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Pro(ust)crastination

*„All action by the mind is easy, if it is not subjected to the test of reality“.
(Cities of the Plain, Chapter 1)*

Marcel Proust’s “A la Recherche du Temps Perdu” –first published in English under the somewhat misleading title “Remembrance of things past” is a world-famous 7-volume novel. It focuses on the development of the narrator – as a child, as an adolescent, coping with the ins and outs of love, and as a young man, being fascinated by the glamorous French nobility of the late 19th century – and it is about procrastination. The procrasti-narrator, in which we easily recognize Marcel Proust himself, who wants to write a novel, explains his dilatoriness like this:


QUOTE ”Had I been less firmly resolved upon setting myself definitely to work, I should perhaps have made an effort to begin at once. But since my resolution was explicit, since within twenty-four hours, in the empty frame of that long morrow in which everything was so well arranged because I myself had not yet entered it, my good intentions would be realised without difficulty, it was better not to select an evening on which I was ill-disposed for a beginning for which the following days were not, alas, to show themselves any more propitious.” UNQUOTE (Within a Budding Grove; Chapter 1: Mme Swann at home)¹

¹ All quotations from the English translation of „A la Recherche du Temps Perdu“ by C. K. Scott Moncrieff and by Stephen Hudson (Time regained); online <http://etext.library.adelaide.edu.au/p/proust/marcel/>

Sounds familiar, doesn't it?

Instead of writing, Proust spend years in just that glamorous society that he became the most relentless critic of. The distractions of the salons rivalled his vocation to become a writer. He published his first book, "Les plaisirs et les jours" in 1896, but it found little attention and was regarded as the work of a dilettante "salonard". Aside from a few essays, Proust published nothing for the next 17 years. "Swann's Way", the first part of his chef d'oeuvre, came out in 1913. Proust was by then 42 years old.

Who was this expert procrastinator?

Marcel Proust was born on the 10th of July  1871, as the first child to Jeanne Proust and Dr. Adrien Proust. Marcel was extremely weak and doomed to die if he were not saved through the medical skilfulness of his father.

Adrien Proust had become a very successful physician, professor and head of a medical clinic, who had published several books on hygiene. He was an action-oriented, energetic person who advocated a very strict way of child rearing.

Jeanne, who was 15 years younger than her husband, gave birth to another son in May 1873, Robert, who is robust and healthy.

Marcel, who since birth had been ailing, understood soon that only new symptoms or the intensification of old ones will secure him his mother's attention. Robert became his father's preferred son and

ended up himself being a professor of medicine. Though Marcel had conquered Robert, his father remained a strong rival for Jeanne Proust's affection, admired and adored by her for his easygoing ways, his energy and competence.

Jeanne Proust loved the theatre and celebrated her appearances in society as if she herself were an actress. She put her sons in costumes and thereby fostered Marcel's snobbish attitudes which later made him the epitome of a dandy. She and her mother Adèle, Marcel's soft, tender and educated grandmother, both loved literature. They read to Marcel who, often sick, had to stay in bed, and thus books early became an integral part of his world. Marcel charged on literature with the same possessive greed that characterized his relation to his mother. He permanently felt the desire to be close to her and she seemed to have felt the same.

Between Marcel and his father, on the other hand, clumsiness and reservations prevailed. His father was annoyed by what he felt to be his son's ado and consequently tried to turn him into a strong and especially masculine man. The way to this was outdoor activities in the course of which Marcel in 1880 as a 9 year old broke his nose. From time to time, his father succeeded in persuading Jeanne not to spoil Marcel. She then decided not to give in any longer to his desires, for example to refuse him the ritual good-night-kiss. What followed is described in the novel in detail: When she is entertaining in the parlour at home, Marcel somehow always succeeds in getting her into his room, with some pain or other disturbing symptoms. She tries to get away with a quick kiss, he jumps out of bed, clinging to her, she stays. While his father

downstairs lectures to the guests on the necessity to avoid dependency, his laws are indulgently being broken upstairs.

This battle culminated and simultaneously came to an end in spring 1881. While taking a walk with his parents on Champs-Élysées, Marcel fell victim to an attack of asthma with such a terrifying dyspnoea, that even his father thought he would die right there. His asthma permanently changed his life.² The first and most important consequence was that his father gave up the idea to harden him by imposing discipline. With the force of his suffering, he had now even won over his father after having long since brought his mother and grandmother under his control.

Proust's oedipal dilemma

Proust explained his procrastination as a lack of will-power – which he saw as the worst of all vices:

QUOTE “What rendered my mother desperate was my lack of will-power. Everything I did was inspired by momentary impulses... The realization of all these beautiful plans, work, peace of mind, reason, occupied us, my mother and me, more than anything else; because we sensed, she more clearly, I more obscurely, but nonetheless very powerfully, that it would be nothing else but the projection of an image into my life, the image of creating myself and within myself that kind of will she had imagined and portrayed. But I always

² The psychosomatic aspects of Proust's asthma are addressed by Schueffel, W, Herrmann, JM, Dahme, B & Richter, R, Asthma bronchiale. In: Th v Uexkuell (Ed) (1996), Psychosomatische Medizin, Muenchen, 810-824

postponed it until tomorrow...” UNQUOTE (Proust, 1997³, 166f; translation HWR)

But Proust himself, mentioning his mother’s desire, hinted at something beyond impaired volition. To understand Proust’s special kind of procrastination, I would like to propose a classical Freudian interpretation⁴.

Looking at Proust’s family, we are looking at the kind of people who Freud met in his consultation room in Vienna, detecting a certain constellation that he referred to as the oedipal complex. In Freud’s point of view we can’t help being confronted with the oedipal drama that what we want most is forbidden, the incestuous object, our mother, if we are a boy, and that our desire triggers the threat of revenge from our other parent, the father. If you believe in Freud’s version or if you rather go along with his critics: There is little doubt that this situation of triangular dynamics is emotionally loaded.

Jeanne Proust had fallen for Marcel, that is clear. His well-being is the most important thing in the world for her. She sees the future literate in him. Adrien Proust’s therapy programmes to increase strength in his son don’t lack a certain aggression.

Marcel is confronted with this standard oedipal dilemma: How can his desire that is directed onto the forbidden be made compatible

³ Proust, M (1896/1997), *Les Plaisir et les Jours*. Dt : *Freuden und Tage*. Frankfurt/M. und Leipzig (Insel) 1997

⁴ Rueckert, H-W (2004), *Das Syndrom des Aufschiebens in Marcel Prousts „Auf der Suche nach der verlorenen Zeit“*. In: E. Jaeggi, H. Kronberg-Goedde (Ed), *Zwischen den Zeilen. Literarische Werke psychologisch betrachtet*. Imago, Psychosozial-Verlag, Giessen, 2004

with his survival? The desire itself poses a problem, as British psychoanalyst Philipps recently pointed out:

QUOTE “If what we want is what we must not have we are going to be, to put it as mildly as possible, divided against ourselves.”

UNQUOTE (Philipps, 2003)⁵

On the oedipal level, we are not just confronted with what Freud saw as incestuous desires and castrations threats. We have to deal with real conflict in triangulation that might finally allow us – if we are a boy - to identify with our father (i.e. acknowledge the good in him), distance ourselves from our mother (i.e. resisting to give in to her unconscious desires) and go on the long way to individuation (i.e. developing our own personality). If we are lucky, we develop ego-strength and acquire the ability to work and to love .

In a way, Marcel Proust might have enjoyed an oedipal triumph, but he didn't go to extremes. For a long time, he did not write that book his mother longed for - that a hardcore Freudian would have seen as the symbolization of forbidden love: the incestuous child with his mother - instead he procrastinated through excessive socializing and charming the nobility.

To endow his literature-loving mother with a real novel would also have meant to utterly challenge his father whose books are far from literature.

⁵ Philipps, A (2003), Bored with sex? London Review of Books 25, 5; online http://www.lrb.co.uk/v25/n05/phil01_.html.

A safe way to avoid oedipal trouble consists in regressing to dyadic relation dynamics. Marcel did not identify with his father. He stayed with his mother whose needs apparently were identical with his own. Regressed to the dyadic level, one stays dependant and the main thing one has to fear is loss. When his beloved grandmother died in 1895, Proust was crushed. After the death of his mother in September 1905, he needed to be hospitalised for two month.

By procrastinating, Proust inflicted upon himself some kind of auto-castration that marked his regressed position from the oedipal situation: Not challenging his father to such an extent that hell would break loose, punishing himself for his forbidden desires, but also not falling into the pitfall of getting completely absorbed by his mother's desires and literary ambition, clinging to his parents in a fixed folie à trois. He lived with his parents until they died – Adrien Proust in 1903, his mother in 1905.

While procrastinating, he experienced the longing expression of desire postponing its fulfilment:

QUOTE “Perhaps the habit that I had formed of nursing in my bosom several simultaneous desires...perhaps the habit of storing up, without assuaging any of them, all these desires, contenting myself with the promise, made to myself, that I would not forget to satisfy them one day, perhaps this habit, so many years old already, of perpetual postponement, of what M. de Charlus used to castigate under the name of procrastination...” UNQUOTE (The Captive, Chapter 1)

Feeling a desire is definitely less risky than acting upon it. But there is a price to pay. As recent studies have shown, the bare fact to intensely focus on intentions inhibits the intuitive behaviour regulation system and generates negative affect in general and particularly when consistent failure to act is perceived as painful. To avoid negative affect, people leave their desks and check out the contents of their fridge, as we all know, or – in Proust’s case – go out and have a ball. To act out our intentions in spite of negative affect either requires self-motivation (from the participation of the self) or external input – sometimes from your friendly shrink - that helps us to cope with negative affect.⁶

Stuck in oedipal conflict and regressed from it, the self cannot fully develop to fulfil the function of self-motivation. His fixation had Proust experience again and again his self-system as insufficient, lacking self-control, be it in the way of repressing negative affect or by integrating it into the wider scope and coping-strategies of the self-system. State-orientation instead of action-orientation dominated – writing did not become “limbic”.⁷

How did Proust overcome his procrastination?

Two factor’s account for Proust to overcome his procrastination:

One is the reconstruction of his childhood - not by psychoanalysis,

⁶ Kuhl, J (2001), Motivation und Persönlichkeit. Interaktionen psychischer Systeme. Goettingen, Toronto; Hogrefe

⁷ Kuhl, J (2000), The volitional basis of personality systems interaction theory. Intern J Educational Research 33, 665-703

Kuhl, J, Kaschel, R (2004), Entfremdung als Krankheitsursache: Selbstregulation von Affekten und integrative Kompetenz (Alienation as a determinant of symptom formation: Self-regulation of affect and integrative competence). Psychologische Rundschau 55 (2), 61-67

but in quite the same way, using his memory. Proust's novel is all about memory – as is Freud's technique of trying to make his patients talk about infantile sexuality, the “forgotten material”.

As he wrote to his friend André Lang:

QUOTE I have tried...to show the consciousness unconscious phenomena which, completely forgotten, sometimes stem from way back in the past”. UNQUOTE (Letter to André Lang, cited by Haymann, 1990, 602)⁸

The memory of our most passionate days, being torn between impossible desire for our one parent and not being able to consummate that desire, dreading revenge from the other parent whom we also might love (or not) and having to cope with fear (of castration, of loss of love), being permanently in danger of being overwhelmed by emotion is something against which we learned to build up powerful defences. That's why in therapy people cannot speak of such turmoil. Instead, they invent cover stories. “I really do want to do my work, it is only procrastination that interferes” is such a cover story through which a communication with the unconscious becomes possible, once we stop believing in that story.

Things – as Proust shows us, don't get better when we only focus on our good intentions. The way our intentions misfire is most amusing and most horrible at the same time. This can show us something about areas of our life in which we have to come up with something better than getting better. Things often won't improve

⁸ Hayman, R. (1990): Marcel Proust. Die Geschichte seines Lebens. Frankfurt/M. – Leipzig (Insel) 2000.

unless we go beyond our usual explanations like “lack of will-power” when something in our self is missing. Proust procrastinating lacked empathic knowledge of his most personal history – and his recovery takes place partly through his painstaking reconstruction of his oedipal dilemma in childhood and adolescence, as described in “Swann’s Way”.

What Proust first regarded as lack of will-power, he came to see as a symptom, sign of a compromise that was adaptive in childhood but blocked his creativity as an adult. To work through his oedipal conflict enabled him to integrate painful experiences into his self, reduced the painful focus on intentions and made writing part of his intuitive behaviour regulation – even if it stayed painful. But suffering changed its stimulus value from something to avoid to something to embrace:

QUOTE “The idea of preliminary suffering is associated with that of work, we dread every fresh undertaking because we are thereby reminded of the pain in store for us before we can conceive it. And, realising that suffering is the best thing life has to offer, we think of death without horror and almost as a deliverance.” UNQUOTE (Time regained, Chapter 3)

The second factor that helped Proust to put an end to procrastination is facing the fact that time was going by, that it was limited and precious and that death was coming closer day by day, that death would not procrastinate:

QUOTE “Having got into the habit, through idleness, of postponing my work from day to day, I doubtless supposed death might deal in the same way with me.” UNQUOTE (Time regained, Chapter2)

It was specifically the Great War (WW I) that gave Marcel a new perspective. Contemplating them with his “new eyes” as he said somewhere, he found his long adored Princesses and Barons look pretty old – but realised that time had not only passed for them:

QUOTE “Thus I who, from infancy, had lived from day to day, with a sort of fixed idea of myself derived from others as well as myself, perceived for the first time, after witnessing the metamorphosis of all these people, that the time which had gone by for them, had gone by for me also and this revelation threw me into consternation.” (Time regained, Chapter 3)

“Finally, this idea of Time had the ultimate value of the hand of a clock. It told me it was time to begin if I meant to attain ...that indefinable something which had made me think life worth living.” UNQUOTE (Time regained, Chapter 3)

Since 1919, Proust was more and more disabled by his asthma. He almost entirely gave up his society life and retreated into the cork-walled rooms of 44, rue Hamelin in Paris to write. The entire “Recherche” comprises 4300 pages.

Together with the reconstruction of his childhood, the notion of his life time passing became a strong incentive for overcoming procrastination and developing in the direction of eternalising himself, writing himself into the literary memory of the world.

Thank you for your attention.