

# Living the Past as a Metaphor: Writing and Re-writing the Past in Marcel Proust's *Time Regained* and Its Translation into Estonian

Madli Kütt

Sõpruse pst. 10-69, 50703 Tartu, Estonia  
madli.kytt@gmail.com

*Marcel Proust's writing of the past is metaphorical. Instead of reminiscing about the moments of the past, Proust's narrator experiences them again, in and through his present moment. The translation doubles the experience of writing by re-writing the narrator's impressions in another language. The Estonian translation offers a particular angle by changing the focus from subject-object connection to the relations between the objects themselves. The article will discuss three views on how the Estonian translation transforms Proust's metaphorical writing: the dynamics of memory spaces, the visibility of experiencing the past, and the involuntary aspect of these experiences.*

Keywords: French literature / Proust, Marcel / literary translation / Estonian language / metaphors / involuntary memory / the past / subject-object relation

In *Le Temps retrouvé*, we find one of the famous explanations Proust gives of his credo on writing being built around the notion of metaphor. He starts by stating his position in distancing himself from a certain descriptive, linear writing:

On peut faire se succéder indéfiniment dans une description les objets qui figureraient dans le lieu décrit, la vérité ne commencera qu'au moment où l'écrivain prendra deux objets différents, posera leur rapport, [...] et les enfermera dans les anneaux nécessaires d'un beau style. (Proust, *À la recherche du temps perdu* IV 468)

To Proust, “un beau style” cannot be reached by an enumeration of descriptions of (beautiful) objects, but rather through something that works in two-sided relations, that is, metaphorically. Using a metaphoric method, the writer can disclose a deeper meaning, or the “essence” of things: “en rapprochant une qualité commune à deux sensations, il dégagera leur essence en les réunissant l'une et l'autre, pour les soustraire aux contingences

du temps, dans une métaphore” (IV 468). But metaphor in the Proustian sense is not merely a figure of style in writing – it is rather a whole way of interacting with the world: “Toute impression est double, à demi engainée dans l’objet, prolongée en nous-mêmes par une autre moitié que seuls nous pourrions connaître” (IV 470). It is a singular connection, a kind of a bridge – to use Alain de Lattre’s metaphor for metaphoric writing – with one end in the object and the other connected to the subject who perceives this object. In that respect, A. de Lattre points out that Proust’s writing is most of all about the bridge itself, rather than either one of its ends (73). His interest is in recognising connections and similarities where none are expected, and these accidental, seemingly illogical connections open the objects in their particularity, depth and reality – make them accessible for the subject, who can now cross the bridge. A metaphor thus opens a passage, a door that the narrator can step through and be in two moments at the same time: “on a frappé à toutes les portes qui ne donnent sur rien, et la seule par où on peut entrer et qu’on aurait cherchée en vain pendant cent ans, on y heurte sans le savoir et elle s’ouvre” (IV 445). That is how metaphorical writing makes the air seem purer and paradise-like when it is inhaled for the second time, and feel new precisely because it is inhaled for a second time:

[I] nous fait tout à coup respirer un air nouveau, précisément parce que c’est un air qu’on a respiré autrefois, cet air plus pur que les poètes ont vainement essayé de faire régner dans le Paradis et qui ne pourrait donner cette sensation profonde de renouvellement que s’il avait été respiré déjà, car les vrais paradis sont les paradis qu’on a perdus. (IV 449)

The act of writing itself is often seen as this secondary layer of metaphorical perception. The scene with the steeples of Martinville from *Du Côté de chez Swann* (I 177–180) is a famous example of “how a metaphor-like impression may be translated into a work of art” (Jaek 100). The vision of the two steeples from a moving carriage, joined by a third one further away, gives the young narrator a particular impression that he cannot immediately identify. It seems like something is hiding inside that vision but remains unreachable. After some time though, he recognises that this impression has reappeared in his mind in a verbal form which reveals the hidden meaning: “leurs surfaces [...] comme si elles avaient été une sorte d’écorce, se déchirèrent, un peu de ce qui m’était caché en elles m’apparut, j’eus une pensée qui n’existait pas pour moi l’instant avant, qui se formula en mots dans ma tête” (I 178). He asks for a pencil and some paper and writes these words down, despite the rattling of the carriage, and feels that it has freed him from that which was hiding inside the vision of the stee-

ples and had captured his attention. Writing is thus a basic need in front of these impressions, it provides the necessary secondary level of discovering the depth of the objects, hidden under their visible surface.

As L. M. Jaeck notes, this scene illustrates how Proust's writing is a translation of the writer's experience of the world. "Le devoir et la tâche d'un écrivain sont ceux d'un traducteur", Proust writes later in *Le Temps retrouvé*. (IV 469) Thus, if writing gives this highly valued possibility to experience an impression for the second time, to connect with it on a deeper level, then translating Proust's text as re-writing adds another layer to this two-fold structure. With one notable distinction – the translator's first experience is a text, a textual reality, and his writing is a testimony of this experience. The following analysis is going to concentrate on the question of how this layer of re-writing changes the metaphorical way of experiencing the past in the case of Estonian translation of *Le Temps retrouvé*, done by the novelist and poet Tõnu Õnnepalu in 2004, whose own works also often deal with memories and reminiscence.

One of the moments where metaphoric writing comes forth in a most obvious way are the almost constant comparisons of impressions and images in Proust's text. Laurent Mattiussi is one of many to point out that Proust's writing, indeed rather poor in metaphors in the strict sense, uses more often the actual form of a comparison to have metaphoric processes work on a larger scale, as an underlying structure of the world, the thought and the narration (8). Comparison may even be a more suitable stylistic form for his purpose as it is more explicitly showing the relational nature that governs Proust's fiction. Most of his descriptions follow the same logic of one image, sensation, experience reminding of another, which become present and united in the same moment, often in the same sentence, but also stay apart, each keeping their individuality. The translation process, however, modifies these comparisons and so changes also the ways that the past is experienced and evoked.

One of the most apparent changes affected by the translation is the basis for the comparison. Such a change is present, for example, in the following description of aeroplanes seen in the night sky above Paris, which are compared to a vision of a mountain:

Avant l'heure où les thés d'après-midi finissaient, à la tombée du jour, dans le ciel encore clair, on voyait de loin de petites taches brunes qu'on eût pu prendre, dans le soir bleu, pour des mouchérons, ou pour des oiseaux. Ainsi quand on voit de très loin une montagne, on pourrait croire que c'est un nuage. Mais on est ému parce qu'on sait que ce nuage est immense, à l'état solide, et résistant. Ainsi étais-je ému parce que la tache brune dans le ciel d'été n'était ni un moucheron, ni un oiseau, mais un aéroplane monté par des hommes qui veillaient sur Paris. (IV 313)

Sel kellaajal, kui õhtused teejoomised veel lõppenud polnud, võis loojangu eel alles heledas taevas näha väikesi pruune tähne, mida võinuks pidada sinises õhtus lendlevateks kihulasteks või lindudeks. Niisamuti võib väga kauge mägi tunduda pilvena. Kuid erutab just see, et sa tegelikult tead: see pilv on miski hiiglaslik, tahke ja tugev. Nii olin minagi erutatud sellest, et pruun tähn suvetaevas polnud ei kihulane ega lind, vaid aeroplaan, mille olid lendu tõstnud inimesed, kes valvasid - Pariisi üle. (Proust, *Taaskleitud aeg* 59)

The comparison is based on the similarity of the point of view: both objects – aeroplanes and the mountain – are viewed from far away, which makes them seem like midges and birds, and a cloud, respectively. The common emotion which ties the images together comes from the difference between the viewer's vision, deceived because of the distance, and his intellectual knowledge that the objects he sees are not really what they seem to be. The viewing from a distance is a central point in creating this comparison, and is thus repeated in both sentences (“on voyait de loin”, “on voit de très loin”). **The comparison thus hinges on the relation between the subject and the objects, which is both an obstacle – a distance separating the subject from the objects and their truth – and a connection point, because it enables a connection between these two images, thus revealing their truth.**

The translation of these two images goes through several changes which also alter the nature of this relation. The changes appear already in the first sentence, where a verb “lendlema” [to hover] has been added in association with the midges and birds, which gain thus a new activity – they are now hovering in the sky. However, there is no longer any mention of their distance from the viewer, as the adverb “de loin” is left out. In the second sentence, on the other hand, the translator omits the repetition of the activity of viewing and goes straight to describing the mountain itself: it is far away and thus seems like a cloud. The mountain now also takes the place of the grammatical subject of the sentence. The translator also omits the second verb related to the viewer subject – “on pourrait croire” [one might believe] – which in the French text gives the viewer the capacity of cognition, of belief, and thus the capacity of being deceived. This results in the viewer no longer focusing and only playing an implicit role.

Therefore, both the subject's physical distance and his position as a viewer and perceiver have been affected by the translation process, which leads to changing the basis for the comparison between the two images. The comparison here does not stand upon the relation, expressed by the viewing distance that settles between the subject and the objects, but is transposed into the similarity of the objects themselves. The aeroplanes and the mountain are now compared on the basis that they are both similar to some airborne and hovering objects like midges, birds or clouds.

This tendency in translation to concentrate more on the appearance of the objects is at work also in the following comparison, again related to aeroplanes:

[T]andis que sur le pont de la Concorde, autour de l'aéroplane menaçant et traqué, et comme si s'étaient reflétées dans les nuages les fontaines des Champs-Élysées, de la place de la Concorde et des Tuileries, les jets d'eau lumineux des projecteurs s'infléchissaient dans le ciel (*IV* 381).

[J]a samal ajal tõttasid Concorde'i sillalt selle korraga ähvardava ja tagaetava lennuki ümber, justkui peegeldades pilvisse Concorde'i väljaku ja Champs-Élysées' purskkaeve, prožektorikiired (Proust, *Taasleitud aeg* 138)

This time, the narrator describes a view of the searchlights in the night sky through a comparison with another image, that of the water from the fountains. One image reminds him of another because the light follows a similar movement as the water does – rising upwards at an angle, and falling down again. The images are given separately also on the grammatical level, as each image forms a phrase with a different verb and a different subject in connection to this verb (“*les fontaines s'étaient reflétées*” and “*les jets d'eau lumineux des projecteurs s'infléchissaient*”) (marked by M.K.). The connection point between the two phrases occurs in the use of the metaphor of “*les jets d'eau*” for the searchlights, which is a frequent synonym for fountains.

In Önnepalu's translation, the two images tend to merge, as it uses only one subject, “*prožektorikiired*” [searchlights], for the two verbs. This changes the subject-object relation, as the fountains give up their place as a subject and become an object of the verb. The searchlights now do two things, in sequence – they project their light towards the sky, and in so doing reflect the fountains onto the clouds (perhaps a little like a video projector would show an image on the screen). The relation between searchlights and fountains becomes less a comparison of two parallel entities and more their combination into a single line. In other words, it is no longer a case of remembering one image through the other, but rather actually seeing two things happening in the same space-time. As there is no longer a comparison, the translation does not need the metaphor of “*les jets d'eau*” any more, and can leave it out.

Another scene with the searchlights shows yet another angle of how the translation deals with subject-object relations. This time, the narrator is comparing two types of movement, again in the night sky above Paris, one of aeroplanes and the other of searchlights, but in this case we are more interested only in the second part of the “equation”. This second movement, that of the searchlights, evokes a stronger emotion because it is a sign of something invisible, hidden and unknown:

[C]ependant que d'un mouvement plus lent, mais plus insidieux, plus alarmant, car ce regard faisait penser à l'objet invisible encore et peut-être déjà proche qu'il cherchait, les projecteurs se remuaient sans cesse (*IV* 338).

[S]ellal kui ühes teises liikumises, aeglasemas, kuid samas hiilivamas, kõhedamas – sest seda jälgides läks mõte millegi alles nähtamatu peale, mida see liikumine otsis ja mida ta võib-olla juba tabamas oli –, prožektorid muudkui tüürlesid (Proust, *Taasleitud aeg* 88).

The narrator feels that there is a danger out there, because the searchlights seem to him like a questing gaze towards the night sky, suggesting that there is a search going on, even though the object of the search remains out of sight. This image expresses the narrator's anxiety, namely, by the metaphor of the gaze used for the searchlights, which works as a filter distancing the narrator from the danger – it is somebody else's gaze that he sees, somebody else's activity that makes him anxious. At the same time, the metaphor functions also as a connection, because the suspense created by distancing the subject from the object makes the feeling of anxiety more intense than the actual encounter with the object might be.

This filter of the metaphor does not come across in the translation, however. Rather, the gaze is taken away from the searchlights, as the noun “ce regard” [this gaze] is translated into the verb “jälgima” [observe], which has a different subject that does not coincide with the French “ce regard”. Since the metaphor is removed, the translator can now focus directly on the object of the observation, which also becomes more concrete. It is no longer just something that is being looked for, and so does not remain merely in an uncertain position, close by (the place phrase “déjà proche” is left out), but is described instead as something soon to be captured, since the translator adds the phrase “mida ta võib-olla juba tabamas oli” [which it was probably going to catch soon]. The translation thus focuses more directly on the object and, by anticipating its capture, opens an opportunity to retrieve the object from the darkness that is hiding it.

However, focusing on the objects rather than on relations may sometimes result in slightly absurd images where a quality of a phenomenon materialises and turns into a physical entity. This happens, for instance, in the following sentence, yet another comparison that Proust uses to describe As the city gets dark at night and the streetlights are turned off because of the black-out regulations, the streets start to resemble some countryside landscape. On this occasion, it happens by virtue of the moonlight, which has become strangely visible in the darkened city and is drawing sharp shadows of trees on the snow:

Les silhouettes des arbres se reflétaient nettes et pures sur cette neige d'or bleuté, [...] elles étaient allongées à terre au pied de l'arbre lui-même, comme on les voit souvent dans la nature au soleil couchant quand celui-ci inonde et rend réfléchissantes les prairies où des arbres s'élèvent à intervalles réguliers. (IV 314)

Puude varjud joonistused lume sinetaval kullal puhtalt ja selgelt, [...] nad sirutusid välja mööda maad otse puu jalamilt, nagu neid tihti näeb looduses päikeseloojangu ajal, kui kollasest valgusest ülejutatud väljad muutuvad peegliteks, millest korrapärase vahemaade järel kerkib puid. (Proust, *Taasleitud aeg* 61)

The effect of the moonlight on the snow is compared here with another light effect, that of the setting sun on the fields, which makes them reflective, and thus prone to outline the shadows of the trees which grow on them. The translated text renders the adjective “réfléchissantes” [reflective] with the noun “peeglid” [mirrors], and gives a more concrete image, which now takes a more finite and at the same time a somewhat more surrealistic turn. The fields' quality of mirroring the trees has changed the fields into actual mirrors. This objectivation brings on another change in that the relative pronoun of place “où” [where] is converted into the object relative pronoun “millest” [from which]. What this means is that the trees are no longer growing in the fields, but stem up from the mirrors which the fields have become.

But Önnepalu's translation not only makes the objects stand out more concretely and interact with each other; the same movement also causes the subject to fade to the background, or sometimes even disappear from the text entirely. As the above examples demonstrated, the translator may indeed place the object in the function of the grammatical subject of the sentence. In some cases, the deictics referring to the narrator's person (*malgré moi, près de moi, faire parvenir jusqu'à moi*, etc.) may be left out completely. Tõnu Önnepalu himself has expressed this tendency as part of the translation process, which for him entails a particular kind of meeting with oneself in which the self paradoxically disappears, or at least becomes unimportant (“Saateks” 64). His translation of Proust certainly confirms this point of view.

Such modifications of perspective also affect the ultimate goal of the metaphoric process – to go beyond the surface of things and access the – of which the three moments of revelation offer a perfect example. I have chosen to look more closely at the second one, because only in this case both “ends” of the experience – the original moment and its resurrection – are present in *Le Temps retrouvé* and can thus be analysed in Önnepalu's translation.

While travelling to Paris by train, the narrator sees several objects in the light of the setting sun, a row of trees in a countryside train station,

some windows, a pink house – generally considered as “beautiful sights” – but he realises that he is unable to appreciate their claimed beauty, because these objects remain closed to him.

C'était, je me le rappelle, à un arrêt du train en pleine campagne. Le soleil éclairait jusqu'à la moitié de leur tronc une ligne d'arbres qui suivait la voie du chemin de fer. Arbres, pensai-je, vous n'avez plus rien à me dire, mon cœur refroidi ne vous entend plus. (IV 433)

The trees have nothing to say to him, he cannot access their depth because the metaphor is not working. Anne Simon has explained that the metaphoric process does not activate here because the cause of the impression – the sun shining on the trees – is presented before the effect (124–125). There is indeed no surprise, no hidden image inside this image; they are a simple, fixed, monotonous continuity of background information which his eyes are merely “registering”.

The translation, however, gives this picture some unexpected liveliness. By translating the noun clause “un arrêt du train” with a verbal phrase “rong peatus” [the train stopped], and changing the location “en pleine campagne” to “kusagil keset lagedust” [somewhere in the middle of a clearing], Önnepalu gives an impression that the train stops almost accidentally, somewhere where it should not be stopping (and using the term “clearing” supposes that there should probably also be no trees). This brings the picture out of the habitual background and makes it stand out as something different and unexpected, and thus already suggests a possibility for an access where the original text denied it. However, as we see in the second encounter with this image, this access will not become entirely usable.

During the Guermantes' party, the narrator experiences three times an accidental opening of a “door”, one of which does indeed take him back to the same line of trees. This happens while waiting in the library for the concert, the narrator hears how a servant preparing the tea knocks a spoon against a plate. The sharp sound suddenly creates a connection between the two moments by reminding the narrator of another sound, that of a hammering against the train wheels. He now has two different elements to put together – a sound that he hears and a sound that he had forgotten – and an image appears from his memory, that of the row of trees by the railway. This is how the Proustian metaphor works: there is no linear, logical way of discovering what these trees mean to him, he cannot access their meaning at all when he first encounters them. He needs to meet them again, by way of merging the two sounds, for the door to open



so that for a moment, the narrator believes that he is in the train again, opening a bottle of beer in front of a row of trees:

[E]t je reconnus que ce qui me paraissait si agréable était la même rangée d'arbres que j'avais trouvée ennuyeuse à observer et à décrire, et devant laquelle, débouchant la canette de bière que j'avais dans le wagon, je venais de croire un instant, dans une sorte d'étourdissement, que je me trouvais (IV 446-447).

[J]a ma sain aru, et see, mis mulle nii meeldiv tundus, oli seesama puuderivi, mida ma säärase tühimusega olin vaadanud ja kirjeldanud ning mida ma nagu mingis hetkelises uimasuses end taas uskusin vaatlevat, parajasti lahti korkides sedasama õllepudelit, mis mul oli olnud vagunis (Proust, *Taasleitnud aeg* 215)

His excitement comes not so much from the memory itself, but from the metaphor that happens to him – the relational nature of experiencing the world. To be able to access the meaning in its depth, he needs another sign, a counterpart, and this is what these two sounds create here. He can now enter through the door and be simultaneously in both moments.

This privilege does not quite fall upon the narrator in the Estonian translation. Instead of replicating the French spatial positioning “devant laquelle je me trouvais”, the translator rather uses a verb to indicate visual observing (“vaatlevat”). This suggests that the narrator can no longer actually go through the opening, but only look through it (as if it was really not a door, but only a window). However, it seems that by way of language magic, which translating undoubtedly is, he still manages to bring through this window his bottle of beer. The translator makes a series of changes here – altering the syntax, adding adverbs and modifying the temporal forms of the verb ‘to have’ – by the end of which we come to understand that the narrator remains in the Guermites’ library, where he is now holding a bottle of beer, the very same bottle he had in the train. Here again, the weight falls upon the object perceived rather than the perceiving subject – it is the bottle of beer that travels through time, not the narrator himself. This picture shows as well how translation may change the direction of the process, and bring back something instead of taking someone into the past. On a more general level, it also suggests that the translator has a different relationship with the narrator of the text than the author does: he distances himself more from the character and is not able to follow him into his memories, but only observe them. The past itself has also changed its nature. Instead of a network of metaphoric impressions relating the subject to his past, the translated past rather forms a kind of a museum, a collection of memories of objects.

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## Živeti preteklost kot metafora: pisanje in ponovno pisanje preteklosti v Proustovem *Znova najdenem času (Le Temps retrouvé)* in njegovo prevajanje v estonščino

Ključne besede: francoska književnost / Proust, Marcel / literarno prevajanje / prevodi v estonščino / metaforika / nehoteni spomin / preteklost / razmerje subjekt-objekt

Proustovo pisanje preteklosti je metaforično. Spozna, da lahko oživi ali ponovno živi pretekle trenutke, vendar le, ko se to zgodi od znotraj, nehote in metaforično. To pomeni, da podobe preteklosti vzrastejo iz njegovega spomina preko čutne analogije, vonja, zvoka, igre svetlobe in senc v trenutku sedanjosti, ki ga nekaj družijo z drugim, preteklim trenutkom. V pisanju ta dva trenutka postaneta en sam, simultano obstajata združena v metaforo. To osebi ne daje le možnosti, da ponovno doživlja preteklost, marveč tudi možnost, da uzre resnično vrednost teh trenutkov, ki v njihovi prvi pojavitvi ni bila zaznana. To je, po Proustu, naloga pisatelja in umetnika – pisati preteklost tako, da nevidno postane vidno. Prevajalski proces podvaja izkušnjo pisanja. Razkriva relacijsko naravo metafor in včasih razkrije tudi tisto, kar v izvornem pisanju ni tako očitno. Članek obravnava

tri vidike, s katerih estonski prevod preoblikuje Proustovo metaforično pisanje: dinamiko spominskih prostorov, vizualnost izkušanja preteklosti in vidik nehotenosti te izkušnje. Prevod lahko v tem primeru razumemo kot povečevalno steklo, ki razkriva pomen teh treh vidikov v Proustovem pisanju preteklosti, obenem pa deluje kot ustvarjanje novega fikcijskega sveta, ki teži k vzpostavljanju svojih lastnih pravil glede dinamike, vizualnosti in nadzora.

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