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Abstract:

This paper argues that Pynchon may allude to Marcel Proust through the character Marcel in Part 4 of *Gravity's Rainbow* and, if so, what that could mean. I trace the textual clues that relate to Proust and analyze what Pynchon may be saying about a fellow great experimental writer.

Pynchon Nods: Proust in *Gravity's Rainbow*

Erik Ketzan

Editorial note: a previous draft of this paper appeared on *The Modern Word* in 2010.

Remember the "Floundering Four" part in *Gravity's Rainbow*? It's a short story of sorts that takes place in a city of the future called Raketen-Stadt (German for "Rocket City") and features a cast of comic book-style super heroes called the Floundering Four. One of them is named Marcel, and I submit that he is meant as some kind of representation of the great Marcel Proust.

Only eight pages long, the Floundering Four section is a parody/riff on a sci-fi comic book story, loosely patterned on *The Fantastic Four* by Marvel Comics. It appears near the end of *Gravity's Rainbow* among a set of thirteen chapterettes, each one a fragmentary "text". As Pynchon scholar Steven Weisenburger explains, "A variety of discourses, modes and forms are parodied in the... subsections... Two... may be read as parodies of the etymological/philological writings in Grimm's Teutonic Mythology... Other subsections parody comic books... scientific writing... travel handbooks... poetic forms (such as Haiku and Miltonic verse), and letters... In the midst of it all, Slothrop finds a scrap of newspaper announcing the atomic blast at Hiroshima."¹

As a first-time reader of *Gravity's Rainbow*, I was perplexed (even more than usual) with the twelve subsections until I realized what, in terms of literary technique, Pynchon was doing: in short, the first nuclear bomb of World War II actually detonates the narrative and text of *Gravity's Rainbow* and reduces the novel to its original elements, in other words the kinds of texts and books that influenced Pynchon's writing. Look again at the paragraph above: books of German mythology, travel guides, poetry, comics... These are the elements and atoms, so to speak, that make up Pynchon's "immense synthesis of modern literature and modern science," as one reviewer put it.² And here, within this mass of texts, literary forms, references and allusions, I believe Pynchon mentions Proust.

The Floundering Four section opens with an aerial view of the futuristic Raketen-Stadt, a city of art deco skyscrapers and fantastic airships. The camera swoops down to street-level, where "thousands of kids," including a bunch of street-smart youths with propeller beanies and water guns, dart through the alleys on various quests and adventures.

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"Here's a memo for you Tyrone, go and find the Radiant Hour (Weepers! Didn't know it was lost!... Onward to rescue the Radiant Hour, which has been abstracted from the day's 24..." (*GR*, 674)

To rescue the Radiant Hour, Tyrone summons the rest of his superhero team, the Floundering Four. Besides Tyrone himself, the team includes Myrtle Miraculous (a Wonder Woman knockoff doomed to never know love), Maximilian (a zoot-suited jazz man), and a mechanical chess player from the 19th century named Marcel.

So how does Marcel indicate Proust? The character Marcel is mentioned only a few times in the chapter, and disappears from the novel shortly after his entrance. But each time he is mentioned, there is a little clue or two that indicates Proust:

"in comes Marcel, a mechanical chess-player dating back to the Second Empire." (*GR*, 675)

The most famous "mechanical chess player" in history was an invention called "The Turk," which was completed in 1770 by Wolfgang von Kempelen, an inventor from the Austrian Empire. The Turk looked like a man in a turban standing over a chessboard atop a large cabinet, which was filled with gears and machinery. The Turk moved his arms and appeared to play, and win, chess games against human opponents, astounding observers for decades after his creation. As Pynchon suggests, a human hidden inside the cabinet operated the Turk's movements.



Figure 1: Image of a mechanical turk engraving from Karl Gottlieb von Windisch's 1783 book *Briefe über den Schachspieler des Hrn. von Kempelen, nebst drei Kupferstichen die diese berühmte Maschine vorstellen.*

The Turk spawned a number of imitations over the years: an automaton named Ajeeb in 1868, another named Mephisto in 1876... But although Pynchon makes multiple allusions to the secrets of these bogus automatons (magnets, a man hidden inside, etc.), he imagines a mechanical chess man from a specific country and era: 19th-century France.

On the one hand, the choice of Marcel's name and nationality could "mean" nothing. Marcel appears in a novel and particularly a chapter in which ideas melt into one another, forming chimeras that elude or outright defy interpretation. But I suggest that Pynchon had Proust in mind here. Beginning with the name, Proust is among the first people with the name "Marcel" that readers of experimental literature (i.e. Pynchon's readers) would think of. Marcel dates "back to the Second Empire," and Proust was born in 1871, the year after the Second French Empire ended.

Pynchon describes Marcel as a "very serious-looking French refugee kid, funny haircut with the ears perfectly outlined in hair that starts abruptly a quarter-inch strip of

bare plastic skin away, black patent-shiny hair, hornrim glasses..." (*GR*, 675) Except for the glasses (and plastic skin, obviously), much of that matches photographs of Proust:



Figure 2: Marcel Proust in 1900.

Pynchon's Marcel, like Proust, is also tirelessly long-winded. When the jazz man Maximilian tells Marcel to "give me some skin,"

"not only does Marcel give him a heavy time about skin, skin in all its implications, oh no that's only at the superficial level, next we get a long discourse on the concept of "give," that goes on for a while, then, then he starts in on "Man." That's really an exhaustive one. In fact Marcel isn't anywhere near finished with it yet." (*GR*, 675)

Robots in science fiction with difficulty understanding human idioms are a common trope. There is even a similar scene in *Terminator 2* where young Edward Furlong teaches Arnold Schwarzenegger how to "give me five." But Marcel expounding at length on "give" and "man" is very different to these typical sci-fi scenes, such as Commander Data from *Star Trek* misunderstanding the phrase, "burn the midnight oil". Marcel does not behave like a confused robot so much as a verbose intellectual, much like the

exhaustive, exhausting Proust. The statement that Marcel "isn't anywhere near finished with it yet" recalls that Proust likewise never completed his life's work, *In Search of Lost Time*.

"Still, [Marcel's] exquisite 19th-century brainwork—the human art it took to build which has been flat lost, lost as the dodo bird." (*GR*, 675)

If the Proust theory is to be believed, it is worth noting that Proust, a great 20th-century writer, was concerned above all with the dying world of the upper classes of 19th-century France ("lost as the dodo bird"). And naturally possessed an exquisite brain.

Finally, Marcel is described as a "Gallic genius," and while any character named "Marcel" might naturally come from France, why a "genius"? The word "genius" appears only six times in *Gravity's Rainbow*, including descriptions of the characters Sir Stephen Dodson-Truck (who seems to symbolize James Joyce, which I may explore in a future essay), and Gerhardt von Göll, a filmmaker. In an essay from 1984, Pynchon uses the word "genius" twice: to describe writers and a filmmaker.³ In short, it's a word that Pynchon seems to associate strongly, if not primarily, with great artists.

Am I positive that Marcel indicates Proust? No. But there's a lot of circumstantial evidence: he's named "Marcel," he's French, he's a genius. These three facts alone in a vacuum would point strongly to Marcel Proust. But Pynchon also gives Marcel shiny black hair, links him with the 19th century, and portrays him as extremely long-winded.

There is one final clue: the Radiant Hour. The comic book parody that begins in the Floundering Four section features a quest "to rescue the Radiant Hour, which has been abstracted from the day's 24..." (*GR*, 674) In other words, the Floundering Four are in search of missing, or lost, time.⁴

If Marcel does refer to Proust, so what? It is tempting to consider the possibility that Pynchon mentions Proust to acknowledge a serious admiration of Proust, debt to Proust, or influence by Proust. There are certainly books that do this: one of the main characters in Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose* clearly alludes to Jorge Luis Borges, whose influence pervades the novel.⁵ It seems unlikely, however, that Pynchon invokes Proust in this way. First, there do not seem to be any other references to Proust in Pynchon's writings.⁶ Second, Marcel appears in only a handful of pages of *Gravity's Rainbow*. But most importantly, Pynchon devotes scant greater intellectual bandwidth to Marcel than to the comic book superheroes, Boston jazz clubs, talking refrigerator, Coca-Cola, Chiquita Banana, and everything else referenced in the kaleidoscope of the Floundering Four chapter.

But Pynchon does have a *little* to say about Marcel. Recall that Marcel is a member of the Floundering Four, who are each "gifted while at the same time flawed by his gift," in Marcel's case, his genius. Pynchon may have added Proust to his superhero team because Proust's genius, too, was a gift and a curse; his endless descriptions and pages-

long sentences are wondrous, but frustrating and exhausting for his readers. Proust's genius produced one of the greatest novels of the 20th century, but also one of the most impenetrable (and unfinished, to boot).

Marcel is not portrayed with complete reverence; Marcel has "no fakery insider to give him any touch of humanity," and the jazz man Maximilian carries on "a long denunciation of Marcel under the thin scholarly guise of trying to determine if the Gallic Genius can truly be said to have any 'soul.'" (*GR*, 679) Morphing the passionate, romantic Proust into a soulless (in any sense) robot is bizarre, to say the least. But if Marcel does allude to Proust, perhaps Pynchon rendered him as a robot without "any touch of humanity" to suggest a kind of ambivalent awe of Proust's genius. As in, "can he even be *human*??" It is a feeling well-known to readers of Proust, daunted by the serpentine plot, million characters, and monumental length of *In Search of Lost Time*, a feeling also extremely familiar to Pynchon's readers. As different as the two writers are, most criticisms of *In Search of Lost Time* can also be leveled against Pynchon's masterpiece. Given that their writing has certain things in common, perhaps Pynchon alludes to Proust with a sense of (at least some) kinship. The Floundering Four are not randomly chosen comic book superheroes; rather, they seem to be Pynchon's heroes: Tyrone Slothrop, his protagonist, Myrtle Miraculous, the seeker of impossible love (like many characters in *Gravity's Rainbow*), Maximilian, one of many noble jazz men in the Pynchon oeuvre, and perhaps Proust, a gifted and flawed fellow traveler.

But who knows? Pynchon's portrayals of anyone or anything are rarely black and white, and Marcel appears in some of the novel's most surreal and fantastic pages. "Interpretation" of such literature should be attempted loosely, as I have attempted to do. Marcel may or may not indicate Proust, and even if he does, it may mean nothing. We don't know much and little can be said with certainty. But I think I saw Pynchon nod.

End notes

1. Weisenburger, p. 282.
2. Mendelson.
3. Pynchon (1984).
4. As pleased with myself as I am in pointing out the parallel between the quest for the missing "Radiant Hour" and the title, *In Search of Lost Time*, I note that *À la recherche du temps perdu* was published under the title *A Remembrance of Things Past* in all English translations of Proust from 1922 until 1992, when *In Search of Lost Time*, a more literal translation of the French title, was employed by the translator D. J. Enright. That said, French appears in dozens of pages of *Gravity's Rainbow*, and it is possible that Pynchon, voracious reader and obscurantist extraordinaire, might have been aware of the literal meaning of Proust's novel if Proust indeed was on his mind.
5. See Ketzan for a basic introduction to Borges allusions in Eco's novel. For an analysis of the dangers of papers such as mine and the topic of literary influence in general, see Eco (2004), pp. 118, 124 ("...the game of finding precise allusions to this or that, which many people play, is generally a waste of time").

6. There may be one more reference to Proust in *Gravity's Rainbow*, but it's a big stretch. The female protagonist of Proust's first few novels is named Odette, a name most famous from Tchaikovsky's ballet, *Swan Lake*. It is *possible*, although far from probable, that Pynchon was influenced by Proust's character name when naming Jessica Swanlake.

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