

The Bedroom

1

Fragments from a Work in Progress

I have an exceptional, I believe fairly prodigious even, memory of all the places I have slept in, with the exception of those from my earliest childhood – up until the end of the war – which have all merged in the undifferentiated greyness of a school dormitory. For the others, all I need to do, once I'm in bed, is to close my eyes and to think with a minimum of application of a given place for the bedroom to come instantly back into my memory in every detail – the position of the doors and windows, the arrangement of the furniture – for me to feel, more precisely still, the almost physical sensation of being once again in bed in that room.

Thus:

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When you open the door, the bed is almost immediately on the left. It's a very narrow bed, and the room, too, is very narrow (give or take a few centimetres, the width of the bed plus the width of the door, i.e. hardly more than one metre fifty), and not much longer than it is wide. In extension of the bed, there is a small hanging cupboard. At the far end, a sash window. To the right, a washstand with a marble top, with a basin and a water jug, which I don't think I used much.

I'm almost certain there was a framed print on the left-hand wall, facing the bed; not just any old coloured print, but a Renoir perhaps or a Sisley.

There was lino on the floor. There was no table, or any armchair,

but a chair without arms perhaps, against the left-hand wall: I used to throw my clothes on to it before getting into bed. I don't think I sat on it; I only came into this room to sleep. It was on the third and last floor of the house, I had to be careful going upstairs when I came in late not to wake up my landlady and her family.

I was on holiday, I had just passed my *bac*. In theory, I should have been living at a boarding-house that took in French school-children whose parents wanted them to improve their use of English. But the boarding-house was full and I had been billeted on a family.

Each morning, my landlady would open my door and put down a steaming cup of 'morning tea' at the foot of my bed, which I invariably drank cold. I always got up too late, and only once or twice did I manage to arrive in time to eat the copious breakfast that was served in the boarding-house.

It will no doubt be remembered that during that summer, following the Geneva Agreements and the negotiations with Tunisia and Morocco, the entire planet experienced peace for the first time in several decades: a situation that lasted for only a few days and which I don't think has recurred since.

My memories are attached to the narrowness of that bed, to the narrowness of that room, to the lingering bitterness of the tea that was too strong and too cold. That summer, I drank 'pink gins', or glasses of gin improved by a drop of angostura, I flirted, somewhat fruitlessly, with the daughter of a cotton-mill-owner who had recently returned from Alexandria, I decided to become a writer, I slaved away at playing, on country harmoniums, the one tune I've ever succeeded in learning: the 54 opening notes – for the right hand, the left hand most often failing to follow – of a Bach prelude.

The resurrected space of the bedroom is enough to bring back to life, to recall, to revive memories, the most fleeting and anodyne along with the most essential. The coenesthetic certainty of my

body in the bed, the topographical certainty of the bed in the room, these alone reactivate my memory, and give it an acuity and a precision it hardly ever has otherwise. Just as a word brought back from a dream can, almost before it is written down, restore a whole memory of that dream, here, the mere fact of knowing (almost without having needed to search for it, simply by having stretched out for a few moments and having closed my eyes) that the wall was on my right, the door beside me on the left (by raising my arm I could touch the handle), the window facing me, instantly evokes in me a chaotic flood of details so vivid as to leave me speechless: the young girl with the doll-like manner, the immensely long Englishman whose nose was slightly crooked (I saw him again in London, when I went to spend three days there at the end of this pseudo-linguistic holiday; he took me into a pub smothered in greenery that, sadly, I've never managed to find again since, and to a promenade concert at the Albert Hall, where I was very proud to hear, conducted it may well be by Sir John Barbirolli, a concerto for mouth organ and orchestra written especially for Larry Adler), marshmallows, Rock rock (decorated barley sugar, a speciality of seaside resorts; the best known is Brighton rock, which is – apart from being a play on words: there are rocks in Brighton just as there are cliffs in Etretat – the title of a novel by Graham Greene; even at Rock it was hard to escape it), the grey beach, the cold sea, and the wooded countryside, with its old stone bridges, where you might have expected sprites and will o' the wisps to appear at any moment.

It's no doubt because the space of the bedroom works for me like a Proustian madeleine (the whole project is of course invoked by this; all it is is nothing more than a rigorous extension of paragraphs 6 and 7 of the first chapter of the first part [*Combray*] of the first volume [*Du côté de chez Swann*] of *A la recherche du temps perdu*) that I undertook, several years ago now, to make an inventory, as exhaustive and as accurate as possible, of all the 'Places Where I Have Slept'. As yet, I've scarcely begun to describe them; on the other hand, I believe I've just about listed them all. There are about two hundred of them (barely half a dozen get added every

year; I have become something of a home body). I haven't yet finally settled on the manner in which I shall classify them. Certainly not in chronological order. Doubtless not in alphabetical order (although it's the only order whose pertinence requires no justification). Maybe according to their geographical arrangement, which would emphasize the 'guidebook' aspect of the work. Or else, according rather to a thematic perspective which might result in a sort of typology of bedrooms:

1. *My* bedrooms
2. Dormitories and barrack-rooms
3. Friends' bedrooms
4. Guest rooms
5. Makeshift beds (settee, moquette plus cushions, carpet, chaise-longue, etc.)
6. Houses in the country
7. Rented villas
8. Hotel rooms
 - a. scruffy hotels, boarding houses
 - b. luxury hotels
9. Unusual conditions: nights on a train, on a plane, in a car; nights on a boat; nights on guard duty; nights in a police station; nights under canvas; nights in hospital; sleepless nights, etc.

I spent several months or years in a small number of these rooms; in most, I spent only a few days or a few hours. It's foolhardy perhaps on my part to claim I shall be able to remember every one of them: what was the pattern of the wallpaper in that room in the Hôtel du Lion d'Or in Saint-Chély-d'Apcher (the name – much more surprising when spoken than when written – of that cantonal capital in the Lozère has been anchored for some unknown reason in my memory since I was in the third form and had been very insistent we should stop there)? But it's from the resurrected memories of these ephemeral bedrooms that I expect the greatest revelations obviously.

2

Minor problem

When, in a given bedroom, you change the position of the bed, can you say you are changing rooms, or else what?

(cf. topological analysis.)

3

What does it mean, to live in a room? Is to live in a place to take possession of it? What does taking possession of a place mean? As from when does somewhere become truly yours? Is it when you've put your three pairs of socks to soak in a pink plastic bowl? Is it when you've heated up your spaghetti over a camping-gaz? Is it when you've used up all the non-matching hangers in the cupboard? Is it when you've drawing-pinned to the wall an old postcard showing Carpaccio's 'Dream of St Ursula'? Is it when you've experienced there the throes of anticipation, or the exaltations of passion, or the torments of a toothache? Is it when you've hung suitable curtains up on the windows, and put up the wallpaper, and sanded the parquet flooring?

4

Placid small thought no 1

Any cat-owner will rightly tell you that cats inhabit houses much better than people do. Even in the most dreadfully square spaces, they know how to find favourable corners.

Placid small thought no 2

The passage of time (my History) leaves behind a residue that accumulates: photographs, drawings, the corpses of long since

dried-up felt-pens, shirts, non-returnable glasses and returnable glasses, cigar wrappers, tins, erasers, postcards, books, dust and knickknacks: this is what I call my fortune.