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The Observer in the Picture: Surface and Depth in a Passage from Proust



Noam Scheindlin

In the orthodox version of externally-narrated fiction, the questions, “who speaks,” “who writes,” and “who sees,” when directed toward the narrator or narrating agency, are non-productive ones from the perspective of the world that is narrated. To ask these questions would require moving from the world of the story and into the world of the author; or, at the very least, one would be required to make use of a critical construct such as that of the “implied author,” in order to transgress—albeit in fiction—the fictional frame.¹ The purely external narrator speaks or writes from a perspective that is disengaged from any responsibility as an actor in the world, in order to become pure observer. The inability to assign a perspective to such a narrator while remaining solely within the frame of the work proper has long served as an index of the fictional.

In the case of internally-narrated fiction, and particularly when the narrator is also the hero of the narrative (Gérard Genette’s “autodiegetic” narrative),² the issue becomes more complicated, because here

¹See Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, 71ff. Part of the function of the implied author, is, as Booth argues, to reveal the ideology of the author through an often ironic contrast with that of the narrative voice. Others, such as Bal, use this as evidence against the possibility of such a notion (Bal, “The Laughing Mice”).

²The term “homodiegetic” seems to have more currency than the species of homodiegetic narrator that Genette terms the “autodiegetic”: “Il faudra . . . distinguer à l’intérieur du type homodiégétique, deux variétés: l’une où le narrateur est le héros de son récit . . . et l’autre où il ne joue qu’un rôle secondaire, qui se trouve être, pour ainsi dire

the narrator's allegiances are split between that of actor and observer. But because of the incompatibility of these two roles (and in particular because the act of writing can never coincide with the content of what is written), the narrator *qua* narrator cannot simply inhabit the role of actor while engaging, at the same time, in the act of narrating.³

This becomes a problematic for modernity in its concern with, as Jonathan Crary describes it, "remaking the individual as observer into something calculable and regularizable and . . . human vision into something measurable and thus exchangeable" (17). We see in the modern novel the tendency, in narration, to emphasize the experience of the narrator—and to account for his or her presence. This is very different from, for example, the "chatty" external narrators of the English novels of the eighteenth century, whose authorial intrusions generally serve the function of asserting the narrator's presence, but who do so without attempting to establish a narrative plane that houses both authors and character, or in the epistolary novels of the same period, where the lack of space between narrator and character conceal the contours of the issue.

That the problematic relation between the observing self who narrates and the experiencing self who is narrated is an issue for Proust from very early on can be seen in an excerpt from a letter that he writes at age sixteen to his philosophy teacher Alphonse Darlu at the Lycée Condorcet:

Quand je lis par exemple un poème de Leconte de Lisle, tandis que j'y goûte les voluptés infinies d'autrefois, l'autre *moi* me considère, s'amuse à considérer les causes de mon plaisir, les voit dans un certain rapport entre moi et l'œuvre, par là détruit la certitude de la beauté *propre* de l'œuvre,

toujours, un rôle d'observateur et de témoin. . . . Nous réserverons pour la première variété (qui représente en quelque sorte le degré fort de l'homodiégétique) le terme, qui s'impose, *d'autodiégétique*" "[We] will have to differentiate within the homodiegetic type at least two varieties: one where the narrator is the hero of his narrative . . . and one where he plays only a secondary role, which almost always turns out to be a role of observer and witness . . . For the first variety (which to some extent represents the strong degree of the homodiegetic) we will reserve the unavoidable term *autodiegetic*" (*Figures III*, 253; *Narrative Discourse* 245).

³It is this that Fielding, for example, saw as untenable in Richardson's attempt to both represent the rhythms of lived experience and at the same time account for the production of the representation. Fielding's Shamela writes, "Odsbobs! I hear him just coming in at the Door. You see I write in the present Tense . . . Well, he is in Bed between us . . ." (18). *Les Liaisons dangereuse*, as a counterexample, seems to use the epistolary form without approaching this impasse of temporalities because its scheming characters are more concerned with their future than with the present.

surtout imagine immédiatement des conditions de beauté opposées, tue enfin presque tout mon plaisir. (qtd. in Tadié, 108)⁴

The kind of immersion that Proust describes before his other self intrudes has long been understood as an essential component of the aesthetic experience. Michael Fried, for example, in his analysis of eighteenth-century French painting, describes it as “the supreme fiction of the observer’s nonexistence” (108). If absorption in one’s life is to be represented in painting, Fried argues, there can be no connection between the realm of the beholder and that of the painted subject, because the very possibility of absorption is founded in the notion that there is no one watching; the subject is simply “there.” Indeed, we might say that fiction is born here, as a register that is heterogeneous to that of the “real” observer. On the contrary, in Proust’s letter, the “autre moi” who observes disrupts the reader’s immersion in the work in order to establish a connection between the actual reader and the work he reads. This effectively does away with the aesthetic illusion that there is no observer. For the young Proust, steeped in a paradigm of fiction that he is about to overturn, this kills his pleasure.

This emphasis on the observer at the expense of readerly pleasure will become in many ways the foundation of the Proustian aesthetic: the narrator of *À la recherche du temps perdu* is a “reader” of his own life experience, one who must ultimately alienate himself from this experience in order to disrupt the immersion in it, so that it can be narrated. For Proust, this is by no means an aesthetic of anti-enjoyment, but on the contrary, a bid to register this enjoyment on the side of the observer, rather than maintaining it on the level of the disembodied experience of reading. Part of this process involves, then, an alienating of oneself from one’s own enjoyment as an absorbed reader, in order to inscribe it back onto the plane of the observer.

In the first paragraph of the novel, the narrator describes having fallen asleep while reading, and then waking to find that his reflections upon his book “avaient pris un tour un peu particulier; il me semblait que j’étais moi-même ce dont parlait l’ouvrage” (1:3).⁵ This

⁴“When I read a poem by Leconte de Lisle, for instance, all the time that I am enjoying the infinite sensual delights as I did in the past, the other *I* is watching me, enjoying observing the causes of my pleasure, seeing a certain connection in them between myself and the work, and thus destroying the certainty of the work’s *own* beauty, above all it immediately starts imagining different prerequisites for beauty, and finally kills virtually all of my enjoyment” (Tadié, *Marcel Proust: A Life*, 80).

⁵“It seemed to me that I myself was the immediate subject of my book” (1:1).

has the effect of putting the reader and the work on the same plane. But in doing so, the work itself as an objective entity becomes lost. We might think of this as a kind of *mode d'emploi* for reading the novel as a whole. The absorption must be disrupted, and the particular enjoyment of entering into a world that one did not create must be “killed” precisely because there is no one to see it, no one, without an observer, to register—and thus *narrate*—this enjoyment. There is a shifting of allegiances, then, between on the one hand, the reader/narrator who fills the narrative foreground at the expense of the character absorbed in his world, and on the other, the character, so absorbed in experience as to preclude its registration on the plane of consciousness. It is the tension between these two poles, we might say, that propels the narrative forward.

In the novel, one of the main vehicles for portraying absorption is through the institution of habit. Habit, in the logic of *À la recherche du temps perdu*, is an immersion *in* the world that precludes the ability to see the world. For the one who is immersed in habit there is no one to see, no one to narrate. To articulate the habitual world requires that one exile oneself from it: when one can, habit becomes “un prosaïsme qui sert de grand réservoir de poésie à celui qui les traverse sans y avoir vécu” (1:49).⁶ Yet this paradox is confounded by the fact that the very act of alienating oneself from the habitual realm likewise produces a perspective which must then be accounted for, and which falls prey to habitual immersion again: one can exile oneself from a particular set of circumstances in one’s life, but one cannot extricate oneself from the habit of being a self. The immersion reasserts itself, then, in the consciousness of the one who would narrate this habitual being, which would then require an additional level of alienation to see *it*, creating what would amount to an infinite regress if there were nothing to stop this procreation of perspectives. Proust’s novel is rigorous in its requirement that the position which the narrator assumes in order to achieve a perspective upon the habitual world is likewise subject to the same blindness that being immersed in it effects: this perspective must likewise be accounted for in the novel’s world. The narrator of *À la recherche*, then, is condemned to describe the world only from within the world: there is no perspective that the narrator as narrator can transcend in order to see. The question which serves as

⁶“A prosaicness which serves as a deep reservoir of poetry to the stranger who passes through their midst without having lived among them” (1:67).

the source for the novel then, is that of how to portray both observer and absorbed on the same narrative plane.

For the Proustian narrator, habit inserts itself between perception and experience. Confronted with the unknown or unthought, the force of habit lies in its ability to, in a certain sense, “fix” time. It does so by incorporating the unfamiliar back into the fold of familiarity through the appeal to an already established conceptual lexicon, one founded in past experience. It is in this way that this habitual vision saves itself from the confrontation with the present moment. That habit can be transgressed, however, is, we could say, the very “thesis” of the novel. The narrative gains its force through the privileged moments when the unfamiliar can be “caught” before it is subsumed again into the lethargy of habit, that is, before perception can be made to fit a conceptual mold. The narrator describes in *À l'ombre de jeunes filles en fleurs*, for example, hearing from within his room a dispute, almost a riot, outside. But as soon as he is able to conceptualize the sound, he eliminates “ces vociférations aiguës et discordantes que mon oreille avait réellement entendues — mais que mon intelligence savait que des roues ne produisaient pas» (2:399).⁷ The sounds that he initially hears without a corresponding visual concept, then, become lost signifiers that fade when they cannot be attached to anything. “Les noms qui désignent les choses,” the narrator concludes, “répondent toujours à une notion de l’intelligence, étrangère à nos impressions véritables et qui nous force à éliminer d’elles tout ce qui ne se rapporte pas à cette notion” (2:399).⁸

In the novel, there is one way of recuperating these lost signifiers, of “fixing” them, in turn, so that they do not fade back into unconsciousness, when habit, with its standardized view of the world, takes over: the aesthetic experience. Here, perception, cut off from its reference in the world, is freed to be experienced as such, and can bring about one of those “rares moments où l’on voit la nature telle qu’elle est,” (2:400)⁹ that is, when perception is not occulted by the conceptual intelligence, which is always one step behind the act of perception. It is in these terms that the narrator frames the long ekphrastic description of the painter Elstir’s view of the harbor of

⁷“The shrill and discordant vociferations which my ear had really heard but which my reason knew that wheels did not produce” (2:566).

⁸“The names which designate things correspond invariably to an intellectual notion, alien to our true impressions, and compelling us to eliminate from them everything that is not in keeping with that notion” (2:566).

⁹“The rare moments when we see nature as she is” (2:566).

Carquethuit. In a visual simile, the painting “avait préparé l’esprit du spectateur en n’employant pour la petite ville que des termes marins, et que des termes urbains pour la mer» (2:400).¹⁰ Here, in the transposition of the sea and the village, the two constituents are loosed from their referents in the world such that it is the perception of them, then, that is prioritized.

Gilles Deleuze writes,

Proust parle souvent de la nécessité qui pèse sur lui : que, toujours, quelque chose lui rappelle ou lui fasse imaginer quelque chose. Mais, quelle que soit l’importance de ce processus d’analogie en art, l’art n’y trouve pas sa formule la plus profonde. Tant que nous découvrons le sens d’un signe dans autre chose, un peu de matière subsiste encore, rebelle à l’esprit. Au contraire l’Art nous donne la véritable unité: unité d’un signe immatériel et d’un sens tout spirituel. (53)¹¹

Yet it is only through recourse to this “peu de matière,” that spirit—which Deleuze defines as the experience of a unity that can only be achieved outside space and time—can be evoked.

Thus, the simile as the privileged rhetorical figure in *À la recherche*. In one sense, Proust’s elaborate transpositions of one part of the world onto another through comparison offer the possibility of a world where things are loosed from their anchors in the world, so that the phenomenon of experience, founded in perception, comes to the fore even as the schematic intelligence is demoted. In another sense, however, the simile does the opposite. Precisely because the components of a simile are taken from out of the “language” of this preconceptualized understanding of the world, the material world closes in on itself, as the simile, in its repertoire of the familiar, circumambulates the thing that it is attempting to describe but can never reach. One might then say that every simile attempts to achieve, as it casts itself out into the world, a view *on* the world that the narrator inhabits, but returns only with something else *in* the world. And thus, every simile brings back the failure that it cannot produce what it seeks to represent.

These analogical chains, then, as Julia Kristeva writes, “a pour effet d’ouvrir la surface des signes vers la profondeur” (265)¹² while

¹⁰“Had prepared the mind of the spectator by employing, for the little town, only marine terms, and urban terms for the sea” (2:567).

¹¹“Proust often speaks of the necessity that weighs upon him: that something always reminds him or makes him imagine something else. But whatever the importance of this process of analogy in art, art does not find its profoundest formula here. As long as we discover a sign’s meaning in something else, matter still subsists, refractory to spirit” (40).

¹²“As a continuous chain of circles, analogy serves to guide the surface of time toward depth” (213).

remaining, nonetheless on the surface. It is, in fact, only in this way that there can be a sense of depth in the cosmos of the novel, for if the narrative maintains, in its rigor, that the spoken must always be accounted for by postulating the presence of a speaker, there can be no privileging of narrative plane, no prioritized position by which one can get a “view” on the world of the narrative. Thus, depth must be inscribed on the surface.

It is difficult not to bring the madeleine into the discussion, then, as the point from out of which the story issues, and thus, in at least a technical sense, as its profoundest moment. Not only does the madeleine, as a workaday symbol, transmute extension in space and time into an evocation of a unity that binds the entropic dispersion of experience, but the madeleine also is a product of this disunity: it is a symbol for the binding of space and time, but it also exists in unbound space and time, and thus, as an element—a thing—in the narrative. As such, it must be accounted for as a constituent *in* what it evokes. It is thus, we might say, that the *metaphor* of the madeleine becomes translated into an outpouring of similes, of the world describing itself from within the world, precisely because the madeleine fails to maintain its metaphoricity. We see it in every simile, as the comparisons struggle against the ungiving confines of the world that the simile attempts to recuperate.

The extended visual representations in the narrative are particularly informative in this regard. In one sense, Elstir’s painterly simile is less “defective” than that of the narrator’s verbal similes: if the act of reading a sentence must take place in time, and must be ordered according to the grammatical logic of language which is shaped by time, the painting can be perceived all at once; in doing so, it suppresses the boundary between the sea and the village, and is thus able to achieve a “multiforme et puissante unité” (2:400).¹³ Elstir’s painting presents then the possibility of, to quote Rimbaud, “un dérèglement de tous les sens” (249) because it is in detaching the familiar from its referent that the things of the world and the moments of a life can be made to describe, beyond their capacity, “la nature telle qu’elle est.”¹⁴ In another sense, the painting is *more* defective, because it comes at an additional remove for the reader, who must then have this “puissante unité” described in language, and thus, in sequential time. Yet,

¹³“That multiform and powerful unity” (2:567).

¹⁴“A derangement of all the senses” (my translation).

we might say, this is all the more effective in conveying the inability to depict this unity in existence (and the narrative as a whole, then, becomes a figure for existence as a whole). These peregrinations from thing to thing within the world re-transcribe this inability to see the world onto the plane of experience. What is important, then, is less that Elstir's painting transposes sea and village, in privileging perception over reference, but rather, that perception itself is a constant wandering from thing to thing as it seeks to transcend its worldly frame in order to see itself.¹⁵

Maurice Merleau-Ponty's formulation of depth as a play between surfaces comes very close to that of Proust (and is often informed by his work):

Ce qui fait énigme, c'est leur lien, c'est ce qui est entre elles — c'est que je voie les choses chacune à sa place précisément parce qu'elles s'éclipsent l'une l'autre —, c'est qu'elles soient rivales devant mon regard précisément parce qu'elles sont chacune en son lieu. C'est leur extériorité connue dans leur enveloppement et leur dépendance mutuelle dans leur autonomie. De la profondeur ainsi comprise, on ne peut plus dire qu'elle est "troisième dimension." (64)¹⁶

Thus, "puisque les choses et mon corps sont faits de la même étoffe," (21)¹⁷ one constituent (say, that of the simile) cannot embody the other, but rather, only overlap, each serving as the "vision" of the other. If Descartes saw no use in attempting to plumb the depths of the unknown, Merleau-Ponty appropriates Descartes's notion of the unknown without negating it: rather, the unknown now becomes a constituent *in* the visible, the distance between me and the things that populate my perceptual field, as that which makes vision possible and necessary. Elstir's "irrational" (from the Cartesian perspective) canvas, then, in which "le peintre avait su habituer les yeux à ne pas

¹⁵Jonathan Crary argues that the invention of the stereoscope and its popularization after 1850 was crucial to the modern tendency to emphasize perception over reference. The stereoscope invented by Charles Wheatstone has the viewer place his eyes in front of two mirrors at 90 degree angles to one another. These mirrors then reflect, for each eye, two different slides, placed on either side of the mechanism. Crary concludes that the Wheatstone stereoscope "made clear . . . the disjunction between experience and its cause . . . [It] left the hallucinatory and fabricated nature of the experience undisguised. It did not support what Roland Barthes called 'the referential illusion'" (*Techniques of the Observer*, 129).

¹⁶"The enigma consists in the fact that I see things each one in its place, precisely because they eclipse one another, and that they are rivals before my sight precisely because each one is in its own place. Their exteriority is known in their envelopment and their mutual dependence on their autonomy" (*Basic Writings*, 311).

¹⁷"Since things and my body are made of the same stuff" (*Basic Writings*, 296).

reconnaître de frontière fixe, de démarcation absolue, entre la terre et l'océan" (2:400-01)¹⁸ becomes in itself a figure for the inability to experience this unity in life as it is lived, in its very dissonance with that of a lived experience that is accompanied by the conceptual intelligence.

It is this oscillation between time and the instant that is the issue in *À la recherche*. In Carquethuit, two signs, freed from their referent, are capable of circumambulating an *instant*, the instant of the madeleine, say, that they cannot represent—because they exist in space and in time—but evoke negatively. They become, then, catachrestical figures, representing that which cannot be said precisely because to say anything must be said in time. But it follows, then, that perception itself becomes, likewise a catachrestical figure: our perceptions, insofar as we become conscious of them, are, like the Proustian similes that shift from worldly thing to worldly thing, ultimately, failures in themselves, much as we might understand the book that the narrator is writing as the catachrestic expression of the book that he can never write, and that we can never read, insofar as we and he exist in space and in time.

Perception then, and its articulation drawn out in time, replaces the ungraspable unity of the world that one is already in, without substituting for it. Or, if it is a substitution, it is one that can never come to fully represent that for which it has been called in to substitute. Thus, rather than incarnating the unity of a world that can only be experienced partially, the perception *accompanies* this unity that it can never embody. Thus, the act of perception in *À la recherche* becomes a *creative act*, and as such, in its bringing into being—into space and into time—that which never was, the ineffable unity which it seeks, we might say, falls away. The narrator says as much in the madeleine scene as he considers the implication of the madeleine in the most complete declaration of the novel's aesthetic before *Le Temps retrouvé*:

Grave incertitude, toutes les fois que l'esprit se sent dépassé par lui-même; quand lui, le chercheur, est tout ensemble le pays obscur où il doit chercher et où tout son bagage ne lui sera de rien. Chercher? Pas seulement: créer. Il est en face de quelque chose qui n'est pas encore et que seul il peut réaliser, puis faire entrer dans sa lumière. (1:45)¹⁹

¹⁸One of the metaphors that occurred most frequently in the seascapes which surrounded him here was precisely that which, comparing land with sea, suppressed all demarcation between them" (2:567).

¹⁹What an abyss of uncertainty whenever the mind feels that some part of it has strayed beyond its own borders; when it, the seeker, is at once the dark region through which it must go seeking, where all its equipment will avail it nothing. Seek? More than that: create. It is face to face with something which does not yet exist, to which it alone can give reality and substance, which it alone can bring into the light of day" (1:61).

The narrative that pours out of the instant of the madeleine, as well as the pages that lead up to it (for let us not forget that the writer/speaker of “Longtemps je me suis couché de bonne heure”²⁰ [1:3], and thus, the one who is recalling his still-voluntary memory, has *already* eaten the madeleine) are then the act of a creation that co-exists alongside the inarticulable apprehension that the madeleine elicits. It is this that propels all the products of experience that the narrator describes into expressions of this apprehension: symbols, or catachreses, that must then co-exist *alongside* the unity that they would hope to articulate. Where the apprehension comes all at once, the narrator can only move forward. Merleau-Ponty approaches this same paradox in discussing the necessity for accounting for one’s perspective in the act of epistemological reflection: the reflection “ne peut feindre de dérouler le même fil que l’esprit d’abord aurait roulé, d’être l’esprit qui revient à soi en moi, quand c’est moi par définition qui réfléchis; elle doit s’apparaître comme marche vers un sujet X, appel à un sujet X” (*Le Visible et l’invisible*, 54).²¹ The newly freed perceptions made available by the work of art then must re-create the absent unity that can be apprehended, but not narrated. It is for this reason that the visual, with its non-syntagmatic appeal, becomes the place where the wandering similes can find their home.

If the absorbed, receptive reader of Leconte de Lisle is in a position similar to that of the taster of the madeleine, it is only in the diminishing of the work’s force, even in the mastering of its force, that the reader can turn his receptiveness into the act of making articulate. The interposition of the neutral observer, then, who emerges out of the conventional, preconceived world of habit, must itself become the material which ultimately, the writer takes up in order to create a “picture” of his own subjection. The narrator must “kill” the madeleine as symbol in order to take possession of it in time. We see this desacralizing gesture throughout the novel: in the captivity of Albertine, for example, where, previously enthralled and aroused by her unknowability, the narrator confesses, “maintenant je n’étais heureux que dans les moments où de ces yeux . . . je parvenais à expulser tout mystère” (3:583).²² But also, upon his demanding of the maternal kiss

²⁰“For a long time I went to bed early” (1:1 translation modified).

²¹“The reflection cannot feign to unravel the same thread that the mind would first have woven, to be the mind returning to itself within me, when by definition it is I who reflect. The reflection must appear to itself as a progression toward a subject X, an appeal to a subject X” (*The Visible and the Invisible*, 32).

²²“If at one time I had been overcome with excitement when I thought I detected mystery in Albertine’s eyes, now I was happy only at times when from those eyes . . . I succeeded in expelling every trace of mystery” (5:91).

which becomes, in the narrator's forcing his mother to abdicate her role, the sad date which inaugurated a new era.

It is in these aggressive acts, then, that an "autre moi" rises up and frames, in its cold neutrality, the self-absorbed in its world. Katja Hausteine, using terminology that seemingly is drawn from Merleau-Ponty's lexicon, offers the intriguing notion of "emotional cavities"²³ as "zones where there is no . . . emotional contact or correspondence between the narrator and the world he perceives, but rather emotional distance and difference, zones where the narrator is left alone, standing before the frame" (161). As such, she situates the novel as "oscillating between a romantically inspired wholesome notion of affect and its modernist erosion" (171). Certainly, Proust seems to be departing from a paradigm of absorption in which the absence of the beholder is the "supreme fiction" that governs the aesthetic experience. And yet, rather than understanding it as the erosion of affect, we might, perhaps more productively, understand this as an exchange of affect, in an appeal to incorporate the observer into the picture. Yet the focus on the observer that this effects results in a corresponding numbness on the part of the object of perception, such as that which Merleau-Ponty describes in the act of touching one hand with another:

Si ma main gauche touche ma main droite, et que je veuille soudain, par ma main droite, saisir le travail de ma main gauche en train de toucher, cette réflexion du corps sur lui-même avorte toujours au dernier moment: au moment où je sens ma gauche avec ma droite, je cesse dans la même mesure de toucher ma main droite de ma main gauche. (*Le Visible et l'Invisible*, 24)²⁴

This exchange of affect, and of perception, then, if it is to be represented, must be flattened onto one canvas, must be created into an image that never "was," and in this way, we might say, the narrator achieves a "picture" of his own subjection.

This can occur because the narrator indeed engages in the kind of experiment that Merleau-Ponty describes. To do so, the narrator "reads" the perceiver who is absorbed in his world. It is this narrator-as-reader (who becomes narrator-as-writer) who must now be accounted

²³[C]e pli, cette cavité centrale du visible qui est ma vision, ces deux rangées en miroir du voyant et du visible, du touchant et du touché, forment un système bien lié . . ." (*Le Visible et l'Invisible*, 190).

²⁴If my left hand is touching my right hand, and if I should suddenly wish to apprehend with my right hand the work of my left hand as it touches, this reflection of the body upon itself always miscarries at the last moment: the moment I feel my left hand with my right hand, I correspondingly cease touching my right hand with my left hand" (*The Visible and the Invisible*, 9).

for as well in the logic of the text. The narrator-reader “catches” the regressive trajectory of a self who must always locate himself elsewhere, and institutes this regress as a figure in the text, as a blank space that can never be overcome but that begins to shape distance into legibility.

When the narrator eats the madeleine with his tea, he is only able to begin to consciously grasp the overwhelming sense of unity that pervades his consciousness once its force diminishes: the more powerful the apprehension, the less articulable, and thus, narratable, is its “meaning.” The apprehension, which appears to come outside of language, can only be narrated in time, and thus, the narrative cannot be true to this unifying experience itself. When the madeleine yields, *what* it yields must withhold itself, as it falls back into the things that populate the world in space and in time. The experience of the madeleine yielding, then, is that of a yielding only to another withholding. It is a withholding that mirrors the opaqueness of the original withholding of the madeleine before it yielded. As the narrative ensues, the madeleine retrieves this original opacity, becoming just a thing *in* the world, and not its source. And, yet, it must do the job of representing both.

If this experience is to be narrated then, it must be done in language, and thus, in time. If the narrator wishes to trace back the path from which he came at the moment of the madeleine, he finds that he cannot because he is only creating more narrative. In the act of “returning” he is in fact, writing, creating. The unity of the experience of the madeleine, then, must be experienced as a series of overlays that resist the oblivion of the absorptive world of lived experience. To narrate this experience of being in time in time requires, then, antiabsorptive techniques.²⁵ One such technique, as we have seen, occurs on the level of the visual. While the original experience of the madeleine itself occurs outside of the realm of perception, spatialization becomes a privileged figure in Proust precisely because, in contrast to narrative, it mirrors the all-at-once quality of the madeleine’s evocation, through the representation of time in spatial terms (let us remember that one of the working titles of the text, “The Cathedral,” speaks precisely to this spatialization of the linear experience of time).²⁶

²⁵On the “antiabsorptive,” see Bernstein, “The Artifice of Absorption.”

²⁶Proust to Rosny Aîné, 22 December 1919: “[J]e veux que tout paraisse ensemble pour qu’on comprenne la composition à laquelle j’ai tout sacrifié et qu’on méconnait tellement qu’on croit que c’est un recueil de souvenirs fortuits!” The work as a structure held together by its own tension is of course an issue for Proust in his description of the novel as a cathedral. See Proust’s letter to Comte Jean de Gagneron of 1 August 1919, as well as Sjeff Houppermans, *Marcel Proust constructiviste*, 9ff.

We can thus find traces of the madeleine's call to unity in some of the elaborate visual descriptions in *À la recherche*. One such description is the ekphrastic paragraph that introduces *Le temps retrouvé*,²⁷ which, I argue, can serve as an emblem of the work's structure from within a narrative whose bid is to bind time in narrative. Yet what makes this passage emblematic is the peculiar quality of its ekphrasis, one which follows the logic of *créer*, rather than *chercher*, and in doing so seems to generate what it describes in the act of describing. In this movement between description and creation, the narrator himself oscillates between writer/observer and narrated. In it we see the narrator in his "time living," in his "time remembering" but it also points to the "time writing," a moment that reaches into a presence that can, of course, never be caught by the writer. I propose, here, a close reading of it.

The passage begins when the narrator has returned to Combray after many years, and stays in Tansonville with Gilberte, who is now the husband of Robert de Saint-Loup:

Toute la journée, dans cette demeure un peu trop campagne qui n'avait l'air que d'un lieu de sieste entre deux promenades ou pendant l'averse, une de ces demeures où chaque salon a l'air d'un cabinet de verdure et où, sur la tenture des chambres, les roses du jardin dans l'une, les oiseaux des arbres dans l'autre, vous ont rejoints et vous tiennent compagnie, isolés du monde—car c'étaient de vieilles tentures où chaque rose était assez séparée pour qu'on eût pu, si elle avait été vivante, la cueillir, chaque oiseau le mettre en cage et l'appivoiser, sans rien de ces grandes décorations des chambres d'aujourd'hui où sur un fond d'argent, tous les pommiers de Normandie sont venus se profiler en style japonais pour halluciner les heures que vous passez au lit—, toute la journée, je la passais dans ma chambre qui donnait sur les belles verdures du parc et les lilas de l'entrée, les feuilles vertes des grands arbres au bord de l'eau, étincelants de soleil, et la forêt de Méséglise. Je ne regardais en somme tout cela avec plaisir que parce que je me disais: "C'est joli d'avoir tant de verdure dans la fenêtre de ma chambre," jusqu'au moment où, dans le vaste tableau verdoyant, je reconnus, peint lui au contraire en bleu sombre, simplement parce qu'il était plus loin, le clocher de l'église de Combray. Non pas une figuration de ce clocher, ce clocher lui-même, qui, mettant ainsi sous mes yeux la distance des lieues et des années, était venu, au milieu de la lumineuse verdure et

²⁷In the most recent Pléiade edition of *À la recherche du temps perdu*, under the direction of Jean-Yves Tadié, *Le Temps retrouvé* begins with this passage. In the previous Clarac/Ferré edition, *Le Temps retrouvé* begins several pages earlier, when the narrator begins his sojourn at Tansonville.

d'un tout autre ton, si sombre qu'il paraissait presque seulement dessiné, s'inscrire dans le carreau de ma fenêtre. (4:275)²⁸

The first sentence of this passage begins with an adverbial phrase, “toute la journée,” followed by a prepositional phrase, in turn followed by the subordinate clause beginning with “qui.” By the time that we finish this clause, we might reasonably expect to be presented with the subject of the sentence. Rather, we are presented with yet another relative clause that not only continues to defer the subject, but also displaces the entire scene from that of the present house to that of a typical house, or perhaps, an imaginary one.

The house where the narrator finds himself is a place to rest “entre deux promenades.” This would seem to reference the narrator’s recent revelation that the two archetypal “ways” that together define the two poles of the narrator’s cosmos, are, in fact, connected to each other, when Gilberte tells him, “Si vous voulez, nous pourrons tout de même sortir un après-midi et nous pourrons alors aller à Guermantes, en prenant par Méséglise, c’est la plus jolie façon” (4:268).²⁹ This house, unseen by the reader, becomes, we might say, a locus, a source of unity from out of which the fragmented narrative issues; but as such, we might also understand this house as a figure for the narrator himself, who, likewise unseen by himself because he is the locus of perception, can only look *out*. Proust, likewise, in *Contre Sainte-Beuve* argues that

²⁸“All day long, in that slightly too countrified house which seemed no more than a place for a rest between walks or during a sudden downpour, one of those houses in which all of the sitting rooms look like arbours and, on the wall-paper in the bedrooms, here the roses from the garden, there the birds from the trees outside join you and keep you company, isolated from the world—for it was old wall-paper on which every rose was so distinct that, had it been alive, you could have picked it, every bird you could have put in a cage and tamed, quite different from those grandiose bedroom decorations of today where, on a silver background, all the apple-trees of Normandy display their outlines in the Japanese style to hallucinate the hours you spend in bed—all day long I remained in my room which looked over the fine greenery of the park and the lilacs at the entrance, over the green leaves of the tall trees by the edge of the lake, sparkling in the sun, and the forest of Méséglise. Yet I looked at all this with pleasure only because I said to myself: ‘How nice to be able to see so much greenery from my bedroom window,’ until the moment when, in the vast verdant picture, I recognised, painted in a contrasting dark blue simply because it was further away, the steeple of Combray church. Not a representation of the steeple, but the steeple itself, which, putting in visible form a distance of miles and of years, had come, intruding its discordant tone into the midst of the luminous verdure—a tone so colourless that it seemed little more than a preliminary sketch—and engraved itself upon the window pane” (6:10).

²⁹“If you like, we might after all go out one afternoon and then we can go to Guermantes, taking the road by Méséglise, which is the nicest way” (6:3).

a writer can only write his “œuvre de soi” through recourse to the objects of his consciousness.³⁰

What the reader receives, then, is the description of a typical house, but not *this* house. This part of the sentence begins with an elocution that the reader of Proust knows well: “une de ces demeures où . . .” This imaginary, or archetypal house, then, occupies the foreground of the sentence, as it spans more than one hundred words. The bulk of this part of the sentence is, in a yet further deferring of the subject, contained in apposition between two dashes, as it offers to the reader the description of the verisimilitudinous wallpaper, which seems to be the narrator’s real interest here. Only after the description of the wallpaper comes to a close at the second dash does the main thread of the sentence pick up again with “toute la journée,”—a reprisal of the beginning of the sentence of which the reader may have understandably lost track—before finally announcing the subject and the main verb of the sentence: “je la passais.” This brings us back from the imagined house to the real one, and though the latter part of the sentence still withholds a description of the interior, it concerns itself with describing the real—as opposed to the represented—vegetation that the narrator sees out of the window.

Thus, the wallpaper that the narrator describes is unlocatable: the “non-place” where it “is” seems to participate in the novel’s problematization of the relation between the observer and the observed, much in the same way that, in the novel’s second sentence, when the narrator informs the reader that, “je n’avais pas le temps de me dire: ‘je m’endors.’” (1:3).³¹ Like the imagined house, the quoted sentence hangs from the void, said by no one, because there was no one there to say it.

Given this lack of a real house in which to situate the wallpaper, then, the lavishness and the description—“chaque rose était assez séparée pour qu’on eût pu . . . la cueillir . . .”—takes on, especially in its juxtaposition to the paucity of words given to the real house—“un peu trop campagne”—an eerie quality. What the narrator describes so meticulously does not properly exist in the empirical world of the novel, so that the artifice of the wallpaper becomes conflated with the artifice of the description. Just as the wallpaper is remarkable because it simulates “real life” while remaining artificial, so too does the descrip-

³⁰“En réalité, ce qu’on donne au public, c’est ce qu’on a écrit seul, pour soi-même, c’est bien l’œuvre de soi” (*Contre Sainte-Beuve*, 131). “In reality, what one gives to the public is what one wrote alone, for oneself: it is the book of the self” (my translation).

³¹“I did not have time to tell myself: ‘I’m falling asleep.’” (1:1).

tion become remarkable because it, likewise, is a work of artifice that nonetheless possesses the quality of reality. The description borrows from that which it describes, creating a meticulous but imaginary set of circumstances, unsettling in its seeming to have commandeered the description the reader was about to receive of the “real” house from which the focus of the passage emanates.

The effect is still further heightened by the use of the imperfect form of the verb “être” in describing the wallpaper: “c’étaient de vieilles tentures.” Employed in this way, there is no clear delineation between the mode in which the real room is described, in a much more normalized imperfect form—“qui n’avaient l’air que . . .”—and that of the imaginary or typical one. Real and imaginary, then, become “flattened” onto the same narrative plane. At the same time, *within* the description, the same process is occurring in the wallpaper: it is made to oscillate between two and three dimensions; the roses you can pick, the birds that you can put in a cage, offer themselves impossibly into three-dimensional space, so that the suggestion of depth and the ineluctable lack of it creates a strange, shimmering effect, the depth of the real giving way to the flatness of artifice which it seems to continually reject without being wholly successful.

This strange oscillation is further heightened by the operative subject of the clauses up until the second dash that marks the sentence’s reprisal with the repetition of “toute la journée”: all the decor that is described serves as a way “pour halluciner les heures que vous passez au lit”: the imaginary interior that is described, which is not the interior where the physical narrator is, has its counterpart in an equally unlocatable “vous” who, it seems, is neither the narrator nor the narrator, but a phantom “autre moi.”

It is in this confounding of modalities that we find an emblem of the book as a whole, which is built out of a “dérèglement” of narrative modalities, beginning in the first sentences, where the narrator wakes to find himself the immediate subject of the book he is reading. This conflated structure, then, offers an immersion that opens itself for the observer, who both stands outside and inside his narrative. This is possible only through the flattening of the depth of experience so that both observer and absorbed are represented on the surface.

Likewise, in mapping this complex onto the structure of the novel as a whole, we see the “time living,” “time remembering,” and “time writing” superimposed upon each other. Let us remember that in the madeleine scene the narrator has not yet written anything (at least not anything substantial enough to be something like the novel that we

read). Rather, the madeleine makes available, beyond the “*mémoire volontaire*” of the maternal kiss, and beyond the narrator’s youthful writing (in particular, the “*Clochers de Martinville*”) the source that will become the basis of the novel that we read.³² The madeleine makes available “time living” for “time remembering” which only becomes, after the *matinée* in *Le Temps retrouvé*, “time writing.” If the experience of the madeleine gives birth to the narrative of Combray and all that transpires after it, nonetheless, it must withdraw in order for the narration to take place *in time*; even so, the narration of the madeleine scene itself must conceal that *it* is a product of writing. It is only during the *matinée* sequence that we can finally understand the madeleine—as something written—to have been elicited from out of the *matinée*, in the same way that Combray was elicited from out of the madeleine. With this, the narrative has quietly shifted allegiances: whereas before, it was the madeleine that served as the impetus out of which the bulk of the story proceeded, now it is the revelation at the *matinée* that appropriates the madeleine and assumes responsibility as the foundation for the story. Thus, the madeleine and the *matinée* engage in an irresolvable oscillation where each makes the other its constituent; each generate its perspective by turning the other into material; each vies for the right to serve as the locus of the novel: the place of the observer. Yet neither can ultimately serve as such, because just at the point in which the one would gain narrative control, the other intrudes on its territory. Each component of the narrative refuses to subordinate itself to an overarching perspective, so that the overall effect is a flattening of the narrative plane, depth and surface made to coexist in a sheen that is perpetually unstable.

In the passage at hand, we see these poles both thematically and formally: thematically, in the wallpaper that oscillates between two and three dimensions; and formally, in the oscillation of the verb tenses that express narrative mood. In both cases, neither modality is assimilable to the other. Depth hovers on the surface, and the impossibility of conjoining the oscillating modalities here furtively brings impossibility as a constituent in the narrative: the narrative must cohere only around this absent unity of time and space, in time and space, and thus, only by representing its lack. The technique that Proust uses here is one that, as Genette observes, appears frequently

³²Which is not necessarily to say that what the narrator finally will write is indeed the novel that we read.

in the novel: a description, seemingly of a general or recurring state of being, is then combined with the description of a uniquely occurring event, an effect which, Genette writes, “donne l’impression—plutôt déconcertante—de *flotter*” (175).³³ The effect here, in concert with the sentence’s resistance to returning back to the level of the literal that it set for itself, is to create an interpenetration between nature and artifice, literal and figurative, and event and context.

When we emerge from out of the description of the imaginary house and back into the real one, the “vous” of the first half of the sentence, now becomes “je” as the sentence finally arrives at its grammatical subject. The subject falls into himself, we might say, from out of the imaginary “vous” relocating the locus of enunciation. But as we move into this I-consciousness, we find that if there was a place in the sentence that was reserved for the description of the real room, it is the description of the imaginary room that occupies it: the description of the room that the reader may have thought was deferred, is in fact, displaced. The locatable “je,” which emanates from the corporeal narrator, can only see *out*: the sentence moves immediately to what the narrator can see from the window of his real—but to us invisible—room. Yet once again, we find that the real cannot remain simply real: what the narrator sees out the window is described as a “vaste tableau verdoyant” flattened against the window. Thus, in the sentence, real and artificial continually trade places: the real interior is only described through the vehicle of an imaginary interior, a description which obscures the real interior. Yet the imaginary interior takes the form of an artificial exterior, which then gives way to the description of the real exterior, which, in turn, becomes flattened into artificiality. The sense, in this oscillation between surface and depth, is of a picture that cannot contain itself.

In the midst of this oscillation between the real and the artificial, the narrator, looking out the window, says that he receives pleasure from this scene only because it is nice to be able to see so much greenery from his bedroom window. This “pleasure” of course, should be immediately suspect: it is the same dubious aestheticizing that the narrator often professes to have when he hesitates to admit that, because something has interposed itself between the observer and its

³³⁴ [I]t gives the impression—a rather disconcerting one—of floating” (*Narrative Discourse*, 151).

object, he is having none.³⁴ However confounded the artificial and the real become in the play of the narrator's description, they still, thus far have remained under the narrator's control. Yet as the sentence progresses, the narrator himself becomes implicated in this play: he finds that he is no longer able to locate himself in one consciousness. In order for him to experience anything like pleasure, he must narrate his pleasure, *tell* himself that someone like "un autre moi" is experiencing pleasure. The poor quality of the narrator's absorption does not permit his perceptions to offer "voluptés infinies," and so, pleasure can only come through the artificial generation of narrative ("C'est joli d'avoir tant de verdure dans la fenêtre de ma chambre") and thus, through the positing of an imaginary other who can receive this narrative *in time*, and who can be compelled to believe what the narrator himself cannot. The "vous" who resolves himself into a "je" still needs a "vous," because as "je" he is impoverished: absorbed in his world, he cannot see it until he tells it.

Let us call this imaginary other a "proto-reader." Because the narrator continues to entertain the possibility of entering into this alienated self, he remains in despair. This we see in the numerous disappointments that recur throughout the novel: visiting Balbec; going to the theater; kissing Albertine, among others. Only when the proto-reader becomes a real reader, only when the narrator realizes that his alienation is ineluctable, and that the condition of meaning-making is indeed one of perpetual alienation *from* life, can he then transmute this alienation into exultation:

[N]'était-ce pas pour m'occuper d'eux que je vivrais loin de ceux qui se plaindraient de ne pas me voir, pour m'occuper d'eux plus à fond que je

³⁴cf *Le Côté de Guermantes*: "Je me dis alors: 'Je n'ai pas trop à regretter ma journée; ces heures passées auprès de cette jeune femme ne sont pas perdues puisque par elle j'ai, chose gracieuse et qu'on ne peut assez payer, une rose, une cigarette parfumée, une coupe de champagne.' Je me le disais parce qu'il me semblait que c'était douer d'un caractère esthétique, et par là justifier, sauver ces heures d'ennui. Peut-être aurais-je dû penser que le besoin même que j'éprouvais d'une raison qui me consolât de mon ennui, suffisait à prouver que je ne ressentais rien d'esthétique" (2:468). "I said to myself: 'I needn't regret my day too much, after all. These hours spent in this young woman's company are not wasted, since I have had from her—charming gifts which cannot be bought too dear—a rose, a scented cigarette and a glass of champagne.' I told myself this because I felt that it would endow with an aesthetic character, and thereby justify and rescue these hours of boredom. I ought perhaps to have reflected that the very need which I felt of a reason that would console me for my boredom was sufficient to prove that I was experiencing no aesthetic sensation" (2:226).

n'aurais pu le faire avec eux, pour chercher à les révéler à eux-mêmes, à les réaliser? (4 :564)³⁵

Until he achieves this realization, the narrator who is narrated remains deluded by the possibility that there is an original unity of self to which he can return. Let us note that he has not yet eaten the madeleine, and thus, has not yet suffered the apprehension that unity, if it is to be recounted, must become fragmented. The experience of the madeleine, then, as much as it is one of unity, also becomes a first apprehension of the fragmented structure of life that will, in turn, serve as the basis for the narrator's retrieval of unity in a modality outside time.

In the frame to which the narrator restricts himself, he remains unaware that there is no pleasure in his "plaisir" until the steeple of Combray intrudes itself upon the picture that he observes. This intrusion does not destroy the picture itself, but renders it *unpleasant*. It becomes flattened into the picture, "peint lui . . . en bleu sombre, simplement parce qu'il était plus loin" so that it is its color that becomes highlighted in the foreground, rather than assimilated into an effect of depth or perspective. Yet with almost no pause, this painted steeple becomes "non pas une figuration de ce clocher, ce clocher lui même." Here, depth is indeed painted on the surface as the steeple puts before the narrator's eyes "la distance des lieues et des années." The steeple, then, pierces the canvas in introducing the quality of depth, while at the same time, rendering this depth back onto the surface. As long as there is no steeple, the narrator can stare out at the greenery and piece together a narrative of its beauty, a beauty that he, as its reader, cannot experience first-hand. The verdure is all visibility and no depth. The steeple, however, in rendering "des lieues et des années" into visible form, are those of the narrator. The picture, then, is no longer something one can simply look at without seeing oneself already inscribed in it "s'inscrire dans le carreau de ma fenêtre." Thus, all the lack of pleasure that characterizes the narrator's alienation now becomes a figure *in* this picture. Here, we might see the impossible coincidence of both observer and observed, such that, as Merleau-Ponty describes it, the body comes to be understood as "un être à deux feuillets, d'un côté chose parmi les choses et, par

³⁵Was it not, surely, in order to concern myself with them that I was going to live apart from these people who would complain that they did not see me, to concern myself with them in a more fundamental fashion than would have been possible in their presence, to seek to reveal them to themselves, to realise their potentialities?" (6:437).

ailleurs, celui qui les voit et les touche" (*Le Visible et l'invisible*, 178).³⁶ The verdure no longer appears as an object to a subject because the narrator sees himself incarnated in its existence. The steeple destroys the picture not by piercing through its flat screen, but by remaining real *in* the picture: it cuts through the fiction that separates fiction from "reality," offering not harmony but discordance on the flat plane. The promise that the imaginary wallpaper offers with its nearly real flowers and birds, then, is here fulfilled in the "picture" of the steeple, though this fulfillment is not what it was thought to be. As "chercher" becomes "créer," reality envelops us into a fiction that we cannot step out of. The scene that the narrator sees rises up before him as a picture *with its depth painted on the surface*. The tone "si sombre" is the unseeable look of the seer inscribed on the plane. Thus, Merleau-Ponty's profoundly Proustian notion that distance is not the opposite of proximity, but rather, that which makes anything like proximity, and thus, self-knowledge, possible:

C'est que l'épaisseur de chair entre le voyant et la chose est constitutive de sa visibilité à elle comme de sa corporéité à lui; ce n'est pas un obstacle entre lui et elle, c'est leur moyen de communication. C'est pour la même raison que je suis au cœur du visible et que j'en suis loin : cette raison est qu'il est épais, et, par là, naturellement destiné à être vu par un corps. (*Le Visible et l'invisible* 176)³⁷

If the verdure that the narrator sees in the window is the *sign* of aesthetic pleasure, the steeple appropriates the sign, and transforms it into a sign, not of an aesthetic experience, but of reality. But the conditions for this transformation are possible because the view from the window, as a sign of pleasure, comes without pleasure: it is an empty sign. But this emptiness serves the function of delineating the sphere of the observer, without whom no pleasure can be experienced. Complete absorption might be pleasurable, but it leaves no room for the consciousness that someone is experiencing it. It is this, we might say, that brings the narrator to speech in this passage, but that, in a broader sense, makes the narrator possible. The emptiness of the sign of the steeple is precisely the distance between the narrator and the object of his perception.

³⁶"Our body is a being of two leaves, from one side a thing among things and otherwise what sees them and touches them" (*The Visible and the Invisible*, 137).

³⁷"It is that the thickness of flesh between the seer and the thing is constitutive for the thing of its visibility as for the seer of his corporeity; it is not an obstacle between them, it is their means of communication. It is for the same reason that I am at the heart of the visible and that I am far from it: because it has thickness and is thereby naturally destined to be seen by a body" (*The Visible and the Invisible*, 135).

This realization is by no means limited to this moment, but rather, is implicated in the very structure of the text. In the well-known telephone scene in *Le Côté de Guermantes*, for example, the first thing the narrator hears when his grandmother answers the telephone is not her voice, but rather, the voice of sound itself:

Et aussitôt que notre appel a retenti, dans la nuit pleine d'apparitions sur laquelle nos oreilles s'ouvrent seules, un bruit léger—un bruit abstrait—celui de la distance supprimée—et la voix de l'être cher s'adresse à nous [. . .]. (2:432)³⁸

The “abstract sound” and the sound of the grandmother’s voice are physically co-extensive. Yet in the act of the recognition of the voice, the first thing that the narrator hears is that which occurs before sound: it is the distance that sound attempts to fill. The narrator hears, in that first utterance of his grandmother, the sound of the necessity of sound, the machinery of his own hearing. The narrator’s perception of the steeple operates similarly. It is not the steeple itself that he sees, but rather, distance incarnated, which takes the “style” of the steeple. The hearing of the “sound of distance,” then, on the telephone, and the seeing of the “picture of distance” as the steeple are those instances when the narrator confronts the underside of the perceptible. In doing so, he realizes that there can be no other narrator that can see what he cannot; the “abstract” sound then, is the sound of this not-seeing (in the case of the telephone scene, not-hearing), an original privation which, as far as the novel is concerned, is native to consciousness itself.

As the novel progresses toward its ultimate epiphany, the tension between the observer and his absorbed counterpart becomes more and more emphatic. When the narrator, in *Le Temps retrouvé*, returns to Paris by train after his second stay in a sanatorium, he feels increasingly constrained by his inability to take pleasure in experience, and his narration, his *telling* of the world to himself becomes more and more explicit: “‘Arbres, pensais-je, vous n’avez plus rien à me dire, mon cœur refroidi ne vous entend plus’ . . . c’est avec froideur, avec ennui que mes yeux constatent la ligne qui sépare votre front lumineux de votre tronc d’ombre” (4:433)³⁹. He notices “les lentilles

³⁸“And as soon as our call has rung out, in the darkness filled with apparitions to which are ears alone are unsealed, a tinny sound, an abstract sound—the sound of distance overcome—and the voice of the dear one speaks to us” (3: 174).

³⁹“‘Trees’ I thought, ‘you no longer have anything to say to me. My heart has grown cold and no longer hears you. . . . It is with indifference, with boredom that my eyes register the line which separates your radiant foreheads from your shadowy trunks’ (6:238).

d'or et d'orange dont il criblait les fenêtres d'une maison" (4:434)⁴⁰ but he is left bereft of any emotion. Not only does he despair of his ability to feel the world as he did when he was younger, he sees in this the indication that he has no talent for literature: "Si j'ai jamais pu me croire poète, je sais maintenant que je ne le suis pas" (4:433)⁴¹.

The narrator has achieved such a level of alienation from his "native" absorption in the world that he has become all observer, at the expense of the "one" for whom all this observation is for. He has arrived, we might say, at the opposite pole from that of utter absorption in the world of habit. Yet as if in compensation for the narrator's inability to register this experience emotionally, the imaginary interlocutor—the proto-reader—takes on an increasingly important role: it becomes the locus of feeling that is unavailable to "the narrator" himself:

[P]ar acquit de conscience, je me signalais à moi-même comme à quelqu'un qui m'eût accompagné et qui eût capable d'en tirer plus de plaisir que moi, les reflets de feu dans les vitres et la transparence rose de la maison. (4:434)⁴²

The imaginary interlocutor however, is no less bereft than the «narrator» is: "Mais le compagnon à qui j'avais fait constater ces effets curieux était d'une nature moins enthousiaste sans doute que beaucoup de gens bien disposés qu'une telle vue ravit, car il avait pris connaissance de ces couleurs sans aucune espèce d'allégresse" (4:434).⁴³

But out of this lacuna between perception and the pleasure that it produces, comes the possibility of writing. If the narrator has not yet begun to write, and complains of his inability to do so, he nevertheless "forgets" this and begins to characterize this very inability, in a farce that the narrator shares with the reader at the expense of the hero, *as* writing:

Si j'avais vraiment une âme d'artiste, quel plaisir n'éprouverais-je pas devant ce rideau d'arbres éclairé par le soleil couchant, devant ces petites fleurs du talus qui se haussent presque jusqu'au marchepied du wagon, dont je pourrais compter les pétales, et dont je me garderais bien de décrire la

⁴⁰"The glitter of gold and orange which the sun splashed upon the windows of a house" (6:239).

⁴¹"If ever I thought myself as a poet, I know now that I am not one" (6:238).

⁴²"[T]o satisfy my conscience, I indicated to myself now as to someone who was travelling with me and might be able to extract from them more pleasure than I, the flame-like reflexions in the windows and the pink transparency of the house" (6:239).

⁴³"But the companion whose attention I had drawn to these curious effects was evidently of a less enthusiastic nature than many more sympathetically disposed persons who are enraptured by such sights, for he had taken cognisance of these colors without any kind of joy" (6:239).

couleur comme feraient tant de bons lettrés, car peut-on espérer transmettre au lecteur un plaisir qu'on n'a pas ressenti? (4:434)⁴⁴

The reader becomes a figure in the narrative just at the moment when the narrator finds it impossible to “read.” If the perceiver must find it impossible both to perceive and be the observer of his perceptions, with the reader as a constituent of the text, he becomes a “corps à deux feuillets,” catching the impossibility of observing this absorption, by foregrounding the distance between observer and observed. The moment of unity of observer and perception, then, must exist alongside the *created* narration, attenuating perception by expanding the frame of the universe to include narration. It is here, then, that the writer, likewise, becomes a figure in the text. The novel becomes a picture of its writer’s subjection to a world that he cannot master.

It is this clarified understanding of this triumvirate of modalities, then, that occupies the rest of the novel: “time experiencing,” “time remembering” and “time writing” exist alongside each other in a manner that can be portrayed, but that can never be experienced in life. Again, debarking from a cab, in a mood of “languissant ennui,” the narrator tells himself that he feels “en essayant cette description rien de cet enthousiasme qui n’est pas le seul mais qui est un premier critérium du talent” (4:444).⁴⁵ He is on his way to the Guermantes’ matinée, where he will discover that he is, indeed, a writer and *this* is what there is to write about.

If the madeleine offers the narrator an apprehension of unity, a unity that can only exist qua unity outside of time, we along with the narrator now understand that the perception, and thus, narration, of this unity must exist in time, alongside this original experience; not as its replacement, but as its companion. Proust writes, in *La Prisonnière*, “Le poète est à plaindre, et qui n’est guidé par aucun Virgile d’avoir à traverser les cercles d’un enfer de soufre et de poix, de se jeter dans le feu qui tombe du ciel pour en ramener quelques habitants de Sodome!” (3:711).⁴⁶ The narrator has no guide because

⁴⁴“If I really had the soul of an artist, surely I would be feeling pleasure at the sight of this curtain of trees lit by the setting sun, these little flowers on the bank which lifted themselves almost to the level of the steps of my compartment, flowers whose petals I was able to count but whose colour I would not, like many a worthy man of letters, attempt to describe, for can one hope to transmit to the reader a pleasure that one has not felt?” (6:239).

⁴⁵“... In attempting this description, not a spark of that enthusiasm which, if it is not the sole, is a primary criterion of talent” (6:253).

⁴⁶“The poet is to be pitied who must, with no Virgil to guide him, pass through the circles of an inferno of sulphur and brimstone, who must cast himself into the fire that falls from heaven in order to rescue a few of the inhabitants of Sodom!” (5:271).

he is not tracing the path of a world that was already there, but is rather, through the intervention of his “autre moi,” creating a world for the first time. The absorption that the narrator seeks is not one that excludes its beholder, but that is enmeshed in the world in the act of beholding.

The long sentence that takes up the bulk of the description of the house at Tansonville, forms itself through a long series of subordinate clauses, moving further *into* the illusory scene, and then, struggling to emerge from out of the illusion and back into a physically locatable consciousness. The narrator only achieves this by finally interrupting the play of illusion, and, without ending the sentence, recommencing the sentence again, and asserting himself—*je*— as its subject, putting the consciousness which emanates from out of his body, alongside that of the fictive—*vous*— observer. Denis Diderot writes in *Pensée détachées*, “Rien n’est beau sans unité; et il n’y point d’unité sans subordination,” (qtd. Fried, 84). Though Diderot is discussing painterly composition, rather than sentence structure, nonetheless, the notion of subordination in both realms entails that of maintaining only *one* operative subject, an overarching unity that precludes its *telling*, its being observed. Here we see the paradigm move from one of subordination to that of accompaniment: a living alongside a unity that both upholds this unity in all its inexpressibility, and that fragments it into articulation: an endless and unresolvable oscillation between an observer and the unobserved whole, each inscribed on the surface.

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