Proust's Medusa: Ovid, Evolution, and Modernist Metamorphosis

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Abstract

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Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* has served as an indispensable text for Modernism, not least for such foundational Modernists as T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound and Wyndham Lewis. This dissertation examines how these writers characteristically employ Ovidian metamorphoses with a specifically evolutionary inflection, particularly in a post-Darwinian world informed by varying –often authoritarian– notions of biological adaptation, as well as an increasing emphasis on Mendalian genetics as the determining factor in what would become known as the Modern Synthesis in evolutionary theory. Using the theoretical platforms of both Queer Theory and Object Ontology, this dissertation proposes that a more pluralized, less authoritative appreciation of Darwinian change can be seen in the very different Ovidianism of Marcel Proust’s *A la recherche du temps perdu*, especially in the well-known English translation by C. K. Scott Moncrieff. Primarily concerned with the importance of Ovid’s idiosyncratic version of the Medusa-Perseus myth to Proust’s project, this study argues that Proust’s Albertine serves as a singularly Ovidian Medusa, yet one with specifically biological and evolutionary resonances that queer the more rigid and narrow Darwinism of “The Men of 1914.”
I owe immense debts of gratitude to a number of people in the preparation of this project. First, I would like to thank Wayne Koestenbaum and Mary Ann Caws of the Graduate Center for their advice and enthusiasm, as well as Richard Garner of the Honors College at Adelphi University, Garden City, NY, for his unflagging support and advice. My fellow graduate students James Hatch, Andrew Libby, and Tina Meyerhoff helped in countless ways from the very beginning, as did my many undergraduate students at Adelphi University’s Honors College. Finally, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1950-2009) began this project with me, and Joshua Wilner was indispensible in helping me finish it. This dissertation is for them.
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That day, as it happened, was the day after the one on which I had seen the beautiful procession of young girls advancing along the sea-front. I questioned a number of the visitors in the hotel about them, people who came almost every year to Balbec. They could tell me nothing. Later on, a photograph showed me why. Who could now have recognized in them, scarcely and yet quite definitely beyond the age at which one changes so completely, an amorphous, delicious mass, still utterly childish, of little girls who, only a few years back, might have been sitting in a ring on the sand around a tent: a sort of vague, white constellation in which one would have distinguished a pair of eyes that sparkled more than the rest, a mischievous face, flaxen hair, only to lose them again and to confound them almost at once in the indistinct and milky nebula.

No doubt, in those earlier years that were still so comparatively recent, it was not, as it had been yesterday when they appeared for the first time before me, the impression of the group but the group itself that had been lacking in clearness. Then those children, still mere babies, had been at the elementary stage in their development when personality has not yet stamped its seal on each face. Like those primitive organisms in which the individual barely exists by itself, is constituted by the polypary rather than by each of the polyps that compose it, they were still pressed one against another. Sometimes one pushed her neighbor over, and then a giggle, which seemed the sole manifestation of their personal life, convulsed them all together, obliterating, merging those imprecise and grinning faces in the congealment of a single cluster, scintillating and tremulous.

*Marcel Proust, A l’ombre des jeunes filles en fleur* (550)
This project proposes to examine two fluid nodes in a largely unexplored topography in modernist studies. The first is the oddly unremarked Ovidianism of Marcel Proust’s *A la recherche du temps perdu* and its significance for a more queerly nuanced account of a modernist Ovid. The second is the equally unnoticed Darwinism of a twentieth-century Ovid and its significance for a more pluralized, more agile critical encounter with evolutionary studies as currently practiced, as well as the many “new materialisms” that have used the strange allure of object-oriented-ontology as their central departure.

The questions it asks are two: First, how to address the long critical silence on an Ovidian Proust in the broader canon of international modernism? The question seems particularly important, especially when the *Metamorphoses* can be shown as integral to the *Search’s* most overtly Ovidian volume, *In the Shadow of Young Girls in Flower* (1919). Yet the same question can be asked of the equally Ovidian landscapes that structure the Combray of *Swann’s Way* (1913), as well as the explicitly Perseid story of Albertine’s abduction and flight that comprise *The Captive* (1923) and *The Fugitive* (1925) and reach their dénouement in the novel’s final volume, *Time Regained*. (1927)

Secondly, how best to approach a similar critical silence on an evolutionarily inflected Ovid, and how would addressing such a question help rethink the impact of a
Darwinian Ovid on the larger moment of modernity? The question seems salient, particularly after the end of the nineteenth century and the fin-de-siècle when one might argue that Ovidian forms, shapes, images, and motifs find some of their most productive encounters with expressly Darwinian and evolutionary art forms in the various objects, architectural details, and interior ensembles usually grouped under proto-modern Symbolist, Art Nouveau and Jungenstil styles. While a nineteenth-century Darwinism has been exhaustively treated in terms of its pervasive influence on such writers as George Eliot, Charles Dickens, and Thomas Hardy, the lack of any serious investigation into the possibility of a post-Darwinian, specifically twentieth-century Ovid seems all the more puzzling, given the evident interest of modernist poets and writers in both Darwin’s Origin (1859) and Descent (1871), as well as in explicitly Ovidian metamorphoses and bodily change. Indeed, the critical scotoma is all the more difficult to explain since the recent resurgence of Ovidian studies, not least in modernist areas.

As Sarah Annes Brown has said in her The Metamorphoses of Ovid from Chaucer to Ted Hughes (1999), the whole of the nineteenth century has been typically viewed as a period of critical eclipse in the reception of Ovid (Brown, 155) – a lacuna that ends, according to critical consensus, with the rise of a distinctly modernist Ovidianism that tracks the canonical ascendancy of works by Eliot, Pound and others, and which continues to proliferate across disciplines in music, opera, fine arts, painting and the avant-gardes of Dada and Surrealism. Indeed, in what has become a commonplace in Ovidian studies, critics such as Theodore Ziolkowski (2005), Lynn Enterline (2000), and others have announced a new Aeta Ovidia
distinctly postmodernist in tone, and which luxuriates in a spate of recent translations, theatrical productions and critical explorations that include re-examinations of the *Tristia* in terms of exile literature and post-colonialism; feminist re-appropriations and re-readings of the *Art of Love* and the *Heroides*; full-length studies of the *Metamorphoses* that have dealt with New Historical intersections of body and voice; Lacanian and feminist analyses of language and the gendered body; as well as any number of recent studies that employ the wide range of theoretical positionings that have characterized studies in English and comparative literature during the last twenty years. Yet any sustained dialogue between Ovidians and biological or eco-critical thought remains largely unexplored.

In order to enlarge that Ovidianism, then, it seems a logical question to ask how a modernist Ovid might also be involved with comparably modernist and modern questions of evolutionary development, the origin of species, and degeneration. How might an early twentieth-century Ovidianism be read through an approach to organismal change that takes into account the wide array of early twentieth-century evolutionary notions of species, extinction, phyletic change and hybridity, particularly in the years before the eventual re-emergence and consolidation of Mendelian genetics? What accounts of evolutionary and material change become available through an Ovidian study that attempts to think in broader terms than the usual rubrics of fitness, degeneration, and the imaginative dysphorias and anxieties those ideas have historically produced? What happens when we introduce Ovid to our own modern imbroglios (the term is Bruno Latour’s) that mix up humans and nonhumans
indiscriminately (Latour, 7), and yet still retain the eroding wall between “nature” and “culture”?

This project suggests that rather than working independently or in isolation from Darwinism and neo-Darwinian concepts of evolution, a modernist Ovid might instead be considered indexical to an entire range of evolutionary attitudes – particularly when one considers the broad accounts of metamorphic, organismal change both at the fin-de-siècle and immediately proceeding the period of High Modernism. Indeed, it would seem remarkable if the Ovid of the modernists – the Ovid of Pound and Joyce, Eliot, Woolf and Proust – had somehow passed unscathed through the rich confusion of late nineteenth-century evolutionary discourse; or that the notion of metamorphic change long associated with Ovid should re-emerge in twentieth-century modernist discourse untouched or largely uninflected by Darwinian ideas. While the Ovidianism of Eliot and Pound has usually been treated as independent of any evolutionary or Darwinian inflection, one might argue instead that both Pound’s and Eliot’s use of Ovid is not unrelated to the evolutionary stances of both writers, not least in their critical writings. Using recent reappraisals of modernism made by such writers as Michael Levensen, Louis Menand, Donald J. Childs and Colleen Lamos, I hope to show that the evolutionary anxieties that Darwinism produced in Eliot, Pound and Lewis surface in what Childs has identified as Eliot’s eugenical stance in the “The Waste Land” (1922) and the early poetry – a stance that resonates with a particularly punitive use of Ovidian metamorphosis that writers such as Proust and Woolf largely avoid in favor of more radical accounts of evolutionary change.
I’m also interested in exploring what critical positions have become available for the study of an evolutionary Ovid in a post-Mendelian world as well, particularly during the last decade or so, when contemporary evolutionary theory begins to explore in a broader array of directions that move away from what Evelyn Fox Keller (2002, 2003), Eva Jablonka (2005), Susan Oyama (2000a, 2000b, 2003), and others have identified as the genocentric positions usually associated with the idea of the “selfish gene” and other, largely sociobiological and pan-adaptive approaches. These directions are not dissimilar to the rich, discursively diverse and diffuse “new materialisms” of Bruno Latour, Timothy Morton, Graham Harmon, Jane Bennett, Samantha Frost, Diane Coole and Ian Bogost. What might these new ontologies have to say about the status of the metamorphic Ovidian object and its relationship to what Bennett has called “the quarantines of matter and life” that have unduly characterized our thinking about materiality, not least concerning evolutionary ideas? How do such traditional dualisms further “encourage us to ignore the vitality of matter and the lively powers of material formations” (Bennett, vii), and how might an evolutionary Ovid help in stepping aside from such dichotomies and their sequelae? As Samantha Frost and Diane Coole point out in their *New Materialisms* (2010), western ideas about materiality have remained largely indebted to the Cartesian proposition of a measurable, quantifiable and inert nature that provided the foundation for both Euclidian geometry and Newtonian physics. (Coole and Frost, 7)

The corollary of this calculable natural world was not, as one might have expected, a determinism that renders human agency an illusion but a sense of mastery bequeathed to the thinking subject: the *cogito* […] that Descartes
identified as ontologically other than matter. In distinction from the passivity of matter, modern philosophy has variously portrayed humans as rational, self-aware, free, and self-moving agents [...] The Cartesian-Newtonian understanding of matter thereby yields a conceptual and practical domination of nature as well as a specifically modern attitude or ethos of subjectivist potency. (Coole and Frost, 8)

As Ian Bogost has pointed out, “All such moves consider being a problem of access, and human access at that. Quentin Meillassoux has coined the term correlationism to describe this view, one that holds that being exists only as a correlate between mind and soul. If things exist, they do so only for us” (Bogost, 4). In this way, “theory has attempted to be multifarious and complex, but the natural or material world is only ever permitted to be singular” (Ibid.). Both contemporary evolutionary discourse and these new materialisms rethink such questions of human mastery, exchanging a world of dead matter and human minds for a world of “open capacities or potencies” that emerge within a multitude of organic and social processes in which “there is no definite break between sentient and nonsentient entities,” no divide between the realms of “matter” and “culture.” (Ibid.)

These and other directions have only begun to complicate and enrich older notions of adaptation, fitness and inheritance and move instead towards a plurality of evolutionary thinking, including ideas of epigenesis and multiple systems of inheritance as well as new, frankly bizarre object ontologies that have done much to open and aerate the complex intersections of C. P. Snow. As Keller, Oyama and other writers such as Judith Roof have made clear, the words gene, genome, gene action, genetic program, genetic engineering have all contributed to what amounts to
an edifice of popular (mis)understanding. Indeed, “The image of genes as clear and
distinct casual agents, constituting the basis of all aspects of an organism’s life, has
become so deeply embedded in both popular and scientific thought that it will take far
more than good intentions, diligence or conceptual critique to dislodge it” (Keller,
2002, 136). However,

New kinds of data gathered over the last few decades have dramatically
fleshed out our understanding of the parts played by genes in cellular and
organic processes, and in doing so they have made it increasingly apparent
how far the weight of such a load exceeds what any one single entity can
reasonably be expected to bear, and hence, how appropriate that it be
distributed among many different players in the game of life. Indeed, even
taking these burdens separately, evolution has apparently seen fit to distribute
each of these among a variety of players. (145)

In other words, “[t]he presence of a character in all or most members of a species
depends on the distribution of sufficient developmental interactants, nothing more or
less” (Oyama, 2000a, 179).

Opposing genetic to environmental factors as explanations for universals
makes sense only under the theory of genes and environment as alternative
sources of phenotypic form (rather than alternative sources of phenotypic
variation). Similarly, the attempt to divide behavior that is variable in a
species into that which is formed by conditional genetic instructions and that
which is explicable by historical accident threatens to erect another three-
quarter house on the nature-nurture course […] Once the questions themselves
are separated and articulated, it becomes clear what sorts of things one would have to find out in order to answer them, and the irrelevance of concepts of genetic encoding of phenotypes becomes even clearer. What are presented as queries about kinds of development or about correct characterization of behavior are seen again and again to be questions about the variability and evolutionary history of organism-environment complexes. (179)

As Oyama explains, “it is not the ultimate a priori that is the Holy Grail here, but the nature of successive ones under various conditions. ‘A priori’ in this sense simply means that which is ‘given’ at any particular moment and which provides the organizing framework for subsequent interactions” (181). Seen in these terms, “Both ontology and phylogeny thus depend on ecologically embedded developmental systems [...] [i]n contrast to the sharp distinction between organism and environment found in narrower views of selection” (183).

With such ideas at its fore, this project contends that it is simply myopic – even wrong – to think about heredity and evolution solely in terms of an isolated or autonomous genetic object; wrong to view genetic inheritance as a simple matter of one-way transmission that acts on an always distinct and passive “environment” with no recursivity or significant epigenetic characteristics; wrong, as biologists Eva Jablonka and Marion Lamb have pointed out, to think of “the popular conception of the gene as a simple causal agent” (Jablonka and Lamb, 6); wrong, as evolutionist Richard C. Lewontin puts it, to think that anything other than “bad biology” is needed “to describe some aspects of the organism as resulting from environmental influence and some the result of genetic effects” (in Oyama, 2000b, xiv).
There are no “gene actions” outside environments, and no “environmental actions” can occur in the absence of genes. The very status of environment as a contributing cause to the nature of an organism depends on the existence of a developing organism. Without organisms there may be a physical world, but there are no environments. In like manner no organisms exist in the abstract without environments, although there may be naked DNA molecules lying in the dust. Organisms are the nexus of external circumstances and DNA molecules that make these physical circumstances into causes of development in the first place. They become causes only at their nexus, and they cannot exist as causes except in their simultaneous action. (Ibid.)

Indeed, “for the most part, the relationship between genes and phenotypes is nothing that straightforward; the ubiquity of epistasis and pleiotropy, combined with the complex systems of epigenetic inheritance that research is uncovering, suffice to make any view that takes the gene as causally central at the level of informal selection and fitness untenable.” Even if a gene that spreads through a given population can be associated with a particular trait, it “does not imply that the gene is itself the target of selection” (Pigliucci and Kaplan, 74). Instead, the phenotype is directly constructed by a complex distributed agency, not transmitted by a single, controlling object. In Pigliucci and Kaplan’s terms,

While the conceptual distinction between those things inherited across generations and the phenotypes that interact with the world has a long history, [...] any sharp distinction between replicators and interactors [has] outlived its usefulness. Replication itself demands, in general, the organism’s ability to
interact. Genomes do not ‘self-replicate’; rather, their replication requires the coordinated actions of a cell, and the replication of a cell requires, at the very least, a complete cell situated in and interacting with the right kind of environment. There is, therefore, no way to distinguish in general between the things that are replicated, the things that do the replicating, and the things that interact. (80)

More candidly, “There is no question in our minds that the modern synthesis – although extremely useful and historically productive – is in need of some major reworking. We aren’t the only ones to suggest this. In the last few years, books by biologists such as Stephen Jay Gould, Mary Jane West-Eberhard, Eva Jablonka and Marion Lamb […] have repeatedly attempted to outline what might be necessary for the next major development of modern evolutionary theory” (264). Thus, “We can abandon our quest for the correct answer to the problem and focus instead on which boundaries we ought to embrace for which purposes” (224). To do otherwise is to ignore “an increasingly large and robust body of literature that points to a more nuanced and pluralistic view not only of species concept, but also – consequently, one might argue – of speciation modes” as well as developmental resources, the role of adaptation, and the Allmacht of environment in all its many forms, scales and instantiations (225).

It is, then, this radical, simultaneous braiding of genetic place and genetic object that seems to me the most productive nexus for a Proustian/evolutionary/Ovidian account of metamorphic change. As Peter J. Bowler has pointed out in The Eclipse of Darwinism (1992), the eventual and emergent consensus in favor of the sort of nuclear preformationism identified by Keller,
Oyama, Roof and Lewontin has been a largely Anglo-American phenomenon, and has worked in conjunction with rigorously selectionist and adaptationist ideas to form the three foundations of what would become a primarily gene-centric view of evolutionary change in the twentieth century. Most continental approaches to genetics never developed a hardline stance against Lamarckianism and non-Darwinian ideas. French evolutionists never succeeded in gaining a rigorous or exclusive place for genetics in the French academic system. So too in Germany: the increasingly rigid institution of genetics never prevented other, non-gene-centered ideas like cytoplasmic inheritance. Consequently, research into heredity never became alienated from paleontology, field studies, and embryology as it had in England and America (Bowler, 273).

According to Bowler, the orthodoxy of adaptation and natural selection was anything but assured at this time, particularly if we understand evolutionary thought as a pre-Synthesis discourse in which selection and adaptationalism had yet to take precedence over more pluralized accounts of evolution that stressed non-adaptational accounts of metamorphic change, and which also included a wide variety of heterodox evolutionary accounts such as saltationism, orthogenesis, structural constraints, recapitulation, neo-Lamarckianism, and other accounts that enriched or made plural the relationship of organism to place. The result was a pre-synthesis evolutionary milieu large and fluid enough to provide for a wide variety of approaches to evolutionary change that neither rigorously centered on adaptationism as the only plausible means of selection, nor on genetic models of “the dominant cell” as articulated by Pound and Lewis.
This is the evolutionary mileu in which Proust wrote, and which can be usefully contrasted with the emergent Anglophone emphasis on design, adaptation and function. Yet one must also be careful not to simply oppose a fluid, continental or French approach to a monolithic British tradition; both Eliot and Pound had formational French sources across a wide range of poets and artists; and Proust had his beloved English novelists and Anglophone writers, including Charles Dickens, George Eliot, Thomas Hardy and Ralph Waldo Emerson. What, then, might distinguish a corrective, eugenic account of evolutionary change as seen in Eliot and Pound – particularly in light of their experience with continental and Francophone ideas – and the more fluid, less anxious accounts of metamorphic change that can be seen in Proust, who had his own intellectual influences from both French and Anglophone sources?

Projects arise from books that are written and read, but they also arise because the book one wants to read goes missing or can’t be found, or perhaps has never been written in the first place. This project began with a similar, itchy desire. Where were the volumes on Proust and Ovid? Where were the studies on Ovidian and Darwinian metamorphosis? What might be the significance of such an exploration – not only for a modernist Ovid, but also for an evolutionary criticism that might more usefully reflect the current richness of contemporary evolutionary thought? Both early and late, what might a nongenetic – that is to say, a nongenocentric – criticism begin to look like? And how might an Ovidian Proust help make such a criticism possible?
It is, perhaps, somewhat perverse to think of Ovid and evolution. For all its insistence on individual eroticism, something relentlessly nonreproductive and nongenital surrounds most of the poem’s metamorphoses. Bodies reproduce in a process of dispersal and multiplication, as if embodiment were not necessarily a process negotiated between individuals, but also an act of less individualized, nonhuman exfoliation imbricated with animality, environments, artifacts, vegetation: a generous, profligate and above all excessive metamorphosis not unlike the longing for other organs Proust expresses in the narrator’s famous kiss with Albertine.

As I hope to show, these sites of change and its vicissitudes make the larger project of a dispersed Ovidian metamorphosis and an epigenetic Darwinism allometric with the idea and practice of Proustian change. This approach foregrounds the contingency and accident that also occur with waste, excess, and nonreproductive modes of inheritance; but it also braids together the several powers of objects, place and habit to produce an emergent material/evolutionary object that is queerly positioned within adaptationist or genocentric narratives.

Morever, this placing of queerness in an animal, organic past becomes less a return to – or an instantiation of – a feminine, gynophobic fluidity in need of correction or control and instead foregrounds the porousness of animal/inanimate/human lives in a sort of spreading and connected laterality. Rather than the telos of epic sweep or the providential pull of Vergil’s Aeneid, Ovidian mock-epic narrative motion produces its own divergent ideas of progress and origins, endlessly recontextualizing them into something like a lateralizing and paratactic map
that explodes and disrupts any linear notion of progress itself – even as it purports to
spin its unbroken narrative thread, “right down to the present day” (Mandelbaum, 1).

Reading that lateralizing movement as a sort of contingent, accidental
evolutionary dynamic avant la lettre, one can see the extended Ovidian joke on the
progression of Vergilian epic, heroism and mastery. In Ovid, the notion of an
unproblematic and continuous march from primordial chaos to the apotheosis of
Julius and Augustus is endlessly ironized, complicated, confused and diverted. In the
same way, an unproblematic ascent (or descent) through the stages of aristocracy is
also disrupted by Proust: a state of affairs corroborated by the wreckage of snobs in
the Search as much as by their eventual success. In either case, any actual origin (of
species, or anything else) becomes problematic in both authors, since the very notion
of what might count as a species or an individual changes for each, as illustrated by
the usually incoherent attempt in the novel to delineate a species itself, whether of the
invert or the denizens of the Faubourg Sainte-Germain. My hope instead is to move
athwart, however partially, any rubric of rigidly adaptational, genetically reductive
and bounded concepts of what might constitute an adequate description of the
evolutionary individual, and thus toward the open, lateralizing areas of what else we
might know about metamorphic change and evolution in the modernist moment, as
well as in modernism’s postmodern and posthuman sequels.

There is, then, not one or two things this project hopes to do, but many. Yet if
the point-blank barrel of an introduction’s gunpoint had to finally find its target, I
would have to say that it is a fascination with objects and their vissícitudes that all
these writers and works share. This fascination often arises from the profound
importance of the Proustian and Ovidian sense of place as a site of what Jane Bennett and other object-ontologists have described as a busy, disruptive world of *actants* and *assemblages*, both human and nonhuman, that work to hold the chiasmic connections of such a project together (Bennett, ix). Put another way, this project attempts to address what it means to be an object, a *thing* – especially what it might mean for something, some *thing, to take place*, with all the multiplicity, plurality and deviance such an event implies. This includes its various and lively nonhuman and environmental participants; its Copernican decentering of human consciousness and agency; its disinterest in dichotomy or dualism as useful heuristics; and its own event-like characterization. If it is more accurate in every way to say that what gets “passed on” in an act of inheritance is not a genome but, as Susan Oyama says, “a genome and a piece of the world,” then an evolutionary/material Ovid – like an evolutionary and object-oriented Proust – is perhaps not only perverse, but productively so.

And yet, despite all these parities, the enormous seductions of a reductive DNA and its gene-like analogs continue to perform incalculable work in fixing ideas of the innate. By offering the tantalizing idea of a genetic code that can be cracked, for example, other preformational analogies arise, including the compact, easily assimilated unfussiness of the notion of pre-existing blueprints or plans, genetic programs or software – that is to say, *any* projected entities that can be thought to control or produce a preformational morphology. These and similar ideas serve as powerful if sometimes unexamined metaphors for the persistent idea of an intelligent “inside” that works on a largely dumb and malleable “outside.” As Phillipe Descola has said, while no contemporary biologist would agree to any naïve division between
vehicle and replicator, the hegemonic dominance of what he calls *naturalism* still structures most discussions about what is “natural” and what is “cultural”:

> It is the formula that we learn at school. That the various media transmit, and that learned thought elaborates and comments upon: humans are distributed among collectives that are distinguished from one another by their respective languages and customs, in other words, their cultures, and that exclude anything that exists independently of them – that is, nature. (Descola, 256)

Dichotomies like these preserve and perpetuate a one-directional dynamic that makes the “nature” half of our chronic nature/nurture divide the business end of what is still a lop-sided and unequal partnership. Such a partnership continues to produce gene-like mechanisms that have dominated the discourse and tone of most writing on the subject (Oyama, 2000b). As Evelyn Fox Keller has said, even before the word gene is coined, “it enters with the supposition that underlying each individual trait is a heredity unit so stable that its stability can account for the reliability with which such traits are transcribed through the generators” (Keller, 2000, 14).

As all these writers tend to ask, however, what does it mean to inherit? “How often do we accurately transmit even a single complex idea to a student or a colleague, and what else must be in place for this to be even thinkable? And what would it mean to transmit a ‘single idea’ in isolation? Something is judged to have been transmitted when it appears, through who knows what processes, in the ‘recipient’” (Oyama, 2000b, 195). Even the word “inherit” tends to summon ideas of receiving something by bequest that fit awkwardly with more pluralized notions of “passing on” a morphology, structure, or developmental conditions. “Development
and evolution are linked by the differential passing on” of the means of development, “or that which is responsible for development; but the genes do not exhaustively define this category” (Oyama, 2000a, 145). Even those biologists who argue for an “interactivist” approach often propose that phenotypes arise as the joint, quantitatively calculated creation of a reified genetic agent and a separate, sundered environment – a solution that hopes to formulate a quantitative answer to almost every question: where intelligence, for example, is calibrated “to be” 55 or 75 percent genetic, with the rest of its developmental freight taken up by a corresponding factor of 40 or 25 percent “from the environment.” As Oyama and others have said, “Such maneuvers do not resolve the nature/nature debate: They continue it” (Oyama, et al., 2001, 1).

At least in the popular mind, the selfishly reproducing gene and its analogs inscribe a dichotomous, oppositional rubric of inside/outside, as well as an ultra-adaptational stance that privileges function and coded inheritance in heteronormalizing and binary terms that have become part of the interminable nature/culture divide addressed by contemporary object materialists, and which provides the engine for the profuse Latourian hybrids and monsters of We Have Never Been Modern (1991), as well as the various beasteries of other object ontologists like Timothy Morton or Ian Bogost. To make matters more confused, the ongoing reductive debate about the status and explanatory power of Dawkinesque “replicators” that control robot-like “vehicles” has continued to multiply the numbers of replicators as well, including, on one familiar level, the ultra-selfish replication of gene-meme analogs that inhabit or “possess” the mind in another replication of tiny but powerful agents that work their effects on a largely passive set of “vehicles.”
Under such a powerful imperative, even the proliferation of created, transgenerational artifacts such as nests and burrows noted by Kim Sterelny (2003) and Jablonski and Lamb (2006) can be seen to act as if they could improve their own chances of appearing in the next generation by “selfishly” serving as useful objects to their own inhabitants: “a still more raucous and motley crowd of squabbling replicators” (Oyama, 2000b, 204). Along with genes, enzymes, chromosomes and the organismal body, such transgenerational artifacts would include the pendulous woven nests of orioles, the three-dimensional, underground matrix of tunnels passed on by sub-Saharan mole-rats, and the portable, habitable bricolage of caddisfly larvae. “Small wonder that this style of evolutionary writing has given rise to worries about the possibility, even the coherence, of cooperation, as well as about the more general implications of evolution for human lives” as well as the unhuman. (Oyama, 2000b, 196) Moreover, such “selfish-gene talk […] seems an aspect of a more general evolutionary machismo directed against anyone foolish enough to think that nature (or humanity) is nice” (Oyama, 2000b, 204). As Oyama concludes, “Nature may not always be nice, but people can be;” and to see “niceness” as an always-already explained strategy of selfishness may say more about the small-mindedness of the theory than its descriptive usefulness. “The risk that we will see humans as being driven by the self-interested replicators that ‘infest’ their bodies and brains is somewhat diluted if burrows and nests can be replicators, too. But crowds of contentiously quarreling quasi-agents may not be the best basis for an adequate view of human life. We are left with more competitors, not a different view of competition” (Ibid.).
Concerned with both modernism and Latour’s “moderns,” then, this project begins with modernism and ends in “modernity”: that is to say, it begins with a familiar, international “High Modernism” and ends with Latour’s anthropological-sociological description of a set of divisive and dichotomous practices that firmly divide the human from the nonhuman. To borrow Jane Bennett’s words, it too “hazards an account of materiality” in which “human being and thinghood overlap [and] slip-side into each other” as evolutionary (and Ovidian) objects tend to do. Indeed, “One moral of the story is that we are also nonhuman and that things, too, are vital players in the world” (Bennett, 4).

These are differences that “need to be flattened,” in John Frow’s terms – that is, “read horizontally as a juxtaposition rather than vertically as a hierarchy of being.” This particular “juxtaposition” or adjacency allows the reader “to begin to experience the relationship between persons and other materialities more horizontally” and “take a step toward a more ecological sensibility” (in Bennett, 10). As I hope to show, such juxtaposition also helps to produce a side-by-side critical practice that is spatial and paratactic in its readings rather than hierarchic; permissive rather than corrective or punitive in its effects; and open to error and its excesses as part of the necessary ground for change rather than its scandalous obstacle and stumbling block. As Bennett points out, geneticism can be considered as another “trope of fixity” – the habituated ideas that anchor the rhetorical work of materiality in “some stable or rock-bottom reality, something adamantine” (56), where “any ‘formative’ power must be external to a brute, mechanical matter” (Ibid.).
The aim here is to rattle the adamantine chain that has bound materiality to inert substance and that has placed the organic across a chasm from the inorganic. The aim is to articulate the elusive idea of a materiality that is itself heterogeneous, itself a differential of intensities, itself a life. In this strange, vital materialism, there is no point of pure stillness, no indivisible atom that is not itself aquiver with virtual force.” (57)

Thus, this project finds itself among the moderns, thoroughly skeptical of each other’s modernisms, correcting, sorting, rooting out defections, strengthening allies, producing manifestos, revising and revisiting, squabbling with each other as they simultaneously seek support and new connections. Indeed, this range of affect and tonalities – reveling in “fiction and paradox, sometimes veering into flippancy” – characterizes much of the celebratory, exploratory work of OOO. These “not quite bodies” (Bennett), this “quirky stuff”, these “actants” (Latour) and “assemblages” (Harmon) are more than simply resources or commodities to be used or exploited, and point instead to other relations between the human and the nonhuman “worlds.” As Bennett says, “This same-stuff claim, this insinuation that deep down everything is connected and irreducible to a simple substrate resonates with an ecological sensibility,” but one that “posits neither a smooth harmony of parts nor a diversity unified by a common spirit” (Bennett, xi).

Instead, as Michel Serres says in The Birth of Physics (2001), this is a “turbulent, immanent field in which various and variable materialities collide, congeal, morph, evolve and disintegrate” (xi), a vital materialism unconnected to either a simplistic “vitalist” tradition, or any “outside” or “that can enter and animate a physical body.”
More than a constructivism, then, whether cultural or linguistic, that tends to underscore human power and mastery over what Bennett calls “thing-power” or the “out-side,” – this is a materialism that looks past largely masculinist fantasies of genetic authority to find instead the strange, excessive liveliness of “the thing formerly known as an object.” (xvi)

In Part One I suggest that the eugenic, evolutionary stance found in many accounts of early modernism is characteristic of what Colleen Lamos identifies as Eliot’s corrective criticism (17) – a critical stance that in turn is related to a punitive, Dantesque Ovid not only characteristic of the early poetry, but which surfaces in the late Quartets as well. Through readings of “The Waste Land” and the critical apparatus developed in The Sacred Wood, I hope to show that what Lamos characterizes as Eliot’s project to root out and correct “error” is related to what Donald Childs has identified as his eugenicism in his Modernism and Eugenics: Woolf, Eliot and Yeats, and the Culture of Degeneration (2001). This presents itself as an evolutionary anxiety that can be seen in Eliot’s handling of the Ovidian stories from Books III and VI of the Metamorphoses, including his use of Tiresias in both “The Waste Land” and in the poem’s much-discussed footnotes. So too, by examining the critical stances of The Sacred Wood and “Tradition and the Individual Talent” (1920), I suggest how Eliot’s eugenic stance works with rigorously adaptational ideas of fitness and how both can be seen as resonant with the increasing hegemony of Mendelian genetics as a sufficient explanation of evolutionary, organismal change and stasis.
In a similar fashion, I also explore the Poundian use of the *Metamorphoses*, particularly the ways Pound uses the Theban Cycle of stories from Book III, including the stories of Cadmus and his family, as well as the Bacchus material that Pound uses and reworks in “Canto II” in *The Cantos of Ezra Pound* (1970). As with Eliot’s eugenicism, Pound’s Ovid can be seen as equally corrective, authoritarian, Dantean and disciplinary. This Ovidianism is less a nostalgia for pre-Darwinian accounts of metamorphosis and change than it is a use of Ovidian change that includes an understanding of Darwin, particularly when that Darwinism is seen as an eugenic corrective to a dangerous metamorphic excess.

Such a Darwinism also resonates with what might be considered as Pound’s proto-genetic search for a discrete, reductive center of authority, variously named as “image,” “vortex,” “master cell,” or “blastoderm” – all of which can be seen as analogous to the re-emergence of an authoritative Mendelian genetics, as well as other similarly structured centers of nucleus-like authority important to the “Men of 1914.” Arguing that the history of Pound’s search for a discrete, reified object-like center of control can be seen as complementary to what I call Eliot’s eugenical critical practice, I hope to show that both Eliot’s eugenical concerns and Pound’s search for the “master cell” are based on similar strategies that can be allied to biological reductiveness and control. This reductiveness can be related to a distinctly modern anxiety over “thingness” – what Luke Menand has identified as “Problems About Objects” (29), and which can be seen in the increasingly object-like status of such modernist terms as “impression,” “sensation,” “symbol,” Wyndam Lewis’s “vortex” and Pound’s “image” or “radiant cluster.” As Menand has persuasively demonstrated,
such an objectification takes the form of an anxious shearing away of what he calls a dangerous Paterian “surplusage” (58-59) – a queerly decadent and metamorphic excess that both Eliot’s essay on “Tradition and the Individual Talent” and the authoritarianism of Pound’s “vortex” and “radiant cluster” attempt to delimit and control. This results in a particularly volatile modernist Ovidianism of highly charged evolutionary anxieties that most often draw on explicitly biological forms and images.

The modernist object of Pound and Eliot, then, can be considered as intimately related to what might be called the emergent genetic object of the early twentieth century – not least because of the reification that characterizes both as discrete objects, but also because each must be defended against Menand’s dangerous “Paterian surplusage”: a surplus that for both writers is most often identified with a dangerously labile metamorphosis. I argue that this dangerous lability is precisely what Eliotic and Poundian criticism seeks to correct, and that such a correction often takes the form of each poet’s “Ovidianism.” The result is a specifically Eliotic/Poundian Ovid where the idea of Dantean punishment is seen as paramount, and which becomes further encapsulated – even codified – in a critical practice that eventually culminates in the surprisingly gene-like status of the New Critical object. Indeed, as Mendelian genetics coalesced with August Weismann’s idea of the sequestered “germ plasm” (Ruse and Travis, 909) as the sole agents of inheritance in what is often referred to as the Modern Synthesis (Huxley, 1942) of evolution and genetics in the 1930s and 40s, the New Critical object emerges as something strikingly similar: an object that is Mendelian in its gene-like austerity and Weismannian in its isolation from the contingencies of time and place.
In contrast, by examining the various metamorphic objects of Proust’s novel in Part Two, I hope to show both the plurality and porousness of what constitutes the “genetic object” in Proust – as well as the uncanniness of Proustian ontology – not only as regards the much-discussed madeleine, (too often read as the singular, genetic object of the *Search*), but also the panoply of lively, errant objects that include the particularly important metamorphic/evolutionary image of Golo, projected by magic lantern on the narrator’s bedroom walls. Other objects include the directly metamorphic body of the sleeping narrator and its various transformations in its variously constituted rooms; the nutritive objects of Aunt Léonie’s bedroom (particularly as described by René Girard, 1961); and the larger nutritive matrix that takes the form of the Church of Saint-Hilaire. Indeed, in Part Two of this project, I look at the whole of Combray as an implicitly epigenetic (as well as explicitly genetic) environment, particularly if we see the epigenetic in C. H. Waddington’s classic terms as an “epigenetic landscape” (Ruse and Travis, 898-899) broadly concerned with the importance of factors and environments in any “genetic” event: an “outer” or *epi*-genetics that is implicitly Ovidian in its focus on place as constitutive, and which therefore makes the separation of a genetic “object” from its “place” a species of Ovidian violence against the *genius loci*. In this way, the Ovidian hawthorns that people the landscape of Combray as local deities prefigure the vastly more explicit Ovidian landscape of Balbec-by-the-sea. There, the household gods of Combray become the Ovidian/evolutionary “monsters and gods” of the Grand Hotel, where a would-be Perseid narrator encounters a band of girls who appear as a kind of collective seaside Andromeda, simultaneously Medusa and *méduse*: both a collective,
evolutionary organism and an Ovidian petite bande of turbaned bacchantes and adolescent gorgons.

In both landscapes I not only hope to explore what I call Proust’s evolutionary Ovidianism and the pluralizing of the genetic object, I also hope to show what I consider Proust’s queering of adaptational utility: not only his concerns with materiality and objects, but also his use of what evolutionists Stephan Jay Gould and Elisabeth Vrba have called exaptation and what Timothy Morton, following Graham Harmon, has called the withdrawn — that is to say, the unexpected and surprising use of biological structures and behaviors that have no predetermined or exclusive function. As such, I attempt to show that exaptation releases the lock-and key model of an always-known adaptational fit to an explicit queering of purpose in which the value of the Proustian object is measured by its ability to deviate, to allow for the new and the unexpected.

Indeed, this idea of exaptation becomes particularly useful when examining both Proustian topographies and Ovidian narratives in light of the “new materialisms” mentioned above, especially when one examines the productive network of novel, hybrid objects that arise in no predetermined or predictable arrangement. As I intend to argue, in contrast to the rigid adaptationism of the Eliotic and Poundian object, it is the idea of hybridity that makes the Metamorphoses so useful as a distinctly “modern” work in terms that Bruno Latour and object-oriented-ontologists might use: it both instantiates and critiques its own “modernity.” Instead of exercising what Latour calls a premodern caution in creating a roster of monsters that cannot be successfully integrated into a natural order, I argue that the Metamorphoses
foregrounds the sometimes distressingly cross-bred encounters that Latour has associated with the profligate modernity of our own day, better described as a world of networks that are “simultaneously real, like nature, narrated, like discourse, and collective, like society” (Latour, 6). This is a world of sometimes violent, sometimes mysterious objects that looks very much like the world produced by Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* and which rewrites Oyama’s cast of “squabbling, infectious replicators” as a fluid, metamorphic assemblage of actants and agents that produce more than narratives of competition, opposition, and inversion.

In a third and final section, I suggest that this excessive, profligate Ovidian/evolutionary fluidity can be seen as amenable to Lamos’s characterization of the more fluid and invertebrate modernism that haunts Pound’s hard-edged sculptural vorticism. In particular, this non-virile, fluid “modernism” can be seen in the ways Proust uses the rich stew of evolutionarily inflected and cross-disciplinary protomodern discourses that include a Franco-Anglophone Decadence, a transatlantic Symbolism, and the heterodox styles of *Jugenstil* and international Art Nouveau: all movements profoundly influenced by Darwin and evolutionary thought, and all particularly disposed to the “vibrant matter” of Bennett and others. Such movements not only serve as examples of late nineteenth-century appropriations of Ovidian motifs, they also serve as protomodern antecedents for a queerer modernist use of Ovid that, through writers such as Proust, H. D., Virginia Woolf and others, actively embraces Pound’s feminine marine “chaos,” and can be read productively as more accurately reflective of the welter of evolutionary images and ideas in a post-Origin period from roughly 1871 – 1925. I relate this organismal queerness to the vibrancy
and fluidity of Proust’s use of Art Nouveau and its similarities with object-orientated assemblage.

As Colleen Lamos has said in her recent study of the powerfully queer currents at work in the presumptively male, presumptively heteronormative modernist canon:

The writings of canonical male modernists were generated and inflected by homoerotic energies that they largely denied and by feminine identifications whose proximity to male self-constitution evoked both fantasies of escape from the strictures of masculinity and fears of same-sex desire. The Grishkins, Albertines, Brett Ashleys, Clara Dawses, and Molly Blooms who populate the texts of male writers in this period testify to their profound ambivalence toward women’s sexual and sociopolitical agency, an equivocal fascination with and revulsion from femininity. This ambivalence was lodged within the masculine psyche in the potential for male femininity, a possibility broached by sexology as a catastrophic potential in the form of sexual inversion. The convergence in the early twentieth century of women’s socioeconomic independence, of feminist political agitation, and of the discourses of sexology, psychology, and anthropology, among others, meant that women could be neither simply rejected nor elevated as absolutely “other” to man but that femininity and masculinity became mutually implicated, even imbricated within each other. The much-noted and oft-decried virilization of women at the same time had as its more disquieting corollary the effeminization of men
which, after the trial of Oscar Wilde, implied the homosexualization of same-sex male affection and bonds. (6)

One of the results of such an anxious (and anxiogenic) division of sexual labor was the stylistic division of modernist writers into a sort of sexual dimorphism — a dimorphism that found its antecedents in the modernist divergence of styles that Michael Levensen (Levensen, 48-50) has identified as traveling in two distinct directions before the First World War: First, an “egoist” direction associated with Ford Maddox Ford, and which claimed for itself a subjectivity that sought its truthfulness in a realism supposedly grounded in an impressionist aesthetics; and second, a more formalizing, hard-edged aesthetic that formed around what Levensen has identified as Hulmean principles of abstraction (98). In Lamos’s analysis, “The convergence of these two currents, after 1914, in Pound’s imagist program ensured that the mainstream of Anglo-American modernism would favor a formally precise, sculpted art along the lines of Lewis’s vorticism and Marinetti’s futurism, opposed to what the latter denounced as the ‘effeminacy’ and ‘sentimentality’ of contemporary English art.” (Lamos, 7) As Lamos points out, the eventual (if ambiguous) modernist distinction between an impressionism that found its most visible avatars in Proust and Woolf, and what she calls the “objective, abstract aesthetics” promulgated by Pound, Lewis and others demonstrates the very sexual dimorphism such a gendering of literary styles instantiates:

This gendering of literary styles served certain polemical purposes at the time and overlapped numerous other oppositions, including Jew/gentile and homo-/heterosexuality, sometimes in conflicting ways. The eponymous hero of
Lewis’s *Tarr* draws an evolutionary line between “lower” and “higher” forms of life; “everything beneath that line was female,” consisting of a “jellyfish diffuseness” spreading and oozing everywhere. Bonnie Kime Scott points out that both *Tarr* and Stephen Dedalus in Joyce’s *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* “place the female at the bottom of their conceptual hierarchies, with mud, vegetative material and animals.” Although in this imaginary scheme women are mired in a primordial muck, they also represented, for Lewis, Eliot, Pound, Lawrence, and many other modernists, an effete, overly refined literary culture that, according to Lewis, reduces art to a “pleasant tea-party.” If women are at once too primitive and too cultured, his vigorous efforts to de-aestheticize art, Lewis’s “blasting and bombardiering” assault on the prevailing bourgeois aesthetic ideology, took the form of asserting the virility of art. (Lamos, 7)

Such an assault also genders evolutionary arenas and actions, as Lamos takes note of Pound’s Canto 29, where “the female / Is an element, the female / Is a chaos / an octopus / a biological process,” while elsewhere for Pound the male is “the phallus or spermatozoid charging, head-on, the female chaos” in the same way that Pound himself identified with what he considered the phallic directive to make it new, “driving any new idea into the great passive vulva of London” (in Lamos, 8).

Drawing on the aesthetics of object-ontologists like Morton and Bennett, as well as the outpouring of queerly marine motifs by artists such as Odilon Redon, Alfred Binet, Emile Gallé, Antonio Gaudi, and the Art Nouveau plates of marine organisms by Ernest Haeckel, I place Proust’s evolutionary Ovidianism in the same stylistic
context that Françoise Leriche has placed the *Search*: that is to say, within the exuberant, excessive and queer surplus of Art Nouveau – particularly in its use of marine and organismal motifs that complicate and enrich what might be meant by “jellyfish diffuseness.” [fig. 1, 2, 3]

I also contrast Poundian dichotomies with the rich plurality of current object discourse. As such, this project seeks to present a queerly mobile site of organismal/Ovidian/evolutionary affordances not simply (or only) in terms of Pound’s inversive distinctions, but instead an organismal, biological space where prediscursive male and female positionalities can not only be exchanged for one another, they can be abandoned altogether in a desire for different bodies, other organs. Indeed, because of what might be called its strange invertebrate queerness, Proust’s *Search* provides a uniquely Ovidian, oddly nongenital Darwinism largely missing from more conventional modernist receptions of either Ovid or, for that matter, in the increasingly orthodox accounts of evolution as it moves toward its synthesis with genetic theory.

By exploring Proust’s singular alertness to the intimacies of object and place, such a study not only becomes congenial but helpful for a critical encounter with evolutionary ideas that decenter merely genetic systems of inheritance or adaptational strategies, as well as larger dichotomies that continue to characterize modern modes of thinking. As I argue in my final section, it is Proust’s singular insistence on the

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1 Numerals in brackets refer to figures and illustrations in the text.
Figure 1. Ernst Haeckel, *Discomedusae*, 1904 (Haeckel, 2004)
Ovidian *genius loci* and his exuberant Art Nouveau-like relationship of object and environment, person and thing that makes the *Search* a virtual rewriting of the *Metamorphoses* in unmistakably evolutionary and object-ontological terms. In short, I suggest that a discussion prompted by Proust’s singularly evolutionary Ovidianism provides a largely unexplored *rapprochment* between various accounts of metamorphic change that are usefully uninterested in merely gene-centered or dichotomous accounts of change. Indeed, this project takes seriously what one recent call for papers called the “vague, sad gap” that has sprung up between queer studies and evolutionary and contemporary ecocritical theory. It makes the suggestion that any discussion of a modernist Ovid is not only impoverished by the omission of a particularly Proustian Ovidianism, it is also impoverished by neglecting a particularly Proustian account of Darwinism that might also serve as a productively queer encounter with current evolutionary and materialist discourse.

Figures 2 and 3. Left: Hector Guimard, detail, table, circa 1900; right: Odilon Redon, *The Temptation of St. Antony*, 1896, detail (Schmutzler, 266)
Both as a cluster of overlapping practices and as a site of contemporary critical re-evaluation, modernism corrects with the same ferocity as it stands corrected. It both revises as its central activity and is itself the subject of revision. Indeed, it seems difficult to talk about almost any view of modernism without the accompanying concepts of error, revision and correction. A recent *New Yorker* piece by Louis Menand that provides a revisionist account of Ezra Pound’s influence on modernism is called “The Pound Error” (Menand, 2008), a title that presumably plays on – and possibly also corrects – Hugh Kenner’s earlier *The Pound Era* (1973). So too, Bonnie Kime Scott’s influential *Refiguring Modernism* (1996) suggests by its own title a corrective retracing or re-tabulation of earlier modernist models along feminist lines. In a similar way, Collen Lamos (1998) describes an errant and consequently corrective modernism as one of the distinguishing characteristics of an Eliotic, institutionalized critical practice that culminates in part with the professionalized affinities and dogmatic exclusions of a largely masculinist New Criticism – itself a late modernist production that began with its own revisionary and critical goals. As Lamos argues, the errant in Eliot is served by a critical practice of error and its
correction that takes the form of a “timeless determination to separate truth from error, to set the boundaries of criticism, to distinguish, in his words, a ‘genuine’ from ‘sham’ poetry, and to rank poets in their proper order” (Lamos, 19). Menand enjoins a similar analysis and critique in his re-evaluation of Eliot in his *Discovering Modernism* (2007).

Of all the many correctional practices associated with modernism, however, none so directly concern attempts at control and revision than those that center on issues of degeneration, evolutionary anxiety, and morphological change. Accounts of *fin-de-siècle* and early modernist change that have engaged in evolutionary discussions have usually centered almost exclusively on decadence and degeneration, a critical point of view that includes a large amount of popular evolutionary criticism, and which constitutes almost the entire corpus of an evolutionarily inflected criticism beginning with Remy de Gourmant and Paul Bourget, and including Richard Gillman’s *Decadence* (1979), Daniel Pick’s *Faces of Degeneration* (1993), Donald Child’s *Eugenics and Modernism* (2001), Charles Bernheimer’s *Decadent Subjects* (2002), Kelly Hurley’s *The Gothic Body* (2004), and Dana Seitler’s *Atavistic Tendencies: The Culture of Science in American Modernity* (2008). All largely center their arguments on questions of degeneration that address the threat of uncontrolled, errant biological change, or that use adaptational and selectionist arguments that have formed the basis for early twentieth-century eugenics. Even studies that deal with correction and error often do so in terms of biological images, even when their analysis is not explicitly or solely biological. As Lamos writes,
The opposition between truth and error, like other binaries such as good/evil and pure/impure, depends upon the absolute exclusion of the inferior term, yet the excluded term must also be presupposed as a deficiency – as a pathological, depraved, or aberrant version of the true, the good, or the pure. In other words, the operation of the true/false binary requires, on the one hand, the abjection of the false from the realm of the true (e.g., “genuine poetry”) and, on the other hand, the continued existence of the false as a flaw within that realm. The asymmetrical, or hierarchical position between truth and error in Eliot’s conceptual framework demands the ongoing purgation of errors that arise within literary discourse – as infinite inquisition. The boundary demarcating the interior of truth from its contaminating exterior must be constantly redrawn because error springs from within, as an internal alien, a fifth column, as in William Cowper’s “The Progress of Error,” an “insinuating worm” who “successfully conceals her loathsome form.” Error seems perversely fecund, constantly breeding new errors as though it were a female monster. Indeed, error has often been imagined as such in English poetry. Like Cowper’s “serpent error.” Spencer’s “Foul Error” in *The Fairie Queen* is an “ugly monster,”

> Half like a serpent horribly displayed

> But the other half did woman’s shape retain,

> Most loathsome, filthy, foul, and full of vile disdain.

> [...] of her there bred

> A thousand young ones, which she daily fed,
Sucking on her pois’ nous dugs.

(Lamos, 19-20)

What’s interesting about the passage is not only that it discusses what Lamos identifies as the errant, but that it uses multiple and pervasive images drawn from biology, even when, as in Lamos’s case, the argument is not explicitly biological or evolutionary. Like mutating cells, both “truth” and “error” are described as discrete and particular objects. Truth, with its contaminating exterior, must be constantly redrawn and subject to monitoring, biopsy, and removal. Errancy is pictured as “an internal alien,” but also a breeding multitude, a “fifth column” that is both suddenly legion and traitorous in the same way that the parasitic, the cystic or the infectious can suddenly threaten and overwhelm the healthy body. Error is a “serpent error,” biologically female and extravagantly fecund, an insinuating “worm” that reproduces without control.

This errant wandering across boundaries of health and disease, across explicit developmental stages, species, morphologies and sexual practices follows the same trajectory in Lamos’s argument laid down for Eliot’s “mature poet” who must negotiate the danger of lingering over immediate pleasures that bring the risk of the expression of a stunted and mature development of taste, and which finds its analogue in the anxious development of a normative reproductive sexuality. As both Menand and Lamos suggest, the cognates of such error include perversion, deviation, and digression: an errant wandering where, as Freud states in his *Three Essays*, “perversions are sexual activities which either (a) extend, in an anatomical sense, beyond the regions of the body that are designated for sexual union, or (b) linger over
the immediate relations to the sexual object which should normally be traversed rapidly on the path towards the final sexual aim,” which itself brings up normative questions of correct biological hygiene and a possibly threatening sexuality and its relationship to eugenic concerns of population control, low or excessive birth-rates, or sexual disease (in Lamos, 23). In Eliot’s words, “one error […] of eccentricity […] is to seek for new human emotions,” for “novelty in the wrong place,” in which the poet’s quest for the new “discovers the perverse.” (Eliot, 1920, 57)

As Menand points out regarding the essays in The Sacred Wood, critical judgements turn, as in Lamos’s analysis, on issues of exclusion and inclusion, the pure and the impure, the healthy and the diseased. The result in both analyses is the creation of a literary/biological object that must be defended, sequestered and eugenically controlled; this produces a critical practice that is itself inversive and eugenic – a practice that Memand refers to as Eliot’s “rhetoric of hygiene” and which Donald Childs identifies as expressly eugenic.

[T]he metaphor is sometimes neurological, sometimes psychological; sometimes – as in the case of Henry James’s mind – sexual; and the pieces collected in The Sacred Wood are filled with critical judgments that turn on this vocabulary’s key terms. Thus Coleridge’s “feelings are impure,” while Aristotle “had [no] impure desires to satisfy”; comparing the Education sentimentale to Vanity Fair shows us “that the labor of the intellect considered largely in a purification, in keeping out a great deal that Thackery allowed to remain in […] Elizabethan rhetoric “pervaded the whole organism; the healthy as well as the morbid tissues were built up on it”; Swinburne’s “intelligence is
not defective, it is impure”; and in Massinger we find an unrefined nervous system and the record of “the decay of the senses.” (Menand, 2007, 146)

In what is perhaps the most famous of these pieces, Eliot’s “Tradition and the Individual Talent”, novelty can only take place within a tradition that both confers authority and somehow requires novelty, but only in so much as the novel object returns the favor and reauthorizes an authority that can only recognize itself. This authority, in turn, can only be affected by that which it authorizes – quite literally so, in that the new author can only be recognizable by the very impersonality and transparency of what qualifies for admission, which is also identical to the group to which he is admitted. The individual artist gives up the desire to express him or herself in return for “the chance to express something far greater – the shape the tradition takes as it passes through time” (Menand, 2007, 143).

For Menand as for many others, the imagery that allows one to do so is expressly mechanical: the famous “shard of platinum” that makes a mechanical metaphor out of a formerly Romantic organicism. Eliot’s images are drawn from chemistry on the model of a catalyst: the passage describing “[t]he action which takes place when a bit of finely filiated platinum is introduced into a chamber containing oxygen and sulfur dioxide” (Eliot, 1920, 54). However, the process can also be compared to adaptation and selection, particularly when the adaptational stance is seen as “novelty in the right place”– that is, an adaptation allied to design and function, and which sees the accidental or the merely contingent as something maladaptive to be culled, as “novelty in the wrong place.” In such an adaptational view, the new is always subject to the already-known and judged:
The existing order is complete before the new work arrives; for the order to persist after the supervention of novelty, the whole existing order must be, if ever so slightly, altered; and so the relations, proportions, values of each work of art toward the whole are readjusted; and this is conformity between the old and the new. (50)

Oxymoronically, this is a Cuverian “adaptation”: a change, in other words, that answers Georges Cuvier’s early nineteenth-century critique of evolutionary or Lamarckian transformation in that any significant change in an organism would demand a re-arranging of an entire organism that is itself already complete, and which Cuvier considered impossible (Appell, 1987). Seen in twentieth-century evolutionary terms, Eliot endorses just such a rigorously adaptational stance in which one adapts to and is, in turn, selected by an exterior condition that confers the test of fitness by producing a successful novelty that both resembles the parent stock but also somehow alters it completely – even if by the Lamarckian means that Eliot himself endorsed and promulgated through his essay “The Beating of a Drum” (1923) as well as reviews and articles on such eugenicists as E. W. McBride, who wrote *An Introduction to the Study of Heredity* (1925) (Childs, 76-80). Such a tradition “cannot be inherited, and if you want it you must obtain it by great labor” (Eliot, 49). Once selected, the individual becomes a Dawkins-esque and impersonal vehicle for the gene-like transmission of “tradition.” The poet has, for example, “not a ‘personality’ to express, but a particular medium, which is only a medium and not a personality, in
which impressions and experiences combine in peculiar and unexpected ways” (Eliot, 56).

This act of surrender is itself the basis of the impersonal. “The poet cannot reach his impersonality without surrendering himself wholly to the work to be done. And he is not likely to know what is to be done unless he lives in what is not merely the present, but the present moment of the past, unless he is conscious; not of what is dead, but of what is living” (Eliot, 59). Even more pronounced is the idea of a selected lineage that survives because of its exclusionary fitness, which is based on the notion of specialized function vs. ideas of the randomly fecund or the “inbred,” the merely “freakish” – both terms that Eliot used repeatedly in a series of essays in the *Egoist* and in his “Essay on Baudelaire” (Menand, 2007, 125-26). The unfit are “inbred,” “degenerate.” But then so are the various “traditions” that must be culled, corrected or extinguished. As Menand points out, Eliot’s tradition proposes “a line of development” that by force subjects the “perverse” to “surrender” to the authorized tradition in an erasure that enacts their own “continual extinction.” Such a criticism “may be said to approach the condition of science” (in Menand, 127), but it is a science that employs its Darwinism in the service of an evolutionarily dubious eugenics. Indeed, on Menand’s view, what looks like surrender to the old can also be called a colonization: an imposing of a literary professionalism from the outside where

[t]he task of the usurping practice is to make his discourse seem not a new, but in fact the traditional discourse, and to make the language of the amateur he is supplanting appear to be an aberration. And this was exactly the procedure
modernism followed in distinguishing itself from and claiming superiority to the established literary culture of its time. In the case of Eliot’s criticism, the mode to be exposed as specious was the mode identified with the Georgian anthologies; the mode to be revealed as traditional was, of course, his own. (Menand, 124)

Certainly for Menand, the tenor of Eliot’s language implies a corporate take-over and market forces more allied with the production and marketing of an Eliotic professionalism that has as its prime function the inclusion of Eliot himself as its foremost practitioner and arbiter of taste. For Lamos and others, however, such a take-over is also gynophobic, where the authority of the male writer is purchased at the price of an erratic sexual waywardness always characterized as female and which must be subsequently controlled or regulated. Both views can be seen in terms of eugenical fitness, selection and other fin-de-siècle ideas associated with degeneration, decay, racial senescence, and the need for strict eugenic control over a rank, unweeded garden of possible miscegenation and dangerous female fecundity. As Eliot writes of the “advance” of “American literature,” the process has been accelerated by the complete collapse of literary effort in England. One may even say that the present situation has now become a scandal impossible to conceal from foreign nations; that literature is chiefly in the hands of persons who may be interested in almost anything else; that literature presents the appearance of a garden unmulched, untrimmed, unweeded, and choked by vegetation sprung only from the chance germination and the seed of last year’s plants (in Menand, 126)
A “garden unmulched, untrimmed, unweeded” and “choked” by “chance germination” is as much an indictment of fertility as it is of uncontrolled random breeding. Singled out by Lamos, Lyndal Gordon, Childs and others, such a Hamlet-esque “unweeded garden” can be considered symptomatic of the pathological women in many of the early poems such as “Ode” (1920) and “Hysteria” (1916), and which themselves can be shown to share the misogyny of eugenic practice.

This idea of change as decay and pathology – what Michael Schmidt in his Lives of the Poets (1999) has called the freedom of association among states of “illness, fever, delirium, and nervous disorientation,” like the hypnogogic state before sleep – implies a composition based on the fear of losing mastery and control:

Images, long incubated, flow free under the vertiginous release of mental and physical disorientation. If they find language, poetry may occur. This appears to have been the case with the rapid composition of The Waste Land and Sweeney Agonistes […] [F]or Eliot, this is not inspiration but something ambiguously negative, “the breaking down of strong habitual barriers” that “re-form very quickly.” One is tempted to say that this, precisely, is inspiration, clearly defined. But most critics take inspiration to be a positive impulse. (Schmidt, 605)

For the early Eliot who “does the police in different voices,” this sort of febrile, vatic, and negative impulse informs the clairvoyants, the fortune-tellers and the figure of his Ovidian Tiresias, who is also a key figure in the Theban section of the Metamorphoses, and who has figured prominently in most Ovidian discussions of “The Waste Land.” Yet if Tiresias is any sort of “key to the poem,” as stated in Eliot’s
famous notes, it is not least as this minatory site of degenerating and blind decay that threatens to degrade rather than correct. In “The Waste Land” the poet himself is diminished, depreciated. Indeed, much has been made of its repeated present participles, “breeding,” “mixing,” “stirring,” “covering” and “feeling.” The activity of the words produce a short-circuited futurity, an indiscriminate and suspect laterality, like the throw of Tarot cards, that laid side by side can do nothing to predict or mitigate a directionless present and its aimless fecundity. As Michael Schmidt says, “the verse enacts the process of decay” (609). According to Menand,

The author of the notes seems to class himself with the cultural anthropologists whose work he cites. He reads the poem as a coherent expression of the spiritual condition of the social group in which it was produced. But the author of the poem, we might say, does not enjoy the luxury of detachment. He seems, in fact, determined to confound, even at the cost of his own sense of coherence, the kind of interpretive knowingness displayed by the author of the notes. The author of the poem classes himself with the diseased characters of his own works – the clairvoyante with a cold, the woman whose nerves are bad, the king whose insanity may or may not be feigned. He cannot distinguish what he intends to reveal about himself from what he cannot help revealing: he would like to believe that his poem is expressive of some general reality, but he fears that it is only the symptom of a private disorder. For when he looks to the culture around him, everything appears only as a reflection of his own breakdown: characters and objects metamorphose up and down the evolutionary scale; races and religions lose
their purity ("Bin gar keine Russin, stamm’ aus Litauen, echt deutsch"); an adulterated "To His Coy Mistress" describes the tryst between Sweeney and Mrs. Porter, and a fragmented Tempest frames the liaison of the typist and the young man carbuncular; “London bridge is falling down.” The poem itself, as a literary object, seems an imitation of this vision of degeneration […] (Menand, 2007, 90)

These contradictions may make Eliot either hypocritical or more interesting, but on either view, Menand locates such a reading in the school of “decreation” as named by Frank Kermode, or in Eloise Knapp Hay’s more recent designation of the poem as a “roadway to nowhere.” In any case, as Donald J. Childs has said in his Modernism and Eugenics, “That ‘The Waste Land’ is about fertility is not news,” whether one views the poem as a New Critical unity as later critics did, or as a piece of “decreation” as a few earlier and many contemporary critics tended to do (Childs, 121). Childs thoroughly documents the long engagement that critics have had with the poem in terms of its attitudes about fertility, beginning with Eliot’s own somewhat infamous and initially divisive notes to the poem, and their references to both Jessie L. Weston’s book on the Grail legend (1920), as well as vegetation gods in Frazer’s The Golden Bough (1906-1915). Critics such as Edmund Wilson, F. R. Leavis, Cleanth Brooks and Northrup Fyre all speak of the poem in terms of its portrayal of the barrenness of modern culture. More recent critics such as James E. Miller have suggested that “the poem’s anxieties about fertility are related to Eliot’s repression of homosexual desire for his dead University friend, Jean Verdenal.” Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar see the impotent and infertile Fisher King as “an instance of the modern
man emasculated by the war’s dehumanization [...] and its empowerment of women” as an unmanning on two fronts that must be answered by the masculinist practices of Eliot and Pound and the New Critical practitioners who followed in their wake (in Childs, 121-2). For Lawrence Rainey, one of the contemporary editors of “The Waste Land”, the rewriting and self-revision of Eliot’s career that began with the publication of his *Lancelot Andrewes* (1928), as well as the well-known statement that he was now “a classicist in literature, a royalist in politics, and anglo-catholic in religion” (Rainey, 36), each initiates a critical sea-change for the poem’s reception, even if its focus on fertility remained undimmed:

In the new climate of taste, one that Eliot himself did much to usher in, there was no longer a tension between the text of “The Waste Land” and the claims to coherence implied by the note’s reference to “the plan.” The problem that had preoccupied the poem’s early reviewers vanished from sight. The most influential American critic to erase that tension was Cleanth Brooks, an American critic from the conservative South, who in 1939 published an essay that profoundly shaped the course of criticism on the poem for the next forty years. Brooks set out to show that the poem was “a unified whole,” that every detail in it contributed to a work of extraordinary structural, thematic, and poetic integrity [...] As for critics who had earlier described a poem far more wild and unruly than the one delineated by Brooks, they were merely victims of “the myth” that had quickly grown up around the poem. (Rainey, 37)

For Childs, however, the poem’s famous concern about fertility is literal and violent. He sees its landscape as a fragmented miasma of prostitutes, diseased and
furtive couplings, unchecked and unregulated births, “infant[s] hydrocephalous,” “bats with baby faces,” as well as the trysting “clerk carbuncular,” the ironically named homosexual Mr. Eugenides, and the withered travesty of a hermaphroditic, impotent Tiresias, now dangerously feminized and made blind by venereal disease (Childs, 122-3). Wayne Koestenbaum has called the violence of such a portrait powerfully “disjunctive,” full of “sibylline discontinuities” and “hysteria’s ruptures,” that despite its broken and fragmented state was used “to shore up that monolith, the male modernist.” If the poem promotes a unity, in Koestenbaum’s powerful reading it is a gynophobic unity that serves only to unite the poem’s two male collaborators. “The two poets can unite because they see the discontinuous poem as a woman in need of a cure” (Kostenbaum, 113-4).

Both Koestenbaum and Childs, then, see the poem’s jagged edges as the result of the fragmentation that arises from the violence necessary to combat such a wayward fecundity. Metamorphosis is figured as degenerate and indiscriminate, subject to atavistic recapitulation (Menand’s “sliding up and down the evolutionary scale”), and characterized by sexual disgust. Indeed, the idea that, torturously, the poem is “a unity” is to make another kind of terror of its Ovidian fluidity, in which, as in Cleanth Brooks’s re-reading, the disparate and the chaotic must be subject to plan, organization and consolidation.

Charles Tomlinson, for example, has noted that the exegete of the poem moves from the “pleasant bewilderment” of a first reading “scarcely possible to recall” to an act of re-focusing in which “our act of reading is an act of metamorphosing the fragments towards a whole” in which metamorphosis itself is a
“directly stated theme” of purification: “*nel foco che, gli affìna*”– which is to say, as Tomlinson glosses, “– into the fire which refines them.” Thus, “This Dantescan fire changes and purifies, and the quoted sliver of Dante gives place immediately to another myth of metamorphosis, that of Philomela and Procne”: “*Quando fiam uti chelidon*” Or, “when shall I become like the swallow?” On this reading, Tomlinson would have the transformation of Philomela and Procne serve as a refining moment for “silence, speech, song and music” (Tomlinson, 132). Yet it reads that refinement at the cost of eliding the violence of Ovid’s tale – a violence that Eliot’s poem makes no attempt to hide – as well as the possibility that the bird-song of the metamorphosis can be viewed as a fall from speech and not as a consolidating purification. To paraphrase both Menand and Koestenbaum, the self-lacerating and hysteric poet (as well as the poem) seems to enact or perform this violence. After such feminizing, as Koestenbaum has argued, it is to Pound that the poet must turn as male midwife, and to whom he submits the diseased body of the poem for its *sparagmos* and its eugenic “cure.”

☐ ☐ ☐

It is interesting that Kenner describes the first meeting of Eliot and Pound as a meeting of two traditions of Dante scholarship, particularly because both the Eliotic and Poundian Dante can be seen as indexical to certain characteristics of each poet, not least in terms of their notions of bodily metamorphosis and punishment. “Pound’s was Pre-Raphaelite, miniaturist of detail exactly perceived. Eliot’s, distilled in Harvard classrooms, fulfilled a New England ideal in discriminating moral tonalities, apprehensible even before the words were quite understood” (Kenner, 133). Yet
Kenner’s miniaturist Pre-Raphaelism obscures the violence of Pound’s Dante as much as it makes an academic purity of Eliot’s “distilled and discriminating tonalities.” As Peter Davidson points out in his 1995 study of Pound’s use of the Roman poets, and of Ovid in particular, “The only constant which obtains for nearly all metamorphoses is that the nature of change is always a revelation of the previous state and nature of the person as much as the punishments of the sinners in Dante are a revelation of their essential natures” (Davidson, 117). For Pound and what he called “his sacred book,” there is a “great wisdom in Ovid” in which he displays “more divine wisdom than all the fathers of the church put together” (Pound, 1968, 179). This essentially corrective, authoritative and patristic image of “the fathers of the church” reinforces Pound’s idea that “the skeptical age hungers after the definite, after something it can pretend to believe. The marvelous thing is made plausible” (in Davidson, 117). Significantly, then, Davidson points out that Pound is particularly concerned with the Theban cycle of Books III and IV, a group of stories that serve as Pound’s locus classicus for what might be called “right perception.” As Davidson says of the section in Pound’s The A.B.C. of Reading (1960) that deals with Golding and Ovid,

Pound makes use of extensive quotation from the Theban story. Later, he quotes the episode of Minyas’s daughters, who undergo a reductive metamorphosis analogous to that of the sailors of Book III, who are punished for a comparable lack of perception in their dealings with the god […] The unbelievers are given a demonstration of the power which they have scorned so that they (and the reader) may know precisely the nature of the error being punished. His use of the particular passage in his critical writings indicate to
us the areas of the *Metamorphoses* where Pound’s interest is at its most intense.” (Davidson, 118)

That interest is predicated on the divine punishment that the sailors to Naxos suffer because of their blasphemous disbelief in the child Bacchus, a story Pound retells in his Cantos without the complicated and recontextualizing skein of nested tales in Books III and IV that surround the story of Dionysios in the *Metamorphoses*, and which reveal the god’s pettiness as much as Pound’s story unproblematically reveals his power. As such, it informs the sort of punitive or exclusionary criticism characteristic of both Eliotic and Poundian approaches to Dante, as well as what I consider their Dantean use of Ovid.

In his annotated translation of the poem, Robert Hollander suggests that “an Ovidian program” in the *Inferno* points up the difference that Dante finds between Ovidian metamorphosis as a fabulist invention and what Hollander calls Dante’s documentary style of punitive reportage: “Dante’s poetry is in fact ‘true,’ while Ovid’s is not.” (Hollander, 50) In this way, Hollander reads Dante’s relation to Ovid as “part of [the poet’s] presentation of himself not as a merely ingenious teller of fantastic tales, but as the scribe of God, only recording what he actually saw of God’s just retaliation for sins performed against Him” (Hollander, 417).

“Oh Potenza di Dio, quant’ è severa,
Che coati colpi per vendetta croscia!” (XXIV, 119-20)

which Hollander renders as:

“O how stern it is, the power of God,
Hurling such blows as it takes vengeance!” (XXIV, 119-20)
He also suggests that the proliferation of Ovidian material in lower Hell increasingly serves to silence Vergil’s authority, as well as Ovid’s. “Let fictive poets yield to this new Christian teller of truth revealed, the humble scribe of God. We do not have to believe this claim, but we can sense that it is being lodged” (Hollander, 435).

\[ \text{Taccia Lucano omai là dov’ e’ tocca} \]

\[ \text{Del misero Sabello e di Nasido,} \]

\[ \text{E attenda a udir quell ch’or si scocca.} \]

\[ \text{Taccia di Cadmo e d’Aretusa Ovidio,} \]

\[ \text{Ché se quello in serpent e quella in fonte} \]

\[ \text{Converte poetando, io non lo ’nvido;} \]

\[ \text{Ché due nature mai a fronte a fronte} \]

\[ \text{Non trasmutò si ch’amendue le forme} \]

\[ \text{A cambiар lor materia fosser pronte. (XXV, 94-102)} \]

[Let Lucan now fall silent where he tells of poor Sabellus and Nasidius, and let him wait to hear what comes forth now!]

Let Ovid not speak of Cadmus or Arethusa, for his poem turns him into a serpent and her into a fountain, I grudge it not,
for never did he change two natures, face to face,
in such a way that both their forms
were quite so quick exchanging substance.] (XXV, 94-102)

In this sense, Dante’s recurrent and circular metamorphoses in the canto are not only to be taken as hellish because they enact a never-ending series of bodily transformations that serve as hellish parodies of an eternally revolving heaven. They are also hellish because, in spite of their energetic and ceaseless activity, the metamorphosed fail to become stable objects like the blessed in Paradise.

In the same way that Lewis and Pound depreciated the speed and blur of Futurist artwork because it seemed to fail at honoring stable and geometric forms, so too Dante’s metamorphoses seem to depreciate any activity, however frenzied or energetic, that fails in its ability to form anything like a permanent ontological being along paradiacal lines. What looks like – and confesses itself to be – an infernal tour-de-force of jaw-dropping Ovidian change becomes instead an indictment of metamorphosis that fails to produce a stable paradiacal object that can itself resist or move beyond change. Such a successful and serenely eternal object can then be contrasted to the sparagmos of the hellish object’s horrific failure to come to any final rest. The damned are held eternally in wearisome and fruitless actions that can be seen as the parodic opposition of an always revolving but nonetheless peaceful Paradise. The same anxieties can be found in the ceaseless, uncontrolled growth and decay of “The Waste Land”, and which finds its antithesis in the invocation of “the peace that passeth understanding”: the “shantih shantih” that brings the poem to a close.
For both Pound and Eliot, then, the modernist Ovid is a Dantean Ovid: an Ovid that for all its metamorphic fury stays in place to punish and correct, and which is itself fragmented into speechless images as well as ruthlessly appropriated. As Rachel Jacoff and Jeffrey T. Schnapp have noted (1991), allusion in the Comedy not only invites its readers to return to its illustrious source-texts, the allusional style it employs also foregrounds the ways those texts have been altered – in Eliot’s phrase, “if ever so slightly” – with the result that, as in a monolithic “tradition,” “the relations, proportions, values of each work of art toward the whole are readjusted” (Eliot, 38).

The most radical colonization, however, is of the classical texts themselves, all of which presumably vanish in the minds of the beatified who have no thought of hell and all it contains – even more so at the Last Judgment, when those who will be damned and those who have been saved will be forever sequestered. In such a scenario, not only will Ovid and Vergil be left behind in the place that no mind will know or recall, so too will their works. Indeed, the whole of the classical tradition will vanish except those which, in both Eliot’s and Dante’s formations, joins a Christian European tradition by adapting to it. That is to say, a process of correction or conversion renders each as precursor to Dante’s own work in the same way that the admission of a New Testament renders a previous testament as “Old.” Indeed,

The connection between Dante’s Christian epic and its Roman predecessor may also be thought of as a drama of fathers and sons, wherein the pagan father is essentially replaced by a Christian (Cacciagrida) who grants his son the vocation to compose a Christian epic that will supplant Virgil’s. The two
texts are placed in a relation of promise and fulfillment, following the model of the Christian reading of Hebrew scripture. Virgil’s poem becomes a provisionally sacred test analogous to the Old Testament book of Exodus. As the inspired narrative of the Trojan’s pilgrimage, it is granted its “true” intelligibility not from within, but rather from a hermeneutical point external to the text itself. The perspective of the Christ event – and by implication Dante’s Christian poem – is posited as the ultimate arbiter of its significance.” (Jacoff and Schnapp, 4)

This displacement in which an Old Testament is subordinated to the authority of a New whose appearance is both sanctioned and predicted in a tradition that includes both can be seen as similar to the submission that classical tragedy performs as it gives way to Christian comedy. Each can be compared to Dante’s introduction and admittance into the company of the classical authors in Canto IV, where he takes his place among Homer, Ovid, and Vergil himself. What seems to be a scene in which a junior member is introduced to a roomful of his betters becomes from Dante’s Christian viewpoint the introduction of a superior to his subordinates, since the classical authors and their works will ultimately be left behind in Hell, unremembered and unmourned, while his own poem survives.

By the time of “Burnt Norton” (1936), such a transformed Ovidianism has itself sunk deeply into any account of temporal change and locale. Whatever relationship the poet had with Emily Hale, for example, has been submerged into what Lyndall
Gordon has called “a silent, faceless companion at Burnt Norton: not the woman as a person, but love’s transforming power.” Predicated on the annihilation of Hale as person, the erasure can be seen as (at least) implicitly Ovidian – that is to say, as the sort of Apollonian/Perseid erasure/appropriation that is everywhere in the *Metamorphoses*. Without noting the Ovidian resonances, Gordon’s terms describe such a transformation: “The public face of Eliot’s poetry obliterates Emily Hale not only by an appropriate conversion of life into art, but by subsuming her unvoiced appeal in the “voices of temptation at the end of ‘Burnt Norton.’” Gordon points out that this is a temptation that meant “love’s sexual dross,” a belief that “love was too delicate to be enjoyed” (Gordon, 343). Yet the Ovidian basis for such a project – its capacity to appropriate, subsume, literally *to abduct* – lies not only in terms of an Apollonian/Perseid abduction of the woman in question, but also in its more literal, rhetorical sense of affirming the consequent, *post hoc ergo propter hoc*, of the Ovidian hero’s just-so-story itself, and which Ovid seems at pains to ironize and critique. In “East Coker” (1940), however, no ironizing or recontextualizing of Hale’s subsumed voice occurs and we have a Dantean landscape once again: one where the Ovidian has become Spenserian,

… in a dark wood, in a bramble,

On the edge of a grimpen, where is no secure foothold,

And menaced by monsters, faery lights,

Risking enchantment. (Eliot, 1952, 125)

So too, Gordon identifies Eliot’s later ancestral voyage in “The Dry Salvages” (1941) as Aenean in the sense that the poet honors the long and suffering voyage of *pietas*,
and like Aeneas, is promised an imperium that is already known and revealed in both prophecy and ekphrasis. However, Ovid renders the hylomorphic transformation of passive matter into significant form problematic for a Virgilian sense of signification, as in the triumphant figure that Aeneas makes of the armor taken from a defeated Mezentius in Book 11 of the *Aeneid*:

\[
\text{haec sunt spolia et de rege superbo}
\]

\[
primitiae manibusque meis Mezentius hic est. \,(\text{Loeb,11, 15-16})
\]

Or in Sarah Ruden’s recent line-for-line translation:

These first fruits are from a proud king.

This is Mezentius, work of my hands. (Ruden, 11, 15-16)

This totalizing, ekphrastic move literally makes a *thing* of Mezentius that can be described using the same sort of abduction that Ovid characterizes as a particularly Roman ruthlessness. Not only can a Poundian or Eliotic Ovid be considered Dantean, so too can their use of ekphrasis. As we will see, however, unlike the Virgilian world of streams, rivers, harbors, and hills that simply wait for their prophesized Roman transfiguration, Ovidian matter is not simply passive, a plastic substance like Mezentius’s armor or spear that can be made into its own “speaking picture.” Instead, even Ovian ekphrasis is a site of furiously interacting, wayward components that, unlike Aeneas’s trophy, have their own errant activities. In any case, if these agents appear as polyvocal in a poem like “The Waste Land”, it is an Ovidian polyphony that threatens to exceed as much as explicate the poem’s “unitary meaning.”

In a similar way, the poem’s Ovidian fluidity presents an explicitly biological, gynophobic, and homophobic porousness that also threatens the momentum and
longing of the poem for rest, for stability, but which remains fugitive and therefore subject itself to Dantean punishment. The volatile and threateningly fecund body of the poem – its corpus – is precisely that which is fragmented at the hands of a Poundian *sparagmos*. Eliot’s later interest in recanting an earlier, more ambiguously modernist poem, moves toward the cessation of metamorphosis that the poem and the poet’s later, more explicit criticism associates with a Dantean stasis. As E. M. Forster wrote of Eliot’s later conversion, “What he seeks is not revelation but stability” (in Schmidt, 603). Michael Schmidt agrees with such an analysis: “Craving stability based on the old order, a writer has to discover what forms are viable in the present” (604). But if language is also perpetually slippery, recalcitrant, a Proteus that cannot be held or sufficiently tamed – where words “slip, slide perish, / Decay with imprecision, will not stay in place” – Eliot sets up “The Word in the Desert” as a solid and unitary counterweight in “language that has the permanence of scripture, as though graven on tablets of the law” (Gordon, 343).

This delivery from a dangerous Ovidian fluidity connected with other anxieties about natural selection takes the stable form of divine election: the transformation of the imperfect organism into what Lyndall Gordon calls “the perfect life” that occurs after the nervous examinations of “The Waste Land” and the conversion recounted in “Ash-Wednesday” (1930). What becomes most influential and persuasive about such an attenuated program of critical formulation is precisely its capacity to simplify. Indeed, Menand says we might illuminate Eliot’s critical tools “with the suggestion that this effectiveness was in fact inseparable from this reductiveness” (Menand, 2007, 15).
So too, in his *Vortex: Pound, Eliot and Lewis* (1979), Timothy Materer finds the origin of Pound’s vorticism in the popularization of physics and astronomy and what he calls “the world of moving energies,” the “multiverse of forces” that Pound explains as “magnetisms that take forms,” like the equally well-known “rose in the steel dust” of the *Pisan Cantos*. (Pound, 1970, 469) Pound notes, “The best artist is the man whose machinery can stand the highest voltage. The better the machinery, the more precise, the stronger, the more exact will be the record of the voltage and of the various currents, which have passed through it” (in Menand, 145). Such electromagnetic or physical metaphors are stressed in the equally familiar Poundian notion of a “radiant node or cluster,” as in his 1915 “Affirmation of Vorticism.” Moreover, Pound goes out of his way to deny that what the vorticist does is simply any mere assumption of “the pattern-making faculty which lies in the flower-seed or in the grain or in the animal cell” (in Materer, 114). Instead, the vortex is the expression of “instinct and intellect together” and not merely “unconscious or sub-human energies or minds of nature” (*Ibid.*). Pound says in his *Selected Prose* (178) that the very name *Blast* recalled, at least in Lewis’s mind, “blastoderms and sources of life” (Materer, 30). While the idea that the artist arranges his work along “lines of force” may have more to do with the physicist than the biologist, the mechanical image is similar to the geneticist’s idea of a structuring and primary “force.” As Kenner points out about the mechanical /biological images of Pound and Wyndham Lewis,

Fabre had described beetles which could “grow out of their bodies menacing spikes, and throw up on top of their heads sinister headdresses, overnight”; not
a profound invention but certainly a creative feat, and “any art worth the name is, at the least, a feat of this description.” And the chemists, the physicists, the biologists, were everywhere discovering a pattern-making faculty inherent in nature. Salt was crystalline, bubbles were vectorial equilibria, Marconi’s pulses patterned the very ether, D’Arcy Thompson in 1917 explained how the bird’s skeleton and the cantilever bridge utilize identical principles. (269-70)

In *Time and Western Man* (1927), for example, Lewis attacks what he considers the “time-cult” of Bergsonism, in which he finds an unsettling temporal and metamorphic self subject to flux. “So what we seek to stimulate, and what we give the critical outline of, is a philosophy that will be as much a spatial-philosophy as Bergson’s is a time-philosophy. As much as he enjoys the sight of things ‘generating’ and ‘merging’ do we enjoy the opposite picture of their standing apart [...] [M]uch as he enjoys the ‘indistinct,’ the ‘qualitative,’ the misty, sensational and ecstatic, very much more so we value the distinct, the geometric” (in Materer, 44). Pound decried Lewis’s time-space categories in which one is either outside time or in time, yet the same defended status persists in the Poundian/Eliotic modernist object. Appropriately, Menand says the goal of Pound was clarity, particularly in the jagged pieces of the *Cantos*, where one is invited to examine a collection of distinct and separate objects that form units. As Kenner writes, for Pound and Gaudier,

the ultimate insipidity [...] was the Hellenic: “pretty” works of “a people to whom instinct is secondary to reason”: a people picking up the Egyptian influence from across the middle sea, and using it to delineate their admiration for themselves. (“An ideal for super-aesthetes and matinee girls,” wrote Pound
of Greek sculpture after exposure to Gaudier’s conversation; and again, ‘the Greeks...the caressable...’; and again, after 14 years, “plastic moving toward coitus, and limited by incest, which is the sole Greek taboo: whereas the Egyptian stone has the god inside it.” (Kenner, 259)

This formula – recipe, equation – is everywhere: “Ford, for instance, explained the poems in Pound’s *Cathay* (1915) [...] by invoking what he called ‘a theory and practice of poetry that is already old – the theory that poetry consists in so rendering concrete objects that the emotions produced by the objects shall arise in the reader.’ ”

One of Pound’s protégés, H. D.’s husband Richard Aldington, said in *The Egoist* (1914): “We convey an emotion by presenting the object and circumstance of that emotion without comment” (Menand, 2007, 175). The idea is found in Eliot’s “objective correlative,” in Pound’s Imagism and his “direct treatment of the thing,” in William Carlos Williams’s dictum “No idea but in things,” as well as in the found and crafted objects of Dada, surrealism, Joseph Cornell, and the object-entities of late modernist psychoanalysis. Lewis’s geometric parsing, “[h]is obsessive concern with the outsides of a thing, with his ‘external approach’ to fictional characters and portrait subjects, schematized his experiences to give him the precarious illusion that he controlled them.” A self-described “super-naturalist” who wanted his viewers “to see what could be done by burying Euclid deep in the living flesh,” Lewis was concerned with “painted equivalents in which the latent organization of their forms stand forth.” (Materer, 127-8) A genetic, geometric latency like his simultaneously organizes from without the artist’s corrective, orthogenic vision by “burying” itself “deep in the living flesh.” [fig. 4]
Lewis’s 1919 The Caliph’s Design: Architects! Where Is Your Vortex? presents the story of a strong and centralized ruler who imposes by fiat the necessary conditions for a renewal of culture. As Materer tells it,

Lewis imagines his Caliph rising one morning, sketching out some strange designs, and summoning his chief engineer and architect. He tells them that his city bores him. “So I have done a design of a new city or rather of a typical street in a new city. It is a little vorticist bagatelle.” The Caliph’s men are amused and puzzled, then terrified as they learn that they have only a few hours “to invent the forms and conditions that would make it possible to realize my design.” If they fail, their “heads will fall.” Under these conditions, the job gets done: “And within a month a strange street transfigured the heart of that cultivated city.” (in Materer, 33)

What seems particularly interesting is how close such a “parable” adheres to a Huysman-like desire for strangeness and the relief of boredom, and how its strong-armed solution lies in the top-down command issued from an orientalized, formative nucleus. As Materer has pointed out, Lewis ended with an implicit critique of The Caliph’s Design that says something significant about the artist’s view of permanence and the transitory. Writing in 1930 in The Mysterious Mr. Bull, he said that “the proposed City-Beautiful turned out to be not rock, as we had naïvely supposed, but some disintegrating living substance. (in Materer, 62) It is significant too, perhaps, that Lewis should have emerged from the war as someone who could ask in his essay On Art (1969) why anyone “would paint a tree when he could paint a man.” (Lewis, 331) Even in the imperative division between humans and nonhumans, Lewis prefers
the human, but only as a Dawkinesque “vehicle” for a Euclidian “replicator” that will not disintegrate as a merely “living substance.”

In response to a correspondent’s question in later life, Pound disparaged the idea that the so-called Men of 1914 were a group with a set of shared ideas, as if the very idea of a shared group were somehow less vital – or viral – than the cantankerous, individual men themselves. “How the hell many points of agreement do you suppose there were between Joyce, W. Lewis, Eliot and yrs. truly in 1917, or between Gaudier and Lewis in 1913 […]? If another man has ideas of any kind (not borrowed clichés) that irritate rigidly bounded men themselves. “How the hell many points of agreement do you suppose you enough to make you think or take out your own ideas and look at ‘em, that is all one can expect.” (Pound, 1971, 222) As Materer recounts the later reminiscences of the poets involved, Pound’s criticism of “Possum” Eliot is described as old-fashioned “baiting”: Eliot and Pound “understood that Lewis always put the issue before the personality.” In later accounts, Eliot calls Lewis “impartial” in his attacks. Not an “enemy” despite the biography of Lewis by the same name, one has “worthy opponents” instead: a “vortex” of original and “independent minds, distinct from a “mere group” (Materer, 36-34). As Materer points out, the Vorticists were never a “group” in the sense that Bloomsbury was a group, or the circle that would form later around W. H. Auden. Indeed, Materer seems to endorse the more contemporary view of George Orwell, who seemed to associate the very idea of a group as somehow weaker, “less gifted,” to use Materer’s term, and who also
appeared to share Pound’s characterization of both Bloomsbury and the Auden circle as politically indistinguishable log-rollers. Writing of Auden and Spender as “less gifted than the writers of the twenties,” Materer quotes with approval Orwell’s essay, *Inside the Whale* (1940), where the Auden group is dismissed with the words: “Technically they are closer together, politically they are indistinguishable, and their criticisms of one another’s work have always been (to put it mildly) good-natured.” (Materer, 35)

Such an approach seems content to pass along the idea that the rivalries and contests among Lewis, Pound, Joyce and Eliot were somehow healthier, more robust than such “groups.” Bloomsbury, on the other hand, is the “whole arseblarsted lot” Pound excoriated from Paris after leaving London on his way to Italy (Pound, 1971, 166). This threatening homoerotic interchangeability of such a “group” contrasts with the supposedly healthy, Oedipal rivalry and rugged, heterosexual individualism of the Men of 1914, who “shored up their fragments” against ruin. By doing so, they engaged in a sort of defense against the merely or dangerously fecund, the soft and porous, as well as the fully two-thirds of Ovid that Pound would relegate to the dust-heap as he scoured everything but the most authoritative of texts from his project of “making it new.”

This emphasis on autonomy was itself transformative and long lasting. Indeed, while the scientistic freight of New Criticism has often been remarked, particularly its rigorous insistence on isolation, its technical terms, its attempt to compete and make viable a sort of non-scientific project by adopting a scientistic proliferation of terms, axioms and methodological rigor, a certain resonance with a Mendelian or genetic
analogue can go unremarked – a resonance that goes beyond a surface association with a term like the Genetic Fallacy. Although any strict analogy is probably unwarranted, one might draw at least some sort of general comparison from what can be perceived as the increasing hardening of both Eliotic or Poundian modernism, as well as a late academic New Criticism and an increasingly rigid account of Darwinian change where all questions can be subjected to rigorously adaptive and selectionist accounts increasingly removed from epigenetics and the messiness of phenotypical variety and development. A similar genetic dynamic increases through the 1920s and 30s, just as the modern object can be seen to reify – as artifact, as imagiste object, as vortex – in ways that are at least reminiscent of the isolated New Critical object removed from the contingencies of history, biography, class and what might be considered as phenotypic incidentals. Both could be said to reach a sort of crescendo of reductionism in the late 1950s and early 1960s with the discovery of the double helix. Imagist austerity is itself a sort of fetish of reductionism, by which, perhaps most famously, a thirty-one-line poem is rigorously centrifuged into the remaining double strand of “In a Station of the Metro” (1913) – an editorial reduction equaled by Pound’s blue-penciling of Eliot’s errant “Waste Land” into fragmentary code. At its most extravagant, the analogy points up the consolidation of the New Critical object as sequestered from its social context, accident and its environment as Weissmanian germ-plasm. At less strained levels of comparison, the resemblance at least highlights both the gene and the New Critical object as isolated, autonomous, and cut off from any environmental or contingent context. Indeed, for William Empson Imagist poetry is “poetry that has lost the use of its legs.” Or as Schmidt has pointed out, it is a
poetry that doesn’t move; a poetry that doesn’t evoke a sequence of time, and that exists instead in a solitary space much like the orthodoxy of Eliot’s “Critical Tradition” (Schmidt, 587).

Like the explanatory concept of the “selfish gene,” any “organicist idea of tradition” that might have found a continuity with any number of nineteenth-century formulations “has been trumped by a category that has of being, to ordinary knowledge, unrecognizable” (Menand, 2007, 161). Within such a project, it is the ironic capacity of an appropriated Ovid to resist change that informs or illustrates the dangerous errancy of an excessive evolution as much as it serves to correct and inform the masculinist hygiene of such a project: a hardening process that produces an increasing rigidity about Ovidian metamorphosis in the post-“Waste Land” poetry and prose.

In his essay on “The Hard and the Soft in French Poetry” (1918), Pound characteristically excoriates most of his predecessors, both in English and in French, for a “softness” he feels must generally be eliminated from modern poetry. Conversely, as he goes on to say, “By ‘hardness’ I mean a quality which is in poetry nearly always a virtue – I can think of no case where it is not.” (1968, 285)

As we have just seen, for both Pound and Eliot the idea of ekphrazein – to proclaim or call out a name by way of a kind of imagistic “speaking picture” – becomes associated with an authoritative practice not unlike the Aenean interpellation
Figure 4. Wyndham Lewis, *Courtesan*, 1912, Victoria and Albert Museum (http://www.vam.ac.uk)
to Mezentius to “become this figure at my hand” (Fitzgerald translation, 331),
Indeed, Pound’s Imagism and Lewis’s Vorticism can each be said to seek an
ekphrastic solution in so far as luidity and errancy are best contained in autonomous
“hard” objects that find a final and unchanging resting place or form – Pound’s
“radiant cluster” in other words, or Eliot’s “language that has the permanence of
scripture, as though graven on tablets of the law” (Gordon, 343).

Yet as Leonard Barkan has pointed out in his *The Gods Made Flesh* (1986),
in the late classical tradition of metamorphic verse,

All images, especially when construed in words, are metamorphic. The
ekphrastic tradition in antiquity is grounded in a belief that the verbal
description of a work of art unfolds into multiplicity and sequential time what
the visual work itself captures frozen. The words make the still work of art
move, and in the process they remind us that the art of the image is always
frozen in multiplicities and changes […] It has been argued, in fact, that
ekphrasis signifies “speaking out,” that is, the bestowing of a voice upon a
mute picture. When Callistratus tells us that the statue of a bacchant has
become a living bacchant or that a bronze statue of a boy “departed totally
from the limitations of its own nature and was transmuted into the true
qualities of the subject” […] artistic power is expressed as metamorphosis
from art to life. (Barkan, 9)

As Barkan notes of the statue in one of Callistratus’s *Descriptions*, its “gilded hair”
both imitates and confounds the difference between sculpted curls and the living locks
of an imagined but referentially “real” boy. We also learn that “the garb which
adorned him was […] a white mantle, of the same color as the marble of which he was made” – a further confounding of artiface and nature that is echoed by the confounding of apposite expressions on the statue’s face:

its glance did not express unmixed exultation nor yet pure joy, for in the nature of the eyes art had put an indication of grief, that the image might represent not only both Narcissus but also his fate. Moreover, it was so delicate and imitated a mantle so closely that the color of the body shone through, the whiteness of the drapery permitting the gleam of the limbs to come out. He stood using the spring as a mirror and pouring into it the beauty of his face, and the spring, receiving the lineaments which came from him, reproduced so perfectly the same image that the two other beings seemed to emulate each other. For whereas the marble was in every part trying to change the real boy so as to match the one in the water, the spring was struggling to match the skillful effects of art in the marble, reproducing in an incorporeal medium the likeness of the corporeal model and enveloping the reflection which came from the statue with the substance of water as though it were the substance of flesh. And indeed the form in the water was so instinct with life and breath that it seemed to be Narcissus himself […] You could have seen how the marble, uniform through it was in color, adapted itself to the expression of his eyes, preserved the record of his character, showed the perception of his senses, indicated his emotions and conformed itself to the abundance of his hair as it relaxed to make the curls of his locks. Indeed, words cannot describe
how the marble softened into suppleness and provided a body at variance with its own essence. (in Barkan, 10)

To use Barkan’s distinction, then, the limitations of an object’s “true nature” foreground its essential inanimacy, the deadness of the bronze or the immutability of marble, which in turn is transmuted to what Callistratus describes as the “true qualities” of the subject: in the case of the beautiful boy not only his beauty, but his very aliveness and fluidity. While such a distinction between animate and inanimate seems operant – even mandated – everywhere in Eliot or Pound, this supposedly unproblematic passage from an initial stasis to a descriptive, enlivening verbal multiplicity is characteristically presented in Ovid as being more unstable and violently asymmetric than either Barkan or his reading of Callistratus might suggest. This appears especially true when any attempt to locate “the limitations of nature” in the *Metamorphoses* becomes as fraught with failure as the attempt to locate and describe the endlessly re-contextualized site of “true qualities” in a poet as self-consciously mannered as Callistratus. Indeed, like Narcissus or Hermaphroditus or Medusa herself, the living body in Ovid is continually frozen and animated, animated and de-animated, in an act of capture that, read in one direction, can be seen as an endless enactment of Callistratus’s ekphrastic release into verbal multiplicity. Read in another, less reciprocal direction, however, the transformed Ovidian body is itself violently captured into an unmoving visual iconicity most notable for the way it has been silenced as much as it “speaks.”

The *locus classicus* for such a “ventriloquizing silencing” is most often located in the story of Daphne and Apollo, where Apollo ruthlessly appropriates
Daphne. Writing under the rubric of an exposing feminism, for example, a recent and fascinating study by Lynn Enterline is concerned with revealing the hidden violence in narratives such as Daphne and Apollo -- violences which, beneath the surface of Ovidian rape, expose another violence of the silenced and ventroloquized voice. Indeed, there is no better example of both a paranoid reading and its ultimate exposure of a covertly hidden ventriloquizing practice than Lynn Enterline's reading of Daphne and Apollo in her chapter "Pursuing Daphne," part of her *The Rhetoric of the Body from Ovid to Shakespeare* (2000). The transformation of Daphne into Apollo's tree, for example, with its insistent emphasis on an escape that is already a kind of recapture, and in which the nymph's ineffective but -- as in Bernini's famous depiction -- already-always-beginning-to-be-caught posture of flight itself is, in Enterline's reading, an always-already-reinscribing capture of the girl as Apollo's own. Caught in the god's embrace, her face and mouth vanish into the very leaves that Apollo's oracle will use to act as the Sibylline and ventriloquized mouthpiece of the god himself:

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vix prece finita torpor gravis occupat artus,
mollia cinguntur tenui praecordia libro,
in frondem crines, in ramos brachia crescent,
pes modo tam velox pigris radicibus haeret,
ora cacumen habet: remanet nitor unus in illa.

Hanc quoque Phoebus amat positaque in stipite dextra
sentit adhuc trepidare novo sub cortice pectus
conplexusque suis ramos ut membra lacertis
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550 555
oscula dat ligno; refugit tamen oscula lignum.

cui deus 'at, quoniam coniunx mea non potes esse,
arbor eris certe' dixit 'mea! semper habebunt

te coma, te citharae, te nostrae, laure, pharetrae;
tu ducibus Latiis aderis, cum laeta Triumphum

vox canet et visent longas Capitolia pompas;
postibus Augustis eadem fidissima custos
ante fores stabis mediamque tuebere quercum,

utque meum intonsis caput est iuvenale capillis,
tu quoque perpetuos semper gere frondis honores!' 565

finierat Paean: factis modo laurea ramis
adnuit utque caput visa est agitasse cacumen. (Loeb, I, 548-67)

In Charles Martin’s translation,

[...] she feels

torpor take possession of her limbs –
her supple trunk is girdled with a thin
layer of fine bark over her smooth skin;
her hair turns into foliage, her arms
grow into branches, sluggish roots adhere
to feet that were so recently swift,
her head becomes the summit of a tree;
all that remains of her is a warm glow.

Loving her still, the god puts his right hand
against the trunk, and even now can feel
her heart as it beats under the new bark;
he hugs her limbs as if they were human
and then he puts his lips against the wood,
which, even now, is adverse to his kiss.
“Although you cannot be my bride,” he says,
“you will assuredly be my own tree,
O Laurel, and will always find yourself
Girding my locks, my lyre, and my quiver too –
you will adorn great Roman generals
when every voice cries out in joyful triumph
along the route up to the Capitol;
you will protect the portals of Augustus,
guarding, on either side, his crown of oak;
and as I am – perpetually youthful,
my flowing locks unknown to the barber’s shears –
so you will be an evergreen forever
bearing your brilliant foliage with glory!”

Phoebus concluded. Laurel shook her branches
And seemed to nod her summit in assent. (I, 754-8)

This troubling move, very different from Callistratus’s, complicates any comparatively simple, inversive symmetry between object and subject in which animation is simply transferred or reversed: an act of gendered ventriloquism
contained in a just-so story of always-already-known origins: the answer, in other words, to the deceptively simple question, "Why is the laurel sacred to Apollo?"

Whether it takes the form of a human being, a landscape, or a manufactured artifact, the ekphrastic object becomes the classical mirror “held up to nature.” And yet, as Ovid seems to ask in story after story, why should reflection be unproblematic, or inversion its only dynamic? A scene of asymmetric voyeurism as much as it is an attempt at scopic capture, what happens in Book IV can be seen as a kind of vertiginous pair-production in which the book itself serves as axis for the larger enantttiamorphic production of the books that precede and follow it. On one side, Ovid presents the mirrored doublings of Book III: the snake-twinned Cadmus, the mirrored tale of Narcissus and Echo, the inversive tale of Acteon and Diana, as well as the cross-gendered, reverse-engineering of a sex-swapping Tiresias. On the other side of Book IV, he introduces the self-regarding mirror-gazers of Book V – not least of which is a vain and heroically absurd Perseus. The Cadmus stories, particularly those that Pound uses as sites of divine punishment, revolve around the inversions and transpositions of what Leonard Barkan has called “mirror metamorphoses.” There, on Barkan’s view, an encounter takes place between an initially clueless and bellicose spectator (Cadmus) and an unfamiliar, opaque and terrifying being (the serpent), usually presented as a locus amoenus, but which Cadmus fails to recognize as having either agency or importance for his own desires in founding Thebes. Like Aeneas, another famous and usually clueless colonizer, Cadmus defeats the serpent (as did Apollo in Book I) and like Aeneas himself, makes of such a creature “this figure at my hand.”
Here, however, the act of mirroring becomes “a place of confusion, mistaken definition, and self-absorption without self-understanding” (Barkan, 48). Indeed, Cadmus fails to recognize the deep complicity he has with the serpent. No simple set of reflecting mirrors, these misrecognitions are part of an impossible but wished-for ekphrastic stability in which the desiring subject seeks to detain and control its object – a move that usually finds its most characteristically Ovidian expression as a scene of desire or self-congratulatory “triumph” that is as much paralysed as it is paralyzing. That is to say, the wished-for stability includes a palpable desire for the stability of reflection and symmetry itself even as it demonstrates the brutality and mendacity of its “hero.”

So too, in the Dionysian tales so important to Pound in Book III, the neat division between a Dionysian authority that is unproblematically legible against a ground of either rationality or delusion is also shown to be unstable. The clear-headed and conscious artistry of Minya’s tale-telling daughters in Book IV, for example, is placed as antithetical to a Dionysian “nature” posited as chaotic and metamorphic. Such a nature, however, is also “artificial” in the sense that what the sailors experience en route to Delos is as delusional as Agave’s or Pentheus’s eventual embrace of the god. In both cases, what suffers is a distinction about distinction, but not distinction tout court, as if distinction were a law everywhere and always the same. Indeed, the stories told by Minyas’ daughters seem so variously concerned with wringing changes upon the very idea of polarity that the only distinction about distinction to survive in their trio of tales is reduced to a repeated motif that acts less like a structuring law than an endless oscillation that itself can at best be figured as a set of reflecting mirrors in mis-en-abîme.
Ekphrasis, then, “like metamorphosis, becomes a key to the complex and celebratory rhetoric concerned with the instabilities of matter and the uncertainties of reality.” (Barkan, 10) Yet in Ovid’s hands, it also becomes – the pun is unavoidable – reflective of reflection itself. For example, in what might arguably be the *Metamorphoses’* first ekphrastic description, the bronze Doors of the Sun that open Book II and serve as Phaeton’s introduction to the world of his father Helios, Ovid seems to present a finished, Homeric world, complete and entire, in which everything seems poised in place: a complete and unshakable order that, while not graven in stone, is nonetheless forged and cast in divine bronze like the Shield of Achilles or Aeneas and, like them, seems to reflect an actual, physical world:

Regia Solis erat sublimibus alta columnis,
citra micante auro flammasque imitante pyropo,
cuius ebur nitidum fastigia summa tegebat,
argenti bifores radiabant lumine valvae.
materiam superabat opus: nam Mulciber illic
aequora caelarat medias cingentia terras
terrarumque orbem caelumque, quod imminet orbi.
caeruleos habet unda deos, Tritona canorum
Proteaque ambiguum ballaenanumque prementem
Aegaeona suis inmania terga lacertis
Doridaque et natas, quarum pars nare videtur,
pars in mole sedens viridis siccare capillos,
pisce vehi quaedam: facies non omnibus una,
non diversa tamen, qualem decet esse sororum.
terra viros urbesque gerit silvasque ferasque
fluminaque et nymphas et cetera numina ruris.
haec super inposita est caeli fulgentis imago,
signaque sex foribus dextris totidemque sinistris.
Quo simul adclivi Clymeneia limite proles
venit et intravit dubitati tecta parentis,
protinus ad patrios sua fert vestigia vultus
consistitque procul; neque enim propiora ferebat
lumina: purpurea velatus veste sedebat
in solio Phoebus claris lucente smaragdis.
a dextra laevaque Dies et Mensis et Annus
Saeculaque et positae spatiis aequalibus Horae
Verque novum stabat cinctum florente corona,
stabat nuda Aestas et spicea serta gerebat,
stabat et Autumnus calcatis sordidus uvis
et glacialis Hiems canos hirsuta capillos.

(Loeb, II, 1-30)

In Charles Martin’s translation:

There stood the regal palace of the Sun,
soaring upon its many lofty columns,
with roof of gold and fire-flashing bronze,
and ceilings intricate with ivory,
and double-folding doors that shone with silver.

Its art surpassed the stuff that it was made of,
for Vulcan had engraved upon those doors
the seas that gird the middle of the earth,
the circling lands and the overhanging sky.

The waves displayed their gods of cerulean hue:
harmonious Triton, inconstant Proteus,
huge Aegaeon, who lifts enormous whales,
and Doris with her daughters, the sea nymphs;
some are depicted swimming, others sit
upon a rock to dry their sea-green hair,
and others are shown riding upon fishes,
their features neither utterly alike
nor wholly different, but rather mixed,
as those of sisters ought to be.

On land
were scenes of men in cities, beasts in forests,
rivers and nymphs and rural deities;
and over this he set the zodiac,
six figures each upon the left and right. (II, 1-24)

However, the world that Phaeton actually encounters is very different from such an ekphrastic ideal. Neither a simple act of mimesis or a reflection of the situation that Phaeton will actually encounter, the Doors show a world with nymphs “neither utterly alike / nor wholly different, but mixed.” Indeed, this is the mixed, asymmetric world that Phaeton cannot see. Instead, he sees only the “fire-flashing” doors as his own
reflecting mirror, his own assumed patrimony and privilege. Rather than the comparatively simple *tour-de-force* described by Barkan, this is an ironic ekphrasis that disrupts the sort of mastery that Callistratus is at pains to show.

Ovidian ekphrasis, then, works primarily as a sort of distorted and distorting mirror that, in Phaeton’s case, reflects back to its observer what he expects to see – which to his surprise most often includes his own inability to change. The Doors of the Sun may reflect the work of the sun, but they do not reproduce it. If neither the image nor the event reflect each other unproblematically, the reason is that each must be assembled out of actants and agents such as weird crabs, cranky horses, and even crankier dragons that are already resistant to Phaeton’s demands because they have plans of their own. As Ian Bogost says of the unpredictable and errant object of OOO, objects also imply subjects – even subjects who cannot recognize their own implication in an object-world in which they too are merely one more object among others (Bogost, 23). If we think of Phaeton’s story as a scenario of inheritance, especially in terms of masculinist epic with its emphasis on fathers and sons and the bequests that entangle them, then Phaeton’s patrimony is nowhere guaranteed – not only in terms of simple heredity, but also of pedagogy, learning, and practice.

This is a world of sometimes responsive, sometimes reluctant, often hostile or otherwise engaged participants who act nothing like dumb or passive matter. Indeed, Phaeton discovers that he cannot accomplish the task of driving the Sun simply by virtue of being a *son*, even if his father happens to be Phebus Apollo himself. In this way, Ovidian ekphrasis inverts, but it inverts ironically. At the same time, inversion does not exhaust the possibilities for epistemological interrogation or critique. Less an
“enlivening” exchange in which the inanimate becomes animate and vice versa, mirroring in an Ovidian world seems the most problematic – even perilous – of all the dynamics that Ovid presents. Instead, one might profitably view the shining, reflective surfaces of Book IV as mirrors that ironically enact the inversive, coercive epistemologies of Book III and V, only to destabilize the supposedly stable polarities upon which they are based.

For Barkan as well as Pound, then, Phaeton’s error is the doomed attempt of a human to act divinely, “a tragic rise and fall” (35), in which Ovid’s mini-epic is to be taken at face value: “The young man is engaged in a search for his father that also becomes a dangerous attempt to cross the boundary between men and gods.” (Ibid.) However, what’s more interesting to me than Phaeton’s “punishment” and Barkan’s delicacy about offending the gods is the way Ovid uses Phaeton as an epic foil: a sort of poster-child for the clownishness of self-important heroism and masculine privilege. By rewriting what might be called Phaeton’s ekphrastic assumptions, Ovid characteristically employs what Morton calls apoleptic irony, the “weird sister” of proleptic irony (Morton, 146). “Apoleptic irony is the retroactive irony we feel when a narrative’s ending causes us to look back differently at the narrative. The gap between what we thought we were reading and what we are now reading is exploited. […] Since in my view there is an ontological gap between an object and its sensual manifestation, irony would seem to be a basic property of reality, not just a fun thing that happens in Jane Austen novels.” (Ibid.)

As Morton suggests, however, there are also distinctions within irony itself: on one hand, “a reified kind of irony, a slogan on a T-shirt kind, and a more open, fluid, hesitating irony.” Unlike cynicism, which “is the attempt to find some kind of
metalinguistic position outside the narrative,” apoleptic irony “is not a form of sarcasm or cynical distance. It is the experience of total sincerity: of waking up inside an object, of being amongst things, in media res. This total sincerity is the moment of birth, not as a moment ‘in’ time, but as an event from which time gushes and spreads into continuity and persistence, like the spreading fan of alluvial water melting from a glacier” (148).

With these distinctions in mind, it is significant that the story of Perseus and Medusa takes place in Ovid’s Book IV, one of the most mirror-obsessed books in the entire, mirror-filled Metamorphoses. Attempted or hoped-for symmetries abound in Book IV, beginning with the mirror-like, axial rhymes of Pyramus and Thisbe that unfold in the dead of night like inky Rorschach blobs on either side of their famous wall; or the equally axial confrontation of Cadmus and his serpent, mirrored in turn by the enantiomorph of the caduceus that he will literally become with his metamorphosed wife Harmonia; or when the doubleness of Hermaphroditus is made literally inseparable from the nymph Salmacis, a story which itself mirrors the story of Narcissus and Echo in the previous book – another set of doubled mirrors that feels less like a simple scission but instead a set of scissions: a bookend of two mirrored images that make each story an echo or reflection of the other. If, for example, Narcissus and Echo are presented as a pair of mirrors whose story of stasis mirrors another mirrored pair, Hermaphroditus and Salmacis, each story presents the very notion of mirroring as an enforced and enforcing symmetry which – in Ovid’s relentlessly fluid and asymmetrical world -- is only stasis and coercion under a different name.
Indeed, if ekphrasis is a way for the poet to make the unmoving image move, it is perhaps doubly ironic that the most mirror-obsessed section of the *Metamorphoses* should end with an ekphrastic object *par-excellence*: the aegis of Athena, at the center of which is the unmoving head of Medusa. Frozen as much as it is potentially freezing, this is the dead and deadening face that stares back at the end of Ovid’s pivotal Book IV and which serves as passage from the early stories of the gods to the mock-heroic tales of humankind that begin with the bumbling, essentially comic “Perseid” of Books IV and V. If ekphrasis is the figure made “by these hands” in order to make the “still art move,” then Medusa herself is the site that ironically resists such a move by enacting and reflecting back her captor’s own inability to move or change.

In Michael Simpson’s superbly detailed notes to his own prose translation of the *Metamorphoses* (2001), Perseus is a parody of a hero: a hero afraid to fly at night, who comes across a chained Andromeda threatened by flood and sea-monster:

*Inde per inmensum ventis discordibus actus*

*nunc huc, nunc illuc exemplo nubis aquosae*

*fertur et ex alto seductas aethere longe*

*despectat terras totumque supervolat orbem.*

*ter gelidas Arctos, ter Cancri brachia vidit,*

*saepe sub occasus, saepe est ablatus in ortus,*

*iampque cadente die, veritus se credere nocti,*

*constitit Hesperio, regnis Atlantis, in orbe*

*exiguamque petit requiem, dum Lucifer*
ignes evocet Aurorae, currus Aurora diurnos.

 [...] pennis ligat ille resumptis

parte ab utraque pedes teloque accingitur unco

et liquidum motis talaribus aera findit.

gentibus innumeris circumque infraque relictis

Aethiopum populos Cepheaque conspicit arva.

illic inmeritam maternae pendere linguae

Andromedan poenas iniustus iusserat Ammon;

quam simul ad duras religatam bracchia cautes

vidit Abantiades, nisi quod levis aura capillos

moverat et tepido manabant lumina fletu,

marmoreum ratus esset opus; trahit inscius ignes

et stupet et visae correptus imagine formae

paene suas quartere est oblitus in aere pennas.

ut stetit, 'o' dixit 'non istis digna catenis,

sed quibus inter se cupidii junguntur amantes,

pande requirenti nomen terraeque tuumque,

et cur vincula geras.' (Loeb, IV, 621-81)

In Martin’s comic rendering:

Driven this way and that by sparring winds

through heaven’s great immensity, as though

of no more substance than the dewy mist,
he looked down from a great height onto earth
as he flew over it; thrice to the frigid north,
thrice to the far south; to the west often,
and just as often to the east he flew.

The setting sun made flight too risky;
he landed on the borders of the west
in the realm of Atlas, where he sought his ease
until the morning star should summon Dawn,
and Dawn bring forth the carriage of the Day […]

Perseus strapped his wings onto his feet
and armed himself again with his hooked sword,
and with his swift-winged sandals split the air.

The world fell back away from him in flight
till he saw Ethiopa beneath him
and near it, the kingdom ruled by Cepheus,
where Ammon had condemned Andromeda
(the one unjust, the other innocent)
to pay the price for her own mother’s speech.

At the sight of her, bound high upon a cliff,
he would have thought that she’d been carved from stone
were it not for the breeze that stirred her hair
and for the warm tears flowing from her eyes;
the woman’s beauty quite astounded him,
and left him witless, to the point that he
almost forgot to keep his wings in motion.

“Oh!” he said. “These chains don’t do you justice;
the only chains that you should wear are those
that ardent lovers put on in their passion.” (IV, 851-930)

As Simpson says, “The absurdity of Perseus as an epic hero, broached with Ovid’s
depicting him as afraid of flying at night, begins to be developed. Seeing Andromeda,
Perseus is so struck by her beauty, Ovid says, ‘that he almost forgot to flap his wings
as he flew’ […], a detail that gives us ‘a comic glimpse of [a] lovesick admirer’”
(Simpson, 309).

Yet if he is an admirer, he seems to be one who pays no attention to
Andromeda’s actual plight, busily washing his hands after dispatching the sea-
monster that threatens her, and tending to his secret weapon, Medusa’s head, as
Andromeda is virtually forgotten. The grisly wedding scene that follows, in which
Andromeda’s bridegroom and his family are transformed into statuary, is so savage
that, like a parodic Aeneas who dispatches another Turnus in order to gain the hand of
another (and still silent) Lavinia, Perseus “is unbelievably vindictive and cruel in his
treatment of Phineus – as vicious as any god in the poem.” (310) In Simpson’s gloss,
Perseus’s treatment of Phineus contravenes the heroic code’s prescribed way of
dealing with fallen enemies (Iliad 24, Sophocle’s Ajax) in so brutal a fashion as to
impart the utmost savagery to Ovid’s parody of the Aeneid, in particular, the
confrontation of Aeneas and Turnus in book 12. As [Franz] Bömer says, in the circles
of true believers and loyalists at Rome, this could only appear “as infamy and pure mockery of the patriotism sanctioned by Virgil and Augustus” [. . .] If there is such a thing as literary treason, Ovid’s parody of Virgil’s Aeneid in his “Perseid” would seem to be it. (Simpson, 31)

Indeed, “objectifying” is what Perseus does best, not only in his brutal appropriation of Medusa’s severed head, but in all his dealings with Andromeda, Andromeda’s parents, the unlucky bridegroom and his equally unlucky family and wedding guests. Described as a motionless and silent statue whose beauty is so arresting that Perseus is stopped dead in his aerial tracks, Andromeda is herself another kind of Medusa that Perseus will abduct as well, just as Medusa was raped by Neptune and transformed by Minerva. “First the object of male desire, then a monster, then a weapon, Medusa is the only mortal woman in [that] narrative. She is variously transformed by Neptune, by Minerva, and finally by Perseus, all of whom are concerned with differing manifestations of power.”

However, almost uniquely in the Metamorphoses, as Julia M. Walker says in her Medusa’s Mirrors: Spenser, Shakespeare, Milton and the Metamorphosis of the Female Self (1998), “We know nothing of Medusa’s desires, as she […] reflects the desires of the other figures in the story. Because of those reflections, which culminate in the literal reflection on Perseus’ shield, she is raped, transformed and killed […] The violent power of Medusa’s face can be contained, even negated, by the reflecting power of the shield, but the powerful violence of her story escapes the containment of textual representation” (Walker, 46–7). And yet, as Walker points out, “She has no face” (Walker, 48). Neither the beautiful mortal raped by Neptune nor the hideous
Gorgon beheaded by Perseus, Medusa’s face is actually invisible in Ovid’s tale, and exists only as a reflection that Perseus employs. Minerva empowers her male colleagues “as she punishes not Neptune but his victim, as she gives the power of the monster she creates to Perseus” (Walker, 49). Unlike Minerva and Perseus who both avert their eyes, Medusa’s victims cannot.

Not only does Medusa’s always missing and unseen face structure the dynamics of the Perseid/Medusan story, then, so too her silence. Like Virgil’s speechless Lavinia, “She says nothing. If she spoke, the narrative has deprived her of the power of that speech as Neptune deprived her of her virginity. Is her silence meant to imply submission? Or has she been subsumed by the deed done to her” (Walker, 50)? This dynamic sits uneasily in terms of the Poundian ideas of punishment we have already explored. “If the metamorphosis was supposed to punish those who gaze and then act with uncontained desire, something has gone fundamentally wrong, for in Ovid her victims gaze at the Gorgon only with fear or out of ignorance” – and, I would hasten to add, with stupefying astonishment. “In the second part of Medusa’s story, desire inheres only in Perseus, who desires the power of the Gorgon and who acquires that power by not gazing directly at her. Ironically, Minerva’s punishment against the unbounded power of one man/god results in the empowerment of another man/warrior” (Walker, 50).

Thus, masculinized power becomes predicated on another’s powerlessness: an axial inversion in which Perseus’s “authority” as subject looks for its reflection in the ekphrastic “object.” In this way, according to Walker,
The problem of polarity raises the question of reflection as a means of representation, the distinction between the mirror and the painting or the text. Any sort of representation is a doubling. The artist – writer or painter – creates the initial image in her eye or imagination and projects that image onto a canvas or a page. The writer or painter who works with a mirrored image first sees, then projects, then reverses the figure. Is this triple representation a means of further distancing, of further objectifying a figure, or is it somehow meant to work as does a double negative? [Tobin] Siebers suggests that we move “toward a comprehensive theory of the sacred” by “conceiving of representations as an agent meant to contain violence.” But, if this is true, do we not also move toward a comprehensive theory of the political by conceiving of representations as an agent meant to contain power?” (51)

In this way, any image of the Medusa is thus either post-mortem, or about to be: the dripping, open-mouthed and sea-weeded, snaky head, mounted as both trophy and aegis on Minerva’s shield like Mezentius at the hands of Aeneas: sanctioned and state-sponsored ekphrastic art. Thus, “The human woman Medusa is not merely diminished by Ovid’s narrative, she is annihilated. Her metamorphosis is not that of Daphne or even of Acteon, for she is denied not only speech, but also thought and emotion. Of all Ovid’s transformations, *Medusa becomes most completely a thing, an object with no human faculties, an identity whose self is entirely external and defined by other characters*” (emphasis added, Walker, 52). Indeed, “As much as it is possible for anything to be so, the transformed Medusa exists only as a reflection in a mirror,” controlled by masculine hands (50). As Walker says of Caravaggio’s famous painted shield in the Galleria degli
Uffizi in Florence [fig. 5] “It is not the face of the Gorgon; rather it is the reflection that allowed Perseus to kill her” (52).

Here, then, is another “heap of broken mirrors” that “cannot cohere.” Ovid’s bullying, authoritarian divinities and self-involved demi-gods can see nothing of the danger they inflict on the various trophies and figures who suffer the brunt of either their passion or their pique. Instead, these scopic captures in which dryads are turned
into trees and blushing boys are immortalized into brooks become scenes of an 
ekprasis-like figuration that produce, as it were, “bad art” by “bad artists,” if only 
because they represent an unproblematic reciprocity of ekphrastic object and subject 
that cannot or will not recognize its own violently deforming authority. The wedding-
rape of Andromeda is littered by the descriptions of mimetic, ekphrastic “statues” that 
Perseus creates of the ousted bridegroom’s friends and defenders. These include 
Thescalus, who becomes “The Spear-Thrower;” the figure of Ampyx, who might be 
entitled “The Swordsman;” and finally Phineus himself, whom Perseus makes into a 
statue of marmoreal submission entitled “The Former Fiancé.”

[...] avertitur atque ita supplex
confessasque manus obliquaque bracchia tendens 215
'vincis' ait, 'Perseu! remove tua monstra tuaeque
saxificos vultus, quaecumque est, toll Medusae,
tolle, precor! non nos odium regnique cupid
conpulit ad bellum, pro coniuge movimus arma!
causa fuit merit melior tua, tempore nostra: 220
non cessisse piget; nihil, o fortissime, praeter
hanc animam concede mihi, tua cetera sunto!
talia dicenti neque eum, quem voce rogabat,
respicere audenti 'quod' ait, 'timidissime Phineu,
et possum tribuisse et magnum est munus inerti,
pone metum! tribuam: nullo violabere ferro.
quin etiam mansura dabo monimenta per aevum,
inque domo soceri semper spectabere nostri,

ut mea se sponsi soletur imagine coniunx.'

dixit et in partem Phorcynida transtulit illam,

ad quam se trepido Phineus obverterat ore.

tum quoque conanti sua vertere lumina cervix
deriguit, saxoque oculorum induruit umor,

sed tamen os timidum vultusque in marmore supplex

submissaeque manus faciesque obnoxia mansit.  (Loeb, V, 214-35)

In Martin’s version,

He turns his face away but holds his hands out

In supplication, confessing his defeat:

“O Perseus,” he cries, “you win! Just take away

that fright of yours, that petrifying head

of this Medusa, whatever she may be –

get rid of it, get rid of it, I beg you!

I never hated you! I never wanted

To rule in your place! What got me into this,

What moved me to take up arms against you,

Was my promised bride – I had the prior claim.

But on the merits you deserve to win.

I’m not at all ashamed at having lost;

Grant me my life and nothing in addition –

yours be the spoils, greathearted Perseus!”
And as he spoke, he did not even dare
To look upon that other, who replied,
“Fear not, fainthearted Phineus the gift
that lies within my power to bestow
(and what a tribute to your cowardice it is!)
I now confer: no sword will injure you.
You will remain a monument forever,
Displayed in the house of my father-in-law;
My wife will find great solace,” said the hero,
“in gazing at her fiancé’s still form.”
And carried the Medusa’s head around
To the agitated gaze of Phineus.

Then, even as he strove to turn away,
His neck grew rigid, and, upon his cheeks,
The tears that he was shedding turned to stone,
And fixed forever in the marble were
The frightened face and suppliant expression
The pleading hands and abject attitude. (V, 310-39))

Perhaps needless to say, this is the script for the Proustian Perseid-narrator as well, another sea-side “hero” who must come to terms with his own bad behavior – particularly after he encounters Albertine and the Little Band at Balbec and stages his own Ovidian abduction in *The Captive* and *The Fugitive*. Proust’s larger narrative highlights something beyond the obvious parallels between Ovidian rape and
Aeneid/Perseid abduction: not only the pursuer’s necessary implication in the process of objectifying and capture, but also the equally Medusan moment that ironically points up the petrification of the subject who, like Apollo, like Perseus, like Proust’s narrator, is able to see himself as hero as long as his intended object remains motionless while he in turn remains unable to recognize his own inability to move. So too, as will see, the astonishing opacity and withdrawal of Medusa is not unlike the equally astonishing and withdrawn opacity of Albertine herself.
2.

Golo in the Place of Desire
The Genetic Object in Proust: Combray

It might seem easy, then, to think of Proust’s famous objects as participants in the same authoritative, preformational accounts of change and adaptation we have found in Eliot and Pound. Objects like the madeleine or the “ferrous bell” in Combray appear as discrete and autonomous agents during the course of the novel. Their characteristic activity seems like the action of a pill or the unfolding of a packet – a proto-gene – that has within it all the information necessary to create or make the recovery of a world possible.

Yet to think of the Proustian object in preformational terms lets slip the environmental and relational contingency of everything that Proust’s “involuntary memory” entails. In addition, any understanding of involuntary memory can seem impoverished when one ignores the physical embeddedness, the organismal/environmental fusion, of what is recovered. Unlike the Virgilian ekphrastic object or the proto-genocentric idea of a compact Lewesian “geometry” that “buries itself deep in the living flesh,” the “genetic object” in Proust displays an inextricable, complex reliance on place as a dynamic partner in processes of inheritance, development, and phenotypical production.
First seen in the very body of the sleeping narrator as it revolves in tandem with its various locales, “[t]he position of its various limbs, its knees, its shoulder blades” (I, 5) are not only connected to a localized past whose history can be arranged in a chronological line of descent. The composite memories of its limbs are also interchangeable with the numerous rooms in which the narrator’s various bodies and body-parts have slept. This is a world where bodies and rooms produce each other in a sort of revolving array that, however sequentially experienced, can also be recalled as laterally, paratactically available. If a sleeping body has arranged around it “the chain of hours, the sequence of the years, the order of the heavenly bodies” that act as orientating points to the variously pieced-together “original components of one’s ego,” so too, the “composite memory of its ribs, its knees, its shoulder-blades” not only remember each earlier room, but also literally re-member the earlier bodies that slept there. Only “our conviction that they are themselves and not anything else” forces upon them “the immobility of our conception of them” (I, 5).

Seen in these terms, then, an array of emplaced bodies revolve around the narrator that cannot be isolated from the rooms in which they have slept any more than the various rooms can be separated from the position of each body –no more easily, as Proust points out, than a running horse can be separated into “the successive positions of its body as they appear upon a bioscope” (I, 7). Unlike the consolidated Poundian image, no single or isolated top-down agent acts on an always passive environment. Instead, both body and place are multiple and multiply productive things. At every point, each requires an intimate interaction in which body is simultaneously transformed into place and place into body.
Indeed, part of the passage’s force comes from this sort of simultaneous, paratatic availability rather than from any inversive dynamic that might arise from the kind of object-environment opposition seen in Eliot, Pound and Lewis, or in the discussions of ekphrasis of the last chapter. Instead, a series of astonishingly multiple, relational objects emerge as what might be called the place-bodies of the narrator. Like the evolutionary objects described by Lewontin and Oyama or the strange ontological objects of Latour, Morton et al., these restless, revolving, multi-limbed objects have no existence beyond the environment in which – and with which – they emerge. Thus, the various objects and places in the Search must be considered together at each instant of their appearances, in the same way that the sleeping and turning bodies of the narrator are inextricable from their own contingent and spatialized histories.

Georges Poulet has analyzed this idiosyncratic Proustian relation to place in his *Proustian Space* (1977):

The only images of themselves Proustian personages are permitted to offer us are similar to those photographs of the same person, of which our albums are full. Such a person in such an epoch of his life, and then in such another; such a person in such an epoch of his life, and then in such another; such a person in the country, in the city, in evening dress, in lounging clothes. Each of these “photos” is rigorously determined by its framework; the whole is discontinuous . . . Without places, beings would be only abstractions. It is places that make their image precise and that give them the necessary support, thanks to which
we can assign them a place in our mental space, dream of them, remember them. (26)

In other words, “The Proustian imagination would not know how to conceive beings otherwise than in placing them against a local background that plays for them the part of foil and mirror” (Poulet, 27). There is never a place described “without in the foreground, the profile of such or such a figure; in the same way that there never appears in Proust a figure without the presence of a framework ready to insert and support it” (23). Indeed, for Proust, “human beings appear in certain places that give them support and outline, and that determine the perspective according to which one is allowed to see them […] Not only are the personages bound to their appearances; it is necessary that their appearances be tied to a local environment that frames them.” (25) This is what Manuel DeLanda has called the level playing field of flat ontology (larvalsubjects.wordpress.com), where Proust’s narrator includes his own sleeping body as part of the inanimate objects around him, where “Sleep […] lay heavy upon the furniture, the rooms, that whole of which I formed no more than a small part and whose insensibility I should very soon return to share.” (I, 2-3)

Of all these objects, perhaps none is more significant Golo as he undergoes his transvertebration in the scene of the magic lantern. Indeed, the novel barely begins before we are introduced:

At Combray, as every afternoon ended, long before the time when I should have to go up to bed, and to lie there, unsleeping, far from my mother and grandmother, my bedroom became the fixed point on which my melancholy and anxious thoughts were centered. Some one had had the happy idea of giving me,
to distract me on evenings when I seemed abnormally wretched, a magic lantern, which used to be set on top of my lamp while we waited for dinner-time to come: in the manner of the master-builders and glass-painters of gothic days it substituted for the opaqueness of my walls an impalpable iridescence, supernatural phenomena of many colours, in which legends were depicted, as on a shifting and transitory window. But my sorrows were only increased, because this change of lighting destroyed, as nothing else could have done, the customary impression I had formed of my room, thanks to which the room itself, but for the torture of having to go to bed in it, had become quite endurable. For now I no longer recognised it, and I became uneasy, as though I were in a room in some hotel or furnished lodging, in a place where I had just arrived, by train, for the first time.

Riding at a jerky trot, Golo, his mind filled with an infamous design, issued from the little three-cornered forest which dyed dark-green the slope of a convenient hill, and advanced by leaps and bounds towards the castle of poor Geneviève de Brabant. This castle was cut off short by a curved line which was in fact the circumference of one of the transparent ovals in the slides which were pushed into position through a slot in the lantern. It was only the wing of a castle, and in front of it stretched a moor on which Geneviève stood, lost in contemplation, wearing a blue girdle. The castle and the moor were yellow, but I could tell their colour without waiting to see them, for before the slides made their appearance the old-gold sonorous name of Brabant had given me an unmistakable clue. Golo stopped for a moment and listened sadly to the little speech read aloud
by my great-aunt, which he seemed perfectly to understand, for he modified his attitude with a docility not devoid of a degree of majesty, so as to conform to the indications given in the text; then he rode away at the same jerky trot. And nothing could arrest his slow progress. If the lantern were moved I could still distinguish Golo's horse advancing across the window-curtains, swelling out with their curves and diving into their folds. The body of Golo himself, being of the same supernatural substance as his steed's, overcame all material obstacles—everything that seemed to bar his way—by taking each as it might be a skeleton and embodying it in himself: the door-handle, for instance, over which, adapting itself at once, would float invincibly his red cloak or his pale face, never losing its nobility or its melancholy, never shewing any sign of trouble at such a transvertebration.

And, indeed, I found plenty of charm in these bright projections, which seemed to have come straight out of a Merovingian past, and to shed around me the reflections of such ancient history. But I cannot express the discomfort I felt at such an intrusion of mystery and beauty into a room which I had succeeded in filling with my own personality until I thought no more of the room than of myself. The anaesthetic effect of custom being destroyed, I would begin to think and to feel very melancholy things. The door-handle of my room, which was different to me from all the other doorhandles in the world, inasmuch as it seemed to open of its own accord and without my having to turn it, so unconscious had its manipulation become; lo and behold, it was now an astral body for Golo. And as soon as the dinner-bell rang I
would run down to the dining-room, where the big hanging lamp, ignorant of Golo and Bluebeard but well acquainted with my family and the dish of stewed beef, shed the same light as on every other evening; and I would fall into the arms of my mother, whom the misfortunes of Geneviève de Brabant had made all the dearer to me, just as the crimes of Golo had driven me to a more than ordinarily scrupulous examination of my own conscience. (I, 9-12)

Like one of Bennett’s mysterious and vibrant objects, Golo “doors” and “knobs” his way as he glides effortlessly over the narrator’s room at Combray. Body becomes place and place becomes body in a sort of inseparable instantiation in which body and place have the same relationship as phenotype to environment. Indeed, this ability to transform back and forth into landscape is a kind of indigenous party-trick that almost everybody seems to be able to perform at Combray – a sort of effortless assumption of local coloration or background not unlike what Angus Fletcher has called, in his discussion of the “environment-poems” of John Clare, a kind of “hiding in plain sight” (Fletcher, 60). Walking in “all weathers, even when the rain was coming down in torrents,” the grandmother has the same “keen, jerky little step” (de son petit pas enthousiaste et saccadé) as she makes her way across Aunt Léonie’s garden that the narrator has just seen in Golo’s “jerky trot” (au pas saccadé) – a step “regulated by the various effects wrought upon her soul by the intoxication of the storm” (I, 12), her plum-colored skirt completely given over to the mud stains “beneath which it would gradually disappear” (I, 13).

Unlike Bloch, for example, who later boasts that he never allows himself “to be influenced in the smallest degree either by atmospheric disturbances or the
arbitrary divisions of what is known as time” (I, 127), the grandmother gives herself entirely to such atmospheres. Even her sisters take on a sort of coy, allusive coloration during their conversation with Swann, when they attempt to thank him for his gift of Asti by taking up the hues of each conversational background like allusive chameleons or fluttering cephalopods, capable of changing in an instant to whatever topical motley serves their purpose best. At the mention of M. Vinteuil, they merely say: “Il n’ya pas que M. Vinteuil qui ait des voisins aimables.” “Vinteuil is not the only one who has nice neighbours” (I, 32).

Swann in particular is subject to such situational hybridity, not only as a screen for the projections of others, but also as a transparent window through which an actual or attributed background shows through as well. Indeed, he seems to fill out and distend, as if the simultaneous pressures of imagined and projected attributes, societal allusion and physical place were each the various airs that conspire to buoy up and puff out a Swann-shaped balloon as it emerges from the dark background of Aunt Léonie’s garden:

Doubtless the Swann who was a familiar figure in all the clubs of those days differed hugely from the Swann created by my great-aunt when, of an evening, in our little garden at Combray, after the two shy peals had sounded from the gate, she would inject and vitalize with everything she knew about the Swann family the obscure and shadowy figure who emerged, with my grandmother in his wake, from the dark background and who was identified by his voice. But then, even in the most insignificant details of our daily life, none of us can be said to constitute a material whole, which is identical for
everyone, and need only be turned up like a page in an account-book or the
record of a will; our social personality is a creation of the thoughts of other
people. Even the simple act which we describe as “seeing someone we know”
is to some extent an intellectual process. We pack the physical outline of the
person we see with all the notions we have already formed about him, and in
the total picture of him which we compose in our minds those notions have
certainly the principal place. In the end they come to fill out so completely the
curve of his cheeks, to follow so exactly the line of his nose, they blend so
harmoniously in the sound of his voice as if it were no more than a transparent
envelope, that each time we see the face or hear the voice it is these we
recognize and to which we listen. And so, no doubt, from the Swann they had
constructed for themselves my family had left out, in their ignorance, a whole
host of details of his life in the world of fashion, details which caused other
people, when they met him, to see all the graces enthroned in his face and
stopping at the line of his aquiline nose as at a natural frontier; but they had
contrived also to put into this face divested of all glamour, vacant and roomy
as an untenanted house, to plant in the depths of these undervalued eyes, a
lingering residuum, vague but not unpleasing – half-memory and half-oblivion
– of idle hours spent together after our weekly dinners, round the card-table or
in the garden, during our companionable country life. Our friend’s corporeal
envelope had been so well lined with this residuum, as well as various earlier
memories of his parents, that their own special Swann had become to my
family a complete and living creature; so that even now I have the feeling of
leaving someone I know for another quite different person, when, going back in memory, I pass from the Swann whom I knew later and more intimately to this early Swann – this early Swann in whom I can distinguish the charming mistakes of my youth, and who in fact is less like his successor than he is like the other people I knew at that time, as though one’s life were a picture gallery in which all the portraits of any one period had a marked family likeness, a similar tonality – this early Swann abounding in leisure, fragrant with the scent of the great chesnut-tree, of baskets of raspberries and of a sprig of tarragon (I, 23-4).

Not unlike the projection of Golo that transfigures the narrator’s room, the projected Swann is transparent to Combray’s ideas of him, as if his outline “were no more than a transparent envelope” that simultaneously contains and displays. This Proustian ability to shift shape, as it were, requires a capacity for acting as the transparent shelter for what one has the apparently limitless grace to contain without disruption or violence to one’s own integrity. This will become the allusive capacity of the salon itself – “a world of conversational implicatures,” to use Antoine Compagnon’s phrase, where the narrator will eventually move and where the salon will become “the very locus of allusion.” (Compagnon, 137) The same allusive capacity infuses the Search as a whole, not least when the alluding and allusive encounter resonants with the Metamorphoses, but also with any of the novel’s myriad intertexts:

Emphasis has dramatically changed over the past twenty years, however, moving from the “alluded to” text to the actively “alluding” one. Allusion has, so to speak, changed direction. And in the general framework of
intertextuality, it has come to designate [...] any device that lets two texts relate to each other, or any simultaneous actualization through the act of reading of two or more texts. Attention has shifted from the source of the allusion to the connections generated by the allusion. The former definition of allusion would justify philological, atomistic, scholarly, and frankly detective-like research among sources. The other definition favors intertextual, semiotic, and poetic analysis of the relationships between the text alluded to the alluding text. The same conjectural paradigm that prevailed in the humanities in the nineteenth century, analyzed by Carlo Ginzberg in “Traces” (1979), a remarkable article, lays the groundwork for these two stages of work. After positivist identification comes its successor, archaeological reconstruction. Research now focuses on the potential significance in any allusion and on the reception of the allusion which takes place in at least four stages: “recognition of a marker, identification of the evoked text, modification of the initial interpretation of the signal, activation of the evoked text as a whole in an attempt to form a maximum of intertextual patterns.” (Compagnon, 143-4)

As Compagnon notes, this movement beyond simple denotation can be seen as a kind of Baudelairian “style allusionnel” that moves beyond the pin-point studded map of direct sources toward “an unlimited and unpredictable series of associations and connotations, ever thickening alluvial deposits of meaning” (Ibid.).

In short, interest has shifted from what an allusion denotes to what it connotes, which is why the implicit versus explicit criterion is no longer as pertinent as it once was [...] [T]oday’s prime focus is on onomastics, titles, and
quotations, all overt, functioning the way proper names do, as “pegs on which to hang a description.” […] Analysis of allusion becomes an archaeological task that seeks to reconstitute vertical connections of signification, layers of literary meaning, contextual resonances. (144-5)

Unlike the Eliotic use of the directly quoted source that erases or replaces its referent as we saw in the case of Eliot’s use of a Dantean Ovid, or even his formulation of an authorizing “tradition” that jealously confers its imprimatur, this is an allusiveness that is performative and open-ended, neither an oedipal anxiety of influence, nor yet another map of misreading. “Intertextual meaning can never be limited to the identification of a single source; the interpretation of any allusion is necessarily more complex” (Ibid.). This broadening of the explicit source into the horizontal and implicit constitutes just such an “archaeological task.”

Using Compagnon’s characterization, the “activation of the evoked text as a whole” affords the possibility for the “maximum of intertextual patterns” rather than the direct allusion. So too, Compagnon’s “direct source’ takes no precedence over surprise or the unexpected. Indeed, the directly applied allusion – what might be called its functional or adaptative use – is countered or supplemented by what might be called its unpredictable adaptational shiftiness. This is a more mobile, paratatic and lateral movement that requires no pin-point accuracy, no overt and direct adaptational function, but instead, as Compagnon says, a potentially “unlimited and unpredictable” layering of allusive “alluvial deposits” that produce their meanings less by the lock-and-key function associated with adaptation, but instead by what can be considered the paratacticelly available, in all its lateral disposition. Part of the coyness of the
narrator’s great-aunts arises from their ability to turn any conversation to their own use, even if the conversation itself has nothing to do with thanking Swann for his gift. The same shiftiness repeats itself in Swann’s emptied-out and elastic outline, as versatile as his interlocutors in its ability to adapt.

As Pigliucci and Kaplan have said in Making Sense of Evolution: The Conceptual Foundations of Evolutionary Biology (2006), their recent over-view of current questions in contemporary evolutionary theory, “one of the striking features of the biological world is the ease, and apparent appropriateness, with which functional ascriptions can be made. It seems entirely natural, and mostly unproblematic, to think that the function of the heart is to pump blood, the function of the eye to see, the function of a sparrow’s wings is to fly.” Yet, they go on to point out, “it may be that the biological world is complex enough that we will be unable to find necessary and sufficient conditions for some biological character trait to have a function […] or, for that matter, for something even to be a biological character trait!” (134) Indeed, “it may well turn out that fewer traits have clear-cut functions than one might have thought – that the relationship between what a trait ‘does’ and the ontogeny and phylogeny of that trait is often so complex and contingent as to resist straightforward interpretation in terms of recent selective history. Similarly, it may turn out that the functions served by particular developmental resources are often so multifarious and complex as to resist (easy) description.” (132)

For Heidegger, of course, things are related to purpose, “a circumstance,” as Ian Bogost points out, “that makes speaking of harmonicas or tacos as things problematic;
stuff becomes ready-to-hand (or *zuhanden*) when contextualized, and present-at-hand (or *vorhanden*) when it breaks from those contexts” (Bogost, 5). Or as Timothy Morton writes in *Realist Magic: Objects, Ontology and Causality* (2013), “Heidegger argues that when we just use a tool, it disappears into its functioning; it appears when some breakage (or our aesthetic framing of it) isolates it from its background” (88). Thus, the idea of “for-ness” as defined by Pigliucci and Kaplan: a mechanical notion that, in Morton’s words,

> distributes the “hot potato” of telos throughout reality, endlessly passing it from one entity to another, shuffling it under the carpet of as many entities as possible like hash browns on a plate of eggs. A mechanism is always a mechanism-for. A spoon is a machine for holding a piece of boiled egg. Holding is a mechanism of the hands for grasping things like spoons. The hands are machines for holding, writing and countless other tasks. (46)

Instead of such a rigidly functional or adaptational agency, objects are *withdrawn*. Neither a “violent sealing off” nor “some void of vague darkness,” withdrawal means that objects are both here and not-here, even as we attempt to describe their function:

> Withdrawn doesn’t mean hard to find or even impossible to find yet still capable of being visualized or mapped or plotted. Withdrawn doesn’t mean spatially, or materially or temporally hidden yet capable of being found, if only in theory. Withdrawn means beyond any kind of access, any kind of perception or map or plot or test or extrapolation […] We live in an infinite non-totalizable reality of unique objects, a reality that is infinitely rich and playful, enchanting, anarchic despite local pockets of hierarchy, infuriating, rippling with illusion and
strangeness. In this reality, objects are perfectly straightforward, with no transcendental or hidden aspects. Yet precisely because of this very fact, objects are completely weird: they hide out in the open, under the spotlight. (55)

Seen in this way, Morton’s withdrawn object is another sort of “hiding in plain sight:”

An object is therefore both itself and not-itself, at the very same time [...] If this were not the case, nothing could happen. The uncanniness of objects, even to themselves, is what makes them float, breathe, oscillate, threaten, seduce, rotate, cry, orgasm. Because objects are themselves and not-themselves, the logic that describes them must be paraconsistent or even fully dialethic: that is, the logic must be able to accept that some contradictions are true. Objects are dangerous, not only to themselves, but even to thinking, if it cleaves to rigid consistency. If thinking refuses to accept that objects can be dialethic, it risks reproducing the dualisms of subject and object, substance and accidents, dualisms that are unable to explain the most basic ontological decision – the one that insists that things are objectively present, as they are. The thing becomes imprisoned in a philosophically constructed cage, a mechanism or in some kind of ideality that falsely resolves the dilemma by shunting everything into a (human) subject. Moreover, thinking itself becomes brittle. The more rigorous the metalanguage, the more susceptible it is to more virulent contradictions. Thinking should learn from Antigone and bend, like a willow: “Seest thou, beside the wintry torrent’s course, how the trees that yield to it save every twig, while the stiff-necked perish root and branch?” (Morton, 36)
Stephan Jay Gould and Elizabeth Vrba have coined the term *exaptation* to help explain this willow-like flexibility and adaptational shiftiness, where an *aptation* – that is to say, any morphological or behavioral capacity – can only be considered an *adaptation* when it can be shown to apply directly to a specific, selected context. An exaptation, on the other hand, is the use of any structure, behavior, or morphological shape for something else: a subsequent use that opens up a new niche or space of relationality that may have nothing to do with any prior or historical utility, or that arises because no prior specialization prevents its subsequent redeployment (Gould, 1229).

The historical origin of a character is irrelevant to the way it functions in a selective process. Thus, the issue of whether a character is a group or individual “adaptation,” and whether it has been shaped for its present role by any particular process, is of no importance in the study of the selection mechanism. There may certainly be historical significance in such observations about the origin of characters. Nevertheless, selection evaluates characters in terms of their current relationship to fitness only, not in terms of their history. (Gould, 2002, 672)

Gould does not follow the idea that the “primary” reason for a feature remains primary in its temporal sense as something “original,” if only because, as he points out, “the original context of an evolved phenotypic feature need not exert such a continuing hold upon later history” (1218).

Thus, an organ need not invent an entirely new function in some mysterious manner, but may evolve by intensifying a previously minor use, or even by
recruiting an inherent but unexpressed potential […] This principle of functional shift deserves far more prominence, and explicit recognition, than it has ever received among evolutionary theorists. I have tried to emphasize its vital role in establishing the contingency and unpredictability of evolutionary change by an adjectival strategy of designation as “quirky functional shift.”

(1223-4)

One might as well say “queer functional shift.” Not only does Gould identify contingency as the largely uncontested notion among Darwinians that organisms adapt to changing local environments (and do not follow preestablished routes towards “progress” or any other goal),” he grants the larger share of contingency itself to such quirkiness or queerness. Indeed, “contingency gains its greatest force through the principle of quirky functional shift: the discordance between historical origin and current utility, and the consequent fallacy of direct inference from modern status to initial meaning” (1224). Meanwhile, the consequences of such effects, as Gould notes, are both extraordinarily simple and profound:

If many features that operate as adaptations under present regimes of natural selection were exapted from ancestral features with nonadaptive origins – and were not built as direct adaptations for their current use (or exapted from ancestral features with adaptive origins for different functions) – then we cannot explain all pathways of evolutionary change under functionalist mechanics of the theory of natural selection. Instead, we must allow that many important (and currently adaptive) traits originated for nonadaptive reasons that cannot be attributed to the direct action of natural selection at all
and, moreover, cannot be inferred from the exaptive utility of the trait in living species. Because the subject of evolutionary biology must engage many crucial questions about the origins of features, and cannot be confined to the study of current utilities and selective regimes, nonadaptational themes therefore assume an important role in any full account of life’s history and the mechanics of evolutionary change. (1248)

This is similar to the observation by Bennett, Bogost, and others that objects are weird, unpredictable, with ideas of their own. Indeed, “To say that existence is coexistence is not to say that things merely reduce to their relations. Rather, it is to argue that because of withdrawal, an object never exhausts itself in its appearances – this means that there is always something left over, as it were, an excess that might be experienced as a distortion, [or] gap” (Morton, 113).

As for the more standard concept of “preadaptation” that exaptation replaces, Gould says in his magnum opus, The Structure of Evolutionary Theory (2002), “we guarantee ourselves nothing but trouble when we invest a word with a ‘plain meaning’ of foreordination as a description and definition of our best examples to illustrate the precisely opposite concepts of fortuity and contingency”(1232). Given such a contingency, the importance and ubiquity of what Gould has identified as spandrels increases – structural by-products that he and Richard Lewontin have compared to the accidental, unplanned spaces between the arches of San Marco in Venice that can Nonetheless be utilized for various purposes – usually decorative (Gould, 2006, 423-43) – and which increase as organisms and their traits become more complex. Constituted as such, spandrels and all other forms of exaptive
potential define the ground of what Gould calls “evolvability.” They play as important a role in macroevolutionary potential as conventional adaptation does for the immediacy of microevolutionary success.

In 1979, Lewontin and I borrowed the architectural term “spandrel” (using the pendentives of San Marco in Venice as an example) to designate the class of forms and spaces that arise as necessary byproducts of another decision in design, and not as adaptations for direct utility in themselves. […] The features of the San Marco pendentives that we explicitly defined as spandrel-properties—their necessary number (four) and shape (roughly triangular)—are inevitable architectural byproducts, whatever the structural attributes of the
The term spandrel may be extended from its particular architectural use for two-dimensional byproducts to the generality of “spaces left over,” a definition that properly includes the San Marco pendentives. Evolutionary biology needs such an explicit term for features arising as byproducts, rather than adaptations, whatever their subsequent exaptive utility. The concept of biological spandrels [. . .] anchors the critique of overreliance upon adaptive scenarios in evolutionary explanation. Causes of historical origin must always be separated from current utilities; their conflation has seriously hampered the evolutionary analysis of form in the history of life. (Gould, http://www.pnas.org)

Figure 7. (Upper) A pendentive (or three-dimensional spandrel) formed as a necessarily triangular space where a round dome meets two rounded arches at right angles. (Lower) “Classical” two-dimensional spandrels; the necessarily triangular spaces between rounded arches and the rectangular frame of surrounding walls and ceilings (http://www.pnas.org)
Like Compagnon’s topographical map of allusion, then, the exaptive is something else we can know – a side-by-side utility of unexpected and unpredictable use that is available not in spite of but because of its withdrawn, uncorrelated and emptied-out “function”. Yet in the rigorously adaptational world of Combray, the narrator can only identify this exaptive emptiness as the “anaesthetic effect” of habit that only knows a kind of adaptational iteration so familiar that it can no longer be seen. “Habit! That skillful but slow-moving arranger who begins by letting our minds suffer for weeks on end in temporary quarters, but whom our minds are none the less only too happy to discover at last, for without it, reduced to their own devices, they would be powerless to make any room seem habitable” (I, 9).

This is why the door-handle to the narrator’s room at Combray is “different to me from all the other door-handles in the world,” because it opens unconsciously, “of its own accord and without my having to turn it, so unconscious had its manipulation become” (I, 11). This, too, is why the narrator’s Combray must both recognize as well as be recognizable itself. At Combray

a person whom one “didn’t know from Adam” was as incredible a being as any mythological deity, and indeed, no one could remember, on the various occasions when one of these startling apparitions had occurred in the Rue du Saint-Esprit or in the Square, exhaustive inquiries ever having failed to reduce the fabulous monster to the proportions of a person whom one “did know,” either personally or in the abstract. (I, 61-62)

The hanging lamp of the dining room recognizes the family as dependably as the squeaky step on the staircase. Indeed, even the dogs must be recognized at Combray.
As the narrator testifies, “Everyone was so well known in Combray, animals as well as people, that if my aunt had happened to see a dog go by which she ‘didn’t know from Adam’ she never stopped talking or thinking about it, devoting all her inductive talents and her leisure hours to this incomprehensible phenomenon” until an answer is found which itself first wards off any admitted space of strangeness. “As if I didn’t know Mme. Sazerat’s dog!” says Aunt Leonie (I, 62-3) – already lauded by Francoise for her encyclopedic astuteness: “Madame knows everything; Madame is worse than the X-rays” (I, 58).

This X-ray-like transparency on the part of animals and onlookers, as well as the familiar, porous stones of Combray’s buildings and the conversational habitus of its inhabitants all help to locate an adaptational explanation that illustrates and accounts for a just-so world. This is why, on one hand, the narrator’s Combray must recognize as easily as it must be recognizable: it recognizes as an adaptive fit recognizes, where function operates always and everywhere without any sense of surprise or strangeness. Indeed, this familiar everywhere is precisely the spatialization of an adaptational epistemology that everywhere diagrams, illustrates and explains without impediment. Seen as the hand-in-glove fit of the always adaptational, the very transparency of these functions seems to insure the comforting regard of an already-there design, reinforced by the habitual overlays of camouflage or projection that are characteristic of Combray. This transparency must be retained to insulate against the strange or the unrecognizable: a just-so-world in which adaptation becomes inseparable from an always functional and human-centered “for-ness.” Form follows function and function follows form to such an extent that the environment and its
inhabitants surrender to each other like hands to gloves, or doorknobs to hands, both humans and nonhumans. The secure fit of a rigid adaptationism becomes the absent-minded recognition of a world in which the only jarring or out-of-place moment is the moment when one is not recognized, the moment which is out of place.

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There are, then, at least two adjacent modes of environmental accommodation at Combray, just as there are at least two narrators. The first is the adaptational functionalism that can be seen everywhere in Combray: the comforting if habitually deadening fit we can associate with the young narrator who may never not recognize as it, in turn, can do nothing but recognize him. The second is a much less noticeable exaptive queering, where even the most habitual can be changed, made strange, and capable of hitherto unused affordances – a queering of the adaptational only recognized by the older narrator who is writing the novel. If Gérald Genette is correct when he says in his Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method (1979) that projection and transposition are the prototype and epitome of Proustian narrative, then Golo becomes one of the novel’s most significant images. Indeed, if all Proustian metaphors become ways of melding or transferring one plane of reality to another – the present to the past, the fantastic to the quotidian, the recovered to reality – then Swann, the neighborhood dogs, Golo and the grandmother are all filled by the “transposed” environment of Combray. Yet for the young narrator – at least in the narrator’s transformed bedroom– the result is also a once-familiar room that becomes wrenchingly unrecognizable.
Thus, the most anxiogenic aspect of any such projection in Combray is that it violates the security of the familiar – even as it does so in a sort of nightmare of adaptation and *transvertebration*. At least for Robert Fraser in his *Proust and the Victorians* (1994), the process is somewhat sinister: a bony and reptilian slithering that slides itself cross the room “like a lizard easing itself across a stone,” slyly adapting its own shape to the knob of a door.

The image-reptile adapts its shape to the knob, which in turn supplies it with a kind of temporary skeleton or ‘ossature’. Thus the world of images honours the world of forms with a categorical acknowledgement – a process that extends from Golo’s translucent body to his putative mind. For Golo not only squeezes himself around the shapes of the room but is seemingly conscious of other forms of constraints, keeping an ear cocked for the great-aunt’s accompanying ‘lecture’, the murmured orchestration of the tale. (Fraser, 4)

While the bony, slithering of an “image-reptile” may seem atavistic, the greater horror of the scene (at least for the narrator) is an ultra-adaptational transformation that results in the instability of the room itself and its sudden capacity for strangeness. This sudden strangeness is also part of the narrator’s bedtime unease at an anxiogenic Golo who cannot be trusted in his morphological transformations because he makes the narrator’s familiar room unrecognizable. Unable to view his once-familiar room as anything other than alienating, the narrator confronts the distinctly un-Combray apparition of the radically unknown: a room that has other lives, other uses, than those that concern his childhood self. Moreover, the narrator’s anxiety about Golo is not only that his room in Combray becomes unrecognizable or incapable of recognizing
the narrator. It’s also the anxiety that *a world which only knows adaptation* will produce a narrator who will himself become unrecognizable by accepting the ossature of another place and time.

This teasing apart of adaptation and exaptation becomes part of a larger adaptational critique that can also work to foreground what Gillian Beer has called the *deviancy* of evolutionary processes in her landmark study, *Darwin’s Plots* (1987). Uninterested in any rigid concept of “for-ness,” this is an accommodation where recognition carries with it a charge of surprise that moves away from a dichotomized “focus on adaptation” in the environment, and towards a more exaptive and mobile positionality (Pugliucci and Kaplan, 128). Seen in these terms, the scene of Golo is as much a dream of a polymorphous promiscuity as anything else, particularly if we see that a promiscuous exaptation is the way that adaptation recognizes novelty and surprise. Indeed, in terms of Golo, exaptation might be said to be the sometimes anxiogenic re-positioning that allows adaptation to move from a naïve, lock-and-key notion of Morton’s mechanical habit in order to recognize the novel and the new. It does so by a sort of Golo-like lability that takes as its most salient characteristic its own withdrawn or nonimpinging content. Thus, Golo marks a layered “archaeological” site that can be seen not only in terms of Compagnon’s “alluvial deposits,” but also as an unforeseen, surprising encounter that itself arises unexpectedly, contingently, accidentally. Golo becomes literally identical to the place that transforms him as he in turn transforms that place; he neither replaces one adaptation with another, nor enacts any alternating, inverse exchange like a “gene” and its “environment.” Instead he co-exists with and takes his form from the
narrator’s room like a Moëbius strip: an object that not only arises from and returns to the topography in which it finds itself, but also can be seen as the literal unfolding of that *topos* in all its lateral and paratactic availability.

According to Proust, then, all these objects exist in what might be called a withdrawn/exaptive space in which they act as archaeological or paleontological resources, dispersed across a world. That is to say, they exist outside us, in the blatter of rain, in the smell of an unaired room or of the first crackling brushwood fire in a cold grate: wherever, in short, we happen upon what our mind, having no use for it, had rejected, the last treasure that the past has in store, the richest, that which, when all our flow of tears seems to have dried at the source, can make us weep again. (II, 300)

Only a kind of functional oblivion allows these objects to be known at all – not only outside us, but [w]ithin us, rather. . . hidden from our eyes in an oblivion more or less prolonged. It is thanks to this oblivion alone that we can from time to time recover the person that we were, place ourselves in relation to things as he was placed, suffer anew because we are no longer ourselves but he, and because he loved what now leaves us indifferent. In the broad daylight of our habitual memory the images of the past turn gradually pale and fade out of sight, nothing remains of them, we shall never recapture it. Or rather we should never recapture it had not a few words […] been carefully locked away in oblivion, just as an author deposits in the National Library a copy of a book which might otherwise become unobtainable. (II, 300-1)
The younger narrator may be discomfited by such oblivion, but for the older and presumably wiser narrator who recounts these events, such a place of oblivion is also a lumber-room, a site of storage, or oblivion’s reservoir *in extremis* -- a world where words and things are imbedded in a matrix already layered and lumpy with strewn artifacts, objects, smells, tastes and touches that are preserved because they cease to make demands based on a deadening and obscuring “for-ness” of rigidly adaptive thinking. That which is forgotten is left in full possession of its strength precisely because of the depth of its oblivion – that is to say, unimportant enough to be left untouched until what has been forgotten can be released when one is finally in the same state of indifference as the forgotten object. Indeed, to use Joseph Litvak’s term, here we can see the exquisitely Proustian idea that it is only through *waste* (Litvak, 77) – that is to say, through the nonadaptive, the nonfunctional, the apparently superfluous or the simply unnoticed – that the exaptive space for actual metamorphosis can occur. As Beer has suggested, Darwin’s idea of survival in the *Origin* occurs in a realm where “superabundance and waste are the primary conditions of such survival, and diversity is the medium of development” (Beer, 117). In this way, the variousness and imperfect multiplicity of the world replaces any prior idea of the world as preordained or constructed. As Beer points out,

Darwin’s copious imagination constantly tried out and extended possibilities, drawing upon the richness of the perceptual world. Because it refused the notion of precedent Idea with its concomitant assumption of preordained Design, his method of description placed great emphasis upon congruities within the multiple materialities of the world […] *Deviance, divergence,*
accidentals, were the materials of sustained change for him.” (emphasis added, Beer, 73-74)

Indeed, according to Beer, Darwin is an anti-essentialist, “preoccupied always with clusters of properties, whose groupings and relations shift as they yield meaning, and whose meaning depends upon their being part of the physical order.” In this way, the “secession of organisms emerge as the result of the shared potentialities of their parts, not as a result of predetermined assemblage.” For Beer, this is a position “close to Kant’s assertion of purposiveness without a governing purpose: Zweckmässigkeit ohne Zweck. Categorization becomes implicated in process, rather than being foreknown or pre-emptive. It is a stage in discovery, not the beginning of discovery, and it is, moreover, always conditional and temporary since it is grounded in history” (Beer, 88). Thus,

Darwin was seeking to create a story of the world – a fiction – which would not entirely rely upon the scope of man’s reason nor upon the infinitesimally small powers of observation he possesses, as they act within the world spread all about him, and as they enclose him through the shortness of his time span. Yet Darwin was not seeking a covertly metaphysical world nor attempting an enthusiasm which would extend the material into a form of mysticism. Throughout his use of metaphor and analogy one can feel the double stress – the attempt to create exact predictions and the attempt to press upon the boundaries of the knowable within a human order […] The whole movement of The Origin is towards expansion, not stabilization. (92-3)
In other words, to use Morton’s terms, Darwinism neither undermines or overmines. That is to say, there are no “ontotheological top objects, just as there are no bottom objects” in Darwinism, no smallest entity that is more real than any larger or largest object. “There is no object to which all other objects can be reduced, so that we can say everything we wish about them, based on the behavior of the bottom object.” Nor can there be any object “from which all things can be produced, no top object. Objects are not emanations from some primordial One or from a prime mover.” Indeed, “If there’s no top or bottom object there just is no final cause. If one has modified telos to be ‘goal-like’ rather than ‘actually final’ one has lost what is special about final causes. ‘Goal-like’ behavior is only ‘goal-like’ for some other entity, not a deep property of things” (Morton, 46). Thus, Morton locates an odd irreducibility – “a strange irredutionist situation in which an object is reducible neither to its parts or to its whole” (Morton, 44).

Any attempt to undermine an object – in thought, or with a gun, or with a particle accelerator, or with the ravages of time or heat – will not get at the encrypted essence of the object. By essence is meant something very different from essentialism. This is because essentialism depends upon some aspect of an object that OOO holds to be a mere appearance of that object, an appearance for some object. This reduction to appearance holds even if that object for which the appearance occurs is the object itself! [...] In essentialism, a superficial appearance is taken for the essence of a thing, or of things in general. Feminism, anti-racism and queer theory are justified in assaulting this find of essence by any means necessary. (Ibid.)
“Neither need we infer that Darwin is offering a single covert sub-text,” particularly when we look at the *Origin* itself. “Nor indeed should we take it for granted that there is an over and under text, or even a main plot and a sub-plot,” as Beer has pointed out. In an exaptive manner, “[t]he manifest and the latent are not fixed levels of text; they shift and change places according to who is reading and when” (93). In particular,

The deliberately guarded and consciously metamorphic status that he gives to the phrase ‘struggle for existence’, which he sometimes varies as ‘struggle for life’ and even in one instance ‘the great battle of life’ [...] also expresses his unwillingness to give dominance to a militant or combative order of nature. He sees struggle as essential to the continuity of nature, but he interprets it as interdependence or endurance as much as battle. The egalitarian, horizontal, ordering of his view of the natural world means that he eschews the simplicity of hierarchy. Neither the ladder nor the pyramid is a useful model for him. When he uses the term ‘the scale of nature’ [...] it is not to sort and distinguish in a vertical order. In nature relations can never be simple [...] There is no single line of ascent and descent, but rather an abstruse lateral range of interconnections. (*Ibid.*)

Unlike the modernist “error” of Pound and Eliot, then, error in Proust is not the target of a punishing or eugenic criticism; instead, *error is the desired form.* As with Golo and the magic lantern, novelty and surprise arise not from rigid adaptational stances or what might be called the protogenetic, imperatives of master genes or originating cells, but from exaptive modes of contingency that make adaptation possible. In this way, any adaptational or genetic mastery associated with a world that provides nothing except a passive, environmental accommodation must be
relinquished as illusory. Indeed, any exaptive encounter produces a sort of necessary “error” in that world of waste – a wasteland very different from Eliot’s – where what becomes most valuable to the narrator is what cannot be predicted in advance.

Nor is there anything particularly atavistic in Proust’s “Being-now” and “Being-then” (to use Dana Seitler’s formulation of Walter Benjamin’s terms), unlike narratives that posit an anxious shuttle between old and new bodies indelibly marked as either modern or degenerate. In marked contrast to Proust’s resource-filled past, atavism is a relentless recurrence. It is a corporeal recognition that the past has never passed, has not ceased to shape and form our sense of self in both psychic and material ways. As a reminder of the coextensive inter-animation of temporal schemes, atavism stages the contingencies of both modernity and the modern subject on the human body itself. An allegory for the modern as much as an invention of modern science, atavism materializes the past in the present, disallowing the past to remain past, keeping it alive as a constitutive feature of the modern self. Atavism, therefore, doesn’t allow for the melancholic distance that Proust forwards as the fundamental relationship between the modern subject and her history. It closes in on the space between past and present: it is the past in present form: gorilla eyes, wolfish teeth, the mark of the animal. (Seitler, 229)

Instead of such an anxiogenic atavism, even at a distance Proust’s past not only survives: it survives by being open to the new and the unexpected – a past that is itself weirdly, paradoxically capable of change rather than simply reiterating or returning. Indeed, if an object in Proust can be said to return at all, what returns includes
possibilities of surprise and change that involve its own continued transformation. Or as Morton puts it, “The response of one object to another is another object.”

This is an evolutionary return that seems less like a rogue’s gallery of atavistic objects or bullying blastoderms, and more like a collection of busy, vibrant objects as avatars: collective sites of agency, interest, constraint, permissiveness. Even the “Combray-Swann” of the narrator’s great-aunts is capable of unexpected change, if only as an “early Swann in whom [the narrator] can distinguish the charming mistakes of [his] youth.” By examining the ways in which the narrator begins to negotiate these avatar-filled, layered landscapes of Combray, one can see that he centers more and more on an exaptive as well as an Ovidian task: the recognition and creation of a resilient-enough, agile-enough world that can suffer and withstand change even as that change presents itself as an anxiogenic strangeness and the paralyzing sufferance of the blank. Neither proto-genelike in their interactions with their environment, nor only and always adapted in any lock-and-key arrangement with function and a passive, compliant world, the genetic object in Proust is both agent and arena in ways not only strikingly different from the modernist object of Pound and Lewis, but also in ways that bring Proust’s notion of organismal metamorphoses closer to current epigenetic notions of evolutionary and biological change.

What, then, can be said about Proust’s iconic, inescapable madeleine in terms of its genetic and environmental status, even as it seems to present itself in the popular imagination as one of the novel’s almost archetypal, genotypical objects – that is, as a
discrete and contained packet that seems to contain, in all its preformational rigour, everything that will already be known or needed for the finished novel – and which only awaits the environmental trigger of the tea-soaked morsel in order to flower in all its organismal wholeness and completeness? Arguably the most famous in a series of Proustian objects that might be regarded as genetic, discrete and powerfully independent, how distinct should we consider such an object from its own environment? The passage itself is long – long enough, that is, to allow the tempos of such a recovery to enact and convey the spatialization of the madeleine’s slow but decisive appearance:

Many years had elapsed during which nothing of Combray, save what was comprised in the theatre and the drama of my going to bed there, had any existence for me, when one day in winter, on my return home, my mother, seeing that I was cold, offered me some tea, a thing I did not ordinarily take. I declined at first, and then, for no particular reason, changed my mind. She sent for one of those squat, plump little cakes called "petites madeleines," which look as though they had been moulded in the fluted valve of a scallop shell. And soon, mechanically, dispirited after a dreary day with the prospect of a depressing morrow, I raised to my lips a spoonful of the tea in which I had soaked a morsel of the cake. No sooner had the warm liquid mixed with the crumbs touched my palate than a shudder ran through me and I stopped, intent upon the extraordinary thing that was happening to me. An exquisite pleasure had invaded my senses, something isolated, detached, with no suggestion of its origin. And at once the vicissitudes of life had become indifferent to me, its disasters innocuous, its
brevity illusory - this new sensation having had on me the effect which love has of filling me with a precious essence; or rather this essence was not in me it was me. I had ceased now to feel mediocre, contingent, mortal. Whence could it have come to me, this all-powerful joy? I sensed that it was connected with the taste of the tea and the cake, but that it infinitely transcended those savours, could not, indeed, be of the same nature. Whence did it come? What did it mean? How could I seize and apprehend it? I drink a second mouthful, in which I find nothing more than in the first, then a third, which gives me rather less than the second. It is time to stop; the potion is losing its magic. It is plain that the truth I am seeking lies not in the cup but in myself. The drink has called it into being, but does not know it, and can only repeat indefinitely, with a progressive diminution of strength, the same message which I cannot interpret, though I hope at least to be able to call it forth again and to find it there presently, intact and at my disposal, for my final enlightenment. I put down the cup and examine my own mind. It alone can discover the truth. But how: What an abyss of uncertainty, whenever the mind feels overtaken by itself; when it, the seeker, is at the same time the dark region through which it must go seeking and 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. And I begin to ask myself what it could have been, this unremembered state which brought with it no logical proof, but the indisputable evidence, of its felicity, its reality, and in whose presence other states of consciousness melted and vanished. I decide to attempt to make it reappear. I
retrace my thoughts to the moment at which I drank the first spoonful of tea. I
rediscover the same state, illuminated by no fresh light. I ask my mind to make
one further effort, to bring back once more the fleeting sensation. And so that
nothing may interrupt it in its course I shut out every obstacle, every extraneous
idea, I stop my ears and inhibit all attention against the sound from the next room.
And then, feeling that my mind is tiring itself without having any success to
report, I compel it for a change to enjoy the distraction which I have just denied it,
to think of other things, to rest and refresh itself before making a final effort. And
then for the second time I clear an empty space in front of it; I place in position
before my mind's eye the still recent taste of that first mouthful, and I feel
something start within me, something that leaves its resting-place and attempts to
rise, something that has been embedded like an anchor at a great depth; I do not
know yet what it is, but I can feel it mounting slowly; I can measure the
resistance, I can hear the echo of great spaces traversed. Undoubtedly what is thus
calling up in the depths of my being must be the image, the visual memory
which, being linked to that taste, is trying to follow it into my conscious mind.
But its struggles are too far off, too confused and chaotic; scarcely can I perceive
the neutral glow into which the elusive whirling medley of stirred-up colours is
fused, and I cannot distinguish its form, cannot invite it, as the one possible
interpreter, to translate for me the evidence of its contemporary, its inseparable
paramour, the taste, cannot ask it to inform me what special circumstance is in
question, from what period in my past life. Will it ultimately reach the clear
surface of my consciousness, this memory, this old, dead moment which the
magnetism of an identical moment has traveled so far to importune, to disturb, to raise up out of the very depths of my being? I cannot tell. Now I feel nothing; it has stopped, has perhaps sunk back into its darkness, from which who can say whether it will ever rise again? Ten times over I must essay the task, must lean down over the abyss. And each time the cowardice that deters us from every difficult task, every important enterprise, has urged me to leave the thing alone, to drink my tea and to think merely of the worries of to-day and my hopes for to-morrow, which can be brooded over painlessly. And suddenly the memory revealed itself. The taste was that of the little piece of madeleine which on Sunday mornings at Combray (because on those mornings I did not go out before mass), when I went to say good morning to her in her bedroom, my aunt Léonie used to give me, dipping it first in her own cup of tea or tisane. The sight of the little madeleine had recalled nothing to my mind before I tasted it; perhaps because I had so often seen such things in the meantime, without tasting them, on the trays in pastry-cooks’ windows, that their image had dissociated itself from those Combray days to take its place among others more recent; perhaps because of those memories, so long abandoned and put out of mind, nothing now survived, everything was scattered; the shapes of things, including that of the little scallop-shell of pastry, so richly sensual under its severe, religious folds, were either obliterated or had been so long dormant as to have lost the power of expansion which would have allowed them to resume their place in my consciousness. But when from a long-distant past nothing subsists, after the people are dead, after the things are broken and scattered, taste and smell alone, more fragile but more
enduring, more unsubstantial, more persistent, more faithful, remain poised a long
time, like souls, remembering, waiting, hoping, amid the ruins of all the rest; and
bear unflinchingly, in the tiny and almost impalpable drop of their essence, the
vast structure of recollection. And as soon as I had recognized the taste of the
piece of madeleine soaked in her decoction of lime-blossom which my aunt used
to give me (although I did not yet know and must long postpone the discovery of
why this memory made me so happy) immediately the old grey house upon the
street, where her room was, rose up like a stage set to attach itself to the little
pavilion opening on to the garden which had been built out behind it for my
parents (the isolated segment which until that moment had been all that I could
see); and with the house the town, from morning to night and in all weathers, the
Square where I used to be sent before lunch, the streets along which I used to run
errands, the country roads we took when it was fine. And as in the game wherein
the Japanese amuse themselves by filling a porcelain bowl with water and
steeping in it little pieces of paper which until then are without character or form,
but, the moment they become wet, stretch and twist and take on colour and
distinctive shape, become flowers or houses or people, solid and recognizable, so
in that moment all the flowers in our garden and in M. Swann's park, and the
water-lilies on the Vivonne and the good folk of the Village and their little
dwellings and the parish church and the whole of Combray and its surroundings,
taking shape and solidarity, sprang into being, town and gardens alike, from my
cup of tea. (I, 48-51)
Unlike the genetic objects of Pound or Lewis, the madeleine is not an object that
directs but a place-object that unfolds, like the “little pieces of paper which are without
character or form,” but stretch and twist as soon as they become wet, and take on color
and distinctive shape as flowers, houses, streets and people, “solid and recognizable.” If
the madeleine moves up from the depths where it has been anchored, it moves up to
laterize into a place; if it acts as genetic agent or as a genetic replicator, it can only do
so cheek-by-jowl with both place and person – indeed, as place, in the way that Gould
and Lewontin have specified that an environment requires an organism in the same way
an organism requires an environment. As Proust says, not “a page in an account book”
to be added up or the “record of a will,” what is inherited or passed on through such a
genetic object is an epigenetic, responsive topography that will provide the space for the
narrator’s own growth as well. As both Lewontin and Susan Oyama point out in their
discussions on the interwoven event that is usually separated into “gene” and
“environment,” this is less a site for the discrete alternation of “object” and
“environment” than it is the promiscuous creation of any number of relational dynamics.

In a similar manner, Proust’s object-phenotype cannot begin to exist without the
conjunction of person and place:

Chromosomal form is an interactant in the choreography of ontogeny; the
“information” it imparts or the form it influences in the emerging organism
depends on what dance is being performed when, where and with whom. The
dance continues throughout the life cycle, and everything that occurs in that cycle,
from the first moments to the moment of death, from the most permanent
structure to the most evanescent, from the most typical feature to the most
divergent, is constructed from these interactants. In the individual, constancy of form is largely ensured by the fidelity of chromosome duplication and by the fact that the maintaining influences for any given process or structure are apt to be supplied by the organism itself or by its niche, which includes other organisms [...] Many other interactants, of course, are sought, found, or created by the organism itself in due time. Over evolutionary time, these processes have become more or less reliably coupled; constancy across generations and within a population is due to these relations, whose reliability is variable. There is no vehicle of constancy (even though the coined term, “interactant” may have an unfortunate particulate connotation), unless the organism and its niche, as they move along time’s arrow, are so conceived. The developmental system, however, does not have a final form, encoded before its starting point and realized at maturity. It has, if one focuses finely enough, as many forms as time has segments. (Oyama, 2000a, 26-7)

So too, not unlike Georges Poulet’s successive “photographs”, the moments between the narrator and the madeleine emerge in a dance of interaction where each does its part, hesitantly, but together. So too, phenogenetic variation:

Form emerges in successive interactions. Far from being imposed on matter by some agent, it is a function of the reactivity of matter at many hierarchical levels, and of the responsiveness of those interactions to each other. Because mutual selectivity, reactivity, and constraint take place only in actual processes, it is these that orchestrate the activity of different portions of the DNA, that make genetic and environmental influences interdependent as
genes and gene products are environment to each other, as extraorganismic environment is made internal by psychological or biochemical assimilation, as internal state is externalized through products and behavior that select and organize the surrounding world. If biological plans, constraints, and controls have a serious meaning, it is only in such mobile, contingent phenotypic processes, not in a preformed macro-molecular code specifying the species type, of which type the individual is but a token. (Ibid.)

This is the cognitive and imaginative space of the Proustian “genetic object” as well as the deeply overlapping juncture of evolutionary and Ovidian maps of person and place: a juncture that not only calls to mind Lewontin’s organismal-environment, but also a more multiple view of heredity that allows for genetic “transmission” as part of a richly various, profoundly local and contingent environment.

Such an emphasis on the subordination of a primarily adaptational theory to the more challenging task of adequate description can be compared to the observation by Jablonka and Lamb that any adequate “explanation” of the process of genetic transcription must take into account such a varied assemblage of attendant and operative interactants that any accurate description or “explanation” reaches such a degree of idiosyncratic specificity that it simply culminates in a local description that is equal to the genetic transcription itself. In the same way, the “transcription” of Proust’s genetic madeleine is its own instantiation as it occurs between its two “magnetized moments.” The present sip of tea and the recalled moment in Combray collude not in an alternating current between a reified “gene” and its passive “environment” but form, as it were, the utterance of its own production. For Proust,
places are person-like in all their evolutionary agency and performative complexity, both in terms of their adaptations and in their yet-to-be-known exaptive capacities as well.

This, too, can be considered part of the “camouflage” endemic to Combray: not only as a reflexive, adaptational response, but also a transparency to a resourceful environment that is not exhausted or regulated by the limits of any one interaction or function. Less a handicap to the narrator or a juvenile epistemological stage to be outgrown as Vincent Descombes has suggested in his *Proust: Philosophy of the Novel* (1992), the resources of Combray are also apparent in an exaptive excessiveness that sits alongside what might otherwise be seen as its hyper-adaptability. Indeed, while René Girard has talked about the ways transubstantiation and nutrition inform the interior of Aunt Leonie’s room (198), the same sense of edible resource extends laterally through Combray as a whole. This too is part of what is inherited in Combray, where the idea of “for-ness” goes beyond the action of any gene-like, inherited particulate, and is instead lateralized into an environment both lovingly constructed and constructive.

Seen in such terms, for example, the Church of Sainte-Hilaire at the center of Combray is another laterally developed and inherited “alluvial” resource, with its morphic, tectonic waves of deliquescent and very nearly edible stone, its breathy, cloudy exhalation of crows that are both continually absorbed and dispersed by the church’s spire. The church’s porch is *grêlé comme une écumoire*, as “full of holes as a colander.” Passing through it with his family – passing through a sort of sieve that
both collects and disperses -- the Narrator tells us that its softness has been the work of many hands. The porch is now

worn out of shape and deeply furrowed at the sides (as also was the holy water stoop to which it led us) just as if the gentle grazing touch of the cloaks of peasant-women going into church, and of their fingers dipping into the water, had managed by age-long repetition to acquire a destructive force, to impress itself on the stone, to carve ruts in it like those made by cart-wheels upon stone gate-posts against which they driven every day. Its memorial stones, beneath which the noble dust of the Abbots of Combray, who were buried there, furnished the choir with a sort of spiritual pavement, were themselves no longer hard and lifeless matter, for time had softened and sweetened them, and had made them melt like honey and flow beyond their proper margins, either surging out in a milky, frothing wave, washing from its place a florid gothic capital, drowning the white violets of the marble floor; or else reabsorbed into their limits, contracting still further a crabbed Latin inscription, bringing a fresh touch of fantasy into the arrangement of its curtailed characters, closing together two letters of some word of which the rest were disproportionately scattered. (I, 45)

A vast, spongy, nutritive mass that must be simultaneously caressed and defended against the destructive force of too many gentle hands, the interior of the church at Combray is the “spiritual pavement,” un pavage spirituel, that carries with it all the amorphic, maternal force of the abbots who are simultaneously deliquescent and stationary, and who form a nutritive, conglomerate mass that, like soft wax or honey,
can be spread, *comme du miel*, sweetly drowning the *violettes blanche du marbre* in flowing swells of moving rock. Like a geological drawing by John Ruskin [fig. 6], this is a rock that moves and swells like a living organism. Simultaneously a many-layered stratigraphic bedding plane as much as it is a sinuous, folded bed of sedimentary rock, the church is as much a fossil bed as it is a spongy, marine organism sailing across the centuries with its collective freight of the Guermantes dead – a building which occupied, so to speak, four dimensions of space – the name of the fourth being Time – which had sailed the centuries with that old nave, where bay after bay, chapel after chapel, seemed to stretch across and hold down and conquer not merely a few yards of soil, but within each successive epoch from which the whole building emerged triumphant . . . thrusting down with its crypt into the blackness of a Merovingian night, through which, guiding us with groping finger-tips beneath the shadowy vault, ribbed strongly as an immense bat’s wing of stone, Théodore or his sister would light up for us with a candle the tomb of Sigebert’s little daughter, in which a deep hole, like the bed of a fossil, had been bored, or so it was said, “by a crystal lamp which, on the night when the Frankish princess was murdered, had left, of its own accord, the golden chains by which it was suspended where the apse is to-day and with neither the crystal broken nor the light extinguished had buried itself in the stone, through which it had gently forced its way.” (I, 46-7)
Figure 8. John Ruskin, *Gneiss Rock, Glenfinlas*, 1853. (Ruskin, 158)
This too is part of the world of “alluvial deposits” in which objects circulate and move, whether someone is there to watch them or not, like crystal lamps burrowing into and being buoyed up by gently swelling rock and stone. As Fraser says, this almost paleontological process “has to be unearthed” in Proust, something “implicit within the landscape, waiting to be recalled” (Fraser, 155) and which can be seen in the tiny, almost aphoristic lines that scrawl across the pages of the *Carnet de 1908* where Proust writes with a certain telegraphic economy of the novels by Thomas Hardy – particularly *A Pair of Blue Eyes* (1873):

I notice in *A Pair of Blue Eyes* this admirable geometrical parallelism, these tombs set side by side, these people who perch on Jethway’s tombstone/this steamboat drawing parallel to the cliff-face from which Knight and Elfride escape, and these adjacent railway carriages in which Knight and Smith travel whilst a third carriage carries the dead Elfride. And Smith’s tentative, slightly tedious romance followed by Knight’s as in *The Well Beloved* but here it is three women who are loved by one man and always, as in *Jude the Obscure*, the piece of sculpture, of sculptured stone. What role does stone play in these books: tombstone, church, career/ Marcia marries Pierston just as Arabella remarries Jude. A little of Pater’s Denys l’Auxerrois in Pierston and the island [. . .] The novels of Hardy are constructed superimposably in this way, tombs, locations one on top of the other. One tiny corner of the earth and quite vertically one on top of the other as in the island where houses are superimposed. (*Carnet, 114, in Fraser, 145*)
This interest in a Golo-like superimposition of overlapping stone and rock is part of what Proust describes in the *carnet* as a “cult of physical things which leave a / living trace beneath which / lies a breath of the past, / old tales, old words, / old things, old trades.” (157) The same superimposition can be seen in both Combray’s Church and the overlapping simultaneity of Golo and the magic lantern.

By parallelism Proust also means something very different: objects in the story that simply lie adjacent. The tombs of the Luxellian clan, to whom Elfride is eccentrically related and into which she eventually marries, lie thus side by side in the vault of East Enderstow Church, where she is destined to join them. Earlier in the book, as Elfride struggles to extricate Knight from a cliff down which he has inadvertently fallen, she discerns a shape passing out of the corner of her eye: it is the steamer that is bringing Smith back to her after a sojourn in India, ignorant of her betrayal and on a route that brings his vessel parallel to the cliff face. When Knight and Smith, meeting after an interval during which Knight has jettisoned Elfride, abandoning her to the newly widowed Lord Luxellian, travel down from London, each to ask once more for her hand, they do so in adjacent railway carriages attached to a train where, on a trajectory continuous with their own, Elfride’s hearse also rides. (Fraser, 148)

As we shall see, this side-by-side, overlapping adjacency is part of what the narrator must learn through the course of the novel: a non-oppositional positioning that not only opens and makes available entire realms of allusion, but also re-examines and eventually rewrites any presumptive or pre-emptive stance of adaptational mastery.
over “dumb matter.” Indeed, seen in Ovidian terms, Hardy’s “alluvial” cliffhanger can be viewed as its own ironically rewritten, alluded-to layer superimposed on Ovid’s already-allusive Perseid, where Knight literally takes the place of the rock-bound Andromeda in need of rescue while Elfride becomes his unlikely Perseid savior. As Hardy tells us, Knight is literally hanging by his fingers, face-to-face with the rocky cliff:

By one of those familiar conjunctions of things wherewith the inanimate world baits the mind of man when he pauses in moments of suspense, opposite Knight's eyes was an imbedded fossil, standing forth in low relief from the rock. It was a creature with eyes. The eyes, dead and turned to stone, were even now regarding him. It was one of the early crustaceans called Trilobites. Separated by millions of years in their lives, Knight and this underling seemed to have met in their death. It was the single instance within reach of his vision of anything that had ever been alive and had had a body to save, as he himself had now. The creature represented but a low type of animal existence, for never in their vernal years had the plains indicated by those numberless slaty layers been traversed by an intelligence worthy of the name. Zoophytes, mollusca, shell-fish, were the highest developments of those ancient dates. The immense lapses of time each formation represented had known nothing of the dignity of man. They were grand times, but they were mean times too, and mean were their relics. He was to be with the small in his death […] Time closed up like a fan before him. He saw himself at one extremity of the years, face to face with the beginning and all the intermediate centuries
simultaneously. Fierce men, clothed in the hides of beasts, and carrying, for defence and attack, huge clubs and pointed spears, rose from the rock, like the phantoms before the doomed Macbeth. They lived in hollows, woods, and mud huts—perhaps in caves of the neighbouring rocks. Behind them stood an earlier band. No man was there. Huge elephantine forms, the mastodon, the hippopotamus, the tapir, antelopes of monstrous size, the megatherium, and the myledon—all, for the moment, in juxtaposition. Further back, and overlapped by these, were perched huge-billed birds and swinish creatures as large as horses. Still more shadowy were the sinister crocodilian outlines—alligators and other uncouth shapes, culminating in the colossal lizard, the iguanodon. Folded behind were dragon forms and clouds of flying reptiles: still underneath were fishy beings of lower development; and so on, till the lifetime scenes of the fossil confronting him were a present and modern condition of things. These images passed before Knight's inner eye in less than half a minute, and he was again considering the actual present. Was he to die? The mental picture of Elfride in the world, without himself to cherish her, smote his heart like a whip. He had hoped for deliverance, but what could a girl do? He dared not move an inch. Was Death really stretching out his hand? The previous sensation, that it was improbable he would die, was fainter now.

Neither inversive nor exclusive, the place where Knight finds himself takes the form of a paralyzing, eye-to-eye confrontation with a long-extinct trilobite that marks an end to any and every sort of adaptation. Indeed, Knight’s adaptive survival is on the
same plane as any organism in life’s long hurly-burly, whether the first “zoophytes” or our own hominid ancestors. In terms of Hardy’s reverse-engineered Perseus, Knight is no longer the well-heeled, slightly absurd son of a god with pinioned ankles and good connections. He stares instead into the indifferent face of a sea-side monster/Medusa where he sees reflected not his own brutal mastery or heroism, but instead his own fragility and vulnerability. The dead stone eyes of the trilobite are not wielded as the hero’s weapon, but serve instead as his rebuke – not only as a would-be Perseus, but also as the Darwinian site of his own possible extinction in a world where his skills as a geologist are useless, and adaptation – either his own or that of the long-dead trilobite -- can end in nothing but eventual extinction at the hands of change. Only at the hands of Elfride’s different sort of Perseus can Knight even hope to become his own rescued Andromeda, which includes relinquishing any ideas of mastery he might have associated with his prior position.

And yet, as Hardy goes on to say, such a relinquishing seems farthest from Knight’s mind:

We are mostly accustomed to look upon all opposition which is not animate as that of the stolid, inexorable hand of indifference, which wears out the patience more than the strength. Here at any rate, hostility did not assume that slow and sickening form. It was a cosmic agency, active, lashing, eager for conquest: determination; not an insensate standing in the way. (243-4)

For Knight, then, the fossil is a reproach; its presence is a rebuff: a Medusan object *par excellence* that has nothing to do with Knight’s precarious hold on what amounts to an instant in geologic time, and everything to do with what Knight doesn’t
know. This is a sort of Golo-like transvertebration where “object” and “background” merge in a huge, horrifying instant; “small and great” are brought together; and the pair of dead stony eyes reflects Knight’s own inevitable extinction, just as the young narrator sees a transformed room that contains his own eventual extinction in yet another ekphrastic mirror that reflects his own immobility, his own paralyzing ideas of mastery. A knight errant, a Knight who errs, Hardy’s protagonist must himself be rescued, not least from his own ideas of heroism in the same way that Proust’s narrator must negotiate a Phaeton-like world of competing, recalcitrant and largely indifferent object-entities who have plans of their own.

This, too, is part of the Narrator’s bedtime unease at an anxiogenic Golo, who cannot be trusted in his transformisme because of the appalling indifference of both his transformation and the equally appalling indifference of the environment that becomes identical with his relentlessly adapting/exapting body. Unable to view either Golo or the landscape of the room as an exaptive event that effortlessly allows Golo his provisional armature, the narrator, like Knight, sees nothing but an alienating and minatory strangeness – a world without him: an extinction. Just as the scene of the bedtime kiss threatens to look forward to a time when the narrator and his mother will be different people with different relationships, so Knight quails before the image of a world where “[t]he mental picture of Elfride in the world, without himself to cherish her, smote his heart like a whip.” Unable to do anything but see himself in the scene that confronts him, Knight “dared not move an inch.” Indeed, the narrator’s childhood self can be said to suffer a similar paralysis in his inability to read the emptiness of the room at Combray as something which can also recognize – even
welcome – by virtue of that anxiogenic emptiness and strangeness. As such, however, it can recognize only as an Ovidian *lieu de mémoire* recognizes: its power of place is its capacity to “hold indefinitely,” in the same way that the same geological instant holds both past, present and future together for Knight. If Combray – and eventually Balbec – work as evolutionary landscapes, they do so in Ovidian ways that decenter Perseid (or Poundian, or Eliotic, or Lewisian) narratives of mastery and control in order to foreground pluralized and unexpected networks of overlapping, contingent agencies and actants, both present-for and withdrawn or exaptive as well. Thus, we can consider Combray as a sort of geological or paleontological unconscious in which the buried and retrievable past lies next to that which is also irretrievable: a place of blurred contours and meltingly sweet resource as much as it is also the burial or entombment of what is lost.

Golo and the magic lantern, then, show a Combray that is as much about exaptation as it is about adaptation; as much about a necessary play of recognition and surprise as it is about an inversive, adaptive mastery alternating between the poles of object and environment. Although it will take the length of the novel for the narrator to learn, this recontextualizing of what constitutes metamorphic change in a radically accidental and contingent environment cannot happen without the exaptive agency of Proustian habit. At their most Ovidian, both site and identity, place and placeholder, become metamorphic in Proust’s Combray, as they will continue to be in Proust’s Balbec. As shown in the following chapter, they do so by a process that we can identify as Medusan – especially if we take the Medusan to signify not only the site of Hardy’s “lashing” and stony hostility, but also the paralytically blank space that will
itself become the exaptive, deviant site of recognition in which the narrator, like
Knight, will attempt to exchange the dead stony glare of the trilobite for a pair of blue
eyes.

☐ ☐ ☐

In his *Proust: Philosophy of the Novel* (1992), Vincent Descombes has described
what he calls the unspoken stricture about what can and what cannot be known in the
vicinity of Combray, and how those strictures limit the imaginative narrator in a
variety of ways. “In Combray everything is clear: both the frontier between Combray
and the outside world (everybody knows who is from Combray), and the rank each
person enjoys by virtue of the status his family has always held” (166). In
Descombes’s terms, there are no strangers in Combray, only guests. “Combray, in
effect, does not allow the work of imagination to apply itself to any possible
realignment of the relationships among its inhabitants […] The unknown life that
inspires dreams and fantasies is not the life of one’s neighbors or visitors” (168). This
limits the young narrator to reveries about the landscape; his scenarios are about the
hawthorns, “the tones in the wood, the reflections of the sunlight, the roofs of the
houses, the towers of the churches” (169). These are topics that Descombes dismisses
as “vacation assignments” – juvenile essays about one’s summer vacation and a
beautiful morning, a day of fine weather, and which result in the prose poem of the
steeples that becomes a failure of adult composition “in the manner of Baudelaire”
because it focuses “on a moment of fusion in the promiscuity of the crowd” (*Ibid.*).
For Descombes, this breaking down into “persons”– the hawthorns of Combray, the
“little phrase” that rises out of Vinteuil’s sonata, the almost autonomous patch of
As we have already seen with Eliot and Pound, the idea that parts are always elaborated at the expense of wholes has itself come to stand for the idea of decadence in its most famous formulation by Lombroso. Similarly, for Descombes the narrator learns that when an authentic aesthetic prize is to be grasped, the event involves the perception of a part at the expense of a whole. “If he wants to become an accomplished aesthete, Marcel must be ready to sacrifice the whole of the work or the performance in order to better appreciate its individuality, which shines with a solely individual brilliance” (Descombes, 108). This dilemma produces two solutions that face the narrator as a would-be writer and artist: the first is a “holism” in which “the originality of the solutions for problems in art is collective”; the second is what Descombes calls an individualistic, post-Romantic regime in which the artist must offer “totally new solutions to problems that increase in difficulty because of what Baudelaire has called ‘the infinite division of the territory of art’” (127-8).

Singled out for particular censure in this conflict is the grandmother’s choice of François le champi, and by extension, the grandmother herself. For Descombes, the grandmother at Balbec is a failure and a point of view to be overcome. “Everything she tries to organize is doomed to failure. When she wants to send Françoise ahead to Balbec she puts her on the wrong train […] In the great dining hall of the hotel at Balbec she simply cannot imagine being deprived of the good sea air” (110). So too, in Combray, the grandmother’s choice of the narrator’s bedtime reading is a similar failure. It is less important that François le champi is “an unreadable
“book,” or that it is a second-rate novel because it does not conform to the standards of Dostoyevsky. More importantly, “The gift must definitively not be used.” (emphasis added, Descombes, 109) For Descombes, this maternal Combray is precisely what the narrator must outgrow, like the grandmother’s choice of second-rate novels.

It is interesting that Descombes is describing a sort of Ovidization here, if by Ovidian one means the ironic recognition or erasure of the genius loci and the accompanying violence that occurs when the person-like attributes of a thing or place are evacuated or forcibly rewritten. As we have seen in the discussions of ekphrasis and objectification, the Ovidian practice of foregrounding the violence of treating people like things is often accompanied by a similar emphasis on treating things like people. Indeed, one could argue that the latter seems more powerfully operant: the failure to recognize things or places as person-like, or as sites of actual agency, is seen as the failure of imagination, and not the mark of its maturity.

As we shall see in Balbec, however, the presence of the grandmother actually helps the narrator endure change and the capacity of change. This is why taking her to task for treating little Marcel as an adult in Combray – in treating him like the adult he will become – is not a failed strategy that must be outgrown or discarded, but instead the sort of exaptive practice, the acting “as if” that, while un provisioned by what Descombes describes as the imaginative provinciality of Combray, is nonetheless the grandmother’s particular métier. As seen above, this Golo-like affinity shows up in her jerky trot in the garden at Combray – the same upheaval in wind and rain as the grandmother walks in her “jerky trot” in the garden at Combray, ‘waved’ by the lashing foliage and yet secure in her capacity to adapt to all weathers
that is to say, the grandmother’s Golo-like ability to withstand – even welcome – change, as well as her ability to sustain and contain change for the narrator until he can do so for himself.

This ability to survive the process of “transvertebration” that makes her into a valuable – even indispensible – resource that works against the grain of Descombe’s characterization of her as a provincial, small-minded moralizer, or as a hopeless idealist – “the weak spot in the education” that the Narrator “receives from the distaff side of the family” (Descombles, 111). As we shall see, she shows the same resiliency at Balbec, going so far as to bring her own Combray-like storm with her to the Grand Hotel, where she “surreptitiously opened a pane and at once set flying, together with the menus, the newspapers, veils and hats of all the people at the other tables, while she herself, fortified by the celestial draught, remained calm and smiling like Saint Blandina amid the torrent of invective which, increasing my sense of isolation and misery, those contemptuous, disheveled, furious visitors combined to pour on us.” (II, 725-6) It will be in Balbec where the narrator will have to negotiate the withdrawn, the unknown, the opaque – all of which are increasingly identified with the evolutionary realm and weird ontology of the Grand Hotel, a sort of evolutionary object-palace in which he is both rebuffed and intrigued by the “monsters and gods” (II, 423) of a world in which he might begin to entertain a life separate from his mother and his grandmother rather than the stark dichotomy between fragments and wholes. As we have seen in the context of both exaptation and OOO, part of the larger arc of the narrator’s education is the increasing capacity to recognize unfamiliar objects and new contexts, even if the apparent value of those objects is not
immediately of use. Indeed, another way of looking at Descombes’s “gift [that] must definitively not be used” [emphasis added] is that of recognizing other exaptive uses than those characterized by adaptational fit.

Instead of Descombe’s “juvenilia,” then, one can see instead the proto-Ovidian landscape that will explicitly bloom in the *jeunes filles* and other denizens of Balbec. In the same way that one might argue that the multiple, dispersed objects of Combray pluralize the subordinating genetic object of Pound, Eliot and Lewis, so the multiple gods and monsters of Balbec resist any attempt to be placed in a “whole” that subordinates their individual agencies. Since the exaptive object can arise almost anywhere, it is not so much that the “part” or an atavistic trait threatens to enlarge and overshadow a “whole” as that the very excessiveness devoted to what Descombes calls a part or ‘thing’ can also serve to make any particular thing or object a point of potentially extraordinary significance and agency. In order to recognize that agency, one need not abjure the grandmother’s naïve misunderstanding or condemn the narrator to a juvenile tendency simply to treat things like persons and persons like things. Rather, as both the novel and object-ontology seem to suggest, we might enlarge our conception of what it means to be a *thing*, not least in evolutionary and Ovidian terms.
3.

Gods and Monsters
The Genetic Object in Proust: Balbec

In his history of the idea of place, Edward S. Casey has remarked on a particularly Western universalism that has generally served to devalue any particular somewhere in favor of a more generalizing everywhere—a notion he connects with treatments of logic and language characterized as “place-blind,” a useful designation that describes ways of speaking and thinking that strive to sound as if they were “wholly unaffected by the locality in which they occur” (Casey, xii). Examples of place-blindness include such early twentieth-century formations as Russell and Whitehead’s *Principia Mathematica*, and de Saussure’s systematic course on general linguistics—systems, that is, that pointedly eschew local or diachronic placings in favor of a privileged and place-blind synchronicity (Casey, xii-xiii). Others such as Emmanuel Levinas and Maurice Blanchot have described the Levinasian il y a, the there is, “as resembling the night revealed to an insomniac, a creepy sense of being surrounded, not by nothing but by sheer existence” (Morton, 127).

Yet unlike the impersonal anonymity of both Blanchot and Levinas, for many object-ontologists “[t]he there is not a vague soup” but a “shatteringly specific
object.” In Morton’s analysis, “The there is is only ever a vague elemental ‘splashing’ or ‘rumbling,’ an inchoate environmentality that seems to envelop you. This vagueness makes Levinas’s there quite different from the fresh specificity that hits you in the arm with its glassy shards, making you bleed; or the studio that seems to be exuding its seductive pull on all phenomena that encompass it and dwell in it – garden, birds, curtains, dilettantes, paintings, sofa and London” (127).

Even the utter void, then, retains the dynamic property of being a scene of emergence, a proscenium on which things can arise as taking place and as having their own place [...] Indeed, the void is best construed as the scene of emergent place. Cosmogonically considered, the void is on its way to becoming ever more place-definite. It is the scene of world-creation and thus the basis of an increasingly coherent and densely textured place-world.

(Casey, 20)

Emergence, then, “is always emergence-for,” as in Casey’s emergent place. “Emergence requires at least one object outside the system that is perceived as emergent. Something must already be in existence for emergence to happen.” As Morton points out, “What happens when objects begin is that more parts suddenly appear, breaking away from objects that seemed like stable entities. These parts are without wholes, like limbs in some horror movie, flailing around in the void. It’s only later that we can posit some whole from which they ‘emerge’” (Morton, 137).

“Space and time,” then, become “emergent properties of objects” (Morton, 35). Unlike Kant, for whom “space is the pure form of sensible intuition,” object-ontology does not characterize space as a pre-established Newtonian box in which things happen.
Rather, “causality […] radiates from objects” — an observation shared by both relativity and phenomenology (*Ibid*). “Thus, to be located ‘in’ space or ‘in’ time is already to have been caught in a web of relations. It is not that objects primordially ‘occupy’ some existing region of spacetime, but that they are caught in the fields of, and otherwise ‘spaced’ and ‘timed’ by other entities” (Morton, 21).

In this way, then, like Phaeton’s sudden, devastating surprise, “One finds oneself ‘in the middle of something,’ or as Horace says of a good epic, ‘*in media res*’ – quite literally *amongst things*” (Morton, 146). This not only includes the *res publica* of the Roman/Virgilian epic, but also (to borrow a phrase) what constitutes the *rerum natura* of Ovid: that is to say, the panoply of *things* in all their demotic and quotidian mystery. “This is a much more honest approach than inventing some middle object in which things appear, such as world, environment, Nature and so on. One simply wakes up on the inside of another object, amongst things. Existence is coexistence” that “hollows out the being of a thing from within, since even a hypothetical isolated thing coexists with its parts” (Morton, 146). And while “Heidegger assumes that this strange being-with applies only to humans, […] there is no significant sense in which humans are any different in this regard than telephones, waterfalls and velvet curtains” (Morton, 146). Meanwhile, in Graham Harmon’s words,

[B]eneath this ceaseless argument, reality is churning. Even as the philosophy of language and its supposedly reactionary opponents both declare victory, the arena of the world is packed with diverse objects, their forces unleashed and mostly unloved. Red billiard ball smacks green billiard ball. Snowflakes glitter in the light that cruelly annihilates them; damaged submarines rust along the ocean
floor. As flour emerges from mills and blocks of limestone are compressed by earthquakes, gigantic mushrooms spread in the Michigan forest. While human philosophers bludgeon each other over the very possibility of “access” to the world, sharks bludgeon tuna fish and icebergs smash into coastlines.

All of these entities roam across the cosmos, inflicting blessings and punishments on everything they touch, perishing without a trace or spreading their powers further – as if a million animals had broken free from a zoo in some Tibetan cosmology (in Morton 13).

As Ovid begins his *Metamorphoses*,

Ante mare et terras et quod tegit omnia caelum

* unus erat toto naturae vultus in orbe,*

* quem dixere chaos: rudis indigestaque moles *

* nec quicquam nisi pondus iners congestaque eodem *

* non bene iunctarum discordia semina rerum. (Loeb I, 5-9) *

[Before the seas and lands had been created,  
before the sky that covers everything,  
Nature displayed a single aspect only  
throughout the cosmos; Chaos was its name,  
shapeless, unwrought mass of inert bulk  
and nothing more, with the discordant seeds  
of disconnected elements all heaped  
together in anarchic disarray.] (Martin I, 6-13)
Different from a void, this chaos is already a place or has the relations of place simply because it has things, “discordant seeds,” even if those things or “elements” are “heaped together in anarchic disarray” instead of any familiar or habitual way.

nullus adhuc mondo praebat lumina Titan,

nec nova crescendo reparabat cornua Phoebe,

nec circumfuso pendebat in aere tellus

ponderibus librata suis, nec bracchia longo

margine terrarum porrexerat Amphitrite;

utque erat et tellus illic et pontus et aer,

sic erat instabilis tellus, innabilis unda,

lucis egens aer; nulli sua forma manebat,

obstabatque aliis aliud, quia corpore in uno

frigida pugnabant calidis, umentia siccis,

mollia cum duris, sine pondere, habentia pondus.

Hanc deus et melior litem natura diremit.

nam caelo terras et terris abscidit undas

et liquidum spisso secrevit ab aere caelum.

quae postquam evolvit caecoque exemit acervo,

dissociata locis concordi pace ligavit:

ignea convexi vis et sine pondere caeli

emicuit summaque locum sibi fecit in arce;

proximus est aer illi levitate locoque;

densior his tellus elementaque grandia traxit.
et pressa est gravitate sua; circumfluus umor

ultima possedit solidumque coercuit orbem. (Loeb I)

[The sun as yet did not light up the earth,
nor did the crescent moon renew her horns,
nor was the earth suspended in midair,
balanced by her own weight, nor did the ocean
extend her arms to the margins of the land.

Although the land and sea and air were present,
land was unstable, the sea unfit for swimming,
and air lacked light; shapes shifted constantly.
and all things were at odds with one another,
for in a single mass cold strove with warm,
wet was opposed to dry and soft to hard,
and weightlessness to matter having weight.

Some god (or kinder nature) settled this
dispute by separating earth from heaven,
and then by separating sea from earth
and fluid aether from the denser air;
and after these were separated out
and liberated from the primal heap,
he bound the disentangled elements
each in its place and all in harmony.

The fiery and weightless aether leapt
to heaven’s vault and claimed its citadel;
the next in lightness to be placed was air;
the denser earth drew down gross elements
and was compressed by its own gravity;
encircling water lastly found its place,

encircling the solid earth entire.] (Martin, I, 6-40)

Thus, Ovid’s emergent cosmology is less an inhospitable environing than an
aesthetic ordering that owes much to the four elements of Stoic philosophy, as well as
Lucretius; but it is his invocation of “some god (or kinder nature)” that strikes the
note of epic mastery. Indeed, in his brief proem Ovid “invokes not just one god (as do
Homer’s Iliad and Odyssey, Lucretius’s De Rerum Natura, and Virgil’s Aeneid), but
all gods. And as Simpson points out, “invoking a host of unnamed gods may be like
invoking none at all” (Simpson, 276). The effect is one of a chaotic, Ovidian
potentiality from which a world freshly steps, rising as a goddess from a bath or an
actor on a stage, the empty space which is “the arena for the appearance of bodies”
that cannot be predicted in advance (emphasis added, Casey, 18).

While a place is the immediate arena for such appearance – a body appears
precisely in a particular place – the void is the scene for this kind of place.
As a precreationist entity, the void is empty of place primarily and of bodies
secondarily. It is empty of the place that is empty of bodies. Thus we need to
emend Aristotle’s dictum: not merely is void “place bereft of body” but “void
is bereft of place that is bereft of body.” The void is doubly bereft. As a
scene, it is an empty stage that is not yet specified as to places or bodies.

(Casey, 18)

Like Poulet’s “photos,” then, there is always a figure that accompanies a frame at Balbec, “in the same way that a figure always appears in Proust with its own frame.” Filled with doorways, windows, arches and openings, Balbec is a welter of altars, prosceniums and “curtain-raisers” brought into being by the three taps of the narrator’s fingers. This “empty stage” occurs as the sort of “moving stage set” or “traveling theatre” often mentioned by object-ontologists, “involving stages, curtains, props and lighting that produce the causal event […] in its fully theatrical sense” (Morton 98). These windows and prosceniums serve to frame the various actors and agents the narrator encounters, all of whom jostle against a throng of small divinities and local gods in the sea-side bazaar that is Proust’s Balbec. Indeed, as seen in any number of nineteenth-century engravings [fig. 7], the archaeological Baalbek itself survived as a series of openings, niches and arches that all work as frames or prosceniums, and which are echoed in the multiple frames and windows of Proust’s Balbec.

As a place-name, Balbec itself includes both the Poenican word Baal, or “lord” (as in the Hebrew Adonai), and bek, as in beqaa, the name of the valley where the original Lebanon town itself was situated – hence the meaning of “god of the beqas,” or “god of the town,” a notion which circulates endlessly in Proust’s fascination for Balbec-sur-la-Plage as the proliferating site of the genius loci, a horde
of local divinities that reflects the dizzying, overlapping and profuse layers of agencies that populate both Proust’s seaside town as well as the ancient Lebanese city on which it is based. Indeed, the term Baalim indicates a plurality of little Baals not everywhere and always considered identical, in the same way that Astarte can be found in the Old Testament in its plural, Ashtaroth. It was as Heliopolis, however, the city of the sun, that the Romans knew the ancient precinct, and consequently, it was as Heliopolis that Ovid himself would have known it, when the city became part of the Augustan building project that characterized the early empire and which produced the most massive religious buildings ever constructed in the empire, as well as its largest place of worship (Awad, 6-8). Those buildings include what has generally
been called the best-preserved Roman temple in the world, the Temple of Bacchus, near the pentagonic shrine of a goddess usually identified as Venus or Astarte. Yet while Baalbeck has been historically identified with the Heliopoline family triad of Jupiter, Venus and Bacchus – in turn identified with the older representations of Baal, Astarte and their divine child – Proust’s resolutely Ovidian Balbec sidesteps any form of heteronormative worship and instead, like the Metamorphoses itself, creates a crowded world that manages to populate itself by every form of nonreproductive sex imaginable.

For both Proust and Ovid, then, place in Balbec is that characteristic of space which is crowded, queer, and ontologically “flat.” It is not simply empty space, since conceptually empty space cannot capture what Casey and many object-ontologists identify as that which is specific to place – “namely, the capacity to hold and situate things, to give them a local habitation” (Casey, 20). Like the crowded, diverse and sometimes recalcitrant objects that Phaeton meets on his wild ride, supposedly empty space is “teeming with waves, particles, magnetic seductions, erotic curvature and menacing grins” (Morton, 35-6). As Morton insists, “Causality is not something that happens between objects, like some coming out party or freely chosen bargain into which things enter. It pours constantly from [each] single object itself” (Ibid). Thus, place is not “entitative” or foundational, according to Casey, “but eventmental, something in process”:

Its primacy consists in its omnilocality, its continual inclusion in ever more expansive envelopments. Which means that there is no simple origin or telos of place: no definitive beginning or ending of the matter. The primacy of place
is not that of the place, much less of this place or a place (not even a very special place) – all these locutions imply place-as-simple-preservation – but that of being an event capable of implacing things in many complex manners and to many complex effects. It is an issue of being in place differently, experiencing its eventfulness otherwise. Otherwise than traditional physicists or metaphysicians, cosmologists or ethicists, would have foretold in ancient, medieval, and modern periods of Western history. But not otherwise than certain native peoples, many artists, and some postmodern thinkers know and have attempted to set forth. (Casey, 337)

This issue of “being in place differently,” of experiencing “eventfulness otherwise,” is another way of stating that place and its manifold are exaptive and withdrawn: they permit novel ways of being in a world that may have nothing to do with either expectations or predictions. As we have seen in the mini-epic of Phaeton and Apollo, this “eventmental” place is similar to an Ovidian “implacing” of a complex network of interactants that can also be identified as an ontological assemblage with its own unpredictable energies. So too, evolutionary development requires a full roster of human and nonhuman agents in the same way, and not some authorizing top-down or bottom-up object intended to control a mute and passive matter. The emptiness of space gives way to the emptiness of place, where even the construction of Ovid’s originary and originating void is cast in terms of already multiple and resourceful agents, actants and things. In the same way, to be a Darwinian or a speculative realist, “one must abandon the belief that human access sits at the center of being, organizing it like an ontological watchmaker. In both a figurative and a literal sense, speculative realism is an event rather
than a philosophical position: it names a moment when the epistemological tide ebbed, revealing the iridescent shells of realism they had so long occluded” (Bogost, 5). These include the “iridescent shells” and sea-side organisms that litter the beach of Balbec like weird and exotic *objets trouvés*. They are the sparkling, shimmering actants and agents that surface in front of the narrator’s astonished eyes after Bogost’s “epistemological wave” has gone by.

If for nothing other than the busy, opaque industry of its actors and objects, something strangely Ovidian pervades the weird entity-zoo of object-ontology. As in Harmon’s characterization, both Ovidian and OOO objects “withdraw.” They are also paratactic, “next-to,” operating as we have seen on a level ontological plane that Morton characterizes as the “n + 1.” They also form collectives such as Bennett’s “thing-power” and her “agentic assemblage,” each different names for the “congregational understanding of agency” (Bennett, 20-21) so important to both OOO and evolutionary development. These include Phaeton’s world of recalcitrant, errant objects as well as almost any Ovidian collective – all of which can be seen as similar to Bruno Latour’s proliferating network of hybrids or “quasi-objects” that exist as unclaimed by either side of what Latour sets up as his “Modern Constitution” in his influential *We Have Never Been Modern* (19). Neither fully claimed by “Nature” or fully part of “Society,”

[quasi-objects are in between and below the two poles, at the very place around which dualism and dialectics had turned endlessly without being able to come to terms with them. Quasi-objects are much more social, much more fabricated, much more collective than the “hard” parts of nature, but they are
in no way the arbitrary receptacles of a full-fledged society. On the other hand they are much more real, nonhuman and objective than those shapeless screens on which society -- for unknown reasons – needed to be “projected.” By trying the impossible task of providing social explanations for hard scientific facts – after generations of social scientists had tried either to denounce “soft” facts or to use hard sciences uncritically – science studies have forced everyone to rethink anew the role of objects in the construction of collectives. (55)

As the early work of Latour suggests, this is yet another “corrective” imperative of modernity as well as modernism, where the word “modern” designates what he identifies as “two entirely distinct ontological zones” with entirely distinct practices that must maintain their distinction if they are to operate at all. Not unlike the corrective practices of Pound and Lewis, one side comprises human beings while the other consists entirely of nonhumans. The first practice produces corrective “purifications” by which partitions are erected between a reified nature and an equally separate society. The second practice produces “translations” – that is to say, hybridical mixtures of “entirely new types of beings” that are the forbidden but nonetheless proliferating quasi-objects that arise in the process of “purification,” the draconian sorting that forces any and all objects into the either-or of the first dichotomy (Latour 5). In this way, the process of translation creates “in one continuous chain the chemistry of the upper atmosphere, scientific and industrial strategies, the preoccupations of heads of state, the anxieties of ecologists” (Latour 11). As he explains in We Have Never Been Modern, the first dichotomy erects a
partition between “a natural world that has always been there” and “a man-made society that has its own stable interests and stakes.” The second dichotomy creates hybrid networks that must be ignored in order to preserve or “purify” the illusion of

Figure 10. The Modern Constitution, (Latour, 19)

the first division. “So long as we consider [these] two practices of translation and purification separately, we are truly modern – that is, we willingly subscribe to the critical project, even though that product is developed only through the proliferation of hybrids down below.” Thus, for moderns, “it is not men who make Nature; Nature has always existed and has always been there; we are only discovering its secrets” (Latour 11).

These alternating moves from Nature to Society are not unlike the dynamic that Eliot uses in his Dantean “fire that refines,” or in the various partitions that Pound and Lewis erect between male and female, between humans and “nature,” between the hard and the soft, the word and the image, or any of the other divisions that reproduce a sort of
heteronormative dualism or division of labor. Nor, as we have seen, are they unlike the neo-Darwinian moves that Keller and Oyama have identified as the largely inversive dynamic between a sequestered genetic “replicator” and the largely passive environment upon which that replicator acts. Writing in 1985, for example, in the heat and fire of sociobiology’s rise to prominence, Oyama voiced concern over a theoretical, hierarchical divide between biological and behavioral sciences in which “some portions of the ‘higher levels’” of one discipline have been swallowed up in the “province of the ‘lower” (Oyama, 2000b, 124). In this way, some objects of study become “genetically determined” and therefore the rightful property of biologists; others become behavioral fodder for social scientists and their related fields. “It is as though a chemist were to say that some compounds were really physical while others were (merely) chemical, or a physiologist, that some biochemical processes were chemical and others only physiological” (Oyama 2000b, 125). This observation underscores Latour’s analysis of the “Modern Constitution” as dichotomous, particularly when one considers what Oyama calls the “unkempt relations” between the two supposedly inviolate realms:

The association of the biological with the immutable and the psychological with the malleable ensured that biologists and social scientists would tend to line up on opposite sides of arguments about the possibility of change, though just because the relations among these ideas are so unkempt, this self-assembly is not unerring. Until relatively recently, we confined ourselves to attempts to delineate the boundaries between these two domains, often declaring them to be fuzzy indeed but rarely doubting the existence of different territories. We have tended not to question the assumption that nature is defined at a level other than that of the
individually lived life, regardless of the circumstances of that life. These ruder questions have yet to make serious inroads into scholarly or popular thought. (Oyama, 2000b, 125)

Thus, the entire construction “allows the expanded proliferation of the hybrids whose existence, whose very possibility, it denies” (Oyama, 2000b, 125). This is part of the paradox of what Latour has called the invincibility of the moderns: an unshakable belief in the total separation of the human and the nonhuman that produces the simultaneous and paradoxical canceling out of this separation by the proliferating hybrids it engenders, because it believes in the total separation of humans and nonhumans, and because it simultaneously cancels out this separation, the Constitution has made the moderns invincible. If you criticize them by saying that Nature is a world constructed by human hands, they will show you that it is transcendent, that science is a mere intermediary allowing access to nature, and that they keep their hands off. If you tell them that we are free, and that our destiny is in our own hands, they will tell you that Society is transcendent and its laws infinitely surpass us. If you object that they are being duplicitous, they will show you that they never confuse the Laws of Nature with imprescriptible human freedom. If you believe them and direct your attention elsewhere, they will take advantage of this to transfer thousands of objects from nature into the social body while procuring for this body the solidity of natural things. If you turn around suddenly, as in the children’s game ‘Mother, may I?’ , they will freeze, looking innocent, as if they hadn’t budged: here, on the left, are things themselves; there on the right, is the free society of speaking, thinking
subject, values and of signs. Everything happens in the middle, everything passes between the two, everything happens by way of mediation, translation and networks, but this space does not exist, it has no place. It is the unthinkable, the unconscious of the moderns. (Latour, 37)

Rather than positing yet another correction – yet another unmasking or correction to correct the corrections of the moderns, Latour suggests instead that the belief in dichotomy itself creates inversions, and not any pre-existing constitutional divide between a “conscious and unconscious, formal and informal, language and practice, illusion and reality” (Latour, 40). According to Larval Subjects, a website devoted to object ontology,

[i]n order to conduct his experiments, [the scientist or inventor] finds that he must construct new glass chambers and gaskets. He is “told”, by his materials, that existing technology is inadequate. He is thus propelled to invention in dialogue with the materials with which he works. Unlike Aristotle’s conception of the artisan where the artisan already has a form in his mind that he then imposes on matter, the materials, in the process of being assembled, “speak back”, playing a role in the development of the instrument. Likewise, what takes place in the glass chamber plays a similar role, selecting for or against various hypotheses in an aleatory fashion that couldn’t have been entirely anticipated by [the researcher]. Such is the point of Latour-Serres’ concept of “quasi-objects” where a quasi-object bends us about us in such a way that it cannot be reduced to a mere vehicle of our representations, but where we too are modified in interaction with these entities. (http://larvalsubjects.wordpress.com)
This, too, is a staggeringly Ovidian analysis and explication, particularly when we examine its claims in light of what Latour calls the *premodern*. In contrast to what he identifies as the modern carelessness about the proliferation of hybridical objects, Latour describes a premodern sensibility that concerns itself almost obsessively with the connections between nature and culture. While modernity seeks to insure the stability of its system by not thinking about the consequences of hybridity at all, the premodern crafts such hybrids with the utmost care, and in almost obsessive detail. “The moderns think they have succeeded only because they have carefully separated Nature and Society . . . whereas they have succeeded only because they have mixed together much greater masses of humans and nonhumans, without bracketing anything and without ruling out any combination!” (Latour, 41)

To put it crudely: those who think the most about hybrids circumscribe them as much as possible, whereas those who choose to ignore them by insulating them from any dangerous consequences develop them to the utmost. The premoderns are all monists in the constitution of their nature-cultures. ‘The native is a logical hoarder,’ writes Claude Lévi-Strauss; ‘he is forever tying the threads, unceasingly turning over all the aspects of reality, whether physical, social or mental.’ By saturating the mixes of divine, human and natural elements with concepts, the premoderns limit the practical expansion of these mixes. It is the impossibility of changing the social order without modifying the natural order – and vice versa – that has obliged the premoderns to exercise the greatest prudence. Every monster becomes visible and thinkable and explicitly poses serious problems for the social order, the cosmos, or divine laws. (Latour, 42)
This is another way that the Ovid of the *Metamorphoses* can be seen, in one sense, both as a thoroughly proto-contemporary poet, and in some recent critical appraisals, a proto-critic of modernity as well. In Latour’s terms, Ovid produces hybrids so permissively and in such profligate amounts that he seems to be part of the modern sensibilities that Latour discusses, busily producing rafts and rafts of troubling, monstrous quasi-objects that fit neither the domain of Nature nor the separate domain of Society. At the same time, however, Ovid seems to show none of the premodern’s anxieties about carefully reinscribing every transformation back into a stable and stabilizing “nature.” Instead, as the *Metamorphoses* shows, any reinscription of the transformed body “back” into nature is the site of a disturbing excess, an \( n + 1 \) practice in which the monstrous cannot simply be returned to some original “nature” with nothing left over. Indeed, in the same way that Latour suggests that both society and nature revolve around distinct “eventmental” collectives of local actants, agents and quasi-objects, Ovidian metamorphosis suggests that transformed and metamorphic objects either refuse to be naturalized or, once naturalized (as Daphne and Medusa are “naturalized”), disperse into singularly local Latourian networks _avant la lettre_ which depict that naturalizing as a violent, authoritarian silencing that most often takes the form of mythologized, heroic Roman rape.

In other words, similar to the rupture that Latour identifies as symptomatic of a modern fracture, the same incoherence can be said to operate in Ovid: that is to say, a galloping proliferation and hypertrophy of hybridization that eventually exceeds and destabilizes its own premodern framework. If Latour’s “Modern Constitution” is overwhelmed by the onslaught of its own production of unclassifiable and disturbing
objects such as frozen embryos, hybrid corn, gene synthesizers, ozone layers, and sensor-equipped robots, then the world of Roman authority and power in the *Metamorphoses* is also overwhelmed by its dryad-trees, its boy-infused brooks, its gender-bending pools, its lachrymose rock-mothers like Niobe, its raped and abducted women, its sentient statues, its paralysed but still conscious forms. Each story produces such a proliferation of lumpy, undigested cultural-natural objects that for the reader of the *Metamorphoses* what counts as “natural” eventually becomes so overladen with its own hybrid objects that, as Latour says of his moderns, “it is as if there were no longer enough judges or critics to partition the hybrids.” How best to classify deforestation, or the ozone hole? In what inviolate category does global warming belong? Or Daphne-becoming-Laurel? Or the laurel tree that bears her name? “Thus, the two constitutional guarantees of the moderns – the universal law of things, and the inalienable rights of subjects – can no longer be recognized either on the side of Nature or on the side of the Social.” Both Nature and Society are rendered unstable. “The destiny of the starving multitudes and the fate of our poor planet are connected by the same Gordian knot that no Alexander will ever again manage to sever” (Latour, 50).

This, then, is object-ontology’s famous concept of nature-cultures: collectives that “mobilize heaven and earth in [their] composition, along with bodies and souls, property and law, gods and ancestors, and beliefs, beasts and fictional beings” (Latour, 107). Not unlike Oyama’s relational biology, Latour’s interactants are “local at all points like a railroad, but not universal enough to take you anywhere (Latour, 117). Instead, Latour’s move is to show that the dualistic, totalizing poles of Nature
and Society, subject and object, revolve instead around the quasi-objects themselves—what he calls a “Copernican counter-revolution,” even as we proceed to act as if the stabilizing poles of Nature and Society continued to exist as inviolate realms (Latour 79). “We do not need to attach our explanations to the two “pure forms” known as the object or Subject/Society, because these are, on the contrary, partial and purified results of the central practice that is our sole concern. The explanations we seek will indeed obtain Nature and Society, but only as a final outcome, not as a beginning. Nature does revolve, but not around the Subject/Society. Instead, it revolves around the collective that produces the necessary interplay between things and people. The Subject does revolve, but not around Nature. It revolves around the collective out of which people and things are generated” (Latour, 79).

When, for example, Latour describes this process as the release of a “captive” formerly imprisoned in either Nature or Society, he only makes his formulation more Ovidian (and more Proustian). Indeed, this is why Daphne is locked into the laurel tree, as much as Apollo is locked into the laurel-Daphne’s ultimately embarrassing withdrawal. Instead, the denial of his rebuff must be instantiated as an assent at the level of triumph, in the same way that Perseus appropriates the head of Medusa to signify his “victory.” That these events happen as acts of interpellation and ekphrasis only intensifies the object-ontologist’s desire for escape from such divisive representations. “Are you not fed up,” asks Latour, “at finding yourselves forever locked into language alone, or imprisoned in social representations, as so many social scientists would like you to be? We want to gain access to things themselves, not only to their phenomena. The real is not remote; rather, it is accessible in all the objects
mobilized throughout the world. Doesn’t external reality abound right here among us? […] Real as Nature, narrated as Discourse, collective as Society, existential as Being” (Latour, 90). As Bennett says,

Bodies enhance their power in or as a heterogeneous assemblage. What this suggests for the concept of agency is that the efficacy or effectivity to which that term has traditionally referred becomes distributed across an ontologically heterogeneous field, rather than being a capacity localized in a human body or in a collective produced (only) by human efforts. The sentences of this book also emerged from the confederate agency of many striving macro- and microactants: from “my” memories, intentions, contentions, intestinal bacteria, eyeglasses, and blood sugar, as well as from the plastic computer keyboard, the bird song from the open window, or the air of particulates in the room, to name only a few of the participants. What is at work here on the page is an animal-vegetable-mineral-sonority cluster with a particular degree and duration of power. What is at work here is what Deleuze and Guattari call an assemblage. (23)

It is, then, as a compelling and not always recognizable collective, an assemblage, that Balbec appears to the narrator: a collective of actants and agents that can be read as another of the familiar rhapsodic lists of OOO that Morton calls “Latour litanies.” Such a list would include the zoophytic and metamorphic Little Band, the plage, the Grand Hotel, Bloch, bicycles, the grandmother, Jews, inverts, the lift-boy, the elderly gentleman under the umbrella, a milk-maiden, Elstir’s paintings, Odette’s portrait, Mme Stermaria, the jellyfish scattered along the beach, the Baron de
Charlus, and the spiky aureole of Balbec’s perpetually presiding sun. As we shall see, if the narrator’s eventual Perseid abduction of Albertine involves coercing her into serving as the metonymic trophy that must represent Balbec as an imaginary, consolidated whole, it is not simply that she has become Descombes’s “thing,” but also, as I suggested in the case of the grandmother, that the narrator’s concept of “thing” has to enlarge along Ovidian and Latourian lines. This not only includes a blurring of the person/thing boundary delineated by Descombes, but also a reconsideration of parts and wholes as markers of decadence, as well as a rethinking of classical ekphrasis that demonstrates its violence as either ruthless objectification or a dismembering blazon.

For Proust, this realized world is that of a hybrid, heterogeneous collective not unlike Latour’s participation in a localized network of actants. As in Morton, Bennett and Harmon, Latour’s “way to be real” seems significantly like those of Proust’s and Ovid’s – a way “to become realist again, but through a completely different route, that is, by extending historicity and sociability to nonhumans” (Daston, 265). *Ad hoc* and decentralized, emergent and heterogeneously competent, with no operant “nucleus” and operating across what Bennett calls “uneven topographies” where powers are thinner or thicker; where some actants intersect repeatedly and others intersect rarely, or not at all: all these assemblages cannot be predicted or predetermined and form instead a “whole that is not given.” This is what Latour has called “the slight surprise of action” that arises from the performance of action itself, independent of any aim or intention of constituent actants. “That which acts through me is also surprised by what I do, by the chance to mutate, to change […] to bifurcate” (Bennett, 27). This
mutational surprise is not unrelated to the decentering of conscious intentionality and conscious-centered thought that Derrida calls “messianicity,” described by Bennett as “the open-ended promissory quality of a claim, image or entity”:

This unspecified promise is for Derrida the very condition of possibility of phenomenality: things in the world appear to us at all only because they tantalize and hold us in suspense, alluding to a fullness that is elsewhere, to a future that, apparently, is on its way. For Derrida this promissory note is never and can never be redeemed: the “straining forward toward the event” never finds relief. To be alive is to be waiting for someone or something that, in order to happen . . . must exceed and surprise every determinate anticipation.” In naming the unfulfillable promise as the condition of the appearance of anything, Derrida provides a way for the vital materialist to affirm the existence of a certain trajectory or drive to assemblages without insinuating intentionality or purposiveness. (32)

Deleuze has called this collective adhesion of the part-whole relationship “adsorbsion”: an attempt to locate how members of an assemblage come together “in a way that both forms a coalition and yet preserves something of the agential impetus of each element” (Bennett, 35). According to Harmon, “Events are effectively frozen into their own absolutely specific location and set of relationships, and cannot possibly endure outside them” (Harmon, 65). Even when it is characterized as an arc of “becomings” like a Deleuzian line of flight, the event-like configuration retains nothing essential. “If we are speaking of instantaneous events, no essential inner core lies beneath the shifting accidents of the moment; no cryptic domestic essence on the
interior of a thing endures across time. Here a thing is found on the surface of the world, but it is now a surface unfolding through a succession of various shapes rather than a cinematic frame of absolute specificity” (Harmon, 65). Like Casey’s “eventmental” space, “[w]hat Latour means is that the essence of a thing results only from its *public performance in the world*” – that is, what amounts to a performativity of the nonhuman as well as the human object (emphasis added, Harmon, 66). In Harmon’s terms, quasi-objects also become quasi-subjects; like the madeleine or Golo, they arise as events in which they are not the only participants.

For Latour, as for Proust and Ovid, then, “here too the gods are present: in a hydroelectric plant on the banks of the Rhine, in subatomic particles, in Aida’s shoes as well as in the old wooden clogs hallowed out by hand, in agribusiness as well as in timeworn landscapes” (Latour, 66), in Daphne’s fleeting, metamorphosizing face, as well as Cupid’s dart. It is not simply that the moderns cannot partition off a world into two walled enclaves; nor that such a separation is impossible because of some intermeshed or inextricable confusion. Instead, even the most casual event shows a cast of actor/agents so full of human and nonhuman components that, as Harmon says, it would be ridiculous to assign them to one “kingdom” or another (Harmon, 124).

This is part of the “radical actualism” that Manuel DeLanda has described: the instant in which an actant, whether animate or inanimate, is “completely actualized in any moment, inscribed without reserve in its current scheme of alliances” (Harmon, 127). Such a topography enacts what Harmon calls a “Copernican philosophy” – a decentering also present in Proust that, as we have seen,
makes the sleeping narrator yet another thing, another part of the slumbering furniture that surrounds him, but also a thing that is nonetheless an active agent that shares in but does not direct the larger constellation of revolving bodies, sliding walls and moving windows that constitutes the narrator’s metamorphic bedtime scene. It does so not by underscoring the human centeredness of such a constellation, but by recognizing that the sleeping man is what Latour would characterize as only one actant among others. Thus, the familiar sort of centering that views “the home turf of human being” as the only axis on which to revolve a world becomes instead the pluralization of that world. The human “center” becomes only one point of view among countless others.

In other words, faced with the environs of Balbec, Proust can be said to come to a similar conclusion as object-ontology: the only way out of the impasse between an animate, human world and the noli me tangere of a mute, reluctant world of lethargic objects is to grant agency to each. In this sense, Proust is closer to Latour’s critique of modernism than he is to the hieratic modernism of Pound or Lewis; more Latourian than the flows of Bergson or Deleuze; closer to Bennett’s “thing-power” or Morton’s weird Tibetan zoo. Proust’s multiple place-bodies produce the “cinematic universe of individual instants” that Bergson wanted to avoid, and by doing so, seem to enlist in a project not unlike those of contemporary object-ontologists. In a Proustian as well as a Latourian universe, “no external force, not even ‘time,’ exceeds the full concrete deployment of actants” (Harmon, 31).

Seen in these terms, Descombes’s distinction between inanimate “things” and animate “persons” seems to make less sense than either Latour’s thing-assemblage or
Proust’s Ovidian foregrounding of the profligate, unpredicatable dynamics between persons and things, agents and actants, persons and places. Like Combray, Balbec includes what tolerates blankness and plurality, but it does so as the sort of bleating, splashing, snorting and sometimes unrecognizable “modern” world that Latour describes: a world of weird and seductive hybrids that shift and change, that fall off edges, that disappear or vanish, that don’t show up, or that stare back from their own various withdrawals and excesses rather than participating in the smashing of Nature and Society into always recognizable function-factions. It is, in other words, the world of “monsters and gods” the narrator recognizes as his own Ovidian *Metamorphoses*, even as it fails to recognize him.

And above all, Balbec is a place that doesn’t recognize. Even before he arrives, the narrator worries that he will be unnoticed, unfamiliar; that he will be literally unplaced:

Overlooking the distant sea from the crests of their dunes . . . were a series of little watering-places which now showed me for the first time their denizens, but showed them only through their habitual exterior – tennis players in white hats, the station-master living there on the spot among his tamarisks and roses, a lady in a straw “boater” who, following the everyday routine of an existence which I should never know, was calling to her dog which had stopped to examine something in the road before going in to her bungalow where the lamp was already lighted – and which with these strangely ordinary and disdainfully familiar sights cruelly stung my unconsidered eyes and stabbed my homesick heart. (II, 327)
“My homesick heart,” – mon coeur dépaysé, a heart taken away from its country – reveals the Narrator to be not only homesick, but unhomed as well. In this most Ovidian part of the Search, the narrator is himself an exile – or at least fears that he is, like the Ovid of the Tristia. As we have just seen, it will be at Balbec that the narrator begins to imagine a life apart from his mother:

For the first time I began to feel that it was possible that my mother might live another kind of life, without me, otherwise than for me. She was going to live on her own with my father, whose existence it may have seemed to her that my ill-health, my nervous excitability, made somewhat complicated and gloomy. This separation made me all the more wretched because I told myself that for my mother it was probably the outcome of the successive disappointments which I had caused her, of which she had never said a word to me but which had made her realize the difficulty of our taking our holidays together; and perhaps also a preliminary trial for a form of existence to which she was beginning, now, to resign herself for the future, as the years crept on for my father and herself, an existence in which I should see less of her, in which (a thing that not even in my nightmares had yet been revealed to me) she would already have become something of a stranger to me, a lady who might be seen going home by herself to a house in which I should not be, asking the concierge whether there was a letter for her from me. (II, 307-8)

This unfamiliarity shows itself everywhere in Balbec: the innumerable peasant-girls and milk-maids who turn indifferent faces as the narrator passes by them on his train; the strangeness of the Church at Balbec and its carved, indifferent faces of the
Apostles, their expressions “as unchanging as that of a corpse” (II, 323). And “how much more were my sufferings increased when we had finally landed in the hall of the Grand Hotel at Balbec, and I stood there in front of the monumental staircase of imitation marble, while my grandmother, regardless of the growing hostility and contempt of the strangers among whom we were about to live, discussed ‘terms’ with the manager” (II, 327). Meanwhile, the chambermaid and the hotel clerks bring to bear on him “the triple stare of Minos, Aeacus and Rhadamanthus” (329), while behind them,

behind a glass partition, were people sitting in a reading-room for the description of which I should have had to borrow from Dante alternately the colours in which he paints Paradise and Hell, according as I was thinking of the happiness of the elect who had the right to sit and read there undisturbed, or of the terror which my grandmother would have inspired in me if, in her insensitivity to this sort of impression, she had asked me to go in there. (329)

The same annihilating indifference follows him to his room, seen in his glimpse of a shadowy chambermaid on her way to some equally unknown chore. “I applied to her face, which was blurred in the twilight, the mask of my most impassioned dreams, but read in her eyes as they turned toward me the horror of my nonentity” (331).

Nonentity waits for him in his room as well, another realm of Dantean punishment “full of things which did not know me, which flung back at me the distrustful glance I cast at them, and, without taking any heed of my existence, showed that I was interrupting the humdrum course of theirs” (333). Even the sky and sea of Balbec seem minatory, reflected back at the narrator by the glass fronts of bookcases that run
along the walls of his room and torment him. Or as Morton says, in a passage particularly suited to the young narrator who can neither sleep nor wash, nor even shave himself properly in such a hostile environment:

The genuine uncanniness of objects, their quality of being themselves and not-themselves, is easy to test when you travel to a strange country. You have jet lag and everything seems weird. Bedclothes and street sounds seem to lurch towards you with unseemly intimacy. When I arrive at a strange new place, the sensual vividness of objects seems to jump out at me in front of those objects. Smells are sharper and more penetratin [...] Light switches and plug sockets seem to emanate clownlike parodies of themselves that leer out at me, mocking my incompetence. Washing or shaving becomes a weird, slightly seductive, slightly unpleasant experience. Reality seems closer to me than ‘normal.’ Then it hits you: this is the default state of affairs, not the world in which regularly functioning things seem to subtend their aesthetic effects. Your regular house in your regular street is really like this. In truth, their smooth functioning is merely an aesthetic effect to which we have grown accustomed. The smooth world is an illusion! The clown-like weirdness of the uncanny situation you find yourself in, on the other side of planet Earth, groggy with jet lag and fumbling for the light switch, is the reality. The idea that I reach for the light switch across a distance that I can ignore is the illusion. What in fact happens is that the light switch has already appeared uncomfortably close to me, leering at me like a circus clown, without distance at all. My intention is to switch it on, and the mechanical action of doing so,
implies an interpenetration between me and the light switch that is already in place. (Morton, 64)

Unlike the largely adaptive, just-so world of Combray, the narrator has “no world, no room, no body now that was not menaced by the enemies thronging around me, penetrated to the very bones by fever” (II, 334). Or as Morton says, “There is no world, strictly speaking – no environment, no nature, no background. These are just handy terms for the \( n \) objects that make it into interobjective relationships with whatever’s going on. There is simply a plenum of objects, pressing in on all sides, leering at us like crazed characters in some crowded Expressionist painting” (Morton, 122) by James Ensor. [fig. 12]

Figure 11. James Ensor, The Intrigue, 1890, Royal Museum of Antwerp (http://www.kmska.be)
“What are these objects, then, that claustrophobically fill every nook and cranny of reality, that are reality [?]” (Morton, 50) As Morton and other object-ontologists ask, “How do objects begin?”

Crash! Suddenly the air is filled with broken glass. The glass fragments are fresh objects, newborn from a shattered wine glass. These objects assail my senses [. . .] There are glass fragments. What is happening? How many? How did this happen? I experience the profound givenness of beginning as an anamorphosis, a distortion of my cognitive, psychic and philosophical space. The birth of an object is the deforming of the objects around it. Likewise, the birth of just one object simply is a distortion of the plenitude of things, however slight. Novelty is guaranteed in an OOO universe, since the arrival of a new thing puts other things out of kilter with one another, just as the addition of a new poem changes the poems that went before it. A new thing is a distortion of other things.” (Morton, 125)

Like Oyama’s Developmental Systems Theory (DST) or Jablonka and Lamb’s multiple agents of inheritance and development, interobjectivity is the dynamic in which novelty takes place:

Interobjectivity positively guarantees that something new can happen, because each sample, each spider web vibration, each footprint of objects in other objects, is itself a whole new object with a whole new set of relations to the entities around it. The evidence of novelty cascades around the fresh object […] Objects are ready for newness, because they have all kinds of pockets and redundancies
and extra dimensions. In short, they contain all kinds of other objects. (Morton, 122).

To borrow Alain Badiou’s term, objects inhabit the paratactic realm of the “plus one,” that is to say, a realm that consists of objects that by addition contribute to “the plenum of objects [that] disturbs the universe” (Morton, 127).

This, too, is very different from Eliot’s “tradition.” Rather than a further consolidation, a shuffling around of already existing writers and works that accommodate the new in order to have it conform to (and ratify) the old, novelty in OOO is disruptive, astonishing, unexpected. In this way, Proust’s narrator is again in the position of Phaeton, who must learn that the world neither recognizes him nor is it made for him in any always-comfortable, adaptational scenario. And if nothing recognizes in Balbec, so too, nothing seems to be “only” itself in Balbec, in the way that the narrator sees Odette “translated” into a pool-boy, or the way Mme Villeparisis is “real” to the narrator because he remembers her as the lady who gave him a chocolate duck when he was a child, and who now barricades herself from what she doesn’t already know, since this “old lady of title never moved anywhere without taking her whole household with her” (II, 348). Indeed, Mme Villeparisis seems to remind the suffering narrator of the sort of ready-made adaptational fit that belongs to the environs of Combray, even as she seems to act as a sort of dubious representative of those scattered guests who seem intent on not succumbing to the novelty surging all around them.

In this way, she “sent a servant down in advance to inform the hotel of the personality and habits of his mistress,” while upstairs in her room, “where her own curtains, replacing those that draped the hotel windows, her own screens and
photographs, set up so effectively between her and the outside world, to which otherwise she would have had to adapt herself, the barrier of her private life and habits, that it was her home (in the cocoon of which she had remained) that travelled rather than herself” (II, 350). The same insulation protects the Stermarias, “an obscure but very ancient Breton family” who come to Balbec “only to see various owners of manors whom they knew in that neighborhood,” and whose “haughtiness […] preserved them intact from all human sympathy, from arousing the least interest in the strangers seated around about them” (II, 352). In this way, “by engulfing them thus in a system of habits which they knew by heart,” the Stermarias protected themselves “from the mystery of the life that was going on all around them” in the same way that the young narrator found himself immersed in the habits of Combray. Meanwhile,

All the long afternoon, the sea was suspended there before their eyes only as a canvas of attractive colouring might hang on the wall of a wealthy bachelor’s flat, and it was only in the intervals between hands that one of the players, finding nothing better to do, raised his eyes to it to seek some indication of the weather or the time, and to remind the others that tea was ready. And at night they did not dine in the hotel, where hidden springs of electricity flooding the great dining-room with light, it became as it were an immense and wonderful aquarium against whose glass wall the working population of Balbec, the fishermen and also the tradesmen’s families, clustering invisibly in the outer darkness, pressed their faces to watch the luxurious life of its occupants gently floating upon the golden eddies within, a thing as extraordinary to the poor as the life of strange fishes or molluscs (an important social question, this: whether the glass wall will always protect the
banquets of these weird and wonderful creatures, or whether the obscure folk who watch them hungrily out of the night will not break in some day to gather them from their aquarium and devour them). Meanwhile, perhaps, amid the dumbfounded stationary crowd out there in the dark, there may have been some writer, some student of human ichthyology who, as he watched the jaws of old feminine monstrosities close over a mouthful of submerged food, was amusing himself by classifying them by race, by innate characteristics, as well as those acquired characteristics which bring it about that an old Serbian lady whose buccal appendage is that of a great sea-fish, because from her earliest years she has moved in the fresh waters of the Faubourg Saint-Germain, eats her salad for all the world like a La Rochefoucauld.” (353-4)

Here is another ontological crash about to happen: a world where distinctions are unstable and all barriers precarious, like the glass aquarium of the Grand Hotel disrupted
by the grandmother’s unquenchable thirst for fresh air – a world that eventually opens onto the vast evolutionary/Ovidian game park that bellows, chirps, roars, sings, and leaps around the fascinated if somewhat terrified narrator. Like another Ensor painting [fig. 12], “The Frightful Musicians” (1891), the inhabitants of the Grand Hotel are fish-faced monstrosities from “the time of the Cimmerians” (II, 373). Thus, like an Ovidian Jove among the waiters, footman, lift-boys and the “arborescent page” with bark-like epidermis, the Baron de Charlus is seen “hurling his terrible and searching scrutiny” at “insignificant people of the humblest extraction” (455) like implied thunderbolts that reach oceanic depths better suited to a plumb-line or sounding-lead. “Swift as a lightening-flash his look shot through me, just as at the moment when I had first noticed him, and returned, as though he had not seen me, to hover, slightly lowered, before his eyes, deadened, like the neutral look which feigns to see nothing without and in incapable of reporting anything to the mind within, the look which expresses merely the satisfaction of feeling round it the eyelids which it keeps apart with its beatific roundness, the devout and sanctimonious look that we see on the faces of certain hypocrites, the smug look on those of certain fools” (454). Even the staid Mme Villeparisis is capable of a kind of metamorphic magic in the presence of this comic Jove, simply because

she was related, and very closely, to the Guermantes, this Mme Villeparisis who had for so long been for me the lady who had given me a duck filled with chocolates when I was small, more remote then from the Guermantes than if she had been shut up somewhere on the Méséglise way, less brilliant, less highly valued by me than was the Combray optician, and who now suddenly went through one of those fantastic rises in value, parallel to the no less unforeseen
depreciations of other objects in our possession, which rise and fall alike – introduce in our youth, and in those periods of our life in which a trace of youth persists, changes as numerous as the Metamorphoses of Ovid. (457)

In his “Object relations in an Extended Field” (2006), Bill Brown has suggested that moderns in general – whether the modernists of Menand and Lamos, or the moderns of Latour – are “faced with the recognition that their subjectivity increasingly lay elsewhere, outside themselves, in the objects that surrounded them” (Brown, 947). Writing about the relatedness of the human to the nonhuman in his pioneering *The Nonhuman Environment* (1960), Harold Searles has spoken of this “structural kinship in terms of physiology, anatomy, atomic structure, and so on, as well as kinship with respect to the evolitional history of mankind” (Searles, 101). At the same time, however, the subject-object divide can also expresses, in Brown’s terms, “a kind of horror at the monstrosity of the material world.” (Brown, 947) Or as Morton puts it, “The common reaction to the sentence ‘I am an object’ is a handwringing horror, or posthuman thrill, that I am saying that I am just a puppet” (Morton, 62). Yet as Bruce Clarke asks in his *Posthuman Metamorphosis* (2008), can the modern metamorphosized object survive what he calls the “travail of its transformation,” and “find a way to fit in, to fit circumstances to itself” (Clarke, 2)? Can there also be a postmodern “non-return ticket” that declines or complicates a re-naturalization into a traditional western Nature (im)properly named as the antithesis of Society, but which also resists the uneasy exile of the monster?
In her recent study, *The Gothic Body* (2004), Kelly Hurley has spoken of the object materiality in which the human has been evacuated or erased, degraded or simply undifferentiated, sometimes to the point of formlessness, in both proto-modern and modernist texts such as Rider Haggard’s *She* (1887), H. G. Wells’s *The Time Machine* (1895), the work of Arthur Machen and H. P. Lovecraft. This “thing-ness” thrives on the amorphous as much as the recognizably hybrid. Indeed, as Hurley sees it, the notion of the hybrid and its sometimes horrifying scenes of fusion or dissolution becomes a necessary characteristic of novels like *The Island of Dr. Moreau* (1896) – novels that can be classified as speculative fiction, but also as examples of what might be called the evolutionary gothic.

In Well’s *Moreau*, for example, “[t]he textual affect that masses itself around the beast people is intensified as much as possible by a series of typically Gothic narrative devices: the prolongation of uncertainty and suspense, narrative elisions, evasions, and discontinuities” (Hurley, 18), even as we are invited to shudder at the spectacle of dog-men and leopard-women slowly reverting to their unhuman state. So too, the *fin-de-siècle* Gothic “offers the spectacle of a body metamorphic and undifferentiated; in place of the possibility of human transcendence, the prospect of an existence circumscribed within the realities of gross corporeality; in place of a unitary and securely bounded human subjectivity, one that is fragmented and permeable” (Hurley, 3).

Seen as a late nineteenth-century resurgence of the Gothic mode that seemed to disappear in the middle years of the century, Hurley calls this organismal, proto-modern “more graphic than before,” in many ways unrecognizable from the earlier
mode, and more clearly aligned with contemporary horror genres than at the beginning of the past century. As such, she considers it the “horrific re-making of the human subject” infused and animated by the same sort of evolutionary anxieties generated by scientific discourses that disturbed Eliot – that is to say, medical, biological and sociomedical discourse that worked to delineate and revise conventional notions of the human including, as Hurley says, ‘evolution, criminal anthropology, degeneration theory, sexology, pre-Freudian psychology” (Hurley 5).

Certainly by the middle of the nineteenth century, the compartmentalization and isolation of the gothic, its buried secrets and its ancestral horrors, its fear of contamination from the past, can be allied with the discourse that begins to arise around evolutionary narratives of degeneration and atavism. Perhaps that is why the gothic has continued to emerge in post-evolutionary science-fiction and horror films, attractive genres for both object-ontologists and evolutionarily-inflected writers, and with good reason. If one thinks of the gothic elements of immurement or walling off, for example, as discrete and recognizable aspects of gothic narrative, the same immurement can be seen in reactions to both late nineteenth-century Darwinism as well as its eventual, neo-Darwinian synthesis. What, for example, could speak more eloquently of a kind of gothic live burial than the endlessly sequestered gene and its DNA, or the walled-off germ-plasm of August Weissman? With its defended mechanisms of reproduction buried inside its various “vehicles” and portioned off from any threat from a non-reproductive “outside,” Weissman’s germ-plasm acts in the same way that nineteenth-century researchers noted of the fluid, osmotic action of cell membranes and their similar scenarios of invasion and defense. Phagocentric and
oral, these organismal tales of incorporation and capture play out spatialized, defensive, now-you-eat-me, now-I-eat-you strategies that can still be seen as the staple of eat-or-be-eaten nature documentaries of the sort that air on PBS and nature channels. These work to further divide human from nonhuman, nature from culture. Indeed, more often than not, they also concern the nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century island narratives so important to evolutionary theory and exploration, and so transformatively important to Darwin himself. Defoe, Melville, Poe, Stevenson, Darwin’s *Voyage*, the novels of Jules Verne, Collodi’s *Pinocchio* and the later stories of Haggard, Conan Doyle, Wells, H. P. Lovecraft and Aldous Huxley all share a literally consuming interest in autonomous, virtually quarantined, sequestered islands and their disturbing relation to incorporation, degeneration, evolutionary horror, extinction, the abnormal or the aberrant, as well as racial and sexual difference. This same interest in islands as scenes of an isolated but infectious atavism continues in contemporary evolutionary horror films like the various versions of *King Kong*, *The Lost World*, and the *Jurassic Park* films.

Part of this interest in islands includes their exotic locale, but also a fascination with their rigorously defended status; their strategic concerns as points of entry and dispersal; their almost iconic isolation; their contributing notions of strangeness and rarity; their various and competing ideas of resource, their importance as sites of an atavistic cannibalism; their propensity for assimilation, for organismal fusion, of swallowing up the traveler and “going native,” as well as their almost iconic status as a breeding ground for monsters and their appetites. *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), for example, repeatedly swallows up its eponymous castaway only to enact
the same process of incorporation in which he is swallowed again and discharged, swallowed again and discharged, like a particle of food alternately ingested and passed along by the vacuole of a paramecium. “Me kill; he eat me at one mouth,” says the boy-Friday surrogate Xury, in the midst of what reads as a sort of orgy of orality and incorporation at the novel’s start (Defoe, 30). Crusoe no sooner sails on his first ship than he is presented immediately with waves that will not be the last to “swallow him up,” (46) and which eventually do, but not before his notions of further fortune are “indigested” (17), his misery “tasted” (21)

Evolutionary horror, then, like voyeur hybridism, spectacularizes the scene of fusion and incorporation as much as it highlights scenes of isolation and defense; of eating and being eaten, of defense and attack, of insides and outsides, of the human and the nonhuman, as much as it privileges the relic, the throw-back, the monstrous hybrid that is often found in watery or amphibious realms. These often take the shape of large, dangerous, amphibious creatures intent on their own scary scenarios of survival, as well as the shambling Lovecraftian “things” that threaten us with their terrifying organic diffuseness as well as their uncanny powers of fusion or fission. As Steven Shapiro has said in a recent essay on William Burroughs, the same kind of horror-hybridity can also be made of the isolated island of the cell itself, with all its freight of recombinant RNA and DNA, particularly when one employs metaphors of cellular invasion and defense prevalent since the world of pathogens discovered at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries. In these terms, even reproduction is a sort of hybrid, viral process:
It is so far from being straightforwardly ‘organic,’ that it necessarily involves vampirism, parasitism, and cancerous simulation. We are all tainted with viral origins, because life itself is commanded and impelled by something alien to life. The life possessed by a cell, and all the more so by a multicellular organism, is finally only its ability to carry out the orders transmitted to it by DNA and RNA. It scarcely matters whether these orders originate from a virus, or from what we conceive as the cell’s own nucleus […] It is impossible to isolate the organism in a state before it has been infiltrated by viruses, or altered by mutations; we cannot separate out the different segments of DNA, and determine which are intrinsic to the organism and which are foreign. Our cell’s own DNA is perhaps best regarded as a viral intruder that has so successfully and over so long a stretch of time managed to insinuate itself within us, that we have forgotten its alien origin. Richard Dawkins suggests that our bodies and minds are merely “survival machines” for replicating genes, “gigantic lumbering robots” created for the sole purpose of transmitting DNA. Burroughs describes language (or sexuality, or any form of consciousness) as “the human virus.” All our mechanisms of reproduction follow the viral logic according to which life produces death, and death in turn lives off life. And so remember this the next time you gush over a cute infant. “Cry of newborn baby gurgles into death rattle and the crystal skull,” Burroughs writes, “THAT IS WHAT YOU GET FOR FUCKING.” (Shaviro, 103-4)
Instead of such leaky, degenerative horrors, the gods and monsters of Proust’s Balbec suggest other, less invasive “monsters” or “postmodern thrills” of blurred and porous selves, bodies and species. These include the Baron de Charlus, the exotic Robert Saint-Loup, the painter Elstir, but also the collective Little Band itself, another fluid, sea-side organism that is simultaneously Ovidian, collective, evolutionary and marine. This “coral identity,” like that of Proust’s *polypier*, suggests what Edouard Glissant and other critics have identified as a vegetal, mobile, and collective identity that has no guiding center (http://amitavghosh.com/blog). Such a “coral imaginary” uses vegetal or mosaic models of identity and relationship that step aside from notions of hierarchy and which stress instead the decentered function of lateralized identities and the spatial model of a Deleuzian “erring connectivity” that can also be used next to Latour’s object-ensemble or Bennett’s “agentic assemblages.” As the Mauritanian poet Khal Torabully has used the metaphor in his *Chair corail, fragments coolies*, *(Ibid.)* the coral can also be seen as rhizomatic: a proliferating site of affordances that provide for both errant and anchoring dynamics that proceed without centers, but which also open up the oceanic affordances and imaginative marine spaces of ungraspability, migration, nomadism and evolutionary metamorphosis. Simultaneously stem and branch, stationary polyp and floating plankton, such a coral imaginary is a literal hybrid capable of fixity, yet also capable of producing a drifting cloud of plankton alive to errant mobility (the Greek *planktos* means errant), as well as vast skeletal structures devoid of center. Such a series of pluralized, decentered identities – a coral flesh, a coral phantasmic – works to produce yet another spatial model of multiple, plural identity that allies itself with the unlikely, invertebrate
figures of both the *meduse* as an evolutionarily ambiguous, ontologically complex and epistemologically opaque “individual” in Proust’s novel that, along with his “polypary” of young girls, is simultaneously one of that novel’s most productive – and productively queer – sites for an exploration of evolutionary and object-change in an Ovidian mode.

This too is a Proustian process of association and substitution of limbs, rooms, environments and lateral supports for the assemblage of a coherent entity: a mobile laboratory of the body “locally and temporally situated and empirically observable,” (Daston, 261), comprised of multiple bodies that exist phenotypically as part of Latour’s natures-cultures, or what population biologist John Odling-Smee has called the “phenogenotype” (Odling-Smee, 266): a portmanteau word that brings together both genotype and phenotype. What distinguishes each is a performative participation in a real world of epigenetic pathogens, predators, symbionts, interactants, toxicities, nutrients, temperature gradients, inherited niches, and geographic locales that does not simply alternate in an inverse dance of “gene” and “environment” but which actually produces an organismal placedness in the most directly contingent of ways. In the same way, the sea-side, littoral Little Band instantiates and participates in all its various forms, positions and locales, not unlike the sea-changes the narrator’s various bodies undergo as they revolve in tandem with their fluid array of bedrooms.

It is almost impossible to overstate the importance of the marine in both late nineteenth and early twentieth-century accounts of evolution, as well as the biological
illustrations that proliferated at the same time. Curled within that near-impossibility lies another, which cannot say enough about the attractive richness of the amorphous, the *animacule*, the *organisme sans vertèbre* that seems everywhere in European culture both before and after the *fin-de-siècle*. This includes the tantalizing ambiguity of the marine organism, its taxonomic confusions, its abiding place in narratives of biological change and transformation, as well as the explosion of marine forms and rhythms in fine and applied arts that occurred after the publication of the *Origin* in 1859, and reaches a sort of apotheosis in the wild, organismal excesses of the various forms and styles of Art Nouveau and *Jungendstil* that bookend the turn of the century.

As Marina van Zuylen points out in *Beyond the Visible: The Art of Odilon Redon* (2005),

> The nineteenth century may have tried to tame and name its monsters, but it too was enthralled by hybridity and cross-breeding [...] [T]his focus betrayed more than just a need for exciting new material, it brought together two intersecting trends: the Renaissance’s wonderment at nature’s playfulness and the Kantian belief in nature’s autonomous willfulness. Rather than acting as the mirror image of our enlightened selves, as it had in the Renaissance, the monster becomes our portrait in negative, reflecting back to us our essential ignorance about the world. (Hauptman, 57-58)

In a catalogue of Redon’s first retrospective in 1894, his biographer André Mellerio wrote that Redon’s work “was from Darwinian epochs [...] in the protoplasm of strange spurting bacilli, of unknown cells coming into being. It is the terrible in the infinitely small. Then silhouettes begin vaguely to form, in a painful
unconscious effort of matter in the direction of organized being” (in Larsen 88). These drawings take the form of Redon’s famous noirs, what Huysmans called Redon’s “charcoals of vibrios and volvox, animacules in vinegar that crawl in glucose tinted with soot” – in other words, the same sort of amphibious creatures that another critic, faced with Redon’s staring, cephalic eyes, called a “kind of infusoria, half-vibros, half-vadicles [that] crawl in shadowy depths and present their deformations to the spectator, heinous, wicked, false or ridiculous, with a human face” (in Larsen, 87).

Yet even here, all is not horror or mere monstrosity. “[O]bviously fascinated by the monster’s ability both to terrify and attract, Redon similarly brought to light its propensity to float in and out of the human” (Hauptman, 60):

The protagonist of Eye-Balloon (1878) [fig. 13] for instance, is both a giant eye and a hot-air balloon. Who is guiding it? How is it attached to the balloon’s basket? Why does it seem so imploring? In Imaginary Figure (c. 1881), a large head balancing on a half-clothed torso also plays on the imbalance between a recognizably human figure, its suffering eyes cast downward, and its frightening skewed proportions – huge nose, bare skull, undefined wide lips. The shape is monstrous but the expression is gentle and pious. A smiling spider (1887) [fig. 14] ballerina-like with its delicate arms and legs, seems to be winking at us, drawing us in, including us in its forbidding underworld. (Hauptman, 60)

In this way, “Redon’s genius is to have made his figures almost repellent. He rescues them from radical ugliness by endowing each of them with traits that produce empathy” (Ibid.) In her recent monograph on the artist, Barbara Larsen has suggested
that while the biology of Cuvier and Sainte-Hilaire form the backdrop for Redon’s monsters, his evident interest in contemporary notions of anatomy and evolution was more solidly Darwinian than Lamarckian, especially in his rejection of what Larsen calls Lamarck’s neatly planned universe. In particular, the fictionalized Redon of Huysman’s *A rebours* (1884), most often “understood as macabre, disconnected from nature, and perverse” (Larsen, 64), catapulted the reluctant artist.

Figure 13. Odilon Redon, *Eye-Balloon*, 1878 (Larsen, 114)
Into the front ranks of the decadence “against his dearest wishes” (Larsen 64). Instead, as Van Zuylen notes, “the monster was the physical manifestation of Redon’s belief in the aesthetics of biology. Well-versed in current theories of evolution, Redon would have been sensitive to Darwin’s more rarely invoked side: the gentle soul marveling at the inexhaustible miracles of differentiation; the poet, not the preacher,
of evolution, the botanist who felt that plants interact with one another as lovers, not as competing species” (in Hauptman, 65). As Van Zuylen goes on to say, this is the Darwin who ended the *Origin* with one of its best known, most quoted passages, cited by Van Zuylen as well:

> There is grandeur in this view of life, with its several powers, having been originally breathed into a few forms or into one; and that, whilst this planet has gone cycling on according to the fixed law of gravity, from so simple a beginning endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful have been, and are being, evolved. (Darwin, 490)

“Redon’s monsters,” then, “were tributes to these ‘endless forms’” (Hauptman, 66). Examples of microscopic and macroscopic medusae, Redon’s floating heads are not so much decapitated as they are vibrantly, mysteriously autonomous [fig. 15]. Like any object, they “document the possibilities of nature, not the restrictions placed upon it by goal-oriented scientists” (Hauptman, 66). Those strange nonhuman possibilities are celebrated in Redon’s illustrations for his *Les origines* (1883), as well as in his drawings for Flaubert’s *La tentation de saint Antoine* (1874) and the amphibian figure of Oannes [fig. 16], a Chaldean deity who is both sea-creature and human, half aquatic and terrestrial:

> Respect me! I am coeval with all origins. I have inhabited the amorphous world when hermaprodite breasts lay slumbering in an atmosphere heavy and opaque, in the depths of dark waters – when finger, fin, and wing were confounded, and lidless eyes floated like molluscs [.] (Flaubert, 1980, 173-4)
A similar interest in the confounding of organisms and decapitation informs the speech of the Buddha as well, part of the throng of clamouring beings around Antony:

With a view to freeing all creatures, I have made hundreds and thousands of sacrifices! To the poor I have given robes of silk, beds, carriages, heaps of gold and diamonds! I have given hands to the maimed, my legs to the lame, my eyes to the blind; I have cut off my head for the beheaded. At the time I was king, I distributed provinces; at the time when I was a Brahman, I despised nobody. When I was a solitary, I spoke kind words to the thief who cut my throat. When I was a tiger, I allowed myself to die of hunger. And in this last existence, having preached the law, I have nothing more to do. The great period is accomplished! Men, animals, gods. Bamboos, oceans, mountains, the grains of sand of the Ganges with the myriads and myriads of stars, all of it will die – and until the coming of fresh births, a flame will dance on the ruins of worlds laid waste! (170-1))

For Flaubert, Antony’s much-discussed desire to become matter is part of a desire to renounce the endless variations of thought, and to rejoice in “the stupid sanctity of things” (Flaubert, 29). This exotic materiality, its medusan autonomy, flagrantly displays itself as strange, opaque and amorphous, crossing species and humans and nonhumans alike. As Hardy writes in The Pursuit of the Well-beloved (1892):

The lady on his right, whom he had brought in, was a leading actress of the town – indeed, of the United Kingdom and America, for that matter – a creature in airy clothing, translucent, like a basalm or sea-anemone, without shadows, and in movement as responsive as some highly lubricated many-
Figure 15. Odilon Redon, Plate 13, *Temptation of St. Antony*, 1896 (Larsen, 59)
wired machine, which, if one presses a particular spring, flies open and reveals its works. (in Millgate, 244)

This oddity of exposure and entrails, a lubrious opening out of a glistering tangle of wires and veils, suggests a similarly marine, cnidarian organism “without shadows,” its diaphanous and trailing movements responsive in both a conscious and unconsciously triggered way – a “highly lubricated many-wired machine” that seems to operate automatically, mechanically, but is also supremely sensual and sensitive, a “creature” that responds on the borderline of plant and animal – “like a basalm or sea-

Figure 16. Odilon Redon, Oannes, Plate 5, Temptation of St. Antony, 1896 (Larsen, 57)
anemone.” In his revised *Life of Hardy* (2006), Michael Millgate associates the description with the actress Ellen Terry (Millgate, 244), but both passages inscribe a showy theatricality that, unlike the usual stage machinery, is at pains to display its own works. Yet they are the works of a machine that is no less mysterious for being available, even exhibitionistic in its display, and which are repeated in design after design at the century’s turn.

Of course, as we have seen, resonances between women and the marine, the amorphous and the medusa, are nothing new, and more than a little misogyny has been practiced in its name, particularly at the hands of decadent writers and artists exhaustively noted by a slew of critical commentators such as Charles Bernheim in his *Decadent Subjects* (2002), Richard Gillman’s *Decadence: The Strange Life of an Epithet* (1979), Bram Dykstra’s *Idols of Perversity* (1988), *Evil Sisters* (1996) and others. It is, however, the queerness of these strange, buoyant heads that works to unsettle such practices, and offer instead an organismal Medusa less connected to decadent anxieties about castration, inversion, and Pound’s dangerous “jelly-fish like” fluidity. Instead, the *fin-de-siècle* Medusa can be said to flaunt that fluidity, in all the various *têtes coupées* that roll across the varied terrain of the *fin-de-siècle*, whether organismal, evolutionary or Ovidian. This can take the form of the head that seems heavy, languid, lolling, disjointed, disconnected, and which finds its extreme form in the actual severed head, but also includes the drooping head of the Virgin in Rossetti’s 1850 painting, *Ecce Ancilla Domini* while Fernand Khnopf’s *I Lock the Door Upon Myself* (1891), Rossetti’s *Blessed Damozel* (1874), and the strangely separated heads of Gustav Klimt’s various portraits, including the *Portrait of Frau Adele Bloch-Bauer*
I (1907) [fig. 17], and the head of Medusa herself by Paul Dardé [Fig.18], looking like nothing so much as a sea-anemone or tentacled polyp. All show the same propensity for visual isolation of the floating, apparently severed head. The heads of Klimt’s women, for example, seem to float defiantly in front of their gilt, textured backgrounds, their neckbands achieving a sort of disarticulated or un-bodied, separated head that, once seen, is difficult to “unsee” [figs. 17, 19].

Figure 17. Gustav Klimt, *Portrait of Frau Adele Bloch-Bauer I*, detail, 1907 (http://www.neuegalerie.org)

This same fluid, aquatic or disembodied Medusan head also makes a similar appearance in Flaubert’s *Salammbô* in the unlikely form of the suffete Hanno. So enamored is he of decapitation, the suffete is revealed to us as a virtually severed head himself, riding in a fringed purple litter and oddly bodiless:
Figure 18. Paul Dardé, *Eternelle douleur*, 1913, Musée D’Orsay, Paris (http://www.musee-orsay.fr)
But the purple curtains were lifted: on a wide pillow was revealed a puffy, expressionless human head; the eyebrows resembled two ebony bows, meeting at their tips; gold sequins sparkled in the crinkly hair, and the face was so pallid that it looked as though it had been sprinkled with powdered marble. The rest of the body was concealed by the sheepskins which filled the litter. (Flaubert, 1977, 44-5)

An artifact set like a jeweler’s stone against a velvet cloth, the suffete’s head is presented to us borne on a “great litter, with bunches of ostrich feathers decorating the coursers” and “crystal chains [and] ropes of pearls” that “beat against the closed hangings.” Not content to be characterized as a severed head himself, the suffete is surrounded by any

Figure 19. Gustav Klimt, *Judith and the Head of Holofernes*, 1901, detail, Österreichische Galerie, Belvedere, Vienna (https://www.belvedere.at)
number of decapitations – sometimes quite literally, as in the scene where one of three severed barbarian heads joins him in a medicinal bath. Later, the medusoid resemblance intensifies when, heavy and ponderous, the suffète himself is described as a sort of idol, made of fluid, deliquescent stone:

He wore black felt boots, sprinkled with silver moons. Strips of cloth, as on a mummy, were round his legs, and the flesh bulged out between the crossed material. His stomach overflowed onto the scarlet jacket that covered his thighs. The folds of his neck fell down to his chest like an ox’s dewlaps; his tunic, painted with flowers, was split at the armpits; he wore a scarf, a belt, and a full black cloak with double laced sleeves. The richness of his dress, his great necklace of stones, his gold claps, and heavy earrings only served to make his deformity more hideous. He looked like some great stone idol roughly hewn out of a block of stone; for a pale leprosy spread all over his body, gave him the appearance of an inert object. However his nose, hooked like a vulture’s beak, dilated violently to breathe in the air, and his small eyes, with sticky lashes, shone with a hard metallic glint. In his hand he held a spatula of aloes for scratching his skin. (Flaubert, 45)

It is curious that while the description strains toward the inert with its explicit evocations of rough-hewn idols and blocks of stone, the passage also flutters and undulates with a spreading, almost aquatic viscosity, like the forms of D’Arcy Thompson’s suspended “Medusoid drops” (Thompson, 73) in his 1942 edition of On Growth and Form [fig. 20]. Anything but inert, and more deliquescent than solid (as he himself will eventually be
described – dripping and lachrymose, almost melting at his later meeting with Hamilcar),
Hanno’s stomach overflows onto the scarlet jacket that covers his thighs; the folds of his
neck fall and spread, as does the bulging, copious flesh of his legs and, already framed at
first glance by the notion of ropes of pearl and crystal chains hanging like a fringe, even
the strips of cloth hover and hang in the reader’s mind like Hardy’s diaphanous sea-
anemone, until one realizes they are bound “like a mummy” around his legs – an image,
however dessicated, nonetheless succumbs to the moisture and undulating texture of flesh
that bulges and flows in between. The violently dilating nostrils seem like the frantic
aspirations of a swimming or paddling creature, its “vulture’s beak” also turtle-like, or

Figure 20. D'Arcy Thompson, Falling ink drops in water, 1942 (Thompson, 73)
like, or like the hard sharp beaks of cephalopods. And while his eyes glare with a “hard, metallic glint,” his “sticky eyelashes,” described as an almost tactile echo of the violently dilating nostrils, are made palpable by the perceived sensation of their stickiness and seem less like the inert and motionless decoration of a bejeweled object, and more like the sticky, beating cilia of an amphibious, motile organism or of one of Redon’s mysterious floating faces.

While artists like Redon and Flaubert often used biotic and organismal motifs as noted by Hauptmann and Larsen, it would fall to later art-historical styles of the fin-de-siècle to make such organismal forms complicit with a Darwinian provenance. Redon’s floating, Medusan heads are usually associated with Symbolist projects, for example, while images like those of Klimt’s are more usually placed within the emergent international movement generally known as Art Nouveau – itself widely characterized by both its practitioners and commentators as a particularly biotic collection of forms and visual rhythms. Indeed, perhaps nowhere else can the sort of shared motile, marine energy we have been exploring be seen more clearly than in the rich, ambiguous conjunction of form and function that arose at the turn of the century under the auspices of the “new art.”

As Deborah L. Silverman has said in her *Art Nouveau in Fin-de-Siècle France* (1989), “The term ‘art nouveau’ conjures up images of a European-wide invasion by
the restless dynamism of organic form. The tremulous whiplash of Van de Velde’s rooms; the mushroom lamps of Emile Gallé; the giant plant-orb sprouting from the top of Joseph Olbrich’s Secession Palace; the dripping plasticity of Emilio Gaudi; the germinating lilies of Guimard’s metros – all contribute to a composite picture of a fin-de-siècle design movement dedicated to vitalizing all recesses of the urban artifice with the evocations of metamorphic growth” (Silverman, 1).

Thus, in the words of art historian Robert Schmutzler, it is precisely this idea of metamorphosis that informs Art Nouveau, where even the human figure is “subjected to an alienation that created something non-human, non-anthropomorphic, a self-impelling ornament which reminds one less of a human being than of a jellyfish or of a Tiffany
glass.” Indeed, as noted of the oddly disembodied, floating head seen in Redon and Klimt, once recognized, the resemblance to jellyfish and sea organisms becomes inescapably ubiquitous and explicit in many Art Nouveau objects [Fig. 22]. “Ambiguous as the form and structure of the whole design may be, so also is its ‘meaning’: an organic flower design has grown out of the inorganic glass, out of the threads drawn in the course of blowing it, and within the total curvature of the bowl the flower-like design of its interior becomes something like the pulsating organism in the gelatinous and transparent wrapping that sheathes the body of a Medusa jellyfish” (Schmutzler, 30).

As noted at the beginning of this project, it is significant that Darwinism itself reached its most pluralized, dispersed, and plastic form at a period when Art Nouveau for pre-genetic notions of transmission and inheritance, the more available it became as part of the propulsive, proliferating force behind the Medusan tendrils, tentacles and undulating biotic fields characteristic of the style – not least inspired by the bewildering array of sea-going, medusoid invertebrates that fascinated artist/scientists from Thomas Huxley to Ernst Haeckel. As Steven H. D. Haddock has explained,

Because of their apparently intermediate position between benthic hydroids and planktonic medusae, siphonophores elicited a special fascination from those grappling with the implications and mechanisms of Darwinian evolution. The great biologists of the time, including Huxley, Haeckel, Vogt, Leuckart, Agassiz, and Darwin himself, enthusiastically enlisted siphonophores in their debates. Deservedly, all these pioneers have had multiple species of gelata named after them. Illustrations from this time were inspired as much by the
Figure 22. Emile Gallé, vase, 1910 (www.macklowegallery.com)
beauty of the organisms as by functional scientific interpretation. Haeckel, fresh from his monumental and still unsurpassed treatise on *Radiolaria* (1887), created detailed illustrations showing entire siphonophore colonies (1888, 1904) with the apparent intent of demonstrating how such diverse specialized parts could serve a united function. His representations from this era compare favorably with living specimens captured by a submersible. Another champion of siphonophores, Huxley (1856), asserted that ‘living nature is not a mechanism but a poem.’ Although some artwork of this time has been said to be distorted by ideological predispositions […] these criticisms cannot detract from their many important positive effects: The predominant attitude was a concern with the whole animal, not merely its parts. This is linked to the desire to understand the origins of life, and the perceptions that cnidarians and ctenophores played key roles in answering basic questions of evolution. (Haddock, 550-1)

Serving as ship’s medical officer on H.M.S. *Rattlesnake*, for example, Thomas Henry Huxley was literally adrift in coelenterates. Edward Forbes, a London biologist, had suggested that the study of paradoxical (and perishable) jellyfish and other marine organisms would help make a name for the 22-year old naturalist; subsequently, Huxley devoted considerable energy to the project. He immediately became fascinated with the *Medusae* and similar organisms in all their strange and exotic forms:

They could be as blue as the ocean, as pink as the sunset or as clear as water. Their bodies could be gelatinous, scaly, shell-encased, spiky or segmented. They moved by means of floating bells, bladders, sails, wings, legs, fins, or by water-jet propulsion. They could sting, ingest, choke, bite or poison their prey. They might
reproduce by self-budding, dividing, egg-laying or sexual intercourse. Some were solitary, others gathered into elaborate colonies. (McCalman, 161)

Whatever their shape or behavior, their morphological relationships were a mystery – not least to Huxley, who thought of the entire amorphous group as a “sort of zoological lumber-room” (Ibid.) – a notion inadvertently echoed in contemporary popular engravings that pictured a peacefully sleeping Huxley in a sort of dream-aquarium filled with fantastic and improbable organisms. [fig. 23] In the posthumously published Diary of his voyage, he left a record of the overwhelming variety of animals that he saw and collected. Chief among these were vast, floating arrays (or “smacks”) of the venomous Physalia, the Portuguese man-of-war that grazed on the Indian Sea around his ship. Other days saw the tiny, striped crests of stinging siphonophores such as Velellae, as well as the huge, bell-shaped floats of Cephea, “an enormous, all-seeing umbrella with its eight red eye dots” (in Desmond, 1994, 61). At the Great Barrier Reef, sea salps, or sea squirts, caught his attention. What looked like two separate kinds of animal living side by side were, he discovered, actually a single species. One generated the other: a more or less sessile form producing a long chain of apparently separate individuals which then broke off from the parent animal. Astonished, Huxley saw how the chains detached, leaving inside each a developing larval form – an individual animal that existed in 50 different sea-faring parts. (126)

Meanwhile, in his celebrated three-volume report on the Radiolaria, Ernst Haeckel suggested that the profusion of species was so great and the distinction between
Figure 23. "What an Aquarium Should Be," 1876, Illustrated Sporting and Dramatic News (http://commons.wikimedia.org)
species so small that there were ultimately no species at all, only a continually morphing spectrum of dizzying form – a scene of themed and rhythmic variation which Haeckel’s famous plates illustrate, both in in his radiolarian atlas of 1887 and his more famous and influential *Kunstformen der Natur*, or *Art Forms in Nature*, published from 1899 to 1904. Both books had enormous influence on Art Nouveau artists in general, and Rene Binet in particular, the architect who designed the famous Radiolarian arch for the 1900 Paris Exhibition [fig. 35]. As the art critic Gustave Geffroy wrote in the introduction to Binet’s *Esquisses décoratives* (1902-1903), the artist had “taken all these lines, all these angles, all these circles, these ellipses, these stars, all these figures” from Haeckel, “which become, at the sweep of his pencil, an extraordinary living geometry” (Binet, 10) [fig. 24, 25, 26, and 27].

Like Haeckel, Huxley was attempting to organize the entirety of the marine invertebrates: jellyfish, sea anemones, molluscs – in short, the entire, inchoate world of gelatinous, paradoxical *animalia* that had hitherto escaped any easy classification beyond that of grouping by default. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, Georges Cuvier had taken the entire, motley, gelatinous miscellany of starfish, anemones and jellyfish and lumped them together in the Radiata, one of his four *embranchements*. Instead, Huxley hoped to organize his specimens based on the sort of philosophical anatomy that would ally him with continental followers of Geoffry-St. Hilaire. Later, when he was attempting a synthesis of continental archetypes and the circular system of classification he adopted from the Australian naturalist William John Macleay, he would think of the myriad marine organisms he encountered during
Fig. 24. Ernst Haeckel, *Discomedusae*, 1904 (Haeckel, 2004)
the *Rattlesnake’s* tour as revolving in a sort of abstract system that found its inspiration in Macleay’s *schema*:

[Macleay] classified all organisms in sets of circles of five, which he pictured on the circumference of a circle. He saw five classes of animals, joined in a ring, each class with five orders, ultimately ending up in myriad circles of five linked species. This elegant pattern was considered a piece of Divine neatness – or more commonly as Macleay’s ‘Quinarian nonsense’. But it was no nonsense to Huxley, searching for the sublime patterns in nature. Macleay’s ‘circular system’ would influence him enormously over the next decade. (Desmond, 90)

While Macleay would take the number five as an organizing principle, Huxley would take the circle, using the very notion of radial form as heuristic for classification itself. In Desmond’s vivid image, Huxley imagined a kind of bizarre Ptolemaic sphere on which sat each distinct and unique organismal form – “all the slugs, squids, whelks and mussels,” in equidistant orbits around some hypothetical, arch-mollusc at their gravitational center. As Desmond notes, “The circles appealed to his aesthetic sense. He had a ‘strong appreciation of the Beautiful in whatever shape’, and in Nature’s circular symmetry the beauty seemed transcendent” (Desmond, 90). Yet as Cuvier had discovered before him, the difficulties of such a project were profound:

Nobody could agree about them. Was each a single organism? Or was it a complex colony of many individuals united, one the gas bag, others modified
Figure 25. Ernst Haeckel, *Trachomedusae*, 1904 (Haeckel, 2004)
as stinging tentacles, still more the food-ingesting or siphon polyps (hence the group’s name), all specialized for single tasks and subordinated to the whole? (Desmond, 1994, 60)

Collectives of connected individuals that appear as single organisms, siphonophores have both mobile and sessile forms that are known as “medusan persons” and “polyp persons.” As Gould wonders in *The Flamingo’s Smile* (1985), “Shall we call the entire siphonophore a colony or an organism […] And what of the parts or persons?” Huxley saw such creatures as “conventional organisms, their parts as true organs and not modified persons.” Louis Agassiz saw colonies of individuals instead, while Haeckel thought of them as something in-between, “in part as colonies (the poly-person theory in his words), in part as organisms (the poly-organ theory)” (Gould, 1985, 89).

In any case, as Mary Windsor has pointed out in her *Starfish, Jellyfish and the Order of Life* (1976), such invertebrate issues were at the forefront of taxonomic controversies immediately before and after the appearance of Darwin’s *Origin*. Indeed, the importance of such marine invertebrates, not unlike the importance of Cuvier’s now defunct order of the Radiata, “was that it elevated the significance of invertebrates, the animals least like ourselves. Jellyfish, starfish and polyps, constituting one of Cuvier’s four embranchements, stood equal in importance to all the birds, fish, and mammals put together. That division, the Radiata, happens to be the only one of his branches that has no modern equivalent […] Thus, the Radiates were a group which came into existence at the start of the last century, embodied for a period the ideals of comparative morphology, and began to fall again by midcentury” (Windsor, 5).
Fig. 26. Ernst Haeckel, Radiolarians, 1904 (Haeckel, 2004)
While Huxley and Haeckel were out to renovate and reclassify Cuvier’s Radiata, others like Louis Agassiz “saw in the disintegration of the Radiata as much of a threat to classical biology as those evolutionary notions he denounced so bitterly. Indeed, to Agassiz these threats were so intimately linked that he tried to combat evolution by defending the Radiates” (5). In either case, whether arising from Huxley’s homologies, Agassiz’s design, or Haeckel’s monism, questions of function, form, and design were inseparable from the aesthetic, especially for the artist/scientists of the end of the century. “Agassiz employed this image when he described living nature as ‘a gigantic conception, carried out in the course of time, like a soul-breathing epos,’ or where he likened the understanding of nature to the appreciation of paintings in a museum” (140).

However, “[t]he design in nature represented by adaptation of form to function was clearly of less interest to Huxley than the ‘harmonious variety in unity’ not dictated by functional necessity, ‘which delighted man’s intellectual and aesthetic perceptions’” (141). While the design of natural theologians as presented in the Bridgewater Treatises (1833-1840) “put their emphasis on functional adaptation” (Windsor, 139), “professional biologists paid slight attention to this line of enquiry. They too saw order in nature, but on a more abstract intellectual plane. Their experience convinced them that species could be arranged in groups, not merely by arbitrary human decision, but by important and real similarities of structure that seemed largely independent of the adaptation of the animal” (140). These included “the relationships between embryology, geographical distribution, the fossil record, and rank in classification” (Ibid.)
In short, while others saw that the innovation of the *Origin* was to focus on natural history, both Agassiz and Huxley “continued to follow rather closely the established models of comparative morphology and embryology,” despite their positions on either side of the Darwinian divide (140). As Windsor notes, Agassiz’s reaction to evolution, as well as that of his son Alexander, “parallels, to some degree, the response of zoology as a whole in the nineteenth century to the new directions indicated by *The Origin of Species*” (167). Alexander Agassiz, for example, understood Darwinism “through the areas his father had already pointed out as most promising,” while neither Huxley nor Haeckel, for all their enthusiasm for evolution as the explanation for the subject matter of classical zoology, showed much real understanding of Darwin’s special contribution” (167-8) of historical contingency. Indeed, for all of Haeckel’s heroic, almost obsessive cataloguing, it’s useful to remember that Darwin’s only illustration in the *Origin* “does not represent classification but the cause of classification” (174) – that is to say, a contingent and unpredictable deviation that happens across time. Instead of orderly patterns or ahistorical regularities that could be mapped as they were in nineteenth-century taxonomies, Windsor stresses – accurately, I think – the vast disruption of Darwinian theory:

The study of order was expected to lead zoology onward to its synthesis, and so it did. Yet powerful and unifying as Darwin’s theory was, the nature of his explanatory laws took many scientists by surprise. Instead of the pure, simple beauty of inertia and gravity, whose cause remained a cosmic mystery, Darwin proposed variation, which was very messy, and natural selection, which was a law of “higgledy-piggledy.” (178)
Fig. 27. René Binet, *ROSACE*, 1902, *Esquisses décoratives* (Binet, 2007)
Nowhere was this sense of disruption or surprise more palpable than in the strange, metamorphic world of tentacled, snake-like sea-going invertebrates: disembodied, free-floating medusas and communal polyps that, like Redon’s Medusan animalcules, seemed to make a shambles of both conventional notions of personhood and individuality, as well as once air-tight taxonomic groupings and the inviolate notion of species itself – not unlike the queerly genre-crossing, labile, internationally diffuse Art Nouveau. Indeed, following Gould, Niles Eldredge has noted that with the modern discussions of Mayr and Dobzhansky, the very notion of the discreteness of species as real, viable entities reappeared as a topic in evolutionary discussions. Indeed, “to the question, Are species real entities in nature? Mayr’s response was unequivocal: if species aren’t real, why then have a theory to explain their origin?”

With this, discreteness at the level of species had, finally, reentered scientific thinking for the first time since [William] Whewell had pronounced species as having “a real existence in nature” [in his History of the Inductive Sciences, 1837], Darwin needed to destroy the notion of species as real, discrete entities in order to establish the truth of his larger proposition: that life has evolved, that all organisms on earth are descended from a common ancestor. It took Mayr and Dobzhansky to affirm that Darwin’s views on natural selection were correct, but that the commonsense observation that species are discrete entities – the hallmark observation of the pre-Darwinian era – was also correct. (Eldredge, 20)
Yet what counts as a Darwinian individual? After posing the same question about siphonophores and “medusan persons,” Gould also asks, “Are vernacular bodies the only objects in nature that merit such a designation – especially when discrete ‘bodiness’ doesn’t always define an unambiguous individual at the focal level of Darwin’s intent” (Gould, 2002, 597).

Are grass blades or bamboo stalks bodies in their own right (as some aspects of functional organization suggest), or parts (called ramets) of a larger evolutionary individual (called a genet)? Do our feelings about definition shift when ramets become spatially discrete and therefore look just like conventional bodies – as in the parthenogenetic offspring of an aphid stem-mother (designated, in their totality, as a single EI, or evolutionary individual, by Janzen, 1977)? And what shall we do with discrete bodies that maintain some genetic variation among themselves (and cannot, therefore, form a set of identical ramets), but operate together as differentiated items (analogs of organs) in a larger “totality” like a beehive or any colony with a single queen? Wilson and Sober (1989) have urged a revival for the old concept of “superorganism” in such circumstances. (598).

This radical ambiguity, then – between part and whole, individual and colony, organ and organism, or organism and superorganism – posed particularly large problems for taxonomists confronting the classification of organisms composed of such a plurality of parts that each have a radically ambiguous status in terms of conventional personhood. For botanists, such dilemmas of personhood have been parsed into relational terms. For example, “genet” refers to the entire collection or
aggregate of cloned individuals, as in a discrete clump of bamboo. “Ramet” indicates the parts in iteration. (Gould, 1985, 94) But as Gould remarks, the terminology is less a solution to the problem than it is a recognition that the problem exists. Moreover, the very coining of the terminology indicates a dilemma that cannot be solved by appealing to less problematic notions of individuality. (Ibid.)

So too, a related series of questions might be formulated around the equally parochial notion of sexual reproduction itself – a notion that Niles Eldridge, Roger Lancaster, Bruce Bagemihl and Joan Roughgarden have explored in a series of recent books, the most persuasive of which may be Eldridge’s extended essay on the topic, and which in turn examines the possibility that the ultra-Darwinian valorization of an all-important, competitive struggle for sexual reproduction may not be the center of the whole of life or its sole driving force. Words like “parasite” or “renegade” or “outlaw” in terms of discussing “selfish DNA” are, according to Gould, attributable to what he calls a further “parochialism of organismic bias.” Taxonomies themselves have traditionally tended to lump together whole rafts of organisms – “weeds, butterflies, bugs” (Gould, 2002, 697) – that have no apparent utility for the naïve taxonomist, while items of more use or relevance are given exquisite distinctions. Indeed, this parochialism in narrowly identifying both sexual difference and the unitary, organismal individual with its competitively-enhanced adaptations may also be the result of a focus on larger and sexualized vertebrates that have long suffered an emblematic status in Western thought. Trumpeted as gender emblem of either a leonine masculinity (however at odds with actual animal behavior), or the ferocious, predatory maleness of species such as dinosaurs, mammoths, mastadons, cave bears,
and dire wolves, vertebrates have long taken priority over invertebrates as more sexy, often serving as models for a presumably “natural” heterosexuality in which an individualized, predatory masculinity takes center stage. Literally less sexy, such invertebrates make unlikely emblems for a nature red in tooth and claw, with all its attendant constellation of gendered meanings of competition and adaptive conquest. Often toothless, often clawless, such invertebrates serve as sometimes shockingly different models for concepts of personhood and sexual reproduction.

Gould has argued that just as we have come to see discrete organisms as conventional biological individuals, we also need to see that the species itself is another “rich-but-different” Darwinian individual. In this view, “The species […] acts as a shelter or arbor that holds itself fast by active utilization of the properties that build its well-defined individuality” (1293). Unlike parts of an organism, parts of a species can flourish because such parts – that is, those organisms that constitute the species – have an independent existence.

This fluid, biological and morphological incoherence circulates around the instabilities of personhood and group, species and individual, as well as sexual and nonsexual reproduction, and displays itself in Nouveau as a riot of boundary-blurring, undulating limbs and whiplashing, biotic forms that have their strongest resonances with the evolutionary marine and its variously constituted “medusa persons.” Amorphous and utterly unlike many standard conceptions of organismal organization and animality, Nouveau’s marine pedigree is written, as it were, on its surface, particularly when a concern for surface itself came to be considered one of Nouveau’s distinguishing characteristics. Whether images of crinoids, cephalopods, jellyfish or
the many representations of the figure of Medusa herself in jewelry, bibelots, and other objects [Fig. 28], the whipping flagellae, tendrils and tentacles of Nouveau

Fig. 28. Alphonse Mucha, Medusa brooch (http://darkenrosejewellery.com)

demonstrate what one German connoisseur of Jugendstil called “a reciprocal osmosis through inner affinity” – rhyming or repeating patterns presented in a series of what Schmutzer has called “closed forms,” – that is to say, “smoothly closed elements of
Fig. 29. Detail of Wallpaper Frieze of the Ballarat Mechanics' Institute Smoking Room, Ballarat, Australia (https://www.pinterest.com)
“form” that are almost always “complementary.” Each form becomes a sort of place-object “integrated within the ground of surface itself” (Schmutzler, 30) in a playful, ambiguous figure-ground relationship that makes isolating such wavering, tentacled “closed forms” from their background – or distinguishing a static background from its foreground – difficult if not impossible [Fig. 29].

A similar disruptive fluidity can also be seen in the way that Art Nouveau slides across any number of artistic genres, often leveling distinctions between fine and applied arts and crafts in a sort of profligate, promiscuous, evolutionary Gesamthunstwerk in which an entire life and all that it touches – applied art, book decoration, typography, carpets, fabrics and textiles, individual items of furniture, upholstery, flatware, pottery -- might be transmuted into an evolutionarily inspired art. This became possible only if one abolished long-held distinctions between the various genres of art: another sort of boundary-blurring, jellyfish diffuseness which Art Nouveau generated, since it tended to view all things as sheer ornament, despite (or in addition to) their functional uses [Fig. 30].

In addition, thanks to the organismal “closed forms” of Art Nouveau that morph and rhyme by virtue of all sorts of biotic shapes and patterns, another kind of “closed system” is achieved in interconnected, resonating ensembles that range from public architecture to the interior decoration of rooms. In each case, shapes, patterns and textures move fluidly from bibelot to wallpaper, from vase to stained glass, from metalwork to trompe l’oeil effects – all hybridizing into new, often extravagant, forms. Indeed, in Art Nouveau the hybrid seems to take on special significance, both in its cross-fertilizing modes and in its artists themselves:
Fig. 30. Victor Horta, The Tassel House, Brussels, 1893-1894 (http://whc.unesco.org)
No other period appears to have had a greater number of artists endowed with dual talents, such as painter-poets, that can be found in the history and prehistory of Art Nouveau. Blake and Rossetti, William Morris, and Aubery Beardsley have left us poems of as great a value as their creations in the field of art. Rossetti painted pictures for poems and wrote poems on pictures, Swinburne composed poems on paintings by Whistler which, written on gold paper, were then attached to the frames; and the titles of Whistler’s paintings, read in succession from a catalogue, one after the other, sound like a kind of abstract poetry, devoid of subject matter. (Schmutzler, 11)

So too, as Olaf Breidbach has pointed out in his monograph on Haeckel’s artwork, the new designs found themselves utilized across broad sociological groups and in a range of applications, including the ordinary and everyday:

It was particularly common in wallpaper patterns and decorative strips that could be applied to plaster with stencils and were thus to be found in simpler homes as well as in the designs found in periodicals and more expensive illustrated books. Prefabricated cast-iron moulds, new porcelain patterns and glass shapes for lampshades, vases and bowls were based on this nature aesthetic whose forms could combine exoticism and internationalism, and which, in drawing on natural life, appeared to have outgrown the problems associated with rapidly changing fashions in art and design. (Breidbach, 60)

The same fluidity applies to the metamorphic frames of Art Nouveau, many of which show “the disappearance of a clear boundary line between its different fields of art,” especially when any useful distinction between frame and content seems to disappear in a
fusion of “frame and picture in an ornamental and undivided whole that is full of significance” (Schmutzler, 10).

This boundary-blurring ornamental element determines the entire style, extending to its “free” painting and “free” sculpture too. Whether in two dimensions or three, objects and designs sought a style that was almost entirely of ornamental surfaces. Indeed, for Schmutzler,

Art Nouveau expresses itself first of all, as an ornamental surface-movement where the ornamental element remains dominant, even if applied to the representation of figures or of objects situated in space. Even artists like Gaudi, Tiffany, or Maillol, who have created extreme examples of three-dimensional form, interpret Art Nouveau first and foremost as a phenomenon of surface. On the other hand, ornament begins to dominate figures and objects set in space as an inner force too, imposing on them an ornamental structure. Since, by its very nature, this ornament is always flowing, its structure must reveal itself full of movement too. Horta’s fragile and elegant linear framework of architecture is ornamental, producing, so to speak, vibrating structures; Tiffany’s and Galle’s vases, with or without further ornament on their carved surfaces, are ornamental bodies in what appears to be a continuously flowing movement; the masses, swelling like sand dunes or humped like a camel’s back, that provide the forms of Gaudi’s houses and cupolas, with their reptilian and iridescent surfaces of scale-like ceramics, are architectonic ornamental bodies developed in space, animated from within by an almost vital morphology. (9)
Like Wilde’s Gwendolyn, then – another architectonic ornamental “surface-body,” not unlike the well-known figures from posters by Alphonse Mucha that seem to billow and swell in tandem with their own ornamentation [16] – such curved and flowing masses “intend to develop in many directions,” as if each figure “were made of a substance that puts out stems and buds” in the same way that the Art Nouveau object often seems to refer to its own function as performative, “as a sort of parable of itself,” as if “it had become the abstract, three-dimensional emblem of its own function” (Schmutzler, 9).

Figure 31. Alphonse Mucha, dance poster, circa 1900 (http://www.wikiart.org)
Fig. 32. Hector Guimard, Paris Metro, circa 1900 (http://www.greatbuildings.com)
In this way, a chair or table might express its function with an excess of elasticity or an exaggerated display of the dynamic force it needs to bear weight, “as a mannered athlete will do when, simply by turning his head, he brings into play an excessive apparatus of muscles” (Schmutzler, 9). Thus, neither “merely” decorative nor “merely” functional, the elastic morphological excesses of Nouveau are ambiguous, metamorphic “signs, closely connected with form, meaning, and symbols” (Ibid.) in ways that seem singular in the history of ornament and design, and which have had a decisive influence on a number of modern artists and succeeding styles. For example, similar experiments with whipping tendrils and undulating, metamorphic forms abound in later illustrations and graphics like Windsor McKay’s *Little Nemo in Slumberland* (1924-1926), which seems to revel in a biotic elasticity of furniture and frames that refuse to remain still and which, for the first time in newspaper comics, also modifies the structural design and frames of the printed page through its rhythmic, organismal growth [fig. 33] and the metamorphosed, moving limbs of inanimate objects [fig. 34]. As Klaus-Jürgen Sembach, points out,

This is why lettering proved to be a fruitful field of activity for Art Nouveau; also, why it is comparatively easy to force such a world of ornamental emblematic forms to “speak” and deliver its message that is hidden behind the pattern and even behind the consciously intended “content” […] That is why Art Nouveau also produced books and bindings in which the typography, the illustrations, and the ornaments fuse in a small but fully integrated work of art. In ensembles such as the “illuminated” books of Blake, in the typography of
Figure 33. Joseph Satler, cover design, *Pan*, 1895 (http://www.vam.ac.uk)
Charles Ricketts, there arises, out of originally heterogeneous elements, a calligraphic synthesis of homogeneous forms and signs that are all subjected to the same rhythm. Similarly, Art Nouveau also achieved a synthesis of the pages of poems in the German art periodical *Pan*, [Fig. 33] or in the fine bindings by lettering and the picture or the lettering and the ornament in a poster. During this period the poster thus acquired for the first time the kind of clarity that insured its being visible from a distance and, at the same time, the concise personal character and style of a signature. (Sembach. 20-21)

In terms of its metamorphic and synthetic vitality, then, for some Nouveau was also interested in making transparent the functional and structural form of girders and entranceways as a kind of biological exuberance: an excessive use of materiality that serves as another sort of exaptive “hiding in plain sight” in which function becomes something so overtly fluid and metamorphic it seems a parody of itself. Yet as Sembach says of the famous Paris Metro signs [fig. 32]:

Doubtless it was unusually bold to abandon the historicist style – which might have shaped the entrances as miniature temples – and to build them instead in the nascent style of Art Nouveau. There was actually no good reason for these enormous ornamentals with their stylized tendrils. Yet they did have the effect of elevating the prosaic vitality to something so unique that it could more easily gain acceptance. They celebrated banality in a way that was actually cynical, but also, for some people pleasurable. The transition from the efficiency under the ground to the glittering street life of the metropolis demanded artistic lubrication; the result abounded in artifice. (Sembach, 21)
Figure 34. Winsor McKay, *Little Nemo in Slumberland* (McKay, 10)
Figure 35. Winsor McKay, *Little Nemo in Slumberland*, detail (McCay, 154)
This artistic lubricity might say less about a cynical banality and more about exaptive ideas of biological and organismal excess, but not without a certain freight of anxiety over the dangerous surplus of such boundary-crossing exuberance. For Sembach, for example, Nouveau’s growing, increasingly “banal” autonomy eventually led to precisely the sort of unwanted excess that other art historians such as Schmutzler tend to celebrate. Indeed, these particular concerns – protean surfaces and mobile frames, an interest in metamorphic objects as well as organic representations of the head and snaky hair of Medusa and medusoid organisms – all point to a dangerously queer decadence and a “febrile” sensuality that erupted, in Sembach’s terms, into a “frenzy” of artifice at the 1900 World Exhibition where Binet built his Haeckel-inspired Radiolarian arch (Sembach, 13-14). Reviewing one of van de Velde’s most celebrated pieces of furniture, he stressed its rigorous devotion to function, as if its “idiosyncratic beauty” and serpentine lines were somehow to be kept in check:

Although made of solid wood, the desk resolves into groups of sinuous lines. Lines of energy flow from one part to the next, give form to its interior and tension to seemingly inert surfaces. It has an idiosyncratic beauty which is more than just a matter of aesthetic balance. Every detail can be accounted for in terms of usefulness. The curving surface yields to the user’s outstretched arms, the hollowed outer edge both strengthens [sic] and serves to house writing utensils. A broadening creates the base for a candlestick-holder at either end. This dominant sweep is echoed by a delicate band of brass drawn from one candlestick-base to
the other, creating a small containing edge, and integrating the candlesticks organically into the whole [...] Formal and functional elements combine in powerful symbiosis; neither is subordinate, the contrast makes each more dramatic. Every detail is at once ornamental and useful, which shows a highly unusual notion of a piece of furniture. The desk is not passive, but has an active message to convey in elevated rhetoric: things should not only be useful, their outer form should express their function. The desk must be desk through and through, in all its parts. Every detail must contribute to the elevated functionality which was van de Velde’s ideal. (emphasis added, Sembach 22-26)

Sembach’s insistence on adaptation and functionality is part of the tendency for some art historians to note the brevity of Nouveau’s appearance as a doomed project most associated with decadence and extinction. As opposed to an adaptive, transparent “functionality,” ornamentation becomes “grotesque embellishments” (15). There is “no good reason” for the “stylized tendrils” of an essentially “cynical style” (21). The

Figure 36. Henry van de Velde, writing desk, Brussels, 1899 (http://russegold.tripod.com)
“undulating line” of Nouveau objects and patterns should be abandoned as part of its characteristic style, since, unlike Schmutzler’s account, the line does not “translate” from wall to object, print to pattern. Indeed, for Sembach, “The link between painting and Art Nouveau has always been controversial. To ascribe entirely, or in part, the work of Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, Jan Toorop, Edvard Munch, Gustav Klimt and others, to Art Nouveau involves narrowing a concept which is too complex to be reduced to a simple handling of line” (12). Thus, “The movement of a line is a less reliable criterion than the motivation behind it. This motivation is bound to be different when applied to an ornament, a chair or a house when relating to a pictorial composition” (12)

Seen in this way, it is the fluid, undulating queerness of Art Nouveau that disturbs or threatens, an excessiveness which must be tamed or seen as comfortably extinct, its effect on modernity placed in the realm of the juvenile or the jejune: something to be outgrown, not unlike Descombes’ assessment of Combray, or Eliot’s characterization of the “poet before his twenty-first year” (Eliot, 1920, 49) – that is to say, a mistake or a perversion that must be “corrected” by a more rigorous and masculinized modernism. In a similar way, for Sembach, “The ambivalence of Art Nouveau, and the protean shapes it took, were generated by a simple response to the dissonances between art and technological progress” which by the turn of the century now “demanded urgent release”:

By 1900 the moment had come. Tension was released in an explosive burst of creative energy whose impact was felt far and wide. It explains, perhaps, why so much was produced in such a short space of time; but it suggests, too, that the
situation was not one in which things could mature. Frenzy often propelled events, and something of the artificiality which characterized the climax – the 1900 World Exhibition in Paris – was immanent in Art Nouveau. From the beginning it was in the public eye, which served to advance it, but also made it disastrously dependent on people’s whims and fancies. (Sembach, 13-14)
This unease is similar to James Trilling’s more recent anxiety over such excess in his *Ornament: A Modern Perspective* (2003), an anxiety evidenced in language that flirts with an Eliotic or Poundian attack against a dangerous and sexualized queerness. For Trilling, “Art Nouveau is no stronger, more decisive, or more spontaneous than the styles that preceded it,” singling out for special criticism two characteristics that he feels are singular in nineteenth-century art:

an emotional explicitness that is probably unsurpassed in the history of ornament, and the near total integration of figure, ornament, and design. Both innovations have their source in the most abstract and labile forms of the rococo, and this pedigree also defines their failings. What lifts the rococo above mere whimsy is its passionate strength of line. Reinterpreted by a later generation of artists for whom strength was unattainable, the same forms radiate exoticism and febrile sensuality. Art Nouveau embodies the self-consciously worldly yet hopeful mindset of the fin-de-siècle, reaching for innocence and renewal yet refusing to leave the embrace of decadence.

(Trilling, 206)

Thus, for Trilling and similar critics, Art Nouveau was not only decadent, it was also doomed to failure, a failed experiment:

Art Nouveau was a thing of the moment. It did not become the basis of twentieth-century ornament. The obvious explanation is that it was tied to a mindset that probably could not last; it was too specialized and too sexual. This is true as far as it goes, but the limits of Art Nouveau are stylistic as well as cultural. If the tone is the same whether the form is innocent or lubricious,
it is because the style, not the content, is limited. Art Nouveau exploits its congenital weakness as a source of emotional strength. There is a saying: “Be careful what you wish for, you might get it.” The most influential designers of the late nineteenth century wished for a style that could express emotion directly, without invoking the connotations of historic styles. They got their wish, but only for emotions that could be expressed in weak and languid (albeit graceful) forms. (Trilling, 206-7)

The attempt at erasure in the passage is significant. As we have seen with Eliot and the “Men of 1914,” the same dangerous excess of being “too specialized and too sexual” was precisely part of the dangerously “languid” or feminizing error to be corrected – not least because such excesses included its unwholesome freight of genre-crossing, boundary-blurring decadence or its unhealthy, jellyfish-like softness and malleability. Indeed, what might be considered as Art Nouveau’s subsequent solidification, its reduction to solidity, tended to occur in its subsequent petrification into denser, less organic – even monolithically static and monumental – styles such as Art Deco, which seemed to turn its back on a excessive, feminized organism by replacing a whipping, caressing, billowing jellyfish-like style with geometrical and mechanical images. Such a change also produced a style less concerned with evolutionary profusion and biological excess, both ideas that could be considered integral to Art Nouveau and its practitioners. As Silverman has noted, Seigfried Bing, the founder of La Maison de l’Art Nouveau, was already alert to the evolutionary and selectionist context of his own project from its very beginnings. In his essay of 1895, Bing saw that “the crafts of the New World” were able to “select judiciously from the
past, combining their study of ancient creations with an immersion in nature’s forms.”

In short, they were able “to adapt artistic forms from the past to new needs, to modern conceptions, rather than engaging in the tricks of sterile archaeology” (Silverman, 182).

Not only adapt, but exapt as well: at once “sinuous” and “organic,” “decadent” and “modern” as well as “proto-modern,” the undecidability of Art Nouveau has become part of its definition in absentia; indeed, its single most defining characteristic might be its restless, nomadic resistance to definition, particularly as it relates to any supererogatory function and use. In such a case, function – that is, the conjunction between design and use – becomes subordinated to what might be called its exaptive or excessive utility, where a second-order or emergent function arises that has more to do with its participation in an aesthetic assemblage than any primary raison d’être of dedicated function. Accordingly, the new designs found themselves utilized across broad sociological groups and in a range of applications, including the ordinary and everyday:

It was particularly common in wallpaper patterns and decorative strips that could be applied to plaster with stencils and were thus to be found in simpler homes as well as in the designs found in periodicals and more expensive illustrated books. Prefabricated cast-iron moulds, new porcelain patterns and glass shapes for lampshades, vases and bowls were based on this nature aesthetic whose forms could combine exoticism and internationalism, and which, in drawing on natural life, appeared to have outgrown the problems associated with rapidly changing fashions in art and design. (Breidbach, 60)
All the more interesting, then, that issues such as these – issues of fluid boundaries, of individual and species, of personhood, plurality, decadence and a plural or dispersed queerness – should arise just as the Third Republic was negotiating the troublesome appearance of the *femme nouvelle*, the New Woman, and all her anxiogenic potential for social, sexual and sartorial disruption. As Silverman has exhaustively noted, a new-found emphasis on the French interior found a particularly French resonance with issues surrounding the proper place of the *femme nouvelle*, not least during the span of artistic innovation that began with the First Universal Exhibition of 1889 and reached a sort of climax during the Paris Exhibition of 1900 – a relationship with official exhibitions, by the way, that itself did not go unnoticed or ungendered:

Before the twentieth century, no other style had, in as great a number of “exhibitions,” admired itself and courted admiration. No other art had yet produced so many and such beautiful periodicals to mirror and reveal itself, though the overt purpose or pretext for these exhibitions and publications may have been the need to reform all of art. It is no coincidence that […] the sudden, artistic evolution of the poster and of the whole art of advertising in this period may also be interpreted in terms of Art Nouveau’s exhibitionistic drives. (Schmutzler, 1)

As Silverman has pointed out in her analysis of the 1900 Paris Exhibition, the project of enlisting an emergent, nationally French-inspired “new art” to help domesticate what she calls the “menace” of *femme nouvelle* was itself inseparable from such an exhibition. While Seigfried Bing’s famous *La Maison de l’Art Nouveau* may have begun its existence with a broadly international appeal to artists who had little reverence for an
exclusive or xenophobically French or Union-approved “art of the interior,” by the time of the Exhibition of 1900 such a project was already increasingly pressured by national institutions such as the Central Union to help contain the dangerous “new woman” by withdrawing her sphere of operation from the public to the private world of harmonious and decorative interiors. This attempt at containment was extended to the emerging, vastly pluralized international movement of Art Nouveau itself, in a simultaneous attempt to domesticate what some considered the movement’s already wayward and very public directions.

Here, too, is another “mirror”: a state-approved “feminine” style which provides the inversive surface that “reveals” the French femme in her proper habitat, the French domestic interior, which is in turn set in opposition to the public architecture and signage of Silverman’s invasive international movement. In an article in the September 15, 1895 issue of La Plume, for example, popular novelist Victor Jozé worried about the influence of new technologies and aesthetic styles on what he considered “the separate life spheres” of men and women, criticizing “any movement of the female away from the private world would violate the natural order and yield an unstable and dangerous state of social inversion.” Interestingly, especially in terms of Proust’s Little Band, he singles out the bicycle as particularly harmful, threatening what Silverman locates as the supposedly stable divisions between public and private space to offer instead what he presents as a dangerous collusion between woman and machine:

The bicycle’s triumph […] necessitates an androgynous outfit […] worn by its adepts of the weaker sex […] Will we never make our skirted publishers and sociologists in dresses understand that a woman in neither equal nor inferior nor
superior to a man, that she is a being apart, another thing, endowed with other functions by nature than the man with whom she has no business competing in public life. A woman only exists through her ovaries . . . Let her not pose as a virago: it does not suit her […] Let there be no […] androgynes! (in Silverman, 72)

Fig. 38. “To the Feminist Congress!” Le Grelot, 1896, detail (Silvermann, 68)
By focusing almost exclusively on the aspects of French Nouveau that provided a “retreat to an organic, feminine, and intimate interior,” the Exhibition attempted to feminize the *femme nouvelle* who threatened to forsake her biological – that is to say, adaptive and functional – destiny in order to become part of the larger world of *les bas bleus*. Not content to “stay at home,” however, neither the *femme nouvelle* nor the larger project of Art Nouveau would consent to be domesticated. Indeed, as we will see, by positing the natural as artificial and thereby emptying the concept of any essential function, the very public androgyny of Art Nouveau would constitute an exhibitionistic, performative practice not unlike the destabilizing and disruptive realms of transvestism, drag and camp.

“Proust, an Art Nouveau Writer?” The question serves as title to Françoise Leriche’s essay in *Proust in Perspective: Visions and Revisions* (2002), in which she notices an unexpected resonance between Proust’s *Search* and a recent visit she made to the Sagrada Familia, the well-known Art Nouveau cathedral designed by Antonio Gaudi in Barcelona, Spain [fig. 39]. There, writes Leriche, walking through the vast, metamorphic church,

I suddenly had the odd sensation that I was strolling through *A la recherche du temps perdu*! What produced this impression […] were the sculpted walls that appeared to have been modeled right out of the masonry, as if the stone itself were a soft and malleable material – an impression of budding, of swelling, as if the stone itself were a living organism. (189)
Leriche notes further similarities between the artists – a “refinement” in “a wealth of detail” that seems “in diametrical opposition to both Impressionism and Cubism”, but never causes the viewer or reader “to lose sight of the overall structure.” So too,

Let us add, to this kinship of [...] style between Proust and Gaudi, a few biographical elements that are not so incidental as they might appear at first glance. Gaudi, who in 1881 had inherited a modest construction project, set about developing it in 1895 into something of gigantic proportions. By 1910
he had ceased all other activities and had taken to living as an ascetic, frequently even sleeping at the construction site, so that he could better devote his time and wealth to this, his life’s work. As one whose concrete approach led him to working on the spot, he was constantly modifying the initial plan, wherever his inspiration led him. At the time of his death in 1926, the cathedral was still unfinished. The very dates, the ascetic life, the lifetime of devotion to his work (even at night), the continual changes in plan, the impossibility of completing his work: all this reminds of very much of Proust.

These parallels owe nothing, of course, to either fate or coincidence but rather reflect a common approach to work, a similar conception of artistic creation which, for two creators who were never to meet, must necessarily be grounded in a shared set of references: the Ruskinian ethos, work-as-cathedral, organismic, vitalism, concern for detail. Gaudi is, as we know, the most celebrated representative of Art Nouveau in Spain. It occurred to me that the ever-unclassifiable Proust could well be the French literary representative of that “between-centuries” art that is Art Nouveau. (191)

Leriche goes on to distinguish an Art Nouveau Proust from the more commonly articulated view of Proust the Impressionist, not least in the familiar description of Elstir’s “marines” as Impressionistic models for the young narrator, but which for Leriche belong instead to a “new manner” by virtue of their “overdone, neo-Baroque composition” that is “quite distinct from Impressionism”. In his Port de Carquethuit, for example, the painter
places the masts amid houses, systematically abolishes the dividing line between land and sea (inlets jutting into the town, wet sand reflecting hulls of boats, and so on), plays on the arrangement of items in the composition […], creates unlikely contrasts of extreme light and dark – thus playfully testing the spectator with challenges to simple logic and topping the challenge with a game of symbol decoding (the crossing of the Red Sea, heavenly Jerusalem).

In no way is he communicating a snapshot of sensory impression, where the blurring would be due to a single dominant effect (sun, fog, color, and so on).

(197)

Instead of such Impressionist effects, Proust’s own style bears no resemblance whatsoever to that of the divided brushstroke, the fast, fleeting, juxtaposed notation, which aims to suggest “sans rien en lui qui pèse ou qui pose” (free of pounding beat, heavy or terse), as Verlaine said in his *Art Poétique*. The Impressionists, strictly speaking, rejected line, drawing, volume, consistency of the object – techniques rehabilitated by those who were to follow. Yet all the critics who speak of Proust’s style concur in defining it by his sinuous, “serpentine” sentence, whatever judgments they might bring to bear on it, and whatever aesthetic trends they may otherwise connect him with. In 1914, Jacques Blanche, himself a painter and one of the early commentators on Proust, described this “absolutely unique” style: “*les entrelacs et les arabesques* d’interminables périodes, claires pourtant et pittoresque, … *solides et nettes*, souples, Lourdes de sens” *(the intertwinnings*
and arabesques of endless sentences, clear however and picturesque, …

**strong and precise, supple, heavy with meaning.** (199, emphasis in original)

Moreover, it is precisely this long and sinuous arabesque that enables “the aesthetic fusion of […] separate domains.” As she points out in her discussion of *Madame Ranson au chat* by Maurice Denis [fig. 40],

The arabesque is a necessary element here because it alone enables the tail and markings of the cat to blend smoothly with the folds of the dress, the swirls of hair to link up with the birds in flight on the tapestry, and the curved leg of the table to echo the double curve of the hands and forearms” (207).

Leriche finds the same fusion in “le double tintement timide, *ovale et doré* de la clochette” of Swann’s Combray visits (the double tinkle, timid, *oval, golden,* of the visitor’s bell), a “hypallage” that “allows for the aesthetic fusion of two separate domains, visual and auditory, without our being able to tell […] whether the ‘dore’ is that of the metal of the doorbell, that of the sunset associated with Swann’s vesperal visits, or another visual element synthesized out of the décor” (207). Indeed, as Leriche points out along with Genette, hypallage is “Proust’s favorite technique for blending an element into its setting, or for associating two co-present elements.”

As we have already seen, this practice of “blending an element into its setting, or for associating two co-present elements” is Golo-like in its capacity to participate in a shared and overlapping laterality. As we saw in Part Two, if Fraser has found something reptilian about his journey, we might also consider it under the “reptilious” auspices of Gaudi’s shimmering, undulating architectonic slide, as well as the many forms of metamorphosis that become part of Nouveau’s repertoire. That is to say,
Figure 40. Maurice Denis, *Madame Ranson au chat*, 1892, Musée Maurice Denis, Saint-Germain-en-Laye (http://www.musee-mauricedenis.fr)
while Leriche finds an intriguing resonance between Gaudi’s cathedral and Proust’s *Search*, we can also consider that resonance part of the exaptive, undulating glide of a marine organism so fluid, so without stable content or shape, that it can adopt or discard any vertebrae at all -- an invertebrate beyond vertebration: a *transvertebrate* who adopts or discards any apparent body-plan at will.

The image is almost dizzyingly rich: not only is Golo’s Nouveau-like “reciprocal osmosis” an exaptive slide from utility to utility, it also demonstrates the fluid overlapping of frame with content in which both a hitherto stable place and a hitherto discrete organism show a flagrant, promiscuous destabilization of any orienting or confining boundaries. The amorphousness of the marine is fundamental to such scenes, particularly when one considers that the scalloped contours of the madeleine itself not only signify what reader after reader has recognized – that is to say, the rich and layered roster of signification detailed by Kristeva, Deleuze and others, but also the familiar *coquille* of Art Nouveau. If the steeple of Combray’s church is *un doigt de Dieu*, a conductor’s momentary hush before a symphony begins, it is also the fluted minaret of a littoral organism, a beachside *trouvée*, that, glimpsed between the less spectacular, scattered rooftop tops of the village, is seen to be made of a material “so different, so precious, so beringed, so rosy, so polished, that it is at once seen to be no more a part of them than would be a part of two pretty pebbles lying side by side, between which it had been washed on the beach, the purple, crinkled spire of some sea-shell spun out into a turret and gay with glossy colour. (I, 50) The *ardoises* that cover the base of the spire -- the black, shining roofing slates the Narrator can see from his bedroom window -- blaze comme un soleil noir, “like black
suns,” and were once the sedimentary deposits of a vanished river-bed (Pléiade, I, 6)

Even the corbeaux suddenly released from the windows of Saint-Hilaire’s steeple like “some infinitely disturbing element” can return and be reabsorbed into the tower, “deadly no longer but benignant, some perching here and there. . . on the points of turrets, as a seagull perches, with an angler’s immobility, on the crest of a wave.” (I, 48)

The rook metamorphoses into a seagull with the same ease as the already deliquescent rock of the church’s vault, in Gaudi-like fashion, took on “all the iridescence of a peacock’s tail, then shook and wavered in a flaming and fantastic shower, distilled and dropping from the groin of the dark and rocky vault down the moist walls, as though it were among the bed of some rainbow grotto of sinuous stalactites . . .” (I, 46)

As we have seen, this fluid, Art-Nouveau-like hypallage can be located everywhere in Balbec, brimming as it does with its own dream aquaria of metamorphic and marine objects of “co-presence” that press against the panes of the Grand Hotel. With an astonishing, jellyfish-like diffusion and plurality, the seaside objects, rooms, windows, places, persons and things of the Grand Hotel blend and coexist with one another with the same Golo-like capacity to share and overlap persons, places and bodies. Indeed, like Golo, such objects seem particularly resistant to or unconcerned with inversive doublings and oppositions. Instead, they seem to slide into one another, becoming something more than compound hybrids or simple sites of exchange, reflection, or reversals of identity and/or function. In other words, what is singular about such transformations is their insistence on plurality – not least in terms of gender and sexuality. Mme Swann is not only transformed into a male pool attendant, she co-exists with him, in the same way that...
the residents of the Grand Hotel are simultaneously residents of the Faubourg Saint-Germain and the deepest Paleozoic seas, or that the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah are the perpetually hyphenated men-women and women-men that people most of the novel.

This metamorphic “jellyfish-like diffusion” helps provide some of the gynophobic reactions such queer ontological slides have provoked, many focused on Proust himself. Elizabeth Ladenson has pointed out that “Proust’s insistent analogy between jellyfish (in French, la méduse) and homosexuality should perhaps [be] read as an implicit commentary on the petrifying effect of feminization” (in Murphy, 128). There is certainly a tradition of Proust’s critics responding to him in similar gyno/homophobic terms. D. H. Lawrence, critical of his analysis and dissection of every emotional impulse, characterized Proust’s narrator as “water jelly”; charges of effeminacy underlie George Moore’s description of Proust “ploughing a field with knitting needles”; while Aldous Huxley goes even further in equating Proust with the feminine when he has a character in Eyeless in Gaza proclaim “that asthmatic seeker of lost time, squatting, horribly white and flabby, with breasts almost female.” (128-9)

Yet as Susan Sontag has observed in her “Notes on Camp”, written during the reemergence of Nouveau as a demotic style during the 1960s, Art Nouveau responded to such criticisms with its own excessiveness and humor – that is to say, “a particular kind of style” as part of its imaging of the world:

It is the love of the exaggerated, the “off,” of things-being-what-they-are-not.

The best example is Art Nouveau, the most typical and fully developed Camp style. Art Nouveau objects, typically, convert one thing into something else:
the lighting fixtures in the form of flowering plants, the living room which is really a grotto. A remarkable example: the Paris Metro entrances designed by Hector Guimard in the late 1890s in the shape of cast-iron orchid stalks. (Sontag, 108)

Sontag’s insight rhymes in its own “vibratory” way with both Schmutzler’s observation that Nouveau is simultaneously alive to the fluidity of boundaries as it is to the performative notion of objects as “parables of themselves.” As Sontag says,

Camp sees everything in quotation marks. It’s not a lamp, but a “lamp”, not a woman, but a “woman.” To perceive Camp in objects and persons is to understand Being-as-Playing-a-Role. It is the farthest extension, in sensibility, of the metaphor of life as theatre […] Thus, the Camp sensibility is one that is alive to a double sense in which some things can be taken. But this is not the familiar split-level construction of a literal meaning, on the one hand, and a symbolic meaning, on the other. It is the difference, rather, between the thing as meaning something, anything, and the thing as pure artifice” (Sontag, 110).

Along with what she identifies as the twin faces of “high culture and the high style of evaluating people” – standards that use as their benchmarks “The Iliad, Aristophanes’ plays, The Art of the Fugue, Middlemarch, the paintings of Rembrandt, Chartres, the poetry of Donne, the Divine Comedy, Beethoven’s quartets, and – among people – Socrates, Jesus, St. Francis, Napoleon, Savonarola,” Sontag’s third great modern sensibility is camp: a practice of what she calls the “failed seriousness” of “the theatricalization of experience.” Seen in this way, “Camp refuses both the harmonies of traditional seriousness and the risks of fully identifying with extreme states of
feeling.” (115) Yet while Camp and tragedy are antithetical, there is still seriousness in Camp as long as it is “an excruciating seriousness.” Indeed, she identifies the quality of excruciation in Henry James as one of Camp’s tonalities, especially in *The Awkward Age* and *The Wings of the Dove*. Camp “is the triumph of the epicene style” in which the convertibility of “man” and “woman,” “person” and “thing” becomes a commonplace. (109)

In light of such queer and campy ”convertability,” it becomes difficult to locate an “interior” stable enough to provide a safe and confining environment for the dangerous fluidities and autonomy of Proust’s bicycling gorgon – just as it is difficult to separate Albertine from her fellows, or divide an apparently whole organism into “persons” of multiple sexual identities. Indeed, if the Little Band and Albertine should be relegated “to the interior,” it is difficult to locate what even counts as an interior in Balbec, since its ontologies are so liquid.

Yet as Michael Murphy points out in his *Proust and America* (2007),

This association of Albertine with speed and physical desirability […] is double-edged. Gilberte Swann, describing Albertine to Marcel long before he meets her at Balbec, calls her “la fameuse ‘Albertine.’ Elle sera sûrement tres ‘fast.’” […] Once at Balbec, however, the reality is even more daunting with Marcel imagining Albertine transformed into a gorgon, “rapide et penchée sur la roue mythologie de la bicyclette […] la tête enturbannée et coiffée de serpents, elle semait la terreur dans les rues de Balbec.” [Bent over the swiftly turning mythological wheel of her bicycle […] her turban-helmeted head swarming with serpents as she spread terror through the streets of Balbec.] (Murphy, 126)
This Medusa-on-wheels “kitted out in her figure-hugging mackintosh” represents the familiar *femme vitale* and *femme fatale*, simultaneously destroyer and destroyed, Perseus and Medusa, both a divinely monstrous sea-creature and an Andromeda who needs no Perseid hero to rescue her. Seen in this way,

Albertine is the antithesis of *la Parisienne*, the five-meter high effigy of a woman dressed in *haute couture* that met visitors as they approached the entrance to the 1900 Exposition Universelle [fig. 41] If *la Parisienne* represented the decorative and feminine, Albertine is an altogether more provocative example of femininity.

(Murphy, 127)

This, then, is another “sudden inadequacy of a definition” (V, 281) that opens out into the rich organismal associations of both a queerly fluid Art Nouveau and the equally fluid, evolutionary notions of organismal personhood that we have been exploring: that is to say, the circulating, fluid notions of reproduction, gender, speciation and individuation that attend the “Little Band” at Balbec. Simultaneously a colony, an aggregate, a group – one might even want to say, a queer collective of Medusan persons, Proust’s *polypary* is not unlike the floating, colonial rafts of siphonophores discussed above. No longer an apotropaic site of an anxious genitality, or an ekphrastic, Perseid trophy that can never be known or seen outside of its own inversive reflection, the Medusan of Balbec more nearly approximates the collective and fluid instabilities of place and personhood we have reviewed above: not only an organismal and biological fluidity, but a Nouveau-like hypallage as well, in which personhood, groups, and gendered bodies blend sinuously together into a sort of collective marine avatar of overlapping plurality, simultaneously Medusa, Andromeda and sea-creature. As such, this is an Ovidian
Fig. 41. *La Parisienne*, Paris Exhibition, 1900 (http://www.delcampe.net)
description that, Proteus-like, escapes any attempt at appropriation and consolidation. Unlike Joyce’s *Ulysses*, for example, where the Ovidian description of the wading girl seems an act of “woman-facture,” to use Lynn Enterline’s useful expression: a woman carved in ivory who is simultaneously heron-like and inscribed by the hand of men:

> Her long slender bare legs were delicate as a crane’s and pure save where an emerald trail of seaweed had fashioned itself as a sign upon the flesh. Her thighs, fuller and soft-hued as ivory, were bared almost to the hips where the white fringes of her drawers were like the feathering of soft white down. Her slate blue skirts were kilted boldly about her waist and dove-tailed behind her. Her bosom was as a bird’s soft and slight, slight and soft as the breast of some dark-plumaged dove. But her long fair hair was girlish: and girlish, and touched with the wonder of mortal beauty, her face.” (Joyce, 175)

For Sarah Anne Brown, this insistent avianizing is part of Joyce’s own appropriation of the trope of the (male) poet as maker. The ivory of the girl’s thighs recalls the ivory of Pygmalion’s woman-facture, as well as the sculptor’s mastery. For Proust, no such Pygmalion-like carving exists. Instead, the seaside description of the Little Band itself seems to take flight – not as “a sign upon the flesh,” a legible ekphrasis that, as we have seen with Aeneas’ Menzentius, both names and possesses reflexively – but instead as a beachside ontological parade that refuses to come to any final rest or form. Indeed, Proust’s description of the Little Band seems similar to the deliberately promiscuous, rhapsodic lists of object ontologists – the “Latour litanies” we have encountered earlier, deliberately provocative lists of “surprisingly contrasted curiosities”: 
The tree that springs up again, the locusts that devour the crops, the cancer that beats others at its own game, the mullahs who dissolve the Persian empire, the Zionists who loosen the hold of the mullahs, the concrete in the power station that cracks, the acrylic blues that consume other pigments, the lion that does not follow the predictions of the oracle. (in Bogost, 38-9)

For Proust, the list includes a flock of gulls about to take off, a collection of limbs that revolve, an “Arabian profile” that vanishes, some geraniums that blush, a series of Grecian statues, a comet that streaks across the sky, an autonomous machine, an irregular agglomerate that is weird and shrill, a pack of cards, a chicken beak, black eyes, green eyes and two glittering sequins of mica (III, 505 – 510)

Francis Spufford has explored what he finds “troublesome” about such lists in literature:

Language usually puts the signs that represent things into definite relationships with each other. Syntax joins: I want to be loved by you, or the sky is falling, or Mr Murdoch has brought The Times. Lists, however, divide, or leave divided, the things they include. They offer only the relationship of accumulation: I, you, love, sky, fall, purchase, Mr Murdoch, the Times. Lists refuse the connecting powers of language, in favor of a sequence of disconnected elements. (in Bogost, 39-40)

This anxiety about lists is similar to the unease about the contingent parataxis that seemed so threatening to Darwin’s critics when they contemplated “the undirected, contingent, and moment-by-moment actions of natural selection” (Gee, 37) – a random, sequential world devoid of meaning and context. Indeed, for some the anxiety was so great that even
self-proclaimed Darwinists like Haeckel found it necessary to imagine a world that was reassuringly progressive and on its way to higher, more sophisticated forms. Yet as Adrian Desmond has noted in his introduction to *The Descent of Man* (2004), in Haeckel’s case “[I]magination was the problem.” The artist/scientist “was notorious for conjuring hypothetical human ancestors out of foetal stages” (xxxvi). In a similar way, Haeckel saw his own radiolarians and medusas as a sort of unfolding crystalline series. By arranging his invertebrates in a series, he “found” the idea of evolution in the same way that he formulated his well-known “biogenetic law” in which ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny. As Henry Gee points out,

> This concept was meat and drink to the nature philosophers, who could now see the archetypal ideas of creatures on the grandest scales played out everywhere in the dramas of individual development. As one nature philosopher put it: “What is the animal kingdom other than an anatomized man, the macrocosm of the microcosm?” (Gee, 36)

According to Gee, “The nature philosophers did not see the natural world in terms of actual transformation, only as the expression of cosmic or divine ideals […] And while Haeckel was probably the foremost popularizer of Darwinian evolution, he missed the essential metaphor of Darwin’s tangled bank.” Instead, he saw evolution “as a kind of motor that would drive transformation from one preordained station on the ladder of life to the next” (Gee, 37). These regularities were crystalline in their symmetries, even if, as Stephan Jay Gould has pointed out, Haeckel was not above adding “a touch of heightened symmetry” to his geometrically precise portraits of organisms (Gould, 1985, 90)
For Haeckel, such regularities consisted of gradations of symmetrical relationships between individual forms, the symmetries being simply understood as increasingly complex variants of mirror symmetries. Kaleidoscopes are perhaps one of the most comprehensible versions of such mirror symmetries. They render a simple picture more complex by using a large number of ingeniously arranged mirrors […] Analogous to a crystallography of the inorganic, there is a crystallography of the organic. (Breidbach, 2007, 31-4)

These “still lifes,” then – each plate an example of a highly stylized *nature morte* most notable for the “living geometry” singled out by Binet -- take the form of a frozen hierarchy of endlessly repeating and familiar shapes. As such, they seem to fit uneasily in the genealogy of Art Nouveau, even though it is commonplace to note the *Kunstwerk* in the history of the movement.

Haeckel’s notion was of a unitary force, a universal and monistic force that works lawfully across scales, across boundaries, in the same way that Binet uses natural morphologies across scales. As Robert Proctor points out in his recent essay on Binet,

In the same way as Haeckel, Binet isolates parts of objects and magnifies them, so that, like the organisms in the *Kunstformen*, smaller details of objects are shown to contain the same patterns and motifs that occur at other scales. The impression given by the *Esquisses* is of nature perceived as a coherent system, and of Binet’s own decorative objects as a part of that natural system. Human beings, surrounded in their daily lives by this environment, become
embedded within it, and are prompted to consider their place in the natural world. (Binet, 13)

Yet what is this place? It’s hard to escape the idea that the overwhelming prolixity of such a natural vocabulary must be parsed as a sort of comforting sameness where the scales of the boxfish must be shown as analogous to the patterns in algae. As Haeckel himself points out, the purpose of the plates is to help further a monistic art that seeks to answer Cartesian dualism by implying the unity of nature, and which lifts scientific inquiry closer to what he considers the Beautiful and the Good – “the truly beatific version of religion and science”. (in Binet, 11)

The idea of scale, for example, works to show how similar motifs emerge at different levels; and as Poctor points out, “the patterned scales of the boxfish takes on the same forms as the microscopic patterns of algae which recall the horizontal cross sections of jellyfish and so on”. (Binet, 13)

As Richard J. Roberts points out,

The formation of mathematical laws had long since brought the physical universe to rational order; and German morphologists of the nineteenth century attempted something comparable in the life sciences—though with a naturphilosophisch twist. Carus held that comparative analysis of animal skeletons demonstrated that the elemental figure out of which they could all be geometrically derived was the hollow sphere (Hohlkugel). By duplication and deformation the sphere could become a double sphere and then a cylinder, and with the repetition of these forms we could rationally understand the structure of the skeletons of radiate, articulate, moluscate, and vertebrate animals. So, for instance, the elemental vertebra itself can be decomposed into a central sphere and a series of smaller
spheres radiating from its periphery. The vertebra of a temporally existing animal, of course, would display the impact of empirical circumstances, though would yet generally conform to its rational archetype. Richard Owen simply followed Carus in his own ideal conception of the archetypal vertebra. This fundamental kind of mathematical idealization of archetypal structures would become a part of Haeckel’s intellectual repertoire. (Roberts, 473)

It is then, a demonstration of sameness that also lies behind – or rather, on the surface – of the apparent profuseness of both Binet and Haeckel’s aesthetic project. Perhaps this is another reason why Proust’s narrator has such distaste for the dead and motionless jellyfish that litter the Norman beach, as well as why Haeckel’s cataloging can sometimes seem to fit uneasily in the fluid productions of Art Nouveau. As soon as the narrator removes himself from any such participatory and fluid collective identity – that is to say, as soon as he begins the Perseid task of opposition, consolidation and appropriation – his object of desire, whether single organism or fluid collective, has already begun to change and elude his grasp. Like Haeckel, he is left with frozen catalogues instead of the objects themselves.

Thus, only in repose can the narrator believe that Albertine is his, gazing on her sleeping face. “I felt at such moments that I had possessed her more completely, like an unconscious and unresisting object of dumb nature.” Yet the consequences of such a possession are also inescapable: “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 when from those eyes, from those cheeks even, as revealing as the eyes, at one moment so gentle but quickly turning sullen, I succeeded in expelling every trace of mystery.” (V, 88) Indeed,
The image which I sought, upon which I relied, for which I would have been prepared to die, was no longer that of Albertine leading an unknown life, it was that of an Albertine as known to me as it was possible for her to be […] an Albertine who did not reflect a distant world, but desired nothing else – there were moments when this did appear to be the case – than to be with me, to be exactly like me, an Albertine who was the image precisely of what was mine and not the unknown. (V, 91-92)

Proust’s ambiguous, sometimes fraught relationship with ocularity has been voluminously parsed in an array of studies:

These and countless other arguments and comparisons have been adduced to demonstrate the indisputable centrality of Proust’s visual preoccupations. But what is sometimes not fully appreciated is the extent to which he incorporated many of the doubts and uncertainties about ocularcentrism, which we have seen emerging in the Modernist era. Toward the new visual technologies of the nineteenth century, for example, Proust maintained a certain ambivalent skepticism. Like Baudelaire before him, he worried about the camera, whose alienating coldness he deeply distrusted. According to Susan Sontag, “Whenever Proust mentions photographs, he does so disparagingly: as a synonym for a shallow, too exclusively visual, merely voluntary relation to the past, whose yield is insignificant compared with the deep discoveries to be made by responding to cues given by all the senses – the technique he called
‘involuntary memory.’” And like many other intellectuals of his day, such as Remy de Gourmont, he deeply distrusted the implications of the cinema. (Jay, 184-5)

All the more interesting, then, that a snapshot-like stillness seems to hang about the first encounter the narrator has with the Little Band, who come to a nearly immobile standstill as they, in a sense, encounter the narrator’s encounter with them—a moment which moves so slowly, as Proust points out, that all activity slows to a crawl. All previous, metamorphic movement slows to a peripheral nimbus like a slow-motion corona around a slowly turbulent sun, flickering around the white-hot center of an opaque gaze that might variously belong to any or all of the girls in question. Like Hardy’s cliff-hanging Knight, the narrator stares paralysed into a pair of stony, autonomous eyes, all the more opaque because of their potentially searing indifference, their sheer self-sufficiency. This, too, is an Ovidian scene that seems to combine both an iconic immobility with the almost cinematic quality of a poised and uncapturable moment in which a group of girls in motion might, at any instant, metamorphose into a flock of birds or an Attic frieze of statues:

[T]he girls […] were advancing straight ahead, without hesitation or stiffness, performing exactly the movements that they wished to perform, each of their limbs completely independent of the others, the rest of the body preserving that immobility which is so noticeable in good waltzers […] [T]hey were known to me by a pair of hard, obstinate and mocking eyes, or by cheeks whose pinkness had a coppery tin reminiscent of geraniums […] I saw a pallid oval, black eyes, green eyes, emerge, [but] I did not know if these were the
same that had already charmed me a moment ago, [since] I could not relate
them to any one girl whom I set apart from the rest and identified. And this
want, in my vision, of the demarcations which I should presently establish
them permeated the group with a sort of shimmering harmony, the continuous
transmutation of a fluid, collective and mobile beauty. (II, 504-505)

From this chaotic collective of obstinate eyes and independent limbs, emerges as a
“sidelong glance aimed from the center of that inhuman world” (II, 510), a glance that
serves as a momentary anchor on which the narrator seizes, only to find himself
transfixed:

If we thought that the eyes of such a girl were merely two glittering sequins
of mica, we should not be athirst to know her and to unite her life to ours. But
[...] I knew that I should never possess this young cyclist if I did not possess
also what was in her eyes. (II, 510-511)

Both an arresting moment, and a moment in the course of their evolution by the sea,
the split-second glance between the narrator and the nameless girl is, like Saint-
Loup’s picture of the grandmother, a sort of Medusan photograph. Both paralyzing
and paralyzed, it arrests as it is itself arrested, and subject and object, in turn, are
stilled to the point of the statuesque. The eyes of such an organism play upon him like
“sunlight on a wall,” reinforcing both its motionless subject, but also the lambent play
of a sun that, in the sky of Balbec, moves so slowly that -- especially at its zenith -- it
seems itself to stand still. As the group approaches near immobility and turns its
collective, wheeling, body to face him, the narrator is frozen, struck – if not dumb, at
least dumbfounded as he both attempts to capture an image that, while itself never
precisely still, nonetheless implicates him in a sort of reverse photograph, a reverse ekphrasis – even as he takes a mental snapshot of the Little Band itself. Surrounded by a barely perceptible movement as slow as the passage of a steamer between two rose blossoms, and which affords the narrator the same improbable freedom that he once exercised to record the lazy, fluttering path of a butterfly, but this time uses to record, as in a snapshot, a girl who in turn, with an almost impossible slowness, swivels her head and fixes upon him an explicitly stony and glittering glance – those “sequins of mica” – that effectively serves to freeze, to paralyse, the narrator’s attention and his gaze in turn, particularly if those reflecting sequins serve to reflect the narrator’s own Perseid desire to possess what lies within them.

Interesting too, as Morton says, that “An object just is a ‘black hole’ with a fading photograph of itself on its surface.” (Morton, 196) This is because “Matter becomes just a retroactive positing of the object that was formed, resulting in the ‘present’ object. Form and matter then are different ways of talking about the past, and the past is just the appearance-for of an object. To repeat, on the surface of the black hole into which I have fallen, you see a rapidly fading photograph of my horrified face.” (Morton, 213)

Walker has pointed out that mirrors and “the mirrored art of reflection” often lead “to a transformation that diminishes the power and selfhood of women” (43). In this sense, Proust’s Medusa is a mirror that looks back, presenting its own glittering and opaque gaze rather than assenting to the narrator’s image of her. This is a reflection that refuses any easy (or violent) consolidation and explodes instead into a bewildering multiplicity even as it eludes the narrator’s Perseid grasp: a many-headed hydra of errancy, simultaneously Ovidian and evolutionary. Rather than participating in the self-
referential, inversive reflection favored by Ovid’s bullying gods and demi-gods, Proust’s Medusa is first and foremost as autonomous as she is fluid, an autonomy most often associated with Albertine’s astonishing opacity.

As Lamos points out, this opacity marks the novel’s “general shift from factualerreur to textual errance” (191). In other words, “The hero’s first mistake is to try to get to the bottom of Albertine, whose illegibility is a paradigm for the errancy of all texts and whose lesbianism epitomizes the elusiveness of every object of love.” (190) Moreover, when Lamos concludes that the Search is “an account of the failure of consciousness to grasp its objects, including itself” (Lamos, 194), it is an adaptationist and genocentric idea of mastery that fails as well. As we have seen before, error is both the starting point and end. For Proust, “We guess as we read; everything starts from an initial error; those that follow (and this applies not only to the reading of letters and telegrams, not only to all reading) […] are quite natural. A large part of what we believe to be true springs from an original mistake in our premises.” (III, 671)

Previously, photographs have been barriers of sorts: for Mme de Villeparisis, they are barriers against difference and guardians of Proustian habit against the unseemly newness of Balbec plage (for Mme de Villeparisis, there are no pictures other than those that have been inherited). For Charlus, however, a photograph acquires “something of the dignity which it ordinarily lacks when it ceases to be a reproduction of reality, and shows things that no longer exist (470). Taken at Balbec, Saint-Loup’s photograph of the grandmother, for example, is precisely on its way to becoming just such an object – an object that is not only inert and was once alive, but needs to be reanimated by the person who invests it with care. It is – to use an even
more precise Ovidian identification – an animation that is Orphic in its sudden, snapshot-like glance at a face that is already on its way to becoming dead or damaged, like the face of Eurydice herself. This backward, Orphic glance, this sudden look back at a beloved face already beginning its long, irreversible slide away into deadness and loss is both the snapshot of the grandmother, photographed against the time of her own eventual ruin as well as the Orphic, backward glance of the Narrator as he sees her speed away against his will, on the street before her death. It is also the same rapidly fading face of Morton’s black-hole photograph of any object, irretrievably escaping into the past under one’s very eyes.

If there are multiple modes of evolutionary change in Combray, there are also multiple Medusas at Balbec: not only the littoral méduses that litter the Normady beach, and the Medusa of the little band, sun-spoked and amorphous, but also Albertine’s Medusa, hydra-headed, and oral, the source of the narrator’s desire for “other organs” as the Little Band was the source of an even more metamorphic identity, a circulating, shared and overlapping participation in plurality itself. Despite the later, equally Ovidian volumes of The Captive and The Fugitive, the narrator is able to see something “subsist in them, through successive expressions, something unalterably material.” But it is also important to remember that Proust’s story is also about a kind of abduction, a genteel but nonetheless confining abduction – a slow motion rape – in which Albertine is taken, as Proserpina is taken, as endless Ovidian women are taken. If, as Enterline has said, the fugitive body of Daphne escapes the discourse that tries to name her --- indeed, does name her – so too is Albertine a fugitive, a prisoner. The story of the narrator’s great love is precisely Ovidian in the
very center of its representation of abduction and its studied, self-reflexive attempt to wield a severed head, a Medusan aegis, in order to make the fugitive stand still. Like Swann who wishes to freeze Odette into a picture of Jeptha’s daughter in Botticelli’s Sistine Chapel -- and who indeed uses a photograph of that face to act as his own Medusan Aegis in order to make Odette’s unruly face itself conform to its frozen lineaments – so, too, the young narrator wants to tame the shifting persons multiplied in Albertine’s aspect, even as an older – and presumably wiser – narrator understands that any attempt at capture, photographic or otherwise, is doomed to failure.

This desire for capture and possession converges with Ovid’s insistence on the silencing of objectification: the iconic representation, as Enterline says, of the distance the voice can be estranged from the body and how that voice can be appropriated by another, in the same way that Perseus appropriates the Medusan aegis, an icon for all the open mouths and faces frozen in horror and speechlessness in the Metamorphoses as they watch themselves disappear into violent appropriations and misprisions. The same can be said for the slow-motion rape and enforced silence that the narrator eventually inflicts on Albertine herself in her later imprisonment in Paris: the prison of the Prisonière as misprison itself, and which takes the equally Ovidian form of a rigorously scripted and destructive jealousy.

“What the narrator must learn, as Emerson wrote in ‘Circles,’ is that ‘In nature every moment is new; the past is always swallowed and forgotten; the coming only is sacred’”. (in Murphy, 106) As Michael Murphy points out, speed is a commonly used, defining feature of modernism. “Like mémoire involontaire, [it] dissolves distance and evacuates space” (Murphy, 61). Thus,
It is not the past per se that Proust aims to reclaim, but rather those objects of our lives that are otherwise overlooked and that might, as with the madeleine, allow us the ability to read into ourselves whole new worlds of possibility . . . [M]émoire involuntaire, then, is less an act of remembrance than of forgetting. As Emerson says, “The one thing we seek with insatiable desire is to forget ourselves, to be surprised out of our propriety, to lose our sempiternal memory, and to do something without knowing how or why; in short, to draw a new circle.” (106)

In other words, “The truths of Proust’s mémoire involuntaire as with Emerson’s transcendentalism do not exist above material and cultural experience, rather they reside within them” (110). This discrepancy is not unlike Proust’s sense that “events are larger than the moment in which they occur and cannot be entirely contained in it. Certainly they overflow into the future through the memory that we retain of them, but they demand a place also in the time that precedes them” (V, 540).

Thus, as in our discussion about the hypallage of a queer Art Nouveau, “The existence of an object is irreducibly a matter of coexistence. Objects contain other objects, and are contained ‘in’ other objects.” (Morton, 43) As Morton puts it, “We are shrink-wrapped in reality” (Morton, 67). In other words, Morton wants us to look “beneath” any unexamined nihilism, “as if the deep water in which modern thought swims turned out to be hiding a gigantic, sparkling coral reef of things” that has its own “Medusan persons” that resist our attempts at names and catalogues (emphasis added, Morton, 47). As we have seen, Proust’s coral reef is not dissimilar, down to the same Redon-like polyps. As in the world of gods and monsters in Balbec, “Everything in the coral reef, from the fish to a single coral lifeform to a tiny plankton, is autonomous. But
so is the coral reef itself. So are the heads of the coral, a community of tiny polyps. So is each individual head. ” (Morton, 45)

It is, then, the exaptive emptiness of OOO, its capacity for an open-mouthed, Munch-like surprise that, as well as its autonomy, marks a particularly queer performativity of the object itself. If Sontag tells us that “a lamp” is “a lamp” in Nouveau, so too in Morton’s queerly ontological and Proustian polypary: the polysemous, open-ended surprise and coy withdrawal of the ridiculous world of objects that, as in Ovid and in Darwin’s tangled bank, escape merely human attempts at possession. Perseus uses Medusa as a surrogate, a borrowed face, when his own words fail and he substitutes her silence for his in a mistaken belief that such an act of appropriation is itself a kind of mastery. Yet the play of significance stops with what might be called the Perseid fetish, the Medusenhaupt that represents – that reflects -- not a phallic prop but instead the hero’s own inversive oscillation, his own particular inability to move or change. Seen in such terms, the Perseid fetish itself must be discarded, moved aside, in order to allow the object to enter again into the free play of signification – a process that can itself be called exaptive – and make of such Medusan fluidity what is described by Ovid as a “memorable monster,” a monster of memory. The recognition of the failure of one’s omnipotence is to stand aside and relinquish mastery and the narratives of mastery. Unlike Perseus, the narrator must relinquish the stance of omnipotence as well as always knowing how to read the “zoophilic Little Band.” It is the relinquishing of always knowing how to read the Metamorphoses.
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