her best chapter, Marcel's *je* is shown to be a "fragmented, dispersed postmodern self, passive and voyeuristic, lacking in depth and motivation", a "postmodern, fractured Beckettian subject". Although Freudian theory would argue that his voyeurism should progress to its reversal, exhibitionism, in fact he becomes more and more withdrawn. He increasingly resembles a dispassionate researcher in his attempts to discover the truth about what Albertine did with whom, and how often. As Malcolm Bowie has pointed out, there ensues a comedy of misapplied cold science, of bringing "powerful instruments to bear upon trivial subjects".

All the consequent hypothesising leads to "circularities and double-binds", the only way out being the "formulation of totalising maxims", nailing conclusions down by means of narrative fiat. Having lost his lover, Marcel is left impotently laying down eternal truths.

Elsewhere, Gray often proves equally lucid, intelligent and forceful. I now finally understand "metaphor and metonymy". But Raymond Picard – and even Roland Barthes – might have doubted her "soundness": there are many obscurities (including much of the introduction, first time round), some of the translations are shaky, and the final chapter – there are no conclusions whatsoever – is so atrocious that it ought to have been printed on tear-off pages. It lists all the awful things advertising has done to Proust over the past 20 years, with a note reading "quoted in J. T. Johnson, ed" repeated 35 times!

Is it all some sort of computerised pastiche? That would be the only charitable conclusion. What I shall remember instead from this book is its delightful exploration of the complexities of that historian of our *fin-de-siècle* uncertainties: Proust, the eternally modern.

William Butcher is principal lecturer in charge of the Centres for English and Communication Studies, the Technical Colleges Planning Team, Hongkong.