

Coming Full Circle : the Use of Digression in Diderot's *Jacques le fataliste* and Proust's "Combray"

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Abstract

The digressive device figures prominently in Diderot's *Jacques le fataliste* and Proust's "Combray." Although belonging to different literary periods, comparative analysis reveals similarities in both the form the digressive device takes in either work and the purpose it serves therein. Since frequent digressions interrupt the story flow, the reader is forced in both works to focus less on the story and more on the structure of the novel. The digressive structure of both works reflects their shared themes of authorial control and the art of the novel. These themes stand at the heart of twentieth century approaches to the novel. Belonging to the eighteenth century, Diderot's *Jacques le fataliste*, however, with its inclusion of the same themes, appears to have been ahead of its time. Thus it comes full circle to twentieth century literary thought as it meets Proust's "Combray" in its shared intent to draw attention to the true nature of the novel through use of the digressive device.

Key words : Diderot Proust Digression Narrative

Separated by a century noteworthy for its production of realist novels, and characterized by differing angles of perspective in relation to that century (the one preparing for it, the other reacting against it), Denis Diderot's *Jacques le fataliste* and Marcel Proust's "Combray" offer a basis for comparative analysis through their common use of digression as a narrative technique. The purpose of the present study is to examine the extent to which these two works resemble or differ from each other in view of the conclusions made previously concerning the use of the digressive device in narratology (Miyamasu, 1994).

I *Types of Digression*

i) *Similarities*

Whenever a name, place, or incident causes the narrator/author to think of an associated idea or incident, and he/she then proceeds to insert it into the story narrative, a type of digression occurs which we here designate as “associative.” *Jacques le fataliste* and “Combray” share this type of digression in common. In *Jacques le fataliste* the dialogues on the parallel narrator/reader and Jacques/master planes give rise to digressions as a result of the associated ideas or anecdotes that spring to the interlocutors’ minds. Thus, at one stage, as the master is recapping the *récit des amours* to remind Jacques of the point at which he had interrupted it, his own words prompt yet another breach in continuity:

... Tu es installé au château de Desglands, et la vieille
commissionnaire Jeanne a ordonné à sa jeune fille Denise de te
visiter quatre fois le jour, et de te soigner. Mais avant que d’aller
en avant, dis-moi, Denise avait-elle son pucelage?
Jacques, *en toussant*. — Je le crois.
Le Maître. — Et toi? (201)

Whereupon Jacques’ reply entails a twenty-one page digression in which he recounts his multiple losses of virginity. At another point, Jacques’ description of the pain in his wounded knee (an element in the *récit des amours*) leads him and his master into a metaphysical discussion—and thereby, a digression—of whether or not the word *douleur* can have any significance for an individual who has never experienced pain (29-30).

In “Combray” similar associative digressions result from the associations the adult narrator makes with the characters, places, and events forming part of his recollections of Combray. An example of this is seen when the mention of a single word, *père*, is sufficient to trigger off an associative digression relating the acquaintance of Swann’s father with Marcel’s grandfather:

M. Swann, quoique beaucoup plus jeune que lui, était très lié avec mon grand-père, qui avait été un des meilleurs amis de son *père*, homme excellent mais singulier, chez qui, paraît-il, un rien suffisait parfois pour interrompre les élans de coeur, changer le cours de la pensée. (23; emphasis added)

Whereupon the narrator devotes the rest of a long paragraph to describing M. Swann senior’s reactions to his wife’s death.

ii) *Differences*

In *Jacques le fataliste*, digressions caused by external effects are common. Such digressions are those characterized by the physical and practical circumstances which cause interruptions in

Jacques and his master's journey and thus of the *récit*. A comic example occurs when Jacques' horse bolts abruptly, carrying him to some gallows (67). On another occasion, it is Jacques' realization that he has left his master's watch and money pouch at the inn which prevents him from resuming his *récit* (36). This type of digression does not find a parallel in "Combray": the adult narrator does not manifestly interrupt or digress from his account as a result of fatigue, interruptions from visitors, mealtimes, and the like. Instead missing from *Jacques le fataliste* and figuring frequently in Proust's "Combray" are temporal digressions. By "temporal digression" we mean any movement of the discourse to describe an event occurring outside of the time frame of the actual story, either before or after it.¹ Such digressions are common in "Combray" since the adult narrator, in telling his life story, easily slips out of the time frame of the "Combray" story to give information that is prior or posterior to it. An example of a temporal digression relating an event prior to the "Combray" story is evident when Marcel's mother brings in his grandmother's gift, a set of books, and the adult narrator explains how she selected them, thereby offering details of which the child protagonist could not have been aware: "Ma grand'mère, ai-je su depuis, avait d'abord choisi les poésies de Musset, un volume de Rousseau et *Indiana*" (51-52). An example of a digression relating information known by the narrator only after the time frame of "Combray" is seen in the revelation of Swann as being not the villain he is initially portrayed as in the *drame du coucher* but rather as the person in reality potentially most sympathetic to the child narrator: "or, au contraire, comme je l'ai appris plus tard, une angoisse semblable fut le torment de longues années de sa vie, et personne aussi bien que lui peut-être n'aurait pu me comprendre" (41).

A further difference in the use of the digressive device in *Jacques le fataliste* and "Combray" can be seen in the overall effect that digression has in either work. To use Attridge's terminology, digressions in *Jacques le fataliste* are "flagrant;" that is to say, whenever a digression is taking place the reader is fully aware of it. We see a fine example when Jacques' horse having bolted and left the master alone, the narrator makes the following proposal: "Et puisque Jacques et son maître ne sont bons qu'ensemble et ne valent rien séparés . . . lecteur, causons ensemble jusqu'à ce qu'ils soient rejoints" (72). Later in the narrative, the reader has to endure further delays in the *récit* when the narrator decides to join Jacques and his master in slumber: "Si j'allais aussi mettre ma tête sur un oreiller, en attendant le réveil de Jacques et de son maître; qu'en pensez-vous?" (104).

In contrast to the more obviously occurring digressions of *Jacques le fataliste*, unobtrusive, equivocal digression is more frequent in "Combray." In other words, at the point when the digression takes place, the reader is often unsure what its relationship to the rest of the narrative is. An example can be seen when the narrator interrupts the account of the young Marcel's bedtime routine:

Après le dîner, hélas, j'étais bientôt obligé de quitter maman qui restait à causer avec les autres, au jardin *s'il faisait beau*, dans le petit salon où tout le monde se retirait s'il faisait mauvais. Tout le monde, sauf ma grand'mère qui trouvait que 'c'est une pitié de rester enfermée à la campagne' . . . (18; emphasis added)

The emphasis is added here to signal where the break from the main account occurs. Without the emphasis, however, the actual text slips into the digression in a way almost imperceptible to the reader. Such unobtrusive digressions appear frequently in “Combray” leading us to qualify the style of “Combray” as smooth flowing. This stands in stark contrast to the more stilted, disjointed style of *Jacques le fataliste* resulting from the frequent use of obtrusive digressions.

II *Function of Digressions*

In both *Jacques le fataliste* and “Combray,” structure relates closely to theme. The major theme of *Jacques le fataliste* is the nature of the novel, focusing on authorial control of something that is not fact, as well as on the problematic of communication through words. The digressive device reflects this theme in two ways: firstly, by frustrating the reader’s expectations regarding the story (since that story flow is constantly interrupted) and thus proving that the story is controlled, that it does not happen of itself and secondly, by its inherent non-linearity (since digression prevents the narrative from making a simple A to B progression), the digressive device mirrors the non-linearity of communication between interlocutors. (Even though speaker B understands speaker A’s words, he/she cannot be assured of having correctly interpreted the meaning of those words.)²

A major theme of “Combray” (and indeed of the whole of *A la recherche du temps perdu*) is fragmentation: the significance of experience is always perceived in a fragmentary way unless a chance sensation recalls identical past experiences, thus proving that the individual has an “essence,” a part of him/herself which is constant, unchanging, immune to the influence of time. For the narrator, art can save from oblivion all those memories of his existence which become resurrected through the “*mémoire involontaire*,” since art survives the destructive force of time. The digressive structure of “Combray” reflects this theme since it causes information to be given to the reader in incomplete, fragmentary form: the full significance of details announced in this first volume of *A la recherche du temps perdu* will be understood only as the reader progresses through the following volumes to find previous details more elaborately illuminated or explained there. Thus, in *A la recherche du temps perdu*, Proust forces the reader to experience a parallel discovery of significance by constructing his novel in such a way that all the fragments finally come together only in the final volume where their full significance is revealed.

Since the meaning of these two works by Diderot and Proust lies within their very structure, we can say that they are hermetically closed, sufficient in themselves. They operate exactly according to an evaluation made by Terence Cave of works by Ronsard, Rabelais, and Montaigne: “. . . the theory which performs as it enunciates converges with the performance which theorizes” (327). We can go further by saying that when a novel’s structure and themes reflect each other, its structure is a conscious and deliberate one. The digressions in *Jacques le fataliste* are not intended simply to convey an impression of the mind’s associative workings as claimed by David Berry (262 - 272). Rather, they serve also to demonstrate clearly to the reader that there is someone in control of the text: it does not proceed independently or arbitrarily as do “real life” events. Moreover, that controlling force, the author, is deliberately organizing the text to be digressive to an extent which

will make the reader understand this control.

"Combray" presents a microcosm of *A la recherche du temps perdu*, introducing places, characters, and themes that will find their full significance later in the novel. It is evident that someone is consciously controlling this fragmentary structure. That someone obviously intends the form of his novel to be such that it will require the reader to be aware of it, how form is related to and reveals content. As Robert Alter points out, this insistence on form serves "to draw our attention to fictional form as a consciously articulated entity rather than a transparent container of 'real' events" (ix).

Thus, both *Jacques le fataliste* and "Combray" oblige the reader to participate actively in them: in the former, to discover what is the cryptic "truth" it proclaims to contain and in the latter, to piece the fragments of meaning together. The emphasis is not so much on the "story" but on the form, the discourse by which the story is communicated. The reader is encouraged to enjoy the text for what it is, a system of words carefully constructed to convey themes and ideas. This emphasis through the digressive device on the discourse in order to highlight what makes the novel art is affirmed by Derek Attridge, ". . . as soon as the stable ratio between the chronology of the events and the chronology of the discourse relating them . . . is broken, the constructedness of those events begins to obtrude, and writing, not the world, is felt to be in charge" (386).

The function of digression, therefore, in both *Jacques le fataliste* and "Combray" is to highlight the novelistic quality of these two works, what it is that makes them art forms. By according equal status to structure and content, both works emphasize the fact that the novel is an art form which communicates by a carefully controlled system of words.

III *Digression: Disruption or Unity?*

Both works display a possibility of levels on which they can be read. If taken as novels in the conventional mode, where the story is presented as real and all novelistic trappings are disguised, then the digressive structure is disruptive since the reader's expectations of the all-important story are constantly frustrated and the chronology of "real" events is distorted. *Jacques le fataliste* and "Combray," however, are not of the conventional mode: in neither is the story of primary importance but rather it assumes an equal (if not lesser) status with that of structure. Read with this understanding (that these are not conventional novels) digressions contribute to the inherent unity of both works where structure and theme interconnect and complement each other to create an hermetically closed system. The order and unity we describe here do not belong to "natural" reality but to that of the novel where all the elements are deliberately controlled so as to contribute to its expression. Thus we affirm that digression disrupts if the novel is read as a representation of the "real," but contributes positively if the novel is read as having its own "novelistic" order.

IV *Conclusion*

Jacques le fataliste and "Combray" belong to the category of novel which is self-reflexive; that is

to say, they reflect their own operations, presenting themselves as a topic and mirroring their own characteristics. They both aim, moreover, at forcing the reader to read actively rather than passively. In these respects, among others, “Combray” and the subsequent volumes of *A la recherche du temps perdu* become forerunners of the twentieth century novel. The same uneasiness which twentieth century writers felt in regard to the nineteenth century’s writer’s conviction in the novel’s capacity to portray an illusion of reality also confronted Diderot when he wrote *Jacques le fataliste* in the eighteenth century. Thus, the modern novel has come full circle to the work of Diderot who, in using the digressive device as a novelistic aid, sought to emphasize the true nature of the novel.

Notes

- 1 Gerard Genette calls movement in the discourse to a time prior to that of the story, *analepse* and movement beyond the time of the story, *prolepse*. (82-115).
- 2 The themes of *Jacques le fataliste* and how structure reflects them have been dealt with in a previous study (Miyamasu, 1994).

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