

Adapting the Unadaptable: Beckett's Proust and Pinter's Unfilmed Screenplay of Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu*

-Effing the ineffable¹-

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*This paper examines Marcel Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu* through the interpretive lenses of Samuel Beckett and Harold Pinter, focusing on themes of memory, time, and artistic adaptation. Proust's novel, explores involuntary memory, the subjective experience of time, and the fluidity of self. An essay from 1930 by Beckett engages Proust philosophically, filtered through Schopenhauer's pessimism and Bergson's theories of time and consciousness, highlighting the significance of involuntary memory and suffering in artistic experience. Decades later, Pinter, collaborating with Joseph Losey and Barbara Bray, adapted the sprawling narrative into a screenplay that translates Proust's memory-driven prose into cinematic language, using visual motifs, sound, silence, and non-linear structures to evoke the same temporal flow. While Beckett intellectualises Proust's experience, Pinter makes it tangible, creating a sensory embodiment of memory. Unfortunately, the film was never produced. This paper situates both works as complementary approaches to Proust, showing how his novel continues to inspire diverse media and interpretive strategies.*

Although never definitively concluded, it is highly likely that Pinter read Beckett's essay and placed Beckett's lexicon and critical framing of Proust directly within the conception of the screenplay, particularly Beckett's emphasis on memory as a violent interruption of chronological time. Pinter's dialogue with Proust-through-Beckett shaped the screenplay's structure, privileging involuntary memory triggers as cinematic events. This challenges the common accounts of Pinter's screenplay which describe the adaptation's strategy rather than placing it explicitly as a philosophical dialogue with a Beckettian reading of Proust. There is no major study which maps how Beckett's abstract compression of Proust's images into philosophical concepts compares to Pinter's concrete cinematic embodiment of those images. By placing Beckett's critical text and Pinter's cinematic strategies in direct counterpoint, this paper identifies a previously

unarticulated, triangulated axis of Proust-Beckett-Pinter, showing complementary treatments of the temporal and psychological structures of Proust's novel, a perspective rarely explored in previous scholarship.

Keywords

Proust; Beckett; Pinter; screenplay; *À la recherche du temps perdu*

*"Time present and time past
Are both perhaps present in time future,
And time future contained in time past"
(T. S. Eliot "Burnt Norton")*

*"Life must be understood backward...but
it must be lived forward." (Søren
Kierkegaard 1843)*

Beckett and Pinter: Friendship and Influence

Samuel Beckett and Harold Pinter shared a profound friendship, exchanging letters and drafts that reveal the extent of their mutual influence. Beckett, the established writer, profoundly shaped Pinter's artistic sensibility, with Pinter describing Beckett as "the greatest writer of our time" (Prentice xxxviii). He recalled his first encounter with Beckett's writing as a formative shock:

He's the boy alright. He can write anyone else under the table [...] Beckett was an absolute knockout for me [...] It was the most terrible chord struck in me at the time. I was about nineteen I think...I went on to read Beckett a great deal. (Prentice xxxviii)

Pinter the actor also performed in Beckett's plays, most notably *Krapp's Last Tape* in 2006, and gave readings at tributes to Beckett, further cementing the artistic dialogue between them. Both were associated – sometimes reluctantly – with Martin Esslin's seminal *The Theatre of the Absurd* (1960) which linked their respective theatrical approaches under a shared conceptual framework (Esslin 2004, 29-91, 234-264). Beckett, for his part, offered measured responses to Pinter's writing but did not hesitate to advise Pinter on possible modifications.

In a letter of 21 April 1969, Beckett writes about Pinter's *Silence*, "[j]ust one speech...I suggest you reconsider" (Beckett Letters Vol. 4, 298). Both writers would receive the Nobel Prize for Literature, Beckett in 1969 and Pinter in 2005.

Proust and *À la recherche du temps perdu*

Marcel Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu* is one of the most ambitious and inwardly-searching works of modern literature, written between 1909 and 1927 in near-total seclusion. Plagued by chronic asthma and insomnia, Proust famously transformed his cork-lined room at 102 Boulevard Haussmann into both sanctuary and laboratory. There, almost entirely by night, he composed a novel that turned, in Beckett's term, "inward", examining the deepest structures of memory, perception, and time itself. What began as a nostalgic project of recollection – an attempt to recover the past through art – became a vast meditation on the very nature of consciousness and experience. Proust wrote in a France caught between the fading certainties of the nineteenth century and the upheavals of modernity. Yet *À la recherche* was never simply a "social novel" of the Belle Époque. Proust's subject, as he famously wrote, was not "le monde" but "la conscience du monde" ["the conscience of the world"]. The novel's seven volumes – from *Du côté de chez Swann* (1913) to *Le Temps retrouvé* (1927) – constitute less a linear narrative than a spiral of time, perception, and remembrance. The opening pages, where the narrator recalls his childhood nights in Combray, set the tone for an inward journey that is as much philosophical as autobiographical: "Longtemps, je me suis couché de bonne heure" (Proust, 2019, I:3). ["For a long time, I used to go to bed early" (Proust 1981, I:3)]. This deceptively simple opening line signals that memory itself will be the true protagonist. The novel begins not in the present, but in the act of remembering – a mind awakening to its own depths. From the very start, Proust treats memory not as a passive archive but as an active, creative force that can reconstitute the past in the present. This discovery finds its fullest expression in the famous madeleine scene from *Du côté de chez Swann*:

Mais quand d'un passé ancien rien ne subsiste... l'odeur et la saveur restent encore longtemps, comme des âmes... portant sans fléchir, sur leur gouttelette presque impalpable, l'immense édifice du souvenir. (Proust 2019, I:46).

[But when from a long-distant past nothing subsists... the smell and taste still remain... bearing unflinchingly, in the tiny and almost impalpable drop of their essence, the vast structure of recollection.] (Proust 1981, I:46)]

This moment of *mémoire involontaire* – the sudden flood of memory triggered by taste – is at the heart of Proust’s philosophy of time. Voluntary memory, as the narrator discovers, can never recover the past; it only reassembles pale imitations. But involuntary memory, arriving unbidden and unprepared, momentarily abolishes time’s linearity and restores lost experience in its full intensity. The past, in such moments, is not recollected but *relived*.

Proust’s novel’s long meditation on memory was informed by contemporary philosophy, particularly the work of Henri Bergson, whom Proust read. Bergson’s *Matière et Mémoire* (1896) argued that consciousness is not a static faculty but a duration [*la durée*] – a continual flow in which past and present interpenetrate. Proust transforms this concept into narrative form: his syntax elongates, loops back, digresses, mirroring the movement of thought itself. As Bergson wrote, “[l]a mémoire n’est pas une faculté de classer des souvenirs... mais de les vivre à nouveau” [Memory is not a method of classifying memories... but of reliving them] (Bergson 112-114). Proust gives this idea emotional life. In his prose, recollection is no longer the act of an observer, but the experience of a being swamped by time.

Time in *À la recherche* is not chronological but elastic, subjective, and recursive. The novel ends where it began, circling back to the childhood scenes of Combray, and the narrator’s realisation in *Le Temps retrouvé* that “le vrai paradis est celui qu’on a perdu” [“the true paradise is the one we have lost”] encapsulates Proust’s metaphysical vision: that art alone can reconcile the self to the passing of time by transforming experience into form.

À la recherche is not merely philosophical; it is also profoundly human and sensory. Proust’s method is to approach abstraction through minute physical detail – the uneven paving stones of Venice, the sound of a spoon in a cup, the musical phrase of the Vinteuil Sonata. The narrator’s world is saturated with sensation yet always shadowed by transience. Characters – Swann, Odette, Charlus, Albertine – age or die in the course of the book, living embodiments of transformations of time. Love, jealousy, habit, and art are not themes but states of consciousness through which Proust explores how identity itself is unstable, perpetually remade by memory. As he writes of love, “le souvenir d’un être n’est peut-être que le regret d’un moment” [“the memory of a person may be only the regret of a moment”] (Proust 2019, III:212). Reid strikes

a slightly sceptical note when he suggests that “there are strong signs that the remembering narrator [Marcel] is ‘recomposing’, rather than accurately remembering, his past and present perceptions of the world” (Reid 7).

Throughout, Proust’s exploration of habit (*l’habitude*) anticipates Beckett’s later obsessions. Habit, for Proust, is both a narcotic and a death; it allows us to live by dulling perception, yet it is also what shields us from despair. “L’habitude est une seconde nature”, he writes, “qui nous empêche de connaître la première” [“Habit is a second nature that prevents us from knowing the first”] (Proust 2019, II:84). In this sense, Proust’s novel is an anatomy of consciousness oscillating between the dulling repetition of habit and the redemptive shock of memory. Beckett, reading Proust two decades later, would seize precisely on this duality, and add a new level of bleakness.

O’Brien remarks that Proust’s “sexuality was a carefully hidden secret”, concealing it beneath a socially acceptable veneer by transposing the gender of his own lovers to keep his homosexuality hidden. He claims that Proust’s heroines have quasi-male names, “strip off the feminine ending of the names... and one has their masculine counterparts”: Albert-ine, Gilbert-e, André-e (934, 941). White claims that “[Proust] was so determined to disguise his own homosexuality he was forced to transpose recalled experiences with men into beguiling tales of the Narrator’s passion for women” (143). Several women in his novel are female homosexuals, thus Proust projects his own “inversion” onto them.

Proust’s aesthetic is also profoundly musical. Indeed, Beckett posits that “[m]usic is the catalytic element in the work of Proust” (Beckett 1999, 92). The novel’s recurring motifs – the Vinteuil Sonata, the “little phrase” – function like leitmotifs recurring in altered forms across the volumes. As Proust himself explained, “[l]e style pour l’écrivain, aussi bien que la couleur pour le peintre, est une question non de technique, mais de vision” [“Style for the writer, as much as colour for the painter, is a matter not of technique, but of vision”] (Proust 2019, IV:322). His style, long ridiculed for its length and digression, is in fact an attempt to capture consciousness as it unfolds – its recurrent, spiralling temporality.

In this sense, Proust’s art becomes his metaphysics. The narrator’s final revelation in *Le Temps retrouvé* – that art alone can recover time – is the culmination of the entire search. Art does not preserve life as it was but redeems it by transforming lived experience into aesthetic order. “Le devoir et la tâche d’un écrivain”, Proust wrote, “sont ceux d’un traducteur” [“The duty and task of a writer are those of a translator”] (Proust 2019, VII:316): to

translate the raw material of sensation into the permanence of form. The novel thus enacts its own theory – memory redeemed through artistic creation.

This conception of time and consciousness – where memory is not recollection but recreation, and where art can redeem time's transience – became a central influence on the next generation of modernists. For Beckett, Proust offered a metaphysical structure of human experience: the endless oscillation between suffering and boredom, habit and revelation, self and its dissolution. For Pinter, the discovery lay elsewhere – in how the past inhabits the present dramatically, how time can be rendered visible and audible. Both men, in their different media, the essay and the screenplay, would take from Proust the same problem: how to give artistic form to the simultaneity of experience, the coexistence of past and present within a single consciousness. Beckett approached it through the lens of Schopenhauer's pessimism and Bergson's *durée*; Pinter through cinematic montage and sound. But both began, as Proust did, from the same recognition: that time is not something we move through, but something that moves through us.

Beckett's Engagement with Proust

Samuel Beckett's engagement with Proust is one of the earliest and most sustained examples of his intellectual and aesthetic preoccupations with memory, time, and the mechanisms of consciousness. Beckett's essay *Proust* (1930), commissioned as part of the Chatto & Windus Dolphin Books series, was aimed at providing a short, accessible monograph on Proust for a general English-speaking readership. Instead, Beckett produced a dense and challenging meditation on Proust's work, reflecting his early philosophical concerns and literary ambitions (Beckett 1999). At the age of 23–24, while teaching French at Trinity College Dublin after two years as a *lecteur d'anglais* at the École Normale Supérieure, Beckett drew upon his immersion in European literature, philosophy, and his acquaintance with James Joyce to craft a text that was part critical essay, part philosophical reflection, and part personal manifesto (Cronin 111; Beckett Letters Vol. 1 36). The essay demonstrates Beckett's early recognition of Proust's preoccupation with memory, temporality, and the role of suffering in artistic experience, as well as his willingness to confront the challenge of translating Proustian complexity into analytical prose. It is striking how little direct engagement Beckett's essay has with Proust's narrative texture. He does not retell scenes,

but, rather, extracts a principle. This is not carelessness but a deliberate critical gesture; instead of the analysis of characters or scenes, Beckett strips the novel to a metaphysical skeleton. Proust's sensory narrative is reduced to a philosophical drama of consciousness, his concrete images are erased to be replaced by abstractions.

Beckett's *Proust* opens with a recognition of the inherent difficulty of the task: "The Proustian equation is never simple...for the purposes of this synthesis it is convenient to adopt the inner chronology of the Proustian demonstration, and to examine in the first place that double-headed monster of damnation and salvation – Time" (Beckett 1999, 11). Some critics have interpreted this literally and formulated the idea mathematically into a triadic equation "Time x Habit = Death". Although Beckett never used this formula himself, Cohn writes of Beckett's "grim equation of time, habit and death" (Cohn 23). This invocation of temporality foregrounds the essay's central concern with memory and the subjective perception of time, themes that resonate throughout Beckett's later literary production. He emphasises that Proust's chronology is nonlinear and erratic: "Proust's chronology is extremely difficult to follow, the succession of events spasmodic, and his characters and themes...seem to obey an almost insane inwards necessity" (Beckett 1999, 81). Beckett's philosophical orientation, informed by Schopenhauer and Bergson, shapes his approach to Proust, as he interprets memory, suffering, and art as intertwined mechanisms through which human consciousness confronts the inevitability of time and mortality (Tonning 19).

Beckett's essay is dense, intertextual, and replete with quotations in French, Italian, Latin, and Spanish, reflecting his commitment to a high level of scholarly engagement. His work frequently draws on Bergson's theories of duration and memory, emphasising the distinction between voluntary and involuntary memory. While Proust notes the ineffectiveness of voluntary recollection, Beckett concurs that "voluntary memory is of no value as an instrument of evocation" and privileges the spontaneous, involuntary memory that "chooses its own time and place for the performance of its miracle" (Beckett 1999, 320-334). Similarly, Beckett's engagement with Schopenhauer filters Proust's work through a lens of philosophical pessimism, emphasising suffering as a condition of artistic experience and art as a form of redemption. Beckett writes to Thomas McGreevy in a letter of 18–25 July 1930, "I am reading Schopenhauer...but I am not reading philosophy...an intellectual justification of unhappiness...is worth the examination" (Beckett Letters Vol. 1, 33).

Stylistically, Beckett's essay mirrors some Proustian features, with occasional prolixity and complex syntactic structures, while retaining a distinctive tonal harshness and bleakness. Beckett interweaves grotesque, violent, sexual, and epigrammatic imagery, often deploying metaphors that combine humour, intellectual rigor, and poetic idiosyncrasy. His short, sharp aphorisms come across as a series of compressed insights rather than a flowing argument. These are somewhat akin to what Beckett calls Proust's "treasury of nutshell phrases" (Beckett 1999, 29). Typical philosophical maxims include: "Friendship is a social expedient, like upholstery or the distribution of garbage buckets"; "Habit is the ballast that chains the dog to his vomit"; "The whole of Proust's world comes out of a teacup"; "We cannot know and we cannot be known" (Beckett 1999, 63, 19, 34, 66). Indeed, that habit is the enemy of perception is one of Beckett's core convictions. These metaphors serve both as philosophical commentary and as early indicators of Beckett's preoccupation with existential concerns, which would dominate his later oeuvre.

Beckett's intellectual ambition as a young academic is also evident in his insistence on intertextual richness. He draws upon an array of European thinkers and literary figures, including Dante, Baudelaire, Racine, Dostoevsky, Nietzsche, and Calderón, demonstrating a sophisticated approach to literary criticism that seeks not merely to explain Proust but to interrogate him from a personal and philosophical perspective (Cronin 111).

Remarking on Proust's "botanical" images (Beckett 1999, 89), Beckett saturates his own prose with strikingly complex, hyphenated and unusual vocabulary, much of it drawn from medicine, biology and philosophy, and blends of all three. Biological-medical words such as "superfoetation", "metempsychosis", "pathological", "protoplasmic" give the impression that Beckett is performing a medical dissection or autopsy on the body of Proust's work, somewhat akin to Eliot's "patient etherised upon a table" from "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock". Memory is repeatedly framed in quasi-pathological terms as if performing a clinical procedure to expose Proust's inner mechanics, exposing its organs and naming functions with scientific precision. This clinical tone strips away sentimentality and replaces it with diagnosis, turning the essay into less of a tribute to Proust and more of a forensic anatomisation. He also uses sophisticated philosophical words such as "amphibiology", "simulacrum", "noumenal", "phenomenal", further complicating the essay's register, suggesting that Proust was not merely a writer but also a thinker and that ordinary critical language would be inadequate to reflect this, keeping the discussion analytical and exacting rather than

sentimental. His hyphenated expressions, “habit-memory”, and “sensation-memory” suggest that Beckett is conscious of the limitations of conventional language to encapsulate the complexities of describing Proust’s involuntary memory and the necessity to compress dual functions into single linguistic units, obligating readers to pause to unpack the meaning. Beckett also invents or provocatively hybridises and distorts words, such as the mock-philosophical metaphor “the Cartesian hotcupboard” to describe false comfort produced by habit (Beckett 1999, 69). Occasionally, his attempts at levity fall flat as the witticisms are simply incomprehensible: “if Habit is the Goddess of Dullness, voluntary memory is Shadwell, and of Irish extraction” (Beckett 1999, 33). It is almost as if Beckett needs to fashion a sharper set of tools than ordinary language provides to perform his surgery. This approach allows Beckett to foreground questions of temporality, memory, and consciousness, while also prefiguring his later exploration of the instability of self-identity, and experiments with literary and dramatic form.

Despite its erudition, Beckett’s essay was not fully appreciated at the time of publication. Publishers and readers noted its difficulty and lack of accessibility, and Beckett himself remained dissatisfied, writing to Charles Prentice in 1930 requesting to expand and refine the essay further (Maude 184). Critics have variously described the essay as “a creative encounter between one great writer and another” (Pilling 1976, 13), “obscurely worded and seriously under-argued” (Acheson 166), and “an essay on Beckett hidden inside an essay about Proust” (Alvarez 143). Beckett’s own later reflections on the essay acknowledge its youthful ambition and stylistic overreach: he referred to it as “cheap flashy philosophical jargon” and admitted that its premises were perhaps less feeble than its conclusions (Beckett 2009, 518; Brater 26). While Beckett salutes Proust’s “anti-intellectual attitude” (Beckett 1999, 85), Nixon quotes a publisher’s report on the essay in which Beckett’s style “reminds one of the proverbial Teutonic professor” (Nixon 22).

Nevertheless, Beckett’s *Proust* is invaluable for understanding both his own developing literary consciousness and the philosophical underpinnings that informed his later work. The essay articulates a systematic investigation into time, memory, and consciousness, foregrounding themes that would preoccupy Beckett throughout his career. It also anticipates the practical challenges of translating Proustian temporality into another medium. Beckett’s emphasis on involuntary memory, the succession of selves, and the intricate interplay of suffering and boredom provides a conceptual framework for understanding Proust, while simultaneously illuminating Beckett’s own existential concerns.

In summary, Beckett's engagement with Proust is both an intellectual exploration of the French author's work and an early articulation of his own aesthetic and philosophical principles. By reading Proust through Schopenhauerian pessimism and Bergsonian duration, Beckett develops a vocabulary and conceptual toolkit that later informs cinematic and theatrical adaptations of Proust, most notably in Pinter's work. This foundation establishes the basis for a comparative study between Beckett's essay and Pinter's screenplay, highlighting their shared preoccupation with time, memory, and the challenges of representing consciousness across different media.

Pinter's Screenplay and Its Analysis

Harold Pinter's adaptation of *À la recherche du temps perdu* into a screenplay represents a remarkable attempt to translate Proust's complex narrative and temporality into cinematic language, "the most difficult task I've ever had in my life" (Brater 21). Pinter's suitability for the task is clear: he produced some forty screenplays, including for films, television and adaptations, some never filmed. In his own work include his so-called "memory plays", demonstrating that he was already creating works which explored characters' recollections and how they shaped the unfolding of events. The Proust screenplay project, initiated by director Joseph Losey in 1970, involved a collaborative team including Pinter, Samuel Beckett as an unofficial but critical consultant, and Proust scholar and translator, Barbara Bray (Billington 224). Pinter, Bray and Losey visited key Proustian locations in France – including Illiers (Combray), Cabourg (Balbec), and Paris – to ensure geographical and emotional authenticity. Originally, the film was to be shot on some sixty-seven different locations. It was Beckett who "suggested to Pinter that Proust's last volume, *Le Temps retrouvé*, was the place to begin" (Pinter 1978, ix-x). Unlike Beckett's essay, which interrogates Proust through philosophical abstraction, Pinter's task was to make the sprawling, 4,000-page novel visually and narratively coherent for film, condensing over a million words and more than two hundred characters (around fifty of them speaking-roles) into a manageable cinematic structure. It was decided that the "architecture of the film should be based on two main and contrasting principles: one, a movement, chiefly narrative, towards disillusion, and the other, more intermittent, toward revelation, rising to where time that was lost is found, and fixed forever in art" (Pinter 1978 xiii). Condensation required difficult editorial decisions. Pinter claimed

that he tried to “distill the whole work, to incorporate the major themes of the book into an integrated whole” (Pinter 1978, xiii). Brater notes Pinter’s extreme condensation and emphasis on memory and time over the novel’s social panorama (121-126). Pinter eliminated minor characters, compressed luxurious descriptions, and translated Proust’s elaborate prose into pithy dialogue and cinematic imagery. He retained only those scenes linked to involuntary memory, abandoning originally-conceived scenes of Proust at his desk writing the book, and extensive voice-over narration explaining memory theory (Renton 148-152). Pinter is unequivocal in stating that “The subject was Time” (Pinter 1978, xiv). Pinter managed to cut his original working document by “twenty-four pages” to the version we see today (Pinter 1978, xiv). Notably, the madeleine episode, arguably the most famous symbol of involuntary memory – was deliberately omitted as it was considered “a Proustian cliché that Pinter deliberately excludes” (Klein 106-109). Instead, memory is evoked through the visual presence of objects and recurring sensory experiences, aligning with Beckett’s philosophical assertion that memory’s power lies in its unbidden, spontaneous emergence (Beckett 1999, 33).

Losey envisioned a painterly, multi-layered approach that would blend realism with dreamlike transitions, capturing Proust’s plasticity of memory. The screenplay was intended to cover the entire novel rather than focus on selected volumes, maintaining the circularity that characterises Proust’s narrative. Pinter emphasised the importance of balancing fidelity to the novel with cinematic demands: “The one thing of which I was certain was that it would be wrong to attempt to make the film centred around one or two volumes...if the thing was to be done at all, one should have to try to distil the whole work, to incorporate the major themes of the book” (Pinter 2000, xiii). He “threw a lot of images down on paper”, his epiphany coming when “Marcel...says that he is now able to start his work, he has already written it” (Menich 1977; Pinter 1978, xiv).

Pinter’s screenplay consists of 174 pages and 455 scenes, many of which are silent, relying on visual and auditory cues to evoke memory. These shots build mood before any dialogue. Thirty-seven years flash by before a word is spoken – a very cinematic technique. The narrative is deliberately non-linear, utilizing a rapid succession of characters at different ages, flashbacks, and associative montages to replicate the workings of Proustian consciousness. For instance, the opening thirty-five silent sequences intercut with a yellow screen, a detail from Vermeer’s *View of Delft*, establish a visual motif that recurs at the conclusion, reinforcing the novel’s cyclical temporality (Pinter

1978, 177). This technique mirrors Beckett's notion that memory is selective, involuntary, and capable of sudden revelation, a concept central to his 1930 essay (Beckett 1999, 320–334).

One of the screenplay's most distinctive features is its treatment of Marcel as narrator-protagonist, objectified for the camera. Pinter considered an absent narrator or subjective camera perspective but ultimately decided these approaches were technically unfeasible. By placing Marcel visually at the centre, Pinter preserves the novel's subjectivity while allowing the audience to experience memory visually rather than linguistically (Menich 1977; Pinter 1978, xiv). Auditory and visual cues, as well as silences, close-ups, and repetitions, function as cinematic surrogates for the involuntary recollections central to Proust's narrative. Sensations of taste and smell play a major role in stimulating Marcel's memory, in Proust's novel; for example, the "musty smell" of the public lavatory in the Champs Elysees – referred to as a "fetish" by Beckett (Beckett 1999, 36). This is impossible to replicate in a screenplay, but Pinter uses "mundane sensory details [which] are woven into the narrative as triggers for memory rather than literal depiction" (Klein 106–109).

Objects, sounds, and gestures are treated as triggers for involuntary memory, akin to Proust's famous madeleine. Pilling refers to these as "memory-objects" (Pilling 1994, 14). Pinter uses objects such as doors, teacups, steeples, a hawthorn hedge, and sunlight on walls as nostalgic mnemonic devices, encouraging audiences to experience memory visually and aurally rather than verbally (Regal 115–116). For example, the sound of a garden gate bell or a spoon striking a plate is used to bridge past and present, evoking the layered temporality that Proust so meticulously constructs in prose (Renton 59–60). Pinter depicts Marcel's tactile stumbling on the "uneven cobbles" outside the Guermantes' residence which sets off a powerful chain of involuntary memories, linking Marcel back to Venice, Balbec, and Combray. This shock of recognition convinces Marcel of his vocation as a writer, and is perhaps the decisive epiphany of the book. Odette's appearance shifts by fourteen years between consecutive scenes, while Marcel moves from eight to nineteen, then thirteen, and twenty-one in rapid montage (Pinter 1978, 35, 50, 52, 64). This intricate temporal management creates a cinematic rhythm that mirrors the flow of consciousness, memory, and perception central to Proust's narrative. Past and present time appear to exist in parallel.

Pinter's approach reflects a synthesis of cinematic and theatrical strategies. While the film was never produced, the screenplay gave rise to stage and radio

adaptations, demonstrating the adaptability and enduring conceptual rigour of Pinter's work. Stage adaptations condense the narrative further while maintaining associative visual and auditory cues, confirming the screenplay's strength as a "distinct work of art" that operationalises Proustian memory and temporality using "specific visual filters" so that the lives of the characters exist in a "simultaneous present moment" (Billington 2000; Dalglish 2016). Interestingly, Proust himself was just getting to grips with the new technology of cinema which he thought entertaining but not deeply moving, external rather than introspective. He wrote about cinema for *Le Figaro* newspaper and published a series of articles on film in 1919.²

Pinter's collaboration with Beckett, who served as a philosophical guide, is evident throughout. In a letter of 31 November 1972, from Beckett to Pinter, Beckett states that he is "very impressed by your Proust script so finely devised [...] it sends me back to itself and to the end of *Time Regained* to begin with" (Billington 224). Similarly, unpublished scholarly materials and archival notes suggest that Pinter's engagement with Beckett's philosophical reading of Proust was not merely coincidental and provide convincing evidence that Pinter used Beckett's essay in his thinking about the working process. In his drafts and notes to the screenplay, a marginal note reads "Proust-Beckett – to Joe", presumably Joseph Losey (Renton 60). Pinter's emphasis on the subjective experience of Marcel, the protagonist, aligns with Beckett's focus on the succession of selves and the fluidity of consciousness, while also exploiting cinema's unique capacities for visualising memory. Beckett's insistence that "[t]ime is not recovered, it is obliterated" (Beckett 1999, 75) resonates in Pinter's non-linear sequencing, freeze-frames, and shifting temporal planes. The screenplay embodies Beckett's analytical framework, translating philosophical concepts into practical cinematic techniques (Renton 64).

Pinter performs the inverse operation than that of Beckett. Where Beckett abstracts, Pinter re-materialises, his central task being how to represent involuntary memory cinematically. Pinter also attempts to preserve Proust's humour and social observation, salon scenes, awkward pauses, social cruelty; elements which Beckett ignores entirely. In so doing, Pinter makes a sustained effort to reconstruct Proust's narrative world in gestures, pauses, silences, and hand-movements, whereas Beckett departs from it into pure theory.

Dialogue in the screenplay is sparse, pithy, and often juxtaposed with extended silent sequences, creating a rhythm that mirrors Proust's long sentences and narrative density. For instance, the recurring scene of Marcel's grandmother bending down to untie his boots – a seemingly trivial gesture – is

rendered visually many times, allowing audiences to absorb its emotional significance directly. Pinter's method underscores his commitment to retaining Proust's emotional and philosophical depth while adapting to the constraints of the cinematic medium (Regal 115-116).

The critical reception of Pinter's screenplay has generally recognised its ingenuity and fidelity to Proustian methods. Critics have highlighted the screenplay's manipulation of multiple temporal planes, associative montage, and sensory triggers as exemplary cinematic strategies for translating literary consciousness (Kauffmann 22; Brater 124). However, dissenting opinions have questioned whether film can fully replicate Proust's prose, arguing that some nuance is inevitably lost in the visual medium (Davidson 221). The stage and radio adaptations further illustrate both the possibilities and limitations inherent in adapting Proust's work across media, yet they validate Pinter's screenplay as a masterful engagement with narrative temporality and memory.

In sum, Pinter's screenplay is a practical, aesthetic, and conceptual translation of Proustian memory into cinematic terms. Its intricate visual and auditory design, informed by Beckett's philosophical insights, demonstrates how literary theory can be operationalised into performative and visual media. By focusing on the interplay of memory, time, and perception, Pinter creates a coherent structure that honours the novel's thematic richness while establishing a distinct medium-specific language. This collaborative adaptation exemplifies the intersection of literary criticism, philosophy, and cinematic practice, and forms a critical counterpart to Beckett's theoretical engagement with Proust. Pinter's screenplay is therefore both an interpretive and translational act, guided by Beckett's conceptual framework and his own theatrical sensibilities.

Comparative Analysis – Memory, Time, and Medium in Beckett and Pinter

The two men had different experiences in preparing their works. Beckett, a fluent French speaker who wrote almost only in French from 1946 onwards, came to Proust through the original French. Pinter worked with the original French but used the services of Barbara Bray and – sparingly – the 1981 version of Moncrieff's English translation. The intellectual connection between Beckett's essay and Pinter's screenplay is most apparent in their shared focus on

memory, temporality, and the challenge of representing subjective experience. Both works engage deeply with Proust's central preoccupation: the passage of time as experienced through involuntary memory. Beckett's essay frames this concern philosophically, drawing heavily on Schopenhauer's pessimism and Bergson's theories of time and memory. In contrast, Pinter operationalises these abstract concepts into cinematic practice, transforming philosophical insight into narrative and visual technique (Beckett 1999, 320–334; Renton 59–60).

Beckett interprets Proust through a Schopenhauerian lens, emphasising suffering, pessimism, and art as a form of redemption. Schopenhauer's notion that human existence is defined by the will and the inevitability of suffering resonates throughout Beckett's reading. He observes that Proust's characters are not stable selves but a succession of selves emerging over time, each moment revealing new facets of consciousness, a concept closely aligned with Schopenhauer's understanding of the human condition (Beckett 1999, 28). Beckett's attention to involuntary memory mirrors Schopenhauer's recognition of the spontaneous, uncontrollable nature of experience and perception. He privileges memory that chooses its own moment for revelation: "The memory which is not memory...an unruly magician...will not be importuned. It chooses its own time and place for the performance of its miracle" (Beckett 1999, 320–334).

Bergson's philosophy further informs Beckett's analysis, particularly the distinction between clock time and lived time (*durée*). Beckett notes that Proust's narrative unfolds according to a subjective, fluid temporality rather than chronological sequence. Bergson's emphasis on the qualitative experience of time allows Beckett to articulate the tension between Proust's episodic events and the unifying psychological and emotional continuity that governs Marcel's consciousness. Beckett's essay thus becomes a meditation on time and memory, exploring how involuntary recollection disrupts linear temporality and exposes the depth of human experience.

Pinter, writing forty years later, translates these philosophical concerns into visual and auditory language. While Beckett remains in the domain of abstraction, Pinter must make practical decisions about what to show, what to omit, and how to depict temporal flow. The screenplay employs rapid succession, flashbacks, and visual motifs to replicate the workings of involuntary memory, reflecting Beckett's theoretical emphasis. Pinter's camera becomes a conduit for temporal collapse, as in the repeated images of doors, teacups, sunlight, and other sensory cues, evoking past and present

simultaneously. The interplay of silent sequences and brief dialogue mirrors Proust's textual density and rhythm, ensuring that cinematic form embodies literary content (Regal 115-116).

Both writers focus on the emotional and philosophical significance of trivial incidents. Beckett identifies eleven key "fetishes" (Beckett 1999, 36) or moments that carry disproportionate weight in Marcel's memory; Pinter translates these into cinematic "memory nodes", which structure the narrative and allow audiences to experience involuntary recollection visually (Renton 59-60). The grandmother untying Marcel's boots, a gesture imbued with tenderness, continuity, and temporality, exemplifies this convergence of thought. Beckett's philosophical reading identifies its symbolic significance; Pinter operationalises it as a recurring visual motif that bridges decades within the narrative (Beckett 1999, 19; Pinter 1978, 38).

The complementary roles of abstraction and mediation are central to understanding Beckett's and Pinter's respective projects. Beckett interrogates Proust as a philosopher, filtering literary content through conceptual frameworks of suffering, art, and temporality. Pinter adapts these insights to the practical challenges of cinematic storytelling, developing a visual grammar of memory that preserves thematic depth while negotiating medium-specific constraints. In both cases, the focus remains on the epistemological and emotional experience of time, memory, and selfhood, rather than conventional narrative causality.

Moreover, both works reflect a deliberate engagement with the problem of representing consciousness. Beckett's essay repeatedly emphasises the complexity and indeterminacy of Proustian time: "Proust's chronology is extremely difficult to follow, the succession of events spasmodic, and his characters and themes...seem to obey an almost insane inwards necessity" (Beckett 1999, 81). Pinter confronts this challenge by fragmenting temporality on screen, creating associative sequences that replicate the mind's movement through recollection and perception. The screenplay's flashbacks, juxtaposed ages of characters, and recurring motifs constitute a cinematic strategy for mapping the inner life of the protagonist. Both works thus illuminate the ways in which literary consciousness may be apprehended, analysed, and represented.

Additionally, Beckett's essay and Pinter's screenplay share a critical consciousness about the role of language and form. Beckett's dense, allusive prose, laden with philosophical, medical and literary references, mirrors Proust's stylistic complexity and challenges readers to engage actively with

temporal and mnemonic structures. Pinter, by contrast, condenses linguistic complexity into visual and auditory cues, demonstrating a fidelity to meaning rather than verbatim textual replication. As Brater notes about the “yellow screen”, “Pinter accomplishes pictorially what Proust accomplishes verbally: the wonder of a fragment which only slowly reveals itself as a small part of a far more comprehensive canvas” (Brater 124).

Finally, the collaborative dimension underscores the intertextual and interdisciplinary nature of these adaptations. Beckett’s essay functions as a critical and philosophical scaffold and lexicon for Pinter’s screenplay, shaping the conceptual framework that guides visual representation. Pinter heavily infers that his work is informed by Beckett’s analysis, even if indirectly, in structuring memory, time, and narrative priorities: “Beckett’s analysis of the condition of time and memory forms the background against which Pinter’s adaptation operates, consciously or not” (Renton 112). The two projects, separated by decades, medium, and style, converge in their exploration of Proustian temporality, memory, and consciousness, illustrating the generative potential of literary criticism across media.

The Critical Reception of Beckett’s and Pinter’s Works

The critical reception of Beckett’s *Proust* essay and Pinter’s unfilmed screenplay highlights the contrasting yet complementary ways in which the two writers engaged with Proust’s novel, and how their distinct media – philosophical essay versus cinematic screenplay – shaped their interpretive strategies. Beckett’s essay, though intellectually rigorous and conceptually ambitious, met with mixed critical response. Scholars such as Pilling describe it as “a creative encounter between one great writer and another” but concede that, by academic standards, it is “only a partial success” (Pilling 13). Acheson emphasises the obscurity of Beckett’s language and his failure to provide sufficient contextual information on Schopenhauer, which weakened the essay’s persuasive power (166-167). Nixon notes that Beckett’s early intertextuality “relies heavily on Schopenhauer which provides him with “much of the tone and direction” but fails to “acknowledge the use of phrases and ideas borrowed from elsewhere” thus revealing a “lack of ideas” (Nixon 53-61).

Despite such criticisms, Beckett’s essay demonstrates enduring significance in terms of intellectual influence. His focus on involuntary memory, the episodic nature of consciousness, and the intersection of art and suffering

anticipates many themes in his later work, and, crucially, provides the conceptual scaffolding for Pinter's screenplay. Beckett's insistence on the philosophical dimensions of temporality, drawing from Schopenhauer's pessimism and Bergson's theories of time and memory, renders his reading of Proust to be as much about Beckett's own preoccupations as Proust's narrative (Beckett 1999, 75; Tonning 19). Ormsby echoes this, asserting that the essay functions as "not an academic treatise but a deeply personal meditation on Proust and his great work" (Ormsby 77). Beckett thus transforms Proust's material into a philosophical quest examining the nature of memory, suffering, and the aesthetic experience.

In contrast, Pinter's screenplay faced a different set of critical challenges, primarily due to its status as an unfiled work. Critics lauded the screenplay's ambition and the fidelity with which it conveys the temporal complexity of Proust. Stanley Kauffmann notes that Pinter "dextrously manipulates a complex of time planes", creating the effect of a magical vessel suspended in time, and praises it as "incomparably the best screen adaptation ever made of a work of art" (Kauffmann 22). Critics acknowledged Pinter's difficulty, of "squashing quarts into pint pots" (Billington (2000)). As Wood notes, "we read the screenplay with all kinds of things in our mind: Proust, Pinter's reading of Proust; the problem of abridgement, the problem of dramatization, the problem of visualization...the script itself as a literary work...Pinter has created a small masterpiece of wit and understanding".

Dissenting voices emphasise the limitations imposed by the medium. Davidson contends that Pinter fails to create an innovative filmic language fully equivalent to Proust's literary language, rendering the screenplay "almost completely devoid of value" (Davidson 221). Similarly, Harle attributes critical neglect to the screenplay's incompletion, describing it as a "desk-drawer draft" that cannot be assessed fully without its intended cinematic realisation (Harle 271). While Losey did float the idea of doing the project for television, Pinter was specifically reluctant to serialise the screenplay, one way in which it could have seen the light of day, as he felt that the work was conceived as a unified film that would lose its artistic integrity if broken up into episodes. Pinter was also wary of the compromises and loss of control required by international co-productions, which often funded television series. He feared ending up with a "terrible pudding of actors" speaking in different dialects of broken English just to satisfy various European backers (Billington 2007, 237). If a television serial were to be contemplated, Pinter and Losey demanded certain conditions such as no advertising breaks and no more than a week's

length between each showing (Harle 264). Pinter and Losey viewed the film as high art and turning it into a television serial was seen as a fallback that Pinter would not contemplate, even though it might have solved the massive financial hurdles that eventually killed the film.

Although the film was never produced, the screenplay spawned adaptations in theatre and radio, ensuring its artistic influence. Michael Bakewell adapted it for BBC Radio 3, with Pinter narrating in 1995 and again in 1997, emphasising auditory evocation of memory. Stage adaptations, most notably by Pinter and Di Trevis at the National Theatre in 2000-2001, utilised Pinter's condensation of narrative and sensory imagery to convey memory and time theatrically, further demonstrating the adaptability and enduring significance of the screenplay. Critics generally praised these adaptations for their "audacious compression" and fidelity to Proust's "thematic essence", even if the sheer magnitude of the original novel precluded full replication. Kaufmann applauds how "the 'complex of time planes is dexterously manipulated'" (Kaufmann 1971). However, Zerofsky calls the theatrical adaptations "skeletal, impressionistic...a series of staged images and vignettes strung together". The adaptations for theatre and radio demonstrate that Pinter's interpretive strategies can be effectively realised in performative media, suggesting that the screenplay's strengths lie "as much in method as in finished product" (Bryden 1997 79). "You feel you have gained valuable insight into the nature of Proust's obsessions...it would be pointless to bang on about what is lost" (Billington).

Conclusion

Taken together, Beckett and Pinter reveal two complementary objectives and readings of Proust. Both works are seen as projects which are part of both writers' engagement with the concept of memory, which both wrote extensively about in their drama. A comparative analysis of Beckett and Pinter underscores a shared intellectual lineage and complementary strategies. Both prioritise memory and temporality as central concerns, yet each operates within the constraints of his chosen medium. Beckett abstracts Proust into philosophical concepts, exploring involuntary memory as an ontological phenomenon and situating human suffering, boredom, and artistic experience within a Schopenhauerian and Bergsonian framework (Beckett 1999, 28, 320-334). Pinter, conversely, translates these abstractions into cinematic

and theatrical form, operationalising them as visual, auditory, and temporal devices: leitmotifs, silence, cross-cutting, and fragmented narrative sequences allow audiences to experience involuntary memory rather than merely read about it (Pinter 1978, 35–36; Renton 59–64). Beckett writes that Proust’s “eye functions with the cruel precision of a camera” (Beckett 1999, 27); Pinter takes up this camera to show and interpret what Proust sees.

A key area of convergence lies in the concept of the “fetishes” or privileged moments. Beckett’s essay lists eleven key evocations that trigger involuntary memory, moments seemingly trivial yet charged with profound emotional and cognitive significance. Pinter takes these moments and constructs visual equivalents: objects, gestures, colours, and sounds become cinematic memory triggers that preserve the intensity and specificity of Proust’s original experience (Beckett 1999, 33; Pinter 1978, 35). This demonstrates a direct intellectual and aesthetic continuity: Beckett theorises, Pinter operationalises.

The two approaches also illuminate differing attitudes towards character and narrative. Beckett is highly analytical and often critical, evaluating Proust’s characters through a philosophical lens of suffering, boredom, and moral detachment. He dismisses Albertine, for example, as “a vulgar nonentity” and interprets Swann and Charlus through the prism of obsession and domination (Beckett 1999, 53, 57, 86). Beckett ridicules Proust’s social circle with his invented, scatological “Duchesse de Caca or the Princesse de Pipi” (Beckett 1999, 77), while Pinter, constrained by the demands of performance and audience comprehension, preserves character psychology primarily through externalised behaviours, visual cues, and associative montage. The emphasis shifts from internal critique to experiential representation, highlighting the subjective perception of memory rather than analytical judgment (Pinter 1978, 82, 159–161).

Both writers, however, converge on the centrality of involuntary memory as a narrative principle. Beckett privileges the unbidden emergence of memory over deliberate recollection, noting that “voluntary memory is of no value as an instrument of evocation” (Beckett 1999, 320–334); involuntary memory should be “excavatory” (65). Pinter translates this into filmic and theatrical practice by presenting memory as sensory, associative, and non-linear, ensuring that audiences are positioned within the perceptual flow rather than observing it from a distance. This fidelity to Proust’s epistemology and phenomenology of memory is the most profound point of convergence between the two adaptations.

The legacy of both works is shaped by their medium-specific strategies. Beckett's essay remains a philosophical text, "intellectually rich but challenging and less accessible to general readership" (Nixon 54). Pinter's screenplay, while unfilmed, demonstrates the possibilities of translating literary temporality and consciousness into "visual and auditory form", influencing theatre, radio, and the theoretical understanding of adaptation (Bryden 1997, 80). Together, these works are complementary: Beckett provides the critical-philosophical scaffolding, Pinter executes a practical, sensory, and temporal embodiment.

In conclusion, this comparative study of Beckett's and Pinter's engagements with Proust underscores the interplay between philosophical reflection and practical adaptation. Beckett interrogates time, memory, and consciousness through a philosophical lens, producing a meditation that is simultaneously analytical and personal. Pinter, implementing Beckett's framework, confronts the practical challenges of representing the vastness and complexity of Proustian consciousness on screen and stage. By translating abstract temporal and mnemonic principles into cinematic and theatrical devices, Pinter operationalises Beckettian concepts, creating a medium-specific realisation of Proust's narrative architecture. While neither work can fully replicate the original novel's scope, together they illuminate the possibilities and limitations of intermedial adaptation, offering profound insights into the philosophical, aesthetic, and performative dimensions of Proust's vision. The interplay of analysis and enactment, abstraction and embodiment, demonstrates how memory, time, and perception can be interrogated and represented across different media, with each writer contributing unique but interlinked perspectives on the novel's enduring questions.

Ultimately, Beckett and Pinter occupy complementary positions in Proustian interpretation: Beckett theorises, Pinter actualises; Beckett tells us what Proust means, Pinter what Proust feels. Together, they demonstrate the enduring power of Proust's novel to inspire rigorous intellectual and artistic engagement, and the capacity of literature to be transformed across media while retaining its core philosophical and aesthetic concerns.

Endnotes

1. "What we know partakes in no small measure of the nature of what has so happily been called the unutterable or ineffable, so that any attempt to utter or eff is doomed to fail" (Samuel Beckett, *Watt*, 62).

2. *Pastiches et Melanges*. Gallimard, 1992.

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