

Proust, playthings, reading, solitude

By William Eaton

... *la lecture, ... ce miracle fécond d'une communication au sein de la solitude, ...*
(*reading, this fertile miracle of communication in the midst of solitude*) — Marcel Proust,
Pastiches et mélanges

This year Gallimard published, in French, an amalgam of some of Proust's writing on reading. Herewith my gloss of a passage that speaks across the span of a century since Proust wrote it:

An idleness or frivolity prevents some people from on their own withdrawing into the deep regions of the self where the life of the spirit begins. Once these people have been led there they can discover and exploit this great wealth, but without outside intervention they live on the surface, forever lost to themselves, in a passivity which makes them the playthings of every diversion, reduces them to the level of whatever surrounds them, and leaves them continually agitated. . . . They would end up willfully lost to all feeling and any memories of their spiritual nobility if an external impulse did not, with a certain force, reintroduce them to the life of the mind, wherein they suddenly find the power to think for themselves and to create.¹

¹ Please note that here and in the other extracts I am offering glosses—renditions—and not literal translations. The French text being glossed in this first case is from pages 49–51 of Marcel Proust, *Journées de lecture* (Gallimard, 2017), which was compiled from an earlier Proust collection, *Pastiches et mélanges*, first published in 1919. Herewith the French:

Or, il existe certains esprits qu'on pourrait comparer à ces malades et qu'une sorte de paresse ou de frivolité empêche de descendre spontanément dans les régions profonds de soi-même où commence la véritable vie de l'esprit. Ce n'est pas qu'une fois qu'on les y a conduits ils ne soient capables d'y découvrir et d'y exploiter de véritables richesses, mais, sans cette intervention étrangère, ils vivent à la surface dans un perpétuel oubli d'eux-mêmes, dans une

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Proust had previously defined these people as depressives, and yet—are we all depressives?—when I came across his words I was stuck by how well they applied to the vast mass. The 99 and 44/100%, we might call them, after the famous, fin-de-siècle advertising slogan for Ivory soap.² Well known are this mass's principal diversions: smartphone images, games, and chatter; televised spectator sports (Trump included?) along with other television programs; and other videos of one form or another. I liked, too, how Proust was able to put his finger on the consequences of these people's, the people's, disease: perpetual agitation and this reduction to the level (or “taille”—size—is Proust's word) of their surroundings. GPS systems offer a convenient example. The many drivers and pedestrians who are attached to such things quickly lose much of their own capacity for orienting themselves, finding their ways around. Their capacity becomes equivalent to that of the software on which they are relying. (It is not heartening that many GPS users would retort that this capacity is greater than their own previous, human capacity to orient themselves. To adapt a line of Abraham Lincoln's, if we ourselves cannot know where we are and whither we are tending, in what sense are we involved in judging what to do and how to do it?³)

Proust goes a step further, however, when he writes that the sufferers may end up willfully lost to all feeling. The verb he uses is *abolir*: to abolish, *en eux*, in themselves, *tout sentiment*, all feeling. This suggests that the people's goal—the reason they allow themselves to be so absorbed by diversions—is denial, denial of what they are actually feeling. We may thus appreciate the extent to which Proust is reprising Pascal. For example, from *Les pensées*:

La seule chose qui nous console de nos misères est le divertissement. . . .⁴

sorte de passivité qui les rend le jouet de tous les plaisirs, les diminue à la taille de ceux qui les entourent et les agitent, et, pareils à ce gentilhomme qui, partageant depuis son enfance la vie des voleurs de grand chemin, ne se souvenait plus de son nom pour avoir depuis trop longtemps cessé de le porter, ils finiraient par abolir en eux tout sentiment et tout souvenir de leur noblesse spirituelle, si une impulsion extérieure ne venait les réintroduire en quelque sorte de force dans la vie de l'esprit, où ils retrouvent subitement la puissance de penser par eux-mêmes et de créer.

² Wikipedia has informed me that Ivory soap's “99 44/100% Pure” slogan was in use by 1895. The claim was that Ivory was more pure than the olive-oil based castile soap then available. Fake news (a.k.a. advertising). The classic Ivory soap bar contained sodium tallowate, sodium cocoate or sodium palm kernelate, water, sodium chloride, sodium silicate, magnesium sulfate, and fragrance.

³ Lincoln, “House Divided Speech,” Springfield, Illinois, June 16, 1858. “If we could first know where we are, and whither we are tending, we could then better judge what to do, and how to do it.” As regards contemporary gadgets and human capacity, one might see *World Without Mind: The Existential Threat of Big Tech* by Franklin Foer (Penguin, 2017). *The Guardian* recently published a sizable extract: [Facebook's war on free will: How technology is making our minds redundant](#). The *Washington Post* version—[How Silicon Valley is erasing your individuality](#)—is considerably shorter. From *The Guardian* piece: “Facebook would never put it this way, but algorithms are meant to erode free will, to relieve humans of the burden of choosing, to nudge them in the right direction.” That is, right for Facebook, Google, Amazon, etc.

⁴ Pascal, *Pensées*:

La seule chose qui nous console de nos misères est le divertissement. Et cependant c'est la plus grande de nos misères. Car c'est cela qui nous empêche principalement de songer à

Diversions are our sole consolation for our troubles, and also our greatest trouble. Because it is diversion above all that prevents us from thinking of ourselves and leads us astray without our realizing it. Without diversion we would be constantly anxious, and this anxiety would push us to look for a better means of escape [for Pascal, faith; for Proust, reading], but our diversions amuse us and bring us, before we even know it, to death.

Note, however, that when I observe, as I did recently, a young aunt, sharing with a friend, across a restaurant table, a homemade video of her very young niece, acting cute, and the two diners are both laughing at the scene recorded—it does not *seem* that these people have been led astray or lost all feeling. Quite the opposite. And yet I wonder what Proust would say. I am sure that there are plenty of contemporary commentators who have written about how, when we take selfies or videos of ourselves, we are turning ourselves into celebrities or actors, and so the artificiality or falseness of celebrities and actors—as opposed to people—infests us and our most “personal” media. We—or our personal “brands,” our public “profiles,” press releases, and social-media strategies—have come to live only superficially and as the playthings of our diversions.

Proust’s proposal is that salvation, recovery of ourselves and our mental capacities, may come—only—from reading and on account of the particular connection between reading and solitude.⁵

Or, cette impulsion que l’esprit paresseux ne peut trouver en lui-même . . .

Now this impulse—which the lazy mind cannot find in itself; which must come to it from others—the impulse has to come in the midst of solitude.

I pause to note that in our day and age solitude is rather more fled than welcomed or lingered within. It is equated with loneliness, a now ubiquitous form of suffering. This past

nous, et qui nous fait perdre insensiblement. Sans cela nous serions dans l’ennui, et cet ennui nous pousserait à chercher un moyen plus solide d’en sortir, mais le divertissement nous amuse et nous fait arriver insensiblement à la mort.

⁵ Prout, *Journées*, 51:

Or, cette impulsion que l’esprit paresseux ne peut trouver en lui-même et qui doit lui venir d’autrui, il est clair qu’il doit la recevoir au sein de la solitude hors de laquelle, nous l’avons vu, ne peut se produire cette activité créatrice qu’il s’agit précisément de ressusciter en lui. De la pure solitude l’esprit paresseux ne pourrait rien tirer, puisqu’il est incapable de mettre de lui-même en branle son activité créatrice. Mais la conversation la plus élevée, les conseils les plus pressants ne lui serviraient non plus à rien, puisque cette activité originale ils ne peuvent la produire directement. Ce qu’il faut donc, c’est une intervention qui, tout en venant d’un autre, se produise au fond de nous-mêmes, c’est bien l’impulsion d’un autre esprit, mais reçue au sein de la solitude. Or, nous avons vu que c’était précisément là la définition de la lecture, et qu’à la lecture seule elle convenait. La seule discipline qui puisse exercer une influence favorable sur de tels esprits, c’est donc la lecture : ce qu’il fallait démontrer, comme disent les géomètres.

summer an illness forced me to spend long hours supine, by myself, and lacking the will to read or turn on electronic devices. Many hours I stared from a couch at two leafy branches of a tree on the other side of a window. In the background some construction activity or a songbird. Recovered, I miss those hours. I knew at the time that I would miss them, and yet I have reverted. Back home on my couch I quickly turn on the TV (sports or cable news) or begin to draw. Perhaps it is that “well” my thoughts are too agitated; I have—in addition to keeping my mortality at arm’s length—too many unfulfilled and unfulfillable desires? It is hard to be alone and quiet with them?⁶

Proust goes on:

As we have seen, it is precisely in solitude that may occur the creative activity that needs resuscitating. But from pure solitude the lazy mind cannot draw anything, since it is incapable of putting its creativity into motion. And the most uplifting conversation or urgent counsels would not serve either, since they cannot engender this original, creative activity. What is needed is an intervention that, while coming from another, takes place deep within ourselves. Although the impulse of another mind, we receive it within our own solitude. And we have seen that this is precisely the nature of reading; that reading alone has this capacity.

Notwithstanding his having used the analogy of depressed people, Proust is here speaking of all of us, “*nous-mêmes*” (himself included). As regards what we “have seen” previously in the text, he had written about how reading

involves receiving input from another mind, but while remaining alone, which is to say continuing to enjoy the intellectual power found in solitude and that conversation immediately dissipates . . .⁷

We might say that Proust and I are preaching to the converted insofar as his and mine are texts to be read and which would only be read by those quite devoted to reading. That reading is the only solution I would certainly not insist, and this not least because—*plus royaliste que le roi*: more Pascalian than Pascal?—I do not believe that there are solutions to the

⁶ Over the years I have kept coming back to this subject. One might see the 2013 essay [On Just Being](#) or, from this past July, Limerick 64, from [Part II \(Injustice, Trump, Illness, Poetry\)](#):

Grave illness can teach us to stare at the air
At a book on a table, clouds in a window square
And we want nothing more
Even our health we ignore
With time we are at peace, exalted by our cares

⁷ Proust, *Journées*, 39 (here going a little further with the French text than in the English rendition):

la lecture . . . consistant pour chacun de nous à recevoir communication d'une autre pensée, mais tout en restant seul, c'est-à-dire en continuant à jouir de la puissance intellectuelle qu'on a dans la solitude et que la conversation dissipe immédiatement, en continuant à pouvoir être inspiré, à rester en plein travail fécond de l'esprit sur lui-même.

human predicament, to our most basic troubles (or *misères*).⁸ I thus conclude much as I, with Proust's help, began: most human beings are living, or seeking desperately to live, on the surface only, in a passivity which makes them playthings of commercial diversions, reduces them to the level of their gadgets and media, and leaves them lost to many other feelings and to human beings' deeper mental resources.

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⁸ William Eaton, [There is no solution](#), Montaigbakhtinian.com.