

The red shoes: Walter Benjamin's reading of memory in Marcel Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu*, in the light of the Dreyfus Affair

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Abstract

Memory in Marcel Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu* is usually interpreted in psychological or metaphysical terms. Walter Benjamin highlighted the historical aspects of memory in Proust through two prisms: modernity and the Dreyfus Affair. This essay presents a comment on Benjamin's reading of memory in *À la recherche du temps perdu*, and on a narrative strand in the novel about a pair of red shoes and a red dress of Mme de Guermantes. These serve as metonyms to remind the reader of how the aristocratic Mme de Guermantes 'forgets' her Jewish friend Swann in the course of the Dreyfus Affair and its aftermath. Involuntary memory, which is interpreted as memory through forgetfulness, emerges as a modest counterweight to a process of memory/forgetting which is constructed under collective pressure.

Keywords: Proust; Benjamin; Dreyfus Affair; collective memory; collective forgetting; assimilation; social exclusion

Introduction

Henri Bergson's metaphysical concept of memory formed a stumbling block for Maurice Halbwachs when he developed his theory on collective memory, which has been recycled and refined in recent debates on cultural memory. Halbwachs in particular contested Bergson's distinction between 'memory-habit' and 'pure memory'. In *Matière et mémoire* (1959) [Matter and Memory], Bergson had argued that the individual, through memory, has access to purely individual images rendering reality. These images can be called up by turning away from active social life, which only gives access to memory-habit, and turning towards contemplation instead. Halbwachs, who was a Republican and political thinker, contested this spiritualistic view of memory and sought to develop a more sociological approach, informed by Durkheim.¹

From a different perspective, Walter Benjamin (1980) developed a strikingly similar critique of Bergson in his 1938 essay 'Über einige Motive bei Baudelaire' ['Some motifs in Baudelaire' (1997)] Benjamin begins his theoretical fragments on the relation between modernity and experience by contrasting Bergson's theory of memory with Proust's representation of memory in his novel *À la recherche du temps perdu* [*In Search of Lost Time*], which for Benjamin expresses the historical character of memory and experience. In doing so, he threw a new light on Proustian memory,

which until then had been read in the light of Bergson's work, and continued to be so read in France throughout the twentieth century by critics ranging from Georges Poulet (1964) to Gilles Deleuze (1964). While contesting a full equivalence between Bergson and Proust, these critics see Proust first and foremost as an explorer of individual memory on a psychological and metaphysical level. Proustian memory for them belongs to the 'profound I', and not the 'social I'. In what follows, I will pursue Benjamin's intuition and interpret historical memory in *À la recherche du temps perdu*.

Two prisms, modernity and the Dreyfus Affair, directed Benjamin's interpretation. I will elaborate on these two aspects of historical memory in Proust through a detailed commentary on an important narrative strand in *À la recherche* that I call 'the red shoes', thus linking this strand to the fairy tale of that name written in 1845 by Hans Christian Andersen (2001). Red clothes and a pair of red shoes appear in Proust's novel each time it touches upon the fact that Madame de Guermantes has 'forgotten' her old Jewish friend Swann over the course of the Dreyfus Affair. By commenting on this specific narrative and its intertextual relation with Andersen's fairy tale, I will analyse Proust's representation of collective and individual aspects of both memory and forgetting at the conflictual historical moment of the Dreyfus Affair.

Walter Benjamin on Proust and the Dreyfus Affair

In his last long letter of 7 May 1940 to his friend Theodor W. Adorno, Walter Benjamin comments on the historical aspect of the experience of time in Proust (Adorno 1977: 203–4). Benjamin gives his brief response to a review by Adorno of two German writers, one of whom was Hoffmannsthal. In this review, Adorno had written that snobbery in Hoffmannsthal's work originated in the hope that happiness could be realized by obtaining a place in those layers of society where people did not exclusively (have to) concentrate on practical matters, but could turn to the pleasures of the mind. However, Adorno had written, he who follows the path of snobbery will not find happiness. The searcher for happiness will not be content with just contemplating the brilliance of an apparently beautiful life, but will try really to experience it, only to find that 'this is not it at all' as soon as he gets closer. Thus, he will repeat exactly the same experience that first inspired him to leave his own circles. In his review, Adorno had argued that Proust was the only writer really to have grasped this experience.

In his comment on this review, Benjamin writes that Adorno felicitously speaks of Proustian experience as the experience of 'this is not it at all', where 'time turns into something we have lost' (Adorno and Benjamin 1999: 329). He further suggests that Proust had a 'deeply hidden model' for this experience, namely the experience of 'this is not it' lived by French assimilated Jews. Benjamin writes about Proust's insight into 'the highly precarious structure of assimilation' when commenting on Proust's comparison of the behaviour of homosexuals and Jews in nineteenth-century French society, when both homosexuality and Judaism were highly taboo. This Proustian insight was, argues Benjamin, externally confirmed by the Dreyfus Affair (Adorno and Benjamin 1999: 330).

I will very briefly summarize the Affair. In October 1894, Alfred Dreyfus, a captain in the French army, was accused of high treason; he was said to have procured

military information for the Germans. From the beginning, it was clear that the evidence was unreliable, but it took five years for Dreyfus to be released from Devil's Island, where he was exiled and badly maltreated. Only after ten years of struggle by his family and an increasing number of so-called Dreyfusards was his innocence finally established. The fact that Dreyfus was Jewish played an important role in the suspicions cast upon him. Dreyfus himself was convinced of this from the moment he was accused. After the first interrogation, he cried out: 'My only crime is to have been born a Jew!' (cited in Burns 1992: 123). The anti-semitic press, headed by Édouard Drumont, revealed Dreyfus's Jewish identity on 1 November, before any details about the precise accusation became available. However, the role of anti-semitism was never acknowledged by the army and the government. This made it difficult to address, even after the Affair had grown into a major political row throughout France. It also made it especially difficult to be a Dreyfusard when one was Jewish, as this invariably induced the accusation that one was only a Dreyfusard because of group ties – an accusation the army and government would never extend to themselves, for they always made a pretence of strict neutrality.

The novel discusses these events from an oblique point of view, through discussions held in the various Proustian salons.² Many of the standpoints defended at the time have their representatives; there are those who argue for or against Dreyfus's guilt in the name of universal justice, and those who accuse Jewish Dreyfusards and aristocratic anti-Dreyfusards of partiality. Through the narrative strand of the red clothes and shoes of a Duchess, Mme de Guermantes, Proust subtly addresses the role of social memory and forgetfulness in relation to the Affair. He tells the story of a lack of solidarity in memory under collective pressure.

Red shoes, clothes and jewels as markers for memory

A pair of red shoes, a red dress and a necklace of rubies belonging to Mme Oriane de Guermantes are mentioned for the first time at the end of *Le Côté de Guermantes* II (Proust 1988: II) [*The Guermantes Way* II (1996: III)], when her Dreyfusard Jewish friend Swann and Marcel³ pay a visit to her and her husband, the Duc de Guermantes. On the evening of the same day, the Duchess wears these clothes to a party hosted by her niece, the Princesse de Guermantes. This episode is described extensively in *Sodome et Gomorrhe* II (Proust 1988: III) [*Sodom and Gomorrah* II (1996: IV)]. At the party, Swann's Dreyfusism is publicly rejected by the Duke and Duchess. The following two times the shoes and the dress appear, they are the object of a conversation between Marcel and Mme de Guermantes that takes place after Swann's death. On both occasions, Mme de Guermantes has forgotten important facts surrounding them, facts that concern the Dreyfus Affair. While she refrains from mentioning Swann, the Proustian text evokes his memory through the repeated references to the red shoes and dress. The first conversation takes place in *La Prisonnière* (Proust 1988: III) [*The Captive* (1996: V)], the second occurs at the 'Bal des Têtes' ['masked ball'] at the end of *À la recherche* in *Le Temps retrouvé* (Proust 1989: IV) [*Time Regained* (1996: VI)].

Le Côté de Guermantes II: Swann announces his imminent death

At the end of *Le Côté de Guermantes II*, Marcel is in the Guermantes's salon and is told that Swann will arrive at any moment. Before Swann's arrival, the Duke tells Marcel that the relation between the Guermantes and Swann has cooled. For twenty years, Swann had been Mme de Guermantes's closest friend, appreciated by her for his fine taste and his behaviour as an experienced *homme du monde*. At the moment described, Swann had already partially lost Mme de Guermantes's friendship because of a bad marriage, but his stance on the Dreyfus Affair now threatens the friendship more seriously, for the Duke in particular is a convinced anti-Dreyfusard.⁴ The Duke warns Marcel not to mention the party that night, because he is not sure whether Swann has been invited. He explains: 'Swann aurait dû comprendre qu'il devait, *plus que tout autre*, couper tout câble avec ces gens-là [les Dreyfusards], or tout au contraire il tient des propos fâcheux' (1988: II, 865) ['Swann ought to have realised that *he more than anyone* must drop all connection with those fellows (the Dreyfusards), instead of which he says the most regrettable things' (1996: III, 668)] (my emphasis). Why Swann 'more than anyone'? In the course of the novel, the Duke makes many remarks about Swann's Dreyfusism, invariably accusing Swann of betraying the aristocratic circles he frequented by becoming a Dreyfusard while also being a Jew; instead, Swann should have been grateful for having been accepted by high society.

The intensity of the animosity during the Affair has caused Swann to distance himself from his old friends in the same way they have distanced themselves from him. When Swann and the narrator find themselves together during the afternoon visit, Swann explains to him why so many noble people are anti-Dreyfusards: 'tous ces gens-là sont d'une autre race, on n'a pas impunément mille ans de féodalité dans le sang. Naturellement ils croient que cela n'est pour rien dans leur opinions' (1988: II 869) ['these people belong to a different race, one can't have a thousand years of feudalism in one's blood with impunity. Naturally they imagine that it counts for nothing in their opinions' (1996: III, 673)]. After rendering this conversation, the narrator writes that Swann's 'declassing' would have been better described as a 'reclassing', because it was to his credit that his Dreyfusism made him return to 'la voie par laquelle étaient venus les siens et d'où l'avaient dévié ses fréquentations aristocratiques' (1988: II, 870) ['the paths which his forebears had trodden and from which he had been deflected by his aristocratic associations' (1996: III, 673)].

The narrator here touches upon what Benjamin called 'the precarious structure of assimilation' that caused the experience of 'this is not it at all' at the time of the anti-semitic reaction to Dreyfus. Later in the novel, the narrator describes this conflict in terms of memory and forgetting. He writes that Swann might have developed 'le sentiment d'une solidarité morale avec les autres Juifs, solidarité que Swann semblait avoir oubliée toute sa vie, et que greffées les unes sur les autres, la maladie mortelle, l'affaire Dreyfus, la propagande anti-sémite avaient réveillée' (1988: III, 89) ['a sense of moral solidarity with the rest of the Jews, a solidarity which he seemed to have forgotten throughout his life, and which, one after another, his mortal illness, the Dreyfus case and the anti-semitic propaganda had reawakened' (1996: IV, 104)]. The distance between the inheritors of feudalism and the Jews, who had suffered

persecution in the past, as the narrator commemorates in this passage, is suddenly not one of history any more, but one of the present. The fact that the Duke accuses Swann of betrayal as soon as his identification with the Jews is foregrounded by the Dreyfus Affair signals the extent to which his 'aristocratic associations' had always demanded from Swann a negation of his Jewish cultural and religious background.

When Mme de Guermantes finally turns up, the group starts a worldly conversation in which none of these sensitive subjects are touched upon. At the end of the afternoon, she asks Swann to come to Italy, the next spring, for an art-historical trip. Swann answers that he will not be able to come and after some hesitation informs the Guermantes family that he is fatally ill. At this precise moment, the Duke decides that he and the Duchess have to leave immediately for the dinner preceding the party at the Princesse de Guermantes's, and the Duchess obeys:

Placée pour la première fois de sa vie entre deux devoirs aussi différents que monter dans sa voiture pour aller dîner en ville, et témoigner de la pitié à un homme qui va mourir, elle ne voyait rien dans le code des convenances qui lui indiquât la jurisprudence à suivre et ne sachant auquel donner la préférence, elle crut devoir faire semblant de ne pas croire que la seconde alternative eût à se poser, de façon à obéir à la première qui demandait en ce moment moins d'efforts, et pensa que la meilleure manière de résoudre le conflit était de le nier. 'Vous voulez plaisanter', dit-elle à Swann. (1988: II, 883)

[Placed for the first time in her life between two duties as incompatible as getting into her carriage to go out to dinner and showing compassion for a man who was about to die, she could find nothing in the code of conventions that indicated the right line to follow; not knowing which to choose, she felt obliged to pretend not to believe that the latter alternative need be seriously considered, in order to comply with the first, which at the moment demanded less effort, and thought that the best way of settling the conflict would be to deny that any existed. 'You're joking,' she said to Swann.' (1996: III, 688)]

The Duchess chooses not to leave the collective frame that the Duke in particular wishes her to conform to. She looks in the wrong book: there is nothing about compassion in 'the code of conventions', for codes only organize ritual, not affect. As the Duchess enters the carriage with the waiting Duke, he expresses his outrage at having been kept waiting. However, when he suddenly notices that the Duchess is wearing black shoes instead of red ones with her red dress, there is enough time left to send her back into the house to change her shoes. The intertextual reference to Hans Christian Andersen's 'The red shoes' gives full depth to this event.⁵

Andersen's fairy tale goes as follows. Once upon a time, there was a young girl named Karen, who was poor and had to go barefoot. Then, someone makes her a pair of shoes out of old red cloth, and she wears these shoes for the first time to her mother's funeral. They are not suitable for mourning, but they are the only shoes she has. An old lady passes by in a large carriage, and adopts Karen. She burns Karen's old shoes and Karen becomes a beautiful young lady. After she once sees a beautiful Princess wearing red morocco leather shoes, she buys a pair just like them. The old lady, nearly blind, cannot see they are red. When Karen wears them to church, everybody stares at her shoes, and they tell the old lady that they are red. The lady forbids Karen to wear the

red shoes to church and orders her to wear black ones instead. Karen cannot resist wearing the red ones to church again and is punished by an inability to stop dancing. She even kicks the lady with the red shoes as they drive back from church in the carriage, and can only stop dancing after she is helped to take her shoes off. However, she cannot resist the temptation to put on the shoes again, and goes to a party given while the old lady is dying. As a punishment, the shoes stick to her feet and force her to dance continuously. She has to ask an executioner to cut her legs off. This punishment is again not enough. When she feels she has repented sufficiently and wants to go to church again, she sees the red shoes dancing on her legs. She has to pray, give up all vanity and stay alone while all the others go to church before she is finally forgiven. As this happens, an angel moves her small room into the church where she meets the other people again. Her heart grows so full it breaks. When she arrives in heaven, nobody asks her about the red shoes any more (Andersen 2001).

This is a story of social forgetting, of the repression of mourning, love's and friendship's link to the past, and of integration into tradition. Karen mourns her poor parents' life through the red shoes, which also promise her a better life, with parties and princesses. The black shoes, the church and the old lady chain Karen to a collective past; not of love or hope, but of tradition, of continuity. The red shoes have to be replaced by black ones, and when this proves an impossible task for Karen, her dancing feet have to become red themselves and must be cut off in order to keep her in her predestined social place. In turn, Mme de Guermantes is forced to wear red shoes instead of black ones, because for her dinners and parties are the social rituals she cannot escape; they are as reified as tradition is for Karen. If she wants to keep her feet on the ground, she will have to forget Swann. The red shoes function as a metonymic marker for this aborted friendship throughout the rest of the novel.

While the fuss with the red and black shoes takes place, Swann and Marcel stand outside, waiting to say goodbye, but the Duke makes them leave before Oriane comes back, and shouts to Swann, in an ultimate denial of friendship: 'vous nous enterrez tous!' (1988: II, 884) ['you'll bury us all!' (1996: III, 691)].

Sodome et Gomorrhe II: the party

The party of the Princesse de Guermantes is described in the first chapter of *Sodome et Gomorrhe II*. The red clothes serve to portray both Oriane's distance from society and her conformity to it. The minute but important differences in behaviour between Oriane and the Duke that we witnessed before have now been suspended; Oriane conforms entirely to the social code. The narrator witnesses the compulsory aspect that pervades her social behaviour. As she takes off her coat, she appears to be wearing 'un véritable *carcan* de rubis' (1988: III, 61) ['a huge *collar* of rubies' (1996: IV, 71; my emphasis)]. The narrator also compares the artificial brightness of her eyes – 'la Duchesse allumait pour toute la soirée' (1988: III, 61) ['the Duchess lit up for the whole evening' (1996: IV, 71)] – to that of her jewels, thereby identifying the symbol of her liveliness with her being chained to tradition and society.

At the party, the reader is made to witness the way Oriane and her husband betray Swann. After a nationalist, anti-Dreyfusard and also anti-semitic speech held by the

Duke in front of several auditors, in which he again accuses Swann of betraying the aristocratic scene that had so generously 'adopted' him, the Duchess adds that she would never receive Swann's wife and daughter, although Swann had expressed his wish that she would do this before he died. She affirms the Duke's complaint that Swann has shown himself ungrateful to them by being pro-Dreyfus. Although Swann himself is present at the party, the Duke and Duchess do not exchange one word with him. Swann is there, ironically, because the anti-semitic Prince de Guermantes, a cousin of the Duke, has become convinced of Dreyfus's innocence. He wants to tell Swann about this, as well as about a strange discovery he has just made: when he asked a priest to pray for Dreyfus at mass the next Sunday, to his astonishment the priest had told him that his wife, the Princess, had asked him to do the same thing. Thus both are secret Dreyfusards.

It becomes clear at the party that all the individual characters have their own opinions about the question of Dreyfus's guilt, which are only partially determined by the group(s) they belong to. However, there is a striking difference between the openness with which they defend their opinions. The Duke and Duchess are the only ones to make their opinion public. The Prince and Swann exchange their words privately, and their convictions as Dreyfusards will remain private. As Marcel's friend Bloch learns about the Prince's conviction, and wants to ask the Prince for his name on a petition on behalf of Dreyfus, Swann refuses to ask the Prince for it, 'mêlant à son ardente conviction d'Israélite la modération diplomatique du mondain, dont il avait trop pris les habitudes pour pouvoir si tardivement s'en défaire' (1988: III, 110) ['blending with his ardent conviction as a Jew the diplomatic moderation of a man of the world, whose habits he had too thoroughly acquired to be able to shed them at this late hour' (1996: IV, 130)]. Swann himself even refuses to add his name to this petition, arguing that his too obviously Jewish name would make the petition less convincing. This is not an unrealistic standpoint given the Duke's reaction, but Bloch finds Swann 'tiède, infecté de nationalisme et cocardier' (1988: III, 111) ['lukewarm, infected with nationalism and jingoistic' (1996: IV, 131)].⁶

'The individual who is isolated in many ways'

Here, I want to bring in another element of Benjamin's analysis of the historical character of Proustian memory, developed in 'Über einige Motive bei Baudelaire' (1980) ['Some motifs in Baudelaire']. This second element is presented by Benjamin as a criticism of Bergson and as a general analysis of experience in modernity. I suggest that we can also interpret his remarks in the more precise context of the sense of exclusion experienced by the French Jews during the Dreyfus Affair.

In this essay, Benjamin attempts to clarify a question that had preoccupied him throughout the 1930s: how does modernity affect individual experience? Modern experience had not been questioned by a late nineteenth-century philosophy busy trying to gain insight into a 'true' experience situated above or outside history. This 'philosophy of life' saw nature, poetry and the age of myths as providing insight into a true, unchanging experience. It is this notion of the unchanging character of experience that Benjamin criticizes in Bergson, who for him was the foremost proponent of this philosophy.

While Bergson presented pure memory as real memory, independent from history, Benjamin argues that this concept is only an 'after-image', received after closing one's eyes to the 'inhospitable, blinding age of large-scale industrialism' (Benjamin 1997: 111). Benjamin constructs a more historical image of memory by turning to *À la recherche*, which serves to put Bergson's theory 'to the test' (111). In contrast to Bergson, for whom the contemplative life concentrated on pure memory was a matter of free choice, Proust presents the grasping of 'pure memory' as an involuntary, contingent event. Pure memory is thus replaced by involuntary memory. According to Benjamin however, this involuntariness is not a natural situation and it is precisely the distinction between involuntary and voluntary memory that throws light on the structure of modern experience.

The concept of involuntary memory bears the mark of modernity: 'it is part of the inventory of the individual who is isolated in many ways' (113), or, as he puts it in the original German, of a 'vielfältig isolierte Privatperson' (1980: 611). Benjamin now contrasts 'modern experience' ('Erlebnis') with experience 'in the strict sense of the word' ('Erfahrung'), and explains:

where there is experience in the strict sense of the word, certain contents of the individual past combine with material of the collective past. The rituals with their ceremonies, their festivals (quite probably nowhere recalled in Proust's work), kept producing the amalgamation of these two elements of memory over and over again. They triggered recollection at certain times and remained handles of memory for a lifetime. In this way, voluntary and involuntary recollection lose their mutual exclusiveness. (1997: 113; German original 1980: 611)

Benjamin here constructs a concept of experience whose structure depends on the existence of collectively shared moments, on rituals in the broadest sense of the term. The split between conscious, voluntary memory and unconscious, involuntary memory results from the split between individual and collective memory caused by secularization and individualization. Benjamin thus transfers to individual experience and memory the insights into the transition from collectively organized societies to individualized ones developed in the early sociology of, for example, Durkheim and Tönnies.⁷

In previous paragraphs, Benjamin had developed an image of tradition in accordance with this concept of experience. There, he had confirmed Bergson's thesis that the structure of memory is decisive for the philosophical pattern of experience and had added an interpretation that gives a historical twist to Bergson's insight: 'experience is indeed a matter of tradition, in collective existence as well as private life' (Benjamin 1997: 110). This concept of tradition is then explained as follows: 'It [experience] is less the product of facts firmly anchored in memory than of a convergence in memory of accumulated and frequently unconscious data' (1997: 110). Benjamin thus distinguishes between the products of archival memory, where all past experiences have a fixed place, and tradition, which is presented as a continuous process within which memories can change place and form different connections. The German original of this passage makes the distinction more precise and reveals more clearly Benjamin's debt to Bergson: 'Sie bildet sich weniger aus *einzelnen* in der *Erinnerung*

streng fixierten Gegebenheiten denn aus gehäuften, oft nicht bewussten Daten, die im *Gedächtnis zusammenfließen* (1980: 608; my emphasis). Benjamin opposes the two concepts of *Erinnerung* and *Gedächtnis*. *Erinnerung* (memory) denotes a fixed, disposable stock of singled-out facts, an archive. *Gedächtnis* (usually translated as 'remembrance'), on the other hand, sees data 'flow together' (*zusammenfließen*) in a much less determined and controllable manner. This distinction is close to Bergson's distinction between 'pure memory' or *durée* (inner time) and 'space-time', which is the reified outward time that transforms experience into habit ('memory-habit'). Tradition is thus conceived by Benjamin as a process, a constantly changing stream, into which new experiences are inserted that change the past with them. It is a process that exists on an individual as well as a collective level.

If we now go back to the Proustian salon, the division between privately hidden and publicly shared opinion recalls Benjamin's isolated private person in an unexpected way. All the characters are isolated to various degrees. However, they are isolated not so much because of a general loss of tradition in modernity, but because of a specific distribution of social power in a conflict where individuals are forced to choose one group or another at a public level, while their personal opinions and solidarities may be much more complex. Swann is isolated, mainly because of his Dreyfusism, and his imminent death. But Mme de Guermantes's red appearance testifies to this isolation from another side. Although she is not publicly excluded, her public appearance shows a fissure between the traces of her personal will and her actual public behaviour. The narrator exhibits a strange perseverance in his comparison of the red necklace of Madame de Guermantes to a chain. He repeats it when he describes Madame de Guermantes at the end of the evening, as she leaves with Marcel and the Duke: 'Droite, isolée, ayant à ses côtés son mari et moi, [...] le col enserré dans le fermoir de rubis' (1988: III, 117) ['Erect, isolated, flanked by her husband and myself, [...] her throat clasped in its band of rubies' (1996: IV, 137)]. Mme de Guermantes is isolated between the Duke and Marcel, who seem accomplices in having her chained.

At this point there is a passage that Proust suppressed in the last version of *Sodome et Gomorrhe* – not mentioned in the Pléiade edition but quoted in a footnote in the edition by Emily Eells-Ogée for Garnier Flammarion (Proust 1987b) – which supports Proust's association of Mme de Guermantes's red shoes with Swann's suffering. In this passage, Proust had added the following to his description of Mme de Guermantes at the end of the party:

Maintenant qu'elle avait des souliers rouges, je m'apercevais qu'ils la complétaient [et] que cette toilette était parfaite. Mais alors je me rappelai les paroles de Swann, que la Duchesse n'avait pas eu le temps d'écouter, et il me semblait que c'était dans le sang de son ami qu'elle était baignée. (Proust 1987b: 357 n. 63)

[Now that she was wearing red shoes, I noticed that they completed her [and] that this outfit was perfect. But at that moment I recalled Swann's words, which the Duchess did not have time to listen to, and it seemed to me that it was in her friend's blood that she had been bathed. (my translation)]

In his essay, Benjamin suggests that Proust restores experience and with it a form of memory close to what he called tradition. A certain continuity between past and present, collective and individual, appears to be re-established in the novel. However, it can be asked whether Proustian experience has not, instead, been detached from tradition. In Proust's story of the red shoes, it becomes clear how much tradition deforms memory by moulding it for its own purposes; it is the ritual aspect of Mme de Guermantes's redness that forces her to forget Swann.⁸ I will try to show how Proust develops another, more modest form of sharing memories, which passes through forgetfulness.

***La Prisonnière*: talking dresses**

In *La Prisonnière*, Marcel visits Oriane because he wants to buy a red dress like hers for his captive Albertine. At the beginning of their conversation, Marcel recalls the way Oriane looked at the party of the Princesse de Guermantes: 'vous aviez une robe toute rouge, avec des souliers rouges, vous étiez inouïe, vous aviez l'air d'une espèce de grande fleur de sang, d'un rubis en flammes' (1988: III, 547) ['you had a dress that was all red, with red shoes, you were marvellous, you reminded me of a sort of great blood-red blossom, a glittering ruby' (1996: IV, 34)]. This is how Marcel creates poetry out of a chain of rubies and the bloody garments of the lady in red. The more carefully one reads *À la recherche*, the more the distance between Marcel and the narrator increases. They together form an exploration of conformism, as one person is split into a socially vulnerable, not too courageous young man (Marcel) and a reflective, 'remembering' narrator.

After these introductory remarks, the narrator relates how Madame de Guermantes remembers her dress of that evening well, but has forgotten that Mme de Chaussepierre was also at the party. The narrator finds it strange that she does not remember this, for not long after the party the Duke had been passed over by M. de Chaussepierre to become the President of the elitist anti-Dreyfusard 'Jockey Club'. This election had been a totally unexpected affront to the Duke. The Guermantes family had always perceived the Chaussepierres as insignificant, highly aristocratic but dull people. At the Princesse de Guermantes's party, red Oriane had even refused to greet Mme de Chaussepierre – a 'scarecrow' in her eyes because she usually wore black woollen dresses. The colours of the dresses are meaningful. In Andersen's 'The red shoes', red and black have the opposite meanings of happiness and freedom on the red side and religiosity and obedience on the black side. Red and black also have a more strictly political meaning. In Stendhal's 1830 novel *Le Rouge et le Noir* [*The Red and the Black*], red symbolized the army and liberty after the French Revolution, while black symbolized Catholic reaction. Now, seventy years later, Mme de Guermantes's reaction to Mme de Chaussepierre testifies to the fact that the symbolism of the liveliness of red and the obscurity of black is still held up in society, but that the meaning of red in particular has become uncertain. Above, we have seen how both red and black defend anti-Dreyfusism and how red has lost its political progressiveness. At the party red Oriane betrays Swann, Dreyfus, the Republic. But one of the reasons that the Duke was not elected was the fact that Oriane, some time after the party where she avoided Swann because of his Dreyfusism, became known as a Dreyfusarde herself.

This, however, had to be forgotten in the Guermantes circles. The narrator begins his account of the conversation with an explanation of how and why memory, but even more forgetfulness, are produced by social situations. He writes that those people active in social life – and he sees all members of society as active, as much so as politicians and diplomats, though ‘microscopiques’ (1988: III, 547) [‘only on a microscopic level’ (1996: V, 34)] – are so preoccupied by the near present that they hardly confide anything to their memory: ‘On oublie du reste vite ce qu’on n’a pas pensé avec profondeur, ce qui vous a été dicté par l’imitation, par les passions environnantes. Elles changent et avec elles se modifie notre souvenir. [...] Quant aux gens du monde, ils se souviennent de peu de chose.’ (1988: III, 547–8) [‘We quickly forget what we have not deeply considered, what has been dictated to us by the spirit of imitation, by the passions of the day. These change, and with them our memory undergoes alteration. [...] As for society people, they remember very little’ (1996: V, 35)]. Mme de Guermantes’s forgetting becomes a social fact which is organized according to her need to feel connected to her own social group and to the present. She thus conforms to what theorists of collective memory – for example, Assmann (1999: 39) – have pointed out, namely that collective memory tends to adapt to the social purposes of a group in the present, and, in order to suggest a continuity of the existence of that group, tends to sieve out the memories of those events that have provoked conflict.

In a letter immediately preceding that from Benjamin previously quoted, Adorno makes a comment about Benjamin’s ‘Some motifs in Baudelaire’ in which he draws attention to forgetting. He asks whether the decisive element of Proustian involuntary memory, which turns it into experience, is indeed the fact that the first impression was unconscious, as Benjamin had suggested. In Adorno’s view, an intermediary step has been left out of Benjamin’s theory; namely, that of forgetting.⁹ Both remembrance and memory are located in forgetting, Adorno writes, and the structure of the experience of an individual human being may depend in the last instance upon ‘*how* that person forgets’ (Adorno and Benjamin 1999: 321).

These remarks by Adorno are in accordance with the view expressed by Proust’s narrator in *Le Temps retrouvé*. In an essayistic, intermediary chapter, the narrator notes how, after several involuntary memories assailing him in rapid sequence had given him a momentary experience of the happiness he had been looking for all his life, he developed a theory of writing as the only possible way to extend this happiness beyond the short moments of involuntary memory. Like Adorno, he too stresses the importance of forgetting.

According to Proust’s narrator, forgetting individualizes moments. Every moment of existence is different because we do not experience only those things on which we concentrate rationally. We also attach to them associations that have no logical connection with them and that we separate from them because they do not serve any rational purpose. Atmosphere, colours, emotions, all of these are attached to every single sensation. It is through these associations that even the simplest act or gesture remains ‘enfermé comme dans mille vases clos dont chacun serait rempli de choses d’une couleur, d’une odeur, d’une température absolument différentes’ (1989: IV,

448) ['immured as within a thousand sealed vessels, each one of them filled with the things of a colour, a sense, a temperature that are absolutely different from one another' (1996: VI, 221)]. Past and present do not amalgamate because of the work of forgetting:

Oui, si le souvenir, grâce à l'oubli, n'a pu contracter aucun lien, jeter aucun chaînon entre lui et la minute présente, s'il est resté à sa place, à sa date, s'il a gardé ses distances, son isolement dans le creux d'une vallée ou à la pointe d'un sommet, il nous fait tout à coup respirer un air nouveau, précisément parce que c'est un air qu'on a respiré autrefois [...]. (1989: IV, 449)

[Yes: if, owing to the work of oblivion, the returning memory can throw no breach, form no connecting link between itself and the present minute, it remains in the context of its own place and date, if it keeps its distance, its isolation in the hollow of a valley or upon the highest peak of a mountain summit, for this very reason it causes us suddenly to breathe a new air, an air which is new precisely because we have breathed it in the past [...]. (1996: VI, 221–2)]

The importance of forgetting lies in the isolation of past moments, which preserve their distance only in that isolation. This interpretation of the function of forgetting casts a new light on involuntary memory. Writing, which for Proust is the equivalent of true experience, of the 'réel retrouvé', depends not so much on involuntary memory – if so, the author would have to wait indefinitely for one specific moment to reappear – but on forgetting, a form of forgetting that is not definitive, but which makes the past accessible to some extent without reducing it only to those images useful for our purposes in the present. This kind of forgetting forms the foundation for the memories that serve him in writing. It is the opposite of a flowing together in memory: there is no streaming or amalgamation of different memories as in the image used by Benjamin following Bergson. For Proust, amalgamation results when the subject superimposes different memories over each other. This has the negative effect of a memory losing its consistency and fading out. In this sense, Proust's narrator does not restore an old form of memory, close to tradition. He stresses discontinuity instead. The forgetting which the narrator describes in the passage quoted above also entails the possibility of a differentiation between individual and collective memories of historical events.

In the semi-private space of their own salon, Mme de Guermantes dares to contradict her husband about the Dreyfus affair. As the narrator, the Duke, the Duchess and a visitor begin to talk about the Dreyfus Affair, it becomes clear that the Affair is now a major point of disagreement in the Duchess and Duke's marriage. The Duke has increased his hatred towards the Jews and delivers a terrifying monologue in which he argues that they should have been driven out because of the troubles they have caused 'La France' (1988: III, 551; 1996: V, 39). The Duchess, on the contrary, defends a much more nuanced standpoint in which she explains why many Jews may have been Dreyfusards: 'justement parce qu'étant Juifs et se connaissant eux-mêmes ils savent qu'on peut être Juif et ne pas être forcément traître et anti-français, comme le prétend M. Drumont. [...] ils sentent bien que s'il n'était pas juif, on ne l'aurait pas

cru si facilement traître *a priori* (1988: III, 551) [‘just because they are Jews and know themselves they realise that a person can be a Jew and not necessarily a traitor and anti-French, as M. Drumont seems to maintain. [...] they knew quite well that if he hadn’t been a Jew, people wouldn’t have been so ready to think him a traitor *a priori*’ (1996: V, 39)]. Now, the Duke and Marcel become accomplices again in isolating her deviating opinions. The Duke replies: ‘Les femmes n’entendent rien à la politique’ (1988: III, 551) [‘women never understand anything about politics’ (1996: V, 39)] and Marcel, who feels things are starting to go wrong, brings the conversation back to dresses: women’s talk. Now, shoes are again discussed: the red shoes, and also a pair of gold ones that Mme de Guermantes wants to give to Albertine. Both pairs of shoes will reappear in the last conversation between Marcel and Mme de Guermantes.

***Le Temps retrouvé*: memories of Swann**

The last time the red clothes and shoes appear in the novel, and the second time they are the object of a conversation, is at the ‘Bal des Têtes’ at the end of *Le Temps retrouvé*. They are one of the final topics of a long conversation between Mme de Guermantes and Marcel.

They first talk about the period when Swann was still Oriane’s friend. The Dreyfus Affair is not mentioned. Afterwards, they talk about the dress and shoes. Now, neither Swann nor the Affair is mentioned. As the narrator reminds her of the red dress she once wore, she melancholically recalls how much time has passed since. At the narrator’s request, she describes the dress in a very precise manner, but then starts to doubt whether she was indeed wearing red shoes. Were they not the gold ones? (1989: IV, 588; 1996: VI, 403). Mme de Guermantes mixes up her fairy tale with another one. The narrator only writes that he preferred not to talk about the event that made him so certain that these shoes were red.

Mme de Guermantes goes on to remember the evening Marcel came to ask about the dress on behalf of Albertine, the first evening the red dress and shoes were cut off from the memory of Dreyfus and Swann. Albertine has been dead for a long time and the narrator writes that he does not mourn her death any more. However, he writes that our dead friends’ ‘poussière indifférente continue à être mêlée, à servir d’alliage, aux circonstances du passé’ (1989: IV, 589) [‘undervalued dust continues to be mingled, like some base alloy, with the circumstances of the past’ (1996: VI, 404)]. He adds that this means that we are obliged to make allusion to these friends when we are speaking of the place or circumstances where they were with us, even if we have stopped mourning them: ‘Telles sont les formes dernières et peu enviables de la survivance’ (1989: IV, 589) [‘Such are the last, the scarcely desirable vestiges of survival after death’ (1996: VI, 404)]. He adds that we have to make allusion to them even if we do not mention them, which is what happens when the narrator reminds the reader of such a small thing as these red shoes without mentioning Swann.

It is here, in the novel, that we can indeed distinguish between different *ways* of forgetting, as Adorno suggested. Mme de Guermantes remembers the past in an amalgamated way, and this fits the way Halbwachs as well as Benjamin reconstructed collective memory and tradition; that is, from the perspective of the present. The

narrator is much more precise and makes a detour. Through the work of forgetting, he separates the different moments where the red shoes appeared and remembers them in their own period, each surrounded with the painful reflections of the moment. The novel thus reconstructs the memory of an individual, not of a group, even if these memories are those of the narrator's conformity to collective pressures. The novel reconstructs the memories of several isolated individuals in a minute way, and makes clear the disparate character of collective memory that appears when one contemplates it in detail and for a longer period. Benjamin's remarks about Proust can now be integrated in an unexpected way. The private form of remembrance that Proust's narrator practises in his novel could be the result of the fact that certain ways of remembering, or mourning, were not feasible within the fixed boundaries of accepted culture in the late nineteenth-century France of the Dreyfus Affair due to the weight of a black and red tradition.

Notes

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- 1 See Gérard Namer's epilogue to Halbwachs (1994: 299–320), which gives a full account of the political aspects of nineteenth-century theories of memory in France.
- 2 This perspective has been extensively discussed by Rosen (1995) and Bidou-Zachariassen (1997). For illuminating interpretations of the problems faced by Proust in dealing with anti-semitism in his novel and of the solutions he sought by constructing it the way he did, see Brun (1988) and Kristeva (1994).
- 3 Marcel is the younger *alter ego* of the narrator. I use 'the narrator' to refer to the Marcel who tells his past life, and 'Marcel' to refer to the same person in the time narrated.
- 4 Most aristocrats were anti-Dreyfusards, at least at the beginning of the Affair. For an account of different positions vis-à-vis Dreyfus in French aristocratic society, see Brelot (1992).
- 5 Intertextuality is used here in the sense of 'something reserved to indicate a diffuse penetration of the individual text by memories, echoes, transformations of other texts'. 'Transtextuality', on the other hand, is reserved for overt relationships between specific texts. These definitions are taken from Jeremy Hawthorn (1994) *A Concise Glossary of Contemporary Literary Theory* (London: Arnold Press), 126.
- 6 As Jean-Yves Tadié notes (1996: 526 n. 3), Proust's spokesman on the Dreyfus affair is Bloch and not the narrator or Marcel.
- 7 In his analysis of cultural memory, the German scholar Jan Assmann mentions ritual as a distinguishing mark of cultural memory, which he approximates to religion in a very broad sense (Assmann 1999: 52–3). An important difference between Assmann's and Benjamin's analyses is that Assmann presents cultural memory as a structure within modernity, while Benjamin held the (modernist) view that cultural memory in this sense was lost through modernization.
- 8 I leave aside the question of whether this 'tradition' was a purely invented one. Gabriel Motzkin (1993) has written about the invention of tradition within nineteenth-century French Catholicism as a reaction to the Enlightenment.
- 9 In the English translation of these letters (Adorno and Benjamin 1999), the German 'Vergessen' has been translated by 'forgetting' rather than 'forgetfulness' or 'oblivion'.

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