

Proust on the Move:
Essence and Mobility in
À la recherche du temps perdu

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List of Abbreviations

Corr.	Proust, Marcel. 1970–93. <i>Correspondance de Marcel Proust</i> , ed. by Philip Kolb, 21 vols (Plon)
Vol. number	———. 1987–89. <i>À la recherche du temps perdu</i> , ed. by Jean-Yves Tadié, 4 vols (Gallimard)
JS	———. 2001. <i>Jean Santeuil</i> , ed. by Pierre Clarac and Yves Sandre (Gallimard)
E	———. 2022. <i>Essais</i> , ed. by Antoine Compagnon and Matthieu Vernet (Gallimard)
BA	Ruskin, John. 1904. <i>La Bible d'Amiens</i> , trans. by Marcel Proust (Mercure de France)
SL	———. 1906. <i>Sésame et les lys: des trésors de rois, des jardins des reines</i> , trans. by Marcel Proust (Mercure de France)
WJR	———. 2010. <i>The Works of John Ruskin</i> , ed. by Edward Tyas Cook and Alexander D. O. Wedderburn, 42 vols (Cambridge University Press)
CL	Sainte-Beuve, Charles Augustin. 1857–70. <i>Causeries du lundi</i> , 16 vols, 3rd edn (Garnier Frères)
NL	———. 1875–78. <i>Nouveaux lundis</i> , 13 vols, 4th edn (Michel Lévy)

For multi-volume works, the volume number is referred to by a capitalised Roman numeral. For example, ‘WJR X’ indicates the tenth volume of *The Works of John Ruskin*.

References are always separated by semi-colons. When referencing multiple pages from the same work, this thesis does not repeat the reference or volume number. For example, ‘Corr. III, 299; 356’ indicates pages 299 and 356 of the third volume of the *Correspondance de Marcel Proust*.

References beginning ‘p.’ indicate a page number within the thesis.

All emphasis in quotations is original.

Abstracts

Short Abstract

Proust on the Move: Essence and Mobility in *À la recherche du temps perdu*

Adam Husain, Christ Church, Doctoral Thesis submitted Hilary Term 2026

Does Marcel Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu* (1913–27) have an essence? Or is it a series of mobile fragments, with no underlying purpose, order, or meaning? Over the last sixty years, Proustian criticism has moved steadily towards the second hypothesis. This study argues against that trend. Rather than examining one particular theme or idea, it takes the *Recherche* as a whole, and goes in search of its essence. The justification for this bold new approach is given in an introduction, entitled 'For a Hermeneutics of Naïvety'. This argues that influential 'fragmentary' readings, like those of Georges Poulet (1963) or Gilles Deleuze (1971), limit our experience of the text as much as earlier readings that theorised its essence. A 'naïve' reader, on the other hand, tries to understand what the novel is 'about' — its underlying message or vision or form — but without a *fixed* theorisation of its essence. The ensuing four chapters elaborate a unified, 'naïve' reading of the *Recherche* from beginning to end. We see how a 'naïve' interpretative desire is solicited from the very first pages, and how the novel then builds on this interest in its opening volumes by articulating two contradictory theorisations of the literary text: text as fluid mobility; text as atemporal essence. The thesis then makes a wholly new case for the importance of boredom for hero and reader of the *Recherche*. It argues that, in the closing volumes, the experience of boredom may solve the hero's problem with theorisation. A close reading of the final pages leads to the argument that it is the very indeterminacy, or 'mobility', of textual essence that underwrites poetic experience in Proust. This fresh approach challenges long-held critical assumptions about the *Recherche*. It proposes not only a new 'naïve' way of reading Proust, but literature more broadly.

Long Abstract

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Does Marcel Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu* (1913–27) have an essence? Or is it a series of mobile fragments, with no underlying purpose, order, or meaning? Over the last sixty years, Proustian criticism has moved steadily towards the second hypothesis. Critics today believe in a 'heteroclitite, plural Proust' (Watt 2009a: 29) — a 'Proust pluralisé' (Simon 2016: 38). They think that we must avoid the 'temptation' of 'reducing the variations of Proust's work to a single transcendental origin or unity' (Baldwin 2013: 203). Indeed, 'the only point regarding which a clear consensus seems to exist in Proust criticism today [is] that the Proustian universe is an ambiguous, hybrid, indefinable constellation' (Fülöp 2017: 2). This thesis argues against that line of thought. It presents an original reading of Proust's novel that goes in search of its essence, and treats the text, not in relation to a particular theme or idea, but as a unified whole.

The justification for this approach is given in a lengthy theoretical introduction, 'For a Hermeneutics of Naïvety'. This gives an overview of six key critical attitudes to the *Recherche*, thereby reconstructing the critical history of the novel around this central question. It explains why earlier structuralist and Bergsonian attempts to theorise the 'essence' of the *Recherche* could not account for the text's ambiguity, variety, and contradictions, and why they were superseded in the 1960s by the 'fragmentary' readings of the novel that are still in vogue today. The introduction then shows how these 'fragmentary' readings — though they appear to celebrate the heterogeneity and plurality of the literary text — actually *limit* our capacity to experience that variety, and obscure certain textual features in their turn. In particular, it analyses Georges Poulet's *L'espace proustien* (1963), which was the first, highly influential attempt to read the *Recherche* as a 'series of fragments', as well as Gilles Deleuze's developments on Poulet in a later edition of *Proust et les signes* (1971). The introduction also demonstrates why 'deconstructive' readings of Proust — most famously,

that of Paul de Man in *Allegories of Reading* (1979) — are just as likely to exclude textual features, as well as to conceal deeper ambiguities in the *Recherche*. The underlying problem for all six approaches is what I call the ‘conundrum of theorisation’. Any ‘theorisation’ of the text’s ontology — whether this defines the text’s essence, or claims that the text does *not* have any essence — implicitly limits a reader’s responses to the work. The purpose of the introduction is to justify a return to a theoretically ‘naïve’ reader’s journey through the *Recherche*. It argues that theoretical criticism has come to disdain amateur responses to the text and, paradoxically, it finds in these a more theoretically sound approach. The ‘naïve’ reader reads the novel in order to discover what it is ‘about’ — its underlying message or vision or form — but without a *fixed* theorisation of the essence that she hopes to find in the work. The ‘naïve’ reader, that is to say, is looking and hoping for the novel to have an essence, but does not know if she will find it, nor precisely what she is looking for. In this manner, the ‘essence’ of the text may itself become mobile.

Therefore, without fixing on what is intended by ‘essence’ or ‘mobility’, this thesis plots a ‘naïve reading’ from the beginning to the end of the *Recherche*. Chapter 1, ‘Out of the Basement of Science’, reveals how a ‘naïve desire’ to interpret the text is kindled in the first six pages (I, 3–9) through an extended close reading of them. It demonstrates how various critics, by attempting to determine the meaning of this passage, close down the very play of signification that creates its principal literary effect. The limits of Bergsonian, structuralist, and ‘fragmentary’ theorisations of the novel are illustrated by showing how, when applied to these opening pages, they fail to capture the ambiguity of the play between mobility and essence in Proust’s prose. This provides our first practical example evidencing the theoretical arguments of the introduction.

In a second part, the first chapter speculates on the origins of the opening passage through a new reading of Proust’s *Contre Sainte-Beuve* (1908–09). By recontextualising this aborted essay on the literary critic Charles Augustin Sainte-Beuve, it argues that Proust’s goal in this earlier work lies far beyond a simple attack on Sainte-Beuve’s particular critical method, as is usually thought (Pinon 2015: 70; Fraisse 2015: 278). Instead, *Contre Sainte-Beuve* is presented as a response to Sainte-

Beuve's alleged 'theorisation' of the literary text as a *physical object* that can be methodologically investigated. In Proust's day, this theorisation was becoming increasingly popular amongst critics such as Gustave Lanson and Ferdinand Brunetière, while, simultaneously, an 'impressionist' reaction to this 'scientific' literary criticism raged in papers and journals. The chapter demonstrates how closely Proust was aware of this debate, and how he grappled with the 'conundrum of theorisation' over successive drafts of *Contre Sainte-Beuve*. It argues that Proust's solution to the 'conundrum' was the writing of a 'récit', where the narrator bears an ambiguous relationship with the author. Through a close reading of an extract from this 'récit', we see how Proust's new formula creates a text that encourages its reader to theorise, without ever producing a univocal and clear theorisation of the literary text. Proust thereby motivates the reader to begin her own interpretative journey, and intervenes in the critical debates of his day without becoming fixed to any particular viewpoint. It is this ambiguous relationship between narrator and author that proves crucial for the redaction of the *Recherche*. By re-reading *Contre Sainte-Beuve*, the second part of Chapter 1 sheds further light on the limitations of the Proust-inspired criticism of the 1960s, including that of Roland Barthes, while showing how Proust anticipates and responds to debates around literary theory which continue into the present.

Chapter 2, 'Through an Assembly Line of Dreams', traces one possible reading of the protagonist's development across the opening volumes, from I, 9 to II, 378. It argues that the hero is socialised during his childhood into a 'theorisation' of artworks and persons that takes them to have discrete, atemporal, and fixed essences. This 'theorisation' is a vulgarised form of Romanticism, and we see how it is introduced to the hero not only via artistic figures such as Swann, Elstir, and Bergotte, but through 'kitsch' objects, such as the magic lantern, photographs, and a souvenir penholder. This approach to Proust echoes recent arguments regarding Romanticism, industrialisation, and kitsch in Flaubert (Yee 2024: 330). Meanwhile, through examining the protagonist's reactions to art, including an extended close reading of his responses to La Berma, we see how the narrator implies that the theorisation and aesthetic expectations of

the younger hero are *incorrect*. The real ontologies of artworks, as well as persons, seem not to lie in a fixed ‘essence’ but in their continuous, temporally-situated ‘mobility’. Read in this way, the chapter offers a new explanation for the Proustian lover’s famous failure ever to understand their loved one: it is not due to the essential unknowability of the Other (see Fülöp 2017: 111–12), but rather a faulty prior theorisation of their ‘essence’. This Bergsonian reading of the opening volumes is introduced further to illustrate the limits that ‘fragmentary’ readings tacitly place upon our interpretation of the text. From this perspective, we can even argue that a ‘fragmentary’ reading of the *Recherche* merely repeats the faulty theorisation of its immature protagonist. This renders unified and mobile persons, such as Albertine, into a series of fragments. However, the central argument of this chapter is then critiqued. We show that, in its turn, this Bergsonian reading cannot capture all the elements of love, or aesthetic appreciation, as they develop in the text. This further reflection allows us to appreciate how the opening volumes of the *Recherche* articulate at least *two* contradictory ontologies — one of fixed essences and one of temporal mobility — without ever resolving these opposed theorisations. The ‘interpretative desire’ solicited in the opening pages is therefore developed by a novel that simply refuses to cohere around any particular theory.

Chapter 3, ‘Across the Plain of Boredom’, continues through the closing volumes, from II, 378 to IV, 445. It makes the case that ‘boredom’ has been a neglected, but crucial, aspect of the *Recherche*, and compares it to the critically appreciated importance of boredom in other Modernist novels, as well as in the works of Gustave Flaubert. The chapter begins with a close reading of one of the most boring passages of the *Recherche*: Brichot’s first monologue on toponyms (III, 280–84). As with previous chapters, it shows how critical readings, such as those of Antoine Compagnon (1989: 229–56) and Christopher Prendergast (2013: 202–05), attempt to establish a signification to this episode, and thereby fail to appreciate its ambiguity and indeterminacy. By contrasting Martin Heidegger’s phenomenology of boredom (1995: 145–65) with boredom in the *Recherche*, we read the hero’s increasing boredom with the world as one possible solution to the ‘conundrum of theorisation’. When the hero is bored, or indifferent, he stops ‘theorising’ the artworks and persons

about him, which finally allows him to experience their essence. We suggest that the increasingly profound boredom of the protagonist towards the end of the novel may prompt the closing epiphanies. This chapter also reflects upon the naïve reader's experience of boredom as she works through the closing volumes of the *Recherche*. After showing how the work begins to repeat itself, and to become wearying, it argues that, unlike with Flaubert or certain Modernist novels, the reader can never explicitly *attribute* her growing sense of boredom to an authorial intention. The reader's uncertainty as to whether the text is deliberately becoming boring, or whether it is simply 'losing the plot', turns her reading of the *Recherche* into a genuine adventure.

Chapter 4, 'What Essence Awaits Us in the End?', analyses the novel's closing pages (IV, 445–625). It argues that the disappointment often described by critics with the end of the novel is due to their expectation that we ought to find in it a 'neatly conceived overall theory' of the *Recherche* (Cocking 1982: 166). It then explains why, given the journey plotted through the text so far, this expectation is unlikely to be realised. Instead, the chapter continues to observe in these pages the ambiguous relations between hero, narrator, and author, that have prevented the text from articulating a clear theory of itself from its opening pages (I, 3–9). A close reading of the third involuntary memory, which is brought to the hero by a 'serviette' (IV, 447), reveals a dazzling array of possible theorisations of the *Recherche*. This vision, and the surrounding pages, also make explicit the ontological contradictions that we found to be implicit in the opening volumes. The Proustian world is theorised *both* as a series of fixed and atemporal essences, and as a unity based upon a ceaseless temporal mobility. The implications of this development, however, remain startlingly unclear. Is the hero really a bad philosopher, the 'pseudo-Marcel' of Descombes (1987)? Or is the text now openly *embracing* the contradiction between atemporal essence and temporal mobility via a 'deconstructive' vacillation (de Man 1979: 72)? Or are we intended to recognise, as Erika Fülöp argues, the necessity for an imaginative recreation of the text (2017: 181)? The *Recherche* remains *indeterminate* in its signification and, more than this, indeterminate *in this indeterminacy*: we cannot be sure, in these closing pages, if their internal contradictions are intentional, or simply the effects of

uncontrolled or unrevised writing, just as we saw with the monologues of Brichot. Ultimately, this chapter argues that the indeterminacy of the text's essence underwrites poetic experience in Proust. *Poiesis*, understood in Heidegger's sense of 'Bringing-forth' (2011: 230), presents a means of re-thinking the complicated relationship between 'mobility' and 'essence'. Paradoxically, it is the possibility that the text may appear, in moments of poetic inspiration, as an atemporal essence that keeps Proust 'on the move' by *preventing* the figure of mobility itself from becoming immobilised.

Finally, the conclusion reflects upon the 'affective arc' that the thesis has plotted through the *Recherche* (Dutton 2023: 15). Its most significant contribution to Proustian criticism, and to criticism more widely, is its demonstration, both theoretically and with practical examples, that a 'fragmentary' reading *remains* a theorisation that limits our capacity to experience the heterogeneity of a text. However, the question that must be faced is whether this 'naïve' reading has itself become just another 'theorisation' of the *Recherche*. Each chapter develops from a close reading of a particular passage, and works by revealing the contradictions between various plausible critical accounts. Do we not find here a repetitive and somewhat predictable method? Would this not inevitably limit possible readings, as was argued in Chapter 1? And how far is this 'naïve reader' merely a cipher for the gaze of a particular critic? The conclusion argues that the thesis' own indeterminacy as to whether it contains a theorisation reflects a movement found in the *Recherche* itself.

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Figure 2 — Morris & Co. *William Morris Collection Mug* (2024) (detail), porcelain, 7.5 cm × 12.5 cm × 9.3 cm. Personal photograph (December 2025).

Figure 3 — Byzantine workshop of the Galla Placidia. *San Lorenzo Lunette, Museo di Galla Placidia* (5th century AD) (detail), mosaic, 313 × 187 cm. Personal photograph taken on site (September 2025).

Figure 4 — Byzantine workshop of the Basilica di Santa Maria Assunta. *Peacock panel, Rood Screen, Basilica di Santa Maria Assunta* (11th century AD), marble, approx. 90 × 90 cm. Personal photograph taken on site (November 2025).

Introduction: For a Hermeneutics of Naïvety

Le jaillissement au-delà de la citation.
— Georges Perec, *Un cabinet d'amateur*

Why do we read *À la recherche du temps perdu*? To such a simple question, we might be tempted to venture the simple answer: because Marcel Proust writes well. That there is pleasure to be had in the moment of reading the *Recherche*, that Proust creates vivid atmospheres, that he is a steadfast observer, a gleeful humourist, and a deep thinker, is all certainly true. Then again, to say we read the novel *only* for the delight it offers seems a little far-fetched.

That is because, as I hope the reader will agree, the *Recherche* does not afford us an unbroken stream of pleasure. When we read through the novel, we encounter passages that are not particularly well-observed, or philosophically rich, or funny, or anything else. Remember — if you can — Professor Brichot's endless toponymic monologues on the way to the Verdurins' holiday let (III, 280–84). Of such passages, we might be tempted to remark, as Elizabeth Ladenson did regarding the similarly uninteresting appearance of Mme Poussin (III, 168), that: 'none of this has any relation to the surrounding story, nor does it really contain much of interest in itself' (2022: 24). Of course, with careful attention, the critic can always eke something 'exquisite' out of these pages (Prendergast 2022: 190). But, as I will argue in Chapter 3, such critical readings cannot replace, nor erase, the tedium that the reader actually feels when confronting the text.

Alongside these seemingly empty scenes, there are also the narrator's obsessive repetitions to contend with. 'As the Proustian novel progresses', writes Leo Bersani, 'it comes more and more to be dominated by the enunciation of general laws' (1990: 3); the reader not only has to put up with the predictability of such occurrences, but with the narrator consistently drawing our attention to them. Love, for example, follows a 'mécanisme proustien' (Sartre 1943: 91) that not only repeats itself, but which the narrator himself explains with 'tenacious repetitiveness' (Bailey 1997: 8). We will examine these repetitions in Chapter 2.

Suffice to say for now that not every, or even any, reader reads every page of Proust's novel simply for their pleasure. So, if reading the *Recherche* is not an unmitigated source of readerly delight, why do we read it, then? Or rather, since the initial question has changed slightly: why do we read this novel without skipping the dull bits? Why do or *should* we — let us assume we want to find a reason why we should — read *À la recherche du temps perdu* from beginning to end?

One important reason to read the *Recherche*, of course, is simply to say that we have read it. When we acknowledge this feat, the interlocutor's face often glazes into a gratifying expression of surprise, or else sharpens with a doubtful look. Then comes the further question: 'What — *all* of it?' What a joy to be able to answer, in all good conscience: 'Yes!' It carries a cultural cachet which, as Christopher Prendergast notes, is 'class-bound' (2013: 1), and which, as Prendergast does not note, is very often delicious as well. From the tone of the questions subsequently put — 'Didn't you get lost? Or tired?' — you would think that 'reading Proust' was a treacherous journey to the ends of the earth, or part of the dangerous initiation rites of Charlus' 'franc-maçonnerie' (III, 18).

All the same, to say that 'we read Proust because it seems impressive' is only to invite the further question: 'So why does Proust seem impressive, then?' The simplest answer would be to say that reading the *Recherche* seems impressive because it *is* impressive — since Proust, alongside being piquant, original, and rich, is dull, lengthy, and repetitive. Another reason would be because the *Recherche* belongs near the head of the 'canon' of socially approved texts (Eagleton 1983: 216–17). The novel is a 'byword for [...] cultural prestige' (Bray 2019: 99). Reading it helps the reader to prove to herself and others that she is part of the cultural élite. Thus, when we work through the boring or repetitive bits of Proust, we might *think* we are enjoying the writing, but, like Legrandin reading Desjardins (I, 117–18), all we are really gratifying is our own sense of social pretension. If we were being a bit more honest, perhaps we would admit, as Roland Barthes did, that everyone skips the odd page of Proust now and then (1973: 22).

Put these two points together and you have one possible explanation for why we read the *Recherche*. The text is punctuated by a series of pleasurable moments (the humour; the euphonious

prose); we get through the duller bits out of snobbishness. Those drawn to this explanation blame earlier generations of critics for ‘swooning’ over Proust (Prendergast 2013: 5), and for canonising the *Recherche* as a unified text with a coherent underlying vision, message, or essence. They argue that, instead of trying to read the novel as a whole, it is better to conceive of it as a collection of fragments, a ‘series of punctual intensities’ (Bowie 2001: 513). A ‘fragmentary’ reading of the *Recherche* would empower an amateur reader who — rather than struggling through the novel from end to end — would privilege her personal interests, ‘peu respectueux à l’égard de l’intégrité du texte’ (Barthes 1973: 21). This ‘skipping’ of Proust is likely to ‘excite curiosity, desire, and fascination’ in readers who would otherwise be flummoxed by the great monolithic volume of the novel (Gray-McDonald 1989: 1023).

A ‘fragmentary’ reading, therefore, refuses to hold that the *Recherche* has an essence. This is regardless of whether ‘essence’ is understood as an underlying ‘message’, a hidden ‘form’, a ‘continuity’, or anything else. As we shall see, critics have inflected their ‘fragmentary’ readings of the *Recherche* in different ways. But whenever the novel is taken to be: a ‘série de fragments non soumis à une unité précise’ (Bizub 2020: 28); a collection of ‘fragments non totalisants et non totalisés’ (Deleuze 1971: 142); or a ‘univers en morceaux’ (Poulet 1963: 54–55); we are dealing with some variety of the ‘fragmentary’ conception. This broad approach to the *Recherche*, and to literary texts more generally, has become commonplace. Critics today believe in a ‘heteroclitite, plural Proust’ (Watt 2009a: 29; also Watt 2009b: 2–3), or a ‘Proust pluralisé’ (Simon 2016: 38). ‘Most critics — to name only a few: Tadié, Henry, Benjamin, Genette — consider *À la recherche du temps perdu* [...] as heterogeneous’ (Ferré 2009: 197). They claim that we must avoid the ‘temptation’ of ‘reducing the variations of Proust’s work to a single transcendental origin or unity’ (Baldwin 2013: 203). Indeed, ‘the only point regarding which a clear consensus seems to exist in Proust criticism today [is] that the Proustian universe is an ambiguous, hybrid, indefinable constellation’ (Fülöp 2017: 2).

By contrast, this introduction will argue that a ‘fragmentary’ reading of the *Recherche* (or any other text) is not theoretically justifiable. Further, it will argue that this approach excludes a certain kind of naïve reader. This ‘naïve reader’ has quite a different answer to our original question. She reads the *Recherche* — partly, yes, for pleasure, and perhaps also for snobbish reasons — but chiefly because *she wants to know what it means* and, since this work is presented to us as a ‘whole’, *that* is why she feels she ought not to skip sections.

This is not a particularly ground-breaking suggestion. We will compare it later on with Paul Ricœur’s ‘seconde naïveté’ (1959: 71; p. 51), which has been theorised as a specific response to a ‘hermeneutics of suspicion’ (Scott-Baumann 2009: 132; 153). But all I am really saying is that: ‘we read the *Recherche* to try and understand it as a whole; not just because it offers momentary flashes of insight, humour, *jouissance*, etc.’. This approach is quite common: we are ‘naïve’ readers whenever we talk about trying to ‘get’ some new artist or band. Still, the philosophical implications of such a straightforward hypothesis — the implication that readers often sense that there is ‘something’ to be understood in the *Recherche*, and that this gives them the grounds for reading the novel — are so outmoded in contemporary criticism that this common phenomenon is not often mentioned. There is an important reason why critics today are more likely to say that we ought to read the *Recherche* as a ‘series of punctual intensities’ than to say that we read it because we feel, as we read, the surging of an impulse to grasp the transcendental truth or ‘essence’ of the text.

It is this: to read like this is to be hoodwinked by a ‘rhetorical strategy’ of the novel (de Man 1979: 64). Chapter 1 will show how the first few pages (I, 3–9) kindle a ‘naïve’, interpretative desire in the reader. After this, as has often been argued (Bourdieu 1998: 10; Kristeva 1994: 329; Barthes 1973: 52), the *Recherche* steadily builds a pseudo-religious conception of artworks’ power to transform and redeem their audience by the revelation of some hidden essence. ‘La recherche des essences oriente aussi fortement la démarche de son œuvre que la recherche du *temps perdu*’ (Genette 1966: 40). ‘Les grandes œuvres d’art, nous dit Proust, révèlent l’essence enchantée des choses’ (Bertho 1994: 103). Both the protagonist and the reader are thereby

brought to hope for an artwork that can disclose ‘l’essence permanente et habituellement cachée des choses’ (IV, 451), and even ‘salvation through art’ (Kuhn 1964: 301). When the hero sees the trees of Hudimesnil (II, 76–79), they seem to offer: ‘a perception of the world as a unity’ (Fülöp 2017: 103). The naïve reader really does *hope* that such a unity might be found, and perhaps a new rapport with the world established, through her reading of the novel. Thus ‘the Proustian quest is itself based on a fundamentally Romantic-Idealist aspiration’ (Fülöp 2009: 44): the hope of transfiguration of the world and the self through a transcendent artistic experience.

A serious literary critic, however, would not fall for this ‘mad belief’, nor the ‘shopworn clichés of Romantic subjectivism’ (Prendergast 2013: 5; 36). This is for two reasons. Firstly, it is associated with class-bound and objectionable views about the redemptive power of art (see Bersani 1990: 10; Eagleton 1983: 216–17; Bourdieu 1992: 10). Secondly, when we look more closely, we can see that the novel contradicts, ‘deconstructs’, and mocks this naïve faith in the powers of art, even while it is being expressed (Watt 2009a: 15; see also Bailey 1997: 69–72; de Man 1979: 72; Hill 1980: 177). The protagonist (on his encounter, say, with Balbec Church, or La Berma) fails to acquire their hidden ‘meaning’ or ‘beauty’, just as he is frustrated in his attempts to understand Albertine or Gilberte. It is for these reasons that: ‘For half a century at least, the idea of literature as a spiritual quest [...] has been ridiculed as being either elitist or, paradoxically, amateurish, belonging to the realm of the book club’ (Bray 2019: 97). A ‘naïve’ reading, in my sense of the term, is not only framed as ‘class-bound’ ‘swooning’ (Prendergast 2013: 1), but somehow also a gullible seduction by ‘metaphorical mystifications’ (de Man 1979: 16). It is at once elitist, passé, and *uneducated*. From this, one may wonder if ‘fragmentary’ readings, which once promised to be a revolutionary levelling of tastes (Barthes 1972: 39), have simply become another fashionable and exclusionary critical trend. It is a pattern that will be all too predictable from our reading of the *Recherche* itself (see Husain 2025a: 11).

All the same, the textual arguments that ground this ‘fragmentary’ approach are highly persuasive. As we shall see in Chapter 2, the opening volumes implicitly question the hero’s faith

in the power of art to communicate ‘l’essence des choses’ (IV, 454). Throughout this thesis, we will observe how the expectations and aesthetics of Romantic Idealism are perpetually being questioned.

Nevertheless, we hold that these disappointments, warnings, and downright contradictions do not necessarily dispirit the hero (nor the reader) in pursuit of their ‘quests’. They may merely serve to whet the appetite: these disappointments, and the tedium of other passages, can begin to feel like necessary sacrifices before some hazy godhead:

Proust’s novel has a lot in common with an initiation rite; not only is the narrator put through a trial before discovering his vocation but also the reader, too, must confront the novel’s riddles, suffer through tedious passages, and look inside himself for whatever truth is to be gleaned from the experience (Bray 2019: 97).

The hero’s early epiphanic experiences imply that the arrival of this hidden truth will only come to the reader when — ‘accablé par la morne journée et la perspective d’un triste lendemain’ (I, 44) — she is fatigued and bored. Chapter 3 argues that the experience of boredom in the closing volumes of the *Recherche* is an unlikely solution to the paradoxes of ‘theorisation’ encountered in Chapter 2. This allows, in Chapter 4, for a re-reading of *Le Temps retrouvé* as a poetic expression of the novel’s ‘essence’.

In short, this thesis will perform a ‘naïve reading’ of the *Recherche* from beginning to end. Like a recent study, it plots one possible ‘affective arc’ through the text (Dutton 2023: 15). It is a ‘holistic’ reading which shows how the reader’s experience of the novel is oriented by the ‘search for essence’ (Erickson 2007: 108). The purpose of this introduction is to explain: why ‘fragmentary’ readings became fashionable; the problems with earlier ‘holistic’ or ‘essentialising’ readings of Proust which they promised to solve; and finally, why only a ‘naïve’ reading can experience a text both in its unity and its heterogeneity. Every other approach, as a ‘theorisation’ of the literary text, limits the possibilities of a reader’s experience (by ‘theorisation’, which is a word that will occur throughout this thesis, I mean a conceptualisation of the ontology of a text). We will first work through three possible ‘holistic’ readings of the *Recherche* — those of Alain de Botton, Jean Rousset,

and a Bergsonian reader. After this, we will see how two ‘fragmentary’ readings of the novel — that of Georges Poulet and Gilles Deleuze — are replete with the same problems. Finally, we will see why Paul de Man’s deconstructive reading of the *Recherche* still fails to solve the ‘conundrum of theorisation’. This overview will be brisk and, as it progresses, increasingly theoretical. It will, however, allow me to introduce a range of key approaches that will be fundamental for the ensuing chapters.

Above all, its purpose is to justify what I call a ‘hermeneutics of naïvety’. The ‘naïve reader’ experiences the *Recherche* as quest, and goes off in search of its essence. The ‘unity’ seemingly glimpsed in the trees of Hudimesnil (Fülöp 2017: 103), or in the ‘phrase de Vinteuil’, promises to restore something important not only in the hero’s life, but in her life as well. That is why the experience of reading Proust, and particularly the inebriation of our first encounter with him, can feel so personal. As in other stories, we are hoping the hero will get what he wants — but we are also, as readers, hoping to get it for ourselves. It is as if we were to read *Don Quixote* — not only believing in the charms of the Dulcinea del Toboso, but with the expectation that we too could win her hand by the close of the text.

This comparison is not a perfect equivalence, however. For the reader of the *Recherche*, like its hero, is not entirely sure what it is that she wants to ‘get’. If the hero expects to find ‘quelque grande idée’ hidden in the literature he reads (I, 832), he does not know what shape that idea will take. *The naïve reader*, in like manner, *does not need to know exactly what kind of ‘essence’ she hopes to find in the text*. Her desire is therefore mobile: she may hope, at times, for an essential moral or message; on other occasions for an ineffable Romantic vision; at still other times perhaps for a form or continuity that will unite her varied experiences of the text. This further naïvety — a meta-naïvety regarding the object of the naïve desire — will prove to be a crucial lynchpin for justifying a ‘naïve reading’ of the novel, which is the purpose of this introduction. It will allow me to be imprecise on the key words of this study — ‘essence’ and ‘mobility’ — for the reason that both terms are not only ambiguous, but liable to change, or even exchange, their meanings.

It will also allow us to remain loose as regards two of the classic problems of Proustian criticism. One of these, which will be considered in Chapter 4, is whether the *Recherche* is the novel imagined by the narrator at the end of the text. Another, which we will consider in Chapter 1, is whether we ought strictly to differentiate ‘Marcel Proust’ (the author) from the ‘narrator’ of the *Recherche*, and then again this ‘narrator’ from the ‘hero’ of the text. Just as the naïve reader’s ‘essence’ is undetermined and unfixed, I think these differences should also remain blurry, and that this very blurriness orients our experience of the novel. If some recent criticism insists on a clear ‘distinction’ between author and narrator (Landy 2004), often relying on classic studies to do so (Genette 1972: 68; Barthes 1967), readers of the *Recherche* are not always so clear and definite. Chapter 1 argues their ‘failure’ to maintain a critical distinction may allow for some of the novel’s most interesting effects. The *Recherche* is ‘inconsistent’ on this question (Haustein 2012: 36–38); its ‘generic undecidability’ (Dutton 2023: 14) defies distinctions, or a Lejeune-style literary pact, between ‘autobiography’ and the ‘novel’ (see also Bray 2019: 96). However, we will argue throughout this thesis that the novel’s ‘indeterminacy’ relies upon its reader *attempting* to distinguish between three figures, whose precise relations remain vague. I will refer to these as: ‘Proust’ (the author); ‘the narrator’ (an older fictional character who narrates the events of his life); and the ‘hero’ or ‘protagonist’ (the narrator when he was experiencing those earlier events). Following convention, I will also call this young and unnamed hero ‘Marcel’.

A First Holistic Reading: Essence as Message

When the naïve reader of the *Recherche* finally reaches the end of the book, does the desired ‘essence’ finally arrive? Some think so. Alain de Botton, for example, calls the *Recherche* ‘a practical, universally applicable story about how to stop wasting time’ (1997: 8). In this case, the essence of the text is found by attributing to it an underlying moral or message. But, if such readings of Proust do exist, they are not entirely satisfying, for the *Recherche* seems constructed to refute any simple or univocal reading of its ultimate message. As far as de Botton’s reading goes, if the narrator

constantly reminds us that his ‘Fall’ into French society and love is a waste of time that could be better spent creating art, it is nonetheless true that this very waste is revealed to be the substance of his art in *Le Temps retrouvé* (IV, 478). ‘C’est un résultat essentiel de l’apprentissage, de nous révéler à la fin qu’il y a des vérités de ce temps qu’on perd’ (Deleuze 1971: 28; see also Bray 2016). Thus, the waste is simultaneously wasteful and non-wasteful, and a (non)essential part of the artist’s (and reader’s) quest.

Everywhere we look, the novel sets itself in such insuperable contradictions. Proust is a ‘committed equivocator of several of the primary binaries’ (Prendergast 2022: 206). As we shall see again and again in this thesis, with any critical reading that attributes a ‘message’ to the *Recherche*, we might well ask, as Proust did: ‘Le contraire ne serait-il pas aussi vrai ?’ (E, 1213). ‘The critic [...] must necessarily make a selection among the novel’s contradictions in order to put forth a theory’ (Bray 2019: 19). Perhaps the greatest of these contradictions is the theory of time outlined in *Le Temps retrouvé* — what Proust amusingly called ‘l’exposition de l’esthétique dans le buffet’ (Corr. IX, 155–56). Is the narrator’s great discovery that he (and thus other human beings) can be ‘affranchi[s] de l’ordre du temps’ (IV, 451)? Or is it rather the fact that we are fundamentally time-bound, and ‘plongés [...] dans le Temps’ (IV, 625)? Are we, in turn, supposed to read the *Recherche* as timeless, or as a ‘living’, time-bound text (Guerlac 2023: 398)? Proust (or Proust’s narrator) seems to argue ‘with and against himself’ (Prendergast 2013: 18): the *Recherche* is ‘une œuvre achevée-inachevée’ (Blanchot 1959: 19). For many, Forster’s prediction proves all too accurate: ‘times past’ are not ‘captured and fixed’ by the final volume, nor does it present us with a retrospective view of the novel as a ‘perfect whole’ (1927: 135). The famed ‘incoherence of *Le Temps retrouvé*’ (Cocking 1973: 82) will be the topic of my fourth chapter. Yet, as with the analysis of competing theorisations (Chapter 2) or boredom (Chapter 3), my approach will not attempt to remove the sense of contradiction and confusion that the reader feels during these pages, but rather make that experience the basis of my analysis.

Let us imagine, then, a reader who has got to the end of the *Recherche*, but has found in it a series of incongruities, and downright oddities, rather than a transcendent and unitary ‘essence’. Such a reader might see but two paths ahead. She can abandon her ‘naïve’ expectation of such a whole, and embrace a ‘fragmentary’ reading. Or, she could try to come up with a theory as to what this ‘essence’ is which can accommodate the contradictions and confusions of the text. In *Forme et Signification*, Rousset made one such attempt at a ‘holistic’ reading (1962). He claimed to have discovered the ‘grande idée’ or ‘Logos’ underlying the *Recherche* by treating the novel as a ‘totalité’ (Rousset 1962: xii–xiii). To do this he developed a particularly stark way of responding to the heterogeneity of the text.

A Second Holistic Reading: Essence as Form

Rousset was either more subtle, or more crude, than de Botton. Observing the heterogeneity present in all literary texts, he recognised that it was impossible to bring every aspect and passage of any novel (still less the *Recherche*) to cohere around one underlying essence. Instead, Rousset believed that the literary critic must ‘pénètre[r]’ ‘l’œuvre’ in order to reveal its hidden ‘forme’ (1962: xxii). Once discovered, this form would allow the critic to determine which parts of the work they might cast aside as contingencies, or ‘accident[s] de genèse’ (1962: 164). Ultimately, it leads the critic to recreate the ‘univers mental’ of the writer, which is revealed only through a close reading of the text (1962: xii–xiii).

Thus, Rousset can claim that no element of the *Recherche* is ‘isolable’; every sentence is an indispensable part of the whole, without which ‘l’ensemble serait inintelligible’ (1962: 146). The *Recherche* is, as it were, ‘une œuvre d’art bien faite où il n’y a pas une seule touche qui soit isolée, où chaque partie reçoit des autres et leur impose sa raison d’être et ses reflets’ (II, 1270). But Rousset’s claim is really tautologous. Under Rousset’s theorisation, anything that does not fit into his idea of the novel’s ‘forme’ is not a part of Proust’s ‘real’ text. Proust’s heterogeneities — Brichot’s rant about toponyms, or the contradictions in *Le Temps retrouvé* — can be safely excluded and forgotten.

Even our temporal experience of reading is ultimately at odds with the real nature of the literary text.

La lecture, qui se développe dans la durée, devra pour être globale, se rendre l'œuvre simultanément présente en toutes ses parties. [...] Le livre, semblable à un « tableau en mouvement », ne se découvre que par fragments successifs. La tâche du lecteur exigeant consiste à renverser cette tendance naturelle du livre de manière que celui-ci se présente tout entier au regard de l'esprit (Rousset 1962: xiii).

Although we must read a novel across a stretch of time ('durée'), our 'tâche' as readers is to reconstitute the artwork as one whole that lies outside of time, and which 'se présente tout entier au regard de l'esprit'. The 'mouvement' (or 'mobility') of the text must be arrested in order for us to grasp its essence. To be clear, Rousset thinks this to be true of *all* literary texts: 'L'œuvre est une totalité et elle gagne toujours à être éprouvée comme telle' (1962: xii–xiii). Still, he claims that the *Recherche* is particularly adapted to his reading method. This is because the explicit message of this novel, as advocated by the narrator and Proust, is Rousset's own truth of atemporal 'forme' as essence (1962: xi–xii). This may be found in the timeless, circular form of the novel, which offers the history of its own composition (1962: 140; see Pennanech 2009: 244). It is also expressed in Proust's letters (1962: 138). The *Recherche* is 'la découverte de l'intemporel dans les extases de mémoire' (1962: 143). *In Search of Lost Time* 'really' is *The Discovery of Timelessness*.

The basic problem for Rousset is the same as it was for de Botton: the *Recherche* is simply too heterogeneous to be boxed in by any single theorisation of its essence. To determine an essence *qua* underlying form, Rousset therefore has to ignore the contradictions which we just observed in the novel's closing monologue on time, and find in it only the 'découverte de l'intemporel'. But Rousset's theoretical scaffolding — his idea that the critic must excise parts of the text that contradict its real 'forme' — offers one bold solution to this difficulty. The trouble is that it lays him open to a still more penetrating critique. This came five years later, in an essay called 'Force et Signification' (playing on Rousset's title *Forme et Signification*) by Jacques Derrida (1967a: 9–50). Commenting upon the Rousset quotation indented above, Derrida writes:

Rousset évoque donc la difficulté d'accéder, dans la lecture, au simultané qui est la vérité. [...] La simultanéité est le mythe, promu en idéal régulateur, d'une lecture ou d'une description totales. [...] « La durée prend ainsi la forme illusoire d'un milieu homogène, et le trait d'union entre ces deux termes, espace et durée, est la simultanéité, qu'on pourrait définir l'intersection du temps avec l'espace » [(Bergson 1898: 83)]. Dans cette exigence du plat et de l'horizontal, c'est bien la richesse, l'implication du volume qui est intolérable au structuralisme, tout ce qui de la signification ne peut être étalé dans la simultanéité d'une forme. Mais est-ce un hasard si le livre est d'abord volume ? (Derrida 1967a: 41–42).

By 'structuralisme', Derrida means any kind of literary criticism: 'La critique littéraire est structuraliste à tout âge, par essence' (Derrida 1967a: 11). That is because literary criticism inevitably attempts to reduce or 'étaler' the diachronic experience of reading through time into the flat 'simultanéité d'une forme', placing the true essence of the work beyond movement in 'durée' (1967a: 16). The quotation from Henri Bergson that Derrida uses to support this claim is a significant nod in a particular philosophical direction. Bergson coined the term 'durée' particularly to describe a continuous flow of time, as opposed to a scientific conception of time as 'la forme illusoire d'un milieu homogène' — that is, a 'homogeneous flux of accumulative now-points' (Comay 1990: 85). Time divided into a homogeneous series of identical instants — t_1, t_2, t_3 — is the scientific and measurable conception of time, as evoked by, say, the ticking of a clock. In a clock's ticking, each second is quite like the next (that is, homogeneous) and they can be cleanly distinguished from one another (that is, they are discrete and discontinuous). In the work that Derrida's quotes from — the *Essai sur les données immédiates de la conscience* (first published 1889; henceforth the *Essai*) — Bergson's central argument is that a scientific understanding of time cannot account for *movement*. This theorisation of temporality leaves us stuck with false problems such as Zeno's Paradox. This is because, if time is infinitely divisible into discrete, homogeneous, and discontinuous instants (seconds, milliseconds, and so on), then there will be an infinite number of moments through which Zeno's runner must travel before he can reach the finishing line (for Proust on Zeno, see Goodkin 1991). Instead, for Bergson, time is a continuous and indivisible flow: you cannot isolate one 'moment' from the next, and nor can there be any discontinuities, since its identity lies in its shifting relation to a whole which itself is ceaselessly moving and

developing. If Rousset himself acknowledges that ‘la lecture [...] se développe dans la durée’, then there must be a reason why he feels this immobilisation of the experience of reading to be necessary. For Derrida, it is this. ‘Structuralists’ (i.e. all literary critics) *must* reduce the ‘richesse’ of time-bound experience into a single present moment in order for the ‘lecture’ or ‘description’ of the work to be ‘totales’. Unless the entire work ‘se présente tout entier au regard de l’esprit’ in one timeless moment (Rousset 1962: xiii), then some element of the work will be absent from the critic’s gaze. If this is correct, the text’s disorder and indeterminacy can never entirely be removed: we cannot go from a ‘passage d’un désordre à un ordre [...], de l’absence à la présence’ (Rousset 1962: iii). The thirst for ‘essence’ forbids the possibility of textual ‘movement’. But, Derrida insists, ‘le livre est d’abord volume’. Our experience of reading a book — progressing through its pages — reveals something fundamental about the impossibility of a complete understanding of the text.

A Third Holistic Reading: Essence as Continuity

The reader may still be a little foggy on this distinction, which is of fundamental importance for the coming thesis, between time as a series of measurable, homogeneous instants, and time as ‘durée’. Part of the difficulty in determining this distinction is that Bergson’s concept of ‘durée’ — exemplifying its own principle — is never fixed by a precise and academic definition; it has, in part, to be intuited or felt (Megay 1976: 53). The desire to define all concepts — to make them into controllable and discrete units — was itself a symptom of the conception of time against which Bergson attempted to articulate his philosophy. His prose privileged, we might say, ‘le jaillissement au-delà de la citation’ (Perec 1979: 30). While this occasioned the disdain of some professional philosophers, its influence on Modernist writers has been well attested (Vrahimis 2011; Guerlac 2013: 10). Here is one pen-portrait of ‘durée’ from the *Essai*:

La durée toute pure est la forme que prend la succession de nos états de conscience quand notre moi se laisse vivre, [...] comme il arrive quand nous nous rappelons, fondues pour ainsi dire ensemble, les notes d’une mélodie. Ne pourrait-on pas dire que, si ces notes se

succèdent, nous les apercevons néanmoins les unes dans les autres, et que leur ensemble est comparable à un être vivant, dont les parties, quoique distinctes, se pénètrent par l'effet même de leur solidarité ? [...] On peut donc concevoir la succession sans la distinction, et comme une pénétration mutuelle, une solidarité, une organisation intime d'éléments, dont chacun, représentatif du tout, ne s'en distingue et ne s'en isole que pour une pensée capable d'abstraire (Bergson 1898: 76).

Like a melody, Bergson believes that our experience of time ('durée') is continuous. There are no discontinuous or discrete 'instants', nor jumps from one moment to the next. Indeed, 'durée' is impossible to understand when partitioned artificially into discrete and immobile 'times'. A 'pensée capable d'abstraire' *could* break down the melody into separate notes, just as we could separate time into a collection of seconds, and our experience into a series of discontinuous 'états'. But to do this would be to misunderstand — and to conceal — their complex 'pénétration mutuelle'. 'La durée est une continuité hétérogène d'interpénétration réciproque' (Aubert 2011: 139). The note takes its meaning from its complex, ceaselessly changing relationships with other notes. Attempting to understand the meaning of just one note, as if it were a discrete and discontinuous 'moment', alters and bends these relationships, hiding the continuity that forms their underlying essence. Just so for the flux of human experience. Its 'essence' lies in the *continuous mobility* of its content. For Bergson, persons (and artworks) are thus not composed of mental states, or epochs, stacked discretely one upon the other, 'as plates are piled on a waiter's hand' (Woolf 1928: 308). They are closer to the strata of a geologically-active mountain, where 'perpétuellement des soulèvements font affleurer à la surface des couches anciennes' (IV, 125; Suzuki 2016: 1436–38).

One early holistic reading of the *Recherche* was to take the text as a kind of 'ultra-bergsonisme' (Thibaudet 1920: 426), or an 'exposition of Bergson's philosophy' (Starkie 1962: 98; see Gunter 2013: 170). This significant critical trend had three main causes. Firstly, there were the well-documented personal and intellectual relations between Marcel Proust and the philosopher. Proust maintained a correspondence with Bergson, attended Bergson's lectures at the Collège de France (Tadié 1996: 450–51; 462), and almost certainly read the *Essai* (Suzuki 2016: 1431). Secondly, Bergsonian readings were generally fashionable in the first half of the twentieth century.

A generation of literary critics, including Albert Thibaudet, were ‘persuaded — with the help of Bergson — that the whole of literature is a flowing, growing organism’ (Frohock 1953: 227). We might note the related philosophy of Gabriel Séailles here too. The influence of his aesthetic ‘organicism’ on both Proust, and early Proustian *criticism*, has been explored by Christine Caro (2006: 6; 37–38) and Luc Fraisse (2013: 149; 244). Thirdly, the *Recherche* itself ‘a des traits incontestablement bergsoniens’ (Fieschi 1965: 244). A listing of these numerous early critical connections can be found in Fernand Vial (1940). If we critiqued Rousset’s approach to the *Recherche* for its privileging of an atemporal essence over time-bound mobility, then a Bergsonian theorisation of the *Recherche* might be an improvement.

To take one of many possible examples, Chapter 1 will demonstrate how the opening pages of the novel might be read as illustrating a Bergsonian theorisation of space and time. However, it will also show that, even in these moments, Proust’s text evades any easy definition as to its ‘message’. There is, therefore, a straightforward reason why the many early ‘Bergsonian’ readings of the novel (such as those of Charles du Bos 1921: 72–73, Pierre-Quint 1925: 33–34; Lewis 1928: 300–10; Monkhouse 1936: 62–63) later became unfashionable. Like Alain de Botton’s reading, they reduced the text to a moral or message: their claim, more or less, was that ‘Proust semble avoir personnellement expérimenté certaines théories bergsoniennes’ (Massis 1937: 160). As we have already noted, the *Recherche* sets itself too often in insuperable contradictions to be caught by such a theorisation. Just as Rousset, for his *atemporal reading*, had to ignore the vision of the ceaseless flow of temporality with which the novel ends, Bergsonian critics struggle with the other side of the coin. While they are happy to read the novel as advocating that humans are ‘plongés [...] dans le Temps’ (IV, 625), there is no easy way of making the atemporal claims — about us being ‘affranchi[s] de l’ordre du temps’ (IV, 451) — square with Bergsonism. *Le Temps retrouvé* is ‘schizoïde’ in its conception of time (Dandieu 1930: 80), or else its author is not a ‘bergsonien orthodoxe’ (Fieschi 1965: 244). In fine, if, at times, the narrator seems to evoke Bergsonian ideas, one can always find moments that contradict Bergson’s ‘philosophy of

movement’ (Paul 2024: 44), as later critics systematically showed (Megay 1976: 51–127; Arbour 1955: 388–40; for further discussion, see pp. 123–24). A similar argument could be made in response to contemporary readings of Bergson in the *Recherche* (Aubert 2011; Hagberg 2023; Guerlac 2023). In the next chapter, for example, we will consider Nathalie Aubert’s reading, which moves from a discussion of particular ‘Bergsonian’ passages to an argument about ‘toute la trame dramatique du roman’ (2011: 130; pp. 65–66).

To leave the question there, however, is to miss the real force and ingenuity of reading Proust *à la* Bergson. Think of how Bergson describes the melody. Instead of trying to find a fixed meaning or message in that text, he describes it as an ‘être vivant’. A text may be made of many heterogeneous elements. But, because it develops within an indissoluble flow of time, these elements can only be understood in their ‘pénétration mutuelle’. We might say that ‘the continuity of style’ is ‘owed to, rather than undermined by, its perpetual renewal’, which is the position that Zakir Paul attributes to Proust in his arguments on classicism (2024: 67, referencing E, 1272). Thus, as Gilles Deleuze argues in *Le bergsonisme* (1966), the very thing that creates the heterogeneity of a work of art (i.e. time) is also what underwrites its continuity (1966: 23–24). Under this approach, even the narrator’s *disagreement* with Bergsonian conceptions of time in *Le Temps retrouvé* would thereby only be another element of the text’s heterogeneity, and thus underlying continuity. A better Bergsonian reading, rather than attempting to fix the text to a message, regards the text’s heterogeneity as proof of the appropriateness of a Bergsonian theorisation. The text’s ‘essence’, therefore, would lie in its continuous ‘mobility’ — its capacity to weave ceaselessly between significations, passages, characters, and purposes. We might note here the ‘proximity’ between Bergsonian ‘durée’ and Derridean ‘écriture’ (Alipaz 2011: 96).

The ingeniousness of this approach is that one does not have to fit a Botton-style ‘message’ to the *Recherche* — nor a Rousset-type ‘form’. On the other hand, critics have objected to Bergsonian approaches for their very nebulousness. For Terence Eagleton, a theorisation of text as a Bergsonian ‘mysterious organic unity’ (Eagleton 1983: 19; 81) is closer to the absence of a

theory than a theory. It is ‘unfalsifiable’, in Karl Popper’s sense of the word (Grünbaum 1976): surely a Bergsonian reading of the *Recherche*, taken in this sense, reveals nothing, since it could be applied to every and any text? This is not, however, the argument given in the most influential riposte to Bergsonian readings of Proust. In *L’espace proustien* (1963), Georges Poulet’s argument did not turn on passages in the novel that reject Bergsonian thinking, nor on the supposition that a Bergsonian theorisation was empty of substance. Instead, drawing on earlier analysis of discontinuities in the *Recherche* (Bonnet 1949: 59; Arbour 1955: 354–55), Poulet recognised that the weak point of a Bergsonian interpretation is its reliance upon a temporal *continuity* underlying textual heterogeneity. For Bergson, movement can only occur within a ceaseless temporal flow (‘durée’). Poulet, however, argued that the *Recherche* was filled with *discontinuities* — both in its fictional world and in the text itself. If there is a ‘principio generale di discontinuità’ [‘general principle of discontinuity’] in Proust, then the text’s ‘essence’ cannot lie in Bergsonian mobility (Contini 2021: 238).

L’espace proustien begins by showing how some Proustian spaces, rather than flowing seamlessly into one another, are bounded, discrete, and discontinuous: ‘il est toute une série de lieux chez Proust, inconfondables avec les autres’ (1963: 28–29). Beyond the opening reveries, Balbec has an essence distinct from that of Combray; Doncières is a different world from that of the Tuileries, and so on. Poulet’s metaphor for this radically disunified Proustian universe, made up of discontinuous ‘spaces’, was the view of various walled-off houses and gardens from an upstairs window of the hero’s Parisian hotel (1963: 54–55). Poulet then argued that, if Proustian spaces can be discrete from one another, the *times* in which these places are experienced must also be discrete. After all, characters could not inhabit a series of discontinuous spaces if they existed in a continuous or ceaseless flow of Bergsonian time, which would join them together. Proustian time, Poulet concludes, must instead be a series of discrete instants, separated from one another like the discrete spaces of the text. Proustian time, therefore, is ‘Cartesian’ or scientific — relying upon a series of discrete and homogeneous instants — rather than Bergsonian.

Avec quelle persistance Proust revient à la notion cartésienne d'une durée composée de moments indépendants, qui, « loin les uns des autres, inconnaisables l'un à l'autre, (demeurent) dans des vases clos et sans communication entre eux d'après-midi différents [(I, 133)] » (1963: 71).

We will be evaluating Poulet's arguments, and his conclusion, in the next section, while we will return to these 'vases clos' in Chapter 4. But what should already be clear is that, despite its apparent celebration of heterogeneity as the grounds for textual continuity, a Bergsonian reading still has to ignore or exclude certain features of the text. Even if a sophisticated Bergsonian approach would not attempt to fix a 'message' onto the novel, but instead sees the text's mobility of signification as underlying its essence, a Bergsonian must still maintain that this mobility is *continuous*. A text of discrete times and places, and of discontinuous fragments, is excluded from Bergsonian analysis: for Bergson, this simply *wouldn't* be an appropriate way to conceptualise, say, our experience of a melody. A Bergsonian reading thereby closes down the text's semantic 'mobility' through the very attempt to fix mobility as the novel's 'essence'.

A First Fragmentary Reading: Discrete Fragments

We have now seen the limits of three 'holistic' readings. To read the *Recherche* as containing an underlying message, hidden 'form', or 'continuity', inevitably requires a (more or less subtle) reduction of the heterogeneity of the text. Even the Bergsonian approach, which seems at the very limits of presenting a contentful 'theorisation', quietly fixes the *Recherche's* ontology, limiting interpretative possibilities. Rousset tried to find a text's 'essence' through arresting its 'mobility'; a Bergsonian finds 'mobility' to be the text's 'essence'. Yet both readings, as theorisations, obviate possible readings of the text. We cannot conceive of 'essence' without some notion of textual 'mobility', but nor can we conceive of 'essence' *as* 'mobility' alone. That is because, without an opposing conception of essence, mobility itself becomes a principle of immobility, closing down the possible transformations of a text.

Seeing this, the reader might well be tempted to take the second path that is open to her upon finishing the *Recherche*. This is to face the music and to declare: ‘the *Recherche* has no essence’. It is a bold move; it would abandon the ‘naïve’ motivation for reading the *Recherche* ‘without skipping the dull bits’. But it may create new ways of enjoying the work as ‘a series of punctual intensities’ (Bowie 2001: 513).

The first book-length study to declare that the *Recherche* just *is* a collection of fragments, ‘un univers en morceaux’ (Poulet 1963: 54–55), was *L’espace proustien*. This radical reconceptualisation has had an enormous impact on contemporary Proustian criticism (for example, see Gunter 2013: 166; Kemp 2018: 39; Elsner 2023: 120; Prendergast 2022: 200). We continue to find frank acknowledgements of the ongoing influence of Poulet’s ‘fragmentary’ reading (Carson 2014: 20; Buuren 2006: 393). Sometimes, a reference to Poulet’s argument is considered enough to disprove any hint of Bergsonism in the *Recherche*: ‘Proust’s conception of time is fundamentally different to Bergson’s, as Poulet (1963: 9) has discussed’ (Kemp 2023: 152). As we shall see (p. 123–24), this assertion is repeated even in the editorial notes for the Pléiade edition of the text (I, 1404). But Poulet also influenced classic studies of Proust, which have gone on to be influential in their own right. These include: Gérard Genette in *Figures I* (1966: 53); Paul de Man in *Allegories of Reading* (1979: 57); *Proust et les signes* by Gilles Deleuze (1971: 133). In what follows, I want to show why such an influential account — although it correctly identifies and exploits the Achilles’ Heel of the Bergsonian reading — still fails to offer us a good theoretical basis for reading the *Recherche*, or any other text.

Poulet’s Reading

We have already seen how Poulet’s argument against Bergsonian readings hinges on discovering discontinuities in the *Recherche*. Although even *one* such discontinuity would stymie a Bergsonian reading, Poulet goes further, arguing that Proust’s universe is a series of discontinuities. Ignoring the many important passages of travel from one place to another — ignoring those key passages

of what Jordan calls ‘Proust in Motion’ (1993: 40–60): time spent on trains (II, 11–19), dogcarts (I, 179–80), automobiles (III, 385), on foot (IV, 385–89), and carriages (II, 76–79) — Poulet argues that: ‘chez Proust, le personnage est toujours placé dans un lieu, il n’est jamais, ou presque jamais, décrit entre les lieux’ (1963: 39). Under Poulet’s conception, each of these fictional spaces is radically separate. Moreover, the ‘individualité propre’ of each person is rigorously defined in relation to the particular and discrete space that they are from (1963: 43). Albertine’s identity is unimaginable without that of Balbec (1963: 36–38). Even more so for the ‘identities’ of women who are — and this is perhaps another flaw in Poulet’s argument — anonymous:

« La passante qu’appelait mon désir me semblait être non un exemplaire quelconque de ce type général : la femme, mais un produit nécessaire et naturel de ce sol [(I, 155)]. » [...] Le lieu s’ouvre donc sur la femme ; mais l’image de la femme s’ouvre aussi sur le lieu (1963: 43–44).

When Poulet analyses the relationships between the ‘passante’ and her ‘terroir’ — in contrast with Genette (1972: 45–46) — he finds a virtuous circle of identification between a specific person and a specific place. Consequently, Poulet alleges that Proustian characters may be theorised as photographs. They are temporally fixed, and can be comprehended only by determining their spatial frame: ‘Chacune de ces « photos » est rigoureusement déterminée par son cadre’ (1963: 40). This conception of Proustian character as photograph will be stress-tested in Chapter 2. But, as one might see from this brief sketch, Poulet’s argument is still troubled by the same basic problem that haunts Rousset and de Botton: it ignores elements of the text. Poulet claims that there is little discussion of movement from place to place (1963: 39), when it is an important leitmotif in the *Recherche*. He also claims that characters such as Albertine can be ‘rigoureusement déterminée[s]’, whereas in fact she is more often described as an ‘être de fuite’ and an enigma (see Fülöp 2017: 111–14). Finally, we might question the elision between the fictional world of the *Recherche* and the text. Even if the *world* of the *Recherche* (the ‘univers proustien’) develops in Cartesian time, and thus contains a series of spatial and temporal discontinuities, this does not imply that the time in which we read the *Recherche* must be discontinuous as well. It is almost as if, by stating that ‘l’univers

proustien est un univers en morceaux’, Poulet has given his own particular idea of the novel’s underlying ‘essence’ — one which (again) excludes other possible readings of the text...

In fact, that is *precisely* the problem. Poulet’s renowned ‘fragmentary’ reading is only another type of ‘holistic’ theorisation. Poulet still imagines an essence underlying Proust. That this ‘essence’ may be the lack of essence — and that the novel’s underlying truth is its lack of underlying truth — is insignificant. By ruling out the possibility that the *Recherche* might have a centre or essence, the fragmentary reader prevents the text from becoming a genuinely radical plurality. This is because one possibility (but one possibility is all we need) is still firmly excluded from this plurality; the plurality, thereby, becomes bounded and determinate: the text’s ontology has been ‘theorised’, and any elements that suggest Bergsonian continuity are airbrushed from the text. In claiming that Proust’s novel is like the collection of walled-off gardens seen from an upstairs window (1963: 54–55), Poulet still looks down on the *Recherche* from a God’s eye perspective.

This is, indeed, an explicit, though oft forgotten, element of *L’espace proustien*. Poulet refers to the *Recherche* as a ‘série de tableaux isolés et juxtaposés’ (1963: 132; see also 122, 126, 136). This may seem to create a sense of the *Recherche* as a radical plurality. But these ‘tableaux’ are each rigorously defined by a ‘cadre’; they are, in that sense, homogeneous. Moreover, they all refer to a pre-existing totality:

Comme des tableaux d’un même peintre pendus à la cimaise de différents musées d’Europe, toute une série de sites proustiens semblent proclamer ainsi leur appartenance à un même univers (1963: 52).

The fragments suggest or invoke a fundamental sameness; they are ‘les fragments d’un même monde’ or ‘même univers’ (1963: 55; 52). As with Rousset, the critic grasps this truth in one synchronous moment of presence.

Proust a conçu la réalité temporelle de son univers sous la forme d’une série de tableaux qui, successivement présentés dans le cours de l’œuvre, devaient, en fin de compte, réapparaître tous ensemble, simultanément, donc hors du temps, mais non hors de l’espace (1963: 136).

In Search of Lost Time ‘really’ is *The Discovery of Timelessness* — yet again! Fundamentally, Poulet’s reading is merely a repetition of Rousset’s; both try to freeze the novel in order to establish one atemporal conception of the text, and of the ‘univers mental’ of its author (Rousset 1962: xii–xiii; Poulet 1969: 66).

[For] Georges Poulet [...] and Jean Rousset [...] the text is reduced to a pure embodiment of the author’s consciousness: all of its stylistic and semantic aspects are grasped as organic parts of a complex totality, of which the unifying essence is the author’s mind (Eagleton 1983: 58–59).

In fact, both critics praised each other’s readings of the *Recherche* (Poulet 1969: 66; Rousset 1962: xvii; 144). While Poulet’s ‘fragmentary’ reading may appear to have more in common with post-structuralist approaches — and indeed did influence them — the basis of its critical motivation remains that of categorising and determining the text: to ‘rentoiler les fragments intermittents et opposites’ (II, 16; quoted by Poulet 1963: 101) into a ‘totalité’ (1963: 102). For a further irony, this theorisation of the work as a ‘totalité organique’ (Pennanech 2009: 240) is not that far from the former Bergsonism to which these members of ‘la Nouvelle critique’ were fiercely opposed (see Douglas 2013: 122).

After encountering the challenges for ‘holistic’ readings, it may have seemed inevitable that the reader ought to declare the text to lack any ‘essence’ — whether that is underlying message, continuity, or form. But this very declaration is, as it turns out, the *branding* of a particular essence upon the text. It is ‘structuralist’ in Derrida’s sense. As Derrida himself noted (1977; 1972c: 56; 1989: 22), to argue for a ‘fragmentary’ theorisation of literary texts is to remain caught within the binary conception of a work between ‘fragments’ and a ‘whole’. Anti-essentialism is a particularly comic, self-defeating kind of essentialism. Worse than this, to call the *Recherche* a ‘series of punctual intensities’ (Bowie 2001: 513) — a series of *discrete moments* — also risks inadvertently returning to a notion of text as a ‘homogeneous flux of accumulative now-points’ (Comay 1990: 85), and thus to an idea of time that offers, not heterogeneity, but a superficial plurality of ‘fragments’ that are qualitatively identical (Paul 2024: 43–44).

The Conundrum of Theorisation

The conundrum proves to be the following. The ‘naïve reader’ of the *Recherche*, as she reads, hopes that the novel will have some ‘essence’. However, attempting to conceive of the *Recherche* as containing an ‘essence’ — whether this is cashed out as an atemporal form, a message, or as Bergsonian mobility — seems necessarily to obviate or exclude some elements of the text. *But*, if the reader decides instead to give up her ‘naïvety’, and say that ‘the *Recherche* doesn’t have an essence’, then she is not out of the woods yet. This *too* is a theorisation, which suffers from the same problem. We return to Derrida’s grim statement: ‘La critique littéraire est structuraliste à tout âge, par essence’ (1967a: 11). Then again, *L’espace proustien* was only the first ‘fragmentary’ reading of the *Recherche*. Perhaps there is a means of recognising the *Recherche* as a series of fragments without inadvertently ‘essentialising’ the text.

A Second Fragmentary Reading: Scrambled Fragments

In a brief footnote in the third edition of *Proust et les signes* (1971, first published 1964), Gilles Deleuze identifies the precisely same problem that we have done with *L’espace proustien*:

Georges POULET dit bien : « L’univers proustien est un univers en morceaux » [(Poulet 1963: 54–55)]. [...] Toutefois, Poulet maintient dans l’œuvre de Proust les droits d’une continuité et d’une unité dont il ne cherche pas à définir la nature originale (Deleuze 1971: 133).

Deleuze likes Poulet’s fragmentary reading of the *Recherche*. All the same, he recognises that Poulet’s conception of the novel is still holistic, insofar as it understands these fragments by reference to an originary ‘continuité’ or ‘unité’. In *Proust et les signes*, therefore, he wants to go further, and to find in the *Recherche* ‘an aesthetic [...] of fragmentation that resists any totalizing wholes’ (Bray 2012: 704). One reason why Deleuze was alive to such a problem in Poulet is that the attempt to think ‘plurality’ or ‘heterogeneity’ *without* any reference to an essence might be said to lie at the heart of his philosophical project, and indeed post-war French thought in general. The abiding question, as Ian James puts it, is:

How can a fragmentation that exceeds any figure of totality be said to characterise a body of thought in its totality, since it is precisely the figure of totality itself which has been displaced or erased by the fragmentary demand? (2006: 3).

A ‘fragmentary’ conception of a literary work always seems to smuggle in some conception of unity, or ‘totality’ — not only because (as I have argued) a ‘fragmentary conception’ of a text is *itself* a totalising one, excluding elements that do not belong to it, but because ‘fragmentation’ itself does not have any meaning except in relation to the idea of ‘totality’ that it has ‘displaced or erased’. To take an example we have already seen, to write that the *Recherche* is ‘un univers en morceaux’ (Poulet 1964: 54–55) is *already* to make a claim about the totality of Proust’s text. In doing so, it remains caught within the structure of binary oppositions between ‘whole’ and ‘fragment’ — and thus maintains a tacit dependence on the ‘figure of totality’.

Deleuze was not interested in this question just for the sake of analysing the *Recherche*, nor even for the sake of literary criticism in a wider sense. It is a difficulty that we also encounter when attempting to theorise the ontology of the ‘human being’ without reference to one central concept (say: the soul) or indeed, particularly after Fascism, the ‘state’ without reference to a single, unified ‘nation’ defining its essence. The fear was that, unless one found a means of performing a ‘fragmentary reading’ without (even subliminal) reference to a whole, one’s thinking would necessarily tend to obviate or exclude (textual) minorities, or peripheries, in favour of some centre. In short, the question is: does ‘theorisation’ of *any* entity necessarily require a reduction of its heterogeneity? We can see, therefore, that this debate around the *Recherche* not only upscales to a debate around how to treat *all* literary texts, but, dizzyingly, it may be taken as a flashpoint in a greater debate around the possibilities for thought itself.

Let us consider Deleuze’s attempt to think the fragment without reference to the whole as it appears in *Proust et les signes* (1971). His basic procedure is that of complexifying and diversifying the relations between Poulet’s fragments. Every character and space is no longer simply a ‘vase clos’. Although Deleuze does rely on this metaphor, which is drawn out of Proust by Poulet (IV, 448 and I, 133; Poulet 1963: 71; Deleuze 1971: 107–08), he also finds some of his own. He argues,

for example, that the novel develops a system of ‘transversales’ (1971: 184–85; from IV, 606) between what he terms (again following Poulet) its ‘monades’ (Deleuze 1971: 52, 178; see Large 2001: 51; Fülöp 2009: 39–40). The purpose of these ‘transversales’ is that they ‘enable a movement from one fragment or multiple “without reducing the many to the One” (Deleuze 2000: 126)’ (Baldwin and French 2023: 762). The ‘transversale’ concept is borrowed, as Deleuze tells us, from the psychoanalysis of Félix Guattari (Deleuze 1971: 184; see Baldwin 2009: 267). Indeed, one can see sketched in *Proust et les signes* an early version of the ‘Rhizome’ essay (1976), and a theorising of the ‘conscience schizoïde’ (Deleuze 1971: 143, 154) subsequently developed in *Mille plateaux* (1980) (Baldwin and French 2023: 460; compare Large 2001: 61). Deleuze’s use of ‘monades’, in turn, anticipates his analysis of Leibniz (1988).

Unlike those later works, however, Deleuze’s approach in *Proust et les signes* is stymied by one inheritance from Poulet that is *not* critically contested. This is the anti-Bergsonian reading of *L’espace proustien*. Deleuze states that any resemblance between Bergson and Proust is not ‘au niveau de la durée’ (1971: 71), and Proust offers no notion of temporal wholeness, ‘comme l’entend Bergson’ (1971: 141). As opposed to the continuous flow of Bergsonian duration, Deleuze conceives of the world of the *Recherche* as ‘éternité’ (1971: 24). Once this is conceded, Deleuze struggles to conceive of his fragments without concession to some concept of ‘unity’. Here we see him trying ineffectively to marry a ‘fragmentary’ reading to an anti-Bergsonian conception of time:

Le temps retrouvé [est] un temps originel absolu, véritable éternité qui s’affirme dans l’art. Chaque espèce de signes a une ligne de temps privilégié qui lui correspond. Mais le pluralisme est là, qui multiplie les combinaisons. Chaque espèce de signes participe inégalement de plusieurs lignes de temps ; une même ligne mélange inégalement plusieurs espèces de signes (1971: 24).

Or again:

C’est dans le temps absolu de l’œuvre d’art que toutes les autres dimensions s’unissent et trouvent la vérité qui leur correspond. Les mondes de signes, les cercles de la Recherche se déploient donc d’après des lignes de temps, véritables *lignes d’apprentissage* ; mais sur ces lignes, ils interfèrent les uns avec les autres, réagissent les uns sur les autres. Ainsi les signes ne se développent pas, ne s’expliquent pas suivant les lignes du temps sans correspondre ou symboliser, sans se recouper, sans entrer dans des combinaisons complexes qui constituent le système de la vérité (1971: 33).

Such passages seem to prove Derrida's contention right. The reduction of time to 'éternité' cannot accommodate the heterogeneity, or 'volume', of a text. In both passages, Deleuze begins with a seemingly totalising claim regarding the 'temps original absolu' of the *Recherche*. Then comes the attempt to complexify the picture: lines, signs, and their mutual interference 'multiplie[nt] les combinaisons'. They 'scramble' the 'divisions between categories' up so badly there is no means of putting them straight again (Baldwin and French 2023: 460). There is asymmetry; there is error and inconsistency. All the same, we are hard-pressed to credit Deleuze's assertion that 'le pluralisme est là'. As Fülöp notes:

It is precisely something *beyond* multiplicities that constitutes the ultimate target of artistic creation [for Deleuze]. The 'Essence' par excellence in and of the Proustian universe cannot be anything other than the ultimate object of the quest (2009: 41).

The play of signs, through which the 'pluralisme' enters, remains on the level of the cosmetic. They are only vaguely related (in the first quotation), or unrelated (in the second), to the 'lignes du temps' that are 'véritables *lignes d'apprentissage*', and 'constituent' the deep current that forms the purpose and unity of Proust's novel: its 'système de la vérité'. For Graham Jones and Jon Roffe, the systematicity encountered in *Proust et les signes* is therefore far greater than that found in more traditional criticism:

What is particularly striking — and possibly unique — about Deleuze's approach in *Proust and Signs* is that he finds a degree of systematicity (albeit implicit) within the novel that goes beyond any conventional concern with narrative or symbolic architecture (2019: 98).

Signs, under Deleuze's analysis, are required for Marcel's quest. In their very contingency, they offer the irrational violence by which real thinking can occur: a sign 'force à penser' (1971: 184). But what a sign 'force [la pensée] à penser' is atemporal essence: 'Sous les signes de l'art, nous apprenons ce qu'est la pensée pure comme faculté des essences'; 'seule la pensée pure découvre l'essence, est forcée de penser l'essence comme la raison suffisant du signe' (1971: 191; 192–93). Contingency, therefore, reveals a reality that is fixed and atemporal (Deleuze 1971: 188). Just as we found with Poulet and Rousset, heterogeneity leads us back to a timeless order once more.

This is all the more confusing since, in *Le Bergsonisme* (1966), Deleuze argued for something very similar to Derrida in ‘Force et Signification’. Any thought that neglects ‘durée’ must substitute the qualitatively heterogeneous only for ‘différences de degré’ — a superficial heterogeneity of quantities (Deleuze 1966: 23–24). Without a conception of time as immeasurable flow, there is no capacity for a genuine conception of heterogeneity (Deleuze 1966: 29). It has even been argued that Bergsonism is at the heart of Deleuze’s later thinking of fragmentariness (Robinet 1965: 28; Roffe 2012: 10–14). The wider questions regarding Deleuze and heterogeneity, which have been so memorably disputed by Badiou (1997), lie beyond the bounds of this thesis. But, to confine ourselves merely to *Proust et les signes*, Deleuze appears to have been limited by his agreement, shared with Poulet, that the *Recherche* has an anti-Bergsonian approach to time. At one point, he seems to suggest that a Leibnizian theorisation of the text through monades would nevertheless restore a ‘différence qualitative’:

Les essences sont de véritables monades, chacune se définissant par le point de vue auquel elle exprime le monde, chaque point de vue renvoyant lui-même à une qualité ultime au fond de la monade (1971: 52).

But again we get into difficulties here when Deleuze recognises that, for Leibniz, these qualitatively different monades still rely upon ‘une unité et une totalité préalables’ (1971: 178). Thus, Proust’s visions must (somehow) be different from these yet again (1971: 179)! In *Proust et les signes*, Deleuze’s thought is compressed into an odd, impossible position. Searching for non-totalising ‘fragmentary’ reading, but bounded by his refusal of Bergsonism, the text runs into a series of insuperable contradictions.

Between Fragmentary and Holistic Readings: Deconstruction

Then again, perhaps that is the point. Perhaps it is the very *impossibility* of the act of criticism that Deleuze’s text manifests. Deleuze might be taken as arguing both ‘with and against himself’, just like how Prendergast describes Proust (2013: 18). For example, Deleuze claims that the novel is the ‘recherche de la vérité’ (1971: 115, 21, 186). Yet he also claims that: ‘*Il n’y a pas de Logos, il n’y a*

que des hiéroglyphes' in the *Recherche* (1971: 195). The 'unité formidable' detected in the *Recherche* is 'absolument vide, uniquement formelle' (1971: 142). In still a later edition, a further section 'contradicts much of what Deleuze argues in the rest of his work' (Bray 2012: 703; see also Bray 2014: 17–18). Perhaps Deleuze returned to his text in later editions in order to thread its initial 'logique de la classification' with a destabilising conception of textual 'mobilités' (Simon 2016: 131). Under this reading, *Proust et les signes* would be an expression of the contradictions inherent the *Recherche* itself; and indeed, as we shall see (p. 118), Deleuze's text contradicts itself even on minor points. This might be expected if Proustian essences are 'essentially' differences: 'Qu'est-ce qu'une essence, telle qu'elle est révélée dans l'œuvre d'art ? C'est une différence, la Différence ultime et absolue' (Deleuze 1971: 51). Paul de Man read Deleuze in this way:

Is this novel the allegorical narrative of its own deconstruction? Some of its most perceptive recent interpreters seem to think so when they assert, like Gilles Deleuze, the 'powerful unity' ['unité formidable' (Deleuze 1971: 142)] of the *Recherche* despite its inherent fragmentation (de Man 1979: 72).

Margaret Gray, equally, writes that: '*Proust et les signes*, through successive revisions and additions, presents an increasingly postmodern Proustian text' (1992: 4). In *Proust et les signes*, signs themselves have been said to have a 'double' or confused ontology: at once 'concrete, distinctly perceived' and 'completely immaterial, amorphous, and virtual' (Drohan 2009: 36).

'Deconstruction' might be taken as a distinctive development beyond a 'fragmentary' reading. Rather than conceiving the text in relation to an 'essence', and rather than claiming that the text is a series of fragments; deconstruction (in the most charitable understanding of the term) begins with the idea that: 'a literary text simultaneously asserts and denies the authority of its own rhetorical mode' (de Man 1979: 17). The text is, simultaneously, 'the elaboration and the undoing of a system' (de Man 1979: ix). A literary text is thereby understood in its oscillation between an infinite semantic 'mobility' and its attempt to construct a fixed and stable 'essence'. The underlying 'unity' is dissolved through contrasting and contradictory gestures, but (crucially) fragmentation

itself cannot be understood without regards to a beleaguered ‘essence’. The text itself is ‘constituted in the first place’ (de Man 1979: 17) by this tide-like oscillation between ‘essence’ and ‘fragmentation’. Thus, deconstruction need not be (as is sometimes claimed) an outright rejection of ‘essence’: it is not (or, at least, *tries* not to be) just another form of anti-essentialism (see Husain 2025b). To do so would be, as Derrida argued (p. 35), not to escape essentialism, but merely to repeat it once more.

However, deconstructive approaches are always menaced by the danger of a collapse into straightforward anti-essentialism. For example, when, in *Proust Between Deleuze and Derrida*, James Dutton writes that ‘[t]here can be no presentation of the “essence” of Proust’s novel’ (2023: 3), he falls precisely into this error. This very statement *brands* an essence on the text. The *Recherche* is essentialised via the *permanent mobility* of its significance: ‘the Recherche is a novel whose philosophical depth is always in a process of renewal’ (2023: 1). This reading of the *Recherche* is expressive of a fixed theorisation of the literary text, which Dutton ascribes to Proust: ‘for Proust, the literary is always a process of becoming’ (2023: 3). However, if we hold that ‘Proust’s novel is always in the movement of becoming-other: it remains an undecidable text’ (2023: 4), then the text’s ontology has *already* been decided upon. It is ‘always’ (note the triple repetition of this term in the preceding quotations) mobile.

To mention in passing two thinkers who will be important later in this thesis, in articulating this nuance in deconstruction, Derrida draws upon Martin Heidegger’s critique of Friedrich Nietzsche. This is developed at length in the lectures (Heidegger 2016), but summarised in the *Letter on Humanism* (first published 1946): ‘From within metaphysics, he [Nietzsche] was unable to find any other way out than a reversal of metaphysics. But that is the height of futility’ (Heidegger 2011: 164). Simply inverting metaphysics is another form of metaphysics and nothing else. Heidegger’s response to this problem is to propose as contradictory conception of disclosure as *poiesis*, a notion to which we will return (p. 207; 217). We might note that this approach, like that of Derrida, was influenced by Bergson’s conception of ‘durée’ (see Heidegger 2008: 500–01).

Now, it is certainly true that Derrida himself sometimes slips into statements that essentialise the literary text. Throughout, say, *Positions* (1972c), he insists that texts are always *not* homogeneous. ‘Le texte heideggérien qui, pas plus qu’un autre, n’est homogène’; ‘pas plus qu’aucun autre texte, celui de Saussure n’est homogène’; Freud, Marx, or Engel’s texts are, likewise, not homogeneous, and ‘c’est ce motif de l’homogénéité, motif théologique par excellence, qu’il faut décidément détruire’ (Derrida 1972c: 18; 71; 86). All the same, deconstruction — when at its best — can also approach the text as an impossibility: both as homogeneity *and* a series of heterogeneous fragments. Thereby, it might unthink the logic of ‘neither/nor’ upon which both essentialism and anti-essentialism depend (B. Johnson 2020: 329). The deconstructive reader can say that: ‘the *Recherche* both does and does not have an essence’. This could dissolve the philosophical binaries of ‘fragment’ and ‘unity’, or ‘mobility’ and ‘essence’. De Man’s approach, as given in the preface to *Allegories of Reading* (1979), echoes the descriptions of deconstruction given by Derrida in the early 1970s.

Déconstruire l’opposition, c’est d’abord, à un moment donné, renverser la hiérarchie [textuelle]. [...] Dès lors, [...] il a fallu analyser, faire travailler, dans le texte [...] certaines marques [...] qui ne se laissent plus comprendre dans l’opposition philosophique (binaire) (Derrida 1972c, 57–58).

A similar outlining of this two-step movement of deconstruction can be found in *Dissémination and Marges* (1972b: 10; 1972a: 392).

The deconstructive approach could handle the *Recherche*’s ‘committed equivocat[ion] of several of the primary binaries’ (Prendergast 2022: 206). As we have already noted, the novel contains several insuperable contradictions, or ‘aporias’ as a Derridean would no doubt call them. It articulates a conception of time-boundedness *and* atemporality; its story is both a waste of time *and* a necessity; it is a world of both underlying continuity and radical discontinuities between spaces and times. In all of these senses, the *Recherche* is ‘une œuvre achevée-inachevée’ (Blanchot 1959: 19). Or, as Reinhard Kuhn put it as early as 1964: ‘the internal or secret structure [of the *Recherche*] seems [...] based on a constant movement between destruction and

reconstruction' (1964: 295). 'The movement of *À la recherche* towards totalization' may be 'both a necessity and an unreachable goal' (Ferré 2009: 207); its essence is forming and deforming itself over the course of the text. Deconstruction also opens a very neat solution for solving two of the classic problems of Proustian criticism. Firstly, what are the relations between hero, narrator, and author? Secondly, is the text of the *Recherche* the text which the narrator, at its close, intends to write? The deconstructive reader can say 'both/and' and 'neither/nor' to these questions. She might write 'Marcel ~~est~~ Proust', making use of Derrida's concepts under 'rature' (Derrida 1967b: 89; see also Dutton 2023: 27). She may even play with a concept of the *Recherche* even as 'Literature', a novel that delivers on our expectations of 'Literature' and simultaneously critiques them. Or again, she might read *Le Temps retrouvé* as *Le Temps retroué* (to mention another abysmal pun which a typographical error, collaborating with my supervisor, has drawn to my attention).

Might a deconstructive reading work for Proust, then? Derrida himself was not so sure. In 'Force et Signification', he writes that: 'L'esthétique proustienne [est] accordée en profondeur avec celle de Rousset'; 'La vérité du temps [chez Proust] n'est pas temporelle' (1967a: 38; 40). As Duncan Large has shown, Derrida articulates an 'uncritical acceptance of Rousset's Proust' even while he develops his critique of Rousset's 'structuralism' (2001: 45; see also Prendergast 2013: 179; cf. Dutton 2023: 9). To my mind, this mistake is symptomatic of a greater problem, which is, as we shall see (p. 88), related to the very form of an essay. Derrida's reading is *itself* a kind of structuralism. To critique Rousset, he has to simplify and caricature his critical output, which is far more complicated, and mystical, than Derrida gives him credit for (Pennanech 2009: 240). But Paul de Man's *Allegories of Reading* (1979) — the final critical approach to be considered in this introduction — *is* a well-known example of a deconstructive reading applied to the *Recherche*. It has had a wide influence (Ellison 1984: 97) and is often debated and discussed (Fülöp 2017: 166; Watt 2009a: 26–31). If *this* can be made to work, then perhaps we can read *Proust et les signes*, too, as a successful experiment.

Paul de Man's Reading

Paul de Man attempts to show that, even while the novel constructs one conception of text as unified continuity, it also deconstructs this projected essence. He investigates what he calls 'the main text on reading' in the novel (1979: 58). When the hero sits down to read in the garden in Combray, the act of reading may at first appear to be synonymous with the apprehension of a text's timeless and original essence. However, the *Recherche* implicitly deconstructs that conception of reading even as it is being enunciated. De Man draws his argument around this sentence:

[M]es rêves de voyage et d'amour [venus de ma lecture] n'étaient que des moments — que je sépare artificiellement aujourd'hui comme si je pratiquais des sections à des hauteurs différentes d'un jet d'eau irisé et en apparence immobile — dans un même et inflexible jaillissement de toutes les forces de ma vie (I, 86).

He writes that:

The persuasive value of the passage depends on one's reading of the fountain as an entity which is both immobile and iridescent. [...] The miraculous interference of water and light in the refracted rainbow of the color spectrum makes its appearance throughout the novel, infallibly associated with the thematics of metaphor as totalization. It is the perfect analogon for the figure of complementarity, the differences that make up the parts absorbed in the unity of the whole as the colors of the spectrum are absorbed in the original white light (1979: 69).

De Man's argument is that the reference to a 'jet d'eau irisé' articulates a totalising theory of the reading. Like a text, a light may seem to contain a plurality of elements when it is passed through a fine body of falling water. However, the colour spectrum can be traced back to the 'unity' of an 'original white light'. Similarly, the apparent heterogeneity of a literary text can be traced back to an underlying, fixed essence.

'The persuasive value of the passage depends on one's reading of the fountain as an entity which is [...] immobile' (1979: 69). Paul de Man is absolutely insistent on this point: 'the continuous flow ('jaillissement') [...] represents an identity that is [...] beyond time' (1979: 68). The fountain, as metaphor for reading, is 'not temporal', 'involves no duration'; it is 'timeless' (1979: 67–9). Consequently, this is a 'spatial representation [...] within one single moment', just as

the novel is ‘the narrative extension of one single moment of recollection’ (1979: 68) — that of the madeleine.

‘Yet the passage’, writes de Man, ‘seems oddly unable to remain sheltered within this intra-textual closure’ since ‘what is here called “love” and “travel” are not, like the narrator and his natural setting, two intra-textual moments in a fiction, but rather the irresistible motion that forces any text beyond its limits and projects it towards an exterior referent’ (1979: 69). Thus, in the moment of reading, there is the ‘projection’ of these elements as belonging to a whole and, simultaneously, through the ‘rêves de voyage et d’amour’ that reading brings, the attempt to move beyond any single theorisation of the literary text. ‘The language of consciousness’ tries to escape becoming ‘ensconced’ in a static essence (1979: 70). Proust’s writing deconstructs its own fantasies as it goes along, ‘simultaneously assert[ing] and den[y]ing the authority of its own rhetorical mode’ (1979: 17). Thereby, the reader senses ‘the novel’s narrative texture as a play of fragmentation and reunification’ (1979: 68).

But how odd that de Man’s deconstruction, which attempts to show how these opposing textual drives ‘never reach a synthesis’ (1979: 71), should itself be so neat in its analysis of texts. Is there not a possibility that the *Recherche*, even in this one-sentence passage, should itself challenge the synthesis (i.e. the refusal of aesthetic synthesis) that Paul de Man has found in it?

Actually, there does seem to me to be a significant blind spot in this reading. If ‘the persuasive value of the passage depends on one’s reading of the fountain as an entity which is [...] immobile’, the problem is that the imagined fountain simply *isn’t*. It is only ‘en apparence immobile’. Really, it is flowing; it is time-bound; it is continuous. Another reading of this metaphor would be that, while one could ‘sépare[r] artificiellement’ the seemingly discrete ‘moments’ of the past, just as one could separate the ‘sections’ of a ‘jet d’eau’, this would fail to appreciate their continuous *movement*. It is again a question of a critic refusing ‘jaillissement’, or else eliding it. De Man writes that: ‘The continuous flow (‘jaillissement’) of the narrative represents an identity that is beyond the senses and beyond time’ (1979: 69). But, again — why? The unity, or totality,

imagined here could just as well be a *moving* unity — a spurt, a ‘durée’, into which apparently different states or moments in time are inextricably blended. Besides this, there is no ‘fountain’ in the actual text! It is a ‘jet d’eau irisé’. It is only through connecting this ‘jet d’eau irisé’ with ‘the refracted rainbow of the color spectrum which makes its appearance throughout the novel’ (1979: 69) that Paul de Man extrapolates the image into a fountain. To offer such a broad view of ‘reading’ in the *Recherche* he not only has to pick out his own ‘centre’ — the ‘central scene of reading in the *Recherche*’ — but also studiously to ignore certain elements of the very sentence he picks for analysis.

How could this be? Don’t ‘deconstructive’ readings, by making contradiction or antimony the basis of their very approach, open themselves both to fragmentation and unification, mobility and essence? In fact, Paul de Man’s conception of aesthetic ‘essence’ may not be sufficiently mobile or heterogeneous. He supposes that, if the *Recherche* offers us a notion of textual completion or unity, that idea must be the static essence imagined by Jean Rousset or Georges Poulet. But, as we have seen, that is not the only notion of unity going. A Bergsonian reader may imagine an *essence in mobility* (or ‘jaillissement’). Might not the *Recherche* have a certain mobility even in the ‘authority of its own rhetorical mode’? The text may move *between* varying conceptions of ‘essence’ while likewise varying the figures of ‘mobility’ that would seem either to challenge or to evidence it.

The basic problem with Paul de Man’s deconstructive reading reveals itself to be the same one that we have observed haunting ‘holistic’ and ‘fragmentary’ readings of the *Recherche*. Even if it is tacit, de Man’s reading remains a theorisation: it relies upon a fixed conceptualisation of the ontology of a literary text (1979: 17). Then, inevitably, it interprets those texts relative to the theory. Whether the text is theorised as ‘essence’ (Rousset), as ‘fragment’ (Poulet, Deleuze), or as the play between ‘essence’ and ‘fragment’ (de Man), there is still a theoretical blueprint to which the critic works. The theory, which they project onto the artwork, then colours their reading, obviating or excluding heterogeneity in the text itself. In the first instance, Rousset suppressed features that did not fit with the text’s supposed ‘forme’; in the second, Poulet suppressed elements of continuity;

in the third, Paul de Man ignored parts that suggest mobility *within the very conception of essence* which, consequently, could not be neatly pinned down or deconstructed in his essay.

Derrida himself was acutely aware of this difficulty in deconstruction. In the *Choreographies* interview, for example, he appears (in a rare moment of self-correction) to regret the two-step definition of deconstruction given in the early 1970s.

I spoke of two distinct phases [of deconstruction] for the sake of clarity, but the relationship of one phase to another is marked less by conceptual determinations (that is, where a new concept follows an archaic one) than by a transformation or general deformation of logic (Derrida and McDonald 1982: 72).

To be ‘too clear’ on the purposes and nature of deconstruction risks reducing it to a concept (Derrida 2022: 283–85; O’Keeffe 2018: 375). Deconstruction must remain untheorized, lest its very approach become another kind of theorisation. Yet this constant requirement can create a kind of paranoia, and a corresponding bad faith, on the part of the would-be deconstructive reader, who is forever frightened of articulating, or avowing, her own purposes and intentions. Derrida’s countering of this tendency involves writing in ‘plus d’une langue’ (see Monod 2005) — moving between a variety of discourses, images, suggestions, double-gestures. But, once this movement between theories has been explicitly embraced as a strategy, does not it too become immobile? To keep moving from discourse to discourse is itself a kind of discourse, and one whose bounded style we can, on reading Derrida, readily sense. Thus, Derridean readings can come to be both predictable and lacking in genuine stakes. As Catherine Malabou asks, as part of an extensive critique of Derrida that argues along these lines: ‘Le trajet de l’écriture [de Derrida] [...] ne se réduit-il pas lui aussi à une manière de phronomie, de déplacement sans aventure ?’ (2005: 92–93). If the answer to such a question would (again) take us beyond the bounds of this thesis, we can at least recognise that it articulates an ever-present danger: deconstruction risks becoming ‘Deconstruction’. It can easily become just another theory of language, and another theorisation of the text (Gasché 1979: 178–79; Culler 1983: 228). Derrida knew this: ‘La critique littéraire est structuraliste à tout âge, par essence’ (1967a: 11). He made this claim not only while performing a

form of literary criticism on Rousset's writings, but with a statement that *itself* essentialises, since it defines literary criticism in terms of its ahistorical 'essence'. Is there any means of reading that is freed from this particular danger?

Justifying Naïvety

I must apologise: for a 'hermeneutics of naïvety', the argument of the last few pages has become increasingly, and perhaps maddeningly, theoretical. After demonstrating why *Proust et les signes* could, under one possible reading, be considered a failure, we began considering an alternative 'deconstructive' reading of Deleuze's text. Yet 'deconstruction' itself, even once defended from a reductive interpretation of it as a kind of anti-essentialism, is always in danger of becoming merely another theorisation of the text. It can teeter into a phronomous predictability, and its apparently subversive gestures become stale and inconsequential.

To return to the issue at hand, we might say that the basic problem faced by every account of the *Recherche* has been the same. This is that the 'critic' inevitably produces a 'theorisation' — a conceptualisation of the ontology of the literary text. Rousset expects all literary texts to be 'totalité[s]'; for Paul de Man 'a literary text simultaneously asserts and denies the authority of its own rhetorical mode' (de Man 1979: 17). Poulet conceives of the work as 'une série de tableaux' (1963: 136), while Deleuze tries to find in it an example of fragmentariness without reference to an underlying centre. Whatever the theory is, the critics have had to reduce the text to fit their theorisation of it. Thus, Proust 'has survived all critical approaches' (Wimmers 2003: 3); no reading of the *Recherche* has been successful. Indeed, as Patrick Bray argues, critics often use Proust as a 'mirror' by which to reflect their 'various and conflicting desires, delusions and designs' (2019: 95–96). The 'fragmentary' reading has shown itself not only to be theoretically self-defeating, and unnecessarily limiting, but also incapable of sustaining a particular 'naïve' experience of the *Recherche* as quest.

My solution is to *stop* theorising the text. What if the nature of the essence longed for by reader and hero were untethered? What if the hero and reader of the *Recherche* were unsure of what they longed for? What if, indeed, one could detect within the *Recherche* itself an ambivalence, and oscillation between, different theorisations of mobility and essence? We have already glimpsed something of the sort. When human beings and literary texts are described as ‘plongés dans les années’ (IV, 625), we detected a theorisation of essence as mobility, redolent of Bergsonism. On the other hand, when the narrator joys in being ‘affranchi de l’ordre du temps’ (IV, 451), he articulates an atemporal theorisation of his essence. Hence my refusal properly to determine and fix the meaning of the two words underlying this thesis: ‘essence’ and ‘mobility’. ‘Mobility’ might be the mobile *discontinuities* of textual movement — say, the ‘morceaux disparates mobiles’ of Albertine’s face (Deleuze 1971: 212; see III, 655; IV, 60). Yet it may also be Bergsonian continuity; the ‘mobilité’ which Thibaudet, for example, found in Proust’s continuous and flowing prose (1920: 426). Essence, therefore, may be opposed to mobility, or it may be a kind of mobility; or we may speak, equally, of a discontinuous mobility between essences. Towards the conclusion of this thesis, essence will also be thought of in relationship with Heidegger’s notion of ‘Being’, as that which allows for the disclosure of ‘beings’, or entities (p. 212).

Crucially, what the naïve reader longs to discover in the *Recherche* remains *untheorized and unfixe*d. It may move over the course of her reading. Indeed, as we read through the *Recherche* in the ensuing chapters, we will encounter the various theorisations articulated here — from Bergsonism, to Poulet and Rousset, to deconstructive readings — again and again. The desire for a textual essence does not prevent us from finding in the text elements of various different conceptions of essence, nor mobility, nor textual fragments. It does not put limits on the ontology of the text. We may say instead, with Maurice Blanchot, that: ‘*Un livre, même fragmentaire, a un centre qui l’attire: centre non pas fixe, mais qui se déplace par la pression du livre*’ (1955: 9). There is, therefore, still the capacity for movement that we might associate with Bergsonian ‘durée’ or Derridean ‘écriture’, but this movement is also freighted with a possibility, and stakes, that turn it into a genuine

hermeneutical adventure: the movement might stop; or fragment into discontinuous leaps; the reader might find, at any moment, the longed-for ‘essence’. Moreover, as I have argued, and as I will show in the first part of the following chapter, I believe that this is closer to how a ‘naïve reader’ actually experiences the confusion and variety of the *Recherche*.

This thesis intends to trace one possible journey through the novel. Rather than defining the critic, as Paul de Man does, ‘as the “second” reader or reading’ of a text (1971: 141; see also Yee 2010: 2; Bray 2024: 37), my intention is to bring the critic and the reader together by jettisoning any prior critical ‘theorisation’ of literature, together with any fixed reading method. In that sense, the approach is still less bounded than Ricœur’s ‘second naïvety’. This ‘seconde naïveté’ is achieved ‘dans et par la critique’ (Ricœur 1959: 71). It is opposed *both* to standard academical exegesis — ‘de la philologie, de l’exégèse, de la psychanalyse’ (Ricœur 1959: 71) — *and* to a ‘pre-reflective, everyday attitude’ (Buzási 2022: 47) or a ‘pre-critical naïvety’ (Scott-Baumann 2009: 153). However, while this thesis will be working ‘through’ competing critical accounts of the *Recherche*, this will not be in order to produce a new, third relationship to the text, but to foreground and defend the intuitions (and confusions) of a ‘first’ and ‘everyday’ reading.

A ‘hermeneutics of naïvety’ is thus not really a hermeneutics at all. It is certainly not a hermeneutics in the sense of the ‘hermeneutic science of textual study’, such as it emerged at the turn of the nineteenth century (Prendergast 2007: 8; see Part II, Chapter 1). But it is also not to be classed with the types of ‘hermeneutics’ that emerged in reaction to these scientific approaches — say, Heidegger’s ‘hermeneutic circle’ (2008: 194–95), or Ricœur’s own circle (1971: 71), which use elements of the text to theorise a sense of its whole, and *vice versa*. Again, we must emphasise that a naïve hermeneutics lacks *any* particular theorisation of text or reading method. It is a ‘holistic’ approach, but it does not suppose that the text has to be a whole, nor that: ‘L’œuvre est une totalité et elle gagne toujours à être éprouvée comme telle’ (Rousset 1962: xii–xiii). Rather, without expressing an idea of what the literary text is or must be, the reading is merely motivated by the hope of finding a textual essence of *some* sort. A ‘hermeneutics of naïvety’ thereby gives the reader

that particularly strong, and personal, motivation to read the *Recherche* from start to finish, but does not freight her with unnecessary metaphysical baggage. Further, it embraces textual heterogeneity in a manner far more profound than the assertion that the *Recherche* is a ‘series of punctual intensities’ (Bowie 2001: 513). The very heterogeneity and ungraspability of the text — as I will try to show in the ensuing thesis — is best experienced *through* the reader’s attempt to find this untheorized ‘essence’. For how can fragments be experienced as *fragments* without some prior conception of wholeness? Without the expectation, or hope, of finding a centre, a labyrinth — which is one of Proust’s metaphors for a literary work (E, 1217) — appears merely as a collection of hedges. Under this approach, it is the reader’s theoretical naïvety that allows her to experience both the fragmentariness and the unity of the text. The desire to find an ‘essence’ underlying the *Recherche* — as long as this essence is not theorised or fixed — sanctions an experience of the novel as ‘spiritual quest’ (Bray 2019: 97). Refusing to determine what it is looking for — but still to be looking for *something* — allows a naïve reading to engage in a real exegetical ‘aventure’ (Malabou 2005: 92–93). Thus, a ‘hermeneutics of naïvety’ remains *itself* naïve, ‘vide, mobile, imprévisible’, in the way hoped for by Roland Barthes (1973: 83). Naïvety is a new means of responding to the challenges that Jacques Derrida, amongst others, found in ‘theorisation’. But it works not through an ever-increasing complexity of ‘Theory’, but by returning to the experience of the reader and an untheorized, but desired, essence. It marks, thereby, a distinctive new response to an on-going debate in post-war French thought.

All this might sound great, as it were, ‘in theory’. But what would a naïve reading look like in practice? What critical tools would it use, or refrain from using? How could it offer any interpretation without ‘theorising’, in some or another manner, the meaning of a text? And can we really read, as literary critics, without a reading method? It is to these unresolved concerns about a ‘hermeneutics of naïvety’ that we will turn in the next chapter, which reads the *Recherche* from its very beginning, sentence by sentence.

Chapter 1: Out of the Basement of Science (I, 3–9)

Nous serons, nous qui faisons l'histoire littéraire — je n'ai point de peine à l'admettre,— ceux
 qui travaillent dans les sous-sol de la science.
 — Gustave Lanson, 'L'histoire littéraire et la sociologie'

This thesis began with the question: 'why do we read *À la recherche du temps perdu*?' It argued that a 'naïve' reader reads because she wishes to understand the essence of the novel, even though she may not know if this 'essence' will be a message, a vision, a form, or something else. This chapter shows how the first six pages of the novel draw the reader into the *Recherche* by eliciting this 'naïve' interpretative desire. It then demonstrates how critical readings, by attempting to determine this meaning, close down the very play of signification that creates this literary effect. A second part speculates on how this opening passage may have arisen out of Proust's response to literary theory in *Contre Sainte-Beuve*. Thereby, we find a further justification for a 'hermeneutics of naïvety' — one which reads without a theorisation, nor a critical methodology, nor a clear distinction between author and narrator.

Part I: The Opening

The Recherche in miniature

Once a reader picks up a novel, how does its author convince her to keep reading? The tried-and-tested formula is by interesting her in the fortunes of a character, or group of characters. Will Bernard Profitendieu pass his 'bachot'? Can Peter, Susan, Edmund, and Lucy adjust to their new life in the countryside? And what will happen to Apuleius, all alone in distant Thessaly?

It is perhaps the mark of a good novelist that they know quite how easily sympathy is aroused — but also how rapidly it fades. The little flame of interest must be tempered by perpetual puffs of excitement if it is to sustain the reader's attention. Thus, in each of these novels, the original difficulty is speedily replaced with something newer and stranger: Bernard discovers his real father; the children enter a magic wardrobe; Apuleius becomes tangled amongst the

storytellers. Our interest in an initial problem is diverted into another one, and then again into another, until the reader herself has become, without realising it, diverted. For Stephen King, writing is ideally a ‘creative sleep’ (2000: 156–57). In this seamless, trancelike state, the ideal reader — like the Sultan in *Les Mille et Une Nuits* — is unaware of the careful manipulations that keep her ‘« dilaté[e] [...] à la limite de la satisfaction »’ (II, 700).

Arguably, the *Recherche* begins with one such account of reading. While reading an undisclosed book, the hero drifts into a sleep where: ‘il me semblait que j’étais moi-même ce dont parlait l’ouvrage’ (I, 3). It is ‘a scenario in which subjectivity degrades’ (Dutton 2023: 48); the hero’s sense of self blurs and mingles with the text (see also Watt 2009: 104; Simon 2016: 143). Then again, if this is the first description of reading that the *Recherche* offers us, it is all the more galling that it is an experience which the novel itself fails to *perform* on its reader. Instead of slipping seamlessly into the fictional world, the novel’s first readers were emphatically unentranced by this opening:

Je suis peut-être bouché à l’émeri, mais je ne puis comprendre qu’un monsieur puisse employer trente pages à décrire comment il se tourne et retourne dans son lit avant de trouver le sommeil (Corr. XII: 87).

Such is the opinion of M. Humblot. The quotation is famous, and often given by critics as an amusing *fait divers* about the fatuity of contemporary reactions to the *Recherche*. Barthes, for example, called it a ‘réaction de bêtise’ (2022: 158; see also Bruncevic 2021: 12; Green 1949: 6–7). It is an instantiation, perhaps, of the narrator’s somewhat pompous claim that ‘des siècles’ must pass ‘avant que le public puisse aimer un chef-d’œuvre vraiment nouveau’ (I, 521–22).

Yet Humblot was no cultural neophyte. As the long-term ‘directeur’ of Ollendorff, he had edited and published writers that were both critically and commercially successful (Zieliński 2019: 306). Nor was his opinion unusual. Jacques Madeleine was the general secretary at Fasquelle, a routine assessor of literary manuscripts, and an established poet in his own right. In his ‘rapport de lecture’, Madeleine was even clearer about the interpretative difficulties of the first volume:

On n'a aucune, aucune notion de ce dont il s'agit. Qu'est-ce que tout cela vient faire ? Qu'est-ce que tout cela signifie ? [...] On se demande constamment : Mais pourquoi tout cela ? Mais quel rapport ? Quoi ? Quoi enfin ? [...]

Il y a là vraiment un cas pathologique (Madeleine 1999: 446).

Madeleine's insistent questions register personal indignation as much as perplexity. The overall impression is that of a listener who has charitably loaned his attention to what promised to be a 'story', and has been deceived. It is as if a pathological joke has been played on anyone who wants to discover 'ce dont il s'agit'. The 'naïve' desire — the desire to read in order to understand what the text means — has been both *aroused* in Madeleine, and then left *unsatisfied*. He feels he should know what it is about, and yet he does not. Is this, too, a 'réaction de bêtise' (Barthes 2022: 158)?

'Quoi ? Quoi enfin ?' How many of Proust's readers can sympathise with Madeleine's exasperated questions? I should think, from time to time, all of them. Rather than taking these reactions as examples of ill-advised early criticism, this chapter will come to argue that Madeleine and Humblot express *appropriate readerly responses* to the opening of the *Recherche*. Through its confusing 'branle' — which rocks between theories on sleep, comparisons to 'hirondelles de mer' (I, 7), and the frankly bizarre memory of a hair-loving 'grand-oncle' (I, 4) — the passage perpetually invites its reader to ask, 'pourquoi tout cela ?' It can be 'annoyingly vague' (Shattuck 1964: 81) and fatiguing. In fact, 'on pourrait supposer que le livre du dormeur éveillé ressemble au livre que nous venons de commencer à lire' (Bray 2022: 26): perhaps the text opens by putting its hero to sleep with itself! However, if they do not tire us out, the opening pages arouse, without satisfying, an interpretative desire in the reader. Satisfaction is deferred because there is no means of forming a stable interpretation of the text — no means of 'theorising' its ontology, or determining its message. Through a close reading of the first few pages, and then a comparison of opposing critical attitudes to them, we will see how the text draws in its reader — *not* through interesting her in the particular fortunes of a character, but through her own interpretative adventure.

The First Sentence

Longtemps, je me suis couché de bonne heure (I, 3).

It may seem quite witheringly staid to begin a study of a novel with its first sentence. Even more so with Proust, and with the sentence that is ‘the most famous of all in French literature’ (Lennon 2007: 53). If, later in this study, I will focus on passages that are more easily forgotten by the reader, for now I wish to consider the very memorability of this opening sentence, which is ‘perhaps the most persistent phrase of Proust’s *Recherche* to have sunk into popular consciousness’ (Dutton 2023: 10). Why is this sentence so often used as a metonymy for the entire *Recherche*? Why is it endlessly quoted and misquoted by writers from Anthony Powell to *Oulipo*, Hervé Guibert to Derrida (Powell 1968: 124–25; Derrida 2013: 153; Looze 2016: 146; Sarkonak 2000: 53)?

Perhaps there is some mantric power in the words. To return to our parallels with *Les Mille et Une Nuits*, they are quite literally the ‘Sésame’ — ‘la parole magique qui ouvre’ the treasure trove of the text (E, 668–69). For Genette, the sentence is a homunculus, ‘la cellule embryonnaire’ of the *Recherche* (1972: 112). Wimmers calls it ‘the very kernel out of which the novel will grow’ (2003: 20). For Barthes, it is ‘le *mandala*’ of the novel, holding ‘rassemblée dans sa vue toute l’œuvre proustienne’ in miniature (2022: 157; see also Barthes 1973: 22).



Figure 1. A mandala

Then again, the sentence is *not* a ‘mandala’ in one important respect. It does not explicitly depict a cosmogony of the world in which it claims to exist. There is no bold, brute proposition about ‘the world as it is’ — such as we find, say, in the first sentence of *A Bend in the River* (Naipaul 1979: 3). Nor is there a programmatic statement which will then orient our means of grasping the coming text. Instead, when one tries to seize upon its deeper meaning, this sentence seems to bob away from the clutching hand. ‘Saisis-moi au passage si tu en as la force,’ the line seems to say, ‘et tâche à résoudre l’énigme de bonheur que je te propose’ (IV, 446). But there is no obvious means of wrestling out its mystery ‘pour de bon’ — nor of determining the relation between ‘de bonne heure’ and the ‘bonheur’ which this choice of words suggests.

Could it be, then, that ‘mystery’ is itself the ‘essence’ of the opening sentence? The initial ‘longtemps’ suggests an indefinable temporality: ‘unanchored, floating’ (Brooks 2004). ‘Proust élimine ici les points de repère temporels les plus élémentaires’ (Genette 1972: 104). ‘This opening sentence [is] free of any exact location in time’ (Shattuck 1964: 81). The ‘je’, likewise, remains unfixed by any ‘solid notion of the self’ (Jordan 2001: 100). Then there is the ‘juxtaposition inattendue de l’adverbe « longtemps » et du passé composé « me suis couché »’ (Bray 2022: 25), although Anglophone critics in particular have a tendency to overemphasise its grammatical incongruity (for example: Ní Cheallaigh-O’Kelly 2015: 298; Shattuck 1964: 81–82).

Have these features (indeterminate ‘je’; the floating ‘longtemps’; the unusual tense) been calculated to shroud the sentence in a semantic ‘instabilité’ (Narusawa 1991: 44)? Could it be that mystery is the essence of the opening sentence, and can we read it as the unknowable ‘mandala’ of an unknowable text? Such an interpretation would be too hasty. We can get carried away in these descriptions of the first sentence’s undecidability or mysteriousness. Taken straightforwardly, it has an obvious, almost comically trivial, meaning: ‘For a long time, I went to bed early’. This is a far cry from the ‘Shantih shantih shantih’ of the *Waste Land* (T. S. Eliot 2000: 22). Proust’s ‘je’ is not completely indeterminate either. We know, for example, from the choice of perfect tense (a fact that would not be available in imperfect or past historic) that this ‘I’ is a man. As Compagnon

states, ‘dans les premières pages, on ne voit plus le côté extrêmement audacieux de cette présence du corps’ — this is a ‘corps masculin’ as well as a ‘corps endormi’ (2013). ‘Mon corps’ is indeed evoked several times in the ensuing passage (I, 5; 6).

Through the careful play of sound in this decasyllable, the reader might also sense that this is a ‘well written’ or ‘literary’ text. Already, in this phrase, what Barthes might call a ‘rhétorique du « beau »’ appears (1982: 84). ‘Je me suis couché’, as opposed to ‘je me couchai’ or ‘je me couchais’ — which Proust also tried (Narusawa 1991: 35) — allows for an agreeable 2/3 patterning of sound that would not otherwise exist.

┌ 2 3 2 3 2 3 2

Longtemps, je me suis couché de bonne heure.

ḡ ə ə ə ɔ œ

When we remember that Proust himself, in an article from 1920, praised Flaubert’s idiosyncratic grammar for its effects of rhythm (E, 1226–27), this might help to explain the unusual choice of tense (Philippe 2004: 45). Certainly, the near assonance of ‘ḡ’ and ‘ɔ’ in ‘longtemps’ and ‘bonne’ is a pleasing one; so too is the repetition of ‘ə’ sound (‘je’, ‘me’, ‘de’), which seems to find its conclusion in the extended ‘heure’. Despite the succinctness of the opening sentence, this subtle play communicates to the reader a delight in sound, and a desire to stretch or turn phrases merely for the pleasure of their utterance, that ‘tôt’, for example, would have failed to offer.

In these ways, we might also think of the first sentence as clear, efficient, and communicative. In just ten syllables, Proust indicates a character, their gender, a situation, and a particular ‘literary’ tone. If we are to explain, therefore, why this sentence has the particular literary effect it does — why it sticks in the mind, and why it is so often parodied and quoted — then, rather than taking it as a discrete fragment, perhaps we ought to consider this sentence’s relations with the passage that proceeds from it, just as Bergson considers one note of a melody only in its ‘pénétration mutuelle’ with others (p. 27).

The Second Sentence

Parfois, à peine ma bougie éteinte, mes yeux se fermaient si vite que je n'avais pas le temps de me dire : « Je m'endors. » (I, 3).

'For a long time, I went to bed early'. Let us imagine how such a sentence might be continued in a novel, following the tried-and-tested formula sketched above (p. 53). We are given here a character, and a practice of this character during a period of time. There is the suggestion — through the connotation with 'bonheur', and the agreeable turn of sound to the phrase — that this past practice was tranquil and healthy. The reader may expect, therefore, a chronological forward movement — most likely, an 'inciting incident' that would explain why this practice ended: 'then the tap dancers moved in downstairs'. Otherwise, she might expect a retrospective justification of this state of affairs: 'it was doctor's orders'. These implicit questions of 'why?' ('Why did the practice start?' 'Why did it stop?') would, once answered, allow her to attribute a *significance* to the first sentence by placing it within a story. 'The initial sentence [...] which, at first, seems simple and straightforward, [...] is intriguing, because it is not backed up by further details one might expect as to [...] the reason for going to bed early' (Wimmers 2003: 20).

Instead, the following sentence progresses the events in no clear temporal direction. 'Parfois' refers to events that occurred during this past period: 'For a long while I went to bed early. Sometimes [during that period] my eyes would close so quickly...' All the same, there is a buried sense of forward temporal progression. The first sentence describes, not sleeping, but the act of 'going to bed' — Genette glosses it as 'se mettre au lit' (1972: 196). The second sentence describes the extinguishment of a candle, and (euphemistically) the act of falling asleep as closing one's eyes. So, despite this 'parfois', the two sentences progress in a familiar chronological sequence: go to bed; lights off; snore.

The reader senses this implicit forward progression whilst simultaneously registering, on the level of grammar, that these are only occasions during a vaguely determined period of the past. Even rhythmically, the second sentence echoes the first one. We are given a two-syllable adverb

(‘longtemps’, ‘parfois’) and then an eight- or seven-syllable clause. Are we moving forwards, then, or repeating ourselves? Through opening this parenthetical ‘parfois’, Sentence 2 diverts us away from any direct *explanation* of the questions implicitly raised by Sentence 1: ‘Why did you go to bed early? And why did you stop doing so?’ In turn, it ignores the question that we implicitly feel the subsequent sentences of a novel should answer: ‘What is the significance of such a statement? Qu’est-ce que tout cela signifie (Madeleine 1999: 446)? Why are you telling me this?’

The Ensuing Sentences

Et, une demi-heure après, la pensée qu’il était temps de chercher le sommeil m’éveillait ; je voulais poser le volume que je croyais avoir encore dans les mains et souffler ma lumière. [...] Je me demandais quelle heure il pouvait être ; j’entendais le sifflement des trains qui, plus ou moins éloigné, comme le chant d’un oiseau dans une forêt, relevant les distances, me décrivait l’étendue de la campagne déserte où le voyageur se hâte vers la station prochaine. [...] Je me rendormais, et parfois je n’avais plus que de courts réveils d’un instant. [...] Ou bien en dormant j’avais rejoint sans effort un âge à jamais révolu de ma vie primitive. [...] Quelquefois, comme Ève naquit d’une côte d’Adam, une femme naissait pendant mon sommeil d’une fausse position de ma cuisse (I, 3–4).

We never find out the answer to the questions implicitly raised by the opening sentence. We might expect Sentence 3 to return to them, cutting off the parenthesis opened by ‘parfois’. Otherwise, we might expect it to balance out this diversion in Sentence 2 with a balancing ‘parfois’ (‘parfois... parfois au contraire’), such as we find later in the passage: ‘Parfois la chambre Louis XVI [...] ; parfois au contraire celle, petite et si élevée de plafond’ (I, 8). Instead, Sentence 3 continues the diversion of Sentence 2, winding us into a ‘story’ about particular occasions told in the habitual past: ‘Then, I would wake up; then I would still think I was the book, etc.’. As in Sentence 2, the use of the imperfect indicates an iterative state of affairs: something that the author ‘used’ to do. Yet Proust (or Proust’s narrator) continues to undermine his choice of grammatical tense — this time, by specifying these events to such a degree that makes it unlikely they would be habitual occurrences. This effect has often been noticed in *Combray II*, where Proust uses the habitual past to ‘présente[r] le particulier sous la forme du général’ (Houston 1980: 97; Tadié 1971: 303; Shattuck 1964: 79). Here, we cannot be sure if that is the case. Would the narrator really, habitually,

hear the whistling of trains after wondering what time it was, and hear this whistling as if it were birdsong in a forest? Or has the text itself, or its author/narrator, now begun to dream, sketching out a scene which, although apparently in the past (*me décrivait*), is in fact only happening now, in the imaginative caprice of the moment of writing? How far is this imagination, and how far memory?

The expansion of the diversion in Sentence 3 is echoed by the sudden expansion of sentence length, and the minute details of these particular nights pile upon one another until we feel that these occasions, first offered to us via *parfois*, have themselves become the main development of the text. In the ensuing sentences, a further *parfois*, then *[o]u bien* and *[q]uelquefois*, scramble the grammatical construct, making it impossible to determine what is happening in relation to when. For example, when *[q]uelquefois [...] une femme naissait d'une fausse position de ma cuisse*, does this 'sometimes' occur during those occasions when the narrator would rejoin his primitive life (*[o]u bien*), as the reference to Eve and Adam would perhaps suggest? Does this occasional return to primitive life, in its turn, happen only within those occasions indicated by the *parfois* of the second sentence? Or alternatively: does this *quelquefois* occur outside of the bracket of that initial *parfois*: 'Sometimes, I would fall asleep so quickly. [...] Sometimes, a woman would be born?' The instinct to categorise and determine the relations between events is bamboozled by the syntax. Again: is it the *chant d'un oiseau dans une forêt* or *le sifflement des trains* which is *relevant les distances*? Charles Scott Moncrieff comes down on the side of the bird: 'punctuating the distance like the note of a bird in a forest' (Proust 1934: 3). Lydia Davis does not: 'I could hear the whistling of the trains which, remote or nearby, like the singing of a bird in a forest, plotting the distances, described to me the extent of the deserted countryside' (Proust 2003: 4).

Through these perpetual diversions, the significance of 'going to bed early' remains unresolved. The narrative frame of the initial assertion is never established; there is no 'before' or 'after' this *longtemps* to which we can point. Above all, there is no reason ever given as to *why*

the narrator goes to bed early, or why that should matter to him or to us. The mysteriousness of the opening sentence, and its metonymic quality for the *Recherche* as a whole, cannot be explained by considering the line in isolation, but by examining its relations with the ensuing passage. Once this is done, we can notice the incredible fact that the *novel forgets its own opening sentence*. This forgetting, fittingly, can only be experienced by the reader in retrospect, as they are carried along by the flow of sentences, whose complications throw up textual confusions in their turn. We will see this movement throughout the *Recherche*, where the artistic quest is tacitly forgotten for various societal and amorous quests, themselves then implicitly forgotten (p. 143). Sometimes, the hero's forward movements – say, to Balbec or Venice — will be impelled by his desire to forget past loves. Rather than being initially diverted by a character's opening predicament, and from there drawn into a story, we are diverted by an initial *interpretative* difficulty, and our interest is kept alive by a text perpetually diverting us with new interpretative problems and questions. The pleasure of the text lies partly in the subtle contrivances with which it leads us into this labyrinth which, while always offering or suggesting forward progression, is grounded on a perpetual capacity to forget. It is 'a peculiar narrative device from the *Recherche* — akin to Viktor Shklovky's notion of "defamiliarization" and Ian Watt's "delayed decoding"— [where] the reader's intelligence is suspended in an attempt at deciphering [the text]' (Paul 2024: 75). The powers of the intelligence are both 'suspended' *and* drawn into the *Recherche*, solicited and refused by the novel. This may also be taken as a way in which, in these pages, Proust produces something like the '*Trottoir roulant*' that he praised in Flaubert's novels (E, 1221; see p. 153). Compagnon and Vernet note that, with this comparison, Proust might be thinking of the 'réseau circulaire de « trottoirs roulants »' from the *Exposition universelle* of 1900 (E, 1812). The text appears both to develop steadily and to go nowhere.

For the success of this effect, the blurring of the category between the 'narrator' and the 'author' (p. 21) is essential. The famous 'indeterminacy' of Proust's 'je' lies not so much in his refusal to produce specific facts about himself — age, place and reason for writing, etc. — but rather the text's refusal to allow us to fit him into any particular determinable 'voice', behind which

we might sense an author exerting creative control. There are plenty of first-person narratives where we cannot be entirely sure about the age of the narrator, nor motivation for writing: *Lolita* (1955); *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951); *Carry on, Jeeves!* (1927). Yet in all of these texts, we can recognise that the narrator *is* a ‘character’, narrating with a carefully bounded style of discourse, a ‘voice’, which an author is managing and selecting. Although *Du côté de chez Swann* was always sold as a ‘roman’, Proust’s ‘je’ is *not* a novelistic ‘character’ in this sense. He seems to contain shades of the author; the reader cannot take him altogether as a ‘product’ to be enjoyed; his utterances, as we shall see, are commonly taken to be articulations of Proust’s own theories about sleep, time, and memory. Humblot, for example, seems to have confounded Proust’s narrator and the author. He writes: ‘je ne puis comprendre qu’un monsieur puisse employer trente pages à décrire comment il se tourne et retourne dans son lit avant de trouver le sommeil’. Is this ‘monsieur’ Proust, or Proust’s narrator? It is difficult to tell. In fact, the very blurring of author and narrator leads the reader to question the organisation of this opening. Is the text’s confusing churn of anecdotes, comparisons and theories managed towards some particular purpose — or is it expressive merely of a lack of authorial care, and even a ‘pathological’ lack of self-awareness (Madeleine 1999: 446)? The reader cannot understand the text’s essence (understood variously as purpose, vision, meaning, or form), but nor can she be sure that there is some essence to this meandering text.

First Theorising Reading: Essence as Mobility

I have gone into the opening sentences in such detail in order to show that the confusion that the opening sentences elicit in the reader is paradigmatic of the novel. At one level, the text coheres. The second sentence develops from the first; the ensuing sentences offer a story (and a somewhat comic and relatable one) about what used to happen to the narrator when he went to bed. At the same time, our attention is perpetually drawn beyond our initial frame of interpretation. When we seize on any part — say, the apparently straightforward opening phrase, or else the adverbs (‘longtemps’, ‘parfois’) — we find that their precise meanings begin to slip away from us. The

attempt to isolate and fix a definite meaning discloses the play of signification amongst signs that are developing in a complex ‘pénétration mutuelle’. Might we not say, therefore, that the ‘essence’ of the text lies in its ‘mobility’? Is it this perpetual change of our expectations and interpretations as we read — a change itself ultimately immeasurable — that typifies our experience of the text? Let’s now briefly consider various theoretical interpretations of the passage that work along these lines. Each of these presents a different kind of semantic ‘mobility’ as the passage’s underlying ‘essence’.

1. Bergsonian Mobilities

The first possibility would be a Bergsonian reading. This affinity is not only due to the similarities between the opening pages and *Matière et mémoire* (Goga 2001: 48). There are also interesting affinities, I believe, with ‘Le Rêve’, a lecture given at the Collège de France in 1901 (Bergson 1919: 91–116). Unlike *Matière et mémoire*, there is no hard evidence that Proust definitely encountered this text — although we do know that Proust wrote to the philosopher at the time, and attended some of his lectures at the Collège de France (Tadié 1996: 450–51; 462). Even if Proust never encountered ‘Le Rêve’, it offers a striking example of similarities between the *Recherche* and Bergsonian thought.

In ‘Le Rêve’, Bergson presents the fluid movement of dreams — floating from one time to another — as an experience in which one can sense ‘la totalité de son passé’ (1919: 91). The irony, Bergson argues, is that the dreamer is always trying to fix and immobilise this series of fleeting impressions.

Le tort du rêveur est plutôt de raisonner trop. Il éviterait l’absurde s’il assistait en simple spectateur au défilé de ses visions. Mais quand il veut à toute force en donner une explication, sa logique, destinée à relier entre elles des images incohérentes, ne peut que parodier celle de la raison et frôler l’absurdité (1919: 98).

This would offer one possible interpretation of the opening pages. The narrator’s various ‘suppositions’ evoke the attempt of his ‘pensée’ (or ‘raison’) to arrest the movement of dreaming.

Yet the very truth of the dream-experience lies in this movement, the ‘logique’ of which cannot be easily determined. ‘Pour Proust, Bergson et Merleau-Ponty, l’expérience est bien abordée comme un problème qu’ils interrogent comme une tension entre proximité et distance’ (Aubert 2011: 136). The attempt to close the epistemic distance between the rational subject and the fluidity of their own experience undermines the possibility for this experience itself to occur. The movement of the text itself, and the reader attempting to fix it with an interpretation, recreates this dialectic for the reader. When the text moves between various ‘évoqueries tournoyantes et confuses’ — when, say, the reader cannot grasp any logical relation between the evocations of a ‘chambre Louis XVI’ and the ‘numéro des *Débats roses*’ (I, 7) — she is required to experience the movement of textual images in their ‘distance’, and beyond the bounds of intelligibility. Proust’s narrator evokes a chain of varied images: a ‘bougie’ beside his sleeping self; the ‘craquements organiques des boiseries’, the sleep beneath a moon that ‘jette jusqu’au pied du lit son échelle enchantée’; and again a fire that sparks with the ‘lueurs des tisons’ (I, 4–8). In ‘Le Rêve’ too, while describing the varieties of sleep, Bergson evokes: ‘le craquement d’un meuble’; ‘le feu qui pétille’; enchanted slumber beneath ‘la lune’; and the ‘bougie’ beside the bed (1919: 96–98).

In a recent article on Bergson and Proust, Aubert writes:

L’ouverture de *La Recherche* est un moment fondamental où la mémoire apparaît comme centrale, mais dans une indistinction tournoyante. Les lieux distincts, morcelés (quel lieu, quelle chambre ?) recomposent les distances temporelles (quelle année ?) comme les étapes irréversibles du temps perdu [...] : « Un homme qui dort, tient en cercle autour de lui le fil des heures, l’ordre des années et des mondes » (I, 5) (Aubert 2011: 144).

Aubert’s Bergsonian interpretation of the *Recherche* avoids the significant problem that we gave for older Bergsonian readings in the introduction (p. 30). This is that, while Bergsonian mobility requires temporal continuity, we might find (as Poulet did) *discontinuities* in the *Recherche*. Aubert seems to avoid such a rebuttal by arguing that there is space for discontinuities, or temporal ‘sauts’, in mobility *à la* Bergson (Aubert 2011: 146; see also Dutton 2023: 51). By contrast, I do not believe Bergson can think of ontological ‘jumps’ while retaining his notion of movement. As previously stated (p. 25), a continuity of time is that which allows for movement to occur for Bergson; a

discontinuous conception of time and space as a series of discrete instants would only lead to Zeno's Paradox once again.

Aubert's emphasis on discontinuous mobility between fragmentary spaces, while drawing her (in my eyes) away from the prerequisites of a Bergsonian reading, puts her interpretation in line with interpretations of the passage that emerged after the turn away from Bergson in the 1960s.

2. *Discontinuous Mobilities*

In 'Longtemps, je me suis couché' (first published 1982), Barthes argues that the opening pages ground the novel's 'révolution logique':

« Un homme qui dort [...] tient en cercle autour de lui le fil des heures, l'ordre des années et des mondes [...] » (I, 5). Le sommeil fonde une autre logique, une logique de la Vacillation, du Décloisonnement. [...] [Ces pages] ouvr[ent] les vannes du *Temps*: la chronologie ébranlée, des fragments, intellectuels ou narratifs, vont former une suite soustraite à la loi ancestrale du Récit ou du Raisonnement, et cette suite produira [...] la *tierce forme*, ni Essai ni Roman (2022: 158).

The reading of the opening pages as a collection of 'fragments, intellectuels ou narratifs' fits with Roland Barthes' 'fragmentary' reading of the *Recherche* (1973: 52). The narrator, drifting in and out of sleep, spins between times and places. The movement between these apparently discrete (or 'cloisonnés') spaces has no regard for linear chronologies or narrative logic; instead they ground 'une autre logique, une logique de la Vacillation, du Décloisonnement'. Barthes acknowledges that these 'fragments' 'vont former une suite soustraite à la loi ancestrale du Récit ou du Raisonnement'. By this, he intends that the opening 'branle' (I, 3–9) is followed by the 'drame du coucher' — a 'récit'. Nonetheless, the opening pages ground the novel in a theoretically indeterminate space, and the subsequent narrative is destabilised by this vertiginous backdrop. Due to the ambiguities of this opening — 'central quoique excentrique' (Genette 1972: 111) — the reader can never determine when or whence the narrator is speaking.

Like a Bergsonian reader, Barthes locates the ‘logique’ of the text in its mobility. He would agree with Dutton’s claim that: ‘The novel’s beginning is a deferral: it is a movement (or weaving) between various places, none of which it prioritises’ (2023: 49). The difference is that this is not mobility in *continuity*, but mobility between discontinuous ‘fragments’ — Aubert’s ‘lieux distincts, morcelés’. Thus, as Simon notes (2016: 142), Barthes here is close to the reading given in *Proust et les signes*. Deleuze also draws his analysis of this passage from the sentence beginning ‘Un homme qui dort’ (1971: 138–39), as indeed does Dutton (2023: 48). The ontology of the *Recherche*, as presented by the ‘mandala’ of its opening, is not that of a world progressing in a continuous (but immeasurable) flow of time; it is rather a ‘scrambl[ing]’ of times and spaces, each discontinuously mobile (Baldwin and French 2023: 460).

3. General Mobility

Let me cite one further interpretation that celebrates the mobility of these opening pages without becoming specific as to whether it is continuous or not.

In the same few opening pages, with the loss of an internal, subjective reality founded on a solid notion of self, the Narrator also loses the external reality of an objective world anchored in fixed notions of time and space: ‘Un homme qui dort, tient en cercle autour de lui le fil des heures, l’ordre des années et des mondes’ (I, 5). [...] The realities of subject and object are, in fact, bound together, but it is the latter that depends on the former for a solid foundation rather than the reverse: ‘Peut-être l’immobilité des choses autour de nous leur est-elle imposée par notre certitude que ce sont elles et non pas d’autres’ (I, 6) (Jordan 2001: 100–01).

Under this reading, the narrator advances a (reliable) ontological theory. The ordered world of time and space (‘l’ordre des années et des mondes’), which we are accustomed to think of as *grounding* the internal, subjective selves, are in fact grounded by and dependent upon them. Our deeper, fluid ontology, with its fleeting and interpenetrating states of consciousness, is what allows for the development of a ‘pensée’ of ‘immobilité’, which, in turn, is what allows us to classify and order the exterior world. So powerful has this thought of ‘order’ become that it has hidden the mobile ‘subjective reality’ that brings it forth. States such as sleep, however, *reveal* the fluid mobility

that underpins the apparently fixed order of things; the reader feels this mobility in the restless movement of the text.

We have now considered several possible readings of this passage as articulating, and performing, an ontology of mobility. I have put these critics together in part to show how — regardless of how they stand regarding the question of continuity — they all seize upon the sentence beginning ‘[u]n homme qui dort’ to support their point. This is no coincidence. The sentence is philosophical: it is about ‘l’homme’ *as such*. From this, a theory may be constructed which can then explain the randomness and confusion in the rest of the passage: ‘l’ordre’ to which we are accustomed becomes unravelled; an ontology of disorder, and mobility, is revealed in its place. These readers take this sentence to be articulating a theory about the text of the novel and/or the ontology of the fictional world of the *Recherche*. But ironically, in order to do this, they must draw this sentence from the very flow of the semantic mobility, and instability, which it allegedly celebrates.

After all, we might ask ourselves whether this sentence provides an accurate ‘theory’ by which to read the passage, or just another stray thought of a character drifting in and out of sleep. Behind it, can we definitely sense the narrator — perhaps even the author — offering us a philosophical handrail by which to descend into the waters of the *Recherche*? Or is its signification just as vague as the description of the ‘hirondelles de mer’ (I, 7)? Taking this sentence for ‘evidence’ of a reading of the text as mobility *explains away* the reader’s confusion before the passage itself. Take Barthes, for example. His reading of the opening is an attempt to show why Humblot’s confusion was a ‘réaction de bêtise’ (2022: 158). It assigns a meaning to the indeterminacy of the text (even if this is, simply, that said text is indeterminate). Once such a theorisation is in place, the opening has been returned to an order of sorts; its semantic mobility has been given a signification, and the reader is spared from the full confusion of a Humblot or a Madeleine.

It is a paradox which we have already described (pp. 35–6). *Any* theorisation of a text — even if this theorisation is the text as mobility — *closes down its indeterminacy*. As we shall now see,

the ‘mobility’ reading excludes at least one possible reading of the opening pages. Rather than *grounding* an ontology of mobility and vacillation, we can also read these pages as the symbolic expulsion of mobility, and instability, from the novel.

A Second Theorising Reading: Determinate Essences

We need not read the opening pages as a paean to mobility. Since the opening swirl of memory and fantasy cedes so smoothly into an ordered narrative, we may as well say the opposite: this shows how disorder must eventually give way to order, just as the narrator returns to ‘certitude’ (I, 8) after the temporary confusion of waking up.

1. Immobilisation

As might be expected from a critic who, as we saw (p. 24), tries to immobilise the indeterminate temporality of reading, Rousset has an alternative reading of these pages (1962: 140–42). The narrator’s experience of mobile temporality, and the confusion it evokes, shows how a ‘profound’ understanding of the self and its past can occur only when such vacillation is arrested.

Le temps est éprouvé comme une force qui divise et projette l’être loin de lui-même: une force centrifuge ; arrachant la personne à son unité intérieure, elle la tourne vers l’extérieur ; c’est pourquoi elle la rend incapable d’une saisie en profondeur de son moi et de son passé (1962: 141).

Georges Poulet echoes this reading. The opening pages are not a celebration of indeterminacy, but a dogged hunt for the certainty of a specific time and place (1963: 19). Poulet argues that ‘joie’ comes, in this passage as well as in others, *only* when the hero can determine with certainty which particular and fixed space he occupies:

Quelle joie, quel soulagement n’est-ce pas pour lui, quand, tout à coup, le vertige cesse, les murs s’arrêtent de tourner, les images de flotter, et que les lieux reprennent leur fixité habituelle ! (1963: 22).

Looking at the opening pages from this angle, we notice how frequently the narrator seems to indicate that their disorder is a temporary aberration. The protagonist’s confusion of himself with

‘ce dont parlait l’ouvrage’ — a confusion read by critics as a disordering of any ‘solid notion of the self’ (Jordan 2001: 100) — only lasts ‘pendant quelques secondes’ (I, 3). Time *qua* indeterminable flux of ‘durée’ is fixed by the checking of a ‘montre’ (I, 4). The narrator, it is true, writes that: ‘Un homme qui dort, tient en cercle autour de lui le fil des heures’ (I, 5). The next line, however, complexifies this apparent ‘theory’: ‘Il les consulte d’instinct en s’éveillant et y lit en une seconde le point de la terre qu’il occupe, le temps qui s’est écoulé’. On waking, ‘l’homme’ *pins down* where he is, both spatially and temporally, ‘en une seconde’. The ‘fil des heures’ is not an endless and profound indeterminacy, but a kind of brain fog that is inevitably cleared.

In the sentences that immediately follow these two statements, the confused, dreamlike state is given a rational explanation:

Que vers le matin après quelque insomnie, le sommeil le prenne en train de lire, dans une posture trop différente de celle où il dort habituellement, [...] il estimera qu’il vient à peine de se coucher. Que s’il s’assoupit dans une position encore plus déplacée et divergente, par exemple après dîner assis dans un fauteuil, [...] il se croira couché quelques mois plus tôt dans une autre contrée (I, 5).

In these cases, rather than showing how an ‘internal, subjective reality’ grounds the ‘external’ one (Jordan 2001: 100), the narrator seems to indicate the reverse. The vacillating internal state is a product of the body’s physical circumstances: ‘une posture [...] différente’, ‘une position [...] déplacée et divergente’. The apparently illogical developments of a dream can, therefore, be explained by physiology: the dream state is merely a physical state, and all that these dreams ‘signify’ is a bodily upset. In Proust’s day, this kind of argument about dreams was favoured by empiricists. For example, in the *Problems of Philosophy* (1912), Bertrand Russell describes how the banging of the door in the external world can create the sleeping fantasy of a naval battle (1912: 34–35). By contrast, in ‘Le Rêve’, Bergson is sharply critical of these ‘scientific’ explanations of psychic phenomena, describing them as post-hoc rationalisations (1919: 118).

2. *Scientific Method*

Proust's narrator may even be said to determine his location through the application of the 'scientific method'. This supposed 'method' was beginning to be formulated by philosophers of science in Proust's day (Cowles 2020: 2). In his best-selling *How We Think* (1910), John Dewey breaks down the scientific method into 'five logically distinct steps: (i) a felt difficulty; (ii) its location and definition; (iii) suggestion of possible solution; (iv) development by reasoning of the bearings of the suggestion; (v) further observation and experiment leading to its acceptance or rejection' (1910: 72). The difficulty felt by Proust's narrator on waking is (i) uncertainty — more particularly (ii) he does not know when or where he is. To counter this, he makes (iii-iv) 'diverse suppositions' as to the various places he could be, and then tests these (v) by gathering empirical evidence:

Mon corps [...] cherchait [...] à repérer la position de ses membres pour en induire la direction du mur, la place des meubles, pour reconstruire et pour nommer la demeure où il se trouvait (I, 6).

Hypotheses as to his location and time pass through the narrator's mind as quickly as the 'positions successives' of a galloping horse when seen in the 'kinétoscope' (I, 7). It is a comparison which Katja Haustein finds 'surprising', and even 'incongruous' (2012: 41). But perhaps the reference here is to a scientific break-through in 1878, which allowed for a galloping horse to be photographed with a shutter-speed quick enough to catch the movement of its limbs (Braun 2010: 69). Only once the blurred mobility of legs had been arrested into discrete temporal sections (t_1 , t_2 , etc.) did we come to understand the mechanics of the gallop. In just the same way, the narrator breaks down the apparently indeterminate 'durée' of psychological time — the blurring of space and place — into distinct spaces and epochs. Let us note, in passing, how opposed such a reading would be to a Bergsonian one. Consider this passage from Bergson on science in the *Essai*:

Le progrès le plus radical qu'une science puisse accomplir consiste à faire entrer les résultats déjà acquis dans un ensemble nouveau, par rapport auquel ils deviennent des vues instantanées et immobiles prises de loin en loin sur la continuité d'un mouvement (1898: 34).

Science can only take ‘snapshots’ that fragment and conceal a movement that is irreducibly *continuous* (see also Gunter 2013: 169). With the coming of the sun — an important symbol throughout the *Recherche* (Bizub 1991: 56–58) — the epistemic ‘night’ of unknowledge disappears: ‘Certes quand approchait le matin, il y avait bien longtemps qu’était dissipée la brève incertitude de mon réveil’ (I, 184). The reader, we might say, is taught how to read and interpret the *Recherche* from these opening pages — to make theoretical conjectures, to test them, and subsequently to refine her interpretations. Thereby, she will follow the narrator from confusion to ‘certitude’ (I, 8).

The Conundrum of Theorisation (again)

So: does this passage found a logic of indeterminate mobility and ‘[v]acillation’? Or does it imply that a scientific method, and careful observation of factual, exterior realities, will ultimately fix the ‘essence’ of a world that may at first appear endlessly mobile? In the introduction, we saw how readings of the *Recherche* as a ‘mobility’ are undermined by essentialising interpretations of the novel, and *vice versa*. We can see the same movement in the critical readings of the first six pages. The opening ‘simultaneously asserts and denies the authority of its own rhetorical mode’, as the deconstructive critic would have it (de Man 1979: 17). But, further, it remains unclear as to what its ‘authority’ or ‘rhetorical mode’ even *is* (previously noticed, pp. 46–47). Does the narrative voice privilege certainty or uncertainty, science or imagination, mobility or fixed essences? And how are we to read the narrator — as authorial stand-in, or as a drowsy character with no privileged epistemic relationship to the fictional world in which he finds himself? There are *no* clear instructions on how to read the novel, and the passage is so carefully indeterminate that *any* theory of it inevitably minimises, or diminishes, the confusion of our reading experience. The text solicits theorising through philosophical statements, such as ‘[u]n homme qui dort’ (I, 5). Yet it also undermines any reading that would take this sentence as a reliable guide to the text. The ‘dreaming’ state can be read as one which grounds ‘external reality’ (Jordan 2001: 100) and the ensuing ‘récit’ (Barthes 2022: 158). Yet the dream state is also presented as a *product* of the dreamer’s physical

circumstances. The result is a text that is not only indeterminate in its signification, but indeterminate in this indeterminacy. The reader can neither be sure of *what* the essence of the text is, nor of whether the text even contains, or is attempting to communicate, an essence. Instead, the *Recherche* emerges ‘comme une chose vraiment obscure’ (I, 3). It is an epistemic ‘nuit’ like that described by Blanchot (1971: 164) — but one which is temporarily lit by flashes of critical interpretations, which may be readerly hallucinations like those of the narrator in his bed (see p. 208).

This confusion draws the reader into the text. Rather than offering her a character with whom she might empathise, the *Recherche* offers the reader a series of interpretative difficulties. How is she to understand this narrator? And why, as Humblot asks, would an author open the text in such a strange way? Does all this mean something? If so, what? It is thus a chancy opening, one which has baffled and infuriated many a would-be Proustian. Yet the reader who is entranced by this opening is given a peculiarly strong, and personal, motivation for reading the ensuing text. This is the ‘naïve’ desire; the desire to read a novel, not merely to see what happens to its hero, but in the hope of finding out its meaning for oneself. In what follows, I will trace how the first drafts of these opening pages emerged out of Proust’s engagement with criticism in *Contre Sainte-Beuve*. To understand in what ways ‘la conscience critique et la création littéraire sont inextricablement liées chez Proust’ (Suganuma 2023: 14; see also Suganuma 2016) is to appreciate how the *Recherche* invites a ‘naïve reading’ — that is, an interpretative journey without any methodology to guide it, nor any fixed idea of the relations between author and narrator, nor a theorisation of the literary text.

Part II: Contre Sainte-Beuve

Sainte-Beuve's Theorisation of the Literary Text

It was most likely in the autumn of 1908 that Proust wrote a collection of essayistic fragments which his editors have entitled 'LA MÉTHODE SAINTE-BEUVE' (E, 701–15). It is commonly suggested that the purpose of this section, and of *Contre Sainte-Beuve* more generally, was to articulate Proust's antipathy to Charles Augustin Sainte-Beuve's critical method. 'Proust's objections to Sainte-Beuve are primarily objections to the biographical method, [which is] the insistence on explaining the work by reference to the man' (Prendergast 2007: 2). Proust, it is said, holds that: 'The essence of the work of art is not to be sought in the social life of the writer' (Paul 2024: 55; for earlier examples see Rowland 1967: 183; D'Hugues 1969: 594). However, rather than only critiquing this method, Proust also attacks the *theorisation* of the literary text on which Sainte-Beuve's method (as well as many other critical methods) depend. We might see this theorisation in a passage which Proust selects from Sainte-Beuve's *Nouveaux lundis*:

« La littérature, disait Sainte-Beuve, n'est pas pour moi distincte ou du moins séparable du reste de l'homme et de l'organisation... On ne saurait s'y prendre de trop de façons et de trop de bouts pour connaître un homme, c'est-à-dire autre chose qu'un pur esprit. Tant qu'on ne s'est pas adressé sur un auteur un certain nombre de questions [...], on n'est pas sûr de le tenir tout entier, quand même ces questions sembleraient le plus étrangères à la nature de ses écrits : Que pensait-il de la religion ? [...] Et riche, pauvre, quel était son régime, sa manière de vivre journalière ? Quel était son vice ou son faible ? Aucune des réponses à ces questions n'est indifférente pour juger l'auteur d'un livre et le livre lui-même » [(NL III: 15–17)]. [...] Cette méthode qu'il [Sainte-Beuve] appliqua d'instinct toute sa vie et où vers la fin il voyait les premiers linéaments d'une sorte de botanique littéraire, [*interrompu*] (E, 703–04).

Rather than belonging to a transcendent or autonomous realm, Sainte-Beuve theorises the literary text as a physical object, in the sense of a Cartesian 'res extensa' (Heidegger 2008: 95–96; see p. 100). The text is not 'distincte' or 'séparable' from the physical world out of which it emerged. In fact, it is understood as an 'effect' that has a tangible 'cause': its author. Once the text is theorised as a 'static object, transcending time, permanently available for our inspection' (Attridge 2004: 59), Sainte-Beuve can then posit scientific, or quasi-scientific, investigation into the cause of the novel as his reading method. 'Si toute œuvre humaine est un événement humain, Sainte-Beuve pense

pouvoir lui appliquer les règles d'une investigation humaine' (Chaudier 2004: 114). Sainte-Beuve's theorisation of the literary text as an *object with physical properties*, and of literary criticism as the analysis of its production, anticipates the argument of Pierre Macherey in *Pour une théorie de la production littéraire* (first published 1966; see Bray 2019: 6). 'Pour réintroduire la critique dans la sphère de rationalité', and to become more than merely 'un art', literary criticism must theorise the text as a product, and concern itself with 'l'élaboration de ce produit', asking: 'quelles sont les lois de la production littéraire ?' (Macherey 2014: 21).

But if the text is an 'effect', how does one understand its 'cause'? To be able to do so in scientific terms requires Sainte-Beuve, in turn, to theorise the *human being as an object*. 'Pour connaître l'homme', according to Sainte-Beuve, one needs to find all the facts available about him — these vary from his religious affiliations to his material circumstances. Once we have reliable answers on all of the various (but factual) 'bouts' that make up a human being, then we can understand him totally: 'le tenir tout entier'. Once all the evidence is assembled, the 'man' — conceived as a *series of factual properties* — can be completely defined, and from there the nature of his literary texts. This is 'l'homme purement biographique, considéré de l'extérieur, réduit à la particularité inessentielle des manifestations de sa vie' (Diaz 2015: 22). Nothing mysterious — no 'pur esprit' — is left.

We might see here surprising correspondences with the 'fragmentary' readings of the *Recherche*. Firstly, as Émile Zola or Honoré de Balzac imagined (Nelson 2007), under this scientific gaze the human being itself is fragmented into a taxonomy of different species and genotypes. Secondly, the human being (as well as the literary text) contains no interior and mysterious essences. Instead, they are no more nor less than a series of different 'bits' of information, all of them visible to the investigating gaze. The literary text, or the human, is *nothing more* than the collection of these facts. A 'fragmentary' conception of the human, therefore, still aims for a total comprehension of its object, just as we saw that Poulet's 'fragmentary reading' of the *Recherche* still aims for a total comprehension of the text (pp. 34–35).

For Proust, therefore, Sainte-Beuve is not *merely* the disseminator of a controversial ‘autobiographical’ method. His method requires a prior theorisation of the literary text as a physical object amenable to a scientific investigation. This conception of Sainte-Beuve was quite common at the turn of the century. Julien Benda and Othenin d’Haussonville, for example, argued that Sainte-Beuve’s idea of ‘literature’ violated the autonomy of the literary sphere, and reduced texts to objects of research (Benda 1919: 138–39; Haussonville 1875). In the *Sacred Wood* (first published 1920), T. S. Eliot writes that: ‘Sainte-Beuve was a physiologist by training; but it is probable that his mind, like that of the ordinary scientific specialist, was limited in its interest, and that this was not, primarily, an interest in art’ (1957: 13). Sainte-Beuve was a scientist who *happened* to take the literary text as his field of study. Proust seems to be articulating a similar concern when he writes: ‘En aucun temps de sa vie Sainte-Beuve ne semble avoir conçu la littérature d’une façon vraiment profonde’ (E, 708). Sainte-Beuve sees ‘literature’ as another variety of physical phenomena to be classed and investigated by science — not, say, as representing another kind of knowledge or ‘episteme’ (see Bray 2019: 9). Reflecting on why Hippolyte Taine praised Sainte-Beuve, Proust writes:

Taine disait cela, parce que sa conception intellectualiste de la réalité ne laissait de vérité que dans la science. Comme il avait cependant du goût et admirait diverses manifestations de l’esprit, pour expliquer leur valeur il les considérait comme des auxiliaires de la science. [...] Il considérait Sainte-Beuve comme un initiateur [...] comme ayant presque trouvé sa méthode à lui, Taine.

Or, en art il n’y a pas (au moins dans le sens scientifique) d’initiateur, de précurseur. [...] Les œuvres de ses prédécesseurs ne constituent pas, comme dans la science, une vérité acquise dont profite celui qui suit. [...]

Mais les philosophes qui n’ont pas su trouver ce qu’il y a de réel et d’indépendant de toute science dans l’art, ont [été] obligés de s’imaginer l’art, la critique, etc. comme des sciences (E, 703).

Taine’s conception of ‘réalité’ was a materialist or scientific one: ‘Taine’s *zoologie de l’esprit humain*—spanning aesthetics, criticism, as well as cultural and social history—adapted the methods of natural sciences to aesthetics’ (Paul 2024: 38; see also Pinon 2015: 63). Therefore, to analyse ‘manifestations de l’esprit’ — that is, artworks — he had to treat them as objects. Sainte-Beuve was important to Taine because, once one method had been advanced, the intellectual *coup d’état*

had been achieved: no longer would the critic be content to rely only upon their direct or immanent experience of the text. Once proposed, the development of ‘method’ could then begin, somewhat in the manner that, as we have seen, philosophers of science were beginning to claim that the ‘scientific method’ had been slowly assembled over the previous centuries (p. 71). This is wrong, according to Proust, because neither literature nor literary criticism is subject to scientific progress. ‘Le temps qui passe n’amène pas forcément le progrès dans les arts’, as the narrator claims, somewhat more cautiously, near the close of the *Recherche* (IV, 580).

In ‘LA MÉTHODE SAINTE-BEUVE’ (E, 701–15), Proust presents Sainte-Beuve as an early scientist of literature, whose theorisation of the literary text has become widely influential. Alongside Paul Bourget’s article of 1907, and Hippolyte Taine’s in 1869, Proust states that ‘j’aurais pu citer vingt autres critiques’ in praise of Sainte-Beuve’s method (E, 702). Elsewhere, he writes that the method is praised not only by ‘Taine, Bourget’ but ‘tant d’autres’ (E, 708). That is quite true (see de L’Isle-Adam 2015: 42). Take, for example, Ferdinand Brunetière. ‘Le critique dominant à la fin du siècle’ (Vérilhac 2010: 5), Brunetière was a professor at the École Normale Supérieure, and widely understood to have been influenced by Sainte-Beuve (Benda 1919: 201–02). This academic position may be significant: this ‘scientific’ stand of criticism has generally been associated with the pressures put upon critics to justify their subject when literature in modern languages was introduced as a university discipline in the nineteenth century (see P. Robert 2011). Charles Augustin Sainte-Beuve was awarded one of the first university chairs in Modern Languages (Compagnon 1995: 1198); Hippolyte Taine, against whom ‘much of the charge in *Contre Sainte-Beuve* is directed’ (Paul 2024: 211), was also a university professor.

In *L’évolution des genres dans l’histoire de la littérature* (1890), Brunetière theorised literary genres as different species amenable to scientific research (Teixeira 2021: 55). By examining how genres develop and adapt in relation to changing environmental conditions, Brunetière hoped to lead ‘la critique’ beyond ‘la simple expression d’un jugement ou d’une opinion’ and towards ‘une science analogue à l’histoire naturelle’ (1890: 9). Brunetière wished to create scientific taxonomies of

literary genres (1890: 31). This desire was influenced by Sainte-Beuve's attempt to produce a taxonomy not only of literary texts, but human beings as well. When Brunetière's describes Sainte-Beuve's attempted system, we might see its parallels with other supposedly 'scientific' attempts to classify humans at this time — such as that of, say, Cesare Lombroso in *L'Uomo delinquente* (1876), translated into French as *L'homme criminel* (1895) (see Gordon 2007: 160–61).

Sainte-Beuve [...] maître de son talent et de sa méthode [...] aborde [...] ce qu'il a lui-même plusieurs fois appelé l'*histoire naturelle des esprits*. [...] Il part de ce principe [...] qu'entre les esprits différents comme entre les visages il doit y avoir, il y a des analogies et des différences ; que le principal objet de la critique doit être désormais de les rechercher, des les préciser, de les distinguer; et qu'il n'y a pas d'autre moyen pour cela, dans l'état actuel de la science, que de procéder à la façon des naturalistes, c'est-à-dire par *monographies*. Une collection de monographies, telle est la définition qu'on pourrait donner en deux mots des *Causeries du Lundi* (Brunetière 1890: 235).

It is perhaps indicative of how far contemporary academic criticism has been influenced by these debates that we do call literary studies 'monographs'. It is an example of a metaphor that has become so normalised that its metaphorical aspect has been forgotten (see p. 213). Literally, a 'monograph' is a piece of writing on a single *species*, often used in nineteenth-century botany. In *Contre Sainte-Beuve*, Proust describes Sainte-Beuve in similar terms: 'L'auteur des *Lundis* définissait la critique : une botanique morale' and 'une sorte de botanique littéraire' (E, 702; 704).

Another example of a critic working in the wake of Sainte-Beuve would be Gustave Lanson. Like Brunetière, he was a professor at the École Normale Supérieure, and later director of that institution. He is considered 'le père fondateur' of the 'historical school' of literary criticism that ran through the twentieth century (Serça 2006: 77). In 'Deux Critiques', for example, Barthes distinguishes between a 'critique immanente' — which engages more directly with literary texts, and which he associates with Georges Poulet — and the opposing form of 'critique universitaire'. This is supposedly the dominant approach in French universities, and is said to come from 'la méthode positiviste héritée de Gustave Lanson' (1963: 447). In polemical speeches, such as 'L'histoire littéraire et la sociologie' (1904), Lanson railed against a 'critique subjective' that bases itself on 'des impressions individuelles', and argued instead for a criticism that draws on a mass of

scientific research to find the objective properties of the literary text. Like Taine, Lanson saw Sainte-Beuve's method as an important precursor to his own method of reading, which investigates not only the biography of the author, but the wider historical and sociological conditions of the *production* of the text. 'Le mérite propre de Sainte-Beuve est ici hors de cause. [...] Mais [...] sa méthode, qui fut à son heure un progrès, serait un recul aujourd'hui si l'on prétendait y revenir' (Lanson 1895: vi-vii). Though the methods may be different, Lanson and Sainte-Beuve have the same basic 'theorisation' of literature. They take the text as an object with physical causes, appearing in a physical system. This is why Proust's 'critique contre la méthode de Sainte-Beuve' may also be read as a 'critique contre le lansonisme' (Serça 2006: 76).

In his argument 'contre Sainte-Beuve', therefore, Proust is not merely attacking the particular method of a lone critic who, although once a fixture of the French literary scene, 'appartient à un passé déjà lointain' in 1908 (Pinon 2015: 64). Instead, he is rebutting a 'theorisation' of the literary text, and the very notion of a methodological literary criticism that was becoming more and more popular at the turn of the century. Proust was well aware of this trend. For example, we know from his notes that Proust read his friend André Beaunier's spirited attack in *Le Figaro* (1910) against Lanson (Nakano 2020: 8). Most likely, Proust was aware of many of the other attacks against Lanson's 'scientism' that occurred throughout the early 1900s in the French press (Mitchell 1977; Paul 2024, 42–43). Lanson's approach to literature is given as one of the influences for Bloch in *Cahier 58* (Nakano 2020: 8). This is repeated in *Esquisse XXIV*: 'Fondre dans son discours [Bloch] ce que disent Nisard et Lanson' (IV, 799). Désiré Nisard was yet another critic from this time in whose work 'on voit [...] triompher sans conteste le mode *d'investigation psychologique et documentaire* proposé par Sainte-Beuve' (Lagarde and others, 1969: 537; see also Compagnon 1995: 1198).

Proust expressed his admiration for Ferdinand Brunetière when writing to Georges Goyau after the critic's death in 1906 (Corr. VI, 314). In the *Recherche* itself, however, Brunetière is associated with aesthetic education that demands a rather facile expectation of 'completeness'.

Brunetière's 'cours' form part of 'l'éducation complète' (the phrase is meant ironically) of Mme de Marsantes (II, 547), and again of Mlle Legrandin (III, 214). This seems to reflect an ironic response to Brunetière's 'learning' that dates back to Proust's secondary school days. One of his first articles in the school paper (1887) was a spirited defence of Théophile Gautier from Ferdinand Brunetière's criticism of him in *La Revue des Deux Mondes* (E, 5–6). In another review, he sarcastically begins a public letter addressed to the 'Académie' with: 'Messieurs, Je ne suis qu'un simple élève de Rhétorique et qui n'a lu ni M. Nisard ni M. Brunetière' (E, 4). Brunetière is also quite possibly the 'directeur de *La Revue des Deux Mondes*' with whom Norpois might be able to connect the young hero (Brunetière was the editor there from 1893 to 1906) (I, 1331). Finally, Brunetière's theory of literature is branded in *Le Temps retrouvé* simply as an 'erreur' (IV, 472). Akio Wada (2014: 48) and Luzius Keller (1980: 1044) find that, in Bloch's and Norpois' discussions of art, together with the pastiche of the Goncourts, we might indeed glimpse elements of a wider satire of 'scientific' criticism.

Proust was equally aware of the *reaction* to this emergent form of scientific criticism — the so-called 'critiques impressionistes' (Caramaschi 1963: 47–54; Diaz 2015: 25). Rather than performing scientific research into the objective properties of a literary text, these critics try, often in flowery language, to record their immanent experience of the artwork. They describe themselves more readily as 'amateurs' or 'humanists' than scientists. Rather than determining the meaning of a text relative to the conditions of its production, these critics are more likely to assume that the meaning of the work changes over time, and in the eyes of each viewer. In 'The Perfect Critic', for example, T. S. Eliot divides contemporary criticism between 'impressionistic critics', amongst which he includes Walter Pater, against the 'purely "technical" critics' associated with Sainte-Beuve (1920: 11). In the famous preface to the *Renaissance* (first published 1873), Pater did indeed define 'aesthetic criticism' as the attempt, first and foremost, 'to know one's own impression' of the text. In this, Pater agrees with a quotation from someone whom he calls only 'a recent critic of Sainte-Beuve': 'De se borner à connaître de près les belles choses, et à s'en nourrir en exquis amateurs,

en humanistes accomplis' (Pater 1998: xxix–xxx). Compare, say, with this quotation from Sainte-Beuve: 'il n'est plus permis aujourd'hui d'être humaniste; il faut être soi-même du métier, être armé de la loupe et du scalpel grammatical' (CL XIII: 299).

Proust certainly read Pater's *Imaginary Portraits* (1887; translated 1899; see E, 1559), which he praises in his obituary for John Ruskin (E, 526; see Tadié 1996: 364–65; Bann 2002: 60; Painter 1966: 2256–57). Moreover, I think that Proust may have been influenced by Pater's 'imaginary portrait' of Jean-Antoine Watteau when Proust wrote his own sketch of the painter. Both Pater's and Proust's accounts describe the 'inconstance' (or 'restlessness') of a fundamentally benevolent artist; both have Watteau 'causing people to pose and dress for his fancy' ('il les priaît de poser' in 'si beaux habits irréels'); both emphasise the importance of his childhood provincialism; both recount the story of 'son élève [Jean-Baptiste] Pater' recalled to the deathbed of the master (Pater 2011: 18–32; E, 174–76). If this line of influence can be discerned, then Proust not only praised Pater in print, but attempted privately to reproduce something in the manner of one of Pater's famous sketches.

In France, another example of a figure often taken to be an 'impressionistic' critic, reacting to a scientism of the literary, is the work of Ernest Renan 'in his declining years' (Chadbourne 1949: 96; see equally Raimond 1966: 390–410; Cabanès 1998: 15–37). 'Renanisme' was a key influence on Anatole France, himself of course an influence on Proust (Chew 1924: 303). In a recent study, Yoan Vérilhac draws the battle lines in this way:

D'une part Brunetière se fait le défenseur d'une critique de jugement à prétention objective et influente. [...] D'autre part, le courant impressionniste, empreint de scepticisme et d'un relativisme revendiqué comme héritage renanien, prône que le critique, incapable de jamais sortir de soi, doit, en dernier recours, suspendre son jugement et modestement communiquer ses impressions de lecture (2010: 84).

At the time, too, Ernest Renan's 'individualist' criticism was opposed to Brunetière's scientific approach in polemical texts such as Charles Recolin's *L'anarchie littéraire* (1898: x-xii). Recolin's argument is that Renan, and others like him, have come to ignore the emergence of a national *discipline* of literary criticism. While 'M. Brunetière [...] invoque le témoignage de Sainte-Beuve et

son exemple' (1898: 7), Renan and others engage only their personal aesthetic instincts and passing whims, leading to the 'literary anarchy' of the title (see also Caro, 1882). References to Ernest Renan pepper Proust's essays (E, 322; 387), where Proust calls him one of the 'Grands écrivains français du xix^e siècle' (E, 56).

The narrator of the *Recherche* has, in turn, been taken as an 'impressionistic' critic of this kind, writing against the scientific theorisation of text as object. The possible line of influence 'from Pater through Proust' has been the subject of occasional commentary (Miller 1985: 110). In *Men Without Art* (first published 1934), Wyndham Lewis noted the 'kindred intelligence' of Pater and Proust with regards to their, in his opinion, hypocritical handling of 'aestheticism' (1987: 13; see also Henry 1981: 305). For Michael Davis, it is Nussbaum's reading of Proust in *Love's Knowledge* (1989) that precisely, if unwittingly, finds this Paterian strain. He writes that:

Nussbaum describes this [scientific critical] tradition [...] in order to introduce what she considers 'Proust's counterproposal', in which 'intellect' and 'theory' are distracting and distorting and in which strong feeling [...] has a more reliable truth function. In describing Proust's position, she describes exactly the Paterian position: 'He tells us that the impression is the only criterion of truth (Nussbaum 1989: 489)' (M. Davis 2002: 272).

Nussbaum here appears to be thinking of Proust's narrator in *Le Temps retrouvé*, who writes that: 'Seule l'impression, si chétive qu'en semble la matière, si insaisissable la trace, est un critérium de vérité' (IV, 458). Once again, if this narrator can be trusted as a reliable guide to Proust's aesthetic position, he does appear to be advocating a position similar to that of impressionistic criticism, as it emerged in reaction to Sainte-Beuve and his followers in the nineteenth century. But perhaps we can find this 'counter-proposal' to scientific criticism even more clearly articulated, and *in propria voce*, by Proust in 'LA MÉTHODE'.

Proust's counterproposal

After articulating Sainte-Beuve's position in 'LA MÉTHODE', Proust offers us an alternative theorisation. He argues the literary text is indeed produced by an author, but not by an author *qua* physical object whose properties can be uncovered by scientific methods. 'Un livre est le produit

d'un autre moi que celui que nous manifestons [...] dans la société' (E, 704). This alternative theorisation is usually taken to lie at the heart of Proust's argument in *Contre Sainte-Beuve* (Serça 2006: 75; Bales 2001: 189; Rousset 1962: 135). It is repeated throughout a recent anthology of essays on *Contre Sainte-Beuve*: 'La thèse de Proust repose essentiellement sur la dissemblance du moi social et du moi littéraire' (Pinon 2015: 70); 'La principale thèse qu'oppose Proust à Sainte-Beuve [est] la distinction d'un moi social et d'un moi profond' (Fraisie 2015: 278). It has been understood, too, as the theoretical development that allowed for the writing of the *Recherche*, and is said to be expressed in the handling of writers and artists, such as Vinteuil, in that text (Bertho 1996: 108). Even today, Proust's general argument appears to be of influence, or inspiration, for artists. Margaret Atwood, for example, opens her recent memoir with a very similar claim: 'There's the daily you, and then there's the other person who does the actual writing' (2025: xiv). More particularly, Proust's theory in 'LA MÉTHODE' was of great influence on some of the critics whom we have already met: Jean Rousset, Georges Poulet, and Roland Barthes. Chaudier has demonstrated how Proust's theorisation of a 'moi profond' effectively stymies the attempt to treat the literary text as 'effect', and physical object, by allowing one to study its 'cause' — the author — only in the text itself (2004: 114). In the 1960s, *Contre Sainte-Beuve* therefore stood 'contre la doxa universitaire de l'époque, i.e. la critique lansonienne' (Serça 2006: 78). This is one reason why 'la Nouvelle Critique française des années 1950 et 1960 [...] s'est abondamment attaché à l'œuvre de Proust' (Pennanech 2009: 239, see also Simon 2016: 33–37; Fraisie 2015: 277). Rather than historical or biographical analysis, a critic with Proust's theorisation of the text would have to turn to what Barthes called 'la critique immanente': a study of the text *itself*; despite, or perhaps because of, the subjectivity of this method (Barthes 1963: 447). The Proustian-inspired critic would then move backwards from the text to hypothesise on the nature of the 'moi profond' of the author who produced the writing. This is, as we have seen, precisely the method employed by Rousset in *Forme et Signification* (1962: xii–xiii) and equally by Poulet (1969: 66) in order to find the author's 'univers mental' (pp. 34–35).

Proust's counter-theorisation of the literary text, therefore, works both as a riposte to Sainte-Beuve, and 'scientific' criticism more generally. But I believe Proust went beyond this incarnation as 'le théoricien du *Contre Sainte-Beuve*' (Serça 2006: 73). In what follows, I will show how he developed a far more interesting approach after the theorisation articulated in 'LA MÉTHODE'.

Problems with Proust's Theorisation

Let us consider some of the problems with Proust's theory as it appears in these fragments of essay. Firstly, it remains a *method* of reading, and therefore limits our interaction with the text. From Proust's argument, it would follow that biographical contexts ought to be excluded from any reading, since this would be to confuse the 'real author' of the literary text with their 'moi social'. This would limit the reader to something like 'practical criticism', as it emerged in the 1920s (West 2002). Some critics have suggested that this is the purpose of *Contre Sainte-Beuve*, particularly for a writer who will soon, himself, write a semi-autobiographical novel: 'Dans le *Contre Sainte-Beuve*, [...] Proust n'a cependant pas d'autre intention que d'enfermer les critiques dans un périmètre étroit' (Brix 2015: 19). But Proust himself does not apply such a method even *within* *Contre Sainte-Beuve* itself (Crépu 2001: 15). As Mathieu Vernet notes (E, 1643), the criticism on Baudelaire partly relies on the author's biography, in direct contradiction to Proust's supposed method (E, 857).

Secondly, Proust's theory is a response not so much to Sainte-Beuve, as to a caricature of Sainte-Beuve, Taine, and scientific criticism more generally (Prendergast 2007: 4). 'En vérité, *Contre Sainte-Beuve* dit le contraire de ce que disait Sainte-Beuve' (Schneider 2014: 67). At the very least, Sainte-Beuve's copious writings describe a wider and more varied technique than this seemingly blind belief in science. Isabelle Serça has argued that Sainte-Beuve's 'method' of criticism is not 'scientific' in many respects (2006: 76). D'Hugues notices how Sainte-Beuve himself *denounced* 'l'esprit moderne' in literary criticism, which Sainte-Beuve saw as privileging factual analysis over

more intuitive and subjective interpretative methods (1969: 595). Indeed, the French quotation that Pater claimed came from a ‘recent critic of Sainte-Beuve’ (1998: xxix), and which he takes as an expression of the ‘amateur’ and humanistic instinct *against* that of the scientific one, is from Sainte-Beuve himself! In one of his two impressive articles on Joachim du Bellay in the *Journal des Savants* (1867a; 1867b), Sainte-Beuve laments the loss of a humanistic manner of criticism that he associates with the time of du Bellay and the following generations. While, during the first generations of the *Renaissance*, accurate reconstitution of ancient texts was the priority, once this work was completed scholars were able to respond in a more personal way to the Classics.

Qu’on veuille bien se figurer ce que pouvait être un ami de Racine ou de Fénelon, [...] un de ces honnêtes hommes [...] qui se bornaient à lire, à connaître de près les belles choses, et à s’en nourrir en exquis amateurs, en humanistes accomplis. Car on était humaniste alors, ce qui n’est presque plus permis aujourd’hui (1867b: 345–46).

The irony that this lament occurs during an article which exemplifies Sainte-Beuve’s scientific approach, and which reveals a staggering, systematic grasp on the literature around du Bellay, is expressive of a tension that runs throughout Sainte-Beuve’s work, as well as that of other ‘critiques scientifiques’, as we shall see. Stranger still, one can clearly see here the influence that Sainte-Beuve’s positioning of du Bellay had on Pater, in his own study of du Bellay in the *Renaissance* (1998: 99–113). Indeed, Pater draws on ‘M. Sainte-Beuve’ explicitly in that essay (1998: 102). Thus, even the *Renaissance*, where ‘impressionist criticism’ is most clearly formulated, has an ambivalent relationship to Sainte-Beuvian analysis and methodology.

Meanwhile, Sainte-Beuve makes many such statements. Take, for example: ‘La critique littéraire ne saurait devenir une science toute positive; elle restera un art’ (NL IX, 84; see also Diaz 2015: 32). Like any good critic, ‘Sainte-Beuve se contredit’ (de L’Isle-Adam 2015: 43) and has even been read as standing *against* the scientific trend of his time (Prendergast 2007: 12–13). Gérald Antoine has argued that, when we consider Proust’s writing beyond ‘LA MÉTHODE’, we can see that Proust was well aware of the ambivalence and complexity regarding Sainte-Beuve (2000: 34), an argument Prendergast echoes (2007: 3). This would agree with Proust’s

‘systématique’ reading of no fewer than ninety of Sainte-Beuve’s articles in preparation for *Contre Sainte-Beuve* from 1908–09 (E, xliii; 1107–29). Proust wrote twice to Georges de Lauris of the difficulty of ordering this wide array of notes and readings (E, 1138–39; Fraisse 2015: 283). Dominique Maingueneau, moreover, has argued that Sainte-Beuve’s manner of drawing pen-portraits of his authors is a direct influence on that of Proust (1994: 47; see also Calasso 1995: 97; Gray 1992: 16–18).

The same arguments can be made of ‘critiques scientifiques’ allegedly working in the shadow of Sainte-Beuve. While he may first appear to be a wholly ‘scientific’ critic, Lanson believed that criticism could never become a science, and that the critic’s subjective experience of the text was the primordial basis of interpretation, on which factual research would have to work. ‘L’histoire littéraire [...] a pour base des intuitions individuelles’ (Lanson 1969: 541). In *Histoire de la littérature française* (1920), we even find Lanson attacking, on the grounds that he is too scientific, Ernest Renan.

[Renan] a écrit dans *l’Avenir de la science* [...] : « L’étude de l’Histoire littéraire est destinée à remplacer en grande partie la lecture directe des œuvres de l’esprit humain [(1890: 226)] ». Cette phrase est la négation même de la littérature. [...] [C]’est aux œuvres mêmes, directement et immédiatement, qu’il faudrait se reporter (1920: vi).

Proust also seems to recognise this complexity in Renan. He writes that Renan’s style is amethodological, ‘si hétéroclite et disparate’ (E, 820). Yet his pastiche of Renan, as we shall see, presents him as an example of an academic critic, whose very excess of erudition prevents him from enjoying certain kinds of text (E, 443–50; p. 200). Meanwhile, Compagnon and Vernet distinguish Ferdinand Brunetière’s ‘rationnaliste’ criticism from positivism (E, 1300). Brunetière’s emphasis on a moralising criticism (see Brunetière 1969: 537–38; Loué 2002) — an emphasis to which the *Recherche* itself alludes (IV, 471–72) — further distinguishes him from a purely scientific approach. In fact, the very idea of a ‘purely’ scientific critic is normally a disobliging caricature — or fantasy, depending on the writer’s perspective. When Balzac compares his work to that of Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire, or Zola describes his novels as ‘experiments’, it is easier to sense, by the

very hyperbole of these claims, that they might be engaging in a kind of discursive metaphor. But when Brunetière or Sainte-Beuve express their desire to develop a complete taxonomy of literary genres, artworks, or human beings, we might equally read in this the expression of something closer to a *fantasy* of criticism — ‘a pseudo-naturalistic overlay’ (Prendergast 2007: 9) — rather than a practical intention. In ‘L’histoire littéraire et la sociologie’ (1904), Lanson, likewise, is conflicted between his desire that literary criticism should aim towards, or become, a ‘Science’, and his recognition that it can never quite leave ‘les sous-sol de la science’. In Proust’s day, as in ours, literary critics shuttled uneasily between the poles of factual research and personal impression.

Marcel Proust was unable to capture this ambivalence in ‘LA MÉTHODE’. He is writing an ‘essay’, somewhat in the style of ‘Taine’ himself (Corr. VIII, 320). Thus, he must identify Sainte-Beuve with a theoretical position he can attack: to be ‘contre Sainte-Beuve’, ‘Sainte-Beuve’ himself has to be defined. This requires a fixing, immobilisation, and thus a *simplification* of the sprawling mass of Sainte-Beuve’s writing.

It also requires a counter-proposal: ‘je tâcherais de dire ce qu’aurait été pour moi l’art’ (E, 702). ‘Sainte-Beuve’s method and its erroneousness will thus serve Proust’s own polemical ends, providing a position from which to legislate what criticism should be’ (Grey 1992: 30). This is yet another theorisation of the literary text. More than this, it is a theorisation of the text *as object*. Even if ‘un livre est le produit d’un autre moi’ (E, 704) — and thus cannot be studied by a scientific investigation of its author — it remains a ‘produit’, with properties that can be investigated. This theorisation of the text requires — as Sainte-Beuve’s did — a further theorisation of the human being. Proust’s compartmentalisation of the human into two distinct parts — a ‘moi social’ and a ‘moi profond’ — has been compared to the scientific work that emerges at the turn of the century (Bizub 2006: 27–33; Brix 2015: 19), including the ‘dédoublement du moi’ theorised by Taine in *De l’intelligence* (1900: 17).

An equally plausible influence is Bergson’s theory on the ‘DEUX ASPECTS DU MOI’ in the *Essai* (1988: 94–104). Bergson and Taine’s approaches are often opposed since:

Bergson [...] was widely considered the philosopher who [...] critiqued the larger culture of scientism. He reversed many of Taine's premises about the neurophysiology of the mind (Paul 2024: 29).

Still, Bergson argues for 'une distinction analogue' to that of Proust's between the 'moi fondamental' (sometimes the 'moi intérieur', or the 'moi plus profond') and the 'moi superficiel' of the 'vie sociale' (Bonnet 1979: 214). The 'social self' dwells in the realm of a shared language that necessarily, to a greater or lesser extent, 'projette le temps dans l'espace' (Bergson 1988: 100). Bergson's 'moi profond' would be closer to the 'pur esprit' that Sainte-Beuve rejects, since one cannot grasp it totally or 'le tenir tout entier' (NL III: 16). In an undated series of notes, Proust conceives of a methodology of reading that is reminiscent of Bergson's analysis of 'mélodie' (p. 27):

Dès que je lisais un auteur, je distinguais bien vite sous les paroles l'air de la chanson [...] et, tout en lisant, sans m'en rendre compte, je le chantonnais, je pressais les mots ou les ralentissais ou les interrompais tout à fait, comme on fait quand on chante où on attend souvent longtemps, selon la mesure de l'air, avant de dire la fin d'un mot (E, 1079).

For Proust, the meaning of any particular 'note' — or 'parole' — is understood through its relation with other elements in a 'pénétration mutuelle' (Bergson 1898: 76). Even if this may seem a more 'fluid' theorisation of the text, it still gives us a reading *method*. Proust writes here 'comme s'il s'agissait pour lui d'opposer à la méthode de Sainte-Beuve sa propre méthode critique' (E, 1079). 'On connaît la méthode de Proust qu'il expose lui-même dans le *Contre Sainte-Beuve* : plus que les paroles, c'est « l'air de la chanson » qu'il retient' (Serça 2006: 70).

As we have already observed with Bergsonian readings of the *Recherche*, even Bergson's fluid and mobile theorisation of artworks still *closes down* some possibilities of our experience of the text, since it remains a 'theorisation'. Likewise, any given method, by its very nature, excludes certain possible practices of reading — in this case, biographical information that Proust himself was tempted to draw upon. When pushed to its logical conclusions, as we saw in Poulet and Rousset (pp. 34–35), the implication that the text will lead us to the 'moi profond' of the artist requires, on the part of the critic, an attempt to arrest the 'durée' in which reading 'se développe' in order to recreate the 'univers mental' of the author (Rousset 1962: xiii). Even if the text is

theorised as a melody, the critic inevitably limits the complex and varied experience of reading itself.

In short, if we were to take only Proust's arguments in 'LA MÉTHODE', we could read him as merely making another move in a critical debate that played out before his time, and continues into our day. Proust is articulating something akin to what Saikat and Vadde (2020) would call 'the amateur impulse' in the face of a growing 'zeal for positivist and empiricist approaches', and a professionalisation of criticism as an academic subject (2020: 50). He is anticipating, and possibly influencing, Barthes' call for 'les pratiques et les valeurs de l'Amateur' in literary criticism (2003: 230), in reaction to a heedless (and, again, partly caricatured) critical 'positivism' (see Mitchell 1977: 13). But Proust is also repeating what any number of Romantics before him had claimed about the inscrutable origins of the work of art, and an argument against autobiographical criticism which many figures, including Alfred de Vigny or Théophile Gautier, had *already* levelled at Sainte-Beuve (Brix 2015: 8–9). In that sense, 'la Nouvelle Critique' is itself just another reincarnation of Romantic attitudes to the literary text. Here, for example, is Gustave Flaubert writing to George Sand in October 1871: 'Est-ce que la critique moderne n'a pas abandonné l'art pour l'histoire ? La valeur intrinsèque d'un livre n'est rien dans l'école Sainte-Beuve-Taine' (Flaubert and Sand 2011: 277). 'Loin que Proust soit un pionnier absolu en matière d'autobiographisme, nombreux ont été les critiques qui, avant lui, ont condamné le penchant à expliquer l'œuvre par l'homme' (Diaz 2015: 21).

The wider problem is this. To counter a scientific theorisation of the literary text as object, a critic feels bound to produce an alternative methodology of reading, together with an alternative theorisation of the text. Even if the critic argues only for a direct experience of the text — even if Proust's method is simply 'lire, lire et encore lire !' (Serça 2006: 70) — it *remains* a theorisation and thus a limitation of possible reading practices. It is, moreover, a kind of mannered reaction, if not an overreaction, to what itself is a semi-hyperbolic pose of 'scientism'. This has led still further critics to argue that 'anti-professionalism' (understood as the attitude against scientific research

into the literary text) ‘is professionalism in its purest form’ (Fish 1989: 245). Or that: ‘anti-professionalism is a ritual of professional legitimation’ (Robbins 1993: 74). The explicit *refusal* of a methodology of reading may itself be a methodology (Eagleton 1983: 198) — in the same way that anti-essentialism is a form of essentialism (p. 42). In short: the ‘critique scientiste’ relies just as much on a theorisation of the literary text as a ‘critique impressioniste’. These two ‘sides’ form a binary *within* literary criticism.

What is most fascinating is the way in which these terms circulate to make the fortunes of the one rise higher than the fortunes of the other, while determinedly resisting the sense that one is always the necessary condition for the other (Garber 2001: 5).

Neither pole can exist in an unadulterated form, since the literary text, like a human being, has ‘double’ (or contradictory) ontology. Both *are* objects, produced in a traceable physical context; they are, in the Heideggerian sense, ‘Things’ or ‘res extensa’ (Heidegger 2008: 95–96; see p. 100). Yet both, also, offer experiences that change from reader to reader, and change over time. Like a human being, a text has ‘objective’ and ‘subjective’ elements. The ‘anxiety’ that this creates amongst literary critics working with the university is still very much a live one (see Bray 2021). As we shall see in the next chapter, it is this confusion in the ontology of the artwork (and the human being) that is consistently problematised in the *Recherche*. It is a problem to which the narrator alludes in *Le Temps retrouvé*: ‘Toute impression est double, à demi engainée dans l’objet, prolongée en nous-même par une autre moitié’ (IV, 471). As Dutton writes regarding a similar passage in the final volume:

Proust suggests that a determinate meaning is not inherent in the objects described by realism [...] [b]ut [...] also implies that ‘meaning’ can never be fully disengaged from [them] (2023: 2).

In ‘LA MÉTHODE’, then, Proust is engaged with a theoretical problem of greater scope and difficulty than the particular autobiographical method of Sainte-Beuve. Yet his response to this problem, as we have seen it so far, has been merely another theorisation of the literary text. His argument requires him not only to simplify the complexity of Sainte-Beuve’s critical output, but equally to advocate a critical methodology that proves overly restrictive, even for his own

subsequent analyses. Proust, here, is caught within a version of the ‘conundrum of theorisation’, such as we have already sketched it. But Proust begins to find a solution to this difficulty later in the redaction of *Contre Sainte-Beuve*.

Proust’s Solution

Proust’s solution to this conundrum is the writing of a text which does not theorise literature, but instead draws its reader’s attention to the impossibility of any single theorisation. In particular, this new text is calculated not to *refute* Sainte-Beuve’s autobiographical method, but to problematise its application. We can see Proust mulling over the key change in a letter to Georges de Lauris:

Est-ce que je peux vous demander un conseil ? Je vais écrire quelque chose sur Sainte-Beuve. J’ai en quelque sorte deux articles bâtis dans ma pensée (articles de revue). L’un est un article de forme classique, l’essai de Taine en moins bien. L’autre débiterait par le récit d’une matinée, Maman viendrait près de mon lit et je lui raconterais un article que je veux faire sur Sainte-Beuve (Corr. VIII, 320).

This letter probably dates from mid-December 1908 (E, 1136; Fraisse 2015: 282). If so, Proust would have written it after ‘LA MÉTHODE’ (E, 701–15), which was probably composed in the autumn of that year (E, 701). Despite Lauris’ subsequent advice to write in an essayistic style (Corr. VIII, 323), Proust began writing the series of fragments entitled ‘Essai narratif’ (E, 717–869) most likely around this time, ‘à la fin de 1908 et au début de 1909’ (E, 717). It is a crucial development. We can recognise the importance of this change even in fragments that still bear a strong resemblance to ‘LA MÉTHODE’. In one example, after trading quotations of classic French verse, a son and mother begin a discussion on Sainte-Beuve (see also E, 715–16):

— Je voudrais te soumettre une idée d’article que j’ai. [...] Le sujet serait contre la méthode de Sainte-Beuve.
 — Comment ? [...] Dans l’essai de Taine [et] l’article de Bourget que tu m’as fait lire, ils disent que c’est une méthode si merveilleuse. [...]
 — Hé bien oui, ils disent cela mais c’est stupide. Tu sais en quoi elle consiste, cette méthode ? [...] Son idée était que [*interrompu*] (E, 764).

This is not some of Proust’s finest work. He seems to be shoehorning in references to the articles of Taine and Bourget which appeared in ‘LA MÉTHODE’ (E, 703). As such, the conversation feels

rather wooden, and nothing more than a ‘dialogized essay’ (Gray 1992: 20). All the same, and whether or not Proust was aware of it (see Corr. IX, 155–56), the change is enormous. Rather than being a straightforward critique of Sainte-Beuve, the meaning and purposes of this text are *indeterminate*. Indeed, Proust’s ‘indecision between criticism and fiction suggests that he was perfecting an experimental style that would create channels between two genres’ (Paul 2024: 64). We are now in the mode of interrogation, rather than monologue, which Tadić argues is Proust’s preferred mode (1996: 130). Or, we might say that we are now in a *form* where any monologues that might occur — and we should bear this in mind for a discussion of Proustian monologues in Chapter 3 — will implicitly be questionable. When the young man says of Taine and Bourget that ‘ils disent cela mais c’est stupide’, is the reader to agree with him? Or does the flippancy and crudity of this very utterance suggest a simplicity in his interpretation? And are this man’s opinions presented as fundamentally childish ones, as is implied by his decision to confide them to his mother?

The reader *cannot tell*. Proust has suddenly found a way of questioning Sainte-Beuve, without *fixing* Sainte-Beuve’s actual position — nor the position of his own text. Proust creates ‘une formule moderne où la théorie, dans son cas le criticisme romantique, constitue le sol de l’imaginaire’ (Henry 1981: 258). The ‘Essai narratif’ expresses a Romantic disdain of science; yet distances itself *from*, say, the anti-Beuvisism of Vigny by simultaneously putting this anti-autobiographical position under question. In fact, it quietly anticipates and encourages the common autobiographical reading of *Contre Sainte-Beuve* (for an example, see de L’Isle-Adam 2015: 43). This is that Proust psychologically required such arguments in order, as a middle-aged dilettante, to begin a work in which he would expose so much of himself. These ambiguities come from the positioning of the narrator. He is called ‘Marcel Proust’ (E, 743). All the same, this ‘I’ and the ‘I’ of the author, whilst similar, are not identical. While the ‘I’ of the ‘Essai narratif’ wishes to write an article of Sainte-Beuve, the *author* has instead decided to write what appears to be an autobiographical, or semi-autobiographical, text about that very desire. The reader does not know

why Marcel Proust (the author) decided not to write — or proved incapable of writing — the original essay. The ‘Essai narratif’ of *Contre Sainte-Beuve* thereby creates a paradox that defies any easy theorisation of its sense. We are given the arguments of an ‘I’ arguing *against* reading literary texts by reference to biographical facts of their author’s lives — all this while this ‘I’ is no longer the disembodied ‘I’ of the essayist, but *himself* in a text that offers a biographical portrait of him. The very form of the text thereby belies the arguments of its protagonist and/or author. How *could* a Beuvian critic read such a text? The biographical facts that she would use — say, the writer’s unusually close relationship with his mother — are incorporated into the work itself. But, by that very act, they have become suspect. We are left with some of the same challenges that occurred during our reading of the opening pages of the *Recherche* (I, 3–9). Are we to read the narrator as recording a conversation that actually happened? Or is this a fictional (or fictionalised) dialogue? Is it imagination, or memory (p. 61)?

The biographical method itself is thereby implicitly put under question. How far is testimony of the past reliable, and how far is it another ‘fiction’ that we tell ourselves? What counts as a biographical fact? And, come to think of it, isn’t Proust’s desire to tell a narrative of a person with his own name itself a biographical ‘fact’ that a Beuvian would have to account for in her reading of the text? In this sense, biographical criticism would *have* to move from a scientific investigation towards a hermeneutic circle (p. 51). The development of the text itself is part of the biography of the author, the account of which is intended to elucidate the text. As Barthes argues, it is the fact that ‘le Narrateur n’est pas Proust’ and yet *resembles* Proust, which stymies a Beuvian attempt to read the *Recherche* through biographical research into the author himself (1963: 450).

It is here, in the ‘Essai narratif’, that we get the first emergence of this distinctive Proustian ‘I’. It is not yet the ‘double-je’ of the hero and narrator of the *Recherche*, but still a different ‘je’, say, from that of *Les Soixante-quinze feuillets* (1907–08), where the ‘monologue sans fin est celui de la confession, de l’autobiographie, non du roman’ (Tadié 2021: 14). Here, by contrast, we find an ‘I’ who articulates an indeterminable distance between the narrator and the author of the text. The

‘Marcel Proust’ of the ‘essai narratif’ both is and is not its author, just as the narrator of the *Recherche* is a figure who, as Proust later claimed, ‘dit « je » et qui n’est pas toujours moi’ (E, 1232; compare III, 51).

It is only now, in the writing of this ‘essai’, that we see the first drafts of what will become I, 3–9. Here, we find descriptions of: the narrator falling asleep so quickly that he did not recognise he had done so (E, 725); the sick man waking up in his hotel (E, 718; 720–21); and ‘le craquement des boiseries’ (E, 723). Some sentences are even taken word-for-word and put into the first six pages of the *Recherche* (E, 726; I, 4). At the heart of their confusion lies, as we have seen, a confusion as to who is telling this story. We can read this ‘je’ neither as a fictional character, nor as the author writing *in propria voce*. It is this ambiguity that saves the text from falling into the conundrum of theorisation: of critiquing one theorisation of the literary text, only to replace it with another. Now, when the narrator or hero articulates a theory — say, his dislike of Sainte-Beuve — the *text* remains indeterminate in its significance and position. As we saw, with the sentence beginning ‘[u]n homme qui dort’ (I, 5), we can no longer take any given theoretical announcement as a reliable guide to the text’s meanings.

Proust intended to begin the ‘Essai narratif’ with his narrator drifting in and out of sleep (E, 763), a decision he retained for the *Recherche*. It seems particularly appropriate when we recall Blanchot’s statement in ‘Rêver, écrire’ that the indeterminate distance between the self of the author and the ‘je’ written on the page — this ‘moi sans moi’ (1971: 169) — is akin to the distance between one’s dream-self and one’s waking-self. It is this gap — ‘les rapports secrets, les métamorphoses nécessaires qui existent entre la vie d’un écrivain et son œuvre’ (JS, 53) — that confuses all attempts on behalf of a reader, or critic, to determine its theory or underlying pretensions. Rawlinson writes that the *Recherche* ‘prohibits itself from advancing any theories’ (1984: 81). We might say, rather, through the creation of this ambivalent distance between narrator and author, that it *cannot* univocally advance any given ‘moral’ or ‘message’ (pp. 21–22). If the narrator does so — as the ‘I’ does in the ‘Essai narratif’ of *Contre Sainte-Beuve* — his position *in a novel*

undermines his arguments. On the other hand, as we shall see in Chapter 3, when other elements in the text belie the aesthetic theories of either the young hero or the mature narrator, we can never quite tell whether these discrepancies are intentional. In this sense, it is true that ‘le roman proustien est plus hardi que Proust *théoricien*’ (Descombes 1987: 15). But, as we have seen, the ‘roman proustien’ emerges precisely from these experiments with theory.

Whilst some critics have wished to draw a sharp division between the narrator of the *Recherche* and its author (p. 21), it is this very confusion that helps to create the indeterminacy of the opening pages, and it is this indeterminacy of signification that draws the reader into the *Recherche*. Further, it allows the novel to articulate an ‘impressionistic’ and Paterian style of art criticism, *as well as* a sociological analysis of the conditions of production of artworks in the vein of Gustave Lanson or Sainte-Beuve (Bidou-Zachariassen 1998; Lucey 2022a). In its capacity to mix impressionistic descriptions with a quasi-scientific elaboration of ‘general laws’, the *Recherche* resembles John Ruskin’s *Stones of Venice* (1851–53). In this three-volume study, on which Proust draws for the *Recherche* (see pp. 160–61), Ruskin derives both the correct (and timeless) principles of architecture in scientific style *as well as* drawing vivid portraits of his artistic ‘impressions’ (p. 117). Likewise, the opening pages of the *Recherche* can be read *both* as illustrating a ‘scientific method’ *as well as* celebrating an endlessly mobile play of subjective impressions. Meanwhile, the ‘dream’ is presented both as the product of physical, exterior circumstances, and that which grounds the exterior world’s apparently fixed order and ontology. Rather than articulating an alternative theorisation of the artwork, the ‘Essai narratif’ and the opening pages of the *Recherche* articulate and problematise the difficulties of theorisation. The confused ‘double’ ontology of the artwork and of the human being, thereby becomes — we will see in the next chapter — a central investigative drama across the opening volumes.

This textual indeterminacy further justifies a ‘hermeneutics of naïvety’ — one which reads without a theorisation, nor a critical methodology, nor a clear distinction between author and narrator. If we start reading the *Recherche* with a prior theorisation of literature, we limit our capacity

to experience the novel as a mode of theoretical questioning. Moreover, we are almost sure to find — in the text’s constant articulation of competing theories (Bray 2019: 94) — the particular theory that agrees with our own position. Once more, to illustrate this point we may take the example of the opening pages. If one theorises the *Recherche* as a collection of fragmentary but mobile discontinuities (like Barthes and Aubert), one can find this in I, 3–9. Yet again, if Rousset supposes that the literary text must advance an atemporal ‘forme’, he can find that too. In all such cases, critics have tried to *solve* the confusion of a naïve reader, such as Humblot or Madeleine, rather than simply trying to explain why the text invokes such a response. Thereby, they are likely to miss ‘le plaisir de le lire [qui] vient en partie du besoin de formuler et de réviser des interprétations provisoires’ (Bray 2022: 157).

If we should not read the *Recherche* with a fixed theorisation, it follows that we should not have a critical method. That is because, as we have seen with *Sainte-Beuve*, a reading method always *implies* a prior theorisation of the text. Admittedly, some critics argue that *any* reading, even one based upon ‘glimmers and hunches’, tacitly requires a method (Eagleton 1983: 198). But this argument, to which we will return (p. 216), may itself be dependent upon an implicit prior theorisation of the text. In *Literary Theory* (1983), Eagleton views the text as material *object*, rather than a living and ‘mysterious organic unity’ *à la* Bergson, a theorisation which Eagleton despised (1983: 19). However, if the text is considered as changing and *responsive* to our attempts to understand it — if, looking at the text, we might encounter ‘the ironic gaze of the object staring back’ (Yee 2010: 3) — we are less likely to suppose that we must always be already using a method of some sort to try and understand the text. Again, the comparison between the ontology of the text and the human being is relevant. Would we be likely to say that everyone must ‘always’ have a method, implicit or explicit, for dealing and responding to other people? Or does the chance and unpredictability involved in any encounter with another person mean that any such ‘method’ will always find its limits?

All the same, it might seem as if a 'naïve reading' suffers from the same danger we descried in deconstruction (p. 48). This is merely to offer a theorisation of the text in its turn. One difference to note — for now at least — is that a 'naïve reading' cannot be a settled one. The naïve reader is actively *in pursuit* of shedding her naïvety: she looks for the *Recherche's* essence, and does not know whether she will get it or not. The very confusion of these opening pages is felt most intensely when we are engaged in such a search, and when we ask ourselves, quite earnestly: 'Qu'est-ce que tout cela signifie ?' (Madeleine 1999: 446). It is this question that propels the naïve reader from I, 3–9 and into the opening volumes.

Chapter 2: Through an Assembly Line of Dreams (I, 9–II, 378)

Morbus litterarius! Le trait caractéristique de ce mal est qu'on aime moins les choses que l'effet littéraire qu'elles produisent. On arrive à voir le monde comme à travers une illusion théâtrale. Le public atteint du même mal ne recherche que ce qui fait tableau ; la clarté de la lampe dégoûte même la lumière du jour.
 — Ernest Renan, 'Réponse au discours de réception de Jules Claretie.
 Discours prononcé dans la séance publique, le jeudi 21 février 1889'

This thesis began with the question: 'why do we read *À la recherche du temps perdu*?' It argued that a 'naïve' reader is driven by the desire to understand the essence of the text. Chapter 1 demonstrated how the first six pages of the novel draw the reader into the *Recherche* by eliciting, without satisfying, this interpretative desire. This chapter will develop a theory of the opening volumes that further challenges a 'fragmentary' reading of the *Recherche*. As we saw in the introduction, a 'fragmentary' reading theorises the novel as a collection of 'fragments non totalisants et non totalisés' (p. 16; Deleuze 1971: 142). This chapter argues that the 'fragments' encountered by the hero and reader are not part of the ontological reality of the text or its fictional world, but are hallucinations stemming from a faulty 'theorisation' shared by the Proustian critic and Marcel. We see how Marcel is pushed towards this 'theorisation' as he grows up, and how, after some struggles, he is finally indoctrinated. My reading offers an alternative view of the opening volumes — not as 'Künstlerroman' (Kuhn 1964: 302), but as what we might call a 'Kritikerroman', where Marcel is offered a farcical miseducation in 'reading' texts.

However, the purpose of this chapter is not to refute a 'fragmentary' theorisation of the *Recherche* and replace it with a better option. Instead, it sketches an alternative, Bergsonian reading in order to reveal the text's ongoing indeterminacy between the 'double' or confused ontology of persons and artworks (p. 90). The naïve reader is drawn further into the *Recherche* by its contradictory articulations *both* of fragmentary, atemporal 'essences' and an underlying temporal 'mobility'.

Magic Lantern: Another 'Mandala'?

After the indeterminate 'je' of the opening pages, we are presented with a young hero, whom we will call 'Marcel' (p. 21). This 'je' certainly *is* a character in a 'récit' (Barthes 2022: 158). Marcel is in a determinate place (his 'chambre à coucher') and, following the tried-and-tested formula (p. 53), there is an 'inciting incident': he faces a problem with which the reader can empathise. The 'lanterne magique' is introduced in the hero's room 'pour [le] distraire les soirs où on [lui] trouvait l'air trop malheureux' (I, 9). Unfortunately, the cure only deepens his mystery.

Ma tristesse n'en était qu'accrue [par la lanterne magique], parce que rien que le changement d'éclairage détruisait l'habitude que j'avais de ma chambre et grâce à quoi, sauf le supplice du coucher, elle m'était devenue supportable (I, 9).

The new invention sweeps away Marcel's habitual, temporally-situated mode of occupying his bedroom. Critics have taken the magic lantern 'as a symbol of the working imagination of the artist' (Jordan 1993: 14; Mendelson 1968: 102) or 'a metaphor for Proust's vision' (Boulouque 2024: 117; Zants 1971: 22). It has also been read as a metaphor for the functioning of artwork, whose 'surnaturelles apparitions' project themselves onto the drab and dreary walls of Marcel's 'chambre' (Genette 1966: 41–43; see also Maurois 1949: 201; Crémieux 1971: 31; Cocking 1982: 55; Leonard 2010: 56). One problem with this sort of reading is its tacit implication that 'art' in the *Recherche* is really what the narrator would call 'un hors-d'œuvre artificiel' (IV, 468) — a concealment of 'l'essence des choses' (IV, 451), rather than their revelation. Another problem is that, unlike art as it is encountered elsewhere in the novel, this is not a transcendental or inspiring projection. If it is 'art' that Marcel encounters here, it is art of a particular kind: mass-produced, lurid, a little alienating. Like a Derridean 'supplément' or 'pharmakon', the magic lantern, *qua* 'cure' for Marcel's 'supplice', has both negative and positive effects (see Silverman 1989). 'Certes', writes the narrator, 'je leur trouvais du charme à ces brillantes projections'. But it also provokes '[un] malaise', makes him 'inquiet', and leads him 'à penser, à sentir, choses si tristes' (I, 10). The lantern roots the hero to the spot, turning his bedroom into a 'point fixe et douloureux' (I, 9). The 'projections' also seem to block all means of escape:

Ce bouton de la porte de ma chambre, qui différait pour moi de tous les autres boutons de porte du monde en ceci qu'il semblait ouvrir tout seul, sans que j'eusse besoin de le tourner, tant le maniement m'en était devenu inconscient, le voilà qui servait maintenant de corps astral à Golo (I, 10).

Beforehand, Marcel's relation to the doorknob was unthinking, indicative of his easy mobility around the house. Now he notices the doorknob's qualities as a spatial and static object: 'le voilà' as a support for the 'corps' of Golo. For Marcel, there is a strange fascination, and even horror, in the sudden change of aspect.

By a strange coincidence, Heidegger also uses the example of a doorknob to illustrate a similar alteration. In the *Basic Problems of Phenomenology*, a lecture course given in 1927, he writes that: '[normally] when we enter here through the door, we do not apprehend [...] the doorknob' (1982: 163). In such cases, the door-handle is perceived only as a function: 'that *with which* we open the door *in order to* go outside' (Beck 2002: 58; see also Dreyfus 1991: 196–97). However, when we start examining a doorknob, and when we consider it without an impulse to turn it, its physical aspect dawns on us. The doorknob can suddenly seem strange. It has become an obstinate "Thing": a 'res extensa' 'stand[ing] in the way of our concern' (Heidegger 1982: 124–25). It has been spatialised: it now occurs to us in the fact of its physical dimensions, rather than in its capacity to be experienced or turned. This is the same ontological change to a *physical object* that we observed in Sainte-Beuve's supposed 'theorisation' of the literary text (p. 74): the critic begins to examine its objective qualities, rather than her 'everyday' relation to it (Heidegger 2008: 96). In this case, due to the effects of this 'projection', a 'cloison' appears between Marcel and the 'salle à manger' where '[il] avai[t] hâte de courir' (I, 11). A barrier emerges, and a discontinuity of space, where no such barrier or discontinuity was sensed before.

We can also find fragmentation in the world projected by the magic lantern. Geneviève — pre-figurement of Albertine, and literal ancestor of Mme de Guermantes (Kocay 1986: 10) — is imprisoned after being accused of infidelity. Golo rides to visit her. Rather than the continuous, fluid movement indicative of Bergsonian flow, the lover's pace is 'tressautant' and 'saccadé' (I, 9–

10; see Riffaterre 1988: 451). The whole magic lantern works, according to Poulet, by ‘un mouvement haché, interrompu et saccadé’ (1963: 115). The world of the lover and the loved one is also fragmentary. The narrator carefully describes how the ‘limite [...] des ovales de verre’ segments each image from the text, forever dividing Golo from Geneviève, who herself dwells in an incomplete ‘pan de château’ (I, 10). Here, then, is one possible example of Poulet’s ‘univers en morceaux’ (1963: 54–55). In fact, Poulet claims that the magic lantern is a kind of microcosm (or mandala) of the text itself. Proust’s novel is a series of discrete spaces, juxtaposed by their frames, and sometimes ‘superposed’ one on top of the other, like Golo on the doorknob (Poulet 1963: 115–17; see also Genette 1966: 51). This fragmentary, discontinuous conceptualisation is precisely the opposite of a Bergsonian theorisation. The *Essai*, for example, warns of destroying our understanding of psychological states through a spatialising ‘projection’ of them:

On détruit la vraie nature des états psychologiques profonds lorsqu’on les examine de près, lorsqu’on les distingue, les juxtapose, et par conséquent lorsqu’on les projette dans l’espace, puisque leur vraie nature est de se compénétrer, de s’influencer les uns les autres, et de changer continuellement. Ils ne sont que durée, ils deviennent temps-espace (Bergson 1898: 99).

When they are fragmented by such a projection, we can no longer appreciate their complex ‘pénétration mutuelle’ in continuous ‘durée’ (p. 27). This description of ‘theorising’ psychological states, and their subsequent change in aspect, influenced the ontological distinctions that Heidegger developed and illustrated by his example of the doorknob (see Heidegger 2008: 382; 500–01).

Thus, the magic lantern may *not* be ‘a metaphor for Proust’s vision’ (Zants 1971: 22). Instead, the lantern displays the same ambiguity that we detected in the first six pages (for still another reading of it, see Kristeva 1994: 260; we will offer still another, pp. 208–09). In the following reading, I will take the lantern as a metaphor for ‘theorisation’: an example of a projection that ‘détruit la vraie nature’ of what it projects upon. Instead of showing the real ontology of the *Recherche*, the lantern is a symbol of Renan’s ‘morbus litterarius’: an aesthetic disease where the artificial ‘clarté de la lampe’ comes to ‘dégoute[r] même la lumière du jour’ (Renan 1889 : 532, cited

E, 1404). The lantern reveals how the world can change appearance when we *project* our own aesthetic expectations onto the text.

The Production of Dreams

If the magic lantern introduces art (or artifice) to Marcel, it also introduces him to art criticism. The hero's visit to this 'vitrail' is oriented by 'le boniment' 'lu à haute voix par [s]a grand-tante' (I, 10), as if she were a tour guide, or a salesperson (Joseph 2004: 110; for another use of 'boniment', see I, 251). Thus, art and the interpretation of art have a twin birth in the *Recherche*. Likewise, Marcel's first *act of writing* is an attempt to escape from the bedroom to which he has been banished. His 'petit mot' wings its way to the dining room and thereby conquers the barriers between apparently discontinuous spaces: 'cette salle à manger interdite, hostile' now opens 'comme un fruit devenu doux qui brise son enveloppe' (I, 30). Later in the novel, Marcel will encounter many more persons or places enclosed by such 'enveloppes' or 'cloisons' (see Mazelier 2019: 107–08; Fülöp 2017: 113). As we shall see, the Proustian lover in particular finds himself unable to penetrate the 'cloison' that surrounds, or *appears* to surround, the loved-one (Pommier 1939: 53).

The 'petit mot' is the first of a series of epistolary break-ins. We might recall the mendacious letters that Swann writes to Odette 'et qu'il lui faisait porter avant le dîner' (I, 222); the letter Marcel writes to Swann ensconced in his hotel (I, 482); and Charlus' letter to Morel inside the barracks (III, 452). Each dispatch overcomes what may seem an insuperable distance between these discrete spaces. The 'petit mot' may also remind us of the three 'petits coups' that escape from the seemingly closed world of Marcel's bedroom in Balbec (II, 29–30). In this case, the 'cloison, pénétrée de tendresse et de joie' becomes 'harmonieuse, immatérielle' (II, 30). We may read this as a 'break-out' of that thin partition wall called the skull, which separates our thoughts from the outside world, and a symmetrical 'break-in' to the mind of another: it is the relief of soul-to-soul communication. Such is the metaphor that the narrator also employs on rare moments

when he trusts Albertine: '[a]lors je ne fus plus seul ; je sentis disparaître cette cloison qui nous séparait' (IV, 110–11).

Gilles Deleuze would call these 'transversales' (pp. 37–38). That is to say, occasions where struts are placed between the various discontinuous 'monades' of the *Recherche*, and where the 'mille vases clos' of the novel open and circulate (IV, 448). This happens during epiphanies. 'In the experiences provided by [...] the trees at Hudimesnil and [...] by the steeples at Martinville, it is, as the narrator says, the "rind" of things that is seen being "peeled away"' (Fülöp 2009: 43). My question is whether such occasions forge only momentary connections between genuinely discontinuous spaces, or whether they are occasions when an *impression* of discontinuity is temporarily shown to be false. Is Albertine really a 'lévinassien' Other, in quite a different and unreachable world from that of the hero (Bensussan 2024: 19; see also Fülöp 2017: 111–14)? Or does she dwell in the same space as Marcel, but his 'theorisation' of reality prevents him from understanding or reaching her? It may be that the doors between people — Albertine and Marcel; Marcel and his grandma — are in fact always open; it is merely the projections of the hero, like those of the magic lantern, that makes them appear closed.

Under this interpretation, the 'intrusion' (I, 10) of the magic lantern in Marcel's bedroom could be read, metaphorically, as the enforced and artificial concealment of his everyday way of being in the world. The lantern, rather than a symbol for art, is really a 'lanterne magique scientifique' (III, 883) which spatialises time, following an argument first sketched by Riffaterre (1983: 455). Similar, in this respect, are the photographs that Swann procures for Marcel (I, 18), partly at his grandma's behest (I, 39–40). These photographs belong to the earliest drafts of the *Recherche* (E, 762). They may constitute a kind of 'primary socialisation' of Marcel into art appreciation (Monaci 2018: 101–02), and represent part of the family's wider efforts to 'l'élever virilement' (JS, 70). The early training seems to work; the collection created is an effective Pinterest board for the young hero, filling him with carefully flavoured dreams. In the *Recherche*, we have none of the explicitly Romanticist education that comes from 'son maître Rustlinor' in *Jean Santeuil*

(JS, 106; 110–11). Nonetheless, the subjects are those favoured by a Romantic sensibility. Marcel receives ‘des photographies de la Cathédrale de Chartres par Corot, des Grandes Eaux de Saint-Cloud par Hubert Robert, du Vésuve par Turner’ (I, 40). Swann will also give him photographs of the allegories in Giotto’s baptistery (I, 80) and he is offered a ‘grande photographie’ of St Mark’s (I, 386). There is already here a note of ambivalence. Marcel’s grandma is upset by the ‘banalité commerciale’ of these photographs, and their ‘mode mécanique de représentation’ (I, 40). This concern might extend to the magic lantern, since this too is both a mechanic and mass-produced commercial toy, increasingly common in the Belle Époque (Marsh 2009: 333). The equivalent of the ‘boniment’ read by Marcel’s great-aunt is now transferred to Swann, who sources his photographs with the ‘renseignements précis’ (I, 97) of a ‘connaisseur d’art’ (Bertho 1996: 109).

The hero’s first encounter with art, then, is through the magic lantern (I, 9–10), while his second is with art *qua* ‘banalité commerciale’ (I, 39–40). In both cases, the narrator’s account emphasises the confusion inspired by these introductory ‘texts’.

Il faut dire que les résultats de cette manière de comprendre l’art [...] ne furent pas toujours très brillants. L’idée que je pris de Venise d’après [la photographie d’] un dessin du Titien [...] était certainement beaucoup moins exacte que celle que m’eussent donnée de simples photographies (I, 40).

Nonetheless, the muggy idea of Venice drawn from this snapshot will underlie his growing desire to see the city, ultimately satisfied — or unsatisfied, as the case may be (see pp. 160–63) — in the penultimate volume. In fact, the hero’s relationship to art throughout the opening volumes will be guided by Swann and his photos.

Swann, for example, puts Marcel onto La Berma and Balbec. According to him, La Berma ‘n’est qu’une actrice’, but he reports that Bergotte places her ‘au-dessus de tout’ in the ‘hiérarchie des arts’ (I, 97; see also I, 433). This leads Marcel to purchase a photograph of La Berma on the ‘rue Royale’ (I, 478). Likewise, Swann’s description of Balbec Church will lead to Marcel being taken to see a photographic exhibition containing ‘des reproductions des plus célèbres statues de Balbec’ (I, 378). Swann introduces the church to Marcel with a swill of technical terms: ‘« L’église

de Balbec, du XII^e et XIII^e siècle, encore à moitié romane, est peut-être le plus curieux échantillon du gothique normand, et si singulière, on dirait de l'art persan » (I, 377–78). It is curious how, as with Charles Bovary's 'casquette' (Yee 2024: 326; see p. 136), this overabundance of descriptive terms makes it almost impossible for the reader to picture the church (see Yoshida 1983; Fraisse 1989; and Bergstein 2013; for the composite origins of this fictional object). The words cover and obscure our sense of this building like an 'enveloppe'. How can something be both an 'échantillon' — that is to say, a characteristic sample — and 'si singulière'? If it is a good example of Norman Gothic, how can it also be Persian and half-Romanesque? The technical words may impress the hero (and reader) merely because they sound impressive, and not because we can get at their sense. When Marcel subsequently checks with Norpois whether the church really is 'en partie romane', Norpois tells him it is *entirely* in a Romanesque style, and 'ne laisse en rien présager l'élégance, la fantaisie des architectes gothiques' (I, 456). Meanwhile, 'persan' here functions like a salesperson's 'boniment': it sells the work. As the narrator later reflects: 'c'était en grande partie à cause de ce que Swann m'avait dit sur les églises, sur l'église persane surtout, que j'avais tant voulu y aller' (IV, 606). The fetishised description is, like all good 'copy', both definite and vague; distinctive, but empty of substantive content. Compare, say: 'Skegness: It's so Bracing!' and 'Balbec: Une Église de style persan' (I, 382; II, 198). It is the very confusion of the 'technical' image that, as with Titian's muggy drawing of Venice, inspires Marcel's reverie.

Dans le nom de Balbec, comme dans le verre grossissant de ces porte-plume qu'on achète aux bains de mer, j'apercevais des vagues soulevées autour d'une église de style persan. Peut-être même la simplification de ces images fut-elle une des causes de l'empire qu'elles prirent sur moi (I, 382).

The simile is almost comically specific, and dates from a 1905 letter (Corr. IV, 1292; cited Mailhos 2002: 385). Marcel sees in the name of Balbec, as if it were a penholder magnifying glass — that is to say, a cheap bit of seaside tat — this simplified image of waves surging round a church. Again, here, a church 'de style persan' does not signify any precise style of architecture. It has already, within a few pages, become an invention of Marcel's, for Swann's initial reference is to

'art persan'. This could well be more in the line of the 'Persian' style of decorative art, which was popularised by William Morris in the 1870s. This so-called 'Persian art' was in turn another technical misnomer and advertising 'boniment': the style really originated from Iznik in Turkey (Gibson 2016). Meanwhile, these 'Persian' artworks themselves quickly became a mass-produced form of kitsch, and now they litter any number of National Trust gift shops. Here, for example, is a family tea-mug with the style printed on it:



Figure 2. An example of Morris' 'Persian' style

From Swann's sketch, Marcel has imagined a logo of Balbec seen, as it were, 'dans le verre grossissant de ces porte-plume qu'on achète aux bains de mer'. Despite its oddity, Proust offers an object which, like the magic lantern and the photograph, frames and limits the possessor's vision according to the divisions of its 'ovales de verre' (I, 10). Poulet relates the image to the magic lantern, since for him the purpose of a magnifying glass is not merely to enlarge objects, but to allow us to isolate them. 'Si le regard s'aide ici d'une espèce de loupe, ce n'est pas pour grossir les objets, c'est plutôt pour les isoler' (Poulet 1963: 119). Stéphanie Sauget, commenting on the same sentence, notes how far it suggests that Marcel's dreams of travel in the *Recherche* are the results of 'dispositifs techniques' (2006: 156; compare p. 45). The penholder is something which

the industrial process has commercialised — much like the Kodak camera which, in the 1880s, became mass-produced and usable by non-professionals (Sarvas and Frohlich 2011). It is probably just such a ‘Kodak’ that Saint-Loup, a keen amateur photographer, uses to take photos of Rachel (II, 141). Jean Santeuil is also a collector and arranger of photographs (JS, 174).

The photographs that Marcel buys or sees — those of St Mark’s (I, 386), or La Berma (I, 478), or Balbec Church (I, 378) — are all mass-produced. Might it not follow that the dreams that flow from them are effects of mass production as well? Kitsch has been termed ‘the bastardized offspring of Romanticism’ and ‘industrial production methods’ (Yee 2024: 319, paraphrasing Calinescu 1987, 234–35). Rather than the reveries of a Romantic individualist, perhaps Marcel grows up in an age when the key images of Romanticism itself have been commodified into so much seaside tat and ‘boniment’:

Comme ces phénomènes naturels dont notre confort ou notre santé ne peuvent tirer qu’un bénéfice accidentel et assez mince jusqu’au jour où la science s’empare d’eux, et les produisant à volonté, remet en nos mains la possibilité de leur apparition, soustraite à la tutelle et dispensée de l’agrément du hasard, de même la production de ces rêves d’Atlantique et d’Italie cessa d’être soumise uniquement aux changements des saisons et du temps (I, 380).

The quotation has been linked to the *Recherche*’s ongoing comparison between ‘le Nom’ and ‘le lieu’ (Khan 2005: 64), which is a theme we will encounter in the next chapter at greater length. Notice, further, how ‘science’ has taken control of the dreams about ‘names’ as ‘phénomènes naturels’; it has fashioned ‘la production de ces rêves’ into an assembly line of dreams. Once they have been bottled into photographs, Balbec and Venice can be reproduced ‘à volonté’. Once purchased, their subjects can now be seen as objects or ‘Things’: discrete entities, removed from their surrounding circumstances and caught in an endless present — thus always available to their possessor. Compare this, say, with Derek Attridge’s claim that literary criticism often theorises the text not as an experience or ‘event’, but as a ‘static object, transcending time, permanently available for our inspection’ (2004: 59; p. 74).

Though it may seem to the young hero that his dreams are the result of the deep and particular yearnings, the mature narrator recognises them as ‘kitsch’, and compares them to something a little more banal: souvenir magnifying-glass penholders. This narrator then speculates as to why his mind was colonised in this way. If such ‘images’ ‘pirent’ ‘de l’empire’ over him, it must mean that ‘la science s’empare’ of the most intimate elements of human consciousness. It is another means of articulating the turn-of-the-century anxiety that, through the treatment of all entities as ‘objects’ in the purview of science, the literary and the human is being squeezed from the world (p. 79). But what happens when these mass-produced dreams meet texts?

Déception (I)

The answer is disappointment, of course. Just like the ‘petite déception’ that occurs when Marcel sees the ‘dame en rose’ (I, 74), or the ‘déception [qui] était grande’ when he first claps eyes on Mme de Guermantes (I, 172), Marcel experiences a ‘déception’ at Balbec Church (II, 21; 196), and on seeing La Berma (I, 440–41). As the narrator later reflects: ‘en ce Balbec depuis si longtemps désiré, je n’avais pas trouvé l’église persane que je rêvais’ (IV, 82). This conforms to a pattern that we have already mentioned (p. 19). Every time the hero expects some great experience to occur to him, it fails to materialise. On the other hand, when he is tired or hopeless — ‘accablé par la morne journée et la perspective d’un triste lendemain’ (I, 44) — the great experience occurs. In the introduction, I argued that this is rhetorically effective, since it implicitly creates, in the reader, the expectation that boredom with the novel itself may produce an epiphanic moment of understanding the text. But could there be a deeper reason for such a pattern?

The narrator states that his expectations of Balbec Church are due to the photographic exhibition he saw beforehand.

[M]on esprit qui avait dressé la Vierge du porche hors des reproductions que j’en avais eues sous les yeux, inaccessible aux vicissitudes qui pouvaient menacer celles-ci, intacte si on les détruisait, idéale, ayant une valeur universelle, s’étonnait de voir la statue [...] réduite maintenant à sa propre apparence de pierre, [...] enchaînée à la Place, inséparable du

débouché de la grand-rue, ne pouvant fuir les regards du café et du bureau d'omnibus (II, 20).

Those photographic 'reproductions' led Marcel to expect the statue to be more fixed and immutable than it really is: 'idéale', 'inaccessible aux vicissitudes', 'intacte' and so on. His actual experience of the church reveals its close relationship with the rhythms of everyday life. 'Ce que j'ai vu jusqu'ici,' writes the narrator, 'c'était des photographies de cette église', but he sees before him a building that is neither 'immuable', nor 'éternelle'.

L'église [...] faisait un avec tout le reste, semblait un accident, un produit de cette fin d'après-midi, dans laquelle la coupole moelleuse et gonflée sur le ciel était comme un fruit dont la même lumière baignait les cheminées des maisons, mûrissait la peau rose, dorée et fondante (II, 19–20).

This is the cause of his 'disappointment'. He expected Balbec Church to have an atemporal meaning and essence: a 'signification éternelle' (II, 20). What he finds instead is described (by the narrator) with a strange and beautiful metaphor — a melting, golden fruit. However, its beauty is *invisible* to Marcel. The young hero wanted the church to be made 'de la pure matière entièrement distincte des choses communes qu'on voit, qu'on touche' — an expectation which, in *Le Temps retrouvé*, is said to be an 'illusion' (IV, 455).

'Je ne voulais plus penser qu'à la signification éternelle des sculptures' (II, 20). Such a position contrasts strangely, say, with Marcel's earlier pleasure in Combray Church (Erickson 2007: 106–07). There, the constant passing of time has carved deep grooves into the stone of the porch (I, 63). The building is imbricated both in 'le Temps' (I, 61), and in the everyday life of the village — Mme Sazerat, for example, puts her packet of 'petits fours' on the 'prie-Dieu' (I, 59). Anne Simon finds in this building a theoretical model for the *Recherche* itself. Though its tombstones may seem to be 'de la matière inerte et dure' (I, 59), 'le temps [...] [les] fait couler comme du miel hors des limites de leur propre équarrisseur' (Simon 2016: 131–32). This earlier church, then, is aesthetically pleasing for the very reasons that Balbec Church is now despised: its susceptibility to time, its honey-like fluidity, its everydayness. It is a stark indication of how far Marcel's aesthetic values have, so to speak, 'developed'.

It has been argued that photography in the *Recherche* is associated with modernity, and with mobility — an art adapted to the momentary and intermittent ‘jouissance’ of the moment (Rushworth 2013: 274). Yet the ‘photographies’ of Balbec Church have a different effect. *Pace* Walter Benjamin (2008: 7–15), these photographs do not *undermine* any ritualistic significance placed on the original. Rather they feed that myth of unique originality. Likewise, these particular photographic ‘simulacra’ do not seem to act as Derridean ‘suppléments’, ultimately scrambling and deconstructing the notion of the Real, as Fülöp argues (2017: 143). Rather, they reinforce the narrator’s propensity to think of artworks as ‘immuable’ realities, ontologically removed from time and the everyday world. In his seminar ‘Proust et la photographie’, Barthes opposes photography and fantasy in the *Recherche*: ‘La Photo [...] va fonctionner comme un affrontement du Rêve, de l’Imaginaire de lecture’ (Barthes 2003: 397; see Haustein 2012: 299). We are taking, instead, the photograph to be *productive* of Marcel’s dreams, and these dreams themselves as socialised, mass-produced responses to art. Because of such photographs, Marcel expects Balbec Church to be spatially and temporally discontinuous — removed from the ‘grand’rue’, and unaffected by the changing light. Its failure to be so causes confusion and disappointment.

Déception (II)

We see the same features in the hero’s disappointment with La Berma. When the hero arrives, filled with expectations, the world of the theatre appears to him to be segmented off, or ‘cloisonné’, behind its curtain:

[J]e commençai à distinguer derrière ce rideau baissé des bruits confus comme on entend sous la coquille d’un œuf quand le poussin va sortir, qui bientôt grandirent, et tout à coup, de ce monde impénétrable à notre regard, mais qui nous voyait du sien, s’adressèrent indubitablement à nous sous la forme impérieuse de trois coups aussi émouvants que des signaux venus de la planète Mars (I, 438–39).

La Berma’s space appears to be ‘ce monde impénétrable à notre regard’ — a ‘beyond’ like that of ‘la planète Mars’. It is enclosed within itself, like one of Poulet’s ‘monades’, or ‘la coquille d’un œuf’. This strange simile evokes the famous simile for artistic creation in the ‘clochers de

Martinville': 'comme si j'avais été moi-même une poule et si je venais de pondre un œuf' (I, 180). But now the artist, instead of Mother Hen, is the chick attempting to escape its maternal enclosure. If La Berma, like 'le poussin', is scratching at her 'rideau' from the inside in a bid to communicate with the world beyond, then she reminds us of Marcel trapped in his bedroom at Combray. Or, again, the 'trois coups' sounded from behind the stage anticipate Marcel's 'trois coups' (II, 29) in his bedroom at Balbec, where he escapes from what may be a physical representation of his claustrophobic interior world. On this occasion, however, no transcendental communication occurs between La Berma and Marcel.

Here is how the first encounter is related:

[A] J'avais beau tendre vers La Berma mes yeux, mes oreilles, mon esprit, pour ne pas laisser échapper une miette des raisons qu'elle me donnerait de l'admirer, je ne parvenais pas à en recueillir une seule. [...] J'aurais voulu pour pouvoir l'approfondir, pour tâcher d'y découvrir ce qu'elle avait de beau — arrêter, immobiliser longtemps devant moi chaque intonation de l'artiste, chaque expression de sa physionomie. [...] Mais que cette durée était brève ! A peine un son était-il reçu dans mon oreille qu'il était remplacé par un autre. Dans une scène où La Berma reste immobile un instant [...] la salle éclata en applaudissements, mais déjà l'actrice avait changé de place et le tableau que j'aurais voulu étudier n'existait plus. [B] Je dis à ma grand-mère que je ne voyais pas bien, elle me passa sa lorgnette. Seulement, quand on croit à la réalité des choses, user d'un moyen artificiel pour se les faire montrer n'équivaut pas tout à fait à se sentir près d'elles. Je pensais que ce n'était plus La Berma que je voyais, mais son image dans le verre grossissant. Je reposai la lorgnette ; mais peut-être l'image que recevait mon œil, diminuée par l'éloignement, n'était pas plus exacte ; laquelle des deux La Berma était la vraie ? [C] Quant à la déclaration à Hippolyte, [...] elle passa au rabot d'une mélodie uniforme toute la tirade où se trouvèrent confondues ensemble des oppositions pourtant si tranchées qu'une tragédienne à peine intelligente, même des élèves de lycée, n'eussent pas négligé l'effet ; d'ailleurs, elle la débita tellement vite que ce fut seulement quand elle fut arrivée au dernier vers que mon esprit prit conscience de la monotonie voulue qu'elle avait imposée aux premiers (I, 440–41).

It is not the most gorgeous passage of prose. In fact, we have here a series of sometimes disconnected and matter-of-fact statements. For ease of analysis, I have distinguished three sections: [A], [B], and [C].

In the first, slightly repetitive section, the narrator emphasises La Berma's mobility, and describes how La Berma moved from line to line, attitude to attitude, too quickly for him to 'study' her. In [B], he attempts to solve this problem by borrowing his grandma's lorgnette. As with the magic lantern, this attempted solution only makes matters worse. Instead of merely *one* confused

and indeterminate image of La Berma, now he has two: one seen through the opera glass, and one through the naked eye. Finally, in [C], he makes his proper attempt to describe La Berma's performance. Rather than marking, with pauses or intonations of voice, the 'oppositions' which 'une tragédienne à peine intelligente' would have noticed, La Berma deliberately treats the famous 'déclaration' with speed, and with surprising 'monotonie'.

Likewise, this description is written in clippy, almost journalistic, prose. Rather than the long, looping sentences of Proustian reverie, we have a recounting of facts that reflects, perhaps, the monotonous way in which La Berma herself delivers the 'discours'. So, for example, [B] is led by the action with lorgnette, and the sentences often begin with the terse repetition of 'subject-verb': 'Je dis à ma grand-mère'; 'Je pensais que'; 'Je reposai la lorgnette'. Beneath this speed and apparent monotony, the development from [A] to [C] is awkward and illogical. If the problem is that La Berma is reciting too quickly for Marcel to 'étudier' her in [A], there is no reason why, in [B], a better view would help to solve that problem: a 'lorgnette' does not stop nor slacken the 'durée' in which this action occurs. The transition from [B] to [C] is likewise swift and unexplained. The 'aveu' to Hippolyte is in Act II, Scene 5 of *Phèdre*; we have suddenly been brought there from a description of her first appearance onstage (Act I, Scene 3). The narrator's description is therefore also brief in its 'durée', skipping over a good portion of the play. Meanwhile, the question which closes [B], regarding which La Berma was the 'true' or 'real' one, is left unanswered and open.

So it is that the reader's position echoes that of the hero. The *Recherche* disappoints her, too, by failing to deliver some long expected dramatic experience. Just like La Berma before Marcel, the *text* is moving too quickly from one problem to the next for the reader to follow it. We have here a disjointed action, 'tressautant' like Golo. One can find in this another example of the influence of 'theorisation'. Marcel's problem with La Berma is primarily her temporality. In order to 'étudier' her, as a good art critic should, Marcel wishes that she would 'reste[r] immobile', or that he could 'immobiliser' an expression. Yet the 'durée' in which she performs each attitude

is 'brève'. La Berma's movement is fluid and continuous. What Marcel expects to see, however, is a series of photographs. In this context, we might better understand his instinct to reach for the lorgnette. Like the 'cadre' of the stage curtain (I, 440), it offers a framing which would cleave La Berma from the world around her, isolating and fixing his vision. It is another industrial object — a 'moyen artificiel' — which will alter his vision. Just as the 'verre grossissant' of an imagined 'porte-plume' gives him an idealised Balbec, perhaps his hope is that 'son image dans le verre grossissant' will give him the desired, idealised La Berma.

However, as this stage, he is repulsed by the very artificiality of such a process. To admit the necessity for such a prop is to stop believing in a direct contact with 'la réalité des choses'. He puts down the lorgnette and is left with a double vision: the industrialised, idealised, fabricated La Berma, and the mobile woman before him. This decision to drop the prop leads him, in [C], to a halfway accurate realisation of her manner of performance. While Marcel seems to be damning her as less intelligent than an 'élève de lycée', we might already be able to guess — from, say, the opening of the *Recherche*, where the 'mémoire de l'intelligence' is denigrated (I, 43) — that this may contain a hidden compliment from the narrator. La Berma's monologue repeats a previous performance of literature that we have heard in the *Recherche* from a different 'lectrice': Maman's reading of *François le Champi* (I, 41–43). There, too, Maman reads in a 'monotonie' — such an approach allows her to bring all the apparent and fragmentary 'oppositions' of the text into a 'vie sentimentale et continue' (I, 42). Marcel may not be able to appreciate this continuity within a famous speech because he expects to find within the text another series of discontinuities — 'oppositions' — each of which may be fragmented and savoured in their turn. With La Berma, then, as with the 'dame en rose', the disappointment comes from the fact that: 'je ne lui trouvais rien de l'aspect théâtral que j'admirais dans les photographies d'actrices' (I, 76). He cannot appreciate La Berma due to his prior theorisation of her.

Marcel's expectations of artworks come from his aesthetic education. This education draws on mass-produced Romantic longings, and in particular the notion of artworks as belonging to a

distant realm — timeless but carefully bounded, as in a photograph. Just as the magic lantern fragments the hero's spatial reality, he expects Balbec Church to be removed and discrete from the world around it. Because the photograph freezes its object in a single instant, Marcel expects to be able to 'immobilise' La Berma. This prior theorisation of their essence disorients the temporal basis on which Marcel can encounter or experience the text. In these early disappointments, Marcel is still able to notice the distance between theory and experience — to see the difference between the real church in its surroundings, and the church of his mass-produced photographs; the distance between La Berma on-stage and the figure seen through his grandmother's lorgnette.

These concerns might have led him to rethink his early aesthetic socialisation. Yet they are only met with more wrongheaded aesthetic teaching — we might even call it browbeating — from figures of still greater power and importance than Swann. This, so runs my theory, finally completes the socialisation, or indoctrination, begun in Combray. Marcel begins to see only with the eyes of the opera glass; he becomes a 'literary critic' of the kind that makes us 'run for the hills' (Bowie 1998: 92; see p. 158).

Kritikerroman

Two hundred pages later, Marcel talks of 'la déception qu'[il] avai[t] eue devant l'église de Balbec' to his new friend Elstir (II, 196). Astonished, the painter breaks into a blistering, somewhat haranguing, monologue of over six-hundred words: 'Comment, me dit-il, vous avez été déçu par ce porche ? [...] C'est fou, c'est divin' (II, 196–97). We might expect Elstir, *qua* 'grand impressioniste' (III, 402; Mazelier 2019: 109–10), to insist that the church's temporality — its changes of aspect in changes of light — constitutes its beauty. On the contrary, Elstir uses yet another photograph to reinforce an atemporal theorisation of the church.

Je lui [Elstir] dis aussi que je m'étais attendu à trouver [dans l'église] un monument presque persan et que ç'avait sans doute été là une des causes de mon mécompte. « Mais non, me répondit-il, il y a beaucoup de vrai. [...] » Et en effet il devait me montrer plus tard la photographie d'un chapiteau où je vis des dragons quasi chinois qui se dévoraient, mais à Balbec ce petit morceau de sculpture avait passé pour moi inaperçu dans l'ensemble du

monument qui ne ressemblait pas à ce que m'avaient montré ces mots : « église presque persane » (II, 198).

Marcel's faith in the conventional way of describing Balbec is revived by retrospectively devalorising his experience before the church. This has been read as the successful development of the hero's aesthetic training:

With the help of the painter Elstir later in the novel, he learns to see the artistic value of Balbec church, no longer through his romantic notion of what it should look like but rather through the concrete details of its sculpture and architecture (Harder 2010: 138).

Only at this point—in his memory and excited by the description of another—does the narrator recognize and appreciate the glory and artistic brilliance of the church (Erickson 2007: 117).

The point here may be that beauty can only be experienced at an epistemic (or temporal) 'distance' from beauty itself (p. 65). If 'les vrais paradis sont les paradis qu'on a perdus' (IV, 449), then it makes sense why, for the narrator: 'la beauté de Balbec, je ne l'avais pas trouvée quand j'y étais' (IV, 455). But is it unquestionably true that a 'full appreciation of the church happens in an artist's studio' (Erickson 2007: 117)? Whereas, standing in the square, he took in 'l'ensemble du monument', now he appreciates the 'joies intellectuelles' (II, 198) afforded by photographs that can select and freeze a specific detail — a 'chapiteau', a 'petit morceau'. The critic's gaze reduces Balbec Church to a series of fragments. Yet notice how floating of a signifier this word 'persane' remains. 'Des dragons quasi chinois' prove its 'Persianness'. What are we to think? Balbec is, apparently, one of those typically 'gothique normande', 'à moitié romane', 'presque persane', and 'quasi chinois[e]' type of churches! We might notice a hidden mobility in the constant alteration of nomenclature. The proliferation of technical vocabulary, and of cataloguing, only leads to a confusing dispersal of details and names; likewise, none of these many photographs of Balbec Church coalesce to form a whole. Indeed, we might add 'presque italien[ne]' to this astonishing concatenation of adjectives. When, during the harangue, the hero suggests a similarity between Balbec Church and Saint-André-des-Champs, Elstir describes, not this church itself, but 'des photographies du porche de cette dernière église'. From these, the painter has noticed how its

angels are in fact different from ‘la gravité des deux grands anges presque italiens [à Balbec], si élancés, si doux’ (II, 199).

In this sense, Elstir does not entirely ‘provide the paradigm of the “innocence of the eye”’ (Paul 2024: 67), despite his ‘Impressionist’ credentials. Elstir’s response seems instead to parody the methods of an academic critic. He insists on facts, and disregards the experiences of Marcel, the amateur, before the work. Yet Elstir’s analysis is confused. The ‘chinois’ quality of the dragons proves them to be Persian; the ‘gravité’ of such angels does not stop them from being ‘élancés’; the church is ‘presque italien[ne]’ in certain features and, simultaneously, ‘mille fois supérieur à tout ce que vous verrez en Italie’ (II, 199).

A similar denigration of Marcel’s actual experience happens with La Berma. Once more, after the disappointment, a great artist provides a critical guide — a kind of ‘boniment’ — for the work.

Il [Bergotte] me dit que dans la scène où elle [La Berma] reste le bras levé à la hauteur de l’épaule [...] elle avait su évoquer avec un art très noble des chefs-d’œuvre qu’elle n’avait peut-être d’ailleurs jamais vus, une Hespéride [...] et aussi les belles vierges de l’ancien Érechthéion. [...]
— [E]lle [dit Bergotte] est bien jolie la petite Phèdre du VI^e siècle, la verticalité du bras, la boucle du cheveu qui « fait marbre », si, tout de même, c’est très fort (I, 550).

What Bergotte appreciates about La Berma is not her agency as an artist, but her ability to reproduce, perhaps unconsciously, truly ‘noble’ works. These are statues of women created by men: ‘une Hespéride’; ‘les belles vierges de l’ancien Érechthéion’. Bergotte likes La Berma because she ‘fait marbre’ and stays immobile. His appreciation recalls Romantic antecedents, such as Goethe’s manner of reading the ‘attitudes’ of Emma Hamilton, which he thought evoked ancient Greek art (Maierhofer 1999: 222). Bowie even likens Bergotte’s reading to the Hellenism of Ernest Renan (1998: 302). Bergotte’s way of appreciating La Berma is just the same as Marcel’s attempted method, only his eye is quick enough to analyse each of her poses. Marcel tries to ‘la revoir dans [s]on souvenir’ with the aid of Bergotte’s description. Still, the analysis does not quite fit with his

memories (I, 550–51). Then he tries to explain to Bergotte his own experience of the piece. In response, Bergotte gives a harangue of some two hundred words (I, 551–52).

Elstir and Bergotte may be artists, but in their manner of appreciating and understanding art they remain caught within a critical obsession with its ‘objective’ qualities, and a desire to ‘repérer’ facts and details (I, 550; compare p. 7). Perhaps Deleuze is right: ‘Les « hommes supérieurs » ne lui apprennent rien : même Bergotte ou Elstir ne peuvent lui communiquer aucune vérité’ (1971: 40). We might note, however, that, characteristically (p. 40), Deleuze contradicts himself on this point: ‘Bergotte apprend au héros que tel geste de la Berma évoque celui d’une statuette archaïque, que l’actrice n’a pas pu voir’ (1971: 45). If Bergotte is taken as a ‘critique universitaire’, this may in turn explain why, in his famous death scene (III, 692), the elderly writer recognises that his writing has become too predictable and fixed, while both are said to have dropped out of the ‘avant-garde’ (III, 205) by the end of the novel (p. 150). In their careful attention to detail, and desire to pin down historic references, they resemble what John Ruskin calls the ‘fact-hunter’ (WJR X: 221). The differences between Ruskin and Elstir are apparent when we compare, say, the ‘dragons’ of St Mark’s with the ‘dragons’ of Balbec Church.

And so, taking care not to tread on the grass, we will go along the straight walk to the west front [of St Mark’s], and there stand for a time, looking up at its deep-pointed porches and the dark places between their pillars where there were statues once, and where the fragments, here and there, of a stately figure are still left, which has in it the likeness of a king, perhaps indeed a king on earth, perhaps a saintly king long ago in heaven; and so higher and higher up to the great mouldering wall of rugged sculpture and confused arcades, shattered, and grey, and grisly with heads of dragons and mocking fiends, worn by the rain and swirling winds into yet unseemlier shape, and colored on their stony scales by the deep russet-orange lichen, melancholy gold; and so, higher still, to the bleak towers, so far above that the eye loses itself among the bosses of their traceries, though they are rude and strong, and only sees like a drift of eddying black points, now closing, now scattering, and now settling suddenly into invisible places among the bosses and flowers, the crowd of restless birds that fill the whole square with that strange clangor of theirs, so harsh and yet so soothing, like the cries of birds on a solitary coast between the cliffs and sea (WJR X: 79).

It is quite a sentence. And it illustrates wonderfully Ruskin’s constant attention to display the artwork in its world — in this case, the square of St Mark’s, with its rules about what grass can be walked on, and its loud, restless birds. The contingencies of the setting are woven into the work’s

meaning, as are its temporal ‘vicissitudes’: the emptied porches and ‘great mouldering wall’. Although, as we saw in the last chapter, Ruskin *can* be factually punctilious (p. 95), there is no ‘fact-hunting’ here — no interest in facts for their own sake. Ruskin is content to be undecided as to whether one statue is of ‘a king on earth’ or a ‘saintly king’. Indeed, this ambiguity suggests a blurring of the immanent and transcendent, the heavenly and temporal. Over and over again, Ruskin’s account emphasises what one does not see and cannot know. These ‘confused arcades’ — the ‘dark places’, or ‘invisible places’ where the ‘eye loses itself’ — create the underlying effect of awe. St Mark’s is a living monument, mouldering and crumbling, but in deep communion, both with the ‘whole square’ and — through the life it shelters; through its own failing life-span — the wider natural world. Just as important is the way in which all of these features are tied together in one movement, one continuous and fluid sentence, much like Bergson’s melody (p. 27). This is, properly speaking, what Marcel half-glimpses in Balbec Church: its vulnerability and temporality; its relationship with the everyday. It is what he enjoyed, as a child, in church at Combray, the description of which recalls Ruskin’s descriptions of St Mark’s (pp. 196–97). Now, the ‘theorisation’ which has been taught to Marcel since childhood prevents him from seeing such ‘vicissitudes’ as anything other than faults in an artwork. We have a Ruskinite, or would-be Ruskinite, who has been raised on nothing but ‘Baedeker’ (E, 1209)!

From Disappointment to Desire

Encouraged or chivvied further in this delusion by charismatic artists, the result is a near-total obliteration of Marcel’s experience before the text. As the novel progresses, he stops noticing the distinctions between his experience of reality and this ‘theorisation’. When, for example, he first sees Oriane de Guermantes in Combray, he recognises, with disappointment, that his fantasy of her was incorrect. She does not, like Geneviève de Brabant, live in the multi-coloured projection of a fantasy castle; she lives in the same space as he does, and breathes the same air (I, 172). Yet when he sees her later on in the opera-box, she does appear in a realm of ‘divinités’ (II, 340–41),

discontinuous and inaccessible from his own. Critics have taken this as evidence of the fragmentation of the Proustian universe. Genette, who was influenced by Poulet (p. 32), writes of the ‘baignoire’ scene as a paradigmatic case of Proustian ‘cloisonnement’, which allows for no ‘synthèse possible’ of Oriane’s and Marcel’s worlds (1966: 50–51). But what if it is this vision of the opera-box that is the fantasy, and the continuity of space between Marcel and Oriane that is the reality? What if Marcel is simply no longer able, or willing, to distinguish between what he thinks ‘beauty’ ought to be — that is to say: ‘idéale’, atemporal — and how he finds it, in fluid conversation with the everyday world?

When we look at the passage in its context, there is plenty of evidence to suggest this opposing reading. This scene marks the second occasion that Marcel goes to see La Berma. After his earlier disappointment, he attaches ‘aucun prix à cette possibilité d’entendre La Berma’ (II, 336). His ‘indifférence’ is as complete as when he lifts the madeleine to his lips (II, 336; I, 44). A little maudlin, he even recalls the days when La Berma, whose ‘photographies’ he would find in the ‘programme’, ‘avaient alors pour [lui] une sorte d’existence absolue’ (II, 344).

Yet, somehow, now Marcel ‘gets’ her (p. 17). Suddenly, he finds himself appreciating her art — but not because he can see how she reproduces ‘les belles vierges de l’ancien Érechthéion’. Instead, what he appreciates is the *opposite* of her capacity to ‘fai[re] marbre’; it is her fluidity and vivacity — her mobility — that dawns on him. La Berma’s acting is a ‘mobile chef-d’œuvre’ that ‘détruirait en voulant le fixer l’attention d’un auditeur’ (II, 351–52). It is because Marcel no longer wishes ‘comme autrefois de pouvoir immobiliser les attitudes de La Berma’, that he understands that their beauty lies precisely in their capacity to be ‘perpétuellement transformés’ (II, 352). As with Balbec Church, La Berma flows *ceaselessly* in time. It was only an ‘idée préalable, abstraite et fausse, du génie dramatique’ that held him back from recognising this (II, 348). What Marcel discovers on this second visit, then, is the ‘inanité même du processus herméneutique qu’il avait tout d’abord engagé’ (Simon 2016: 129). *Bergotte’s* description is also inaccurate; only at the end of the novel will it become true of La Berma. Then, her immobile, lapidary air is a presage of

imminent death: ‘La Berma avait [...] la mort sur le visage. Cette fois c’était bien d’un marbre de l’Érechthéion qu’elle avait l’air’ (IV, 575–76).

We have here a possible explanation for the pattern observed earlier (p. 19; 104; 108). Why do epiphanies only occur when Marcel is ‘in a dispirited state of mind — bored, usually tired’ (Shattuck 1964: 69)? Why, conversely, are his expectations usually disappointed? The deepest truths of his own experience, and the reality explored by art, can only strike the hero when he does not wish to understand them. When he applies his understanding, he uses an ‘idée préalable, abstraite et fausse’, which occludes the mobile essence of the text. When he takes up the ‘lorgnette’ of the intellect, he can no longer experience the phenomenon in front of him in its everyday aspect; now he can see it merely as ‘object’, just as the doorknob changed under the magic lantern’s projection. Only when he does not wish to look, and thus puts down his theoretical construct, can the truth of a temporal, mobile experience catch him unawares. The ‘cloison’ separating him from an appreciation of the artwork (or person) is constructed by his own perceptions.

The great irony in the scene is this. Just when the hero has reached a revelation regarding how his own ideas prevent access to the realities he most craves to witness, Marcel applies the same type ‘idée abstraite et fausse’ to Oriane’s supposed essence:

Je ressentais le mystère mais ne pouvais déchiffrer l’énigme de ce regard souriant [...] et qui, si j’eusse pu en décomposer le prisme, en analyser les cristallisations, m’eût peut-être révélé l’essence de la vie inconnue qui y apparaissait à ce moment-là (II, 351–52).

With La Berma, he wanted to ‘immobiliser longtemps devant moi chaque intonation de l’artiste’ (I, 440). Now he wishes to freeze the ‘regard souriant’ of Oriane’s eyes so that he might ‘analyser les cristallisations’ (II, 352). The attempt is once more to *freeze time* in order to determine the fixed, hidden ‘essence’ of a ‘vie inconnue’; like Rousset, Marcel is attempting to reject the inconvenient truth that: ‘La lecture [...] se développe dans la durée’ (Rousset 1962: xiii; p. 24). Once again, Marcel does not realise that such a life cannot be understood outside of the flow of time and space in which it occurs. His efforts are unsuccessful. Marcel can only make out flashes and fragments. An ‘éclat bleuté’ and ‘la phosphorence de deux yeux célèbres’ shine out from the opera-box, as if

he has captured them with flash photography (II, 339). But there is worse. Rather than being disappointed by this epistemic failure, Marcel revels in the very mystery created by his ‘theorisation’.

The conception of the world as an unknowable, discrete collection of fragments has now developed its own aesthetic pull. Rather than being disappointed because of his inability to understand Oriane, or to see into the opera-box, it is this very opacity that comes to prove her worth. Looking up, the young Marcel no longer sees, with disappointment, that she is in the same space as him, as he did with Balbec Church. Instead he hallucinates that her box is in fact partitioned from the world around it, ‘le séjour des mortels à jamais séparé’ (II, 340). If we follow such an argument, the opera-box appears as a fractured and impenetrable space only *from the perspective of Marcel*. This is because Marcel now sees not only artworks, but the world itself with the eyes of a literary critic and aesthete — the ‘morbus litterarius’ has done its work. Proust was quite aware of the supposed disease, and saw it as a particular problem in his day: ‘Nous mourons d’une maladie que Renan a classée *morbus litterarius*’ (E, 387). As with *Contre Sainte-Beuve* (p. 83), this attitude has its later echoes. In *The British Museum is Falling Down*, for example, Camel appropriately tells his fellow doctoral students that it is a ‘special form of scholarly neurosis [...] no longer [to be] able to distinguish between life and literature’ (Lodge 2011: 53). It is now Oriane who is, as it were, ‘onstage’ for Marcel, and permanently so: ‘On arrive à voir le monde comme à travers une illusion théâtrale’ (Renan: 1889; cited E, 1404). The reason why this epistemic distance does not register as a disappointment is that Marcel has come to savour his own rejection. The ‘surnaturelles apparitions’ of the magic lantern, which used both to excite and to frighten him, now *only* excite. It is his very alienation from Oriane, his inability to connect with her, that proves her value, because it allows him to see her as an extraordinary ‘Thing’, superbly isolated from everything else.

This suggests a radical hypothesis. What if *all* such ‘cloisons’ were only created, or rather hallucinated, by the hero? What if the Proustian universe, therefore, were not in ‘morceaux’, but quite the opposite? To read Proustian places or characters as fundamentally ‘cloisonné’ is to

mistake the ‘surnaturelle’ fantasy of an immature hero for the ontology of the fictional world. On this account, critics who perceive the novel as such are merely repeating the mistakes of critics *as they are presented in the novel itself*: the pursuit of detail, and the treatment of text as object, cause its fragmentation. Recall that one of Poulet’s metaphors for the ontology of the *Recherche* and its characters is simply a series of photographs (p. 33). Further, as previously argued (p. 26), the ‘fragmentation’ of the literary text may, paradoxically, be a means of limiting its heterogeneity, since it removes that features of the text which fundamentally cannot be measured or controlled: its Derridean ‘volume’ or Bergsonian ‘durée’.

Bergsonism

Some measure of this attempted control might be found in Jean-Yves Tadié editorial interventions.

Glossing the narrator’s cry of ‘[m]ais que cette durée était brève’ (I, 441; quoted above) he writes:

Le mot « durée » est ici, comme chez Descartes par exemple, un simple synonyme de « temps ». Chez Bergson au contraire, la durée, saisie intuitive et vécue de la réalité temporelle, s’oppose au temps mesurable (I, 1333).

In another note, Tadié is even more specific:

Pour Proust, la « durée » [...] n’est rien d’autre qu’une succession d’instant, un temps discontinu, mesurable [...], sans rapport par conséquent avec la « durée » intérieure de Bergson (I, 1418).

To support such positions, he references the anti-Bergsonian reading of Joyce Megay (1976), and *L’espace proustien* (I, 1404).

Here we have a critic, in the guise of an editor, attempting to limit the possibilities of the text by reference to its ‘objective’ attributes. As we have seen, this apparently heterogeneous ‘theorisation’ of the novel as a series of discontinuities cannot abide one alternative possibility: that of textual continuity *à la* Bergson. To maintain, therefore, its theorisation of the text, it must determine for the reader what connotations its words can and should hold. Tadié’s argument, however, is tenuous. Megay’s book, as previously mentioned (p. 29), develops a systematic dismissal of previous Bergsonian readings of the *Recherche* by re-examining their evidence passage

by passage (1976: 51–127). During this discussion, she works through every occurrence of ‘durée’ in the *Recherche* and shows how it can be interpreted without any reference to Bergson (1976: 54–56). She concludes that: ‘Proust n’emploie jamais le mot « durée » quand il veut parler d’un temps psychologique qui aurait quelque rapport avec la durée intérieure de Bergson’ (1976: 55–56). Yet she goes on immediately to notice how Proust’s use of the term ‘durée’, or ‘temps’, is far more heteroclitic, and far less rigid, than that found in Bergson’s writing: ‘l’auteur de la *Recherche* nous présente plusieurs plans différents du temps’ (1976: 56). Or, again: ‘le mot temps, si fréquemment évoqué dans *La Recherche*, comporte des sens aussi multiples que complexes’ (1976 : 72). This is a remark to which one exasperated reader of the Taylor Institution’s copy (GB.PRO8 7&VB1 H6) has appended the comment: ‘because P is NOT a philosopher!’

That, to my mind, is quite right. Bergson’s sense of ‘durée’ itself was fluid (p. 26); Proust’s may be even more so. Why should a novelist have decided in advance on the meaning of her key terms? How can any critic determine all the possible meanings that ‘durée’ had ‘pour Proust’ (I, 1418)? And, even if they could, how could those authorial intentions prevent the text itself suggesting different connotations to its readers? In this case, when the narrator notices that the ‘durée’ is too short in which to capture and fix La Berma’s different ‘attitudes’, is it really inappropriate to note the disjunction between the hero’s current attitude to time (which, as Tadié would agree, is time as a series of instants) and an opposing conception of time as a continuous and indivisible flow — the conception which, in Proust’s day, was widely popularised by the very word used in this sentence: ‘durée’? Why does Tadié feel obliged to warn his readers away from this possible reading, unless it *is* possible to hear Bergsonian resonances?

A few pages after this reference to ‘durée’, we have a passage that contains distinctly Bergsonian overtones. While attempting to recall the ‘traits de Gilberte’, the hero notices how he has no clear picture of her.

La manière chercheuse, anxieuse, exigeante que nous avons de regarder la personne que nous aimons, [...] tout cela rend notre attention en face de l’être aimé trop tremblante pour

qu'elle puisse obtenir de lui une image bien nette. [...] Le modèle chéri, au contraire, bouge; on n'en a jamais que des photographies manquées (I, 480–81).

The quotation has solicited much critical debate (compare Infantino 1993: 20 and Bernateau 2016: 140, with Hanney 1990: 81). One might read such a passage supposing that time 'pour Proust [...] n'est rien d'autre qu'une succession d'instant, un temps discontinu, mesurable' (I, 1418). Perhaps Marcel is just not quick enough to capture the loved-one's essence. On the other hand, one might suppose that this difficulty is akin to Zeno's Paradox, as presented by Bergson (p. 66). A photograph may fix a subject's position at t_1 , with another photograph fixing at t_2 , and so on. Thus, photographs present time as 'une succession d'instant'. The galop of a horse was famously broken down for the first time by such a means in 1878: that which appeared, before, as an unmeasurable blur of movement was now analysable (Braun 2010: 69). As we have seen (p. 71), the narrator muses that the rocking of his own memory might be broken down in the manner that 'nous n'isolons, en voyant un cheval courir, les positions successives que nous montre le kinétoscope' (I, 7). But this passage tacitly suggests another possibility. What if no such 'fragmentation' of time were possible? What if the artwork, or the loved one, is rather in constant, continuous movement? What if, as Bergson himself wrote in the *Essai*, science can only take 'des vues instantanées et immobiles prises de loin en loin sur la continuité d'un mouvement' (1898: 34)? If so, a photographic approach would *never* work; one would see only a blur of features — or, even worse, we might mistake the picture as a fixed 'essence' of a being who remains mobile:

Je conclus à la difficulté de présenter une image fixe aussi bien d'un caractère que des sociétés et des passions. Car [...] si on veut cliquer ce qu'il a de relativement immuable, on le voit présenter successivement des aspects différents (impliquant qu'il ne sait pas garder l'immobilité, mais bouge) à l'objectif déconcerté (III, 830).

That which we may suppose to be 'relativement immuable' is in fact in a process of constant and continuous movement, so that no 'image fixe' can capture it. Or, to put it simply: 'Notre manière de prendre le cliché de cet univers mouvant, entraîné par le Temps, l'immobilise au contraire' (IV, 542; see also IV, 153).

Photographs later in the Recherche

What has emerged is a new Bergsonian reading, in direct reaction to ‘fragmentary’ approaches. Poulet’s principal argument against a Bergsonian approach, which has been wildly influential (p. 32), turns on the claim that there are discontinuities in its fictional world. Temporal and spatial leaps reveal that: ‘il est toute une série de lieux chez Proust’ (Poulet 1963: 28–29). Such discontinuities are, indeed, encountered by the hero. But, according to this new theory, they are only available from his *perspective*. Meanwhile, the narrator often implies that Marcel really lives in a temporal continuity with the artworks and persons he encounters; it is a ceaseless, porous *mobility* that determines their essence. This would explain why the problems of love constantly recur. Whenever Marcel looks to understand a lover, he treats her — due to his socialisation — as an object. This prevents him from grasping her real ontology. The more obsessed the lover is, the more he tries to understand, but his mode of understanding, being defective, only causes the ‘modèle chéri’ further to blur and fragment.

Take, as an example, Marcel’s next steps after seeing Mme de Guermantes in the opera-box. After his failure to grasp her by gazing into her box, Marcel trails Oriane around Paris (II, 359–63). He is surprised, each time he comes across Oriane in the street, to encounter a *new* Oriane: ‘chaque jour, dans l’ensemble de sa personne, la figure était autre’ (II, 361). Marcel is left with a baffling collection of different Duchesses, each seen on different days (II, 361–62): she too has become a ‘series of punctual intensities’ (Bowie 2001: 513). During these walks, he obsessively returns to his memory of Oriane in her opera-box, checking it again and again:

Le souvenir de Mme de Guermantes à l’Opéra [...] m’échappait par moments; il passa peu à peu à une association unique et définitive [...] avec mes idées romanesques si antérieures à lui; [...] il était la première esquisse, la seule vraie, la seule faite d’après la vie, la seule qui fût réellement Mme de Guermantes; [...] ensuite, au fur et à mesure que ces idées le fixèrent plus définitivement, il acquit d’elles une plus grande force, mais devint lui-même plus vague; bientôt je ne sus plus le retrouver; et dans mes rêveries, je le déformais sans doute complètement, car, chaque fois que je voyais Mme de Guermantes, je constatais un écart, d’ailleurs toujours différent, entre ce que j’avais imaginé et ce que je voyais (II, 360).

Marcel attempts to turn his memory of Oriane at the opera into a ‘fact’, against which he can measure subsequent glimpses of her. As with Balbec Church, he hopes it will prove ‘unique et définitive’ : ‘la seule vraie, la seule faite d’après la vie’. But the very attempt to raise this memory to such a pitch interweaves it with desires and ‘idées romanesques’. In order for this memory to feel essential, it has to take on some of the rhetoric of fiction. Thus, ‘au fur et à mesure’ as it is fixed in the mind, it becomes more and more ‘vague’. The attempt to essentialise — to find, beneath difference, one unique and ‘vraie’ Mme de Guermantes — paradoxically creates or reveals a certain mobility in essence itself. It is a little like the proliferation of technical words by which Swann, Elstir, and Norpois attempt to ‘fix’ Balbec Church. Paradoxically, this also showed the semantic mobility of each description, which blurred into the next: ‘romaine’, ‘gothique’, ‘persane’, ‘italienne’, ‘chinois[e]’ and so on. Through this process, Marcel ‘déformai[t]’ his memory of Oriane ‘sans doute complètement’. Her essence twists and bends each time he comes to think of it; it, too, is caught in time, like Bergson’s memory of the melody (p. 27; see also p. 202). A ‘doublement’ occurs — like the ‘doublement’ the hero experienced with La Berma; or the ‘doublement’ of the trees at Hudimesnil (II, 76–79). Between memory and the present, between the ideal Oriane and the one in the street, there is ‘un écart’ — a ‘distance’ (p. 65; 115) which is itself changing, ‘d’ailleurs toujours différent’.

Something of Marcel’s confusion, or nausea, is conveyed in the prose. Its many observations are presented in one long, tortuous sentence, which is daisy-chained together by semicolons. The trouble only encourages Marcel to fix more definitively, and to think further. His ‘cure’ is this: rather than relying on a memory, he decides to try and procure a *photograph* of Oriane. This would give him:

Une rencontre prolongée, comme si [...] elle s’était arrêtée auprès de moi [...] et m’avait laissé pour la première fois regarder à loisir ce gras de joue, ce tournant de nuque, ce coin de sourcils (jusqu’ici voilés pour moi par la rapidité de son passage, l’étourdissement de mes impressions, l’inconsistance du souvenir) (II, 378).

This desire ‘to know’ seems linked with the desire to control Oriane — to have her held beside him for as long as he wishes, ‘complete’ under his gaze, like Rousset’s ideal text (p. 26). The photograph promises to overcome both the ‘rapidité de son passage’ — i.e. her movement — and ‘l’inconsistance du souvenir’ — i.e. the movement of memory — fixing and holding Oriane’s immobilised ‘essence’. The same is true with other loves: ‘pour Albertine c’était une question d’essence: en son fond qu’était-elle, à quoi pensait-elle, qu’aimait-elle, me mentait-elle ?’ (IV, 97–98). Likewise, we saw how Poulet argued that Proustian characters ultimately have the ontology of determinable and fixed photographs (1963: 40; p. 33). But is this true, or is this another fantasy? ‘Are critics necessarily jealous readers, like Swann and Marcel?’ (Bray 2019: 112).

Once more, we can find comparisons between the novel’s aesthetes and Poulet’s theorisation. Swann proves Odette’s ‘objective’ worth to himself with photographs: ‘Puis il [Swann] regardait des photographies [...] [et] se rappelait comme elle avait été délicieuse’ (I, 287; see also I, 221–22). Saint-Loup and Marcel are reticent about showing their photographs — one of Rachel, the other of Albertine — to each other for the same reason. They think the photograph may confirm the lack of objective value in their lovers (II, 141; IV, 20). Meanwhile, the narrator consistently implies that this is foolish. Fixing or determining the objective significance or worth of another person will inevitably fail — not because we lack the appropriate ‘shutter speed’, but because a person simply cannot be immobilised. The flight of the ‘petite bande’ (II, 146–52), the movement of the spires of Martinville, or the trees of Hudismesnil — all of these might be read as fundamental experiences of ‘décloisonnement’. Out of Marcel’s boredom comes the elementary figure of mobility previously hidden by his theorisation of the world. The ‘bande’ are ‘la translation continue d’une beauté fluide, collective et mobile’ (II, 148), recalling La Berma’s ‘mobile chef-d’œuvre’. They are ‘confus comme une musique où je n’aurais pas su isoler et reconnaître au moment de leur passage les phrases’ (II, 148), like the notes in Bergson’s ‘mélodie’ (p. 27). Even Poulet remarks upon ‘la mobilité’ of the spires of Martinville (1963: 96–97). However, true to form, he believes that the spires are moving towards a static unification: ‘La vision finale des trois

clochers, donnée par Proust, a [...] pour objet une forme unique, parfaite, totale' (1963: 99–100). We might say instead that Proustian mobility cannot be arrested; the spires never will unify into one unique and total shape. Any single fixed image, since it cannot capture its object, then encourages the aesthete, or lover, to 'take' another: a better, definitive portrayal. This quest for a *fixed* essence inevitably renders the person (or text) into a 'series of punctual intensities' (Bowie 2001: 513) — a variety of temporal slices which cannot sum to any centre:

Comme la mémoire commence tout de suite à prendre des clichés indépendants les uns des autres, supprime tout lien, tout progrès, entre les scènes qui y sont figurées, dans la collection de ceux qu'elle expose, le dernier ne détruit pas forcément les précédents. En face de la médiocre et touchante Albertine à qui j'avais parlé, je voyais la mystérieuse Albertine en face de la mer. C'était maintenant des souvenirs, c'est-à-dire des tableaux dont l'un ne me semblait pas plus vrai que l'autre (II, 230).

Notice how the narrator emphasises how the 'photograph-taking' process obviates or excludes any *continuity* between these fragments: 'supprime tout lien, tout progrès, entre les scènes'. This creates the juxtaposition and superposition that Poulet read in the magic lantern: memories, like the slides, are arranged next to one another. Like Golo on the doorknob, they can also be superposed. But none of these 'tableaux' seems to contain more truth than the next: 'je ne possédais dans ma mémoire que des séries d'Albertine séparées les unes des autres, incomplètes, des profils, des instantanés' (III, 655). This agglomeration of instants, by eliding continuity, only makes Albertine seem more confused and strange. This holds true just as much for Albertine, for artworks, and, ultimately, for the narrator's conception of his own life. Immediately before his epiphany in the 'cour de Guermantes', Marcel realises that his *memories* of his own life have become as fragmented as a collection of photographs.

J'essayais maintenant de tirer de ma mémoire d'autres « instantanés », notamment des instantanés qu'elle avait pris à Venise, mais rien que ce mot me la rendait ennuyeuse comme une exposition de photographies. [...]

Mais c'est quelquefois au moment où tout nous semble perdu que l'avertissement arrive qui peut nous sauver, 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, 444–45).

After stumbling on the paving stones, Marcel suddenly feels a deep joy and, after focusing for a moment, he manages to trace this joy back to its source: ‘Je le reconnus, c’était Venise, dont mes efforts pour la décrire et les prétendus instantanés pris par ma mémoire ne m’avaient jamais rien dit’ (IV, 445). So it is that, at the end of the *Recherche*, we return to our opening distinction between ‘instantanés’ of Venice (I, 40) — which evoke the ‘banalité’ of tourist snaps — and the *real* Venice. It is the rejection of a photographic conception of the past — and, with it, time and space as a series of discontinuous instants — which allows for this real Venice to emerge (see Haustein 2012: 43–45). Marcel’s ‘distraction’, and his boredom, allow him to encounter the text quite accidentally. This element is detailed by the narrator explicitly before the above epiphany. Everything seems to him ‘perdu’, and he knows with certainty that: ‘je n’étais plus bon à rien’ (IV, 444). Once he stops trying to discover the past, it reveals itself spontaneously to him, as with La Berma. The ‘door’ opens without him looking for it — could this not be the door first closed by the magic lantern? At long last, Marcel’s bedroom — as symbol of his closed inner world, and the ‘cloison’ that separates him from others — is opened. This is, paradoxically, precisely *because* he has stopped searching for the exit.

Returning to Naïvety

What I have presented so far has not been a ‘naïve’ reading: it has been Bergsonian. To theorise the *Recherche* as a ‘univers mouvant’ (IV, 542), we have drawn on elements of the text which suggest that the world of the *Recherche*, and its characters, are immeasurable continuities, and that the treatment of them as ‘objects’ is what causes the confusion of its protagonist. I have argued that this alternative ‘theorisation’ is a socialised response and an ‘intrusion’ (I, 10) into his private world. It runs against his experience, but is encouraged by Elstir, Bergotte, and mass-produced Romanticist kitsch. Perhaps Romanticism itself is tacitly dependent upon, or entwined with, the scientific materialism that it would affect to disdain (see p. 148).

Such a reading, unlike other recent Bergsonian formulations of the *Recherche*, does not try to accommodate Bergsonism with discontinuity (pp. 65–66). Rather, it argues that discontinuity does not constitute the fundamental reality of the fictional world of the *Recherche*, nor the ontology of the text. In the novel, the discontinuities of space and time are understood as hallucinations on the part of the protagonist; as for the text, its apparent discontinuities are the hallucinations of critics who *theorise* the text as object, thus transforming it into a ‘series of fragments’ by the same process. Once more, I have illustrated my underlying theoretical argument with practical examples. We have seen how a ‘fragmentary’ reading of the novel remains a ‘theorisation’ that must exclude or obviate certain possible readings. But, as we have also argued (p. 31), a Bergsonian reading — a reading of the ‘essence’ of the *Recherche* as its continuous ‘mobility’ — is just as much of a ‘theorisation’, and just as liable to close down our experience of the text.

Such a ‘theory’ must exclude certain features in its turn. To take just one example the hero *is* sometimes successful in ‘immobilising’ certain features of a character. Looking at Albertine’s face as an object with fixed properties, Marcel is able to determine certain physical characteristics:

Je profitai de cette immobilité pour regarder et savoir définitivement où était situé le grain de beauté. Or, comme une phrase de Vinteuil qui m’avait enchanté dans la Sonate et que ma mémoire faisait errer de l’andante au finale jusqu’au jour où ayant la partition en main je pus la trouver et l’immobiliser dans mon souvenir à sa place, dans le scherzo, de même le grain de beauté que je m’étais rappelé tantôt sur la joue, tantôt sur le menton, s’arrêta à jamais sur la lèvre supérieure au-dessous du nez (II, 232).

The mole may seem to be an expression of a continuous fluid mobility, wandering across the cheek, chin, and lip. But such mobility is really a confusion in the mind of the observer. In reality, the mole is fixed in a discrete spatial position that can be determined with scientific accuracy: ‘la lèvre supérieure au-dessous du nez’. The reference to Vinteuil’s melody seems more than coincidental. One does not have to rely upon memory, as Bergson does when he describes the ‘mélodie’: there are facts of the matter! We can find the ‘partition’, and thereby ‘immobiliser’, once and for all, the apparently continuous ‘éléments’ of a text; the objective, methodical critic wins out over the experience of the amateur.

So — what is the hallucination? A continuous mobility, or a fixed underlying essence? For Erika Fülöp, this would be the wrong kind of question. It would assume that there really is one underlying ontology to the text, whereas in fact the message of the *Recherche* is that we imagine our own realities, simultaneously discovering or creating them. The narrator's conclusion, for Fülöp, is that it is 'the work of imagination that made life worth living', even if 'it requires recognizing all of one's illusions and accepting them' (Fülöp 2017: 181; see also Starling 2018: 99–100). This compared to Nietzsche's 'life affirming attitude' (2017: 181), and considered to be a scrambling of 'the paradigm of Platonic rational thought' (2017: 185; for similar comparisons of Nietzsche and Proust see Large 2001: 31; Henry 1981: 266). With Balbec Church, perhaps what we glimpse in Elstir's studio is this capacity to 'recreate' the text through an act of Nietzschean 'imagination' (Kuhn 1964: 295–96). Perhaps Marcel is learning to construct meaning out of its apparent absence — to project 'vitraux' onto the drab walls of his 'chambre'.

It is an exciting reading, but simply another 'theorisation' of the text. Let us recollect Heidegger's analysis of Nietzsche (p. 42): the contradiction of Platonism or metaphysics is simply another metaphysics. Besides, when we look closer, no clear-cut lessons can be drawn from the 'baignoire', or the flight of the 'petite bande'. They are not definitely fixed essences, nor continuous mobilities. The 'baignoire' *might* be read as a celebration of the powers of the imagination. But it might equally demonstrate the folly of applying onto reality an 'idée extérieure à lui, impalpable, immense et saccadée comme une projection' (II, 338). After all, the imaginative act does not really create a new truth. When Marcel is finally introduced to the social space of the Guermantes, he discovers that they are not divinities, but just as banal as everyone else (II, 832–33; III, 540). Perhaps the mobility of the 'petite bande' is also a hallucination (II, 148). Their apparent 'mobility', as it is given in the first fantastical vision, does not last. Even during the vision itself a measure of certainty becomes apparent when Marcel looks closer: 'leurs traits charmants n'étaient plus indistincts et mêlés' (II, 150).

It is this indeterminacy which, I believe, creates the true magic of the ‘magic lantern’. To interpret the lantern merely as a symbol for art, imagination, or authorial vision, is to miss some of its more uncanny and frightening properties. Yet to take it only as a symbol instead for the dangers of theorisation and the ‘morbus litterarius’ would be to miss the wonder of its ‘vitrail’. We are left undecided between two potential readings of the object. Just like the hero, we hesitate between lifting and dropping our analytical ‘lorgnettes’.

The lantern is a ‘metaphorical toy’, continually developing new ‘accretions’ and ‘metaphorical dimensions’ as the text goes on (T. Johnson 1971: 19). Photography is also a fluid metaphor in this respect. We can read the camera as symbol of scientific truth, which the *Recherche* consistently undermines (Hörisch-Hellgrath 1986: 26; Sontag 1977: 164; Guerlac 2009: 398). Or we can read the photograph as a deregulatory principle, undoing ‘objective’ stability in the text (Rushworth 2017: 270–78). Or again, the photograph may be read as a metaphor for artistic creation (Hanney 1983; Buuren 2006; Kawakami 2013; Setina 2016). As Haustein puts it, Proust’s deployment of photographic metaphors is ‘unsystematic, non-strategic, and imprecise’ (2012: 41); the symbolism of the photograph ‘as such’ is indeterminate.

The purpose of this exercise in reading has been to show the limitations of the ‘fragmentary’ reading of the *Recherche* — but not in order to ‘superpose’ this theorisation of the novel with another one. Rather, the intention has been to reveal the text’s ongoing indeterminacy. Proust’s text oscillates *between* the articulation of fixed, atemporal essences and an ontology of continuous mobility. The reader senses this movement, but is just as incapable of determining where it will go, or what it means, as the hero himself. We cannot empathise with the hero’s predicament in the same way as other novels — we cannot hope for the prison escape, or the marriage to a wealthy suitor — because we cannot even *conceptualise* his difficulty with any clarity. Rather, we are experiencing the same confusion (on the level of textual interpretation) that the hero experiences in the fictional world. So it is that while, after the first six pages, it may seem that we are now drawn into a ‘story’ — with a determinate hero; a determinate place; and a reasonably

clear series of changing problems — the text remains indeterminate. Sometimes, the more Marcel inspects an artwork, and the more he ‘theorises’ it as a critic, the less he seems able to experience or appreciate it. Yet again, sometimes, it is this very act of concentration — as with Albertine’s mole — that pins down to the ‘text’. So: is art projection — or is it revelation? Is the text mobility, or does it have a fixed essence?

The further we have gone into the novel, the more the indeterminacy of the opening pages has become, both for hero and reader, the very *drama* of the *Recherche*. Rather than solving or satisfying our interpretative desire, our attempts to interpret the text endlessly complicate it. In the next chapter, we will consider one possible solution to this problem of ‘theorisation’.

Chapter 3: Across the Plain of Boredom (II, 378–IV, 445)

Ô Ennui ! Noble ennui !
— Charles Augustin Sainte-Beuve,
Chateaubriand et son groupe littéraire

This chapter argues that, in the closing volumes of the *Recherche*, ‘boredom’ comes to dominate the experience of both hero and reader. Part 1 articulates the ambiguities of Brichot’s monologues by contrasting critical accounts of their meaning by Christopher Prendergast and Antoine Compagnon. Part 2 explores the possible meanings of boredom in the *Recherche* relative to Gustave Flaubert, other Modernist novels, and Martin Heidegger’s phenomenology. Overall, the chapter presents boredom as a crucial element in the reader’s journey through the text, and a possible preparation for the hero’s epiphanies in *Le Temps retrouvé*.

Part I: Boredom in the *Recherche*

‘Les terribles étymologies’

It might seem useful to begin by defining our key term, and distinguishing ‘boredom’ from ‘acedia’, ‘Langeweile’, or ‘ennui’ (for one attempt at this, see Spacks 1995: 10–13). However, following my earlier treatment of ‘essence’ and ‘mobility’ (pp. 49–50), I will avoid fixing the meaning of ‘boredom’ in any technical sense. The various meanings of ‘boredom’ are precisely what this chapter will investigate and, as with the ‘Persian’ Balbec Church, we will come to find a certain degree of mobility in this word. Let us begin instead, then, by considering an instance of boredom in the text. On the train to La Raspelière, Marcel tells M. Brichot that he is looking forward to reading a book of toponyms recently published by the curate of Combray. This prompts Brichot to respond:

— Ne vous fiez pas trop à celles [les étymologies] qu’il indique, me répondit Brichot ; l’ouvrage, qui est à la Raspelière et que je me suis amusé à feuilleter, fourmille d’erreurs. Je vais vous en donner un exemple. Le mot Bricq entre dans la formation d’une quantité de

noms de lieux de nos environs. Le brave ecclésiastique a eu l'idée passablement biscornue qu'il vient de Briga, hauteur, lieu fortifié. Il le voit déjà dans les peuplades celtiques, Latobriges, Nemetobriges, etc., et le suit jusque dans les noms comme Briand, Brion, etc... Pour en revenir au pays que nous avons le plaisir de traverser en ce moment avec vous, Bricquebosc signifierait le bois de la hauteur, Bricqueville l'habitation de la hauteur, Bricquebec, où nous nous arrêterons dans un instant avant d'arriver à Maineville, la hauteur près du ruisseau. Or ce n'est pas du tout cela, pour la raison que bricq est le vieux mot norois qui signifie tout simplement : un pont. De même que fleur, que le protégé de Mme de Cambremer se donne une peine infinie pour rattacher tantôt aux mots scandinaves floi, flo, tantôt au mot irlandais ae et aer, est au contraire, à n'en point douter, le fiord des Danois et signifie : port. [...] Quant à Saint-Mars, jadis (honne soit qui mal y pense) Saint-Merd, c'est Saint-Medardus, qui est tantôt Saint-Médard, Saint-Mard, Saint-Marc, Cinq-Mars, et jusqu'à Dammas » (III, 280–81).

The reader initially may think that she is being treated to a comic monologue, after the fashion of Bloch or Legrandin (O'Brien 1965: 259–63). There are some signs of this: we can laugh at Brichot's affected periphrases ('le protégé de Mme de Cambremer') and his abysmal sense of humour ('Saint-Merd'). Yet, as the speech goes on, something strange starts to happen. These comic touches become dwarfed by lists of toponyms which are not in themselves amusing, nor indexed to Brichot's idiosyncrasies. What can we make of a sentence like: 'Vous avez près d'ici Sottevast, le vast de Setold ; Brillevast, le vast de Berold' (III, 281)? It is not a 'Brichotism'. *Anyone* might have said it. The rant becomes choked with such run-of-the-mill sentences:

Il est certain que le mot de vieux a joué un grand rôle dans la toponymie de cette région. Vieux vient généralement de vadum et signifie un gué, comme au lieu dit : les Vieux. C'est ce que les Anglais appelaient « ford » (Oxford, Hereford) (III, 281).

These sentences adopt a neutral 'style de Baedeker' (E, 1209), and might have come from any given academic article on toponyms. Soon, the reader realises that she is no longer laughing at Proust's ability to imitate a pedant. Rather, the text seems to have become pedantic itself.

One cannot plead that Proust has included these speeches for the sake of Realism. Surely *no-one* reels off so many bootless facts in conversation — not even (dare one say it) an academic. Brichot, like Bloch and Norpois (p. 80), has been fingered as another example of a 'critique universitaire' satirised in the *Recherche* (Pierre-Edmond 2011: 4). Compagnon even finds in these responses of Brichot something of Maurice Barrès' satirical critique of Renan's fantastical etymologies (1989: 230). Yet it seems unlikely that Brichot, a 'bon professeur' (III, 361), whose

talks attract a ‘foule’ of interested students (III, 795), would speak like this, even in one of his lecture halls. There are simply too many facts to be taken in, and they are given too dryly and quickly. Nor is it realistic that Marcel, sitting opposite him in the railway carriage, could absorb this volume of information enough to recall its minute details later on (III, 281; 486). Meanwhile, the narrator stretches the limits of our credulity by supposedly being able to recall *all* of these speeches. Rather than being ‘Realist’, the length and detail of the list pierce the fictional conceit of the text, somewhat like the famous ‘casquette’ of Charles Bovary (see Philippot 1994; Yee 2024: 326). We are reminded of ‘C.’ in *Jean Santeuil*, a writerly precursor to Bergotte, whose novelistic ‘réflexions’ are ‘souvent très ennuyeuses pour le lecteur pour qui elles coupent l’intérêt et ôtent l’illusion de la vie’ (JS, 52). It is as if Proust has forgotten to respond to the question which Michael Lucey shows him answering so deftly elsewhere: ‘How do you write so that banality or mediocrity can be perceptible in your writing, but not assignable to you? [...] How can mediocrity be well written?’ (2022b: 235).

As the speech drones on, it becomes harder and harder to understand its purpose. As Compagnon delicately puts it, readers ‘hésitent sur la fonction, la valeur, le sens de ces morceaux’ (1989: 229). Prendergast is somewhat less delicate: ‘From a strictly “functional” point of view, the burgeoning excess of erudition is [...] an extraneous textual growth that develops into a kind of monstrous carbuncle’ (2013: 203). Their length is quite simply egregious. The initial tirade continues for four pages after this quoted portion, and Brichot frequently returns to the topic (III, 316–17; 321–29; 484–86; 490–91). Indeed, Tadié’s ‘Résumé’ glosses a later burst with an exasperated, but accurate: ‘Encore des étymologies’ (III, 1908)! How is the reader to appreciate these pages? Is she supposed to enjoy learning real toponyms of real places, or to be laughing at incorrect etymologies, or marvelling at the author’s ability to create credible fictional etymologies or — or what, exactly? Proust himself seems to have been cheerfully ambivalent on this question, writing in his correspondence that: ‘Soyez rassuré pour les terribles étymologies. [...] On mettra

ce qu'elles ont de fantaisiste ou d'erroné sur le compte de mes ignorants personnages' (Corr. III, 304, cited Mettan 2022: 157).

Then again, surely Proust could not have expected all of his readers to enjoy these endless lists quite as much as his hero? If this were the case, then the novel would be arguably more 'raseur' than Brichot himself. Marcel at least encourages Brichot to continue. But the narrator (or author) has no such sense that these rants will interest their reader. In fact, the text here seems almost determined to be wearying. These lists do not develop or progress. Nothing, it seems, would be gained if they were longer, nor lost if they were edited. For these reasons, they tempt the reader to 'sauter' (Compagnon 1989: 229; 253). Barthes noted that readers of Proust often skip sections (1973: 22). In this passage, the desire is created by their principal literary effect, which is to bore us, whether or not this is done deliberately. The simple question that the naïve reader asks herself while reading through these speeches is that of Madeleine: *Why should I be reading this?* 'Qu'est-ce que tout cela signifie ?' (1999: 446).

Brichot: Three Theories

To some critics, this question does not have a good answer: it is simply a case of bad writing. These rants are 'une fatigue [...] pour le lecteur, et [...] une faute de goût' (Vendryes 1952: 85). 'Proust a travaillé ses étymologies avec tant de soin que je vois dans cet engouement comme une étrange intention perverse' (Compagnon 1989: 245–46). What makes the monologues all the more irritating is that they do not seem to be aware of their own incongruity. No 'meta' joke is made, during the rants, out of their undue length: the text does not draw our attention to the fact that Brichot's single 'exemple' (III, 280), say, has been extended to twenty or thirty. This is, in Bayard's terms, a 'digression implicite': a digression that is not acknowledged as a digression (1996: 10–11). With a 'digression implicite', therefore, the reader can never entirely be sure whether or not the narrator (or even author) knows they are digressing.

But Prendergast stops short of dismissing the passage merely as bad writing. He argues instead that the rants are boring precisely because this is a way of making them incongruous, and that this incongruity contributes to the development of a theme: the contemporary French ‘politics of etymology and toponomy’ (2013: 203). Prendergast’s idea is that Brichot is an ‘anti-Dreyfusard nationalist’, and Proust is *mocking* nationalists as obsessive or maniacal by having him bore us so thoroughly. Thus Brichot’s monologues bore the reader in order to create an ‘exquisite’ irony:

If Brichot’s learned disquisitions are a sort of ‘foreign’ body imported into the fabric of the text, there remains the exquisite irony of the importing agent himself being an anti-Dreyfusard nationalist hostile to all things foreign (2013: 203).

The trouble with such an ‘exquisite irony’ is that it is not an irony we can savour while *reading*; knowledge of it does not counteract or undo the monologues’ actual effect, which is to bore us. This is instead the irony of someone who has decided that Brichot’s rants *are* ‘foreign’ to the fabric of the *Recherche* (something I will dispute), and then, searching for an explanation as to why, decides that Brichot must be a ‘nationalist’ character, thereby discovering an ‘irony’. It is drawn from a critical reading — a ‘second’ reading of the text (p. 50) — rather than a first one. Even if Prendergast were right, could not Proust have indicated Brichot’s incongruous foreignness in clearer and more enjoyable ways than sheer tedium? Does he not telegraph foreignness in other ways in the novel — with, say, Charlus’ Germanophilia (IV, 354), or in this very scene with Princesse Sherbatoff (III, 286)?

When one examines the speeches closely, one finds that Brichot occupies a more ambivalent position than that of the Barrès-style nationalist defending France’s ‘uncontaminated “purity”’ (Prendergast 2013: 205). ‘Les exemples (de Brichot) illustrent la tendance du curé à trouver des racines chrétiennes et françaises aux noms de lieux normands, d’origine païenne et scandinave’ (Compagnon 1989: 237). Brichot’s first ‘example’ mocks the curate’s inclination to derive place-names like ‘Bricq’ from a Celtic past (‘les peuplades celtiques’), when in fact it comes from ‘un vieux mot norois’. The perlocutionary effect of Brichot’s speeches is likewise not to ‘shut out’ the foreigner. They embolden the Norwegian philosopher to join the conversation at dinner

(III, 320–21), whereas M. de Cambremer, who is presented as the typical rural French aristocrat, is completely ignorant of them (III, 304–05). Many of Brichot's examples belie the myth of an original 'pure' France:

— Chose inexplicable, il semble que des Goths [...] soient venus jusqu'ici [...]. La trace en est restée à Gourville (Gothorumvilla). [...] — Moi je demande l'explication de Thorpehomme, dit M. de Charlus. [...] — « Homme » n'a rien à voir ici avec le sexe auquel je ne dois pas ma mère. « Homme » c'est Holm, qui signifie « îlot », etc. [...] Vous voyez comme tout ce pays a été germanisé. — Je crois qu'il exagère, dit M. de Charlus. J'ai été hier à Orgeville... — Cette fois-ci je vous rends l'homme que je vous avais ôté dans Thorpehomme, baron (III, 485).

My point here is not that Brichot's speech should be read as 'anti-nationalist', *pace* Prendergast, but that there is no single way to theorise these speeches. The text's thematic ambivalence continues to be an unavoidable element of its composition, as we observed in the 'Essai narratif' (pp. 92–93). Perhaps Brichot does, as Prendergast argues, reveal the unhealthy extent of a scientific nationalist's obsessions by the maniac tedium of his monologues. Or perhaps Brichot is an example of how science can debunk the simplicities of a curate's parochial jingoism. In any case, even if the speeches could be taken to be proving something, it seems difficult to explain why, to do this, they have to *bore us*.

To offer a second reading, we might argue that the toponyms offer an oblique perspective on sexual inversion, this volume's central theme. In the quotation above, Brichot innocently 'offers' men to Charlus. He also says that the country has been 'germanisé'. This is an inadvertent allusion to homosexuality in a context where, after the Eulenberg Affair — to which Charlus will allude in this conversation (III, 311) — homosexuality was euphemised as the 'German disease' (Le Moigne 2005: 84–90). Even 'Orgeville' suggests 'orgie', or its root 'orgia', during this etymological discussion.

'L'inverti et l'érudit, Charlus et Brichot, seront liés par une complicité croissante' (Compagnon 1989: 255). Perhaps Brichot's obsessive mania for collecting toponyms reflects Charlus' mania for collecting men; perhaps Proust has Brichot go into such depth to illustrate the obsessive pathology of these two collector's 'diseases'. Indeed, there are interesting similarities, as

we shall see, between the lover, the pedant, and the aesthete, when taken as different types of Proustian ‘raseur’. When the hero seems to reject the ‘*morbus litterarius*’ at the end of the novel, he discards ‘les illustrations de [s]a mémoire’ which he ‘cataloguai[t]’ with ‘un plaisir égoïste de collectionneur’ (IV, 452). Nevertheless, once again, this thematic interpretation cannot explain why Brichot should have to bore *us* as readers.

To give a third reading, Compagnon’s central argument is that the speeches are tedious because they ‘forment également contraste avec l’onomastique poétique exposée au début de « Nom de pays : le nom »’ (1989: 234). Proust’s narrator does note that: ‘Les noms déjà vidés à demi d’un mystère que l’étymologie avait remplacé par le raisonnement, étaient encore descendus d’un degré’ (III, 496). Genette also contends that: ‘Les révélations de Brichot [...] achèvent de détruire ses anciennes croyances et introduisent en lui le désenchantement salubre de la vérité’ (1976: 325). Thus, we might say: ‘the boredom induced by Brichot’s speech reinforces its thematic purpose, which is to reveal the world’s underlying mundanity’.

Yet, even as he makes this argument, Compagnon concedes that Brichot’s etymologies also accomplish the *opposite* gesture: the toponyms prove fodder for flights of fancy (see also Vendryes 1952: 126). They furnish new heroes that Marcel can associate with the train stops — ‘les fantômes d’Herimund, de Wiscar, et d’Herimbald’ (III, 494). We learn that: ‘les stations elles-mêmes, leurs noms [...] s’étaient humanisés [...] depuis le soir où Brichot [...] nous en avait plus complètement expliqué les étymologies’ (III, 483–84). Far from abandoning his interest in the stations after these rants, Marcel begins to visit them assiduously (III, 493–96). It is the seemingly aimless meandering up and down this line that gives *Sodome et Gomorrhe II* its structural underpinning, and introduces essential narrative episodes, such as that in the casino (III, 198).

Compagnon admits that, alongside stultifying and simplifying the world to scientific facts: ‘Elles [les étymologies] réinvestissent les noms de secret, elles leur rendent une autre épaisseur’ (1989: 235). He goes on to explain this lack of coherence as an *error* on Proust’s part, introduced during the hurried composition of the speeches:

Les explications que donne Proust [note: Proust, not the narrator] sur le rôle des étymologies dans la désillusion ne sont donc pas absolument cohérentes, ce qui se comprend, si l'on sait que le développement du thème n'avait pas été prévu de longue date : [...] il trouble en vérité la belle symétrie de « L'âge des noms » et de « L'âge des choses » (1989: 243).

While it may be generous of Compagnon to suggest that this incoherence 'se comprend', it is only incoherent if one has already *agreed* that these monologues have been marshalled to serve his chosen theme. This is in fact the point that Compagnon is intending to prove here. It is odd, too, that Compagnon resorts to such an explanation, since he provides plenty of evidence to show how carefully Proust researched these passages, and how they date from the very first drafts of *Sodome et Gomorrhe* (1989: 251; 246).

In short, Brichot's monologues may be read *either* as revealing the tedious manias of scientific French nationalists, *or* as demonstrating how etymological science can undercut nationalist fantasies. And they may be explained *either* as a boring thematic counterweight to the name-based daydreams of *Nom de pays*, *or* as an example of how facts themselves are the food of fantasies, like the photographs and railway timetables that provoke Marcel's Venetian dreams (p. 104). As we have seen in the previous two chapters, literary analysis can draw completely opposing, but credible, readings out of the *Recherche*. We might recall the narrator's comment near the close of the novel: 'dès que l'intelligence raisonneuse veut se mettre à juger des œuvres d'art, il n'y a plus rien de fixe, de certain, on peut démontrer tout ce qu'on veut' (IV, 472). Or, as Bray puts it:

La vérité d'une interprétation critique [de Proust] dépend plus de l'heuristique choisie que d'une analyse exhaustive des données du texte. Comme le proposait Balzac dans *Le Père Goriot*: "All is true" [(Balzac 2012: 33)] (2022: 157).

Hugh Ledwidge, in his bid to court Helen Amberley in *Eyeless in Gaza*, likewise thinks to himself that: 'Talking of Proust, it would be possible to say everything — everything, but always in terms of a strictly literary criticism. Perfect!' (Huxley 1936: 183). Any such theories, however, still fail adequately to explain the principal literary effect of this passage, which is to bore us. The naïve reader's question remains unanswered: why should she read this?

Brichot in Context

Through its egregious tedium, the passage elicits such a question. Once raised, the question may have a snowball effect, causing the reader to ask herself whether she might not simply ‘sauter’ the conversation, or even the entire dinner scene (Compagnon 1989: 229). Why not? What would she have lost if she does not read that: ‘Vieux vient généralement de vadium’ (III, 281)? This, in turn, might cause her to doubt her reasons for reading the *Recherche* in general.

Let us recap. The introduction argued that the ‘naïve’ reader searches the novel for some underlying ‘essence’. Chapter 1 demonstrated how the opening pages kindle this naïve, interpretative desire. Chapter 2 argued that the opening volumes intensify it by articulating two contradictory ontologies at once: one of discrete, atemporal essences; the second of unified Bergsonian mobility. ‘Theorisation’ itself may lead to some of Marcel’s difficulties: trying to understand Albertine, or Oriane, relative to a prior theorisation of their essence, may render them enigmas. After the partial revelation of this problem in his second visit to La Berma, Marcel, as we saw, trails Oriane around the streets of Paris. The more intently he gazes at her, the more confusing and fragmentary she becomes. The desire to secure a photograph of Oriane as a means of ‘fixing’ her essence takes Marcel to Saint-Loup in Doncières (II, 369). Yet the journey seems a little half-hearted. Once his request is refused by Saint-Loup, Marcel tacitly decides to stick around (rather than, say, rushing back to Oriane again).

In fact the whole episode at Doncières (II, 381–431) is another ‘digression implicite’ (Bayard 1996: 30). The long discussions of military tactics (II, 408–17) mirror, in their scientific obsession, the later tirades of Brichot. They are just as impossible to put into a thematic box. On the one hand, we might take the narrator to be showing how the French officer corps was still obsessed with Napoleon, and totally unprepared ‘for the eruption of war and its trans-valuation of values in *Le temps retrouvé*’ (Warren 2017: 696). In this sense, they instantiate the principle that an intellectual class will never be ready for the next (aesthetic) revolution since ‘un beau livre est particulier, imprévisible, et n’est pas fait de la somme de tous les chefs-d’œuvre précédents’ (II,

16–17). ‘The narrator’s visit to Doncières offers in retrospect a sobering lesson about the impossibility of strategic planning (whether a battle or a work of art)’ (Mahuzier 2012: 14).

On the other hand, we might take the narrator to be evidencing, as Saint-Loup later claims (IV, 340), the contradictory idea that even industrial warfare will be directed and determined by earlier conflicts (Fraisie 2020: 89). Similarly, in the art world, past masters form the soil upon which future artists ‘viendront faire [...] leur « déjeuner sur l’herbe »’ (IV, 615). After the war, the hero notes how Saint-Loup’s strategic ideas ‘s’étaient souvent [...] trouvées vérifiées par la dernière guerre’ (IV, 558). Is an ‘événement’ truly new, or is it always already a repetition of some earlier occasion (see Bray 2022: 14–21; 2024: 32–33)? On this point, as so many others, the text is indeterminate.

Meanwhile, the reader may doubt whether this long digression at Doncières, and *a fortiori* these military digressions, are essential, or even germane, to the story. ‘L’occurrence de réflexions stratégiques [...] est en soi suffisamment surprenante pour qu’un doute sur la fonction surgisse assez vite’ (Bayard 1996: 32). In this, there is a strange complicity between hero and narrator. Just as the hero appears to forget his reason for coming to Doncières (Oriane’s photograph); the narrator too seems to forget the love-plot with Oriane, just as we saw with the novel’s first sentence (p. 62).

The artistic quest has been long neglected, but even the quest for love, which has replaced it, is no longer pursued either by the narrator or hero with much alacrity. On returning to Paris, Marcel is so blasé that he turns down not one, but two, invitations to dine with Oriane (II, 669–70). One might argue that he is subconsciously afraid that the ‘divinité’ of the ‘baignoire’ will be ruined by too close an acquaintance. However, when he does go, and is (predictably) disappointed by the humdrum ‘stupidité’ of her salon, this disappointment itself is treated ironically (II, 832–33). Marcel seems aware of the principle, already much attested in the novel, that ‘le réel ne peut que décevoir’ (Waelhens 1971: viii). The disillusionment was *expected*. Then again, the reader might ask herself: if Marcel concludes that such dinners are scarcely worth the bother of dressing for (II,

833), then why has the narrator just spent a hundred and thirty pages covering such a dinner with the pathological detail of a Professor Brichot (II, 709–835)?

This may be, as with Doncières, just a passing worry. After all, there is humour and life in these pages: in the debates of the cavalrymen, the witticisms of Oriane, and the connivances of Norpois. All the same, when compared with the opening volumes, the tone has shifted, slowly but surely. Gone are the lush, breathless descriptions of flowers, milkmaids, and the ‘petite bande’; gone too are the restless and sudden bursting of epiphanies. ‘After a promising start, the *moments bienheureux* fall off rapidly’ (Shattuck 1964: 76). Scott Moncrieff called his translation of this volume *Cities of the Plain*. That is, in one sense, quite apt. We are entering the plain of the text: a great, unvarying steppe land, with none of the Romantic abysses and heights of ‘L’âge des noms’. ‘Le rêve de prose poétique est absent de *Sodome et Gomorrhe*’ (Compagnon 1989: 252). ‘In the long middle reaches, everyone seems to be reduced to “passing time”’ (Shattuck 1964: 137).

Jean Cocteau saw the descriptive sparseness of these passages as evidence that Proust was beginning to tire of writing the *Recherche* (1983: 272). Might it not equally be seen as evidence that Marcel is beginning, slowly, to become despondent and fatigued? He may harbour a faint but growing fear that, despite his meteoric social rise, he is caught in a vacuum of meaning. Fraisse writes that, behind the idle amusement of these pages, a deeper sense of boredom is steadily being cultivated:

[Marcel] découvre l’ennui d’une réception mondaine [...] ; enfin [...] naît un ennui essentiel, profond, qui est celui de se laisser vivre. [...] Un tel ennui, qui ne repose donc pas sur un témoignage autobiographique [...] est dès lors le produit d’une fabrication concertée (2013b : 132).

Perhaps Marcel’s boredom is reflected in a series of cascading repetitions which, as we remarked in this thesis’ opening pages, may tire the reader as well (p. 14). Society scenes, which are already unnecessary for the plot, begin to repeat themselves. The afternoon at the Villeparisis salon echoes the dinner at the Guermantes, echoes the soirée, echoes the dinner at La Raspelière. When the constant asides finally make way for the plot slowly developing around Albertine, that plot *itself*

repeats patterns of love affairs that the reader has already seen: ‘l’action feint d’avancer pour qu’ou voie mieux qu’elle piétine’ (Henry 1983: 140). We practically *expect* to find out that Albertine is not there when he returns home from the Prince de Guermantes’ ball (II, 132). We can predict, equally, that the suspicion of Sapphism will inflame the hero’s jealousy, as with Swann (II, 198). Girard finds in this excess of narrative redundancy an element that is distinctively Modernist (1961: 281). The reader is still probably enjoying herself — and that is a testament to Proust’s craft — but she knows that she is headed for a *fourth* failed love affair (after Odette, Gilberte, and Oriane) and a *fourth* society scene (following Villeparisis’ salon, the Guermantes’ dinner, and the *soirée*), when she is assaulted, on the little train, by these stultifying toponymical tirades. Perhaps, like the hero himself, she feels only a ‘vague ennui’ about what will happen next (IV, 451).

Proust as ‘raseur’?

As we have seen, some critics turn their analysis on the assumption that Proust simply did not realise that Brichot’s speeches would bore his readers. One reason for this is that Marcel, whom it is tempting to read as the authorial stand-in, seems to enjoy them so much. However, there are several indications that, while the hero may not recognise that Brichot could possibly be boring, the *narrator* does. Princesse Sherbatoff indicates to Marcel that *she* finds Brichot to be irritating: ‘— Je ne complends [*sic*] pas ce qu’il [Brichot] veut dile [*sic*] », grommela la princesse, d’un ton dont elle m’aurait dit par gentillesse : « Il nous embête, n’est-ce pas ? » (III, 286). For Mme Verdurin, Brichot’s speeches ‘manque[nt] [...] de goût’ (III, 339); Vendryes, we might remember, called them ‘une faute de goût’, but on the part of Proust, not Brichot (1952: 85). ‘Brichot’, she says, ‘nous jette à la tête, pendant le dîner, des piles de dictionnaires’ (III, 339; see also 340–41). Even Brichot says he must have ‘ennuyé notre jeune ami’ with his toponyms (III, 485).

Such passages indicate the narrator is at least *aware* of Brichot’s capacity to bore. Such is the power of Marcel’s perspective, and its association with that of the narrator’s (and Proust’s), that we can easily assume that *his* attitude is the only correct one. But, in an early draft, it was not

Marcel but Albertine — a character who is (as we shall see) prone to flatter — that expressed her interest in Brichot's etymologies (III, 484; 1611).

To confuse 'Marcel' with the author repeats a possible mistake we saw in Chapter 2. There, Marcel's vision of the 'baignoire' was taken as an example of the ontology of Proust's universe, rather than as an adolescent's delusion (p. 119). Then again, the *blurring* of 'narrator', 'author' and 'hero', is, we have argued (p. 21), also essential for the text's indeterminacy. This indeterminacy fundamentally alters the reader's experience of boredom. We could see the etymologies as the expression of authorial obsession — with Marcel as authorial stand-in and readerly role model — while the Princesse and Mme Verdurin merely showcase the customary indifference of the *boi polloi*. Conversely, we might see Marcel as another fallible character in the novel.

Marcel's overenthusiasm is read by others as a sign of mental illness: 'Elle [Sherbatoff] avoua plus tard à Cottard qu'elle me trouvait bien enthousiaste ; il lui répondit que [...] j'aurais eu besoin de calmants' (III, 291). In this Cottard recalls Proust's own father, who speculated that overexcitement can be caused by 'cette existence toute artificielle et factice' of idle life in High Society (Proust and Ballet 1897: 31–32). Likewise, after still further compliments about La Raspelière, the Cambremers tell Marcel plainly that « ce n'est pas possible que vous soyez sincère » (III, 340). Marcel chalks this up to their jealousy of the Verdurins, who have rented it from them. Again, it is important to recognise that this reading is plausible. In the same manner, Marcel plausibly suggests that the Verdurins have no interest in going to see the sunset because they are satisfied merely *knowing* that they have rented the house with the best view in the area (III, 297). Nevertheless, even while he criticises the Verdurins for their lack of interest, Marcel does not see the irony that he himself — unlike, say, when he visited the 'tableaux d'Elstir' at the Guermantes' dinner (II, 712–14) — no longer bothers to go and see such things: 'je n'insistai pas' (III, 297).

Once we take into account the careful balancing of perspectives, we are barred from a fixed interpretation of Marcel's reaction to Brichot. And, just as we cannot tell to what extent his

interest in Brichot is genuine, faked, or the product of an overly idle mind, we cannot say whether he really *does* still find beauty in the Normandy coast. An earlier description of the cliffs by La Raspelière is a strange mix of the appealing and the mechanical:

De la hauteur où nous étions déjà, la mer n'apparaissait plus, ainsi que de Balbec, pareille aux ondulations de montagnes soulevées, mais au contraire, comme apparaît d'un pic, [...] un glacier bleuâtre ou une plaine éblouissante. [...] [L]e bruit distinctement perçu de chaque flot qui se brisait avait dans sa douceur et dans sa netteté quelque chose de sublime. N'était-il pas comme un indice de mensuration qui, renversant nos impressions habituelles, nous montre que les distances verticales peuvent être assimilées aux distance horizontales, au contraire de la représentation que notre esprit s'en fait d'habitude ? (III, 289–90).

The first sentence is another variation on a Proustian theme (see p. 194). The allusion to the 'montagnes' of the sea reminds both hero and reader of the 'collines de la mer' outside Marcel's window at Balbec (II, 33–34). They also suggest Elstir's metaphorical treatment of the sea as land (II, 192; see p. 212). In fact, the tendency to understand new experiences only in regard to former ones becomes more and more pronounced as the *Recherche* continues. For the moment, the reader, explicitly reminded of those earlier descriptions, may be tempted to draw an unflattering comparison with this hurried sketch on the same theme. The passage is pleasant, but it also seems to gesture at a 'Proustian beauty' which is already somewhat predictable.

It is a repetition on many levels. Firstly, the transmutation of the 'mer' into a 'glacier' or a 'plaine', while it first appealed to us in Balbec, now merely repeats that aesthetic. Secondly, in the description of 'flot' as 'sublime', and in the position of the artist, as it were, 'penché sur l'abîme' of a cliff, Proust evokes a trope of Romantic poetry — such as we find it, say, in Victor Hugo's 'Un jour je vis' (1973: 33). Romanticism is a highly relevant context. In *Jean Santeuil*, the eponymous hero reads *Les Contemplations*, which is the collection that this poem begins, during his school days with M. Rustinlor (JS, 109). In the very opening of *Nom de pays : Le nom*, the narrator states that, before visiting Balbec: 'Je n'avais pas de plus grand désir que de voir une tempête sur la mer' (I, 377). Particularly in the context of northwest France, this makes one think of the childhood 'orages' described in the first volume of the *Mémoires d'outre-tombe* (first published 1849; 1904: 47); Proust's narrator and Proust himself flagged this text as anticipating the *Recherche* (p. 181). Likewise,

during the maritime ‘tempête’ of *Jean Santenil*, the wind bequeaths (in High Romantic style) ‘la poésie, l’inspiration’ to Jean (JS, 390–96). The narrator tells us that this desire to see a sea-storm comes from Legrandin; yet the hero does not yet recognise it as a literary trope (I, 377). Rather, he hopes the desired storm will be ‘un moment dévoilé de la vie réelle de la nature’; we learn that: ‘la nature par tous les sentiments qu’elle éveillait en moi, me semblait ce qu’il y avait de plus opposé aux productions mécaniques des hommes’ (Ibid.; compare p. 169). Yet this desire for nature itself is implicitly positioned as another example in the *Recherche* of the mass-production and dissemination of Romantic sentiments (p. 107).

Is Romanticism itself, then, just a material product, itself dependent upon laws of cause and effect? The third sentence seems to lead in that direction. In the mention of ‘un indice de mensuration’— whatever that is — and in the drawing of imaginary horizontal and vertical lines, a materialised, scientific conception of space begins to graph the scene. Marcel’s point is that the noise of the waves reveals that space is a Cartesian *homogeneous field* — the same in all directions — and thus sound extends both horizontally and vertically. In Chapter 2, we speculated on how Romantic sentiment might be read as ‘mass-produced’ in the *Recherche*, and tacitly reliant upon the circulation of material objects. Here, Marcel’s aesthetic slips from Romantic celebration of the sublime to a materialist conception of space as a ‘homogeneous flux of [...] points’ (Comay 1990: 85; p. 25). Romanticism leads to, or depends upon, a material reality. It does not help that this scientific observation, which we might expect to be clear, is sheathed in its own redundant repetitions (we only need one of: ‘renversant nos impressions habituelles’; ‘au contraire de la représentation que notre esprit s’en fait d’habitude’), and an unnecessarily tortured arrangement of clauses. The speed at which each approach is picked up and then tossed aside suggests a listlessness in the narrative voice. It is as if the narrator is only going through the motions. A little like the Verdurins, he seems to desire only to ‘take in the beauty’ of this scene merely because it is a famous beauty spot.

Later descriptions can also feel like deliberate, faded repetitions of the previous aesthetic codes. The descriptions of the countryside around later train stops (III, 401–02; 288), for example, are so short as to be almost redundant. In a similar manner, Marcel's descriptions of 'passantes' and 'inconnues' become increasingly perfunctory (III, 232–33; 537; 649). From his passionate invocation of the milking maid from the train (II, 14–16), or the charge of the 'petite bande' (II, 145–53), we begin to learn of heartaches, and sometimes whole *love affairs*, in only a few sentences. If the charm of the 'passante' is the promise of open possibility — or indeed a figure of the Unknown — the narrator or hero has now come to recognise that they inevitably disappoint: an unknown person cannot continue to *symbolise* the Unknown once we meet them. 'La belle jeune fille à la cigarette' still intrigues us but, like Marcel himself, we are not heartbroken when she jumps from the train and disappears into the night (III, 276). By *Albertine disparue*, Marcel is aware that his interest in an Austrian 'passante' is fundamentally superficial, and 'ne dura pas', *even as he speaks to her* (IV, 227–28). The most extreme case of this is the Venetian love-affair (IV, 219). We learn that Marcel has started a relationship with a Venetian, and that this relationship is serious enough for him to consider bringing her back to Paris with him, but ultimately that he decided against it — all in one sentence. Not only does the narrator seem to fail to find enough interest in this affair to enlarge upon it; it also does not solicit interest in *us*, as readers. The question remains: 'And so what? Who cares?'

At La Raspelière, then, there are indications that Marcel is becoming a fully-fledged dilettante. That he is oblivious to this, and imputes the collected impressions of Mme Verdurin, Princesse Sherbatoff, the Cambremers, and Dr Cottard to their own failings, merely makes Marcel another example of a widespread narratorial principle. This is that the vicious person is the most blind to the existence of their *own vice*, although it is self-evident to third parties (III, 25). Legrandin, for example, is not consciously aware of his snobbishness (I, 127). Charlus sometimes does not even realise that his intentions with young men are lustful (III, 710). His vice, which he thinks hidden, is obvious to others (III, 299; 356; 712; IV, 343). In fact, in his conversations with Brichot,

Charlus' very attempt to *hide* his predilections by talking unaffectedly about homosexuality is what inadvertently reveals them: 'Il était raseur comme un savant qui ne voit rien au-delà de sa spécialité' (III, 809).

The 'raseur' is someone who 'rase' — who bores. But 'raser' can also mean 'to shave'. We might say, playing with the word a little, that the 'raseur' shaves off his sense of the position and meaning of his field in the wider context: he 'ne voit rien au-delà de sa spécialité'. Thus, Brichot's obsession with his 'special subject' bears a relation with the same fragmentising gaze that the aesthete brings, say, to Balbec Church when he tries to isolate it from its surroundings — or the lover fixing his loved one in a photographic 'cadre'. In this manner, the 'raseur' might also 'raze' in the verb's third sense — that of 'razing to the ground'. The 'raseur' is someone who wants a total control of all the facts, and who pursues this illusory 'total understanding' to the annihilation of mobility, temporality, and context.

By the end of the *Recherche*, Saint-Loup may have become 'raseur' like his uncle Charlus (IV, 340). Again, echoing the theories of Proust *père*, the narrator states that this nervous 'fébrilité [...] naît [...] de l'ennui' (IV, 276–77). However, becoming 'raseur' is a problem not only for pedants and the sex-obsessed, but also for the artists of the *Recherche*. Poussin is accused of being 'raseur', and Ruskin too (III, 205; 99). In fact, pedantism, obsessive jealousy, and excessive aestheticism (the 'morbus litterarius'), might be varying manifestations of the same underlying pathology, and an evasive reaction to a growing sense of meaninglessness.

Later in the novel, an unnamed lawyer claims that Elstir has also dropped out of the 'avant-garde' (III, 205). Mme Verdurin, still angry at Elstir's abandonment of her set, makes the same argument about him in the dinner scene (III, 333). While we might be tempted to dismiss both of these opinions due to their questionable provenance, Bergotte himself begins to wonder whether his 'derniers livres' have been aesthetically repetitious when looking at Vermeer's paintings (III, 692). Meanwhile, Marcel himself comes to critique Elstir's aesthetic. On visiting Marcouville-

l'Orgeuilleuse, he realises that it is contradictory of Elstir to dislike this church simply because it is a restoration:

Je trouvais que le grand impressionniste était en contradiction avec lui-même : pourquoi ce fétichisme attaché à la valeur architecturale objective, sans tenir compte de la transfiguration de l'église dans le couchant ? (III, 402–03).

This moment alters the sequence of apprenticeship that we traced in the last chapter. This new church caught in the sunset reminds us of Balbec Church, with its 'coupole moelleuse' (II, 227–28). In that description, we noted (p. 109) the discrepancy between Marcel's experience of the church's 'mobility' contrasted with his expectation that it should have a fixed essence. Through Elstir's rant, and photographs, his aesthetic expectations were partly restored (II, 404). Only now, years later, does Marcel recognise that Elstir's impressionism is itself confused by the 'double' ontology of the artwork, in a manner akin to the confused debate between 'scientific' and 'impressionist' critics that occurred in Proust's time and continues in our own. If the only thing that matters to an impressionist is the subjective impression an artwork makes on them, then why should 'la valeur architecturale objective' matter?

Perhaps this 'fétichisme', or rather this internal contradiction, restricts Elstir's art in the same way that Bergotte's faith in atemporal essences impedes his reading of *La Berma* (p. 116; see also Bertho 1996: 94). In any case, Marcel is now beginning to question their guidance and assumptions. And it is telling that these reflections occur when the Proustian novel itself, like Bergotte's late works, seems to be trapped in an ever-narrowing circle of aesthetic repetitions. In this context, perhaps Brichot's monologues — by the acuteness of the boredom they inflict on us — encourage the reader to ask herself if the novel itself has become 'raseur' or not.

So far, then, we have seen that there are reasons to believe that, when it came to Brichot's toponyms, Proust did not simply lose himself in a personal 'engouement' (Compagnon 1989: 246). The narrator tacitly indicates his awareness that they will most likely bore the reader, and even that Marcel's interest in them is scarcely credible, potentially revealing some deeper psychological flaw. Yet the initial question still remains unanswered: why should the novel bore us? Worse than this,

we have added still another difficulty. We have seen how the text remains carefully ambiguous as to whether or not Brichot, or any other possibly boring episode, can definitively be taken as *intentionally* ‘boring’. After all, Marcel’s reaction may be the appropriate one, and perhaps Brichot’s speeches bore only the artistically illiterate; perhaps the ‘naïve’ reader’s reaction, such as I have sketched it, marks her for one of the *hoi polloi*. Likewise, if Marcel might seem less enraptured by landscapes or ‘passantes’ than he once was, we still cannot know for certain if he is bored with them or not. Such an argument raises the further question: if the novel shows awareness that it *could* be boring us, why does it never show that it *knows* that it is boring explicitly?

So we have two important questions. Firstly, what is the purpose of boring the reader? Secondly, why does the novel remain ambiguous on whether or not it intends to bore us?

Part II: Boredom and its Meanings

The Interest of Boredom

Perhaps the best place to start when answering these questions is other Modernist texts. In works like *Of Human Bondage* (1915), *Ulysses* (1922), *The Man Without Qualities* (1930), or *The Magic Mountain* (1924), it has been argued that boredom is an intended literary effect of the prose as well as an important theme (Goodstein 2005: 335–9; Kaufman 2011; Herr 2014: 154; Copuroglu 2025: 2–4). Why is this? There are several conjectures. If we can believe Goodstein, boredom is a ‘distinctly modern form of malaise’; the uptake of interest in boredom in Modernist literature is a reflection of this (2012: 3; see also Kuhn 1976). Meanwhile, in 1934, Fenichel defined ‘Langeweile’ as ‘a state of instinctual tension with repressed aims’ (first published 1934; 1951: 349–51). The difficulties that Philip Carey in *Of Human Bondage*, and Ulrich in *The Man Without Qualities*, face in finding *meaningful* work may be related to an implicit critique of the unthinking ‘busyness’ of capitalism, where an existential vacuum is hidden by a perpetual current of empty activity (Svendsen 2005: 107–22). The ‘difficulty’ and length of these Modernist novels is itself taken as a riposte to the pace of Modern life, as well as earlier Realist fiction (Mahaffey 2007: 3). Perhaps, in these novels,

'boredom' is the philosophically defensible, and potentially fruitful, attitude that Bergson presents it as in *La perception du changement* (1911) (Aloisi 2023: 129–31). Alternatively, we might claim that this reflects a growing philosophical interest in boredom as a permanent element of the human condition, rather than 'Modernity' as such. Kierkegaard described the paradoxical effects of boredom in *Either/Or* (originally published 1843), while Schopenhauer presented boredom as a fundamental element of experience in *The World as Will and Representation* (originally published 1819) (Spacks 1995: 165–69). Indeed, Fraisse (2013a: 329) has discovered moments where Proust's narrator seems to repeat Schopenhauer's catchy aphorism that 'entre la douleur et l'ennui, la vie oscille sans cesse' (I, 312; III, 757; 895; see also Henry 1981: 318–27). Yet, while it has long been acknowledged that, say, the 'Eumaeus' chapter in *Ulysses* attempts to bore its reader (Litz 1961: 45; Maddox 1974: 211), no such comparison has been made to boredom in the *Recherche* with Brichot.

A key influence on boredom for Proust, as well as the above authors, was Gustave Flaubert. *Bouvard et Pécuchet* (1881), for example, is 'designed to be exasperating' (Culler 1974: 180). The rigid form of each chapter, which begins with the heroes investigating a new branch of science, and ends with their discovery of insuperable contradictions in the field, keeps the reader trapped within a repetitious cycle (Foley 2014: 145). It gives 'a picture of futility, apparently objective, scientific' (Huxley 1936: 15). Bouvard and Pécuchet thereby foreshadow the 'raseur' in Proust. Each chapter sees them repeating the same erroneous way of looking: firstly, they 'rasent' ('shave off') any interests outside of the new 'special subject'; then they 'rasent' ('raze') the subject itself, consulting every source, until they find themselves enmeshed in a web of contradiction, only to give up and start again, like Marcel with Gilberte, then Oriane, then Albertine. The belief in inevitable scientific progress — and perhaps also the belief that a novel should progress — is unsettled by these structural repetitions, and by the neutral, list-like quality of the prose, which is often directly lifted from scientific textbooks, in the same way that Proust cribbed from academic studies for his etymologies. The satire echoes Flaubert's critique of scientism, and of scientific criticism, such as he found in Sainte-Beuve (p. 89).

In his article on Flaubert's prose style (E, 1220–33), Proust recognises Flaubert's ability to keep his readers on a constantly moving plain that denies any forward progression, or Romantic peaks and abysses. 'Ce grand *Trottoir roulant* que sont les pages de Flaubert, au défilement continu, monotone, morne, indéfini [...] sans précédent dans la littérature' (E, 1221). As we have seen (p. 62), Proust may be thinking of the 'réseau circulaire de « trottoirs roulants »' from the *Exposition universelle* of 1900 (E, 1812). If that is so, Proust is evoking even more clearly the sense of endless or circular continuation in Flaubert's prose.

But, once again — why did Flaubert *need* to reproduce such an experience? Could he, or the Modernists previously evoked, not have made such arguments about the boredom of Modernity, or boredom as the human condition, without actively boring their readership as they did so? It certainly seems to be a strange, contradictory gesture for a novel stubbornly to refuse what could be said to be its most obvious 'function': entertaining us. But one might also find in this gesture an element of camaraderie. After all, if by writing boring work the novelist cheekily suggests that her *reader* has 'nothing better to do with her time' than to be bored, the novelist is *also* confessing that she has 'nothing better to do' than to write boring pieces. If the reader continues to read, and the writer continues to write, then the very act is a confession of their complicity. If one is interested in boring texts, surely it is because entertaining novels have stopped being interesting. And, if one continues reading, surely this is the proof that one really does have nothing better to do than to be bored, perhaps in the vague hope that this state of boredom itself will disclose something. So what might boredom reveal?

We have already seen that, in the various discourses of the time, boredom has various significations: as an element of Modernity; as a fundamental aspect of the human condition; and as a riposte to Scientism or progress. This variety of possible meanings has been the reason why I have refrained from defining or fixing 'boredom' as a technical term. As we have already observed with 'essence' (pp. 49–50), 'boredom' in these texts circulates between these various philosophical and historical meanings. But as regards to our question, perhaps Proust gives us a clue when, in

the same article on Flaubert, he describes Flaubert's prose style as evocative of time itself: 'Il sait donner avec maîtrise l'impression du Temps' (E, 1228). In the *Magic Mountain*, Hans Castorp's long monologues — which might also be compared to Brichot's for their 'breathless intensity' and 'technical complexity' — have been said to create an 'unusual time-feeling' for the reader (Honor 2021: 5). During those speeches, the reduction of the extra-diegetic time of reading almost to the intradiegetic time of the narrative creates an 'abnormal' sense of the similarity, and disjunction, between fictional and real temporalities (Weigand 1965: 18). Far from the 'sleep' of a traditional novel, which diverts its reader so carefully that, like the King in *Les Mille et Une Nuits*, they are never consciously aware of the manipulations of their attention (p. 54), in such moments a text renders transparent the *time* of reading to the reader. By taking its time, Proust's novel shows how it takes our time, and implicitly asks its reader: 'How are you to respond? Have you got anything better to do? Or do you still have faith in this text?' We might get clearer on the effect of boredom on temporality by examining another analysis of boredom that is contemporaneous with the *Recherche*. This is Heidegger's phenomenology of boredom in the *Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics* (1995), a lecture course from 1929–30.

Boredom and Temporality

Heidegger distinguishes between three kinds of boredom, each more philosophically significant than the last. He begins with a discussion of 'acute' boredom — that is, boredom obviously induced 'by' a particular event. In yet another startling coincidence with Proust (p. 100), Heidegger chooses a countryside railway station to illustrate this phenomenon.

We sit for example in a small tasteless train station of a remote minor railway. [...] We do have a book in the knapsack — to read, then? No. Or think through a question, a problem? It is impossible. We read the train schedule or study the index of various distances between this station and other places equally unknown to us. We look at the clock — only a quarter hour has passed (1995: 140).

This is an example of acutely being bored *by* some particular thing or circumstance. Interestingly enough, his imagined character, unable 'to read' or 'think through' any question, tries to interest

herself, as Marcel does, in ‘places’ that have no particular significance for her on the railway line. By the reference to the clock, we can see already how this form of ‘boredom’ — as opposed to the unthinking ‘busyness’ of Modern life, itself evoked by the railway — is beginning to disclose time as an experience and problem.

Such difficulties may seem readily explicable in the context of being made to wait in a railway station — or to wait through Brichot’s speeches in a railway carriage. But behind this more ‘superficial’ boredom *by*, Heidegger distinguishes a boredom that is ‘deeper’ and ‘more deadly’ (1995: 162). This ‘boredom *with*’ is one step closer to the experience of time that ‘profound boredom’ reveals. His example of this second form of boredom reminds us, by another strange coincidence, of the dinner scene at La Raspelière:

We are invited somewhere in the evening. [...] There is the usual food with the usual table-talk; everything is not only quite pleasant but also tasteful. One sits afterwards, as one says, animatedly together, perhaps listens to some music, chats; it is witty and amusing. [...] One thus comes home quite satisfied [...] And then it comes: Actually I was bored this evening (1995: 165).

What makes this second experience of boredom ‘deeper’ for Heidegger is because it comes for no obvious or acute reason. Our boredom here is scarcely perceptible: we do not realise we are even bored at the time; we may never have realised it. Everything at the dinner is ‘tasteful’ and nicely arranged; we are not *disappointed* by it — if anything, it conforms too closely to what we imagined. This perhaps is the very problem: there are no surprises. No unexpected ugliness — but, then again, no epiphanies.

Perhaps Brichot’s speeches are a kind of ‘boredom by’. But the acuteness of the boredom they offer the reader then jolts her into the *realisation* of a greater ‘boredom with’. The question that they elicit — ‘why are you reading this?’ — makes her realise that the novel itself, while still somewhat charming, has become tedious, predictable, repetitive. And perhaps this realisation would not have come without Brichot’s egregious toponyms. The careful ambiguity of this boredom could be an important part of this strategy. In this sense, Proust is still more daring than Flaubert in *Bouvard et Pécuchet*, and more experimental than ‘the ‘boring chapters of *Ulysses*’

(Jameson 2015: 130). In such novels, the reader can tell that boredom is a desired effect; *Bouvard et Pécuchet* is clearly ‘designed to be exasperating’ (Culler 1974: 180). But if there are no such obvious cues, the reader begins genuinely to doubt whether the author has lost control of the novel, or not. To continue reading in such circumstances requires the naïve reader, with her particular motivation, to perform an act of faith in the text.

As we saw, the opening volumes articulated contradictory theorisations of the artwork. But this implicit tension drew the reader’s interest, while the hero did seem to be questioning and developing as he grows up. In the ensuing volumes, however, that paradox in the ontology of the artwork seems to have been left unresolved, and even *forgotten*. It is only now, when the very possibility of understanding the text is being put under its greatest strain, that a ‘naïve reading’ most properly becomes a quest or adventure. A real adventure requires a nadir, and a moment when its hero or heroine genuinely doubts, or despairs, of finding what they seek. Such a nadir can only be effected on a *reader* if she begins to lose her faith, not only in the central character, but in the capacity of the story itself to deliver meaning. Once again, the *blurring* of the figures of ‘narrator’ and ‘author’ and ‘hero’ in this passage — the lack of certainty as to whether, say, the narrator is ironising his younger self or not — is instrumental. Readers (including, as we have seen, some of the novel’s most respected critics) ‘hésitent’ as to whether such boring speeches are there simply because the author happened personally to be obsessed with etymologies (Compagnon 1989: 229). That reading is quite possible: it cannot be discounted. Due to these very uncertainties, the naïve reader may begin genuinely to doubt whether or not the novel is under control. Will it really be able to deliver the expected ‘unity’ or ‘l’essence permanente et habituellement cachées des choses’ for which she has been hoping (IV, 451)? Simultaneously, surreptitiously, in this *experience of boredom*, perhaps the experience of time is being disclosed to her. In the repetitions of the latter half of the novel, and in the acutely boring passages such as Brichtot’s speeches, the reader of Proust is made aware of the passing of her *own time* as she reads the novel. When Marcel falls into

a state resembling Heidegger's third and final form of boredom — 'profound boredom' — this relationship to time leads to a reconfiguration of his relationships with others.

Vers le vide

In the closing volumes, Marcel's life becomes increasingly 'monotonous' (Bersani 1990: 27). In fact, in his obsessional collecting of facts on Albertine, Marcel risks becoming an amorous 'raseur', like Charlus or Saint-Loup. But he risks becoming an artistic 'raseur' too, as this speech to Albertine reveals:

« Rappelez-vous les tailleurs de pierre dans *Jude l'obscur*, dans la *Bien-Aimée*, les blocs de pierres que le père extrait de l'île venant par bateaux s'entasser dans l'atelier du fils où elles deviennent statues ; dans les *Yeux bleus*, le parallélisme des tombes, et aussi la ligne parallèle du bateau, et les wagons contigus où sont les deux amoureux, et la morte ; le parallélisme entre la *Bien-Aimée* où l'homme aime trois femmes et les *Yeux bleus* où la femme aime trois hommes, etc., et enfin tous ces romans superposables les uns aux autres, comme les maisons verticalement entassées en hauteur sur le sol pierreux de l'île. Je ne peux pas vous parler comme cela en une minute des plus grands, mais vous verriez dans *Stendhal*... » (III, 878).

As Bowie writes, this tirade of literary impressions is 'very much in the manner of an ingratiating reference work' (1998: 91). Like Brichot, Marcel 'jette des piles de dictionnaires' at his audience (III, 339). This is the patronising monologue of a *specialist*, and in particular a 'literary critic' (Bowie 1998: 92), to his 'petite fille' (IV, 880). It might remind us of the haughty and crazed rants of, say, Charlus (II, 851–53; III, 454), but more particularly those of Elstir, or Bergotte speaking of 'la petite Phèdre' (I, 550; p. 116). Like those speeches, it is long, and part of its persuasive force seems to come from the esteem in which its speaker holds himself. Marcel's rant continues for three pages. It is so thick with facts that we lose, as with Brichot, an overall sense of clarity: what does 'le parallélisme des tombes' mean exactly?

As with Brichot, we cannot also quite work out if the speech is intended to bore us or not. Perhaps it is making good points; perhaps it offers a window into Marcel's maturation as an artist (or a critic); it is '*seria* and *buffa* at the same time' (Bowie 1998: 92). By putting the speech more widely into its context, Bray has shown how it reflects deeper concerns about whether or not: 'art

points to, or perhaps creates, the illusion of a unique world' (2019: 102). Now Albertine plays the part formerly played by Marcel: she shows enthusiasm, which may or may not be genuine. Her cross-questioning forces Marcel to admit that his claim that *all* the novels of a writer are, in essence, 'superposables' is 'tiré par les cheveux' (III, 879). Marcel and Albertine are having a debate that, like a play within a play, reflects and anticipates different modes of reading Proust's text. As we have seen, Poulet theorises the *Recherche* as a collection of 'cent tableaux' that nonetheless have an underlying essence to them (p. 34). These discrete fragments, like those of the magic lantern, are not only 'juxtaposés' but 'superposés' (p. 101). Albertine's counter-argument is that such an idea of essence, even if fragmented, cannot account for the heterogeneity of an author's productions.

Yet, even as she contradicts him, Albertine flatters Marcel, playing her role of 'petite fille': 'Regardez comme vous voyez la littérature d'une façon plus intéressante qu'on ne nous la faisait étudier' (III, 879). She has a good reason to distract him with the sound of his own voice, since this draws the conversation from its previous subject, which was her presumed lesbian proclivities. So is Albertine genuinely interested in what Marcel has to say, or not?

Perhaps both contradictory explanations are true simultaneously. Perhaps Albertine is genuinely interested in what Marcel has to say, and is also feigning interest to mollify him — and perhaps this capacity of Proustian characters to defy the law of noncontradiction is at the heart of why Marcel, with theorisation of a unique essence, can never understand Albertine.

As Marcel becomes more and more obsessively focussed on her, the narrator reflects his growing disinterest in the outside world. The couple visit Versailles without Versailles ever being described: it exists only as a name (III, 906; 638). This seems a natural progression of the half-hearted descriptions of train stops (III, 401–02; 288). After Albertine flees, the novel struggles again through Marcel's obsessive attempts to recover her, but this plot has no proper stakes for the reader, who assumes (correctly) that Marcel's 'research' into her objective character will come to nothing. If there is pleasure in following Marcel in his inquiries, it is only the pleasure in watching

the laws of love again work themselves out on another victim, with the smoothness of a ‘mécanisme’ (Sartre 1943: 91).

Then, in the third ‘étape’ of *Albertine disparue*, a possible means ‘out’ of this malaise unexpectedly presents itself: we find ourselves unexpectedly transported to Venice. This trip has been implicitly promised to the reader since the start of the novel (I, 9; 30). In particular, this desire has been built up during the Albertine volumes, where the hero reminds himself that his love of Albertine prevents him from visiting Venice (*qua* symbol of Art) with growing impatience (III, 616; 675; 913). Indeed, ‘not-getting to Venice is one of the recurring preoccupations and themes for over five-sixths of the book’ (Tanner 1992: 242). St Mark’s, as the narrator observes, represented ‘le terme d’un trajet’ (IV, 224) that began in childhood. This is the first *new* setting since Doncières. We might reasonably hope to find in it a genuinely new moment in the novel; a development of some sort, after all the growing tediousness. Here is how the episode opens:

Ma mère m’avait emmené passer quelques semaines à Venise et [...] j’y goûtais des impressions analogues à celles que j’avais si souvent ressenties autrefois à Combray, mais transposées selon un mode entièrement différent et plus riche. [...] Comme à Combray le dimanche matin on avait bien le plaisir de descendre dans une rue en fête, mais où cette rue était toute en une eau de saphir. [...] Comme à Combray les bonnes gens de la rue de l’Oiseau, dans cette nouvelle vie aussi les habitants sortaient bien des maisons, [...] mais ce rôle de maisons projetant un peu d’ombre à leurs pieds était, à Venise, confié à des palais de porphyre et de jaspe [...]. Sur la piazza l’ombre qu’eussent développée à Combray la toile du magasin de nouveautés et l’enseigne du coiffeur, c’étaient les petites fleurs bleues que sème à ses pieds sur le désert du dallage ensoleillé le relief d’une façade Renaissance (IV, 203).

One can find this description revivifying and appealing. Collier claims that Venice ‘appears as a figure of the ideal’ (1989: 24). ‘When Marcel arrives in Venice [...] the whole of Combray is regenerated’ (Collier 1989: 9). But is this generation vivacious, or a haunting of the present with the past?

We might read the journey to Venice as ‘a source of disappointment for the narrator’ (Aubert 2009: 23) and for a Marcel who is ‘déçu’ (Bray 2022: 164); a source of disappointment and boredom for the reader also. The above quotation bores me, at least. The narrator begins with the equivalent of a ‘thesis statement’ in academic writing: ‘My impressions of Venice were similar to

those of Combray'. Then, just like Professor Brichot, he marshals a long list of facts to evidence his position. These 'facts' are repetitions of earlier aesthetic tropes and clichés. If the naïve reader cannot be expected to notice that the 'petites fleurs bleues' and the 'palais de porphyre et de jaspe' are literally calqued from Ruskin's *Stones of Venice* (Bastianelli 2017: 731–32), she still is aware — even from the *Recherche* itself (II, 99) — that eulogising Venice as a timeless haven of the 'Renaissance' is a well-trodden cliché. Indeed, Proust also wrote of a 'maison [...] de jaspe' in his earlier pastiche of Ruskin, indicating that he knew its resonance as a stereotypical description (E, 609). The anaphora of 'comme à Combray' might build a sense of awe in the unexpected similarities that Marcel discovers. But it could also be seen as reinforcing the obsessive repetitiveness with which the text sticks to its academic point. After all, *is* it a wonderful discovery that: 'Comme à Combray les bonnes gens de la rue de l'Oiseau, dans cette nouvelle vie aussi les habitants sortaient bien des maisons'? Is it really shocking that Venetian locals use canals rather than normal streets? Does this shed any light on Combray, or, alternatively, do memories of Combray increase the aesthetic beauty of Venice? Or is our hero prevented, by his aesthetic code, from experiencing genuine novelty?

The text remains ambivalent on this point, yet again. It is for the reader to decide if Marcel has become the half-hearted repeater of Ruskin that Bloch once warned him about: « Oui, (aller à Venice) pour boire des sorbets [...] tout en faisant semblant de lire les Stones of Venaïce, de Lord John Ruskin, sombre raseur » (II, 99). The narration evinces an anxiety in this respect since — like the description at La Raspelière — it slides from one 'cliché' to another. Marcel sees American tourists sat in gondolas, 'mollement appuyées sur les coussins' in the manner of would-be Ruskinites (IV, 209). Seeing in them, perhaps, an unflattering reflection of himself, Marcel moves into a different mode, avoiding the Grand Canal, and going out walking at night in a labyrinth of quiet streets: 'Le soir je sortais seul [...] comme un personnage des *Mille et Une Nuits*. [...] Je m'étais engagé dans un réseau de petites ruelles, de *calli*? (IV, 229). However, as the narrator states, this *reaction* to the Venetian cliché has itself become cliché:

Ce fut le tort de très grands artistes, par une réaction bien naturelle contre la Venise factice des mauvais peintres, de s'être attachés uniquement à la Venise, qu'ils trouvèrent plus réaliste, des humbles campi, des petits rii abandonnés (IV, 205).

To focus on the small streets of Venice is not more authentic. Even the comparison to the '*Mille et Une Nuits*' is clichéd; the same simile is used to describe Venice in the 'journal inédit des Goncourts' (IV, 288). Thus, the experiment of night-time Venice is passed over just as quickly as the 'Grand Venice' of the opening.

We see a counterpoint to the impossibility of discovering a new or true Venice through an unexpected plot development.

MON AMI VOUS ME CROYEZ MORTE, PARDONNEZ-MOI, JE SUIS TRÈS VIVANTE [...] ALBERTINE. Alors il se passa, d'une façon inverse, la même chose que pour ma grand'mère : quand j'avais appris en fait que ma grand'mère était morte, je n'avais d'abord eu aucun chagrin (IV, 221).

Even the miraculous resurrection of his loved one cannot be processed as a new event; it is immediately understood in terms of a death; it is another repetition, 'la même chose', just in an opposite sense. We seemed barred from any genuinely new occurrence, or 'événement' (p. 143; for Death as 'événement subit' in Proust, see E, 1208).

The Venice episode ends with a recognition of the hero's failures to appreciate the city or distinguish it from the clichés (see Freed-Thall 2015: 61–63). The 'O sole mio' scene is an epiphany of boredom, where Marcel's budding disappointment in the city suddenly expresses itself.

La ville que j'avais devant moi avait cessé d'être Venise. Sa personnalité, son nom, me semblaient comme des fictions mensongères. [...] Les palais m'apparaissaient réduits à leurs simples parties, quantités de marbre pareilles à toutes les autres, et l'eau comme une combinaison d'hydrogène et d'azote. [...] Tels les palais, le Canal, le Rialto, se trouvaient dévêtus de l'idée qui faisait leur individualité et dissous en leurs vulgaires éléments matériels. [...] J'étais étreint par l'angoisse que me causait, avec la vue du canal [...], de ce Rialto banal qui n'était plus le Rialto, ce chant de désespoir que devenait *Sole moi* et qui [...] achevait de les mettre en miettes et consommait la ruine de Venise. [...]

Ainsi restais-je immobile avec une volonté dissoute, sans décision apparente ; sans doute à ces moments-là elle est déjà prise (IV, 231–33).

The essence of Venice has been reduced to its 'vulgaires éléments matériels'; its 'eau de saphir' becomes 'une combinaison d'hydrogène et d'azote'. Marcel has become consumed by 'the "materialist" hypothesis' (Bray 2019: 107). This experience is accompanied by 'O sole mio,' which

is to say yet another well-known ‘cliché’ of Venice (Rushworth 2024: 153). Nevertheless, we might remark that the song (a bit like those ‘Persian’ tiles) had in fact been transferred from its origins in Naples. Venice — as symbol of the narrator’s mass-produced and Romantic fantasies — has revealed itself to be, or to be dependent upon, a simple collection of physical objects and properties. If the world is, ultimately, just a collection of atoms (‘simples parties’), then the attempt to find in it deeper, artistic meanings would be a ‘fiction mensongère’. Art is merely artifice — projected, like the magic lantern, on top of a ‘homogeneous flux’ (Comay 1990: 85; p. 25). If persons and places formerly were cloaked in the ‘enveloppes’ of fantasy (p. 102), they are now ‘dévêtus de l’idée qui faisait leur individualité’: it is a twilight of the idols.

Venice seems to be Marcel’s final throw of the dice for the Romantic fantasies of his childhood and ‘L’âge des noms’. Although one can read it as a ‘figure of the ideal’ (Collier 1989: 24), it might also be seen as an enormous flop — the end of dreams of both art and love. Despite some wonderful passages, such as the excursion to Padua (IV, 226–27), Venice does not offer the pay-off of artistic glory that the reader has been expecting. It may instead be another example of the pattern described in the last chapter (p. 120): that, in Proust, what is expected is deferred, and that everything comes when we are indifferent, bored, and least expecting it (Erickson 2007: 96). When Marcel brings the cup of tea to his lips, it is ‘en pensant simplement à [s]es ennuis’ (I, 46). Likewise, through the very boredom of the ‘sole mio’ scene, a strange hope dawns.

In Heidegger’s third and deepest sense of boredom, the sufferer is paralysed by indecision, because *all* projects seem equally meaningless (Boss 2009: 101). Yet it is this ‘profound boredom’ that, in the absence of any daily ‘busyness’, reveals the background against which all projects are set: temporality (Svendsen 2005: 107–22). Marcel is supposedly ‘immobile’ on the balcony, yet the progress of ‘sole mio’ — in one sense, the ‘sun,’ which Heidegger claims to be the most basic temporal symbol (2008: 468–69) and is an important image throughout the *Recherche* (p. 72) — reveals his existence in time. As Rushworth writes:

This moment is one of suspense and suspension, both out of time and yet intensely in time, given the sense that with every note the protagonist is running out of time to change his mind and catch the train (2024: 164).

Although he appears indecisive ('avec une volonté dissoute, sans décision apparente'), Marcel has become resolute: the decision is probably 'déjà prise'. What is this decision? To follow his mother to Paris, *merely* because she would like him to come with her, rather than to stay in Venice and pursue the notorious 'femme de chambre de Mme Putbus' (IV, 230).

This is more significant than first may seem. It is the first occasion in the novel where Marcel has interrupted a long-held fantasy project — Putbus' maid — for the sake of someone else. It is also, symbolically, to give up not only on Putbus' maid, but on Stermaria, on Albertine, on the 'passantes', and all these other, supposedly 'artistic' (but really derivative and mass-produced) sexual fantasies. Profound boredom may be the cure for Marcel's mistaken, obsessive, Proustian kind of 'love'. It may dissipate the 'morbus litterarius': the longing for women, artworks, places, but always under the same identikit theorisation of them. Or, alternatively, following Fülöp (p. 131), we might say that boredom leads Marcel along the path to recognising the only possibility for art, and for meaningful life, is a *feat of imagination* over and against the drab 'materialist hypothesis'. Or, we might say that this profound boredom steadily reduces the heights and depths of the novel — like those of the cliffs outside La Raspelière — into a plain, a 'grand trottoir roulant', on which Marcel finally sees his own desires as being on the same level as those of others. Shattuck has argued that this Romantic figure of altitude then returns in *Le Temps retrouvé*, and particularly with its closing image (1964: 128–29).

After Venice, Marcel's indifference to his *own* projects will send him to comfort Gilberte while her husband, the 'raseur', philanders elsewhere (IV, 278–81). Meanwhile, even the Great War does not necessarily strike the hero as a novelty. Paris simply becomes a copy of Venice, itself a copy of 'Bagdad': under the blackout, its streets are like 'le vieil Orient de ces *Mille et Une Nuits*' (IV, 388). The various and *discrete* 'essences' or 'divinités', with which Marcel once held the world to be populated, seem to have completely vanished: in more than one sense, there is a 'pénurie

d'essence' (Ibid.) in the wartime metropolis. The brothel scene may seem to be genuinely novel, and unexpected, for the reader. But, almost inevitably, repetitions of earlier thematic events creep in. The many different rooms suggest the fragmenting effects of desire (IV, 393–94). The 'cassis' which Marcel is given to drink in his particular 'chambre 43' evokes the upstairs 'chambre' of Aunt Léonie's house. This is where Marcel first masturbates. We are twice told that it is perfumed by a 'cassis' (I, 12; 156), which is the drink Marcel now orders here (IV, 393). A little later, he finds himself gazing into the 'chambre 43' — the text appears to 'forget' that this is the 'chambre' where Marcel himself was sent (Lavagetto 1991). Now, it is a bedroom where Charlus has replaced a 'lit de bois' with a 'lit de fer', since 'Charlus tenait tellement à ce que ce rêve lui donnât l'illusion de la réalité' (IV, 419). It is a redecoration of a bedroom in order to project and perform fantasy like Grandma's redecorating Marcel's childhood room with photographs (p. 103). More than this, the narrator tells us that this childhood bedroom was itself redecorated with a 'lit de fer', to which he too, like Charlus, was attached like a 'condamné'.

Une fois dans ma chambre, il fallut boucher toutes les issues, fermer les volets, creuser mon propre tombeau. [...] Mais avant de m'ensevelir dans le lit de fer qu'on avait ajouté dans la chambre [...], j'eus un mouvement de révolte, je voulus essayer d'une ruse de condamné. J'écrivis à ma mère (I, 28).

In this sense, Charlus' 'supplice' (IV, 394) is merely a repetition of 'le supplice du coucher' (I, 9) with which the Proustian 'récit' begins. Charlus' whipping — both punishment and reprieve; indeed, both *crime* and punishment — is another ambivalent 'pharmakon' (p. 99). Marcel is watching a version of his childhood self on the torture rack of this 'lit de fer', in an artificially 'cloisonné' space, that is, symbolically, a prison ('condamné') and a 'tombeau'. The narrator compares Charlus 'enchaîné sur un lit' to 'Prométhée sur son rocher' (IV, 394). A similar comparison is made about Jean Santeuil, precursor to Marcel, when he has an involuntary memory: 'océanides invisibles' sing to him of the past like 'Prométhée' during his punishment (JS, 122).

We might also think of the flaming gridiron of San Lorenzo, as it is portrayed in one of the most famous Byzantine mosaics in Ravenna.

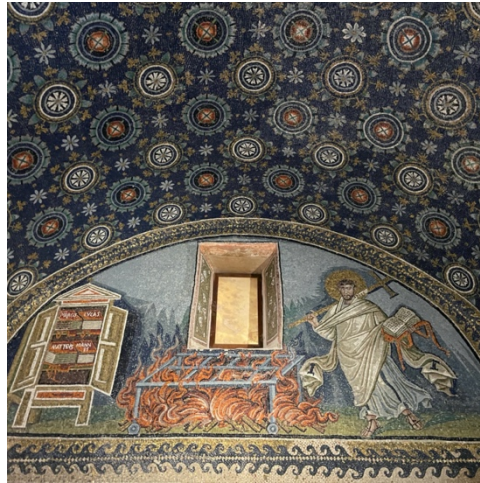


Figure 3. San Lorenzo (Galla Placidia)

These mosaics were a matter of serious interest for Ruskin (WJR XXX: lxi–lxii; 80; 227; XXI: 43). Beneath a deep blue, abstract pattern, we see the bed-like gridiron, site of the saint’s martyrdom. We see Lorenzo’s library; we see the open book in his hand — but not the Roman soldiers who are to carry out his punishment. In fact, it seems as if the saint were about to punish *himself*, in his own room, and in a moment of martyrdom which — like Charlus’ whipping, or the ‘drame du coucher’ — is self-inflicted ecstasy and affliction.

Even the extremity of the whipping scene, then, is a repetition of earlier scenes; the novel cannot ‘jump the shark’; the reader of the *Recherche* becomes liable to see foreshadowing and repetitions even when they know that it cannot be intentional (Bray 2022: 41; see also p. 196). A few pages after this, there is the tremendous ‘blanc’ in the story of the hero’s life: the undescribed years in a ‘maison de santé’ (IV, 433). The reference may suggest the ‘blanc’ in *L’Éducation sentimentale*, which Proust, in his article on Flaubert, called ‘la chose la plus belle’ in the novel (E, 1228). It has been argued that, in Modernist writing, the blank punctures ‘the necessary coherence of the text’, or rather ensures that such coherence must be ‘implemented by the reader’s acts of ideation’ (Iser 1976: 185, cited Yee 2010: 3). Otherwise, it has been claimed that the *Recherche* lacks ‘unité’ because ‘il y a des blancs, des sauts dans le temps’ (Bray 2022: 10; see also Genette 1966: 58–59). Certainly, the blank is an extremely important point in favour of fragmentary,

discontinuous readings of the novel (see Sollers 1971: 41, cited Large 2001: 41). Still, what Proust appears to have enjoyed in Flaubert's 'blank' is the 'extraordinaire changement de vitesse, sans préparation' in 'la mesure du temps' of the novel.

Flaubert vient de décrire, de rapporter pendant de longues pages, les actions les plus menues de Frédéric Moreau. [...] Ici un « blanc », un énorme « blanc » et, sans l'ombre d'une transition, soudain la mesure du temps devient au lieu de quarts d'heure, des années, des décades (E, 1228).

It is the refusal of the novel to explain this sudden shift in intra-diegetic time that Proust finds particularly innovative in Flaubert. Balzac, he notes, also has quick changes in the dynamic between the two temporalities. But 'chez lui [Balzac] ces changements de temps ont un caractère actif ou documentaire' (E, 1229). Flaubert's changes, by contrast, cannot be explained by reference to a 'fonction' (E, 1229); Flaubert's writing somehow dissolves the 'intelligence' in order to put us more directly in contact with 'les choses' (E, 1213–14). Proust's own 'blanc' is a reversal of Brichot's monologues. Whereas, on those occasions, the temporality of one's reading experience was brought to the attention by the 'menus' details of the professor; here it is the plot's sudden refusal to account for itself that draws the reader's attention. Perhaps, the jump reflects the utter disinterest of the hero or the narrator in the abbreviated years: the increasing existential boredom of the protagonist explains why 'the novel goes silent, the machine stops functioning' (Bray 2012: 705).

After this 'blanc', on a train to Paris that echoes the train where Brichot gave his speeches, we find Marcel gazing at a line of trees. Their beauty provokes only 'absolue indifférence'; 'la couleur inaccoutumée ne m'aurait pas tiré du plus languissant ennui' (IV, 434). We sense here some honesty about the real motivation of his attempts to observe and describe the world, which we can then impute *back* onto descriptions in earlier scenes:

Si j'avais vraiment une âme d'artiste, quel plaisir n'éprouverais-je pas devant ce rideau d'arbres éclairé par le soleil couchant [...] dont je pourrais compter les pétales, et dont je me garderais bien de décrire la couleur comme feraient tant de bons lettrés, car peut-on espérer transmettre au lecteur un plaisir qu'on n'a pas ressenti ? (IV, 434).

For Shattuck, this is ‘the low point in the curve [of the novel], the dead point of all Proust’s machinery’ (1964: 76). Even in this state of ‘languissant ennui’, the hero can still recognise what counts as ‘beautiful’ — ‘ce rideau d’arbres éclairé par le soleil couchant’ — according to the conventions of a Romantic sensibility. He assumes that an ‘artist’ would be touched by such moments and, while his dream of writing remained important, we might now suppose that, in those earlier descriptions, we were partly observing Marcel’s attempt ‘to work himself up’ appropriately before La Raspelière and Venice, well-known beauty spots. Only once writing has become a meaningless ‘fiction mensongère’ (IV, 295) can Marcel be honest about his lack of real feeling for these Romantic scenes. Paradoxically, *boredom*, when finally acknowledged, distinguishes him from the horde of ‘bons lettrés’ who would respond to the picture-postcard sunset — like Chateaubriand staring at the moon (II, 81) — with a mechanically Romantic monologue (see also Neefs 2007: 407).

Heidegger’s third and deepest form of boredom is what Paumen calls the ‘vide fondamentalement ennuyeux’ or ‘vide en totalité’ (1989: 103–04). In such a condition, we are brought directly in contact with our own time, which is no longer camouflaged by unthinking ‘busyness’. This disclosure of temporality is, for Heidegger, the disclosure of our existential freedom. Like ‘Angst’ in *Being and Time*, this is a space where *no* outside duty or requirement presses on us (Boss 2009: 101) — in this case, it would be the supposition that ‘artists’ are moved by cliffs and sunsets. Liberated from the conventions and clichés of the past, the subject can create her own meaning. Fraise, in a discussion unrelated to Heidegger, writes of the same effect of boredom in Proust: ‘L’ennui suscite ainsi, c’est son rôle, un corollaire secret, qui est l’appel de la vocation, l’appel à créer’ (2013b: 140). Proust himself wrote of the movement from ‘néant’ to creation:

Du moment que depuis cette longue torpeur j’ai pour la première fois tourné mon regard à l’intérieur, vers ma pensée, je sens tout le néant de ma vie, cent personnages de romans, mille idées (Corr. III, 195).

An important difference with Heidegger’s account is that while Heideggerian boredom tends to result in the subject discovering (or inventing) the ‘real’ meaning of their own lives, Marcel’s

‘languissant ennui’ and ‘absolue indifférence’ (IV, 434) leads him to recognise the needs of others. This is another sense in which Proust might be more ‘lévinassien’ than Heideggerian (Bensussan 2024: 19).

When he steps into the *cour de Guermantes* ten pages later, Marcel is also reflecting on the boredom and the ‘néant de [s]a vie’:

Je descendis de nouveau de voiture un peu avant d’arriver chez la princesse de Guermantes et je recommençai à penser à cette lassitude et à cet ennui. [...] Dans un instant tant d’amis que je n’avais pas vus depuis si longtemps allaient sans doute me demander de ne plus m’isoler ainsi, de leur consacrer mes journées. Je n’aurais aucune raison de le leur refuser, puisque j’avais maintenant la preuve que [...] la littérature ne pouvait plus me causer aucune joie [...] si elle était, en effet, moins chargée de réalité que je n’avais cru. [...]

Mais c’est quelquefois au moment où tout nous semble perdu que l’avertissement arrive qui peut nous sauver : 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, 443–45).

Once again, Marcel’s recognition of his own boredom encourages him to devote the rest of his time to other people (‘leur consacrer mes journées’) and move out of the self-isolation (‘m’isoler’) that recalls the childhood bedroom. Unlike Elstir or Bergotte, Marcel hopes that this ‘sec’ and meaningless existence might lead him from a Romanticised interest in ‘Nature’, and towards others: ‘Peut-être dans la nouvelle partie de ma vie, si desséchée, qui s’ouvre, les hommes pourraient-ils m’inspirer ce que ne me dit plus la nature’ (IV, 434; compare p. 148). Marcel’s profound boredom comes from his belief that art itself seems to do no more than cover over the bare, grey facts of ‘réalité’ (IV, 232). Having dismissed a clichéd Romanticism, Marcel has now found the meaninglessness of the materialist theorisation of the world that his Romanticism tacitly relied upon. If reality is, at bottom, no more than a collection of ‘vulgaires éléments matériels’, and writing is a ‘fiction mensongère’ — an artificial projection — then there really is no point in isolating from the world in order to pursue the creation of these fantasies. Marcel’s decision to devote the rest of life to others (‘leur consacrer [s]es journées’) is followed by the ‘opening’ of a door that has been closed since Combray (pp. 128–29).

In fact, it would make sense that a generalised and profound boredom proves to be the solution to Marcel's attention problem, which may not be an attention deficit, but an attention *surplus* disorder, as we have seen. His disinterest in La Berma that allowed him finally to understand her 'mobile chef-d'œuvre'. Perhaps disinterest in the world writ large is what allows for the possibility of Marcel coming to appreciate artworks and people in their finite, mobile temporality. In the novel so far, 'love of literature behaves like a predator or an asset-stripper towards love between persons' (Bowie 1998: 93). Abandoning literature — or, rather, the particular, Romantic notion of 'Literature' that Marcel has been taught — may return him to a more everyday respect, and comprehension, of other people.

Boredom: A Circulation of Meanings

That would be one reading at least. Under this analysis, boredom allows for an 'unthinking' of the Romantic instincts instilled in the hero over the course of the 'Kritikerroman'. For the reader, on the other hand, the *Recherche's* capacity to bore without ever making this an explicit intention distinguishes the text from *Bouvard et Pécuchet*, and makes his style more 'révolutionnaire' than *Ulysses* (Genette 1966: 57). It allows the reader genuinely to doubt the text, and therefore really to have an interpretative adventure — the 'trial' and 'initiation rite' of reading (Bray 2019: 97; p. 19). The *Recherche's* boredom may prove, or reveal, to the reader her own 'existential' boredom, and thus the strength of her own desire to find or create meaning. As with Charles' 'casquette', or Frédéric's 'blanc', to continue onwards, the reader must acquiesce to the novel's consistent refusal to explain itself — to spend four pages on a toponymic speech and to cover years in a sanatorium in one sentence. In this, we might find a further explanation of boredom in the *Recherche*. In such passages, the novel shows the reader the limits of her interpretative capacities: the text may itself 'raze' the critical instinct through the seemingly endless repetition of the narrator's theories and problems.

Proust was all too aware that his writing might have such an effect on an intellectual or scientific critic. In a letter to Robert Dreyfus in 1909, Proust comically imagines what Taine's response would have been to his 'Pastiches'. It is subtitled '*Explication par H. Taine des raisons pour lesquelles tu me rases à me parler des Pastiches*' (E, 611), and places Proust himself as an example of the artistic 'raseurs' that haunt his later novel. It is the repetition of the *Pastiches* that bores this Taine-Proust figure, just as Sainte-Beuve's complained about the 'ennui' in Chateaubriand (Sainte-Beuve 1861: 91, cited de L'Isle-Adam 2015: 59). The critic is tired by this 'indefinite' repetition of caricatures and sketches, which seem to be a preliminary — a 'vestibule' — before an entry into the 'real' literature in the 'bibliothèque'. Taine-Proust writes:

La caricature fatigue vite. [...] Vous voulez bien d'une ou deux caricatures dans un vestibule, avant d'entrer dans la bibliothèque. Mais il est ennuyeux de rester indéfiniment dans le vestibule (E, 612).

The meaning of 'boredom' in the *Recherche* circulates across many different possibilities of signification, both for reader and hero; the mobility of its meanings is part of its effect. When a novel bores us, it also relaxes or nullifies our desire to 'theorise' and fix a meaning to the text; when we are bored, we no longer try to work out what 'tout cela signifie'. Boredom is also, then, a means of quieting the very interpretative desire that the novel's opening volumes solicit in us. When we enter the 'bibliothèque' in the next chapter, perhaps it is this training — or rather 'anti-training' — of our interpretative instincts in the 'vestibule' that will allow us to experience the 'essence' of Proust's novel as naïve readers.

Chapter 4: What Essence Awaits Us in the End? (IV, 445–625)

Ainsi, la poésie, qui suit les démarches de l'âme,
doit se composer de petits mouvements et à chaque instant changer d'allure.
— Hippolyte Taine, *La Fontaine et ses fables*

This thesis has traced one possible journey through the *Recherche*. This develops from the interpretative desire solicited by the opening pages (Chapter 1), through competing theorisations of essence and mobility (Chapter 2), to boredom as a possible solution to the problem of 'theorisation' and the 'morbus litterarius' (Chapter 3). Now, at the turning of IV, 445, the naïve reader is more uncertain than ever of whether or not the unfixed but projected 'essence', which motivates her quest through the novel, will ever arrive. Can these contradictory ontologies, one of temporal mobility, the other of discrete fragments, really be resolved? After first explaining why the close of the novel (IV, 445–625) often disappoints literary critics, a lengthy close reading of Marcel's third involuntary memory shows how the ending may be read as a new experience for the reader through reconstituting the *Recherche* as both past and future. Ultimately, it is the novel's very failure to cohere that creates a poetic experience of its 'essence'.

Déception (III)

As she approaches the end of the *Recherche*, the naïve reader inevitably asks herself whether she will find 'an intellectual reward equal to the effort' (Bray 2019: 93). On the face of it, the answer would seem to be: no. After reading what Proust called 'l'exposition de l'esthétique dans le buffet' (Corr. IX, 155–56), readers are often disappointed. Instead of some brilliant philosophical theory that makes sense of the whole book, the involuntary memories spark a spree of some fifty rambling pages (IV, 445–96) whose subjects range from attacks on literary critics (IV, 472) to 'les cris poussés par un mammouth' (IV, 459). The famous 'double-je' of the *Recherche* — the distance between narrator and hero — now seems to converge: in 'the book's final pages [...] the Protagonist [...] evolves into [...] [the] Narrator' (Harder 2010: 138). But this unified 'I' (who is

sometimes further confused with the author) seems to be little more than a ‘part-time philosopher’ providing a ‘hodgepodge of answers’ (Prendergast 2013: 37). The ‘théorie de l’art’ (E, 1232) advanced here is full of contradictions, many of which have been collated by Chaudier (2009). Like Marcel during his first visit to La Berma (I, 440–41), the reader may struggle to understand why such internal ‘oppositions’ are ignored (p. 111). Meanwhile, the centre of the maelstrom would seem to lie in the philosophical significance attributed to a new string of involuntary memories (IV, 445–51). Marcel stumbles on uneven paving stones. They give him a ‘vision’ of Venice (IV, 446). The tapping of a spoon on a plate recalls a train stopping in the forest (IV, 447). Moments later, the touch of a napkin on his lips recalls Balbec (IV, 447). The hero asks himself why such memories are powerful enough to ‘me rendre la mort indifférente’ (IV, 446). He tries to ‘fixer’ ‘cette contemplation de l’essence des choses’ and to find its signification (IV, 454). When he does so, the answer he comes up with is a little suspect. Since the ‘essence’ that joins these two temporally distant moments is the same, this ‘essence’ must lie outside time. For the hero to experience the atemporal aspect of this essence, he too must (at least in part) be atemporal.

L’être qui alors goûtait en moi cette impression la goûtait en ce qu’elle avait de commun dans un jour ancien et maintenant, dans ce qu’elle avait d’extra-temporel, un être qui n’apparaissait que quand, par une de ces identités entre le présent et le passé, il pouvait se trouver dans le seul milieu où il pût vivre, jouir de l’essence des choses, c’est-à-dire en dehors du temps (IV, 450).

Is this the ‘théorie de l’art’ (E, 1232) which Proust promised to friends and the public — is this the moment when ‘ma pensée se dévoilera’ (IV, 1256)? Is this, also, the transcendent ‘unity’ that the hero seems to glimpse at so many key moments in the *Recherche* (Fülöp 2017: 103; p. 20)? If this is the theory that we have been promised, then it is a poor one.

The first problem is that the argument is not logically valid. An experience can repeat itself at two different times without needing to be the expression of an atemporal ‘essence’; circumstances might just arrange themselves so that the same string of sensations recur. Moreover, the *perception* of such an ‘essence’ does not prove that the person who perceives must (in part) be atemporal. To perceive the colour green, do we need (in part) to be green ourselves? In *Seven Types*

of *Ambiguity* (first published 1930), Empson sums up what he takes to be ‘Proust’s’ (i.e. the author’s) argument with pitiless precision:

You remember how Proust, at the end of his novel, [...] brings out with pathetic faith, as a fact of absolute value, that sometimes when you are living in one place you are reminded of living in another place, and this, since you are now apparently living in two places, means that you are outside time (1949: 131).

For similar reasons, Bersani, Ferré, and Chaudier all offer invectives against ‘le « culte » dont Proust fait l’objet’ (Bersani 1990: 7) which leads us to treat these pages as if they were a ‘vache sacrée de la pensée moderniste’ (Chaudier 2009: 102), rather than a patent absurdity (Ferré 2007).

Two further problems with this theory are its banality, and its incoherence with the rest of the text. If this ‘extra-temporality’ only belongs to the ‘being’ in us that can occasionally sense it — an ‘être qui n’apparaissait que quand [...] il pouvait se trouver [...] en dehors du temps’ — then what boots this great revelation? The claim is not that Marcel has an eternal soul, or is otherwise deathless. Rather, there is ‘someone within him’ — his ‘vrai moi’ (IV, 451) — which is atemporal, but only comes to exist, or to be perceived (‘and by whom?’ we might ask), on these rare occasions where involuntary memories bring past and present together. These moments are fleeting. They last for an ‘instant’ (IV, 447) and ‘la durée d’un éclair’ (IV, 451): ‘à ce moment-là l’être que j’avais été était un être extra-temporel’ (IV, 450). Here is another place where the theory is formulated:

Qu’un bruit, qu’une odeur, déjà entendu ou respirée jadis, le soient de nouveau, [...] aussitôt l’essence permanente et habituellement cachée des choses se trouve libérée, et notre vrai moi qui, parfois depuis longtemps, semblait mort, mais ne l’était pas entièrement, s’éveille, s’anime en recevant la céleste nourriture qui lui est apportée. Une minute affranchie de l’ordre du temps a recréé en nous pour la sentir l’homme affranchi de l’ordre du temps (IV, 451).

‘[L]’essence permanente et habituellement cachée des choses’, which naïve readers have been expecting for so long (p. 18), only appears in these flashes. This means that there is no ‘essence’ or ‘unity’ to the hero’s life overall, nor the overall text. Rather, each ‘past’ has a distinct essence — ‘mille vases clos dont chacun serait rempli de choses d’une couleur, d’une odeur, d’une température absolument différente’ (IV, 448; see also I, 133). ‘L’image du « vase clos » [...] exclut toute possibilité d’interpénétration mutuelle des états de conscience’, writes Megay (1976: 57–58),

deliberately echoing Bergson's 'pénétration mutuelle' (p. 27) to underline her anti-Bergsonian reading. Each of these essences is discrete and atemporal, just like Poulet's 'monades'. In fact, as we have already seen, Poulet draws on this image to illustrate his theorisation of the text (1963: 70; p. 31). These different pasts — one in 'Balbec', another in 'Venice', and so on — are so distinct that the hero claims he will have to 'exécuter les parties successives dans une matière en quelque sorte différente' (IV, 449), a little like the different slides of the magic lantern, when he comes to write his imagined work. If 'l'œuvre d'art que [il] [s]e sentai[t] prêt déjà [...] à entreprendre' in these pages is the *Recherche* itself (and this is a question to which we will return), then the essence of the *Recherche* would lie, as Poulet claimed, in its fragmentation (Ibid.).

The problem with this is that the *Recherche* contains a competing and contradictory notion of a *continuity* underlying seemingly discrete places, pasts, and persons. It was the task of Chapter 2 to demonstrate how, although these various spaces may *appear*, at times, to be discrete and impenetrable, on other occasions they run into one another like the notes of Bergson's melody. If we accept the hero's 'theory', therefore, it brings us very little in terms of justifying the ways of the *Recherche* to men, for it fails to explain these privileged moments of continuity and 'décloisonnement'. The hero has returned to the aesthetic education given by Swann, Elstir, and Bergotte, but without explaining those parts of his experience which contradict this theorisation. It is the 'morbus litterarius' all over again: Marcel is trying to 'peupler [...] [sa] vie de divinités' (IV, 477) and to return to the illusions of 'l'âge des noms'.

For early Bergsonian readers, the discovery of these 'atemporal' essences in *Le Temps retrouvé* (first published 1927) was particularly unpleasant. Albert Thibaudet, for example, went from calling Proust's work an example of 'ultra-bergsonisme' (1920: 426) to writing that 'on l'imagine [Proust] mal lisant un livre aussi dur que *Matière et Mémoire*' (1929). If this is the 'theory' that emerges from the meditation in the 'bibliothèque' (IV, 445–95), early critics (like those in our day) immediately saw how it is contradicted by the observations of the 'Bal des têtes' (IV, 495–625). As we have already noticed (p. 22; 28), here the vision seems to be one of characters

developing ceaselessly within time: ‘plongés [...] dans le Temps’ (IV, 625). Well before Deleuze, Arnaud Dandieu called this attitude to time ‘schizoïde’:

La notion du temps [...] n’est pas claire chez lui. Tantôt Proust considère le temps sous son aspect bergsonien — comme la durée. [...] Tantôt au contraire, et peut-être le plus souvent [...] le temps est la forme même de l’espace (1930: 80).

Perhaps the publication of *Le Temps retrouvé*, and the subsequent disappointment of readers, was one of the reasons why the novel’s reputation waned in France in the 1930s (Ferré 2013: 191). Forster’s prediction, prior to its publication, that the final volume would not be able to ‘fix and capture’ all of ‘times past’, nor present the wandering novel as a ‘perfect whole’, seems to have been accurate (1927: 135). Like George R. R. Martin, was Proust simply incapable of assembling all of his (philosophical) plotlines? In 1952, Georges Cattai — who, even at the time, was considered to be a little hagiographic of Proust (Czoncizer 1954: 306), and might be thought a bona fide member of Prendergast’s ‘Proust-cult’ (2013: 4) — took the disappointment induced by these closing pages to be a critical commonplace:

Tout le monde a connu la difficulté, dirais-je l’impossibilité de voir clair dans la méditation dans la bibliothèque. [...] Sur la dernière partie du roman [...] il est difficile de *parler* d’une manière cohérente (1950: 249).

As Cocking puts it:

I need hardly labour the point about the *incoherence* of *Le Temps retrouvé*. Can all its disconcerting features be put down to the lack of purely textual revision and technical craft, or had Proust not really thought his plan quite through to the end? (1982: 164).

This chapter, which attempts to find an ‘essence’ to the *Recherche*, therefore has two problems with ‘l’exposition de l’esthétique’ (Corr. IX, 155–56). Firstly, the ontological theory advanced by the hero and/or narrator and/or author is not logically valid. Secondly, it does not explain the novel we have just read.

Not Necessarily a ‘Theory’

To address this third ‘disappointment’, let us return to two earlier aesthetic ‘disappointments’ in the novel (p. 108). In Chapter 2, we saw that Marcel’s disappointments before La Berma and

Balbec Church may have stemmed from a faulty ‘theorisation’ of artwork — an ‘idée préalable, abstraite et fausse’ (II, 348). If we are to take these as examples, we might ask ourselves which *expectations* prevent us from experiencing and enjoying these closing passages. The answer would seem to be obvious: we expect to find a satisfying theory in them. Prendergast, for example, writes of these pages that: ‘The theory is incomplete and digressive’ (2013: 176). Similarly, Cocking writes: ‘The neatly conceived overall theory destined for the novel’s climax [...] is desultory, repetitive, confused, and sometimes obscure’ (1982: 166).

In our reading of the *Recherche*, however, we have seen how the novel consistently solicits and impedes any critical ‘theorisation’ of itself. If this is true, then a ‘neatly conceived overall theory’ (Cocking 1982: 166) would be the last thing that we ought to expect. For Vincent Ferré this common expectation is an alarming ‘false premise’ (2009: 197). It would deny the experience of reading as it has unfolded over the last few thousands of pages. It would also render those pages purposeless prevarication: if there really were a clear and univocal ‘theory’ that comes from involuntary memories, and if this was the whole purpose of the book, then why do we need the rest of the text? From this perspective, the ending’s apparent ‘failure’ to articulate a neatly conceived theory of itself is a continued riposte to critics who wish to find an essential vision or message. We might even find some intentional irony in Proust’s tantalising 1920 suggestion, in the article on Flaubert, of a ‘théorie de l’art’ to come in the final volume (E, 1232). Not only is this an effective publicity move, it is also a joke waiting to be played upon theoretically-minded critics, who will instead find themselves confronted with an attack on ‘théoriciens’ during these very pages (IV, 460). ‘Rather than seeing the end of the novel as a belated effort at systematicity, we can consider it a lure for [a] reading that seeks to stabilize’ (Paul 2024: 67). In this same article, Proust may nod at this when he complains of how, with ‘grands écrivains’ like Nerval and Chateaubriand, ‘on se plaît [...] à appauvrir et à dessécher par une interprétation purement formelle’ (E, 1232). In one *Carnet*, Proust also anticipates the bewildered critical reaction to an irrational ending: ‘Dans la dernière partie [du roman] [...] les gens du monde trouveront bête précisément ce que j’ai voulu

faire en ayant toujours de l'irrationnel comme objet' (Proust 2002: 95–96, cited Suganuma 2024: 100).

Within IV, 445–51, there are some hints that this 'theory' ought to be understood as an irrational 'trompe l'œil' (IV, 452) rather than a 'philosophical treatise' (A. King 1968: 111). The impact of the involuntary memories — the joy that they produce, together with the fearlessness of death — occurs without any theory or argument: 'sans que j'eusse fait aucun raisonnement nouveau, trouvé aucun argument décisif, les difficultés [...] avaient perdu toute importance' (IV, 445). An involuntary memory, which draws on some entirely peripheral or insignificant past event, 'portait sur lui le reflet de choses qui logiquement ne tenaient pas à lui, en ont été séparées par l'intelligence qui n'avait rien à faire d'elles pour les besoins du raisonnement' (IV, 448). The 'force' of the involuntary memories, therefore, lies outside of the world of logic or reasoning; the problem of death is solved without Marcel being able to give any explanation as to why. 'It is analogical, rather than logical thinking' (Paul 2024: 73). Thus, Marcel's ensuing 'theory' may be read as a post-hoc rationalisation of an experience that is fundamentally inexplicable. Perhaps it is like the post-hoc rationalisations of dreams — which, as we saw, Bergson thought to be an unnecessary encroachment of rationalism into an illogical dream space (p. 70). The involuntary memories are like (and dislike) the hero's former 'dreams':

L'ébranlement effectif de mes sens par le bruit, le contact du linge, etc. avait ajouté aux rêves de l'imagination ce dont ils sont habituellement dépourvus, l'idée d'existence — et grâce à ce subterfuge avait permis à mon être d'obtenir, d'isoler, d'immobiliser — la durée d'un éclair — ce qu'il n'appréhende jamais : un peu de temps à l'état pur (IV, 451).

It is the confusion ('ébranlement') of his senses in involuntary memories that allowed Marcel to mingle 'cette contradiction d'opposés' — that is, 'passé et présent' (Kristeva 1994: 246). This 'subterfuge' in turn is what allows him to isolate 'un peu de temps à l'état pur' (IV, 451). This 'pure' time is, as it were, 'time without time': 'une minute affranchie de l'ordre du temps' (IV, 451). If it strikes the reader as a flat paradox to have a 'minute' lying outside of time, or indeed a perception of timelessness that is itself *time-bound* — lasting only 'la durée d'un éclair' (for more on this, see

Simon 2009: 262 and Fieschi 1965: 250) — then the hero would seem to agree. He states that, in conditions other than those of heightened and confused ‘ébranlement’, this perception of time ‘out of time’ is something that: ‘mon être [...] n’appréhende jamais’. The very confusion of the syntax in the sentence above, with its three hyphens that do not clearly indicate which thoughts they are bracketing, may recreate the confused, excited thoughts of a hero attempting to explain, or theorise, that which he simultaneously takes to be beyond apprehension. In this, the prose suggests the play of adverbs we found in the opening pages, as well as their confused oscillation between theory and reverie (p. 61).

If this is a ‘theory’, then, it is a ‘theory’ of moments that lie beyond ‘logique’ and ‘raisonnement’. The involuntary memories offer sudden glimpses into the vast landscape of the past, and the prose of the ensuing pages — confused, often repetitive, then moving via ‘*transitions brusques*’ onto new topics (Cattai 1950: 252) — evokes the hero’s incapacity to fix clearly on what he has seen. The involuntary memories, like an ‘éclair’, are perhaps closer to ‘la lumière et les rafales d’un ouragan de beauté’ (III, 650) than to the premises of a logical argument. If we read through the pages again, we might find in them the slightly breathless, anxious thinking of a character in a scene, rather than a ‘neatly conceived overall theory’ (Cocking 1982: 166).

Marcel *fait rire*

Prendergast finds these pages to be humourless and fatiguing:

But what of the earnest *longueurs* of the coda in *Le Temps retrouvé*? No jokes [...] here. Am I alone (I doubt it) in the view that much of the prolonged meditation on the literary vocation and the redemptive conception of ‘literature’ is simply wearing? (2013: 3).

It is true that the ‘méditation’ in the bibliothèque (IV, 445–96), as well as the subsequent festival of remembrance in the ‘Bal des têtes’ (IV, 496–625), can be ‘wearing’. We are jostled amongst a miscellaneous tumult of thoughts, which divert into memories and rants, and run on for many pages. But these ‘*longueurs*’ are *not* entirely in ‘earnest’.

Let us recall how some critics thought Brichot's monologues might be an earnest expression of the toponymic interests of the author. We found that we cannot attribute such a signification to the rants, since they are mocked — and even Marcel's interest in them is mocked — by other characters in the scene. In short, we ought not to 'extraire une formule du roman sans considérer le passage global dans lequel elle s'insère' (Simon 2009: 261). Although Marcel's string of involuntary memories may seem to be solemn moments of idealistic awe, their comic aspect becomes visible when we consider the wider setting. Thereby we may trace a continuation of the ambiguous disjunction between 'narrator' and 'hero' even in these final pages of the *Recherche*.

Immediately after the joy caused by the first involuntary memory, the hero tries to recreate it by swaying again on the uneven paving stones: 'Je restais, quitte à faire rire la foule innombrable des wattmen, à tituber comme j'avais fait tout à l'heure, un pied sur le pavé plus élevé, l'autre pied sur le pavé plus bas' (IV, 445–46). In the excitement of the recollection, this sentence is easily passed over. But the image is undoubtedly a comic one. The neurasthenic, aged socialite sways in the courtyard of a Parisian hotel, while 'wattmen' — drivers of electric cars, and symbols of chic, English-flavoured Modernity (Eells 2012: 203) — look confusedly on. In *Cahier 58's* version of the scene, we have a clearer impression of an implication that still exists in the final draft. This is that, while Marcel is *pretending* not to care about 'la foule innombrable des wattmen', he cannot ignore them altogether:

Cependant sans me soucier de ce que pouvaient penser les gens qui passaient dans la cour, invités ou domestiques, je restais un pied sur un des pavés. [...] Je tâchais de ne pas voir les gens qui passaient, de laisser, seule dans ma conscience, la sensation que j'avais pu éprouver en passant d'une pierre sur l'autre (IV, 804).

Here, we see the movement from the claim that he is 'paying no attention' to the drivers ('sans me soucier'), to the tacit admission that, instead, he is 'trying not to look at them' ('tâch[er] de ne pas voir'). There is an amusing false consciousness present here, even in this moment of utmost seriousness for the hero. In the final draft, we see it, equally, in the decision to continue into the hotel even though the mystery of the paving stones has not yet been resolved.

Tout en me le demandant et en étant résolu aujourd’hui à trouver la réponse, j’entrai dans l’hôtel de Guermantes, parce que nous faisons toujours passer avant la besogne intérieure que nous avons à faire le rôle apparent que nous jouons et qui, ce jour-là, était celui d’un invité (IV, 446).

At the most important moment of his life, the social instinct still triumphs ‘la besogne intérieure’. Perhaps the suppressed fear of being found amusing by the ‘wattmen’, or ‘les gens qui passaient’, encourages Marcel inside. In any case, he remains comically prey to the commands of his social ‘rôle’. The distance here between ‘narrator’ and ‘hero’ remains indeterminate. We may read this explanation regarding ‘le rôle apparent que nous jouons’ as free indirect discourse offered by the hero to justify himself in his own eyes, but equally as post-hoc explanation by a narrator, himself loath to acknowledge an earlier embarrassment.

Before Proust, ‘ressouvenirs inconscients’ (E, 1232) were a leitmotif in Romantic literature (Mein 1962: 46). Jean Pommier finds such scenes in the writings of two of Proust’s contemporaries whom we have already discussed: Ernest Renan and Paul Bourget (1968: 121). The narrator draws attention to the way his involuntary memories recall moments in Chateaubriand, Nerval, and Baudelaire (IV, 498; see Bray 2022: 56), as Proust himself did in the article on Flaubert (E, 1232). However, as he undergoes these profound moments of recollection, Proust’s hero is also the object of passing bemusement for those nearby. The juxtaposition of these heightened Romantic epiphanies with the banalities of the social world is a common comic device in the *Recherche*.

L’humour proustien repose presque toujours, ainsi, sur l’incongruité entre deux aspects d’une situation, telle que, de l’intérieur, elle est sentie et telle qu’en fait [...] elle transparait à l’extérieur (Bree 1969: 131).

In these epiphanies, therefore, we find something more than the ‘shopworn clichés of Romantic subjectivism’ (Prendergast 2013: 36). Rather, that very ‘subjectivism’ continues to be questioned as a social pose, or at least as a stance that can never fully escape the social world. Even when Marcel is at the height of his epiphanies, the narration reminds us that he is, as it were, unable to ‘fuir les regards du café’, just as before Balbec Church (II, 20).

Moreover, it is the hero's very decision to *cede* to the demands of this social world that grants him access to further revelations. Once in the hotel, Marcel follows the directions of a servant: 'un maître d'hôtel me demanda d'entrer un instant dans un petit salon—bibliothèque attendant au buffet, jusqu'à ce que le morceau qu'on jouait fût achevé' (IV, 446). Without this respect for those listening in the other room, as well as the wishes of the 'maître d'hôtel', Marcel would not have heard the sound that releases a second epiphany: a servant knocking a spoon against a plate (IV, 447). Then, a servant hands Marcel a napkin to mop his mouth, which creates a third involuntary memory. The capacity to open this interior world is attributed to another servant: 'je croyais que le domestique venait d'ouvrir la fenêtre sur la plage [...] à Balbec' (IV, 447). In an early draft, it is explicitly Marcel's desire to please these servants which unlocks the past:

Pour lui [le maître d'hôtel] faire plaisir je bus un peu de champagne et je lui tendis le verre et voulus m'essuyer la bouche avec la serviette qu'il m'avait donnée. Mais alors pour la troisième fois la phrase délicieuse de bonheur et de vie s'adressa à moi (IV, 805).

Not only is this still comic — we have the image of Marcel, rapt in his contemplation of the 'cuiller', again being pressed by the niceties of the social occasion — but noticing this context alters the signification of the memories themselves. No longer are they isolated moments of purely 'Romantic subjectivism'. Instead, the epiphanies consistently arise out of Marcel's connections with others — 'wattmen', 'domestique[s]' and the 'maître d'hôtel'. 'Une réunion mondaine, le retour dans la société, m'eussent fourni ce point de départ vers une vie nouvelle que je n'avais pas su trouver dans la solitude' (IV, 496–97). In the last chapter, we speculated about how profound boredom allows Marcel to begin to recognise the desires of others (p. 169). The epiphanies would seem to be another example of this outward turn.

Le plus vite possible'

Once we understand the social context of Marcel's involuntary memories, we can also read his 'theory' as the frantic suppositions of a character in a constrained, time-bound social environment. He is thinking against the clock — or against the melody playing in the next room — and the

subsequent theory may simply be a ‘charmante variation sur l’idéalisme subjectif procuré par l’ivresse’ (Henry 1986: 198).

Le morceau qu’on jouait pouvait finir d’un moment à l’autre et je pouvais être obligé d’entrer au salon. Aussi je m’efforçais de tâcher de voir clair le plus vite possible dans la nature des plaisirs identiques que je venais [...] de ressentir (IV, 448).

Amusingly, the fact that he is *not* obliged to enter the salon — that he might simply say ‘give me a minute’ to the footman who comes to collect him — never seems to occur to our hero. He is consumed by his social ‘rôle’, even in this moment of extra-temporal transcendence. This sense of (slightly fabricated) urgency is felt in the prose. After one chain of thoughts, the hero has to ‘gliss[er] rapidement sur tout cela’ and move onto the next (IV, 449). These, in turn, give rise to still further ideas: ‘Et déjà les conséquences se pressaient dans mon esprit’ (IV, 457). We feel, as readers, this somewhat anxious compulsion to think ever ‘onwards’ as we work through the many subjects of the ensuing pages. This may explain the breathless confusion of the memories themselves. Take, for example, the following description of the third involuntary memory. It is a sentence the analysis of which will occupy us for the next few pages.

Un maître d’hôtel depuis longtemps au service du prince de Guermantes m’ayant apporté dans la bibliothèque où j’étais pour m’éviter d’aller au buffet, un choix de petits fours, un verre d’orangeade, je m’essuyai la bouche avec la serviette qu’il m’avait donnée ; mais aussitôt, comme le personnage des *Mille et Une Nuits* qui sans le savoir accomplissait précisément le rite qui faisait apparaître, visible pour lui seule, un docile génie prêt à le transporter au loin, une nouvelle vision d’azur passa devant mes yeux ; mais il était si pur et salin, il se gonfla en mamelles bleuâtres ; [...] la serviette que j’avais prise pour m’essuyer la bouche avait précisément le genre de raideur et d’empesé de celle avec laquelle j’avais eu tant de peine à me sécher devant la fenêtre, le premier jour de mon arrivée à Balbec, et, maintenant devant cette bibliothèque de l’hôtel de Guermantes, elle déployait, réparti dans ses pans et dans ses cassures, le plumage d’un océan vert et bleu comme la queue d’un paon (IV, 447).

What a jumble of images! We might say that Proust is writing ‘impressionistically’. Yet Proust’s ‘impressionism’, like that of the actual Impressionists, is a controlled mix of piquant details and suggestive vaguenesses (Berrong 2006: 205). Here, there seems to be no such control within this parade of unruly images. What ‘unity’, or underlying effect, might be found in this disparate series,

which takes us from a djinn to a ‘vision d’azur’, from there to salinity, ‘mamelles bleuâtres’, and finally a peacock?

Through the confusion of such a long and obscurely evocative sentence, the reader is placed in a position analogous to that of the hero, and may attempt to decipher what is suggested by this vision in *her memory* of the *Recherche*. Let us try to unpack some of the interpretative difficulties. To begin with, this is a ‘nouvelle vision d’azur’ because the first vision of ‘azur’ occurred during the involuntary memory on the ‘pavés’: ‘Un azur profond enivrait mes yeux, des impressions de fraîcheur, d’éblouissante lumière tournoyaient près de moi’ (IV, 445). This earlier ‘azur’ turned out to be, or to signify, Venice, recalling ‘l’azur du Canal Grande’ (E, 609). This second ‘azur’ instead suggests ‘Balbec’. But it is curious — and this is a contradiction to which we will return — that even while the hero (and/or narrator) insists on the *distinctness* of the sensations which produce these memories (‘la serviette [...] avait précisément le genre de raideur et d’empesé’), he describes the impressions produced by the same word. A fundamental similarity, or continuity, between Venice and Balbec is evoked through this repetition of ‘azur’, even while they are distinguished as different ‘vases clos’, each to be written ‘dans une matière en quelque sorte différente’ (IV, 449). There is even a faint hint here of Combray, where ‘la surface azurée du silence’ dominates the village on Sundays, according to a celebrated metaphor (I, 87; Genette 1972: 41).

The ‘docile génie’ may also suggest Balbec since, during the flight of the ‘petite bande’, Albertine is described as a ‘petite Péri’ (II, 152). This is a reference to the ‘female genie in the story of Prince Ahmed’ from *Les Mille et Une Nuits* (Prendergast 2022: 195). But if the ‘serviette’ transports Marcel to this ‘vision d’azur’ like a djinn from *Les Mille et Une Nuits*, then this also suggests ‘la ville enchantée’ de Venice, where he wandered ‘comme un personnage des *Mille et Une Nuits*’ (IV, 229–30), a comparison repeated in *Le Temps retrouvé* (IV, 288; pp. 161–62). The same ambivalence haunts the reference to a ‘paon’. This is a comparison we find in drafts for this scene: ‘cette serviette plus belle que la traîne d’un paon’, ‘elle [la serviette] répartissait comme un paon

une traîne d'émeraude et de saphir' (IV, 1396). In drafts for earlier volumes, the sea at Balbec is compared three times to the colours of a peacock's tail, or the 'bleu de paon' (I, 952; III, 1266; 1426). Thus we might explain why 'paon' is brought up in relation to Balbec's 'azur'. But 'paon' equally suggests Venice. Byzantine carvings and mosaics of the peacock — which 'is the well-known symbol of the Resurrection' (WJR X: 171) — can be found in St Mark's Basilica and many early churches on the islands. They were, as Proust undoubtedly knew, much admired by Ruskin in the *Stones of Venice* (WJR X: 26; 64), and mentioned by the narrator in an early draft of Marcel's sojourn in the city (IV, 693).



Figure 4. Byzantine Peacocks at Torcello

So in this description there is already an ambivalence. While the vision is supposed to be precisely the sensation felt on 'le premier jour de mon arrivée à Balbec', through the evocations of 'azur', *Les Mille et Une Nuits*, and the 'paon', the essence of Balbec is textually entwined with that of Venice. Even in these moments of 'absolute faith', is there not, therefore, a degree of confusion? Is Marcel (and/or the narrator) remembering, or misremembering?

The 'serviette' allegedly recalls the one 'avec laquelle j'avais eu tant de peine à me sécher devant la fenêtre, le premier jour de mon arrivée à Balbec'. Most likely, the hero is recalling an

earlier occasion involving a ‘serviette’ on his first visit to the seaside resort. In *Le Temps retrouvé*, the precise details of the window, and the serviette’s ‘raideur’ and ‘empesé[e]’, are repeated:

À tous moments, tenant à la main la serviette raide et empesée où était écrit le nom de l’hôtel et avec laquelle je faisais d’inutiles efforts pour me sécher, je retournais près de la fenêtre jeter encore un regard sur ce vaste cirque éblouissant et montagneux et sur les sommets neigeux de ses vagues en pierre d’émeraude (II, 33).

We have here an indication of why the ‘serviette’ recalls the sea, and is associated with blue and ‘azur’, since the sea is described ‘en pierre d’émeraude’ and ‘bleuâtre’ later in this description (II, 33). We can recall that the sea observed at La Raspelière is also ‘bleuâtre’ (III, 289; p. 147). These descriptions implicitly link the sea in Normandy with the ‘eau de saphir’ of Venice (IV, 203; 466). Moreover, this is a recollection of a habit that Marcel acquired in the mornings in Balbec, and it first occurs ‘le lendemain matin’ *after* ‘sa première journée’. That is to say, a habitual action, defining an epoch of life, has been streamlined into an ‘instant’, and even this ‘instant’ is incorrect — the hero now believes it happened in an evening, whereas in fact it would happen during the mornings. Through this misremembering, therefore, certain ‘real’ details from Marcel’s first stay in Balbec (and the text the reader has worked through) have been excluded or obviated.

The same suspicion might hang over the other involuntary memories. The first reminds the hero of tripping over the ‘dalles’ in St Mark’s Baptistery, but this is not an event that the reader can recall. St Mark’s is evoked when the hero’s mother describes to him how she believes his grandmother would have enjoyed the higgledy-pigglediness of Venice (IV, 208). We might associate this lack of composure with the ‘mixity’ of these pages (Auber 2009: 28), and even the details of this very sentence. But the tripping is not found in the subsequent visit to the Baptistery (IV, 224–25), where we encounter a description of the mosaics which turns out to be inaccurate to the real building (IV, 1122). Besides this, there is the strange fact that there *are* no ‘dalles’ in the Baptistery of St Mark’s: ‘the floor of it is of rich mosaic’ (WJR X: 86). After this strangeness with the ‘dalles’, a dropped spoon recalls the sound of a hammer tapped against a train stopped in the

woods. This is the train discussed only a few pages before (pp. 166–67). Yet the ‘bruit du marteau’ is not described in this extract either!

What are we to make of this? Does it suggest that these earlier descriptions of those events were written with the ‘mémoire de l’intelligence’, which ignores those very small moments — ‘le geste le plus insignifiant’ (IV, 448) — where the ‘true’ past is contained? Would that, in turn, suggest that the book the hero decides to write is not the one that we have read? Or did these events never ‘actually’ happen — or occurred, as with the ‘serviette’, in a slightly different manner from that now ‘remembered’? Were, for example, the ‘deux dalles inégales du baptistère de Saint-Marc’ (IV, 446) actually those marking the entrance to the Baptistery, where, in the photograph that influenced this passage (Ruskin 1908: 127, cited Perrier 2015: 28), we can see a step down toward the mosaics (see also Eells 2020: 22)? Or — alternatively again — are these memories ‘real’, but simply not mentioned in the descriptions of Venice, or the train-halt, precisely because they ‘actually’ are insignificant, and their significance only occurs when recollected? This would be a little like how the beauty of Balbec Church is (under one reading) only appreciated later, when reconstructed in the ‘artist’s studio’ (Erickson 2007: 117; p. 115). As the narrator states in an aside during the description of his former visits to the Baptistery: ‘Aujourd’hui je suis au moins sûr que le plaisir existe sinon de voir, du moins d’avoir vu une belle chose’ (IV, 225).

What does a ‘real’ or ‘true’ memory even come to mean here? Fülöp, as we have seen (p. 131), reads the novel as rejecting the notion of a single ‘reality’, and as advocating for the Nietzschean powers of artistic imagination to create and discover its own worlds (2017: 181). These memories might draw their force from just such a mixing of the ‘rêves de l’imagination’ with ‘l’idée de l’existence’. If the hero is coming, via these new impressions, to reject a material ‘reality’, and memories *qua* ‘instantanés’ of factual events, then it makes no sense to attempt to fact-check these impressions by comparing them to the ‘factual record’ of the *Recherche*’s earlier pages, nor the real conditions of the Baptistery in Venice. By implication, the text of the novel would no longer be a ‘fact’, or collection of facts, by which we can measure the accuracy of our

own theorisations of it! Perhaps the *Recherche* itself has now become, for the reader, a ‘livre intérieur de signes inconnus [...] pour la lecture desquels personne ne pouvait m’aider d’aucune règle’ (IV, 458). With Marcel’s re-imagining of his past, the reader is thereby invited to re-imagine the novel she has just read, and draw from it a reading without any definitive ‘règle’ or method.

Azur — Salin — Mamelle

This is, however, just one of many possible interpretations. We might equally read in this sentence — in direct opposition to the Fülöpian possibility sketched above — a *collapse* from a Romantic faith in ‘imagination’ to a world of hard facts and material objects, such as we saw in the description of the cliffs at La Raspelière (p. 147).

To begin with, the word ‘azur’ evokes the Romantic longing for unbounded space, particularly as it is simultaneously expressed and satirised by Baudelaire. ‘L’inaccessible azur’ is used as a symbol of an unbounded ‘beyond’ in Baudelaire’s ‘L’Aube spirituelle’ (1857: 99). Baudelaire’s ‘Beauté’ also ‘trône dans l’azur’ (1857: 46), though we might already read in this poem a ‘parody’ of such Romantic longings (Yee 2018: 5–6). Baudelaire’s albatross, a metaphor for the poet, is one of the ‘rois de l’azur’ in his poem of that name in the second edition of *Les Fleurs* (1861: 11). This latter poem is referenced in the *Recherche* when it is misquoted by Mme de Cambremer (III, 209). Later in this passage, the narrator will also quote a line from Baudelaire’s ‘La chevelure’: ‘l’azur du ciel immense et rond’ (IV, 498). In Mallarmé’s poem ‘Azur’ (1864), we find ‘l’éternel azur’ occupying a similarly shaped symbolic space (1951: 37). Meanwhile, Mallarmé’s ‘Cantate pour la première communion’ (written 1858) begins with the same internal rhyme we find in Proust’s sentence (‘vision d’azur’; ‘si pur’) :

Ange à la robe d’azur
Enfants des cieux au cœur si pur (1951: 5).

Thus, we might reasonably think of this ‘vision d’azur’ as another of the ‘clichés of Romantic subjectivism’ (Prendergast 2013: 26) and/or aggravated omphaloskepsis. Perhaps Anthony Beavis,

the hero of *Eyeless in Gaza*, is thinking of such a moment when he recalls: ‘the vision of that asthmatic seeker of lost time squatting [...] in the tepid bath of his remembered past’ (Huxley 1936: 8). The evocation of the ‘azur’ would echo the association of Romanticism with involuntary memory.

Yet this ‘azur’ is subsequently glossed: ‘il était si pur et salin, il se gonfla en mamelles bleuâtres’. Besides the obvious connection with the seaside, ‘salin’ has technical and scientific meanings. It is the proper word for the chemical definition of a ‘salt’; it is also the proper word for ‘salt crystals’. In this context, ‘pur’ could evoke both chemical ‘purity’ as well as the religious purity of Mallarmé’s angels. Finally, the ‘azur’ swells into ‘mamelles bleuâtres’. What a bizarre, and unexpectedly gross, combination of words! ‘Mamelles’, again, has a scientific sense. It describes the mammary gland of any animal. This precise, technical sense — like that of the ‘romane’ church (p. 105) — paradoxically keeps the image unclear and indeterminate, since the reader does not know whether to imagine teats, udders, or breasts. Rather, than being a Nietzschean invitation to reinvent one’s own past through the imagination, perhaps this involuntary memory suggests how any such quasi-Romantic longing ultimately rests upon crude, material realities. The azure of Balbec leads back to mammary glands and salted chemicals, just as we saw with the ‘azure’ of Venice (pp. 162–63).

Another possible, albeit conjectural, reading would develop on the strong Biblical connotation of ‘mamelles’ (as in Mathieu 21:16 or Psaumes 8:2). In particular, the word is used in the sense of dashing a child from their mother’s breast: ‘On arrache l’orphelin à la mamelle’ (Job 24:9). This Biblical context is evoked in ‘Combray’ when we read of ‘antiques lois’ which require one to ‘massacrer les enfants à la mamelle’ (I, 28). Through this further connotation, the ‘mamelles’ implicitly recall the *real* ‘premier jour de mon arrivée à Balbec’, as it is actually described earlier in the text. This is the occasion where Marcel is horrified by his new bedroom, ‘tourmenté par la présence de petites bibliothèques à vitrines, qui couraient le long des murs’ (II, 27). This location may now be seen to foreshadow the ‘bibliothèque de Guermantes’ in which Marcel now finds

himself (Pommier 1968: 20–21). When the *mature narrator* analyses his former fear of this new room, he argues that it was actually a fear of death — ‘ma propre mort’ (II, 32). This is because the change of room, and its furnishings, tacitly suggested to his younger self that nothing is permanent. In the end, Marcel gives ‘trois coups’ on the ‘cloison’ with his grandmother’s room. These ‘trois coups’ remind us of the three ‘clochers’ of Martinville and Hudimesnil’s three ‘arbres’, as well as the involuntary memories that have occurred so far in this passage, of which the napkin is the third.

Alors ma grand’mère entra ; et à l’expansion de mon cœur refoulé s’ouvrirent aussitôt des espaces infinis.

Elle portait une robe de chambre de percale [...] qui était pour nous soigner, pour nous veiller, sa blouse de servante et de garde, son habit de religieuse. [...] Quand j’avais ainsi ma bouche collée à ses joues, à son front, j’y puisais quelque chose de si bienfaisant, de si nourricier, que je gardais l’immobilité, le sérieux, la tranquille avidité d’un enfant qui tète (II, 28).

The ‘espaces infinis’ now might be seen to echo the unbounded spaces of the ‘azur’. The grandmother’s ‘robe de chambre’ — which is a ‘blouse de servante’ — relates her to the ‘domestique[s]’ that will later supply Marcel with ‘petits fours’ and ‘orangeade’. And here we have another explanation as to why the ‘serviette’ and its ‘vision d’azur’ leads Marcel to an image of ‘mamelles bleuâtres’, and why this potentially frightening image is actually a joyful one. In Balbec itself, on the ‘premier jour’ of his arrival there, he pressed against his grandmother’s cheek like ‘un enfant qui tète’. The same image is used in *Jean Santeuil*: ‘Jean goûtait longuement les joues tendres de sa mère’ (JS, 73). Although we do not have the colour(s) of her ‘robe de chambre’, percale fabrics are typically dyed in white or blue, colours appropriate for this image of the maternal-figure and suckling infant, since they are those of the Virgin Mary. This is reinforced by the further description of her attire as ‘son habit de religieuse’. The metaphorical ‘milk’ ‘puis[é]’ from his grandmother by the young hero thereby suggests the nourishing, spiritual milk of the *Madonna del Latte*. This originally Byzantine icon was introduced to Italy via Venice in the thirteenth century (Lasareff 1938: 35; Dorger 2012: 3), and painted by Veronese’s brother in Venice (Sperling 2021: 286). Indeed, an ‘analogie entre la mère du narrateur et celle du Christ’ (Genette 1972: 49) might

be found in the description of the mother, *qua* mosaic ‘aux joues rouges’, in the Baptistery (IV, 225). A few pages before these involuntary memories, the narrator bemoans his lack of capacity to believe in the world of his imagination by playing on ideas of holiness, purity, and milk: ‘j’avais perdu ce privilège, comme après la première jeunesse on perd le pouvoir qu’ont les enfants de dissocier en fractions digérables le lait qu’ils ingèrent’ (IV, 436). Later, his ‘vrai moi’ is offered ‘céleste nourriture’ by the involuntary memories (IV, 451), while ‘l’art’, like Grandma’s cheeks, is said to be ‘vraiment nourricier’ (IV, 471). Art, then, conceivably performs the same role as the spiritual nourishment that Marcel received from the ‘nourrice’, his grandmother, who in turn suggests the *Madonna del Latte* (for a discussion of milk in Proust and Flaubert, see Ott 2008).

The fact that these epiphanies can ‘rendre la mort indifférente’ is all the more poignant if they tacitly recall a moment where the fear of death stole over the young Marcel, and when this is cured by a ‘cœur immense’ which opens up discrete and fragmentary ‘espaces’. Such a reading would give precisely the opposite interpretation to that offered overtly by the hero. Rather than presenting the past to him as ‘mille vases clos’, the memory would instead evoke a moment when that which *seemed* to be a Poulet-style ‘monade’ was suddenly opened (p. 102), while the visions themselves, which ‘tournoyaient près de moi’ (IV, 445), create a perpetual mobility also suggestive of Bergsonian continuity. Perhaps, when he tries to theorise these visions, Marcel rushes to ‘immobiliser’ and ‘isoler’ (IV, 451) them in the same way that he once attempted to ‘immobiliser les attitudes’ of La Berma (II, 352; p. 119). It might be that more important and salient memories, often iterative ones, as well as the *continuity* of these memories and their resemblances to each other, are hidden by his attempt to fix them in a single atemporal ‘instant’. It is as if, unintentionally, Marcel returns to his mechanical, photographic viewing-style — the ‘prétendus instantanés pris par ma mémoire’ (IV, 446) — that he denigrates just a page previously. The old desire to ‘immobiliser’ an essentially mobile ‘chaîne’ of memories produces a jumble of images which, like Albertine or Oriane (p. 127), become confused and blurred. We *might* be observing here, therefore, the comic spectacle of Marcel’s brain going into overdrive as he tries to determine, or invent, a

precise and fixed meaning for these memories while caught within a social world and its pressures. Perhaps this is a reversion to theorisation, and rebound from the depths of boredom where no signification was possible, as symbolised by the ‘blanc’ in the text (pp. 166–67). Reading between the lines, and through the jumble of her own reminiscences of the novel, the reader may sense how the narrator undermines the neat ‘theory’ that its hero subsequently generates.

Petits Fours and Orangeade

Yet this reading, too, cannot be advanced with any certainty. Rather, with these involuntary visions, we seem to be entering a space where Proust’s text is capable of generating any number of interpretations (see Bray 2012: 709), by drawing upon the hero’s (and reader’s) confused memories. We might read here a ‘theory’ of discrete atemporal essences, and a counter-theory of continuity and mobility, such as we traced in Chapter 2. This may therefore be read as a ‘deconstructive’ passage that ‘simultaneously asserts and denies the authority of its own rhetorical mode’ (de Man 1979: 17; p. 41). Yet this too is only one possible ‘theorisation’. Take, again, the detail that this third memory is produced after the consumption of ‘orangeade’ and ‘petits fours’. What happens if the reader were to try and interpret this detail by drawing on the symbolism of ‘orangeade’ in the *Recherche*?

The serving of orangeade is typical of ‘le faubourg Saint-Germain’ (IV, 535). But ‘orangeade’ is particularly associated with the Guermantes. Before he has ascended to their social world, the young Marcel imagines how, in summer, ‘au petit bout de jardin qui s’étendait entre de hautes murailles [...] Mme de Guermantes faisait après dîner servir des liqueurs et l’orangeade’ (II, 331). This social world is as removed from his own as ‘l’oasis de Figui’ (Ibid.). Orangeade, therefore, is one of the signs of this exclusive and discrete world, ‘cloisonné’ behind its high walls (p. 102). The garden evokes the ‘garden’ of paradise (Prendergast 2022: 196), while orangeade is the symbol by which ‘Proust saisit l’essence de l’aristocratie’ (Chaudier 2005: 11). Later, we learn that: ‘On n’avait jamais connu, des Guermantes, dans ces après-dîners au jardin, que l’orangeade.

Elle avait quelque chose de rituel' (II, 802). 'L'orangeade traditionnelle' (II, 803) is a form Oriane maintains even in the 'déclin de sa vie' (IV, 581). The hero's consumption of this symbolic orangeade, then, might signal his long familiarity with this social world — but, simultaneously, it may symbolise its ongoing fascination to him, where a key theme of these pages is his new capacity to apply 'imagination' to the world and fantasise about its 'divinités' in the manner of his childhood. Previously, only absent things could appeal to Marcel, since his imagination — 'mon seul organe pour jouir de la beauté' — could only focus itself upon 'ce qui est absent' (IV, 450). Now, the involuntary memories are 'à la fois dans le passé' and before him. This has 'ajouté aux rêves de l'imagination ce dont ils sont habituellement dépourvus, l'idée d'existence' (IV, 451). The 'orangeade' can be tasted as this everyday and uninteresting beverage — since Marcel is now long accustomed to drinking it with the Guermantes — and with the delicious imaginings of his younger self. We have, finally, both 'l'âge des noms' and 'l'âge des choses'.

But the reader of Proust may also, or alternatively, recall orangeade's associations with Swann and Odette. When Swann is first brought into her apartment, it is one of the various objects by which he is seduced, including a 'lampe' that recalls the frightening and exciting effects of the 'lanterne magique': 'comme cette lampe, cette orangeade, ce fauteuil qui contenaient tant de rêve, qui matérialisaient tant de désir : une sorte de douceur surabondante et de densité mystérieuse' (I, 294). Orangeade here might be taken as a kind of poison for, while apparently harmless and non-alcoholic, it draws Swann into a world of 'rêve', materialising his fantasies. 'L'orangeade [...] substantifie le lien déjà évanescant entre Odette et Swann' (Kristeva 1994: 254). 'Buvant son orangeade, Odette n'échappe plus' (Richard 1972: 4). This is a pattern repeated with Marcel and Albertine years later (III, 136). Odette offers orangeade to other guests, including Forcheville (I, 528). The fear that she is drinking orangeade with someone else — now the drink seems to be a euphemism — haunts Swann during their relationship (I, 371). Orangeade will then accompany Odette as she climbs higher into Society (III, 142). Perhaps, therefore, drinking this 'orangeade' is not the expression of the triumph of a Fülöpian 'imagination'. Perhaps Marcel is instead drinking

the Kool-Aid — putting himself again under the spell of a Circean ‘rêve’, and repeating Swann’s critical error, which during these pages is also recollected (IV, 456).

Or again: orangeade is equally a symbol of the Verdurin Salon. It is *also* typically consumed after their dinners (I, 209; 293; 912; III, 356; 780). If that is so, ‘orangeade’ could be one of Deleuze’s ‘transversales’ (pp. 37–38). Like Swann, it moves between apparently discrete worlds. Without them being aware of it, the ‘near-ubiquitous orangeade’ (Milesi 2001: 179) unites many diverse characters and spaces in the novel: the aristocrats and the bourgeois, the lover and his loved one. Orangeade is said to be a symbol of ‘la communion sociale’ (III, 803). Orangeade may be comic transubstantiation of the sacramental wine, while the ‘petits fours’, with which it is often served (III, 142), take the place of the wafers. Thereby, we might see the orangeade and petits fours as symbols of a uniting ‘communion’ between ‘oppositions’ in the *Recherche*... Or perhaps, by this time, this ‘orangeade’, as ‘équivalent du langage’ (Kristeva 1994: 257), has become so watered down that it has lost any stable meaning.

Maybe we are again ‘dealing with thirty-three variations without a theme’, so that ‘[t]he theme is diffracted entirely in the variations’, as Barthes puts it in ‘Proust Round Table’ (Deleuze 2007: 44–45, cited Baldwin 2013: 203). Perhaps the ‘petits fours’, too, have become ‘détestables’ to the reader, as they are described in a later simile from the ‘Bal des têtes’ (IV, 582). This is one way in which these pages are both exhilarating and ‘wearing’ (Prendergast 2013: 37). The reader is exhilarated as she begins to notice one or more of these possible chains of signification stretching back across the immensity of the text, and lighting up forgotten passages like lightning flashes in a hurricane (III, 650). Yet when we attempt to map out precisely what this novel *is* that we are now finally finishing, or when we track down these symbols, their signification becomes increasingly evasive. The ending would seem to be, in one sense, the apotheosis of the novel’s perpetual diffraction or ‘deferral’ of meaning (Dutton 2023: 46–55). Maybe it is true that: ‘The complexities and difficulties of the various forces of time and space become intertwined in ways that demonstrate Derrida’s *différance*’ (Erickson 2007: 122). This process occurs not only to the

reader attempting to understand the text, but, arguably, to the hero (and/or narrator) as he attempts to theorise, to ‘fix’ or capture, the importance of the insight that has supposedly occurred to him. Hence the disjointed carousel of ideas, theories, and memories. If, instead of finding in these pages a ready-made ‘theory’, we see in them the articulation of a confused attempt by the hero to *theorise*, then the reader remains personally engaged in the *Recherche* as ‘quest’. She continues to occupy a position that echoes that of the hero, since the reader, too, tries to understand what *she* has experienced over these previous pages, with a ‘sentiment de fatigue et d’effroi’ (IV, 624; see Watt 2009b: 5). Indeed, if a ‘nouvel écrivain est généralement assez fatigant à lier et difficile à comprendre parce qu’il unit les choses par des rapports nouveaux’ (E, 1216), then it is unsurprising that such an experience is ‘wearing’. ‘The novel can’t think for us, it can only provoke us to think’ (Bray 2019: 98). If we take this sentence as an invitation to think, and to think through the hero’s thinking, the text can tire us — yet we might also emerge with pearls, or anchors, drawn from its oceanic depths (I, 45). Like Marcel’s memories, these readings may be a question both of recalling, discovering, and *creating* the *Recherche* (I, 45).

The Petits Fours in Circulation

Just as we saw with the Proustian ‘photograph’ when read as a symbol (p. 132), the ‘petits fours’ seem to operate on the level of the symbolic, but without any fixed signification. Their associations with the Sacrament date from a moment we first encountered when distinguishing Combray Church from Balbec (p. 109): ‘Parfois les jours de semaine, à midi, quand il n’y a pas d’office [...] on voyait s’agenouiller un instant Mme Sazerat, posant sur le prie-Dieu voisin un paquet tout ficelé de petits fours’ (I, 59). The ‘petits fours’ rest above Mme Sazerat as she kneels on the ‘prie-Dieu’ in the same way that the Host, on the altar, rests above the faithful at Communion. The fact that Sazerat does this specifically on days when ‘il n’y pas d’office’ reinforces the implication that the humble ‘petits fours’ stand in for the ‘Pain de Vie’.

After this detail, the description of the ‘vitraux’ continues:

Il y en avait un qui était un haut compartiment divisé en une centaine de petits vitraux rectangulaires où dominait le bleu [...] mais soit qu'un rayon eût brillé, soit que mon regard en bougeant eût promené à travers la verrière tour à tour éteinte et rallumée un mouvant et précieux incendie, l'instant d'après elle avait pris l'éclat changeant d'une traîne de paon ; [...] un instant après les petits vitraux en losange avaient pris la transparence profonde, l'infrangible dureté de saphirs [...] derrière lesquels on sentait, plus aimé que toutes ces richesses, un sourire momentané de soleil; il était aussi reconnaissable dans le flot bleu et doux [...] ; il me consolait que la terre fût encore nue et noire, en faisant épanouir, comme en un printemps historique et qui datait des successeurs de saint Louis, ce tapis éblouissant et doré de myosotis en verre (I, 59–60).

The stained-glass recalls the magic lantern itself, with the 'compartiment divisé' of 'petits vitraux rectangulaires' recalling the 'ovales de verre' separated one from another by their frames (I, 10; p. 101). Yet, Marcel perceives movement in this apparently fixed window. Though he cannot tell whether it is his own 'regard' that has created this appearance, or a ray of light shining in from the outside, the glass — 'mouvant' and 'bougeant' — takes on the 'éclat changeant d'une traîne de paon'. Here, we find, perhaps, the distant ancestor of 'la traîne d'un paon' (IV, 1396) evoked by the 'serviette'. The 'paon' — symbol of both Balbec and Venice — is *equally* shown, via these 'petits fours', when taken as a Proustian wormhole, to have been foreshadowed in the stained-glass at Combray. The text, too, is glinting at us here; we cannot tell if these minute correspondences are intended, or a result of our own searching gaze. Nor do the similarities stop there. The 'saphirs' found in these 'vitraux' also suggest the 'vagues en pierre d'émeraude' of Balbec (II, 33) as well as the 'Grand Canal incrusté de scintillants saphirs' in Venice (IV, 466). The 'mamelles bleuâtres' are evoked by the colour 'bleu' that 'dominait'. These 'myosotis' may now be read as anticipating Venice:

Sur la piazza l'ombre qu'eussent développée à Combray la toile du magasin de nouveautés et l'enseigne du coiffeur, c'étaient les petites fleurs bleues que sème à ses pieds sur le désert du dallage ensoleillé le relief d'une façade Renaissance (IV, 203).

When we previously examined this quotation (p. 161), we observed that 'petites fleurs bleues' are calqued from the *Stones of Venice*. In fact, the entire church of Combray evokes the Baptistery of St Mark's as it is described in that text.

We are in a low vaulted room ; [...] a single ray of light [...] glances across the narrow room, [...] and the only thing that it strikes brightly, is a tomb. [...] The roof of the canopy

above [the tomb] has been blue, filled with stars; beneath, in the centre of the tomb on which the figure rests, is a seated figure of the Virgin, and the border of it all around is of flowers and soft leaves, growing rich and deep. [...] The floor of it is of rich mosaic [...] and its walls are of alabaster, but worn and shattered, and darkly stained with age, almost a ruin (WJR X: 85–86).

Both the blueness and the flowers recall Ruskin's Baptistery: its canopy 'has been blue', while the border of its Virgin is trimmed with 'flowers and soft leaves'. Blue is thereby imbued with another connotation: the blue background of fresco paintings. In particular, we may think of Giotto's Paduan frescoes where 'la voûte entière et le fond des fresques sont si bleus' that they suggest the 'azur' sky of cloudless days (IV, 226–27; see also Prendergast 2022: 81–82). Against this blue background, Ruskin evokes a 'single ray of light'. In Proust, we find 'un rayon' or 'un sourire momentané de soleil'. In this description, we also see many of the same techniques that Ruskin deploys in the ekphrasis of St Mark's (p. 117). Rather than being 'inaccessible aux vicissitudes' (II, 20), it is the way in which the Baptistery is 'worn and shattered, and darkly stained with age' that contributes to its beauty. The inability to see *everything* in the tomb is part of its meaning. Ruskin also emphasises that the Baptistery is the final resting place of Doge Andrea Dandolo, whom he takes to be the last great figure of the Venetian Republic (WJR X: 85). The Baptistery is thus an ambivalent symbol in the *Stones* — a place both of life and death.

After this description of the 'petits fours', Marcel goes 'à tâtons sous la voûte obscure' of the crypt of Combray Church. Here, he finds another stone — the tomb of a forgotten Frank.

Sur [le tombeau] une profonde valve [...] avait été creusée, disait-on, « par une lampe de cristal qui, le soir du meurtre de la princesse franque, s'était détachée d'elle-même des chaînes d'or où elle était suspendue [...], et, sans que le cristal se brisât, sans que la flamme s'éteignît, s'était enfoncée dans la pierre » (I, 61).

A lamp is buried beneath stone, yet still remains intact — is this not an excellent metaphor for Proustian involuntary memory, a metaphor all the richer because, in the intricate descriptions of the church, it is also likely to lie forgotten?

Combray's 'lampe de cristal' recalls not only the delicate glass of the 'lanterne magique', but Ruskin's *Seven Lamps of Architecture* (1849). We have already seen, behind the 'serviette', the

forgotten torment of Marcel's 'real' first night in Balbec, and the fear of death which was, in its turn, hidden there. Likewise, beneath the 'cour de Guermantes' we find the 'dalles inégales' of St Mark's. These are tomb-like in an earlier draft, since they 'évoque[nt] un mois de ma vie passée et splendide qui gisait inerte sous cette pierre' (IV, 805). Beneath *these* 'dalles', in turn, lies the (forgotten) crypt of Combray, which *in turn* has its own mythic 'lampe de cristal' buried still deeper beneath the surface. Art is a return to these nestled crypts of memory: 'l'art vivant [est] le retour aux profondeurs où ce qui a existé réellement gît inconnu de nous' (IV, 475).

Can one 'décrypter les associations' of such a text (Kristeva 1994: 270–71)? Or there is no end to the vertiginous circulation of correspondences and echoes? Through their evocation of the Combray Church, the 'petits fours' have thereby created one possible 'chaîne' of readerly references that lead, via the 'paon', to Balbec, and, via the 'tomb', to Ruskin and St Mark's. It is yet another example of how 'Ruskin's presence is still strongly felt in *Le Temps retrouvé*' (Aubert 2009: 25). To offer still another possible 'chaîne', '[a]u début du roman, *Les Mille et Une Nuits* n'est qu'un motif vulgaire sur les assiettes de la tante Léonie' (Bray 2022: 28). The 'petits fours' are served on these plates (I, 17–18; 70). The scenes depicted include: '*Aladin ou la Lampe Merveilleuse*, un autre *Ali-Baba*, le *Dormeur éveillé* ou *Sinbad le Marin*' (II, 257–58; I, 758). We find 'buried' here, beside another treasure-hunting 'Ali-Baba', three further images that seem now of great symbolic relevance: a 'Lampe Merveilleuse', a 'Dormeur éveillé', and 'Sinbad le Marin' (see also II, 220). The association of the 'petits fours' with *Les Mille et Une Nuits*, and with the 'assiettes peintes' on which they were painted, also suggests their relationship with the 'visual kitsch', as inheritance of Romanticism and mass production (pp. 106–08). Emma Bovary is fascinated by a similar set of 'assiettes peintes' (Yee 2024: 319–20). Are we seeing here a complexity similar to the 'double attitude taken by Flaubert toward kitsch' (Yee 2024: 330)? These plates are both examples of industrialised art, and reincorporated at the end of the novel as symbols for reverie, and for the *Recherche* itself (IV, 620). The circulation of *Les Mille et Une Nuits*, via the 'petits fours', draws a further continuity between Combray, Venice, and Balbec. In this manner, all of these apparently

discrete spaces — the ‘mille vases clos’ that would mark ‘toute une série de lieux chez Proust’ (Poulet 1963: 28–29) — are put in continuity with each other. But the possible interpretations, and references, feel endless. The reader is confronted with ‘l’édifice immense du souvenir’ (I, 46) of her *own* textual memories.

‘When we consider *Le Temps retrouvé*, we must read again, like the narrator, “en même temps qu’avec les yeux qu’avec la mémoire” (IV, 503)’ (Watt 2009b: 3). But could a reader really be expected to recall some or any of the possible connotations of ‘orangeade’, ‘petits fours’, ‘azur’, and ‘paon’? Ruskin supplies us with one possible answer (WJR VIII, 51–52). As we saw with the lengthy description of St Mark’s (p. 117), part of the beauty of a cathedral is not only its ‘imperfection’ (Aubert 2009: 35), but the attention given to details that are not visible to the naked eye of worshippers in the nave. This may sound as if the lay figure, the church-goer, is neglected for the ‘fact-hunter’. But Ruskin’s further suggestion is that the preponderance of these details nonetheless *have* an effect on the worshipper; that, even if they cannot all be examined, they produce a feeling of wonder and awe.

Or perhaps what we are really marvelling at is the sudden ‘expansion rhizomatique du corps romanescque’ (Simon 2016: 133), like ‘l’expansion de mon cœur’ in which ‘des espaces infinis’ opened themselves (II, 28). At the close of the novel, we can suddenly appreciate rhizomatic underground connections between different spaces and times. From the plates of Combray to late-night Venetian promenades, from Balbec to Ali Baba, the *Recherche* itself has become a Deleuzian ‘spider’, with a web whose strands wind on and on (see Bray 2012). The surfeit of key words in this third vision act like a series of strands on which the reader may pull, drawing themselves further and further back into the novel even as they attempt to wriggle out of it. Proust himself loved to find these sorts of buried connections in Ruskin, tracing down the various inflections of an image, or argument, across his vast œuvre in the footnotes for his translations.

C’est le charme précisément de l’œuvre de Ruskin qu’il y ait entre les idées d’un même livre, et entre des divers livres des liens qu’il ne montre pas, qu’il laisse à peine apparaître

un instant et qu'il a d'ailleurs peut-être tissés après-coup, mais jamais artificiels cependant puisqu'ils sont toujours tirés de la substance [...] de sa pensée (SL, 62).

The flashing for 'à peine [...] un instant' of these possible textual connections is reminiscent of the hero's experience of involuntary memories, which last only for an 'instant' (IV, 447) and the 'durée d'un éclair' (IV, 451). Perhaps, like Proust with Ruskin, the hero is performing a confused, and unfinished, act of criticism of his life *construed as text*.

The attempt to find an essence — a meaning, a purpose, a truth, or a vision — is both satirised, and presented as inevitable or necessary. One finds this even by tracing — in proper erudite and critical style — still further references to this word 'paon' in Proust's work. Proust, when writing as Ernest Renan in his pastiche of that critic, makes reference to a local song, which Compagnon and Vernet give us in the notes:

Marchand de plumes de paon
Zizi panpan
Qui veut des plumes de paon
Zizi panpan (E, 1524)

'Les mots de Zizi Panpan', writes Renan-Proust, 'ne présentent à l'esprit qu'un sens assez vague. C'était [...] peut-être même simplement une exclamation admirative, poussée à la vue de l'oiseau de Junon' (E, 445). Proust is making a mockery of critical erudition, which finds in the mention of a 'plume de paon', and a 'zizi', nothing but the shadow of classical references. Yet there is equally a suggestion that folk songs themselves, since they operate through a parade of inexplicable images and associations, are examples *par excellence* of literary texts that *defy* analysis. Thus, they may be taken as examples for the Modernist writer wishing to escape from the clutches of the critic, as they were in 'Lokashahitya' ('Folklore'), a 1907 essay by Rabindranath Tagore. For example, after quoting one Bengali folk song, Tagore writes:

Even the most sympathetic critic will have to admit absolutely no relationship between the respective thoughts in this rhyme. A series of pictures floats by, one after another (Sen and Tagore 1996: 4).

Proust was aware of Tagore, since he wrote to Gide admiring the latter's translation of Tagore's poems (Corr. XIII, 107; see Le Sage 1952: 60) and to Gaston Gallimard regarding the recent

publication of Tagore's *La Fugitive* (Tagore 1922; Corr. XXI, 331–32). It remains unlikely that Proust would have encountered Tagore's particular approach to folk songs. Still, critics have noticed Proust's surprising use of folk songs across the *Recherche* (Spitzer 1944; Rushworth 2024), including, of course, *O sole mio* at the height of the Venetian boredom (p. 162). Perhaps this third involuntary memory, and the *Recherche* itself, can be thought of as a Tagorean folk song, oscillating from one line to the other in a parade of images whose lack of relationship dispel the critical instincts, and theorisations, of the reader. Particularly with the details of our chosen sentence, we might agree that: 'La minutie interprétative du romancier finit par dissoudre la possibilité même de l'herméneutique' (Simon 2016: 37).

But this too is, of course, a theorisation of the text. Here is another. If part of the experience within Combray Church, or before the façade of St Mark's, lies in the impossibility of the entire work appearing before the eye in a single moment of presence, then this also may be true of our experience of the *Recherche*. References to 'azur', to 'mamelles bleuâtres', and to 'orangeade et petits fours', may evoke a haze of distant memories in the reader, amongst which she too must try to fix the correct reference from the possible various 'évolutions' (IV, 445). They did drink 'orangeade' somewhere before, didn't they? But where was it? At the Verdurin, or the Guermantes? 'Ce serait intéressant à « repérer »' (I, 550; p. 117), as Bergotte says! To seize on one explanation — just as, perhaps, the hero seizes on one moment evoked by these shimmering, heteroclitic 'visions' — is to shut out other, contradictory possibilities: it is to remember and misremember, just as the hero (mis)remembers the 'serviette'. As the narrator puts it elsewhere: 'Nous nous souvenions, nous allions au-devant, d'un paon et nous trouvons une pivoine' (II, 269). In fact, perhaps misremembering cannot be removed from the act of memory. The proof of a real memory, as opposed to the complete 'clichés' taken by the intelligence, is: 'cette infaillible proportion de lumière et d'ombre, de relief et d'omission, de souvenir et d'oubli que la mémoire ou l'observation conscientes ignoreront toujours' (IV, 458). Our relation to the text itself — and what it means to 'know the text as a whole' — is beginning to alter. The *Recherche* so far has

continually put stress on the difficulties of constructing a ‘theory’ out of literature. At its close, we find the suggestion that ‘knowing’ a text, or one’s past conceived as text, does not mean holding it in one full moment of presence. ‘Grands livres’ are later compared to buildings that ‘ne seront sans doute jamais finies, à cause de l’ampleur même du plan de l’architecte’ (IV, 610). But perhaps this very lack of completion is what helps to create the beauty of ‘de grandes cathédrales [qui] restent inachevées’ (IV, 610). Is this not true, equally, for the *Recherche*, that ‘œuvre achevée-inachevée’ (Blanchot 1959: 19)?

In one of the many extended reflections in the ensuing waves of thought, the narrator discusses how, if given the option, he would not re-read the books of his past, for fear that this reading would change his relation to them:

Si j’avais encore le *François le Champi* que maman sortit [...], je ne le regarderais jamais ; j’aurais trop peur d’y insérer peu à peu mes impressions d’aujourd’hui jusqu’à en recouvrir complètement celles d’autrefois, j’aurais trop peur de le voir devenir à ce point une chose du présent (IV, 466).

It is an alarming, and slightly comic, paradox. Even the practice of returning to our souvenirs — the moment of remembering — changes our relation to the memories that they symbolise or evoke, since ‘les choses sont poreuses à l’esprit et s’en imbibent’ (IV, 466). It is, in fact, another version of the problem of ‘theorisation’ that we have seen throughout. The act of fixing denatures that which it attempts to fix; the act of remembering alters the memory. If this is true of *François le Champi*, then it is equally true of the *Recherche*. As we try to recollect this work — led in that quest by the (un)trustworthy involuntary memories — what we fish up out of the depths is itself only another impression of the past: not, as it were, the ‘real’ thing. ‘On arrange aisément les récits du passé’ (IV, 563), writes the narrator; this might be true, equally, of our impressions of the text. Then again, if ‘les vrais paradis sont les paradis qu’on a perdus’ (IV, 449), it is perhaps this very unknowable *distance* that creates the aesthetic pleasure of ‘finishing’ a literary work (p. 115). When we put down a truly excellent novel, does not part of the pleasure come from knowing that we have finished it, and part of the pleasure come from knowing that we can and will open it again?

Since ‘il n’y a pas de fourreurs qui s’y connaissent aussi bien comme les mites’, for Françoise the proof that a piece of clothing is of the finest quality is that it has some holes in it (IV, 611).

Naïvety, Again

In the last few pages, we have developed a series of metaphors for the *Recherche*: Ruskinian cathedral, Deleuzian spider, Tagorean folk song. The text itself spits out further images of the novel ‘to come’ (whether or not that is this text itself) as ‘grimoire’ (IV, 457) or ‘robe’ (IV, 610). Each theorisation of the text’s ‘essence’ leads quickly to another (Bray 2012: 709), and we might conceivably go on endlessly. The novel encourages the reader to theorise it, but doing so may help only to emphasise the difficulties of theorisation, and the distance that emerges between the experience of the text and our attempt to grasp it as a whole. An ontological contradiction that we have found throughout the novel — that of continuity and discontinuity— is, in these pages, drawn explicitly into the open and *left unresolved*. ‘At the centre of Proust’s final volume [...] two opposing tendencies of the work are [...] restated in their most extreme terms and brought together in truceless conflict’ (Bowie 2002: 3). ‘Nowhere in *À la recherche* is the novel’s meta-discursivity richer or more provocative than in *Le Temps retrouvé*’ (Watt 2009b: 4); ‘entre une unité « dogmatique » [...] et une esthétique de la fragmentation qui ne cesse de la perturber’ (Simon 2016: 36). Perhaps ‘c’est par la continuité la plus dense et la plus substantielle que l’œuvre réussit à représenter ce qu’il y a de plus discontinu, l’intermittence des instants’ (Blanchot 1959: 33).

Are the epochs of the hero’s life, and the reader’s experience, ‘mille vases clos’, sealed and distinct from one another? Or do they flow and circulate, like the complex ‘pénétration mutuelle’ of notes in Bergson’s melody (p. 27)? Is the true nature of time really an ‘état extra-temporel’ (IV, 450)? Or are these supposedly ‘atemporal’ moments themselves time-bound, lasting only for ‘la durée d’un éclair’? At the close of the novel, the narrator draws our attention to ‘l’essence permanente [...] des choses’ as well as the temporal *mobility* of ‘essence’ itself. Certain characters, as they grow older, seem to ‘changer l’essence’ like trees in ‘l’automne’ (IV, 515). Meanwhile, the

hero's idealised capacity to love, 'l'amour de la femme', 'flottait comme ces essences [...] qui errent en suspens dans l'air printanier' (IV, 141). Through these references to the changing seasons, 'essence' — which the narrator describes as *removed from time* (IV, 450; 451; 454; 464; 468; 477) — is also presented as temporal. If 'le nom' is taken throughout the *Recherche* as a symbol of the (possibly fantastical) belief in the timeless 'essence' of a 'divinité', now 'le nom de Guermantes, considéré comme un ensemble de tous les noms qu'il admettait en lui [...] subissait des déperditions, recrutait des éléments' (IV, 548). In *Le Temps retrouvé*, then, 'essences' — whether they be those of a woman, or Guermantes — seem to be both fixed and mobile.

What really is the nature of the book we have just read? A series of 'fragments d'existence soustraits au temps' (IV, 454)? Or a 'univers mouvant, entraîné par le Temps' which any attempt to 'immobilise[r]' would ruin (IV, 452; see p. 22)? It is certainly 'wearying' to try and make sense of this text by sifting through our memories of it. The reader is put in the same place of Marcel when confronted with persons in the 'Bal des têtes' whom he does not immediately recognise; we, too, are trying to remember, and perhaps with a similar strain of embarrassment, figures such as 'Mme de Souvré' (IV, 552). If we have no idea who she is, does that mean we have already forgotten the *Recherche*? All the same, these reminiscences can be delightful, not only because they permit us to marvel at tiny correspondences buried in the text, but to chart our own meanings across the novel. When, during this final scene, Gilberte and Marcel discuss Robert's military strategies, Marcel recalls how he 'comparait devant moi les batailles à des pièces où il n'est pas toujours facile de savoir ce qu'a voulu l'auteur, où lui-même a changé son plan en cours de route' (IV, 559). On these occasions, the possibilities for the 'critiques' of such battles, or plays, are endless, 'chacun pouvant refaire une pièce à sa manière' (Ibid.). This is precisely the way in which, as we saw (pp. 142–43), critics themselves have come to interpret the *Recherche's* own discussions of military strategy, being able to draw out of them completely opposing, but plausible, interpretations.

Reading as struggle, and reading as pleasure, has indeed been taken as the moral or message of the close of the *Recherche*. ‘L’œuvre du temps est donc tour à tour mystérieuse et cohérente, lisible et indéchiffrable’ (Chaudier 2009: 108). ‘The novel does not present [its] knowledge in the form of a theory; rather it makes us suffer it, feel it, and experiment with it’ (Bal 1997: 239; see also Bray 2019: 111). But even here, the text is not quite clear enough (nor unclear enough) for the reader to be *sure* that this is the intention. In fact, to be sure of this would be to destroy that very goal, for the meaning of the text would then be fixed. Nor can we be sure, say, that the reward for the adventure of reading, such as we have charted it throughout the novel so far, is the (slightly twee) appreciation of such an adventure for its own sake. After all, the narrator also articulates a ‘theory’ of time in very explicit terms. So, has Marcel, at the very end, returned to the fragmentary and immobilising way of seeing we associated with Bergotte, Swann, and Elstir? Is he really a bad philosopher, the ‘pseudo-Marcel’ of Descombes (1987)? Or is his thought now capable of *embracing* the contradiction between atemporal essence and a ceaseless mobility via a ‘deconstructive’ vacillation and ‘deferral’ (Dutton 2023; p. 194)? Or does he recognise, *à la* Fülöp, the necessity for an imaginative recreation of the world? The *Recherche* remains *indeterminate* in its signification and, more than this, indeterminate *in this indeterminacy*. As with Brichot’s speeches, we cannot be sure if indeterminacy and internal contradictions of the ending are intentional, or simply bad writing or insufficient editing. We will not go so far as Duncan Large, who claims that ‘the conclusion of *À la recherche* hinges precisely on the *non*-coincidence of “narrator” and “hero”’ (2001: 45). We will say instead that it is the impossibility of *marking* the differences between ‘narrator’ and ‘hero’ which leaves the status of this ‘théorie de l’art’ (E, 1232), and its relation to the author’s own position, in question. In this sense, Proust’s premature death may be the act by which the indeterminacy of his text was consummated: we cannot say for sure if the *Recherche* is finished, unfinished, or unfinishable.

This does not mean that we should give up on interpreting it, however. Rather, the very attempt to theorise an essence creates an experience of the *Recherche* in its ungraspability. Like the

‘clochers’ of Martinville, or the trees of Hudimesnil, the artwork calls to the reader: ‘Saisis-moi au passage si tu en as la force’ (IV, 446). Like the ‘phrase de Vinteuil’, its signification ‘pass[e] si proche et pourtant à l’infini’ (I, 215). This experience of vertiginous, unknowable ‘distance’ (p. 65; 126) is a form of *poiesis*, in the sense of ‘Bringing-forth’ or ‘let[ting] what presences come forth into unconcealment’ (Heidegger 2011: 230; 227; see Wolfson 2019: 343). Compare it with the young Jean Santeuil’s experience of poetry:

Si la plus haute poésie n’était pas celle que remplissaient les grandes réalités en présence de qui il vivait, qui restaient à le regarder pendant ses promenades, pendant son travail, lui disant : regarde-nous, élucide-nous, pénètre-nous, la poésie n’était rien (JS, 110–11).

Poetry — and literature, or perhaps life itself — demands of us that we attempt to understand it, without ever guaranteeing that this struggle will have an intellectual reward. Nor can we say, however, that ‘the struggle is its own reward’, or that ‘it will never be rewarded’, for we might think of occasions where Marcel’s attempt to analyse his impressions reveals, for example, ‘tout Combray et ses environs’ (I, 47) — or else the miraculous moment, just before seeing La Berma, where a missing line of poetry, returned from the abyss of forgetfulness, is remade whole in his head (II, 338; see also p. 130). On such occasions, as Genette argues, the return is both a *discontinuous* moment — surging out of nowhere — and the revelation of an underlying continuity between the present and the past; equally it is both immobilising and mobile: ‘cet effet paradoxal de la réminiscence, qui est tout à la fois d’immobilisation et d’impulsion’ (1972: 62). *Pace* Dutton (p. 42), the arrival of complete meaning cannot, therefore, be theorised as a moment that for Proust will ‘always’ be deferred. The reader remains in a state of genuine anticipation as to whether it will arrive or not, and *this* is the poetic experience of ‘essence’ that, for me, lies at the heart of the *Recherche*. The novel’s final pages articulate many of the possible aspects of such a longing: its anxious instability, its comedy, its tedium, its gloriousness.

This balance is precarious. Too clear a theorisation of the ‘essence’ hidden in the text can, as we have already seen, rob us of the experience of the work and blind us to its possibilities. Yet *no* expectation of any essence results in boredom; the adventure of reading dissipates into the

'blanc', or the dullness that we saw in Venice (pp. 166–67). The experience of reading occurs when in anticipation of a 'unity' or 'essence' underlying the artwork, but without a clear conception of what this 'unity' or 'essence' is. What hides beneath the 'pavés inégaux' may still move: perhaps it is the Baptistery of St Mark's; perhaps the crypt of Combray; perhaps nothing.

Thus, even at the end of the novel, the 'essence' of the text still lies ahead: it is 'to come', though whether or not it will come we cannot be sure. Although the 'anticlimactic ending, makes us doubt the possibility of any aesthetic unity, even after we've reached the end' (Bray 2019: 96–97), still it cannot *banish* the aspiration or possibility of unity altogether. Near the end of *Being and Time*, Heidegger argues that it is the human being's projection of themselves towards a *future*, and in particular death, that allows for the constitution of our sense of the 'past' (2008: 373–78). At the close of the novel, the hero's (and reader's) 'past' likewise becomes their future: it is that which, through the adventures of writing or reading, they still have to discover, create, translate, and remember. The hero's involuntary memories lead us chasing chains of references, filigree strands that express the rare detailing of this enormous work. Yet the hyper-specificity of these slivers send us off into wild, general conjectures as to the novel's 'essence'. It is another example of the 'cercle philologique' in Proust (Spitzer 1970: 45), or Heidegger's 'hermeneutic circle' (2008: 194–95; p. 51). This movement allows us to articulate another way of reading the famous 'circularity' of the *Recherche*, and the vexed question of whether the novel we read is intended to be the novel imagined by the hero. If the remarks quoted above about *François le Champi* are correct, then in one sense it cannot be, because a text is constantly in flux. Each time we come to read the *Recherche*, since we bring to this reading our 'impressions d'aujourd'hui', we read a different novel. The text's differences from itself, on each reading, suggest to us these unmarkable and changing differences between the author and the 'je' that he writes, both 'moi' and 'non-moi' (p. 94). The uncertainty as to whether, once we have finished reading the *Recherche*, it should be read again as the substantiation of the hero's dream, or instead the story of a hero's journey towards an imagined

text (like the ‘récit’ of *Sainte-Beuve*), allows the work again to differ from, and to repeat itself. It ensures that any supposed ‘second reading’ of the novel will always *also* be a first (pp. 50–51).

Our attempts to understand the *Recherche* require us to theorise its ontology, and these theorisations occur to the narrator and reader in flashes, ‘changeant à chaque instant’, from ‘grimoire’ to ‘cathédrale’, ‘cathédrale’ to ‘robe’ (IV, 610). Each memory lights up the past like an ‘éclair’, yet underneath these breathless visions, or fantasies, we sense not only social anxieties, but existential ones: the thought of death is never far from these pages; perhaps also, in the constant grasping after new ideas, the threat of boredom and meaninglessness. By a third remarkable coincidence (p. 100; 155), Heidegger’s term for ontological disclosure recalls the ‘durée d’un éclair’: ‘Lichtung’ means both ‘lightning’ and ‘forest clearing’ in German (Glazier 2022: 323). Heidegger views the human being as one who discloses their world through theorising its ontology via lightning flashes, or opening clearings in a forest of the unknown: these are both projections either of a limited temporal or spatial duration (Heidegger 2011: 114–15). Any such theorisation cannot reveal the entirety of the world in which the human dwells: the epistemic ‘night’ (p. 73) remains dark; the forest, beyond the clearing, is impenetrable. Thus, the human being *reveals* the world through a process of theorisation that can never fully disclose it. *Aletheia*, or ‘truth’, relies upon a primary forgetting, or ‘Lethe’ (see E. Jones 2022; compare p. 62). ‘The essence of truth [...] subsists between clearing and concealing’; ‘Truth is the clearing and concealing of beings’ (Heidegger 2011: 115; 127). The projections of the magic lantern can be likened to this primordial Heideggerian sense of ‘ecstatic projection [Entwurf]’ as both *revelation and concealment* (Heidegger 2011: 164). Humans project, creating and disclosing their worlds, through language. But this very projection necessarily hides or excludes elements of what it projects upon. ‘Projective saying is poetry. [...] Projective saying is saying which, in preparing the sayable, simultaneously brings the unsayable as such into the world’ (Heidegger 2011: 129). The same may be true for the reader of the *Recherche*. The novel, at its close, continues to solicit theorisations of itself; we cannot help but to reflect on its essence, or lack of essence, through the hero’s lightning-like flashes of

ontological realisation. References and characters suddenly emerge from the dark bowels of the text. Still, rather than leading to a complete theory of the novel, this experience may reveal to us only how much of the novel, even now as we are 'finishing' it, remains in the darkness beyond our searching gaze, forgotten, or undisclosed. The text is experienced, therefore, both as past and as future for the reader; her task, like that of the hero and narrator, remains one of *poiesis*.

Conclusion: ‘Une sorte d’éternité’

Bonheur de Proust : d’une lecture à l’autre, on ne saute jamais les mêmes passages.
— Roland Barthes, *Le plaisir du texte*

We have now reached the end of one journey through the *Recherche*. Beginning with the opening pages, we have seen how the text intrigues its reader, and solicits a ‘naïve’ interpretative desire through articulating a plurality of theorisations of both itself and texts in general. In the final chapter, we failed to establish a fixed theory for the ‘essence’ of the novel. Rather, we claimed that the very indeterminacy, or ‘mobility’, of essence underlies the poetic experience in Proust, both for reader and hero. Further, and quite paradoxically, it is the possibility that the text may express itself in ‘atemporal’, immobile, and ecstatic instants that keeps Proust ‘on the move’ by *preventing* the figure of mobility itself from becoming essentialised. Through their very confusion, the closing pages reconstitute the text as a past experience that lies *ahead*, and it is through this futural projection that the reader and hero may glimpse the vast landscape of the past for ‘la durée d’un éclair’ (IV, 451). The *Recherche*, figure of the eternal book, closes with the invitation to open it again. We, in our turn, have come back to precisely the same place as the reader who has just finished her first reading of the *Recherche*, as we sketched her in the introduction (p. 23).

Is there anything, therefore, that we have learned? We have demonstrated, both theoretically and with practical examples, that a ‘fragmentary’ reading relies upon a limiting theorisation of the artwork. Both the ‘fragmentary’ and the ‘holistic’ reader of Proust (whenever she has a fixed theorisation of textual essence) will inevitably encounter contradictory elements of the text. All the same, in the last chapter, I argued that a ‘theorisation’ of some sort — *qua* primordial Heideggerian ‘projection’ — was necessary for the very possibility of textual disclosure. By this, I mean that we have to have *some* theorisation (however mobile, vague, or contradictory) for the text even to reveal to us how it does not fit those assumptions.

For Heidegger, language reveals the world while concealing it; truth is ‘aletheia’, based upon a prior and unrecoverable ‘Lethe’, or forgetting (Heidegger 2011: 228; Campbell 2017: 73).

Both truth and language work through the process of metaphor (Bruzina 1973). In this, Heidegger recalls Nietzsche: ‘What, then, is truth? A mobile army of metaphors’ (Nietzsche 1982: 46–47). He also influences Derrida, who claims (albeit with characteristic complexity, as we shall see) that any disclosure of the world is metaphorical: ‘il n’est rien qui ne se passe avec la métaphore et par métaphore’ (Derrida 1987: 65). Likewise, for Paul Ricœur in *La Métaphore vive* (1975), not only is poetic language metaphorical, but the development of new metaphors for the world is a process *both* of discovery and creation (Gerhart 1976: 25). This recalls how the hero both ‘cherche’ and ‘crée’ his own past (I, 45) via the ‘métaphore’ of involuntary memories (Genette 1972: 55; see also Ellison 1984: 5–10). In Proust, the ‘double’ or confused ontology of the text (p. 90) is reflected via metaphor: ‘La métaphore [chez Proust] exemplifie une connaissance de la réalité dans laquelle dimensions subjective et objective, valeurs heuristique et créative sont étroitement entrelacées’ (Contini 2024: 51).

To return to Heidegger’s account, a name itself is *a metaphor*: ‘he [Heidegger] sees metaphor as embedded in and complicit with the sign relation’ (Meservy 2014: 4). The primordial act of naming (we might imagine that of Adam in the Garden) fixes onto an unknown entity a name, and an essence. However, this essence, by both suiting it and failing to suit it, reveals and conceals said entity, necessarily limiting which aspects of it disclose themselves:

Language, by naming beings for the first time, first brings beings to word and to appearance. Only this naming nominates beings *to* their Being *from out of* their Being. Such saying is a projecting of clearing [Lichtung], in which announcement is made of what it is that beings come into the open *as* (Heidegger 2011: 128).

Language is, therefore, like an ‘enveloppe’ (p. 102) — or like the clothes of Saint-Loup or Odette, which both reveal and conceal their persons (Genette 1966: 154).

The importance of metaphor in the *Recherche* has long been noted, with Roger Shattuck going so far as to argue that: ‘The action which dominates all of *À la recherche*, then, is the action of metaphor’ (1964: 126). Metaphor is said to disclose ‘essence’ at the end of the *Recherche* (compare I, 862):

La vérité ne commencera qu'au moment où l'écrivain prendra deux objets différents, [...] et [...] dégagera leur essence commune en les réunissant l'une et l'autre pour les soustraire aux contingences du temps, dans une métaphore (IV, 468).

We might compare this with Proust's description of the task of a 'nouvel écrivain' (E, 1216; p. 195). Here, as in Proust's letters and earlier notes (Corr. VII, 167; Contini 2024: 48), the notion seems to be that, while a metaphor unites 'deux objets différents' by finding 'leur essence commune', their distinct identities — their differences — are not entirely effaced by such a process (compare Genette 1972: 60–61; Kristeva 1994: 264–65). If they were effaced, we would risk no longer being able even to perceive the disclosure *as* a metaphor. So, for example, with Elstir's paintings:

Une de ses métaphores les plus fréquentes dans les marines qu'il avait près de lui en ce moment était justement celle qui comparant la terre à la mer, supprimait entre elles toute démarcation (II, 192).

While Elstir shows what is 'seaish' about the land, and 'landish' about the sea, the difference between sea and land themselves has to be maintained in order for such a comparison (and its disclosive capacity) to function. Revealing what two elements have in common via metaphor may also reveal in what ways their natures are distinct. This difference may lead to an appreciation of 'Being', as that which allows for the disclosure of 'beings', or entities (compare p. 41): 'la métaphore proustienne qui conjoint des apparences révèle de fait la profondeur de l'Être' (Kristeva 1994: 271). In fact, Elstir's work is compared to an Edenic act of naming, again perceived as a kind of metaphor.

Le charme de chacune [de ses toiles] consistait en une sorte de métamorphose des choses représentées, analogue à celle qu'en poésie on nomme métaphore et que si Dieu le Père avait créé les choses en les nommant, c'est en leur ôtant leur nom, ou en leur en donnant un autre qu'Elstir les recréait (II, 191).

The creative process reveals how the original 'names' (like those of 'l'âge des noms') are not fixed; further, it implies that this process is unfixable. Bergotte's 'métaphore[s]' are also highly valued by the hero (I, 94). But it is not as if they can or will be the 'final word'; in fact, these visions may in turn become tired, neglected, or replaced — as indeed may have happened with Elstir and Bergotte

by the end of the *Recherche* (pp. 150–51). In the ‘Préface de « *Tendres Stocks* », Proust writes that: ‘l’univers périssable et nouveau que crée l’artiste [...] durera jusqu’à ce qu’un nouveau survienne’ (E, 1216–17). Alternatively, if the metaphor is successful, it will stop being taken *as metaphor*; it will become the ‘earth’ or ‘soil’ upon which later artists will ‘faire [...] leur « déjeuner sur l’herbe »’ (IV, 615), taking the contingencies of their historical situation for a natural growth. In the *Recherche*, language itself is said to contain a suite of earlier metaphors whose metaphorical character has been forgotten (I, 40). In this the narrator recalls Nietzsche, who wrote that so-called ‘truths’ are really ‘metaphors which are worn out and without sensuous power’ (1982: 47; see de Man 1979: 103–18). In an early draft, the hero grasps a similar truth about truth when the Duc de Guermantes evokes the history of the noble names that are still ‘worn’ by their contemporaries.

Les noms tels qu’ils étaient fixés aujourd’hui n’étaient que la combinaison, ayant enfin trouvé un état stable, de parties interchangeables et vagabondes qui avaient eu jadis une existence séparée, comme ces radicaux distincts, ces métaphores aujourd’hui effacées qui sont maintenant indissolubles, confondues, difficiles à apercevoir sinon en soumettant le corps composé à l’analyse, dans la plupart des mots que nous employons.

Des noms qui forment aujourd’hui un tout indivisible comme Luynes, duc de Chevreuse, comme Rohan-Chabot vécurent autrefois séparés (II, 1270).

What appears to be — or perhaps is — ‘fixés aujourd’hui’ in a ‘tout indivisible’ is, from another perspective, a mobile series of fragments, in the process of forming and deforming themselves. The narrator comes to see ‘le nom de Guermantes’ itself in this way after the epiphanies (IV, 548; pp. 204–05).

Perhaps, then, each successive critical theorisation of the *Recherche* is a metaphor, each capturing different elements of the text, binding them within a particular atemporal ‘tout’ or ‘essence’, but necessarily limited, and liable, in its turn, to become ‘effacé’ and replaced. When the hero looks back on his own memories, their characters are ‘comme ces rares personnages, à peine distincts pour l’œil obligé de s’adapter au vague mystérieux des pénombres, qui émergent d’une fresque effacée’ (II, 642). The reader, likewise, peers into her own, blurred memories of the text, and begins to distinguish within them some forms — an eye here, a leg there — until she might feel, for ‘la durée d’un éclair’, the sense and meaning of the *whole*. Then this blinding metaphor,

and the certainty it brings, begins to fade, be forgotten, or evaporate on further contact with the text. ‘L’expérience de l’extra-temporalité [est] donc insérée dans le mouvement même du temps’ (Simon 2009: 262). This temporal atemporality is a paradoxical solution to the problem that haunts the more straightforward assertion that the *Recherche* is endlessly semantically mobile. As we have seen throughout this thesis, if the text is theorised as containing an endless variety of meanings, then it has already been immobilised and essentialised. If, however, this mobility is itself arrestable, continuous and discontinuous, essential and contingent, then the advent (however timeless or temporary) of a complete meaning can still occur, and may still lie tantalisingly ahead of us. The ability to project this possible ‘future’ is what allows us to experience the variety and heterogeneity of the past text.

In the article on Flaubert which we have cited so often in this thesis, Proust famously writes that: ‘je crois que la métaphore seule peut donner une sorte d’éternité au style’ (E, 1220; see Genette 1966: 43). Then, slightly less famously, he rows back a little on the claim: ‘Mais enfin la métaphore n’est pas tout le style’ (E, 1221). Why is metaphor only a ‘kind of’ eternity? And why the subsequent hedging?

In the *Recherche*, we might say that the involuntary memories create a ‘sort of eternity’ insofar as their ‘atemporal’ vision is itself timebound. Likewise, if we say that metaphor lies at the heart of *poiesis*, then this too would only be a sort of *metaphor* — liable, in its time, to fade. As Derrida writes: ‘Tout énoncé au sujet de quoi que ce soit qui se passe, y compris la métaphore, se sera produit *non sans* métaphore’ (1987: 65). Thus if, in Proust, metaphor ‘dépassé les apparences pour accéder à l’« essence » des choses’ (Genette 1966: 39), such an ‘essence’, like the ‘nom de Guermentes’, must be mobile and immobile, unified and fragmentary.

This in-built provisionality is one of two ways in which this thesis tries to avoid the obvious, and significant, criticism that one could make of it: that it simply produces *another* theorisation of the text. When we look back, in this conclusion, on the study as a whole, one might say that a ‘hermeneutics of naïvety’ is itself a critical approach, despite its claims not to be one.

Seen with hindsight, the chapters express similar patterns of analysis, so that we are reminded of Eagleton's suggestion that the critic's 'refusal of method' must tacitly always rely upon a method, since 'what glimmers and hunches you have will depend on a latent structure of assumptions' (1983: 198; p. 96). We could argue that each of the chapters of this thesis (except perhaps the last) have followed the same basic method: (i) isolate a passage from the novel; (ii) contrast opposing critical readings to show off its indeterminacy; (iii) claim that this critically produced indeterminacy is somehow closer to the 'naïve reader's experience' of the text. So: Chapter 1 contrasted 'mobile' readings with 'essentialist' readings of the opening pages, and found that their signification was indeterminate; Chapter 2 contrasted a Bergsonian reading with a Poulet-influenced 'fragmentary' reading of Marcel's visits to La Berma, and found that their meaning, too, was indeterminate; Chapter 3 contrasted Compagnon's and Prendergast's readings of Brichot's speeches to find that no single signification could be reliably imputed to those pages: indeterminacy, yet again. The itinerary resembles our sketch of the 'exasperating' structure of *Bouvard et Pécuchet* (Culler 1974: 180; pp. 153–54); critical interpretations have been set against one another in order to reveal, not a new interpretation, nor a synthesis, but an increasingly predictable defeat. Has this analysis not itself become, therefore, repetitious, and in *precisely* the way associated with deconstructive approaches (p. 48)? This repetition has been tacitly evoked by stylistic quirks throughout the thesis. Each chapter began with a quotation (of varying relevance) from one of Proust's critical forebears; each included a different image, which may now be taken as a different *theorisation* of the text.



Figures 1–4.

Here, we see four more possible metaphors for the novel: *Recherche* as mandala; *Recherche* as vulgarised and mechanised Romanticism; *Recherche* as figurative mosaic; and *Recherche* as wellspring of ‘eternal life’, as suggested by the play of the two hand-carved peacocks, which reflect and differ from themselves.

Despite this cosmetic variety, each chapter, while claiming to be a new step on a journey through the *Recherche*, has effectively been a repetition of the same basic theorisation: indeterminacy as *poiesis*. Meanwhile, the thesis has paraded the ‘experience’ of a ‘naïve reader’ — which feminism, or rhetorical guile, has induced me to call a ‘she’ — as if it were the sole criterion for interpretative success. However, if it is the ‘impression’ of the amateur that is what ultimately disproves, or verifies, the analysis of the critic, then Chapter 1 explained why such a methodology itself limits possible readings, and relies upon a restrictive theorisation. Besides, beyond the confusions of Humblot and Madeleine (pp. 54–55), what evidence is there that the naïve reader really does react to the novel in the way described? *Is* she intrigued by the interpretative ambiguities of I, 3–9? Do

Brichot's rants really tempt her to skip a few pages? Who is this 'naïve reader'? Pierre Bourdieu would have a particularly damning answer to that question:

Qu'on le baptise « lecteur implicite » avec la théorie de la réception (et Wolfgang Iser), « archilecteur » avec Michael Riffaterre, ou « lecteur informé » avec Stanley Fish, le lecteur dont parle réellement l'analyse [...] n'est autre que le théoricien lui-même qui, suivant en cela une inclination très commune chez le *lector*, prend pour objet sa propre expérience [...] de lecteur cultivé (1998: 491).

The 'naïve reader' could be unmasked merely as Bourdieu's *lector*: the supposedly atemporal 'reader' who really reflects class-situated assumptions, and upholds a critically suspect theorisation of the 'Literature' as an autonomous experience, transcendently removed from any scientific or historical analysis. If the 'naïve reader' is merely a cipher for this author's particular reactions to the text, then my arguments against Compagnon, Prendergast, Poulet *et al.* have been based only on the rather tenuous evidence that they disagree (or only partly agree) with how I feel about the *Recherche*. The analysis of Proust has really been an 'auto-analyse', as Bray claims it must be (2022: 11; 155; see also Bray 2019: 95). If *that* is so then, a little worryingly, the most glaring defects and 'vices' of its critical perspective will no doubt be visible only to others, following a principle articulated in the *Recherche* (p. 149). If the 'naïve reader' merely is a kind of *lector* (should such a theorised creature really exist) then not only is the overall argument of this thesis unconvincing, but it is explicitly contradicted by the argument of Chapter 1.

However, alongside the inherent provisionality of its conclusions (p. 215; 97), it is this very tension that may allow this thesis to avoid the critique that it merely presents another theorisation. As we observed with *Contre Sainte-Beuve*, a critique must always 'fix' what it is critiquing, and yet Sainte-Beuve's own contradictions make his work resistant to any global formulation of its theorisation or method (pp. 85–86). If, at moments, the thesis has developed an analysis of a passage relative to its 'impression' on a supposed 'naïve reader', *at other moments* the analysis has clearly relied upon academic research. For example: Chapter 1 defended the 'naïve' reading of the opening passage by critically situating *Contre Sainte-Beuve* in its intellectual context; Chapter 2 defined similarities and differences between the opening volumes and Bergsonism; Chapter 3

described the experience of boredom in the *Recherche* relative to Heideggerian phenomenology. The thesis has responded to long-running debates on the ‘cloison’ in Proust, and the Proust-Ruskin relationship; it has also intervened in the more positive reappraisal of Bergson’s influence on Proust, arguing against certain elements of that growing critical trend (pp. 29; 65–66). If the comparisons with Heidegger may at times have been opportunistic, perhaps they open the door towards what has (rather surprisingly) not yet taken place: a comparative study of both thinkers. The deliberate placement of Derrida in conversation with Bergson in the introduction is in tune with recent scholarly approaches (Douglass 2013: 183; Guerlac 2013: 8–10; Alipaz 2011: 96), though the question of the proximity between ‘durée’ and Derridean ‘écriture’ — of whether ‘écriture’ operates within a kind of ‘durée’, or a discontinuous time, or whether the whole question is inappropriate — has, while operating at the back of many analyses, not yet been explicitly broached. This would be another fruitful research direction.

The guiding tension is this one: while the ‘naïve reader’ — *qua* ‘lector’, Paterian impressionist, or ‘amateur’ — has been sometimes mobilised to dispute with, or disprove, the ‘proustiens professionnels’ (Bray 2022: 46), on other occasions this thesis has employed the methods of critical analysis in order to defend and define the naïve reader’s experience. The thesis, then, has both depended upon a ‘naïve reader’ and quite possibly undermined her, without acknowledging this critical difference from itself. If the introduction took as its motto ‘le jaillissement au-delà de la citation’, the subsequent chapters placed both the ‘citation’ of critical analysis, and the ‘jaillissement’ of the reader, in a confused, mutually-supportive and mutually-combative relationship, similar to the one we have found between ‘mobility’ and ‘essence’. In Chapter 4, this conceit of the ‘naïve reader’ was stretched to its limits when we argued that she might be able to follow one of any number of textual allusions back through the *Recherche*, navigating not only through authorised text, but previous draft versions as well. The suggestion that, even if a ‘naïve reader’ would not notice all of these details, their presence would still somehow be able to evoke wonder and awe in her, verged, perhaps, upon a mystical level of

‘hermeneutic narcissism’ (see Bourdieu 1998: 493–94). One might easily say that here the university critic has researched certain minute textual correspondences — and then foisted them, by hook or by crook, onto the ‘experience’ of the reader. Then again, this tension only exists if the ‘naïve’ reader is taken to be a variant of Bourdieu’s *lector*. If the rhetoric of the introduction certainly associated her with ‘everyday’ and ‘amateur’ readers, then still, strictly speaking, all that one requires to be a ‘naïve reader’ is the desire to search for an essence in the *Recherche*, without a fixed definition of that essence. Thus ‘naïvety’ might extend to theoretical critics as well. To argue in this way, however, would be to lose much of the rhetorical force and motivation for plotting a new journey through the text.

These reflections have therefore led us to a still deeper conceptual strain. If the indeterminacy of essence underwrites the poetic experience in Proust, then this is in tension with the attempt to plot an ‘affective arc’ through the novel (Dutton 2023: 15). If the novel is constantly indeterminate, and indeterminate even in that indeterminacy, then how could any such ‘arc’ be plotted? One example of this deeper tension, as we find it expressed in the thesis, lies in Chapter 3. This chapter presented ‘boredom’ as a possible solution to the hero’s problem of ‘theorisation’; his state of boredom prevents him from expecting such artworks and persons to have fixed essences, and it is this *expectation* that prevented him from understanding and appreciating them. However, although this problem was sketched across Chapter 2, that chapter concluded by revealing how this reading was itself limited and limiting. The ‘Bergsonian’ reading was allegedly introduced only to illustrate the limitations of a ‘fragmentary’ reading, and thus to reveal the text’s indeterminacy between ‘mobility’ and ‘essence’ (pp. 129–31). Thus the hero’s problem with theorisation is never certainly, or definitely, an ‘actual’ problem in the text; instead, it may be ‘virtual’ in the Deleuzian sense (see Khandker 2014; Bray 2022: 165). As a result, this ‘naïve’ reading of the meaning of boredom in the *Recherche* was itself tacitly dependent upon a prior Bergsonian theorisation. Or, rather, we had constantly to say that the ‘naïve’ response to the experience of boredom was one of confusion, and that the figure of boredom ‘circulated’ between several

possible meanings in the text. For the same reason, this quest through the *Recherche* has itself consistently been framed, and with some slight awkwardness, only as ‘one possible’ journey that the naïve reader could make. This thesis has required a constant and confused shuttling between subjective ‘impression’ and ‘objective’ analysis, such as we argued lies in many critical responses to the ‘double’ and confused ontology of the text (p. 90). The thesis repeats, in that sense, the ‘impossibility’ that *Proust et les signes* expresses (p. 40). It is to be distinguished from deconstructive analysis perhaps only by a demand for an essence which, in the ‘final’ analysis, may have been a rhetorical gesture. The ambiguous distances between the author (using the critic’s scientific, or pseudo-scientific toolkit) and ‘naïve reader’ (both authorial stand-in and fictional supposition) recreate the differences observed between Proust and his narrator.

These tensions effectively prevent one from finding within this thesis any clear theorisation of the literary text or any consistent method. This feature has the characteristic of a Derridean ‘supplément’ (p. 99): both positive and negative. In fact, any reading of the thesis which found a unified method, or theorisation, within it, would require the exclusion or suppression of certain textual features. It would be a ‘passage d’un désordre à un ordre’ (Rousset 1962: iii) that would require the cleaning up of certain inconvenient details. The closing argument regarding indeterminacy as poetic experience must itself be provisional or indeterminate, just as the understanding of language as metaphor is itself a metaphor: only ‘une sorte d’éternité’, a mobility immobilised for ‘la durée d’un éclair’.

To draw these closing comparisons between this thesis and the *Recherche* is not intended as some absurd form of self-aggrandisement, but rather a means of noticing how the challenges of reading the *Recherche*, such as we have articulated them, can be found in all manner of texts: in our attempts to understand ourselves, other artworks, friends, lovers, and even passing examples of ‘la critique universitaire’ (Barthes 1963: 447). Barbara Johnson tells us that: ‘the difference between literature and criticism consists perhaps only in the fact that criticism is more likely to be blind to the way in which its own critical difference from itself makes it, in the final analysis, literary’ (1978:

9). Perhaps (and it must only be 'perhaps') the failure of this thesis to come together, or to cohere around a single argument, method, purpose, or idea, can be taken as an essential failure.

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