

## Modernist Extracts

### Proust

I have enclosed as our Proust extract some of the best-known lines of prose in French canon, the opening of Proust's epic *In Search of Lost Time*. This passage was initially turned down by French publishers, one of whom wrote "I might be as thick as two short planks tied together, but I can't see the interest of beginning a novel with a bit about falling asleep" as an explanation to other reviewers as to why he was turning it down. Since that time, this passage has become a classic, and I wonder if you might be able to

- (1) explain its appeal
- (2) explain its novelty relative to Naturalism and Realism, and
- (3) consider the differences in the two principal translations, that of Moncrieff in 1922 and Davis in 2002.

### Gide

Gide's interest here lies for me in showing an alternative face of Modernism, and in particular in a different style of autobiographical literature. The extract is intended to be compared directly with Proust, and it is from his starkly revealing autofiction, *Si le grain ne meurt or If it dies* (1926), where the sexual events of his life are described in detail. The English translation can be found by following the hyperlink below, and it is from the opening on page 9 ("I was born on November...") until the end of the first section ("...crooked look in my eyes").

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### Unknown poem

Further to our discussions on Romanticism in Hugo and Baudelaire, I thought I would enclose a poem from slightly after Baudelaire, which illustrates the ongoing evolution of Romantic verse in the French language. I have deliberately obliterated the name of the poet, the translator, and the dates of these various translations, so you might treat this as a task of practical criticism.

Two questions that might be worth considering:

- (1) what, if any, metre is this poem written in?
- (2) What features of Romantic poetry might be found in these lines, and in what ways does the poet distance themselves from that work? Finally, I think much can be said about the changes in tone apparent in the English translations – domestication and foreignisation.

## La Grande Ivresse

Par les nuits d'été bleues ou chantent les cigales, Dieu verse sur la France une coupe d'étoiles.  
Le vent porte à ma lèvre un goût du ciel d'été! Je veux boire à l'espace fraîchement argenté.

L'air du soir est pour moi le bord de la coupe froide où, les yeux mi-fermés et la bouche goulue,  
je bois, comme le jus pressé d'une grenade, la fraîcheur étoilée qui se répand des nues.

Couché sur un gazon dont l'herbe est encor chaude de s'être prélassé sous l'haleine du jour, oh!  
que je viderais, ce soir, avec amour, la coupe immense et bleue où le firmament rôde!

Suis-je Bacchus ou Pan? Je m'enivre d'espace et j'apaise ma fièvre à la fraîcheur des nuits. La  
bouche ouverte au ciel où grelotte les astres que le ciel coule en moi! Que je me fonde en lui!

Enivré par l'espace et les cieus étoilés, Byron et Lamartine, Hugo, Shelley sont morts. L'espace  
est toujours là; il coule illimité; à peine ivre il m'emporte, et j'avais soif encore!

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## THE GREAT DRUNKENNESS

Through the blue summer nights when the cicadas sing, God over France a cup o'er-brimmed  
with stars doth pour. A taste of summer skies to my lips the breezes bring! I fain would drink  
all space, so freshly silvered o'er.

A goblet's frigid rim is evening's air to me, whence, with my eyes half-closed, I quaff with  
greedy zest, like to the cooling juice from a pomegranate pressed, starred freshness slow  
diffused from heaven's immensity.

Couched on a velvet sward, whose grasses warm betray how they had sprawled at ease beneath  
the breath of day, I would drain tonight with what divine content, the cup immense and blue  
where wheels the firmament !

Am I Bacchus? Am I Pan? I tipples space. Elate, with the freshness of the nights I slake my  
fever-fit, my mouth agape to heaven where planets scintillate. Let heaven flow in me or let me  
melt in it !

With their inebriate souls in heaven's starred cup immersed, Byron and Lamartine, Hugo and  
Shelly died. Yet changeless space is there. It rolls creation-wide. Scarce drunk it bears me  
hence, and I was still athirst !

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## **The Great Intoxication**

Through the blue summer nights when the cicadas sing, God pours over France a chalice full of stars. The wind brings to my lips a taste of the summer sky! I want to drink from the freshly silvered firmament.

The evening air for me is the rim of the cold chalice where, with eyes half closed and greedy mouth, I drink, as if it were the expressed juice of a pomegranate, the starry coolness diffused from the skies.

Lying on truth, its grass still warm from basking beneath the breath of the day, oh! how I could drain tonight, with love, the vast blue chalice where the firmament wheels!

Am I Bacchus or Pan? I am intoxicated with space, and I soothe my fever in the coolness of the nights. Mouth open to the sky where the stars are shivering, how the sky flows within me! how I melt into the sky!

Intoxicated by space and the starry heavens, Byron and Lamartine, Hugo and Shelley have died. Space is there; its flow is boundless; scarcely drunk it transports me, and I was still thirsty!

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Longtemps, je me suis couché de bonne heure. Parfois, à peine ma bougie éteinte, mes yeux se fermaient si vite que je n'avais pas le temps de me dire : «Je m'endors.» Et, une demi-heure après, la pensée qu'il était temps de chercher le sommeil m'éveillait ; je voulais poser le volume que je croyais avoir encore dans les mains et souffler ma lumière ; je n'avais pas cessé en dormant de faire des réflexions sur ce que je venais de lire, mais ces réflexions avaient pris un tour un peu particulier ; il me semblait que j'étais moi-même ce dont parlait l'ouvrage : une église, un quatuor, la rivalité de François I<sup>er</sup> et de Charles Quint. Cette croyance survivait pendant quelques secondes à mon réveil ; elle ne choquait pas ma raison mais pesait comme des écailles sur mes yeux et les empêchait de se rendre compte que le bougeoir n'était plus allumé. Puis elle commençait à me devenir inintelligible, comme après la métempsycose les pensées d'une existence antérieure ; le sujet du livre se détachait de moi, j'étais libre de m'y appliquer ou non ; aussitôt je recouvrais la vue et j'étais bien étonné de trouver autour de moi une obscurité, douce et reposante pour mes yeux, mais peut-être plus encore pour mon esprit, à qui elle apparaissait comme une chose sans cause, incompréhensible, comme une chose vraiment obscure. Je me demandais quelle heure il pouvait être ; j'entendais le sifflement des trains qui, plus ou moins éloigné, comme le chant d'un oiseau dans une forêt, relevant les distances, me décrivait l'étendue de la campagne déserte où le voyageur se hâte vers la station prochaine ; et le petit chemin qu'il suit va être gravé dans son souvenir par l'excitation qu'il doit à des lieux nouveaux, à des actes inaccoutumés, à la causerie récente et aux adieux sous la lampe étrangère qui le suivent encore dans le silence de la nuit, à la douceur prochaine du retour.

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(Moncrieff translation, 1922)

For a long time I used to go to bed early. Sometimes, when I had put out my candle, my eyes would close so quickly that I had not even time to say "I'm going to sleep." And half an hour later the thought that it was time to go to sleep would awaken me; I would try to put away the book which, I imagined, was still in my hands, and to blow out the light; I had been thinking all the time, while I was asleep, of what I had just been reading, but my thoughts had run into a channel of their own, until I myself seemed actually to have become the subject of my book: a church, a quartet, the rivalry between François I and Charles V. This impression would persist for some moments after I was awake; it did not disturb my mind, but it lay like scales upon my eyes and prevented them from registering the fact that the candle was no longer burning. Then it would begin to seem unintelligible, as the thoughts of a former existence must be to a reincarnate spirit; the subject of my book would separate itself from me, leaving me free to choose whether I would form part of it or no; and at the same time my sight would return and I would be astonished to find myself in a state of darkness, pleasant and restful enough for the

eyes, and even more, perhaps, for my mind, to which it appeared incomprehensible, without a cause, a matter dark indeed.

I would ask myself what o'clock it could be; I could hear the whistling of trains, which, now nearer and now farther off, punctuating the distance like the note of a bird in a forest, shewed me in perspective the deserted countryside through which a traveller would be hurrying towards the nearest station: the path that he followed being fixed for ever in his memory by the general excitement due to being in a strange place, to doing unusual things, to the last words of conversation, to farewells exchanged beneath an unfamiliar lamp which echoed still in his ears amid the silence of the night; and to the delightful prospect of being once again at home.

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(Davis translation, 2002)

For a long time, I went to bed early. Sometimes, my candle scarcely out, my eyes would close so quickly that I did not have time to say to myself: 'I'm falling asleep.' And, half an hour later, the thought that it was time to try to sleep would wake me; I wanted to put down the book I thought I still had in my hands and blow out my light; I had not ceased while sleeping to form reflections on what I had just read, but these reflections had taken a rather peculiar turn; it seemed to me that I myself was what the book was talking about: a church, a quartet, the rivalry between François I and Charles V. This belief lived on for a few seconds after my waking; it did not shock my reason but lay heavy like scales on my eyes and kept them from realizing that the candlestick was no longer lit. Then it began to grow unintelligible to me, as after metempsychosis do the thoughts of an earlier existence; the subject of the book detached itself from me, I was free to apply myself to it or not; immediately I recovered my sight and I was amazed to find a darkness around me soft and restful for my eyes, but perhaps even more so for my mind, to which it appeared a thing without cause, incomprehensible, a thing truly dark. I would ask myself what time it might be; I could hear the whistling of the trains which, remote or nearby, like the singing of a bird in a forest, plotting the distances, described to me the extent of the deserted countryside where the traveller hastens toward the nearest station; and the little road he is following will be engraved on his memory by the excitement he owes to new places, to unaccustomed cities, to the recent conversation and the farewells under the unfamiliar lamp that follow him still through the silence of the night, to the imminent sweetness of his return.

**[End of Proust extract]**

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## I

Je naquis le 22 novembre 1869. Mes parents occupaient alors, rue de Médicis, un appartement au quatrième ou cinquième étage, qu'ils quittèrent quelques années plus tard, et dont je n'ai pas gardé souvenir. Je revois pourtant le balcon ; ou plutôt ce qu'on voyait du balcon : la place à vol d'oiseau et le jet d'eau de son bassin – ou, plus précisément encore, je revois les dragons de papier, découpés par mon père, que nous lancions du haut de ce balcon, et qu'emportait le vent, par-dessus le bassin de la place, jusqu'au jardin du Luxembourg où les hautes branches des marronniers les accrochaient.

Je revois aussi une assez grande table, celle de la salle à manger sans doute, recouverte d'un tapis bas tombant ; au-dessous de quoi je me glissais avec le fils de la concierge, un bambin de mon âge qui venait parfois me retrouver.

« Qu'est-ce que vous fabriquez là-dessous ? criait ma bonne.

– Rien. Nous jouons. »

Et l'on agitait bruyamment quelques jouets qu'on avait emportés pour la frime. En vérité nous nous amusions autrement : l'un près de l'autre, mais non l'un avec l'autre pourtant, nous avions ce que j'ai su plus tard qu'on appelait « de mauvaises habitudes ».

Qui de nous deux en avait instruit l'autre ? et de qui le premier les tenait-il ? Je ne sais. Il faut bien admettre qu'un enfant parfois à nouveau les invente. Pour moi je ne puis dire si quelqu'un m'enseigna ou comment je découvris le plaisir ; mais, aussi loin que ma mémoire remonte en arrière, il est là.

Je sais de reste le tort que je me fais en racontant ceci et ce qui va suivre ; je pressens le parti qu'on en pourra tirer contre moi. Mais mon récit n'a raison d'être que véridique. Mettons que c'est par pénitence que je l'écris.

À cet âge innocent où l'on voudrait que toute l'âme ne soit que transparence, tendresse et pureté, je ne revois en moi qu'ombre, laideur, sournoiserie.

On m'emmenait au Luxembourg ; mais je me refusais à jouer avec les autres enfants ; je restais à l'écart, maussadement, près de ma bonne ; je considérais les jeux des autres enfants. Ils faisaient, à l'aide de seaux, des rangées de jolis pâtés de sable... Soudain, à un moment que ma bonne tournait la tête, je m'élançais et piétinais tous les pâtés.

L'autre fait que je veux relater est plus bizarre, et c'est pourquoi sans doute j'en suis moins honteux. Ma mère me l'a souvent raconté par la suite, et son récit aide mon souvenir.

Cela se passait à Uzès où nous allions une fois par an revoir la mère de mon père et quelques autres parents : les cousins de Flaux entre autres, qui possédaient, au cœur de la ville, une vieille maison avec jardin. Cela se passait dans cette maison des de Flaux. Ma cousine était très belle et le savait. Ses cheveux très noirs, qu'elle portait en bandeaux, faisaient valoir un profil de camée (j'ai revu sa photographie) et une peau éblouissante. De l'éclat de cette peau,

je me souviens très bien ; je m'en souviens d'autant mieux que, ce jour où je lui fus présenté, elle portait une robe largement échancrée.

« Va vite embrasser ta cousine », me dit ma mère lorsque j'entrai dans le salon. (Je ne devais avoir guère plus de quatre ans ; cinq peut-être.) Je m'avançai. La cousine de Flaux m'attira contre elle en se baissant, ce qui découvrit son épaule. Devant l'éclat de cette chair, je ne sais quel vertige me prit : au lieu de poser mes lèvres sur la joue qu'elle me tendait, fasciné par l'épaule éblouissante, j'y allai d'un grand coup de dents. La cousine fit un cri de douleur ; j'en fis un d'horreur ; puis je crachai, plein de dégoût. On m'emmena bien vite, et je crois qu'on était si stupéfait qu'on oublia de me punir.

Une photographie de ce temps, que je retrouve, me représente, blotti dans les jupes de ma mère, affublé d'une ridicule petite robe à carreaux, l'air maladif et méchant, le regard biais.

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## I

I was born on November 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1869. My parents at that time lived in the Rue de Médicis in an apartment on the fourth floor which they left a few years later and of which I have kept no recollection. Stay though, I do remember the balcony, or rather what could be seen from the balcony—the bird's-eye view of the Place with its ornamental piece of water and fountain; or rather, to be still more exact, I remember the paper dragons which my father used to cut out for me and which we launched into the air from the balcony; I remember their floating away in the wind over the fountain in the Place below and being carried away as far as the Luxembourg Gardens, where they used sometimes to catch in the top branches of the horse-chestnut trees.

I remember too a biggish table—the dining-room table, no doubt—with its table-cloth that reached nearly to the ground; I used to crawl underneath it with the concierge's little boy, who sometimes came to play with me.

“What are you up to under there?” my nurse would call out.

“Nothing; we're playing.” And then we would make a great noise with our playthings, which we had taken with us for the sake of appearances. In reality, we amused ourselves otherwise, beside each other but not with each other; we had what I afterwards learnt are called “bad habits.”

Which of us two taught them first to the other? I have no idea. Surely a child may sometimes invent them for himself. Personally, I cannot say whether anyone instructed me in the knowledge of pleasure or in what manner I discovered it—I only know that as far back as my recollection goes, I cannot remember a time without it.

I perfectly realise, for that matter, that I am doing myself harm by relating this and other things that follow; I foresee what use will be made of them against me. But the whole object of my story is to be truthful. Put the case that I am writing it for a penance.

One would like to believe that in that age of innocence the soul is all sweetness, light and purity, but I can remember nothing in mine that was not ugly, dark and deceitful.

I used to be taken for my outings to the Luxembourg; but I would not play with the other children; I kept sulkily apart with my nurse and watched their games. I remember once they were making mud-pies with their pails... All of a sudden, when my nurse was looking another way, I dashed up and trampled all the pies underfoot.

The only explanation I can think of for this behaviour is that I must have gone up to one of the children and asked to be allowed to play with them. It was their refusal that enraged me so and made me want to destroy their game.

The other incident I must relate is still odder, for which reason, no doubt, I am less ashamed of it. I often heard my mother tell the story later on, so that it kept fresh in my memory.

It happened at Uzés, where we used to go once a year to visit my father's mother and other relations—amongst them my de Flaux cousins, who owned an old house and garden in the heart of the town. It was in the de Flaux' house that it happened. My cousin was a very beautiful person and she knew it. Her black hair, which she wore parted in the middle and smoothed down on either side of her face, set off the perfection of her cameo-like profile (I have seen a photograph of her since then) and the dazzling whiteness of her skin. I remember the dazzling whiteness of her skin very well—and I remember it especially well because the day I was taken to see her she was wearing a low-necked dress.

“Go and give your cousin a kiss,” said my mother, as I came into the drawing-room. (I couldn't have been much more than four years old—five, perhaps.) I went obediently up and she drew me towards her; but at the sight of her bare shoulder and its dazzling whiteness, some sort of craziness possessed me; instead of putting my lips to the cheek she offered me, fascinated by her dazzling shoulder, I gave it a great bite with my teeth. My cousin screamed with pain and I with horror. She began to bleed and I to spit with disgust. I was speedily carried off and I really believe they were all so astounded that they forgot to punish me.

I have found a photograph of myself taken at that time; it represents me half hidden in my mother's skirts, frightfully dressed in a ridiculous little check frock, with a sickly, ill-tempered face and a crooked look in my eyes.

**[End of Gide extract]**

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