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Proust and Ariosto: Interpreting the Signs of Desire

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Abstract: The paper analyzes the writings of the two authors who have been distant for four centuries but in whose works we have found closeness in the treatment of the themes of longing and desire as an impetus for the semiotic practice of interpretation. This definition of desire was first mentioned by Gilles Deleuze when talking about Proust's work, but the systems of signs that Deleuze finds in Proust are also applicable to Ariosto. The rich critical opus devoted to the great author of the 20th-century French literature will actually serve us to draw some of the features of Ariosto's renaissance work.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Although these two authors belong to different literatures and periods and between them there were probably no interferences or influences, in Ariosto and Proust surprises us the closeness in treating the theme of love in close correlation with the madness and the desire as an insurmountable urge for interpretation. On the one hand, Ariosto represents the 16th-century Italian Renaissance, and on the other, Proust belongs to the 20th-century French modernism. Among other things, Ariosto appears as the author of the knightly epic poem *Orlando Furioso* (*The Frenzy of Orlando*) and Proust is recognizable for its syntactically complex novel À *la Recherche du Temps Perdu* (*In Search of Lost Time*). Although literary criticism has yielded an incomparably extensive production on Proust's work unlike that of Ariosto, nevertheless, theoretical works devoted to Proust could in many ways be applied to Ariosto.

Following Gilles Deleuze's turning book *Proust and Signs*³, that opened up a whole new perspective in interpreting Proust's work according to which the character of a Bildungsroman interprets the signs of the three circles - Love, Society and Art, the approach to the interpretive choices of the protagonist has become a common practice. A special addition to Deleuze's work is also the chapter dedicated to the madness of two of the characters in Proust: Albertine and Charlus. But all that Deleuze finds in Proust can be found in the same way in Ariosto by unification of the themes of interpretation and madness, making it a rare occasion for a new work to reveal the meaning of the work that preceded it for several centuries.

Our attempt to find studies that have already compared these two authors has failed. The obviousness in the treatment of the subject, however, remained unnoticed, perhaps because Proust did not read the Renaissance authors, but rather the 19th-century authors, and in his work that is rich in intertextuality one cannot find the name of Ariosto, and probably no scholar was instructed to compare these two authors. Only in 1969 in the journal Romance Notes², published by the University of North Carolina, there is a paper entitled Sacripant and Sacripante: a note on Proust and Ariosto, where the author emphasizes to the fact that unlike numerous researches devoted to the nonliterary sources of Proust's names of the characters, the portrait of Odette's painting by Elstir in the third volume of the novel, À l'Ombre des Jeunes Filles en Fleur¹⁰ (In the Shadow of Young Girls in Flower), titled Miss Sacripant, comes from the Italian literary Renaissance, notably from the epic poem by Ariosto. In Canto primo from Orlando Furioso, the characters of Sacripante and Angelica are introduced, where Sacripante compares Angelica's virginity to the flower, and undoubtedly the flowers appear as a motif through the second volume of Proust's novel, Un Amour de Swann⁹ (Swann in Love), devoted to Odette, and to the sexuality that she represents. Like Swann, Sacripante begins to suspect that he is not the only one who can posses Angelica, with the characters in both works becoming active and almost aggressive figures possessed by the capture of their love object. However, Odette's portrayal of Miss Sacripant appears in the third volume In the Shadow of Young Girls in Flower when the young narrator visits Elstir and learns about his painting technique of impressionism. It is assumed that at the time the portrait was painted, Odette was Elstir's mistress, and he, like Swann, doubted her faithfulness, and gave her the

name associated with the events from *Orlando Furioso*. In the portrait Odette is wearing a man's suite with flowers as a decoration, emphasizing her androgynous nature, and even the name is a combination of *Miss* as a young girl and *Sacripant* as the male character in Ariosto's poem. Later, in the same volume, the narrator meets Albertine, who is awaited by Miss Sacripant, containing her androgynous nature and her inability to adhere to a subject she will be devoted to.

Ariosto began writing *Orlando Furioso* towards 1505, completing his first version in 1516, which contained 40 songs, while the third and final version will be expanded to 46 songs. As for the full epic fable, it takes over the already treated issue of the legendary hero Orlando (or Roland in the French tradition) as the most prominent warrior of Carlo the Great, who begins the battle against the Saracens to defend Christianity. Although earlier versions of this story treat Orlando's exploits, noting his knightly courage, when Italian Renaissance writers decide to take up the subject again, the full narrative of the epics intertwines with the theme of love, first in *Orlando Innamorato* (*Orlando in Love*) by Matteo Maria Bojardo and than in *Orlando Furioso* by Ariosto, where love is already the threshold that the hero crosses to enter the waters of madness. After one of his travels, Orlando manages to capture the Saracen Princess, but ever since she does not cease to run away, eternally elusive and dissatisfied with her fate of the abducted girl. Searching for her, Orlando repeatedly finds signs of her love for the ordinary Islamic soldier Medoro, which puts him in a state of rage and then in need of false interpretation to appease his conscience. This in turn results in a failure to recognize the real and the unreal, or in a delusion and consolation that every moment risks turning into a cruel and melancholic reality.

The Proust's Angelica is of course Albertine. Albertine is one of those characters in the novel *In Search of Lost Time* presented through the most fragmentary, unfinished, inconsistent, incoherent perspective: from the moment of her emergence as part of an inaccessible group of girls, when the narrator's visual field can hardly identify her separately from the rest of the girls, through the lies that, according to the narrator, conceal Albertine's forbidden pleasures, until her disappearance and her sudden death that symbolically signify the ultimate inability of her possession. The strong longing that is fundamental to the narrator's experience and defining of Albertine contributes to the endless deepening of the layers of meaning associated with her being.

II. THE POETICS OF THE RENAISSANCE AND MODERNISM

One of the essential features of the Renaissance poetry is the perspective on man as the measure of all things and his central position in the estimation of worldly values, and thus the distancing from the religious understanding of man's predestination by God. In art, the foreground are the sensual representations of the author who enjoys portraying the beauties of nature and presenting the passions without the patronage of the reason. Angelica is the fruit of such poetics that represents the desire as the human side of Orlando, when emotion overrides reason, and when the most famous knight who does not know about military defeat is now defeated by love.

Because the Modernism, for its part, is characterized by the complexity of the narrative structure and the tendencies to examine the spheres of the unconscious in man, these two authors who belong to distant periods of time can meet in their search for the irrational. As Proust will quote in the introduction of *Contre Sainte-Beuve*: "Chaque jour j'attache moins de prix à l'intelligence. Chaque jour je me rends mieux compte que ce n'est qu'en dehors d'elle que l'écrivain peut ressaisir quelque chose de nos impressions, c'est-à-dire atteindre quelque chose de lui-même et la seule matière de l'art". If we can follow the irrationality in which the narrator falls into both works, Proust first presents it in the visual perception of the loved one, which is the beginning of her incompatibility.

Proust's Albertine appears as a character in the third volume of the work, titled *In the Shadow of Young Girls in Flower* and is part of Proust's narrator's memories that begin as his adolescent admiration to continue in critical and exhilarating suspicion towards the end. For Proust, fragmentation becomes a feature of the perception burdened by desire. The instability that occurs between the dream and the past, the present and the future, in Proust, is supplemented by the visual field that occupies the domain of the inaccessible subject. Presented for the first time in a crowd of girls speeding along the sea and who, through their gestures and screams are a kind of sea hurricane that anticipates the future mood of the narrator, the image of Albertine will gradually crystallize. The undefined identity of Albertine, who will later appear in all aspects of her description, - name, origin, status, past, - is present at the very beginning in her visual portrayal. The group of girls that comes up as a fury is only represented in parts:

à vrai dire, je les voyais depuis si peu d'instants et sans oser les regarder fixement que je n'avais encore individualisé aucune d'elles. Sauf une, que son nez droit, sa peau brune mettaient en contraste au milieu des autres comme, dans quelque tableau de la Renaissance, un roi Mage de type arabe, elles ne m'étaient connues, l'une, que par une paire d'yeux durs, butés et rieurs ; une autre que par des joues où le rose avait cette teinte cuivrée qui évoque l'idée de géranium ; et même ces traits je n'avais encore

indissolublement attaché aucun d'entre eux à l'une des jeunes filles plutôt qu'à l'autre ; et quand [...] je voyais émerger un ovale blanc, des yeux noirs, des yeux verts, je ne savais pas si c'était les mêmes qui m'avaient déjà apporté du charme tout à l'heure, je ne pouvais pas les rapporter à telle jeune fille que j'eusse séparée des autres et reconnue.¹⁰

Albertine is involved in a special kind of aesthetics characterized by speed and processuality, with fragmentation of the parts of the future jigsaw puzzle, with elusiveness and incompleteness. She is a student of the Impressionist painter Elstir, but later her own figure will become part of the aesthetics of impressionism whereby the rigid contours of things disappear to merge into one another in undefined wholeness. The narrator's gaze is constantly overwhelmed by desire, which also contributes to the image appearing before him in complete dispensation: he sees fragments, eyes, cheeks, but still cannot identify girls.

In both works, not only the words or the actions of the loved one are a pretext for interpretation, but as Deleuze points out, the very being of the other becomes a layered figure who as if incorporates within itself innumerable worlds that seek to be revealed. These unknown worlds for the two narrators are fueled by the dark and pagan side of Angelica belonging to the Saracen army, and also by Albertine's future affiliation with a specific vicious group that Proust portrays as imaginary territory named Gomorrah:

« L'être aimé apparaît comme un signe, une « âme » : il exprime un monde possible inconnu de nous. L'aimé implique, enveloppe, emprisonne un monde qu'il faut déchiffrer, c'est à dire interpréter. Il s'agit même d'une pluralité de mondes ; le pluralisme de l'amour ne concerne pas seulement la multiplicité des êtres aimés, mais la multiplicité des âmes ou des mondes en chacun d'eux. Aimer, c'est chercher à expliquer, à développer ces mondes inconnus qui restent enveloppés dans l'aimé. C'est pourquoi il nous est si facile de tomber amoureux de femmes qui ne sont pas de notre « monde », ni même de notre type. C'est pourquoi aussi les femmes aimées sont souvent liées à des paysages, que nous connaissons assez pour souhaiter leur reflet dans les yeux d'une femme, mais qui se reflètent alors d'un point de vue si mystérieux que ce sont pour nous comme des pays inaccessibles, inconnus : Albertine enveloppe, incorpore, amalgame « la plage et le déferlement du flot » ».³

III. INTERPRETATION OF SIGNS IN ARIOSTO

The specificity of Ariosto's epic poem is that the knightly ideals are not only intertwined with the theme of love, as well as other Italian Renaissance epics in contrast to the medieval ones, but that Orlando symbolizes the blurring of the sense of reason by love, the displacement of the thin thread between the reality and the reason. As the epic narrator suggests:

Diro d'Orlando in un medesmo tratto cosa non detta in prosa mai, ne in rima: che per amor venne in furore e matto, d'uom che si saggio era stimato prima;^{6/1} (Canto I, 2)

In pursuit of Angelica, Orlando encounters a series of signs that he is forced to interpret, as Proust's narrator interprets Albertine's words and actions and is constantly in a state of agitation or comfort depending on his view of the evidence offered. Orlando finds the inscribed names of Angelica and her lover, the Muslim soldier Madoro, on the bark:

Tre volte e quattro e sei lesse lo scrito quello infelice, e pur cercando invano che non vi fosse quel che v'era scritto; e sempre lo vedea piu chiaro e piano: ad ogni volta in mezzo il petto afflitto stringersi il cor sentia con fredda mano.

In the same strain of Roland will I tell
Things unattempted yet in prose or rhyme,
On whom strange madness and rank fury fell,
A man esteemed so wise in former time;
If she, who to like cruel pass has well
Nigh brought my feeble wit which fain would climb
And hourly wastes my sense, concede me skill
And strength my daring promise to fulfil.

Rimase al fin con gli occhi e con la mente fissi nel sasso indifferente.^{6/2} (Canto XXIII, 111)

His interpretation begins with suspicion, but gradually turns into self-deception, in the false consolation that Maduro's name is his own name or that someone has imitated Angelica's handwriting to create the illusion that will provoke his anger. But as his reason tries to sublimate, new signs of interpretation exacerbate the pain, and thus the madness. The cave in which Angelica heals Maduro is filled with love poetry that recounts their happenings. The third culminating moment that does not allow Orlando's reason to be deceived is the story of the innkeeper who relays the love story between the two lovers he witnessed. Orlando's mind can no longer hold and his madness leads him into hallucinations and fights with imaginary opponents.

IV. INTERPRETATION OF THE SIGNS OF LOVE IN PROUST

On the other hand, Albertine becomes part of the narrator's life, but her every word, gesture or action is a precursor to doubt. Proust's narrator should first interpret Albertine's lies, her strategy being to dispel the doubts of her mistakes without calculating the effect of the situation she constructs through her lying. Her anger at Marcel who does not stop with his questionings puts her in new outbursts that forced her to refute the previous lies, so that she herself would not know which truth is best to decide. The inability to think about few things at once, the use of a lie that requires strong rational engagements, brings Albertine into traps from which she can only be saved if, in good faith, Marcel's trials stop. Unable to produce argumentative speech at the very moment, Albertine puts out views that only pull her out of the trap at the moment. As for the narrator, he is embroiled in a real game of knowledge and his absence, trying to establish control over her desires and her constant elusiveness. The inability to create a perfectly argumentative discourse that will be false but also credible in itself, without gaps and incoherence in the story, is crucial in the discursive portrayal of Albertine's character.

Proust opens up a new subject that concerns the unconscious attraction to the person who remains forever a stranger to him. On the one hand he wants to know the truth about Albertine, but on the other he seems to want to share the pleasure he is not destined to know. Or as Jacques Dubois states: "Errance des désirs. Albertine invente une libido mobile, dont la circulation n'est pas contrôlable. Cette libido est partout et nulle part, échappe à la règle, au classement, à la nomination [...] Ce qui perturbe Proust dans Albertine, c'est que, femme doublement femme, elle lui échappe. Très pratiquement: elle n'est jamais là; ou jamais vraiment là; ou là tout en étant ailleurs. Mais très ontologiquement aussi: elle est radicalement étrange et donc inconnaissable." This characteristic of escape and distraction which, according to Dubois should create the conditions for a "mobile libido", corresponds to Angelica's description in Ariosto's first song of the epic poem and makes her a subject of desire:

Dove, poi che rimase la donzella ch'esser dovea del vincitor mercede, inanzi al caso era salita in sella, e quando bisogno le spalle diede^{6/3} (Canto I, 10)

Indosso la corazza, l'elmo in testa, la spada al fianco, e in braccio avea lo scudo;

- 2 Three times, and four, and six, the lines imprest Upon the stone that wretch perused, in vain Seeking another sense than was exprest, And ever saw the thing more clear and plain; And all the while, within his troubled breast, He felt an icy hand his heart-core strain. With mind and eyes close fastened on the block, At length he stood, not differing from the rock.
- There, lodged by Charles, that gentle bonnibel,
 Ordained to be the valiant victor's meed,
 Before the event had sprung into her sell,
 And from the combat turned in time of need;
 Presaging wisely Fortune would rebel
 That fatal day against the Christian creed:
 And, entering a thick wood, discovered near,
 In a close path, a horseless cavalier.

e oiu leggier correa per la foresta, ch`al pallio rosso il villan mezzo ignudo.^{6/4} (Canto I, 11)

Unlike her, Albertine at one point becomes a prisoner in the narrator's home, which should mean a total control of her desires and actions. Not only does Albertine lose the opportunity to enjoy the free will, but in a way she becomes a project made by the will of the other. She is slowly losing her original properties to become a cultured lady who responds to Marcel's demands. From the initial girl who enjoys the sweetness of spoken food she becomes the inmate who slowly accumulates sadness in her eyes and who at any moment is ready to leave. That prisoner's progressive depression will also be symbolically ended with her death, which may be interpreted as suicide.

Slowly but surely, Albertina loses her strength and is dominated by the tiredness of the quarrels, of the arguments and the interrogations, so that her anger begins to eject phrases that expose Gomorrah. She uses unfinished sentences that make the narrator think for a while, eventually revealing some of the vocabulary typical of the sodomist's argot.

V. FOLLOWING THE TRACES OF ALBERTINE

While Angelica has been on the run from the very beginning of the epic poem, Albertine's physical escape takes place in the volume *Albertine Disparue*¹¹ (*Albertine Gone*), when she leaves Marcel's apartment unexpectedly and unannounced. The volume begins with an event that makes a sharp cut in the narrative of the Proust's novel, at least as far as the narrator's expectations are concerned. However, judging by Albertine's "prunelles tristes et soumises" and her progressive passivity, her departure stood much earlier as a possible solution to breaking the symbolic chains. The inconsistency with this abandonment, which completely alters the narrator's feelings about her, leads him to embark on a series of strategies that would bring Albertine back. In this way, the character himself seems to want to take the story into his own hands, to become a narrator and creator of the further course of his love affair with Albertine, to postpone her loss, instead of returning her and making a plan for marriage. But unlike the Renaissance romantic comedy in which the conventions require Machiavellian cunning to achieve the desired goal, the actions of the narrator of this novel will be in vain, and with the unplanned death of Albertine, this love story remains forever unfulfilled.

The news of Albertine's death does not stop the narrator's search for Albertine's past. On the contrary, she seems to still live in his thoughts, as if he cannot yet recount the news of her disappearance. Albertine's death symbolizes the final impossibility of her possession. And as a subject of incorruptible longing, she remains only as an image captured in his thoughts and continues to possess his spirit.

VI. ON REASON AND SUBLIMATION

The only solution would be for someone else to write the story of Albertine instead: "Les romanciers prétendent souvent dans une introduction qu'en voyageant dans un pays ils ont rencontré quelqu'un qui leur a raconté la vie d'une personne. Ils laissent alors la parole à cet ami de rencontre et le récit qui leur fait c'est précisément leur roman. Ainsi la vie de Fabrice del Dongo fut racontée à Stendal par un chanoine de Padoue. Combien nous voudrions quand nous aimons, c'est-à-dire quand l'existence d'une autre personne nous semble mystérieuse, trouver un tel narrateur informé!"

Marcel is actually looking for a narrator who would know how to tell the truth about Albertine, or an omniscient narrator, putting himself in a position not to be a narrator, but rather a person who is personally affected by the story he is about to tell and for which he cannot obtain definitive knowledge.

The part of the novel *Albertine Gone* can be called precisely a "in search for a narrator", one who would know the whole story of Albertine and who would eventually dry up Marcel's curiosity. But in the course of the

5 "sad and submissive lashes"

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⁴ With shield upon his arm, in knightly wise,
Belted and mailed, his helmet on his head;
The knight more lightly through the forest hies
Than half-clothed churl to win the cloth of red.
But not from cruel snake more swiftly flies
The timid shepherdess, with startled tread,
Than poor Angelica the bridle turns
When she the approaching knight on foot discerns.

action it will be seen that for various reasons, such a narrator is impossible to find, and the author will first and foremost place the emphasis on the unreliability of each of the narrators, on their reluctant morality. So, there are narrators, but the main narrator Marcel cannot rely on any of them. It remains only Albertine to become the object of his writing, and the search for her to become a search for himself through creation. Or if every creation needs belief, and not a rational proof, KKona is right when she says:

À partir du moment où témoigner n'est pas prouver, le verdict de culpabilité ou d'acquittement devient une question de croyance. [...] Si c'est le désir qui engendre la croyance, c'est le désir également qui cause son évanouissement. Ou peut-être la croyance s'évanouit-elle avec le désir. Croire Albertine innocente, c'est maintenir le désir pour Albertine vivant. Et si Marcel déclare avoir opté pour la culpabilité d'Albertine, c'est que, son deuil avançant, son désir pour Albertine risque de s'éclipser.⁵

The inability to construct a story is tantamount to the inability to create a narrative identity for Albertine's character. The intertwining of stories that are seasoned with financial interest and the moral inconsistency of the storytellers alleviate the pain of the one who seeks for a moment, until he himself doubts the testimonies he has heard. Not only is Albertina prone to lies, not only does the narrator employ unethical strategies in his desire for knowledge, but all other characters use potential false testimonies and are victims of their own low interests. The infernal circle only narrows and entangles, involves new participants, but leaves the truth on the basis of the impossible. Almost the whole novel is a kind of persecution in which the narrator cannot first draw the sketches on Albertine's face, until later he cannot discover the truth about her life.

VII. CONCLUSION

In both works, the key point is that in the end neither of the protagonists owns his object of longing, neither of them reaches the realization of the love they seek from the beginning, and both resolve the problem by finding mechanisms to control or divert passion. In Proust it happens through sublimation, that is, after Albertine is already dead, the narrator can sit down and start writing about his passion, at the same time diverting the desire in his writing. In Ariosto the resolution is less tragic, and more witty in accordance with the principles of the Renaissance epic poem, where taken to paradise, Orlando can retrieve his mind held in a jar and see the fate of many whose brains are up there, in the world of lost things on earth, and as he himself says:

Altri in amar lo perde, altri in onori, altri in cercar, scorrendo il mar, ricchezze; altri ne le speranze de' signori, altri dietro alle magiche sciocchezze; altri in gemme, altri in opre di pittori, ed altri in altro che piu d'altro aprezze. (Canto XXXIV, 85)

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⁶ Some waste on love, some seeking honour, lose Their wits, some, scowering seas, for merchandise, Some, that on wealthy lords their hope repose, And some, befooled by silly sorceries; These upon pictures, upon jewels those; These on whatever else they highest prize. Astrologers' and sophists' wits mid these, And many a poet's too, Astolpho sees.

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