

The avant-garde in the archive:

Towards Proust's spectrology (in dialogue with Philippe Sollers's *Oeil de Proust: Les dessins de Marcel Proust*)*

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*Philippe Sollers, *Oeil de Proust. Les dessins de Marcel Proust* (Paris: Stock, 1999). This article is an extended version of a paper delivered at the "Life Writing of the Avant-Garde" conference held at the Institute of Polish Culture at the University of Warsaw on September 28–30, 2022. Sollers's work is not available in English. References are provided directly in the text. All quotations from works not available in English have been translated by MO from Polish.

In the late 1970s, Yuri Lotman and Boris Uspensky drew attention to the "avalanche-like nature" of culture, which, not necessarily positively, contributes to its accumulation and makes one activate new type of memory reservoirs in the form of "secondary metalinguistic systems."¹ I draw on Lotman and Uspensky's findings to describe the contemporary reception of one of the most important works of French literature, that is Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*. Numerous studies devoted to this text have reached a critical "tipping point" and today intimidate rather than inspire contemporary readers and writers alike. For example, the young French poet Julien Syrac recently stated: "It is foolish to presume that, if we were asked to, we would have something innovative and intelligent to say about Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*."² At the same time, there is a widespread belief that we simply cannot free ourselves from Proust's legacy. This sentiment was expressed by the 2022 Nobel Prize Winner Annie Ernaux – in a lecture delivered at the Collège de France, she observed that: "To-

¹ Lotman, Yuri and Boris Uspensky, "On the Semiotic Mechanism of Culture," *New Literary History* (1978) 9: 231-232.

² Julien Syrac, « La joie du réel retrouvé », *La Nouvelle Revue Française* 654 (Automne 2022): 108.

day, one cannot be a French or Francophone author without referring to the author of *In Search of Lost Time*.³ Proust's myth is still prevalent in contemporary French literature, as proved by the publication of a significant number of works, most often in the form of biographical essays or biographical fiction⁴ which focus on the personal relationship to Proust. They have been published in recent years (the beginning of the 21st century actually marks a turning point) and together create a kind of "literature in the second degree," which tries to address both the existing body of critical works and (the still seemingly unaccounted for) modernist legacy. Ultimately an intertextual dialogue with the work itself, which we might think of when we refer to Gérard Genette's well-known concept, is not the goal. The goal is to engage with both the novel and its author as well as to explore a unique relationship that the authors of Proust's biographies have with the brilliant French writer as readers of *In Search of Lost Time*, insofar as they feel the need to address Proust's myth. What comes to mind here is the category of the specter which, as Jakub Momro puts it, "forever haunts individuals and communities in various incomplete, impermanent, radically time-inconsistent, asynchronous, and transitional ontological forms."⁵ All biographical works in question make use of the great writer's archive. The goal is not to reach biographical truth but to deconstruct certain myths about Proust. Such archival disputes have been very lively in recent years.⁶ In this article, I wish to analyze a rather unique work, unique insofar as it describes Proust's somewhat obscure works, namely his drawings, which the writer drew in the margins of his manuscripts or attached to his many letters. These drawings were discussed in an essay by the contemporary writer, literary critic, and founder of the avant-garde magazine *Tel Quel* Philippe Sollers in the essay entitled *Oeil de Proust: Les dessins de Marcel Proust* [Proust's Eye. The drawings of Marcel Proust]. I draw on Sollers's notion of "inner experience," which he, in turn, borrowed from Georges Bataille, to discuss idealistic interpretations of Proust's eye. Then, referring to the Derridean category of "specters," I wish to analyze the significance of Proust's drawings in the process of forming Proust's legacy in contemporary literature.

Proust's lesson

The publication of the manuscript of Marcel Proust's now famous essay *Contre Sainte-Beuve* [By Way of Sainte-Beuve] in 1954 marked a new era in the reception of his works, not to mention the impact it had exerted on the development of literary studies,⁷ but other documents that we today include

³ Annie Ernaux, *Proust, Françoise et moi*, lecture delivered at Collège de France on 19 February 2013 (<https://www.college-de-france.fr/agenda/seminaire/lire-et-relire-proust/proust-francoise-et-moi>, date of access 22 Jan. 2023). Ernaux was asked to deliver her lecture by Antoine Compagnon to celebrate the centenary of the publication of *Swann's Way*.

⁴ These include, for example, Michel Scheider's *Maman* (1999) and *L'auteur, l'autre. Proust et son double* (2014), Jérôme Prieur's *Proust fantôme* (2001), François Bon's *Proust est une fiction* (2013), Eveline Bloch-Dano's *Une jeunesse de Marcel Proust* (2017) and many more.

⁵ Jakub Momro, *Widmontologie nowoczesności. Genezy [Hauntologies of modernity. Genesis]* (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo IBL, 2014), 8 and 50.

⁶ I refer to the argument between the Proustologist Antoine Compagnon and the writer Patrick Mimouni regarding the misdeeds of the publisher of Proust's letters Philip Kolb. Kolb allegedly concealed traces of Jewish heritage in Proust's biography. The discussion had taken place in the journal "La règle du jeu" founded by the philosopher Bernard-Henri Lévy from 2018 to 2022.

⁷ I have in mind, among other things, new approaches to the autobiography and the literary subject, or the development of genetic criticism. Certainly, in the 1960s the research on *Contre Sainte-Beuve* was considered crucial for the development of New Criticism. See, for example, Kazuyoshi Joshikawa, "Du «Contre Sainte-Beuve» à la «Recherche»", in: *Proust, la mémoire et la littérature*, ed. Antoine Compagnon (Paris: Odile Jacob, 2009), 49–71.

in Proust's archive have been somewhat forgotten. I have in mind, in particular, some of Proust's letters (and, as we know, Proust wrote several thousand letters) published only two years later (in 1956) by the American Romance scholar Philip Kolb⁸ under the title *Lettres à Reynaldo Hahn* [Letters to Reynaldo Hahn]. The original copies of these letters, addressed to Proust's lover – the composer Reynaldo Hahn, had been sold separately at various collector's auctions and their contents had not been taken as seriously as the aforementioned manuscript of *Contre Sainte-Beuve*. The collection published by Kolb contains about thirty of Proust's drawings. As we know today, Kolb included these drawings in some of the published letters arbitrarily; he changed their original location, ignoring, among other things, the fact that they were most often executed on separate sheets of paper. However, the worst part is that critics had for a long time either disregarded or dismissed the drawings. For example, the British Romance scholar Richard Bales wrote in 1975: "They are largely concerned with Proust's reaction to Hahn himself [...] As we have said, however, these drawings are of no far-reaching importance."⁹ In France in the 1960s and the 1970s, critics and publishers did not want to address these drawings because of the widely spread myth/vision of Proust as a great writer as well as because of the modernist understanding of literature as the art of the word. Since then, the approach to these visual documents has changed significantly, especially thanks to the pioneering essay by Claude Gandelman, in which the researcher identifies, among other things, which drawn characters correspond to characters and scenes in Proust's novels.¹⁰ Philippe Sollers's essay, published in 1999, discusses two kinds of Proust's drawings:¹¹ found in the abovementioned letters to Hahn (importantly, Sollers discusses and publishes many more letters than Kolb), currently kept in The Kolb-Proust Archive at University of Illinois in the United States, and the famous *carnets* and notebooks archived at The Bibliothèque Nationale de France in Paris.¹² Still, Sollers did not discuss Proust's drawings from the perspective of an archivist or a literary expert, as had been the case so far, but from the perspective of a writer. Inspired by the drawings, he reflects on (the myth of) Proust and a specific vision of literary history that had been consistently created for many years.

Born in 1936 in Bordeaux, Philippe Sollers was a very prolific writer with many different interests. French readers have known him for decades; he belonged to the generation of critics which also boasts Roland Barthes and Julia Kristeva. They contributed to the post-war discovery of Proust and the popularization of his works. Sollers's interest in Proust had been also shaped by the relationship with his literary mentor, François Mauriac. Mauriac was also born in Bordeaux, and he met Proust in person. Ever since *Une curieuse solitude* (1958), Sollers's debut novel dealing with memory and its role in literature, Proust had been an important writer for the French critic, even as he himself turned to more experimental forms of writing, as manifested by the rejection of traditional narrative structures, use of repeated sequences, or non-existent punctuation. However, it is not Proust as a writer of memory and regained time that Sollers was ultimately interested in, but rather, especial-

⁸ Marcel Proust, *Lettres à Reynaldo Hahn*, ed. Philippe Kolb (Paris: Gallimard, 1956). The basis for their publication was the collection of Marie Nordlinger, a British friend of Marcel Proust, whom he met in Paris in 1898. Nordlinger helped Proust translate John Ruskin's works.

⁹ Richard Bales, *Proust, and the Middle Ages* (Genève: Droz, 1975), 145.

¹⁰ See, for example, Claude Gandelman, "The drawings of Marcel Proust", *Adam International Review* 394 (1976): 21–57.

¹¹ Notes which explain the origin of each of the published drawings in the book in question were composed by Alain Nave. He is a teacher and a renowned editor of many publications on art.

¹² These documents were presented during an exhibition devoted to the origins of *In Search of Lost Time* titled *Marcel Proust, la fabrique de l'oeuvre*, held at The Bibliothèque Nationale de France in Paris at the turn of 2022 and 2023.

ly since the launch of *Tel Quel* magazine in 1960,¹³ it was Proust as seen through the lens of Bataille's "inner experience."¹⁴ Recalling in one of the interviews from this period the famous scene from *In the Shadow of Young Girls in Flower*, in which the narrator fails to identify the memory that haunts him at the sight of the trees he passes by while riding with Mme. de Villeparisis in a carriage,¹⁵ Sollers points directly to this affiliation:

[T]hose extraordinary moments in which Proust finds himself in the presence of a world that is not a world of memory, but, one might say, a world of a kind of ecstatic fear, as well as those moments of *insatisfaction*, [allow him] to explore a mystery that is much more compelling than moments in which he literally resurrects the past, for example. [...] If I refer to Bataille, it is because it seems to me that there is something most essential about Proust [...], there is a certain lesson that can be drawn from Proust's total and unconditional engagement, which seems heroic, as we read his works filled with emotions which we cannot help but feel in the face of this fight which must end in death. It is a concept of the book, an attitude towards language and the world, which seems to me fully modern and interesting.¹⁶

Heroism that stems from inner experience, heroism that consists in completely surrendering one's life to one's work is not exclusively, Sollers further writes, a feature of Proust's writing. It may also be seen in the lives and work of many other writers and artists whom Sollers cherished, including Dante, Mallarmé, or Mozart. What they have in common is a critical approach to the legacy of their era as well as total dedication to their craft. Sollers was in that respect similar. He was, on the one hand, extremely, at times controversially, independent and, on the other hand, unconditionally devoted to literature. The rejection of one's legacy constitutes a paradoxical principle, which Sollers describes as "innovative regression" (16). As we will see, it will be the foundation for Sollers's memory of Proust.

The embodied gaze

Visual documents collected in *Oeil de Proust* are virtually worthless from the perspective of an art or literary historian. They are certainly not intentional works of art, as it is difficult to consider sketches on the margins of a novel as such. Respectively, copied (even, as some researchers believe, using carbon paper) engravings from Émile Mâle's work on medieval art in France,¹⁷ which Proust includes in his letters to one of his friends, are also not considered to be of significant

¹³The quarterly "Tel Quel" was a magazine strongly associated with the literary avant-garde of the 1960s, the defense of the French "nouveau roman" and generally with the promotion of texts by authors who were either less known or considered controversial at the time, such as Lautréamont, Artaud, Joyce, Bataille, Derrida, Foucault, and Barthes.

¹⁴Cf. Georges Bataille, *L'expérience intérieure* (Paris: Gallimard, 1978), especially the chapter: "Digression sur la poésie et Marcel Proust", 128–145.

¹⁵"I looked at the three trees; I could see them plainly, but my mind felt that they were concealing something which it could not grasp, as when an object is placed out of our reach... Where had I looked at them before?" Marcel Proust, *In the Shadow of Young Girls in Flower*, trans. J. Grieses (Harmondsworth and New York: Penguin, 2002), 297.

¹⁶Cf. La leçon de Proust par Philippe Sollers, a radio show made in 1963 to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the publication of *Swann's Way*. Transcription available at: <https://www.pileface.com/sollers/spip.php?article2597>, date of access 20 Jan. 2023.

¹⁷The art historian Émile Mâle is the author of *L'Art religieux du XIIIe siècle en France. Étude sur l'iconographie du moyen âge et ses sources d'inspiration* (Paris: Ernest Leroux, 1898). The book significantly influenced the structure of Proust's novel. See on this topic: Luc Fraisse, "Du symbolisme architectural au symbolisme littéraire: Proust à l'école d'Émile Mâle", *Studia Romanica Posnaniensia* 1 (2011): 81–101.

artistic value. For this reason, as has been mentioned, they had not been of interest to previous researchers of Proust's works. Unlike Jean Cocteau, Max Jacob, or George Sand who in addition to their writing were also successful artists, Proust is not considered a writer-artist. At the beginning of his essay, Sollers recalls that Proust noted with great regret that he had no artistic talent. So what status do these drawings have in relation to both the manuscript of the novel and the final published work? Do they only have documentary value? Does "Proust's eye" refer to Proust's metaphor of a book as an "optic instrument"?¹⁸ Or, as Michel Erman argues, perhaps it is an optic metaphor through which the novel's narrator reveals his repressed desires?¹⁹ It seems that Sollers abandons such idealistic interpretations of Proust's eye. In the aforementioned scene from *In the Shadow of Young Girls in Flower*, the narrator has the impression that the trees which grow by the side of the road make him identify a memory or give it a name, thus ensuring their survival:

But I saw them as ghosts from my past, beloved companions from childhood, sometime friends reminding me of shared moments. Like risen shades, they seemed to be asking me to take them with me, to bring them back to the realm of the living. In their naïve and passionate gesticulations, I read the impotent regret of a loved one who, having lost the power of speech, knows that he will never be able to let us know what he wants, and that we can never deduce his meaning.²⁰

The memory of the trees, demanding the narrator's attention, is defined by him as *dessin*, a drawing, because he wished to match (which, as we know, he failed to do) this visible "drawing" of the trees to a different, albeit vague, impression or memory. A similar scene can be found in *Oeil de Proust* when the writer tries to identify figures which appear unexpectedly between the lines of the manuscript using graphic notation (il. 1):

The hand moves across the page [...], scenes and characters are created, and from time to time a character moves between the lines, resists, inhabits the page. He is a specter that has not yet been reduced, an apparition, one conjured up during a *séance*, a grimace, a wink of the eye (8).

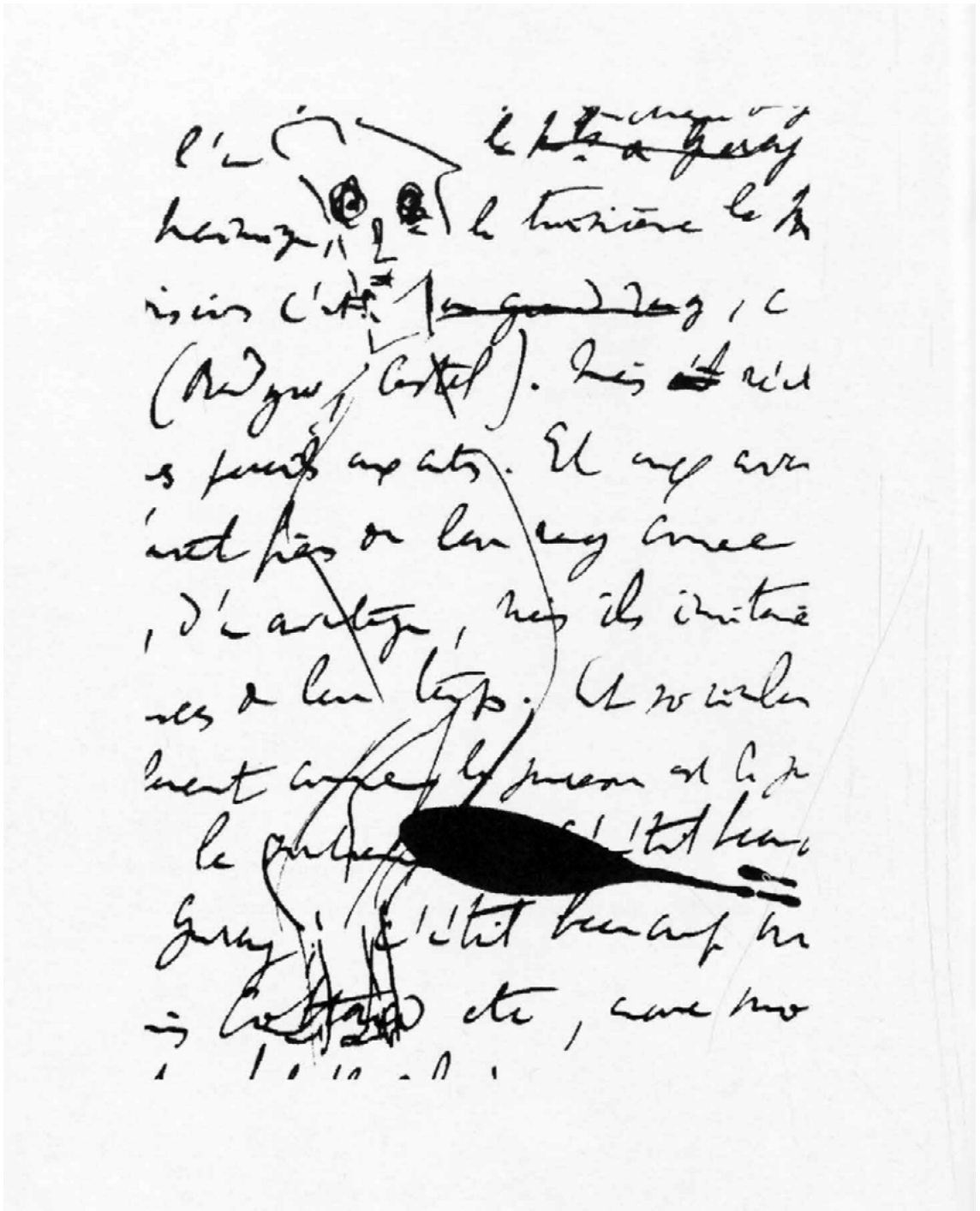
In both cases we see that the effort to capture the elusive reality is based on the internal work of memory or the work of the narrator's/author's body. At the same time, both texts make us realize that, as Sollers states in the above-mentioned radio show, "the deepest reality is the reality of internal experience [...]. It is within this experience that find the real world." Sollers finds confirmation of this observation in Proust's work; in *Time Regained* the narrator states: "I perceived that to express those impressions, to write that essential book, which is the only true one, a great writer does not, in the current meaning of the word, invent it, but, since it exists already in each one of us, interprets it."²¹ Since the book in a sense "already exists," since "literature [...] is the only life which is really lived," the role of the writer changes fundamentally: "The duty and the task of a writer are those of an interpreter." As Sollers states: "It's about reading signs, it's about deciphering, decrypting. In

¹⁸In *Time Regained* Proust writes: "The work of the writer is only a sort of optic instrument which he offers to the reader so that he may discern in the book what he would probably not have seen in himself."

¹⁹Michel Erman, *L'œil de Proust. Écriture et voyeurisme dans «A la recherche du temps perdu»* (Paris: Éditions A.-G. Nizet, 1988).

²⁰Proust, *In the Shadow of Young Girls in Flower*, 299.

²¹Marcel Proust, *Time Regained*, trans. Stephen Hudson (London: Chatto & Windus, 1970). Henceforth quotations come from this edition.

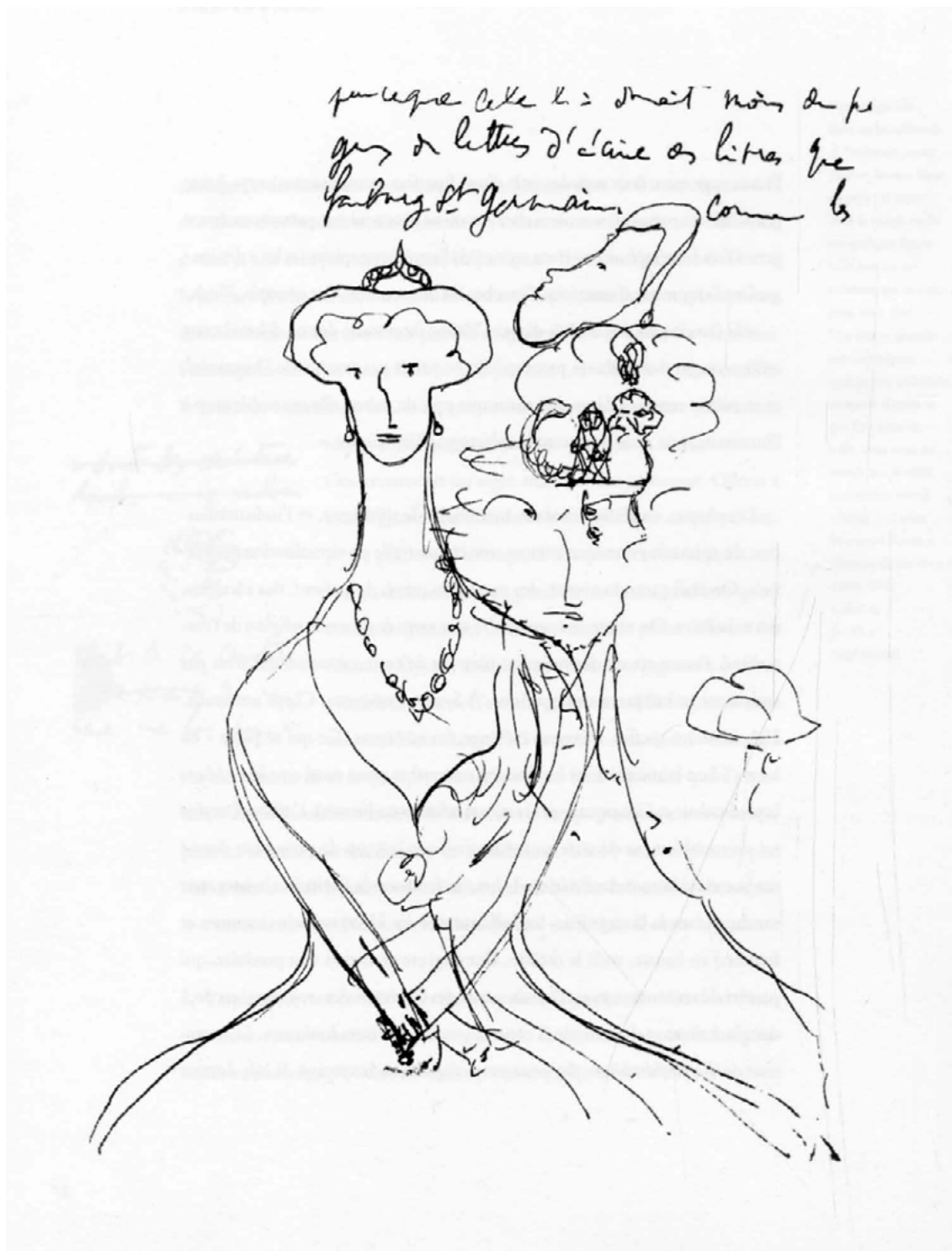


il. 1

this sense, Proust is one of the first writers, at least modern writers, who talked about it so openly.”

This observation, which brings to mind Gilles Deleuze’s famous essay,²² certainly shows that the writer is rooted in the modernist literary tradition. In *Oeil de Proust*, however, Sollers proposes

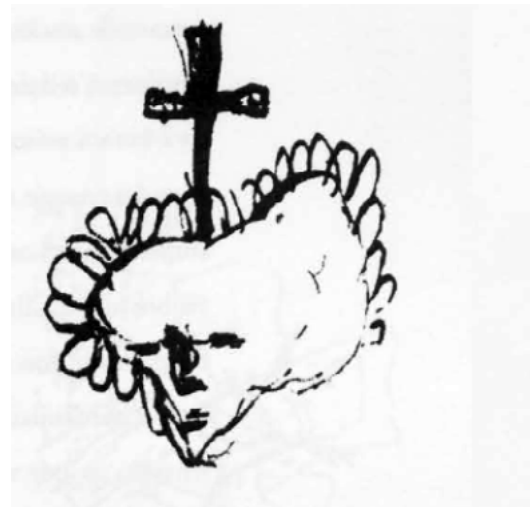
²²I have in mind Gilles Deleuze’s 1964 essay *Proust et les signes*; English edition: *Proust and signs*, trans. Richard Howard (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2000).



il. 2

its new version. He argues that this almost automatic form of writing, which oscillates between letters and drawings, stems from the writer's body, his seeing eye and writing hand. "Proust's hand writes constantly," Sollers states, "his brilliant brain makes use of his increasingly tired body, which has become embodied and living writing" (7). However, as we saw above, the author of *La Guerre du goût* is interested not so much in the success of this form of writing as in the

writer's attempt, or even failure, to capture inner reality (to which the titular "search," in his opinion, refers). This attempt can be seen in the unique way in which the characters are presented; the narrator shows their various aspects, or "perspectives" (11) (their appearance, gestures, and diction, which reflect their social standing or function), in the same "portrait" simultaneously. Sollers also identifies a similar way of presenting characters in some of Proust's drawings, in which the details of the characters' faces or clothes are shown fragmentarily or without observing the rules of perspective, which creates a cubist effect (il. 2).²³ By playing with the perspective and combining various "viewing angles" (8), these avant-garde drawings, which, as some critics argue, could be considered



il. 3

autonomous works of art,²⁴ provide a contrast to the works of art mentioned in *In Search of Lost Time* and the impressionistic scenes found in the novel. However, Sollers does not think that they are simply artistic experiments but rather manifestations of a more general principle that applies to both the drawings and the impressionistic scenes found in the novel. This principle is akin to what Bataille calls the "holocaust of words" ("L'holocauste de mots"), which marks the "immoral" horizon of poetry.²⁵ "All the different techniques are used," Sollers writes, "fragmenting, cutting, cutting out, gluing, putting back together. The truth is carved with a chisel, like a sculpture" (22). In the case of Proust's manuscripts, "immorality" does not refer to content, although there are many drawings with erotic or even sadomasochistic themes, but rather to the form – the skewed perspective, clumsy lines, and fragmentation, which makes these drawings acquire a primitive or even primeval character. In other words, Sollers seems to claim that only an "immoral" drawing, that is, a "bad" drawing, one devoid of banal beauty, may capture the elusive inner reality. This impression is intensified by some terrifying drawings, which depict, for example, a female head with a dagger in the shape of a crucifix stuck in it (il. 3), or drawings of figures with bird beaks (they represent both the subservient relations in Mme. Verdurin's salon as well as queer erotic rituals). In Proust's letters to Hahn, we also find drawings of sculptures from medieval cathedrals, whose religious symbolism is actually eliminated when Proust recognizes in them the gestures of people he knows or when he renders them erotic, referring to the intimate relationship with his friend.²⁶ This effect is further enhanced by Proust's

²³On cubist effects in Proust's drawings see for example: Claude Gandelman, "The Artist as Traumarbeiter. On Sketches of Dreams by Marcel Proust", *Yale French Studies* 84 (1994): 131–132.

²⁴As suggested by, among others, Claude Gandelman, "Proust caricaturiste", in: *Le regard dans le texte* (Paris: Méridiens Klincksieck, 1986), 124.

²⁵Bataille talks about the "holocaust of words" as a feature of poetry that rejects known and established meanings, moving towards meanings that are inaccessible to ordinary language. See: Bataille, 130.

²⁶Françoise Leriche argues that Proust's drawings in his letters to Hahn show that he could not understand the meaning of these medieval sculptures; as a result, they were read anachronically through the prism of psychologism. Cf. Françoise Leriche, "Proust's Eye", in: *Proust and the Arts*, ed. Christie MacDonald, François Proulx (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 169. Fraisse, however, notes that these drawings, inspired by the works of Emile Mâle, allow one to discover the principles of montage, a technique that played an important role in the architectural structure of the novel. Cf. Fraisse, 99.

language, filled with distortions, erotic undertones, spelling mistakes, and infantile terms of endearment or “pet names” used by the lovers.

However, Sollers mainly juxtaposes Proust’s clumsy or even primitive drawings with photography. As we know, when it first became popular at the end of the 19th century, photography was supposed to fulfill the dream of perfect artistic imitation. It was, in a sense, the opposite of what Bataille calls “a state of unfulfillment.” Still, despite its groundbreaking role in the modern era, Sollers criticizes photography. He argues that photography marks the beginning of, as Guy Debord put it half a century later, the “society of the spectacle:”

Photographs are, in fact, spiritualistic operations, and the industrialization of the spectacle is a new era of widespread virtualization. Life, death, past, present, identity, and birth will be bought and sold (17).

Sollers does not criticize photography because it imitates reality but because it is detached from physical reality.²⁷ It also establishes a new temporal order that focuses on the present and the momentary (*instantanéité*), as seen in Mme. Verdurin’s obsession with novelties. In this sense, her salon and worldly life anticipate the era of the industrialized image, which for the essayist is an era of falsehood and illusion. In the emerging new media context, Proust’s drawings, due to both their style and “immorality,” turn out to be anachronistic. As Proust’s embodied gaze, they also introduce a biographical element that points to him as both a real person and a historical persona. In one of his earlier essays, Sollers wrote:

A writer is not pure spirit, he is not born out of nothing, his family story is by all means important, just like the events around him. Biographical curiosity is completely justified, if only to show that it is based not so much on mystery (there is nothing mysterious about creation) but on living in a different way.²⁸

Described by Deleuze as the “body without organs,” the novel’s narrator finds in Proust’s archive his physical *analogon*, a real author who uses his senses to, just like an ethnologist or a biologist, register and analyze signs produced by others. In contrast to the idealistic understanding of inner life found in the modernist *Contre Sainte-Beuve*,²⁹ Sollers emphasizes the physical aspects of Proust’s gaze. The physical counters the virtual offered by the modern world:

The real novelty, therefore, is the profound renewal of the body in History. A different retina, a different eardrum, a different smell, a different taste, a different touch, a different breath. In spite of Sainte-Beuve, in fact in spite of everyone, our true self has nothing to do with the social image created by others (24).

With his, paradoxically, “outer inner eye” (9), Proust appears as someone radically different, someone who comes from a different era. He insists on the real, challenging the increasingly unreal world.

²⁷Thus, Sollers does not seem to partake in Barthes’s phenomenology of the photographic image, as expressed by the famous “it-has-been.” Cf. Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 85.

²⁸Philippe Sollers, “L’écrivain et la vie”, in: *La Guerre du goût* (Paris: Gallimard, 1994), 324.

²⁹Proust famously wrote: “a book is a product of a different self from the self we manifest in our habits, in our social life, in our vices”. Marcel Proust, *By Way of Sainte-Beuve*, trans. Sylvia Townsend Warner (London: Chatto & Windus, 1958), 76.

The “visor effect” and memory

This otherness, revealed in clumsy drawings, certainly confirms the myth of Proust as a solitary writer devoted entirely to his art, which is already very popular in French culture. Interpreted anew, as I have described it in the first part of this article, this myth is used by Sollers, on the one hand, to criticize the contemporary “society of the spectacle,” and, on the other hand, to stop a certain “idea of literature”³⁰ from “coming to an end,”³¹ as announced by different critics. Instead, Sollers reflects on the role played by both the novel and its author in the modern world and in literature. Indeed, for Sollers literature and culture are a site of competition or even struggle. What is at stake in this struggle is “taste” [*goût*],³² as defined by the 18th-century aesthetics. Writers and artists who do not have any partake in the massification of culture, while those brilliant few who, like Proust, wish to develop an individual style of artistic expression, see writing as the ultimate goal/meaning of life. Sollers also locates Proust in this context when he writes that:

The great question of literature, which we will understand more and more as it disappears, is not to find out “What is it about?” or “What is the story about?” but “Who tells whom?” In other words: who controls the story? (26)

However, as we already know, the quest for the new is not the goal. In *Oeil de Proust*, the idea of inner experience, which allowed Sollers to discover Proust’s anachrony in relation to his era, also seems to refer to Proust’s impact, or influence, on contemporary literature. Basically, it refers to a certain form of remembering Proust, one which goes beyond the traditional history of literature and takes into account not only the novel as a product of the writer’s imagination but above all how the writer was/is remembered. Derrida’s metaphor of the “visor effect” in which vision is combined with domination and a unique understanding of time illuminates this idea:

This spectral *someone other looks at us*, we feel ourselves being looked at by it, outside of any synchrony [...] according to an absolute anteriority [...] and asymmetry. **Here anachrony makes** the law [emphasis mine – K.T.-J.]³³

Distinguishing between the specter and the spirit, Derrida treats the specter much more materially and individually. At the same time, the French critic emphasizes the lack of historical continuity between the specter and those it observes:

To feel ourselves seen by a look which it will always be impossible to cross.³⁴

³⁰I refer to the title of Alexandre Gefen’s essay, *L’idée de la littérature: de l’art pour l’art aux écritures de l’intervention* (Paris: José-Corti, 2021).

³¹The “end of literature” has actually become a topos of both contemporary literature and literary criticism in France. See, for example, Henri Raczymow, *La mort du grand écrivain. Essai sur la fin de la littérature* (Paris: Stock, 1994); Dominique Maingueneau, *Contre Saint-Proust où la fin de la Littérature* (Paris: Belin, 1996); Antoine Compagnon, *La Vie derrière soi. Fins de la littérature* (Paris: Editions des Equateurs, 2021).

³²See in particular the collection of essays *La Guerre du goût* [War of taste].

³³Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York and London: Routledge, 1994), 7.

³⁴Derrida, *Specters of Marx*.

All these issues are discussed in Sollers's essay. Sollers (as has been mentioned above) belonged to the first generation of writers who could not meet Proust in person,³⁵ although he eagerly listened to the stories of people who knew the writer. In this context, the documents presented in *Oeil de Proust* seem to Sollers to be something more than a historical testimony of the writer's unique way of looking at the world.³⁶ They become a material substitute for his absence. They embody Proust's gaze, in turn structuring how we look at the world. "To see [adoption] through Proust's eyes," Sollers writes, "is, for example, to see that everything that is presented to us as 'new' immediately becomes obsolete; it is to see that new generations rapidly adapt to older ones without even being aware of it" (32). In the light of the previous findings, these documents even seem to challenge Proust's metaphor of the book as an "optic instrument" that was supposed to help the reader discover "what he would probably not have seen in himself." "The truth is spectral," Derrida writes, "and this is its part of truth which is irreducible by explanation."³⁷ For Sollers, Proust's spectrality seems to be related primarily to what could be described, as Derrida put it, as the "sensuous non-sensuous" of his manuscripts. The novel does not explain what life is to the reader; it is a call to action which may be found in archival documents which makes the reader chase the new and *de facto* triumph over time. Proust's lesson is ultimately an invitation to live in real time and not in the "false time of death" (48) imposed by industrialized modernity. Time regained is not time remembered, as modernist interpretations of the novel suggest, but embodied time. This "lesson" which Sollers finds in Proust's manuscripts which function as "embodied and living [life] writing" (9) reverberates in *Time Regained*. In the famous episode of "Le Bal des têtes" (death-masks' ball), the narrator looks at the faces of his old friends and notices that they have changed over time. The faces show the passage of time.

But the "visor effect," the gaze embodied in archival documents, also concerns the impact that Proust wanted to have on future generations and the way in which Sollers approached Proust's documents. Proust's letters, published posthumously, show that he actively pleaded with critics and publishers; he wanted his novel to reach a wide audience and to enter the literary canon.³⁸ Indeed, in one of his letters he is critical of his literary pastiches; he did not want to come across as a writer devoid of individual style:

For me everything was a matter of hygiene, I had to cleanse myself of my natural tendency towards idolatry and imitation. And instead of pretending to be Michelet or Goncourt [...] instead of doing it openly in the form of pastiche, I had to become Marcel Proust again when I wrote my novels.³⁹

³⁵For example, Roland Barthes, born in 1915, still during Proust's lifetime, feels this direct, almost physical bond with the writer, when he says: I was beginning to walk, Proust was still alive, finishing *À la Recherche du Temps perdu*. See Roland Barthes, *Œuvres Complètes*, volume IV, ed. Éric Marty (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2002), 603. This is the caption under Barthes's photograph from March 1919.

³⁶This is how Françoise Leriche looks at Proust's drawings from a genetic perspective. He emphasizes that research on Proust's gaze and drawings is more widespread in the United States than in France, where the visual aspects of the novel itself are studied more than the author's way of looking at the world. Cf. Leriche, 161–178.

³⁷Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. Eric Prenowitz (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), 87.

³⁸Proust's attempts to influence literary criticism have been discussed, among others, in the abovementioned biographical essay by Michel Schneider: *L'Auteur, l'autre. Proust et son double*.

³⁹Quote after: Yves Sandre, "Pastiches et mélanges. Note sur le texte", in: Marcel Proust, «Contre Sainte-Beuve» précédé de «Pastiches et mélanges» suivi d'«Essais et articles» (Paris: Gallimard, coll. Pléiade, 1971), 690.

In fact, the same can be said about *Time Regained*. The narrator reflects on the work of the painter and the writer and comes to the conclusion that writing is a form of drawing. In the context of visual documents published in *Oeil de Proust*, the following quote may be considered a trick intended to fool the reader into believing that the writer is devoid of other artistic skills:

The writer envies the painter, he would like to make sketches and notes and, if he does so, he is lost. Yet, in writing, there is not a gesture of his characters, a mannerism, an accent, which has not impregnated his memory; there is not a single invented character to whom he could not give sixty names of people he has observed, of whom one poses for a grimace, another for an eyeglass, another for his temper, another for a particular movement of the arms. And the writer discovers that if his aspiration to be a painter could not be consciously realised, he has nevertheless filled his notebook with sketches without being aware of it.⁴⁰

Sollers realizes that these efforts to remember often led to the need to conceal those aspects of Proust's biography that were socially unacceptable, especially his Jewish origin or homosexuality. However, Sollers uses them to remind himself that Proust was primarily a writer. For this reason, he views Proust's letters to Hahn, in which the writer's homosexuality was exposed and confirmed, primarily through the prism of Proust's artistic growth as a writer. Sollers does not search for biographical truth, although, as we have seen, he also recognizes the value of referring to the author as a person. Still, reduced to sensational revelations, biography belongs, in his opinion, to the order of the "spectacle." Despite the aspirations of the modern world, in which political correctness triumphs over literature, and despite attempts to turn Proust into an icon of trendy interpretations,⁴¹ Sollers sees Proust primarily as a "prophet of a new law" (48), which refers to the universal order of literature. And it is precisely in its, from today's perspective, anachronistic understanding as well as more generally in the paradoxical "innovative regression" (16) of literature and art, that, in his opinion, there lies a common principle which structures the community of artists and writers. It is "outside of any synchrony," in "[...] true, living and vertical, history of art and literature; a movable ladder which you can traverse in both directions."⁴²

Summary: Archival fiction

In *Oeil de Proust*, which transcends genetic criticism, Proust's drawings are read as material records of the way in which Proust was/is remembered. The title of the essay, in which the eye intersects, as we have seen, with the idea of power, also refers to the memory of the writer's actual eyes, which supposedly could reveal his Jewish origin.⁴³ Entangled in this "unfulfilled fulfillment of modernity,"⁴⁴ which the specter ultimately is, Sollers activates different literary

⁴⁰Proust, *Time Regained*.

⁴¹In his essay, Sollers alludes to Cultural Studies, and specifically to Gay and Lesbian Studies, which he treats essentially as a manifestation of American pragmatism.

⁴²Philippe Sollers, *La Guerre du goût* (Paris: Gallimard, 1994), 9.

⁴³Paul Desjardin, a schoolmate of the Proust brothers, described Marcel Proust as "a young gazelle-eyed Persian prince with sleepy eyelids." Cf. Jean Recanati, *Profils juifs de Marcel Proust* (Paris: Buchet/Chastel, 1979), 9.

⁴⁴Momro, 8.

and cultural associations connected with the legacy of modernism (whose, let us add, favorite body part was the eye⁴⁵) and uses his authority as a writer to comment on it in the context of literature. By blurring the boundary between document and literature, he abandons the modernist “phantasm of origin” (Momro), which in Proust’s case meant that these drawings were considered worthless. Sollers does not provide the reader with conclusive interpretations of Proust’s archives; still, especially in its material dimension, the French critic’s book is also included in the Proustian “corpus,” and two meanings of the word are at play here, in terms of both the body and the text. When read outside the strictly historical context, these drawings are open to various interpretations, in line with Derrida’s observations about the archive: “There is no meta-archive. [...] The archivist produces more archive, and that is why the archive is never closed. It opens out for the future.”⁴⁶ As such, they do not only preserve the memory of the writer but also the memory of the “idea” of “literature.” Indeed, as Jean-Luc Nancy said: “the art we call ‘contemporary’ is not simply art from the present day. It is called ‘contemporary because [...] [i]t inherits only the enigma borne by this word—art [...]”⁴⁷ And perhaps it is a certain idea of literature that is ultimately the specter that haunts Sollers.

translated by Małgorzata Olsza

⁴⁵Tomasz Swoboda writes wonderfully about this topic in his book *Historie oka* [Stories of the eye] (Gdańsk: Słowo/Obraz Terytoria, 2013).

⁴⁶Derrida, *Archive Fever*, 68.

⁴⁷Jean-Luc Nancy, *Portrait*, trans. S. Clift and S. Sparks (New York: Fordham University Press, 2018). Quote after Momro, 18–19.

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KEYWORDS

Philippe Sollers

MARCEL PROUST

Georges Bataille

ABSTRACT:

This article analyzes an essay by the contemporary French writer Philippe Sollers in which Sollers analyzes Marcel Proust's drawings found in the French writer's private letters and manuscripts. I draw on Sollers's notion of "inner experience," which he, in turn, borrowed from Georges Bataille, and discuss the idealistic interpretations of Proust's eye/gaze as found in the metaphor of the book as an "optic instrument." Then, referring to the Derridean category of "the specter," I analyze the significance of Proust's drawings for the understanding of his legacy in contemporary literature.

Jacques Derrida

specter

ARCHIVE

inner experience

OKO

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