



Jonah Lehrer, *Proust Was a Neuroscientist*, Houghton Mifflin, Boston 2008

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“Proust Was a Neuroscientist” is a brilliant book: concise, fluent, pleasant to read. The young author – strong supporter of the fourth culture, i.e. a culture that, as he says, tries to find out the relations between classical and scientific studies – aims to show us that the great artists of the past anticipated, with their intuitions, some of the biggest discoveries of moderne neurosciences.

The reader is invited to proceed during the reading to jump from a discipline to another. Moving from figurative arts to Chomsky, from Stravinskij to neurogenesis, till the nineteenth-century novel, the feeling is a leonardian mixture of mental images, superimposed in successions that becomes always more contracted.

Some comparisons are very well-constructed: while lingering on the amusing chapter three we enjoy ourselves in learning that chef Auguste Escoffier, inventor of the veal broth, anticipates the discovery of Kikunae Ikeda, chemist at the Imperial University of Tokyo, about glutamic acid; in fact he saw that the degradation of its molecules leads to the formation of L-glutamate. Our tongue (that we trusted could distinguish only four flavours: sweet, salty, bitter and sour) is very sensitive to this amino acid; in fact L-glutamate gained the Japanese nickname *Umami*, or fifth flavour. Moreover, it has nowadays a leading role on the composition of modern foodstuff, from ketchup to soup cube.

On the contrary, some other approaches seem to be quite strained: nice, undoubtedly, the reading of the vicissitudes of George Eliot, who refused to make the same mistake of Laplace and Spencer supporting their positivist theories. But, recalling the purpose of this book, the whole chapter leaves us little puzzled; Eliot, in fact, did not anticipate any future discovery, did not guessed anything, but she simply agreed to the opinion, not really important at that time, relating chance and inderterminatness as the most important variables in order to comprehend the universe.. If, afterwards, Heisenberg and the observation of the introns confirmed these hypotheses, the reward is not entirely to George Eliot but to Maxwell, a writer she used to read , and to Darwin, whom she read and admired.

Lehrer is not a reductionist, this is sure. He often says it, and we can prove it by observing the way he manipulates one of the most important sentences of the Dawkins *Selfish Gene*, decontextualizing it to demonstrate its supposed falseness. His holistic vision brings him to ascribe – as in a huge *I Ching* – a superstructure to every succession of events; as usual, sometimes the method works better, sometimes it does not.

And... Proust? Where we can find the man who lends his name to the title? The section concerning the french writer is – without any doubt – one of the most interesting of the whole book. His intuitions about the mechanisms of memory and recollection are surprisingly near to the acquisitions of the latest scientific scholars, from neurobiology to cognitive psychology.

Moreover, as we discover in the introduction, the reading of the *Recherche* was the spark that gave to Lehrer the initial idea for his work.

We remain just with one, big regret: the author unknowing of a book that could be very helpful to him: ten years ago was published in France *Le sens de la mémoire* (Paris 1999), written by the brothers Tadié, one a famous neurosurgeon, the other an important connoisseur of Proust. As the authors say, the title has a double meaning: *baudelairian*, seen as a sixth sense englobing and maybe conditioning all the others, and *phenomenological*, because the memory gives a sense to men life. Human memory, in fact, is explained to the non-specialist reader from a purely scientific point of view, i.e. from a proustian point of view.

It is not easy to draw close these two works, first because of the different space consecrated to the french novelist: Lehrer dedicates to him about fifteen pages; Tadié and Tadié put him as a foundation of their book. But, even with these differences, the point of departure is identical: the transalpine researchers believe that our knowledge advances following three parallel ways: the “writers way”, that describes the experiences lived by themselves; the “philosophers way”, that analyzes the matter from a conceptual point of view; and the “scientists way”, that bases its method on the experiment and on the empirical verification of the data. These three ways – this is the heart of the speech – are equivalent, equidistant from the truth.

So, if Proust is considered by Lehrer as an extreme case, a perceptive genius who imagined what the science demonstrated only one century later, the brothers Tadié – anticipating at the same time the work of the american researcher – reintroduce him in a more wide context, in a multidisciplinary system of research in which are advancing with the same pace Plato and Bergson, Saint Augustine and Baddeley, Freud and Diderot.