How to Critically Inherit Modernism? Gender Issues in Chantal Akerman's and Anne Carson's Rewritings of Marcel Proust's À la Recherche du Temps Perdu

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Abstract:

Just as Eliot, in his famous *The Tradition and the Individual Talent*, peremptorily posits that the value of an author can only be established by placing him "among the deads ones" and comparing him with them, so the heirs of Modernism seem to be aware of the impossibility of simply getting rid of the past. Conceived as a reservoir of shared images that guarantee to individuals their allegiance to a society, tradition has nevertheless ceased to be organized as a series of authority figures arranged in a linear and compartmentalized pattern over the centuries, resulting in everyone seemed to have acquired the right to take freely from it in order to establish a permanent parallelism with the present. Drawing on the example provided by Anne Carson's The Albertine Workout and Chantal Akerman's *La Captive*, this essay aims at investigating the way contemporary female authors can critically inherit from Modernist tradition (and from Proust in particular), that is to say acknowledge its authority without fully accepting its legacy.

Keywords: Modernism, Gender Studies, Marcel Proust, Chantal Akerman, Anne Carson

– Tu l'aimes pas beaucoup, Proust ?

– Il est tellement couvert d'amour… Il a tellement été aimé… depuis un siècle… Tu te demandes comment un petit baiser supplémentaire peut bien se loger sans se noyer dans ces litres de salive déposés depuis tant de temps…

(Nathalie Quintaine, *Ultra-Proust*)

1. *1922-2022: Modernism's* annus mirabilis

1922 is no ordinary year in the history of European and Anglo-American Literature. Also known as Modernism's *annus mirabilis*, it is in fact the year in which James Joyce's *Ulysses*, T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* and Virginia Woolf's *Jacob's Room* were published. But 1922 also marked the publication of Paul Valéry's *Charmes*, as well as the achievement of Rainer Maria Rilke's *Duineser Elegien*, of Giuseppe Ungaretti's *Il Porto Sepolto* and Wallace Stevens's *Harmonium*, all of which were published the following year.

One concern seems to be shared by these works: the desire to enter into a critical dialogue with tradition and its exponents. Just as Eliot, in his famous *The Tradition and the Individual Talent*, claimed that

> No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists. You cannot value him alone; you must set him, for contrast and comparison, among the dead (Eliot [1919], 1975, p. 21).

So the heirs of Modernism are well aware of the impossibility of simply getting rid of the tradition. Conceived as a stock of shared images that guarantee the allegiance between an individual and a society, tradition has ceased to be organized as a series of authority figures arranged in a linear pattern over the centuries: everyone seems to have acquired the right to draw from it at will and establish a permanent comparison with the present. The task of the writer and of those who master the fragments of the

tradition will no longer consist in struggling alone against the force of the past, but rather in conveying their experience in a form that can connect with other authors and themes scattered across space and time.

In her book *21st-Century Modernism: The "New" Poetics*, American critic Marjorie Perloff suggests that we should reconsider the common places usually referred to Modernist inheritance among the 21st century poets: for example, the idea that Modernism has to be identified with the autonomy of the text, while the Postmodern text is "open" and its meaning is indeterminate. Or the one according to which the participation of the reader is irrelevant to the text in Modernism, while it has become not just relevant but crucial to the text for its successors[1]. With this paper, we will explore two different ways of critically inheriting the Modernist tradition: by critically inherit, we mean acknowledging its authority without fully accepting its legacy. We will focus our attention on two rewritings of Marcel Proust's *À la Recherche du temps perdu* which call into question the representation of female characters and femininity in the novel: Chantal Akerman's movie *La Captive* (2000), and Anne Carson's *The Albertine Workout* (2014). Both works provides us with material to reflect on the relationship that contemporary authors engage with their Modernist models and with the idea of literary tradition in general[2].

[1] "Even when Postmodern literature was most committed to describing itself as a repudiation of Modernism, it was also insisting on a continuity between its values and those of a certain subset of Modernist writer" (Perloff 2002, p. 17).

[2] Unlike other literary phenomena whose theoretical birth dates long after their arosal, Modernism was critically born and canonized at the same time: among the key figures in this process we find F. R. Leavis, Allen Tate, William Empson, but also T. S. Eliot and Paul Valéry, themselves to be consider among the most representative authors of the movement. Luckily, such self-consecration has not prevented critics of the second half of the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries from revisiting the Modernist canon and to discuss its legitimacy. Examples include Bonnie Kime Scott's *The Gender of Modernism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), Rita Felski's, *The Gender of Modernity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), Susan Stanford Friedman's *Planetary Modernism. Provocations on Modernity Across Times* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015) and Christopher GoGwilt's *The Passage of Literature: Genealogies of Modernism in Conrad, Rhys, and Pramoedya* (New York: Oxford University Press).

2. Albertine's gaze: Chantal Akerman Remaking of the Proustian Masterpiece

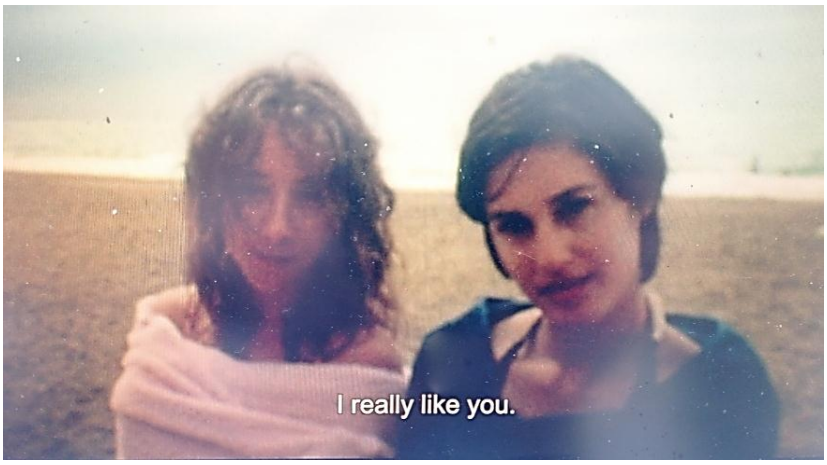
Chantal Akerman's *La Captive* is generally considered to be a loose adaptation or, better to say, a rewriting of the Proustian masterpiece. But it is also a cinematic essay on the possibility of adapting a literary work: among Proust's volumes, Akerman choses to only film *La Prisonnière*, a book almost exclusively focused on the Narrator's jealousy towards Albertine, a *jeune fille* whom he both loves and hates. In contrast to previous adaptations (particularly Volker Schlöndorff's and Raoul Ruiz's ones), Akerman does not aim at reconstructing the original setting of the novel: if the movie is more or less recognizable as to be taking place in Paris and in Normandy, the historical period is harder to seize. Not only characters wear 1950s fashioned clothes, but they also talk to each other through modern phones:

Chantal Akerman, *La Captive*, scene 3

Chantal Akerman, *La Captive*, scene 5

La Captive could therefore barely be called an adaptation of a literary work. Narrative lacks in its crucial points, dialogues are fragmented, and even the psychological portraits are voluntary weak. As I mentioned, *La Captive* focuses on a very small fragment of one volume of *À la Recherche*. In this respect, Akerman claimed that, when she cowrote the manuscript with Erik de Kuyper, she relied on her confused but still dear memories of reading *À la Recherche* as a young woman. It is indeed the combination of the vagueness of the contents she has tried to remember and the vividness of the feelings she has felt that led her to *La Captive*, which should then be understood as a work on an adolescent reading experience and its re-elaboration as an adult.

Let us dwell on one scene that can help us thinking about this critical and intermedial rewriting of the Modernist masterpiece, the first one. As audience, we are witnessing Simon (the Narrator, interpreted by Stanislas Merhar) projecting a group of young girls at the beach, playing, diving, laughing, and sometimes gazing into the camera. This explicitly meta-filmic scene should correspond with Albertine's first meeting with the Narrator in *À l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs*. As it happens in the novel, it is one of the young girls who appears to have caught the attention of the Narrator (or, in Akerman's *La Captive*, of Simon the filmmaker). She will soon be identified as Ariane (Albertine, interpreted by Sylvie Testud). While looking at Simon watching his 8mm film, we progressively understand what he tries to do: he is lip-reading Ariane's words and repeating them: "Je… je vous aime…je vous aime bien" ("I… I really… I really like you").



Chantal Akerman, *La Captive*, scene 1,

As suggested by Jorgen Bruhn, one way of reflecting on the sense of this scene is by indulging on the strong opposition between the two characters. Ariane is in fact portrayed as a silent, passive, distant (and, we shall discover, eventually dead) girl, while Simon looks like a vivid, acting, present, young man, who films and thus actively objectifies Ariane. Considered under this perspective, the scene seems to perfectly fit in the well-known definition of "male gaze" provided in the 1980s by Laura Mulvey:

> In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female […]. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness (Mulvey, 1975, p. 84).

Even though all along the movie Ariane seems to be objectified by Simon, there indeed exist a moment for her to take back the autonomy her alias in the Proustian novel, Albertine, never succeeds in regain. Any time she looks straight into the camera – an action that does not find any equivalent in *La Prisonnière,* where everything appears to be filtered through the Narrator's perspective – she challenges the spectator with a potentially emancipated character. Should we think that the film, possibly despite the conscious intentions of its director, expresses a critique to Proust's representation of desire in *La Prisonnière*? In the previous works, Akerman inquired about a way to film women's lives from other perspectives than the ones imposed by a male-oriented movie tradition. Yet in *La Captive* she seems to be asking her audience whether it would be possible not to get rid of, but rather to critically inherit such tradition. Just as Albertine, when asked by her lover, teacher and jailer Marcel, only pretends to surrender to him, so Akerman appears to adapt the traditional representation of the man-woman relationship in order to potentially reverse it.

3. "Plants do not actually sleep. They expose their genitalia": Training with Anne Carson

In the lyrical essay *The Albertine Workout*, Canadian translator, poet and academic Anne Carson intends to solve (literally to *work out*) the mystery surrounding the character of Albertine, as well as to reflect on the way Proust reiterates gender bias on female desire. The book is composed of fifty-five numbered short notes, so that we can consider it as a sort of treatise, and as some kind of exercises list. These notes are completed with a sixteen-notes appendix on various topics, from Samuel Beckett on adjectives, to the latest research on sleep theory. Carson's use of quotation and savant references reinforces both the irony and the seriousness of her purpose. The assertiveness of the academic writing (echoed by the use of foot-notes, italics, and MLA's style quotations) is reproduced in order to strengthen the purpose of the essay and to lighten it.

> 5. Albertine is believed by some critics, including André Gide, to be a disguised version of Proust's chauffeur, Alfred Agostinelli. This is called the transposition theory […]
> 9. Volume 5 is called *La Prisonnière* in French and *The Captive* in English. It was declared by Roger Shattuck, a world expert on Proust, in his award-winning 1974 study, to be the one volume of the novel that a time-pressed reader may safely and entirely skip
> 10. Albertine does not call the Narrator by his name anywhere in the novel […]. The narrator hints that his first name might be the same first name as that of the author of the novel, i.e. Marcel. Let's go with that (Carson, 2014, p. 13).

Mixed with fragments from Barthes, with digressions on Beckett or on Zeno's paradox, the Proustian quotations allow Carson to criticize the basis of the analogy built by the Narrator between Women and plants. This seems at least to be the aim of indulging on the following passage:

> By shutting her eyes, by losing consciousness, Albertine had stripped off, one after the another, the different human personalities with which she had deceived me ever since the day when I had first made her acquaintance. She was animated now only by the unconscious life of plants, of trees, a life more different from my own, more alien, and yet one that belonged more to me (Proust [1923], 2002, p. 288).

Should we think, as we wondered about Akerman, that the denunciation of the male gaze implies a rejection of Proust's work by Carson? What if it was rather a question of using the rewriting as an instrument to critically reflect on her own intellectual education, her models and the contradictions they carry within themselves? The so-called "kimono scene" that follows in the novel provides us with a particularly striking example of this ambivalence. Albertine is here depicted by both Carson and Akerman as the potential victim of an abuse. As it happens in the novel, she is lying in Simon-Marcel's bed while he rubs himself and achieve an orgasm against her clothed body:

> 24. The state of Albertine that most pleases Marcel is Albertine asleep
> 25. By falling asleep she becomes a plant, he says
> Plant do not actually sleep. Nor do they lie or even bluff. They, however, expose their genitalia
> a) Sometimes in her sleep Albertine throws off her kimono and lies naked.
> b) Sometimes then Marcel possesses her
> c) Albertine appears not to wake up
>
> 26. At this point, parenthetically, If we had time, several observation could be made about the similarity between Albertine and Ophelia – Hamlet's Ophelia – starting from the sexual life of plants, which Proust and Shakespeare equally enjoy using as a language of female desire. Albertine, like Ophelia, embodies her lover's blooming girlhood, but also castration, casualty, threat and pure obstacle […]
> 33. Albertine's behavior in Marcel's household is that of a domestic animal, which enters any door it finds open or comes to lie beside its master on his bed, making a place for itself. Marcel has to train Albertine not to come into his room until he rings for her (Carson, 2014, p. 25).

Despite the explicit wish to reread *La Prisonnière* in the light of its female protagonist, Carson's text cannot be simply reduced to an anti-Proustian pamphlet. On the contrary, the author admits that, just as Marcel loved Albertine as an ideal object on which to cast his literary ambitions, so too did she love *À la Recherche* for the intellectual desire it aroused in her.

We suggest that these models here are Proust, Hitchcock's *Vertigo*, Roland Barthes (widely quoted in *The Albertine Workout* and in other Carson's works), but also *La Captive* by Chantal Akerman and maybe Elisabeth Ladenson's book *Proust's Lesbianism*, both unmentioned by Carson in her work. Are the two feminist reflections erased in order to make the author's one more personal and, in doing so, less academic? Our intuition is that in Carson's oeuvre, the Classics (the ancient but also the less explored modern ones) are not only to be considered as the roots of the Western literature and culture, but also as the arenas in which to set a competition between ancient and modern values. According to Carson, traditional texts need to be constantly rethought and replaced in the present, along with their aim at representing one epoch's conception of truth, love, or knowledge. In her works, we are particularly thinking of *The Glass Essay* (a long poem which deals both with Charlotte Brönte's and with Carson's lives and works), the author tries and voluntarily fail to translate past into present, literature into biographical experience. Her experiments in this direction provide us with a ground with which to reflect on the relationships between tradition and innovation, individual memory and collective experience.

4. Inheriting Modernism: a Challenge for Acknowledgment

In her introduction to *Gender and Modernism*'s first volume, Bonnie Kime Scott remembers that Modernism "has since its inception been marked, consciously or unconsciously, by gender" (Scott, 2008, p. 1). With their adaptations, Akerman and Carson demonstrate how the apparently paradoxical fight for acknowledgment in the authoritarian relationship between models and heirs can help in bringing out this long neglected issue. Both authors confess to be helplessly in love with a Modernist literary work, of which they nevertheless admit having mostly fragmentary but strong and cherished memories they now look at with a critical, sometimes severe, regard. But these scattered and partly lost memories, they continuously try to restage them (in Carson's terms, to *work* them *out*) in order to process and to justify them as part of their intellectual education. In doing so, they do turn Proust's *La Prisonnière* back on itself, denouncing the patriarchal and patronizing vision of love it conveys. At the same time, they challenge their own relationship with this model and with the tradition it embodies. The choice of substituting the historical settings, dialogues and references with

modern ones is then to be seen as an attempt not only to actualize the plot for a twenty-first century audience, but as a way to point out that the relationships described by Proust are the same a woman can experience nowadays. By rewriting *A la Recherche*, Akerman and Carson succeed in questioning one of the experiences that have led them, like so many other women, to confront a male-based imaginary in which they have long managed to fit in only at the cost of identifying themselves with the dominant gender who has shaped it.

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