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FIGURES OF
LITERARY
DISCOURSE

GÉRARD GENETTE

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PROUST PALIMPSEST

In the Proustian theory of style, which to begin with is a theory of the Proustian style, there is a difficulty, perhaps an impossibility, the examination of which might throw light on all the other difficulties. This difficulty concerns the fundamental question, that of the role of metaphor.

For Proust, as we know, there is no "well wrought style" without metaphor, and "metaphor alone can give style a sort of eternity."¹ This is not, for him, a mere formal requirement, an esthetic point of honor, as it was for the practitioners of the "style artiste" and, more generally, for those naive dilettantes for whom "beauty of imagery" constitutes the supreme value of literary writing. According to Proust, style is "a question not of technique but of vision,"² and metaphor is the privileged expression of a profound vision: a vision that goes beyond appearances and penetrates to the "essence" of things. If he rejects "so-called realistic" art, the "literature of description," which "contents itself with 'describing things,' with giving of them merely a miserable abstract of lines and surfaces,"³ it is because, for him, this kind of literature ignores true reality, which is to be found in essences:

He can describe a scene by describing one after another the innumerable objects which at a given moment were present at a particular place, but truth will be attained by him only when he takes two different objects, states the connection between them . . . and encloses them in the necessary links of a well wrought style; truth—and life too—can be attained by us only when, by comparing a quality common to two sensations, we succeed in abstracting their common essence and in reuniting them to each other, liberated from the contingencies of time, with a metaphor.⁴

not

but

Thus metaphor is not an ornament, but the necessary instrument for a recovery, through style, of the vision of essences, because it is the stylistic equivalent of the psychological experience of involuntary memory, which alone, by bringing together two sensations separated in time, is able to release their *common essence* through the *miracle of an analogy*—though metaphor has an added advantage over reminiscence, in that the latter is a fleeting contemplation of eternity, while the former enjoys the permanence of the work of art. "To this contemplation of the essence of things I had decided therefore that in future I must attach myself, so as somehow to immobilize it. But how, by what means, was I to do this?"⁵ The answer comes, unequivocally, three pages later: "This method, this apparently sole method, what was it but the creation of a work of art?"⁶

At this point we should be clear as to what the nature of this vision of essences is and why it is so important to Proust. For him it is a crucial experience: the search for essences orients the development of his work as strongly as does the search for *lost time*;⁷ in fact the search is only its means, and the world of essences is his true Lost Paradise: if the "true self" can only live "outside time," this is because eternity is the only "medium" in which it can "enjoy the essence of things."⁸ There alone it finds "its sustenance and delight," it "is awakened and reanimated as it receives the celestial nourishment that is brought to it."⁹ These terms, with their characteristically mystical overtones, are enough to show the importance of what is at issue; they also show under what species Proust represents the essence of things to himself: he takes delight in it, feeds on it, takes it into himself; it is not an abstraction, but a profound material, a substance. Deprived of this beneficent grounding in essences, abandoned to intermittency, to evanescence, things become arid and wilt, and—near them, but separated from them—the self languishes, loses its taste for the world, and forgets itself.

It was in this way, as substantial unities, that the young narrator imagines the cities, monuments, and landscapes that he would like to visit: the magic of their Names presents him with an *essentially different* image of each of them, "a confused picture, which

Timeless
by
full essence

draws from the names, from the brightness or darkness of their sound, the colour in which it is uniformly painted, like one of those posters, entirely blue or entirely red, in which . . . are blue or red not only the sky and the sea, but the ships and the church and the people in the streets."¹⁰ Thus the whole of Parma was necessarily "compact and glossy, violet-tinted, soft," Florence "miraculously embalmed, and flower-like," and Balbec, like an "old piece of Norman pottery that keeps the colour of the earth from which it was fashioned." It is only later that contact with "reality" disintegrates these unique, simplified images, showing for example that Balbec-Ville and Balbec-Plage have no common substance and that the sea cannot "unleash itself at the foot of the church" because they were several kilometers apart, and teaching the Narrator that reality is always, inevitably, disappointing because "impressions such as those to which [he] wished to give permanence could not but vanish at the touch of a direct enjoyment which had been powerless to engender them."¹¹ From then on the narrator divorces himself from a reality that is unfaithful to its own essence, of which it offers only a pale, dull reflection like the shadows in Plato's Cave. From then on, too, "it was scarcely ever except in my dreams, while I was asleep, that a place could lie spread before me wrought in that pure matter which is entirely distinct from the matter of the common things that we see and touch but of which, when I had imagined these common things without ever having seen them they too had seemed to me to be composed."¹² The work projected as an artificial equivalent of the dream will, therefore, be an attempt to restore to objects, places, monuments their essence or lost substance: "I should have to execute the successive parts of my work in . . . a new and distinct material, of a transparency and a sonority that were special."¹³

This idea of a substance-style, restoring simply by virtue of its high degree of fusion the material unity of things, is one that Proust often expressed in almost identical terms. In a letter to Lucien Daudet, he speaks of those few marvelous sentences "in which the supreme miracle, the transubstantiation of the irrational qualities of matter and life into human words is achieved."¹⁴ In *Contre Sainte-Beuve*, he says that he has found this quality in Flaubert:

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"All the elements of reality are rendered down into one unanimous substance, with wide, unvaryingly polished surfaces. No flaw remains in it. It has been rubbed down to looking-glass smoothness. Everything is shown there, but only by reflection, without affecting its consistent substance. Everything at variance with it has been made over and absorbed."¹⁵ In a letter to the Comtesse de Noailles he attributes the same merit to La Fontaine's fables and Molière's comedies, and this diversity of attribution shows that he was trying to define through the "great authors" an ideal of style that was his own: "a kind of cast, of transparent unity . . . without a single word that remains outside, that has remained resistant to this assimilation. . . . I suppose it is what is called the Varnish of the Masters."¹⁶ This "varnish" is not a superficial glaze, but a diaphanous depth of color itself. It is the varnish of Vermeer, "the precious substance of the tiny patch of yellow wall," which the dying Bergotte contemplates, and which provides him with his last lesson in style: "'That is how I ought to have written,' he said. 'My last books are too dry, I ought to have gone over them with several coats of paint, made my language exquisite in itself.'"¹⁷ Again the exquisite sentence, the well wrought style are not for Proust an ideal in themselves: but the sentence must be given a weight equal to that of the objects represented, a density in which can reside that "hidden essence" which eludes perception, but which one must feel in the transparent "*impasto* of the text."

But in what sense do these effects of *transubstantiation* require a recourse to metaphor? What could be less analogical, what could be more enclosed in immanence than the art of Vermeer, referred to here, or that of Chardin, the subject of a posthumous article, which have no other merit, it seems (but a crucial merit nonetheless) than to know how to make "beautiful to the eye" by making "beautiful to paint,"¹⁸ those simple objects, those familiar scenes, "those peaceful moments when it is as if things are surrounded by the beauty that there is in being"¹⁹ And if one regards Flaubert's descriptive style (and this is apparently Proust's very thought) as the equivalent in literature of the still lifes of the great masters, what could be less metaphorical (in the Proustian sense)

than a body of work which, Proust declares, perhaps does not contain "a single beautiful metaphor"?²⁰

It would in fact seem that Proust's ideal of the "well-wrought style" contains something like two degrees, of which the "miracle" of the substantial style (despite the qualification "supreme" used in the letter to Lucien Daudet) is only the first, the second being that other miracle of which *Le Temps retrouvé* speaks, that of analogy. To the beauty which there is in being is added another, more mysterious, more transcendent beauty, the appearance of which is marked specifically in the passage from Chardin to Rembrandt: the former "has proclaimed the divine equality of all things under the light which beautifies them and to the mind which reflects on them. . . . With Rembrandt, even reality will be left behind. We shall learn that beauty does not lie in objects, since then it would certainly be not so unsearchable and so mysterious."²¹ This passage from Chardin to Rembrandt, or perhaps from Chardin to Elstir (which Proust suggests when he says that "as Elstir had found with Chardin—you can make a new version of what you love only by first renouncing it,"²² that is, by going beyond it), is also, of course, the passage from Flaubert to Proust himself. No doubt this new, secondary beauty, which is no longer simply a question of being, but of suggesting something other than what is, or of being both what is and something other, the paving stones of the Guermantes' courtyard and those of the baptistry of St. Mark's, is for Proust actually just an indirect but necessary way of reaching primary beauty (or truth, the two terms being for him equivalent), the beauty of being. The discovery of this inevitable diversion would then appear to merge into the fundamental experience of the inaccessibility of reality, of its evanescence in contact with direct enjoyment, of our powerlessness (revealed by the twin or synonymous disappointments in love and travel) "to realize ourselves in material enjoyment or in effective action,"²³ and the necessity, if we are to attain reality in its essence, of abandoning the direct use of our senses and of borrowing the link provided by imagination, "which was the only organ that I possessed for the enjoyment of beauty."²⁴ The passage from the ontological to

✓ the analogical, from the substantial style to the metaphorical style, would appear to mark therefore a progress not so much in the quality of esthetic achievement as in the awareness of the difficulties, or at least of the conditions, or such an achievement. So the success of Chardin or Flaubert (in attaining the essence through a perception or a direct representation) no longer seems to be inferior to that of Elstir or Proust, but rather to be too *miraculous*, too easy not to be improbable, illusory, or at the very least inaccessible to Proust by virtue of some weakness peculiar to himself. Metaphor, then, like reminiscence, would seem to be merely an indispensable expedient.

look for 2 makes easy

✓ Whether expedient or supreme miracle, the use of metaphor is nevertheless given a profound justification by Proust. But it is precisely in this justification that the difficulty resides. How, in fact, can we say that a metaphor, that is to say, a displacement, a transfer of sensations from one object to another, can lead us to the essence of this object? How can we admit that the "profound truth" of a thing, that particular, "distinct" truth sought by Proust, can be revealed in a figure that brings out its properties only by transposing them, that is to say, by making them strange? What reminiscence reveals is a "common essence" of the sensations and, through them, of the objects that awaken them in us; it is the writer's task to "present the relationship" between these objects in a metaphor. But what is a *common* essence, if not an abstraction—that is to say, what Proust wants to avoid at all costs—and how can a description based on the "relationship" between two objects avoid destroying the essence of each? If in every metaphor there is the simultaneous operation of both a resemblance and a difference, an attempt at "assimilation" and a resistance to this assimilation, without which there would be a sterile tautology, is not the essence to be found more on the side that differs and resists, on the irreducible and *refractory* side of things?²⁵

✓ This is certainly what Proust himself shows, perhaps without intending to, in the passage from *La Fugitive* where he compares Venice and Combray, and where the particular essence of Venice is revealed, precisely through the opposition that it manifests within resemblance itself: "I was receiving there impressions anal-

ogous to those which I had felt so often in the past at Combray, but transposed into a wholly different and far richer key."²⁶ As at Combray, the windows of his room open on to a church tower, but instead of the slates of Saint-Hilaire, it is the golden angel of the campanile of St. Mark's. As at Combray on Sunday morning, the streets are in holiday mood, but these streets are canals. As at Combray, there are rows of houses, but these houses are Gothic or Renaissance palaces, etc. Venice is another Combray, but a Combray that is quite *other*: aquatic, precious, exotic, and it is this difference, of course, that is essential to him.

It is true that the "relationship" considered by Proust in *Le Temps retrouvé* is the analogy between a present sensation and a past sensation and that the abstraction effected here consists in the effacement of the temporal distances necessary to the blossoming of a "minute freed from the order of time." The present object, then, is merely a pretext, an occasion: it vanishes as soon as it has fulfilled its mnemonic function. Moreover it is not a question here of metaphor in the true sense, since one of the terms would appear to be purely incidental. The "common essence" is reduced in fact to the earlier sensation of which the later one is merely the vehicle: "a profound azure intoxicated my eyes, impressions of coolness, of dazzling light, swirled round me."²⁷ This takes place "in" the Guermantes' courtyard, but the Guermantes' courtyard has totally disappeared, just as the present madeleine disappears, effaced by the memory of the past madeleine with, around it, the houses and gardens of Combray.

But very often Proust lingers over purely spatial transpositions that involve no "freeing from the order of time," and which, in fact, have nothing in common with the phenomenon of reminiscence. It is these transpositions that are the Proustian metaphors in the true sense: the Paris Opéra transformed into an underwater crypt during a gala performance given by the Princesse de Parme, the sea turned into a mountainous landscape on waking that first morning at Balbec. The latter provides a particularly characteristic version of Proustian metaphor. The key to it is to be found later when, analyzing Elstir's art in his picture of the harbor of Carquethuit, Proust observes that by "a sort of metamorphosis of the

palimpsest

Palimpsest
Present
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disappears

Not just
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things represented in it, analogous to what in poetry we call metaphor," the painter had employed "for the little town, only marine terms, and urban terms for the sea."²⁸ Similarly, when describing the sea seen from his window at the Grand Hôtel, Marcel uses only what might be called Alpine terms: "vast amphitheatre, dazzling, mountainous;" "snowy crests"; "steep fronts"; "mountain-chains"; "glaciers"; "hills"; "undulations" (*vallonnements*); "pastures"; "craggy sides"; "peaks"; "crests"; "avalanches."²⁹ What we have here is an implicit, developed comparison, "tacitly and untiringly repeated,"³⁰ the landscape referred to never being directly named, but constantly suggested by a vocabulary the allusive value of which is obvious. But we do not see that this dazzling counterpoint of sea and mountain leads us to the "essence" of either. We are presented with a paradoxical landscape in which mountain and sea have exchanged their qualities and, as it were, their substances, in which the mountain has become sea and the sea mountain, and nothing is further removed from this sort of vertigo than the feeling of stable assurance that the true vision of essences ought to inspire in us. Similarly, in Elstir's picture, the terrestrial parts seem more marine than the marine parts, and the marine more terrestrial than the terrestrial, and each of the elements resembles the other more than it resembles itself. The sailors in their boats seem to be perched on jaunting-cars, "racing over sunlit fields into shadowy places, dashing down into the troughs of waves"; the women among the rocks, on the other hand, had the appearance "of being in a marine grotto overhung by ships and waves, open yet unharmed in the path of a miraculously averted tide."³¹ A little later Proust adds this revealing comment:

At one time [Elstir] had painted what were almost mirages, in which a castle crowned with a tower appeared as a perfect circle of castle prolonged by a tower at its summit, and at its foot by an inverted tower, whether because the exceptional purity of the atmosphere on a fine day gave the shadow reflected in the water the hardness and the brightness of the stone, or because the morning mists rendered the stone as vaporous as the shadow.³²

Thus, in his seascaapes of Carquethuit, the "reflexions had almost more solidity and reality than the floating hulls, vaporized by an

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effect of the sunlight." Mirages, misleading perspectives, reflections more solid than the objects reflected, a systematic inversion of space: we are very close to the usual themes of Baroque description, which cultivates through them a whole esthetic of paradox—but by the same token we are very far from the essentialist intentions of the Proustian esthetic. No doubt this is an extreme case and, anyway, it might be objected that Proust's art is not necessarily a replica of Elstir's art. But Proust himself answers this objection by invoking "illusions" of the same order, and declaring: "The rare moments in which we see nature as she is, with poetic vision, it was from those that Elstir's work was taken"—and this is a perfect formulation of the Proustian enterprise. We have to admit, then, that Elstir's style corresponds faithfully to Proust's idea of his own style and, consequently, of his own vision.

✓ present
disappear
in time
and space

In fact, the most characteristic feature of Proustian representation is no doubt, together with the intensity of their material presence, that superimposition of objects perceived simultaneously which has been called "surimpressionism."³³ We know of the fascination exercised over Marcel by the effect of "transverberation" that was produced by the magic lantern at Combray,³⁴ projecting its immaterial, yet visible images over the various objects of his bedroom: Golo's red cloak and pale face molding themselves over the folds of the curtain, over the swelling surface of the door-handle, two spaces, the real and the fictional, combining without merging. In the room of the Grand Hôtel at Balbec, it is not a projection, but a reflection throwing across the glass doors of the low bookcases "a frieze of sea-scapes, interrupted only by the polished mahogany of the actual shelves":³⁵ the natural landscape thus takes on, through the artifice of a particularly unexpected *mise-en-scène*, the appearance of a work of art: reality becomes the object of its own representation. These sophisticated spectacles are a typical expression of Proust's taste for indirect vision, or rather of his marked incapacity for direct vision. Was not nature herself, he writes, "a beginning of art, she who, often, had allowed me to become aware of the beauty of one thing only in another thing, of the beauty, for instance, of noon at Combray in the sound of its bells, of that of the mornings at Doncières in the hiccups of our central heating?"³⁶

But this indirect perception is necessarily a mutilated perception, so that it is often impossible to discern whether it results from an unfortunate evanescence (reality lost), or from a beneficent reduction of the essential (reality regained): for it obliterates not only the object perceived through transparency—Combray transposed into the sound of its bells, Doncières filtered through the hiccups of the central heating—it alters even more the object on which it imposes the transitory role, and as it were the transitive state of a mere signal. This sound of bells apparently swollen with a presence that goes beyond it and enriches it can be opened up to this new meaning only by impoverishing itself in another respect, only by exhausting itself, almost to the point of disappearing as a perceptible event. One cannot at one and the same time hear the village in the sound of its bells and hear the sound of the bells in its sonorous plenitude; one can only gain one by losing the other. Proust knows this better than anyone: he himself writes, concerning the "text" from the Goncourts' *Journal* that has just revealed to him in the Verdurin drawing-room realities of which he was previously unaware: "The apparent, copiable charm of things and people escaped me, because I had not the ability to stop short there—I was like a surgeon who beneath the smooth surface of a woman's belly sees the internal disease which is devouring it. If I went to a dinner-party I did not see the guests: when I thought I was looking at them, I was in fact examining them with X-rays."³⁷ The superimposition results here from an excess of penetration on the part of the gaze, which is unable to stop at appearances and perceives "in the middle distance, behind actual appearances, in a plane that was rather more withdrawn." At the same time, it is received rather favorably: through the different states of the Verdurin drawing-room, it makes it possible to uncover its identity "in various places and at various times." On other occasions a phenomenon of the same order is experienced as a painful servitude: "If we seek to portray what is relatively unchanging in [a character], we see it present in succession different aspects (implying that it cannot remain still but keeps moving) to the disconcerted artist."³⁸ Time metamorphoses not only characters, then, but faces, bodies, even places, and its effects are sedimented in

space (what Proust calls "Temps incorporé," or "integral time")³⁹ to form a blurred image the lines of which overlap in a sometimes illegible, almost always equivocal palimpsest, like Gilberte's signature, which Marcel is to take for Albertine's, like the face of Odette de Forcheville, which contains in suspension the memory of the Lady in Pink, Elstir's portrait of Miss Sacripant, the triumphant photographs of Madame Swann, the "quite simple little old daguerreotype" kept by her husband, and many other successive "proofs," plus an obscure resemblance to Botticelli's Zephora.

This palimpsest of time and space, these discordant views, ceaselessly contradicted and ceaselessly brought together by an untiring movement of painful dissociation and impossible synthesis—this, no doubt, is the Proustian vision. In the train taking him to Balbec for the first time, Marcel sees through the window a ravishing sunrise: over a small black wood, "some ragged clouds whose fleecy edges were of a fixed, dead pink, not liable to change, like the colour that dyes the wing which has grown to wear it, or the sketch upon which the artist's fancy has washed it." But the course of the line alters and the landscape presents to the eye its nocturnal face: "a nocturnal village, its roofs still blue with moonlight, its pond encrusted with the opalescent nacre of night, beneath a firmament still powdered with all its stars."⁴⁰ Each of these pictures summarizes and concentrates a page of Flaubert or Chateaubriand at their most substantial, most intensely penetrated by the freshness and plenitude of reality; but instead of exalting one another they combat one another in painful alternation: with Proust, two euphoric visions can come together to form a tormented vision: "so that I spent my time running from one window to the other to reassemble, to collect on a single canvas the intermittent, antipodean fragments of my fine, scarlet, ever-changing morning, and to obtain a comprehensive view of it and a continuous picture." If the movement that presents them successively accelerates, the compensatory movement "from one window to the other" will no longer be possible: one will have to submit first to intermittence; then to confusion, and finally to the mutual effacement of the two pictures. But is not this precisely what occurs in Elstir's "mirages" and in Proust's metaphors?

Thus, between its conscious intentions and its real execution, Proust's writing falls prey to a singular reversal: having set out to locate essences, it ends up constituting, or reconstituting, mirages; intended to reach, through the substantial depth of the text, the profound substance of things, it culminates in an effect of phantasmagoric superimposition in which the depths cancel each other out, and the substances devour one another. It certainly goes beyond the "superficial" level of a description of appearances, but it does not reach that of a higher realism (the realism of essences), since on the contrary it discovers a level of the real in which reality, by virtue of its plenitude, annihilates *itself*.

This destructive movement, which ceaselessly involves a sensible presence in equivocation and dispute (of which each moment, taken by itself, seems unalterable) this movement so characteristic of Proust's writing, is obviously the actual method of the *Recherche du temps perdu*. Just as each fragment of his "versatile" landscapes might be one of Chateaubriand's descriptions, except that the whole forms a "disconcerted" vision that belongs only to him, so each appearance of his characters, each "state" of his society, each episode of his narrative could provide material for a page of Balzac or La Bruyère, were it not that all these traditional elements are swept away by an irresistible force of erosion. It might be said of Proust what was said of Courbet,⁴¹ that his vision is more modern than his theory; it might also be said that the work as a whole is more Proustian than each of its details.

At first sight the characters of the *Recherche* scarcely differ either in their physical appearance or in their social and psychological characteristics from the characters of the traditional novel: at most one might detect, in the depiction of a Bloch, a Legrandin, a Cottard, the Guermantes or the Verdurins, certain rather over-stressed features, certain elements of pastiche bordering on parody, which might push the portrait over into caricature and the novel into satire. But such a tendency is not contrary to the traditions of the novel; it represents rather a permanent temptation of the genre, perhaps a condition of its exercise: it is the price that has to be paid

if a character is to escape the inconsistency of life and attain a fictional existence, which is a hyper-existence.

But for the Proustian character this state is merely an initial one, which is soon contradicted by a second, a third, sometimes by a whole series of versions, all equally exaggerated, which are superimposed on each other to form a figure on several planes the eventual incoherence of which is merely a sum of partial excessive coherences;⁴² thus there are several Saint-Loups, several Rachels, several Albertines, all incompatible and mutually destructive. "Albertine's face" is a striking illustration of this: just as the narrator, during his first stay at Balbec, discovers in turn a young-urchin-Albertine, a naive-schoolgirl-Albertine, a young-lady-of-good-family-Albertine, a perverse-innocent-Albertine, so Albertine's face alters from one day to the next, not only in its expression, but also in its very form and material:

On certain days, slim, with grey cheeks, a sullen air, a violet transparency falling obliquely from her. . . . On other days her face, more sleek, caught and glued my desires to its varnished surface. . . . sometimes, instinctively, when one looked at her face punctuated with tiny brown marks among which floated what were simply two large, bluer stains, it was like looking at the egg of a goldfinch—or often like an opalescent agate.⁴³

As one looks at it, each successive "face" is richly endowed with the attributes of material existence: a matte or glossy surface, a violet transparency, a pink glaze, blue stains, but the total effect, as in the picture of Balzac's *Chef-d'oeuvre inconnu*, of which this page, and several others, seem to be intended as a kind of literary reply, is not a transparent depth, but an overloading, a textual plethora in which the face becomes bogged down, engulfed, and finally disappears. This is more or less the experience of the Narrator in the celebrated description of kissing Albertine:

In this brief passage of my lips towards her cheek it was ten Albertines that I saw; this single girl being like a goddess with several heads, that which I had last seen, if I tried to approach it, gave place to another. . . . Suddenly my eyes ceased to see; next, my nose, crushed by the collision, no longer perceived any fragrance, and . . . I learned, from these unpleasant signs, that at last I was in the act of kissing Albertine's cheek.⁴⁴

With the exception of the Narrator's own family, which embod-

ies, among other values, a sort of nostalgia for stability, almost all the characters of the *Recherche* are just as protean, and the reader might say of them what Marcel, some days after their first meeting, thinks of Saint-Loup: "I was taken in by a mirage; but I have corrected the first only to fall into a second."⁴⁵ It is the effects of Time, of course, that change the proud Charlus into a pitiful wreck, the grotesque Biche into the celebrated Elstir, Madame Verdurin into the Princesse de Guermantes, and which lead Odette from the *demi-monde* to the *grand monde*, or Rachel from the brothel to the Faubourg Saint-Germain. But time is not the only, or even the principal worker of the Proustian metamorphoses; often it merely reveals after the event sudden changes for which it is not itself responsible: certainly we see Swann gradually detach himself from his love for Odette, but what progress, what duration can explain their subsequent marriage? As Georges Poulet has shown,⁴⁶ Proustian time is not a flow, like Bergson's duration, but a succession of isolated moments; similarly, the characters (and groups) do not evolve: one fine day, they find that they have changed, as if time confined itself to bringing forth a plurality that they contained *in potentia* from all eternity. Indeed, many of the characters assume the most contradictory roles *simultaneously*: Vinteuil, the ridiculous neighbor and the famous composer; Saint-Loup, Rachel's passionate lover and Morel's admirer; Charlus, prince of the Faubourg Saint-Germain and Jupien's accomplice; Swann, the intimate of the Prince of Wales and the butt of Madame Verdurin's jokes. All simulate and dissimulate, lie or lie to themselves, all have a secret life, a vice, a passion, a virtue, a hidden genius, all are Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, lending themselves from one day to the next to the most spectacular revelations. Certain historical events (the Dreyfus affair, the War), certain social facts (Sodom and Gomorrah) seem to take place only to provide further surprises: this ladies' man cared only for waiters, this violent anti-Semite was a Dreyfusard, this hero was a coward, this man was a woman, etc. The caprices of heredity, the confusion of memory, secret influences effect mysterious transformations: the elderly Bloch becomes Monsieur Bloch *père*, a dulled Gilberte becomes Odette, Gilberte and Albertine, Swann and Marcel are "telescoped," and in the midst of the uni-

versal movement even certain stabilities become paradoxical: thus Odette, incomprehensibly intact among a hundred unrecognizable old people, represents, at the last of the Guermantes' afternoon parties, the strangest anachronism.

Just as individuals are unaware of duration, society is unaware of history, but each event determines a massive and almost instantaneous modification of what Proust calls, very revealingly, the *social kaleidoscope*.⁴⁷ In Proust one does not find those slow upsurges that manifest, in the work of Balzac or Zola, the progressive renewal of the "social body," the rise of "new strata," that subterranean but irresistible movement which Zola compares to that of germination. Moreover, we know that Proust represents not society, in the broad sense, but Society, in the narrow sense (the *Monde*, or rather *Mondanité*, which is embodied in several *Mondes*: aristocracy, bourgeois bohemia, the provinces, domesticity), that is to say, the formal side of society, which is governed not by the social laws dear to the nineteenth century, but by those *decrees* of Opinion of which Oriane's caprices, Aunt Léonie's gossip, Françoise's fads, the vetoes of Madame Verdurin or the "Marquise" des Champs-Élysées represent the most characteristic forms. The succession of these decrees does not proceed from history, that is to say, from a meaningful evolution. It is based above all on Fashion, the only fixed value of which is, at each stage, a radical novelty with no memory: "Oriane's latest" effaces the last but one, and all the preceding ones; hence that feverish haste to get to the news, to keep "up to date." For this tradition provides a whole range of attitudes and feelings of which only the object is renewed, since snobbery, a recurrent form, is indifferent to its content. Similarly, the Dreyfus Affair or the War structure and restructure Society around new values (anti-Semitism, Germanophobia), the rearrangement of which is enough to hoist some petty-bourgeois woman suddenly to the top, or to hurl some Highness down to the bottom of a hierarchy that is preserved only by constantly overthrowing its criteria: a rigid but unstable protocol, a closed world compensating and preserving its enclosure by ceaseless permutation, Proust's society is confirmed in a perpetual denial.

Fashion

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The very movement of the work seems to oppose the security of the fictional material with a sort of obscure, negative will. Certainly Proust is neither Joyce nor even Woolf, and his narrative technique is in no sense revolutionary. In detail, his masters seem to be the great traditional writers he himself quotes, Balzac, Dostoevsky, George Eliot, Dickens, or Hardy, to which are added a few models that might be termed pre-fictional: Sévigné and Saint-Simon in narration, Chateaubriand and Ruskin in description, Ruskin again and perhaps Bergson in the essay, not to mention the contribution of the minor genres that Proust had himself practiced at the outset of his literary career, such as the society columns of *Le Figaro*, nearly all of which are to be found, almost intact, in his work. Thus the *Recherche du temps perdu* might be seen as an agreeable succession of scenes, tableaux, portraits, digressions of all kinds, skillfully linked together by the unsurprising thread of a "roman de formation," or *Bildungsroman*: childhood loves, entry into Society, first love affair, literary discoveries, and so on—the novel departing from its own tradition only to the benefit of even more traditional genres. But this is only a first impression, one that can be sustained only by the most selective kind of reading of the *Recherche*—a reading obviously contrary to the wishes of the author, who constantly claimed for his work the benefit of patience, attention, the ability to perceive distant relationships ("My work is not microscopic, it is telescopic,")⁴⁸ in fact, a structuring reading.

Now the paradox of this work is that its structure devours its substance. We know that what Proust admired more than anything else in *L'Education sentimentale* was that "hole" of several years which follows the days of June 1848. Lacunae of this kind, like the indeterminate time that separates the chapters on the War from the last afternoon party given by the Guermites, and other less visible ones in which chronology is lost, and with it the material of the narrative, occur constantly in his work. We have seen what a gap is introduced between *Un amour de Swann* and the resurgence of the character as Odette's husband; later, Swann is to die as he married, by ellipsis. The second event is more expected than the first, it is even prepared for at length, only to vanish the more completely—in actual fact, Swann does not *die*, he has no right to

a true death, as does Bergotte or the Narrator's grandmother; he disappears between two pages: he fades away (his necrology is to be retrospective). Saniette, on the other hand, dies twice. Albertine revives (but it is a mistake). The age of the Narrator and that of the other characters are often inconsistent with one another, as if time did not pass for all of them at the same speed, and one sometimes has the sense of an inexplicable overlap of generations. The material incompleteness of the *Recherche* is doubtless responsible for some of these effects, but it merely accentuates a tendency that is already there: the contradictions of the manuscript can be interpreted not as insignificant oversights, but on the contrary as *parapraxes* in the Freudian sense, all the more revealing in that they are involuntary.

Marcel's childhood is not quite an origin, since it is, essentially, resuscitated by the little madeleine, and it is more a dreamed childhood than a real childhood: "chronologically" anterior to the revelation of *Le Temps retrouvé*, it is psychologically posterior to it, and this ambiguity of situation cannot but alter it. The childhood loves are not quite an initiation, since Swann's love affair has already more than outlined their course. Marcel is later to say that it is difficult for him to distinguish between his own experiences and those of Swann: just as the phrase heard by Swann in Vinteuil's sonata is recognized by Marcel in the septet, the feelings, memories, and even things forgotten slip from one character to another, and these transfers disturb the time of the work by introducing into it an incipient repetition.

The spatial framework is hardly more stable than the temporal dimension: the settings of the *Recherche* are apparently well isolated, by their substantial individuality even more than by their distance;⁴⁹ between Balbec, bathed in its marine atmosphere, impregnated with salt and foam, and Combray, with its confined, old-world atmosphere, where the sweet scent of home-made preserves hangs in the air, no relationship seems possible; no journey ought to be able to link such heterogeneous materials: Marcel is amazed at the idea that a train can take him in one night from Paris to Balbec or from Florence to Venice. Yet, even without recourse to this mechanical expedient, the Proustian narrative passes

effortlessly, and as if without perceptible movement, from one place to another: this is the privilege of memory or of day-dreaming, but it is also, above all, the sovereign ubiquity of the narrative, by which places are dematerialized and slide over one another. All novels, of course, move their action from one setting to another in this way; but generally these settings are neutral, they remain in their place and do not adhere to the narrative. With Proust, on the other hand, places are active, they become attached to the characters,⁵⁰ penetrate the texture of the novel, which they follow from page to page, ceaselessly recalled, reintegrated, reinvested, always present all at once (a reading of the entries under Balbec, Combray, or Venice in the index of the Pléiade edition is instructive in this regard) and therefore made absent by their very omnipresence: having emerged from a cup of tea, Combray finds itself enclosed in a Paris bedroom, Oriane carries with her, in the midst of the Faubourg Saint-Germain, the landscape of Guermantes with the Vivonne and its water-lilies, just as Albertine takes with her Balbec, with its jetty and its beach. The "two ways" of Combray, the opposition and incommunicability of which, "one of those distances of the mind which time serves only to lengthen, which separate things irremediably from one another, keeping them for ever upon different planes,"⁵¹ were the very foundation of Marcel's view of the world (and of the construction of the work), are revealed in the opening pages of *Le Temps retrouvé* to be singularly close and in no way irreconcilable, and are symbolically joined together in the person of Mademoiselle de Saint-Loup, daughter of a Swann and a Guermantes. Thus the reader undergoes in the time and space of the work the motionless journey of the sleeper mentioned in the first pages of *Du Côté de chez Swann*: "The magic chair will carry him at full speed through time and space, and when he opens his eyes again he will imagine that he went to sleep months earlier and in some far distant country."⁵² And in the end it is the entire material of the novel, all its characters and events, that come together, in the mind of the reader as well as in that of Marcel observing Mademoiselle de Saint-Loup, "interlacing their threads" in a single point—manifesting by their in-

conceivable encounter the unreality of their hitherto separated existences.

There is also, at the heart of the work, another place where its impossibility is in some sense concentrated: this is the pastiche of the Goncourts. That the Narrator, opening the Goncourts' journal, should find there an account of a dinner at the Verdurins', that the Verdurins, and Elstir, and Cottard, and Brichot, and consequently, by degrees, all the characters and the Narrator himself should thus escape from the fiction and slide into the gossip column, this is no doubt a plausible adventure at the level of the fiction, since this fiction offers itself as a gossip column and its characters as real persons whom the Goncourts might have met, but it is impossible at the level of the work as it exists for a reader, who knows very well that he must regard it as a pure fiction, from which its characters can no more emerge than the brothers Goncourt, or he himself, can enter it. Yet this is precisely what is persistently suggested by this strange episode, which serves as a door in the work, leading to something other than the work, something that it cannot know without destroying itself, a door that is there and which nevertheless can be neither opened nor closed.

Maurice Blanchot, considering the relations between *Jean Santeuil* and the *Recherche du temps perdu*,⁵³ observes that, by the involuntary trick of an apparently inexplicable postponement, which no doubt corresponded to the profound necessity of his work, Proust gradually moved away from his initial purpose, which was to write a "novel of poetic moments" (the privileged moments of reminiscence): these moments declined into scenes, the appearances into portraits and descriptions, thus diverting the execution of the whole from the poetic to the fictional; but he also shows that this "fictionality" is in turn diverted towards something else, insofar as the work turns around, folds back upon itself, taking up all its episodes in "a slow, relentless movement," in "the moving density of spherical time." Here indeed is the most disturbing paradox of the *Recherche*: it is offered simultaneously as a work and as an approach to the work, as fulfillment and as genesis, as search for lost time and as an offering of time regained. This ambivalence

gives it the openness, the critical dimension, which Proust saw as the essential mark of the great works of the nineteenth century (and which is even more so of those of the twentieth), works that are still "marvelously incomplete," in which the writers, "watching themselves at work as though they were at once author and critic, have derived from this self-contemplation a novel beauty, exterior and superior to the work itself";⁵⁴ such an ambivalence also gives the work a double time and a double space, a "double life" like that of its heroes, a double foundation, or rather, the absence of a foundation, through which the work is constantly seeping away, escaping from itself. "We never know," says Blanchot, "to what time the event described belongs, whether it is taking place only in the world of the narrative, or whether it is taking place to facilitate the arrival of the moment in the narrative from which what has taken place becomes reality and truth." In fact each moment of the work appears in a sense twice over: first in the *Recherche* as the birth of a vocation and second in the *Recherche* as the exercise of this vocation; but these two occasions are not given together, and it is the lot of the reader—informed *in extremis* that the book which he has just read remains to be written and that this book that is to be written is more or less (but only more or less) the one which he has just read—to go back to those distant pages, to the childhood at Combray, the evening at the Guermantes, the death of Albertine, which he had first read as safely deposited, gloriously embalmed in a finished work, and which he must now read again, almost identical but a little different, as if in abeyance, still unburied, stretching anxiously towards an as yet unwritten work; and conversely, forever. Thus, not only is the *Recherche du temps perdu*, as Blanchot says, a "completed-uncompleted" work, but its very reading is completed in incompleteness, forever in suspense, forever "to be taken up again," since the object of that reading is constantly thrown into a dizzy rotation. "The literary object is a peculiar top which exists only in movement," writes Sartre.⁵⁵ This is particularly true of Proust's work, which is more unstable, more *mobile* than those of Calder, since a single glance is enough to set off a circulation that nothing can then stop.

A reading of *Jean Santeuil* or *Contre Sainte-Beuve* can only enhance this sense of dizziness. In these "works," which are, like the earlier texts collected in *Mélanges* or *Chroniques*, no more than sketches for the *Recherche du temps perdu*, we witness the appearance of a whole series of first drafts of certain episodes, settings, themes, or characters of the "definitive" work. To the multiple images of the Baron de Charlus is added the figure of the Marquis de Quercy, who, in *Contre Sainte-Beuve*, is obviously a first sketch of him, just as Bertrand de Réveillon in *Jean Santeuil* foreshadows Robert de Saint-Loup, or Marie Kossichef, Gilberte Swann. At first Bergotte was the name of a painter. To our surprise, we find Albertine's kiss on the lips of Oriane. Charlus is strangely enriched for having first been merged with Monsieur de Norpois. Between Illiers and Combray, in a strange intermediary zone that does not yet belong to the work, but no longer quite belongs to life, is interposed the Etreuilles of *Jean Santeuil*. In the same way Ernestine is placed between Félicie and Françoise, and Jean himself between Proust and Marcel—but also between Proust and Swann, for if Jean Santeuil is a sketch of the Narrator, his composite love affairs prefigure several others: Marie Kossichef at the Champs-Élysées is Gilberte, Charlotte Clissette refusing a kiss is Albertine; but the scene of the lighted window, with Madame S., the sonata by Saint-Saëns, with Françoise, already suggest Odette.

A rather disturbing perspective is thus set up between life and the work, which gives an unusual piquancy to the search for "sources" and "models." Albert Le Cuziat seems to have had something of Albertine and much of Jupien. Madame de Cheigné had the face and the voice of Oriane, Madame Strauss her wit; Charles Haas, Swann's red moustache, Charles Ephrussi, his culture. Balbec is Trouville, Dieppe, Cabourg, Évian. The garden at Combray is the garden at Illiers, but it is also Uncle Weil's at Auteuil. . . . All these transformations, these substitutions, these unpredictable splittings and fusions, not to mention what still lies hidden in the unpublished notebooks, add to the Proustian palimpsest almost unfathomable depths. One dreams of a monstrous edition in which, around the *Recherche du temps perdu*, would be

gathered all the preparations and successive modifications which—as work in progress—culminated in that final state, which as we know was the result not of an act of completion, but of a sudden interruption, outside the profound law of this work, which was to go on growing ceaselessly and never to reach its end.

Similarly no page of the *Recherche* can be regarded as truly definitive, none of its variants can be absolutely rejected. Starting from *Les Plaisirs et les Jours*, Proust's work exists and did not cease to move until November 18, 1922. This growth, this ceaseless metamorphosis, is not only a circumstance of its elaboration, which one might ignore, considering only its "result," it is integral to the work itself, it belongs to it as one of its dimensions. The work itself stands on that "giddy summit" of "years past but not separated from us"; it too must be taken as "having the length not of [its] body but of [its] years," weighed with its "incorporated time," described as "occupying a place, a very considerable place—for simultaneously . . . they touch epochs that are immensely far apart, separated by the slow accretion of many, many days—in the dimension of Time."⁵⁶

If one considers only the "theoretical" pages of the *Recherche du temps perdu*, there can be no doubt that Proust had conceived of his work according to the unambiguous scheme of a spiritual experience, a completed spiritual experience, the culmination of which was known, as *Contre Sainte-Beuve* shows, well before the publication of *Du Côté de chez Swann*. The movement of this experience is in some sense analogous with that of the great Judeo-Christian myths. There is a Lost Paradise, which is the distant time of childhood daydreams, when the world appeared as an immediate spectacle, an unlimited possession; there is a Fall into Time, which is the negative experience of life "as lived": the evanescence of reality, the intermittences of the self, impossible love (there is even the sketch, valuable perhaps for psychoanalysts, of an explanation by means of Original Sin, namely the scene of the maternal Kiss interpreted as an abdication and an irreversible moral lapse); there is a long promise of Salvation, with its portents (the

hawthorns at Tansonville, the steeples at Martinville, the trees at Hudimesnil), its prophets (Bergotte, Elstir, Vinteuil), its Precursor (Swann); there is the final ecstasy of Reminiscence, the fleeting contemplation of eternity and the certainty of embodying in a work what Proust himself calls Perpetual Adoration. Whatever might be said of these (perhaps purely formal) analogies, which Proust stresses in his vocabulary with a satisfaction no doubt tinged with humor, what concerns us here in that experience is its movement, its univocal orientation, summed up in the word Vocation, which it imprints on the existence of the Narrator, and consequently on the work itself, which receives from it the value of a message, even of a revelation.⁵⁷ Whatever precautions were taken to save appearances ("a work in which there are theories is like an object which still has the ticket that shows its price,"⁵⁸ the *Recherche du temps perdu* was to be the illustration of a doctrine, the demonstration, or at least the gradual unveiling, of a Truth.

Can we say that the work, in its execution, remains faithful to this manifest intention? Yes, since its apparent structure still corresponds to the course, for so long thwarted but never forgotten, of the truth that emerges in the Narrator's consciousness, and culminates in the illumination that gives it order and meaning. No, since the negative experience that was to be no more than a stage in the overall progress of the work sweeps it up whole and entire into a movement that is the reverse of the one proposed, and since its point of arrival finds it carried off on a new trajectory, which it is no longer in its power to terminate. The relationship between the work and the system that engenders it is therefore ambiguous: the Proustian ideology is not a "superstructure," a useless excrescence that one could quickly dismiss in order to approach Proust's work independently of it and in a "healthier" spirit; on the contrary, it represents an inevitable reference and even, in a sense, the only possible reference for the reading and understanding of the work. But at the same time the positive meaning that it is intended to give to the work is, if not betrayed, reversed and finally absorbed by a counterpoint of contrary movements: that which carries a message in plain language and that which accompanies this message to the point that it becomes obscure and gives way to the

(question that has no answer. One of Proust's successes is in having undertaken and carried out a spiritual experience; but how little this success matters to us beside that other success, of having succeeded in the failure of his undertaking, and of having left us the perfect spectacle of that failure, namely, his work. Directed entirely toward the revelation of Essences, it never ceases to move away from them, and it is out of this failed truth, this dispossessed possession, that the possibility of a work is born, and its true power of possession. Like Proust's writing, Proust's work is a palimpsest in which several figures and several meanings are merged and entangled together, all present together at all times, and which can only be deciphered together, in their inextricable totality.⁵⁹

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[1961]

NOTES

[References to Proust's *À la Recherche du temps perdu* are to the three-volume Pléiade edition (Paris: Gallimard, 1955-56) and to the seven-volume translation by C. K. Scott Moncrieff and Andreas Mayor (vol. 7), published by Vintage Books (New York: Random House, 1970)—Tr.]

1. *Essais et articles*, Pléiade (Paris: Gallimard, 1971), p. 586.
2. *A la Recherche du temps perdu*, III:895; *Remembrance of Things Past*, 7:152.
3. III:885; 7:144.
4. III:889; 7:147.
5. III:876; 7:136.
6. III:879; 7:139.
7. For Proust, lost time is not, as is widely but mistakenly believed, "past" time, but *time in its pure state*, which is really to say, through the fusion of a present moment and a past moment, the contrary of passing time: *the extra-temporal, eternity*.
8. III:871; 7:133. "As if," as a passage from *Jean Santeuil* (Pléiade—Paris: Gallimard, 1971, pp. 401-2), makes even more clear, "our true nature were outside time, created to taste the eternal."
9. III:873; 7:134.
10. I:388; 1:296.
11. III:877; 7:137.
12. III:876; 7:137.
13. III:871; 7:132.
14. Letter of November 27, 1913, *Choix de lettres*, Philip Kolb, ed. (Paris:

Plon, 1965), p. 195. Elsewhere (on the subject of Flaubert), he speaks of those pages in which "intelligence . . . seeks to become the vibration of a steamboat, the color of mosses, a tiny island in a bay. . . . It is transformed intelligence, which has become incorporated in matter" (*Essais et articles*, p. 612).

15. *Contre Sainte-Beuve*, Pléiade (Paris: Gallimard, 1971), p. 269; *On Art and Literature 1896-1919*, Sylvia Townsend Warner, tr. (New York: Meridian, 1958), p. 170.

16. *Correspondance générale* (Paris: Plon, 1930-36), II:86.

17. III:187; 5:129.

18. *Essais et articles*, p. 373; *Art and Literature*, p. 325.

19. *Jean Santeuil*, p. 320.

20. *Essais et articles*, p. 586.

21. *Essais et articles*, p. 380; *Art and Literature*, p. 334. [Translation modified: Warner has "quality" where the French text reads *égalité*—M.-R. L.]

22. III:1043; 7:268.

23. III:877; 7:138.

24. III:872; 7:133.

25. Cf. I:387; 1:296—" . . . more special, and in consequence more real."

26. III:623; 6:149.

27. III:867; 7:129.

28. I:835-36; 2:301.

29. I:672-73; 2:182-83.

30. I:836; 2:301.

31. I:837; 2:301.

32. I:839; 1:296.

33. Benjamin Crémieux, quoted by André Maurois, *A la Recherche de Marcel Proust* (Paris: Hachette, 1949), p. 201; *Proust: Portrait of a Genius*, Gerard Hopkins, tr. (New York: Harper, 1950), p. 188.

34. The Pléiade edition (I:10) has *transvertébration*. [Scott Moncrieff (I:8) has "transubstantiation"—Tr.]

35. I:383; 1:293.

36. III:889; 7:147.

37. III:718-19; 7:18.

38. III:327; 5:228.

39. The Pléiade edition has here (III:1046) *temps évaporé*, which is obviously a mistake. Earlier editions gave *incorporé*, a reading confirmed by the context. [Scott Moncrieff follows the later editions and has "evaporated," 7:270—Tr.]

40. I:654-55; 2:169.

41. Pierre Francastel, *Art et technique* (Paris: Minuit, 1956), p. 146.

42. Proust himself points out these effects of superimposition in relation to Albertine and Oriane. See Georges Poulet, *L'Espace proustien* (Paris:

Gallimard, 1963), p. 113; *Proustian Space*, Elliott Coleman, tr. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977), p. 92.

43. I:946; 2:380.

44. II:365; 3:263.

45. I:732; 2:226.

46. Georges Poulet, *Etudes sur le temps humain* (Paris: Plon, 1950), pp. 396-97; *Studies in Human Time*, Elliott Coleman, tr. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1959), p. 293.

47. II:190; 3:135.

48. Maurois, *Proust*, p. 271;

49. Poulet, *L'Espace proustien*, pp. 47-51; pp. 31-33.

50. Poulet, *L'Espace proustien*, pp. 36-39; pp. 24-26.

51. I:135; 1:103-104.

52. I:5; 1:5.

53. Maurice Blanchot, *Le Livre à venir* (Paris: Gallimard, 1959), pp. 18-34.

54. III:160; 5:110.

55. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Situations II* (Paris: Gallimard, 1948), p. 91; *What is Literature?* Bernard Frechtman, tr. (New York: Harper and Row, 1949) p. 34.

56. III:1046-48; 7:270-72.

57. "At last I have found a reader who has *guessed* that my book is a work of dogmatics and a construction!" (Letter to Jacques Rivière, February 7, 1914, Kolb, *Choix*, p. 197).

58. III:882; 7:141.

59. The image of the palimpsest appears at least twice in Proust (I:132, I:101; and II:109, 3:76), but in a very modest way. On the other hand, it is given a particularly high (and very Proustian) value in this page from Baudelaire's *Paradis artificiels*, translated from the *Suspiria de Profundis*: "What is the human brain, if not an immense natural palimpsest? My brain is a palimpsest, as yours is too, reader. Innumerable layers of ideas and feelings have fallen one after another on your brain, as gently as light. It seemed as if each were swallowing up the previous one. But in reality none has perished. . . . Forgetting is only momentary therefore; and in such solemn circumstances, in death perhaps, and generally in the intense excitement generated by opium, the whole immense, complicated palimpsest of memory unfolds in an instant, with all its superimposed layers of dead feelings, mysteriously embalmed in what we call oblivion. . . . Just as every action, thrown into the whirlwind of universal action, is in itself irrevocable and irreparable, an abstraction of its possible results, so each thought is ineffaceable. The palimpsest of memory is indestructible."