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HEARING SWANN FROM OUT OF THE *RECHERCHE*

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In this essay, we explore an approach to aesthetic experience within, or emerging from, some related scenes in Marcel Proust's novels. What we want to highlight in this account is not a formalized philosophical or theoretical system. Instead, we want to highlight the force of an incomplete sensation that is implied, but not fully present in these scenes as they are written. In this respect, these scenes resist formal capture and even explanation. We want to suggest that Proust's writing works to evoke this as (an) experience itself. Cinematically, sonically, imaginatively, transmedially, this mode of experience is an aesthetic kernel that exceeds formal stratification into discrete figures, and therefore bleeds through signifying orders. In so doing, we want to draw attention to—without necessarily capturing "in" the presentation of text, argument, or form—how Proust's work suggests shortcomings in explaining thought using self-enclosed, defined, and bordered "concepts" of sign or aesthetic category, particularly through several moments that pertain to music, sound, and listening.

This bears on how we understand sound, philosophy, and an aesthetics of the audible because of sound's unique relation to presence, problematizing signifying places in a system of philosophical appropriation: "a" sound is always the coming and going of others within and outside of it. Proust's "writing" of aesthetic experience opens out the forms we use to describe, to think, or to "hear" memories of a past that remains, superabundant but not wholly present, as a concept of sign. We will indicate this at work in an example of long-range Proustian counterpoint—the different aesthetic experiences described first by Swann, and then much later by his narrator, in response to accidental encounters with music composed by the *Recherche*'s fictional composer, Vinteuil.

Swann's experience has often been understood in Proust scholarship as a stunted, incomplete, or even "failed" version of the narrator's developed aesthetic theory—and

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not without reason, as the narrator himself occasionally tends to make this suggestion.[1] But this already takes Swann's experience as whole, fully-formed, and insular, which we regard as a false premise. In contrast to this, we want to suggest that it is precisely *because* Swann's is unfinished and failed (in terms of expositive account) that it offers a productive gesture towards Proust's aesthetics, exempt from and indeed challenging philosophical "precision" that can only reduce the aesthetic range of experience in trying to pin it down. In drawing out various complications with the narrator's mature aesthetic theory, we understand our task here to be pointing toward a certain concept of "quiet Proust," a formulation whose punning in this context is not lost on us. By this term, we mean to highlight in particular the virtual components of Proust's writing, which in turn enable it to exceed capture by a traditional philosophical system. In other words, Proust is not only interested in how literature can convey philosophical themes, but also in how the evocation of aesthetic experience through literature—in this case, the placing side by side of two different figures in the assessment of works by the same composer—can exceed philosophical communication. If we seek to articulate Proust's quietness with reference to Vinteuil's music and the characters' commentaries on it, it is because the sonic medium allows for a different modality of listening than we are used to once it is placed into the texture of a work of literature, which in turn directs our attention toward sense's excess beyond signification through both the music's and the writing's iterability. In literature, the sonic is interrogated, and its implications are brought to bear—without, however, being exhausted or even landing upon a single unified meaning. Because sound

[1] Jean-Pierre Boon reads Swann in contrast to his critics: "There is a temptation among critics to devalorize Swann's experience of involuntary memory because, unlike the Narrator's, it does not lead to the act of creation. Swann, it is argued, 'in his passivity ... only learns of the death of the past.' What he learns, in fact, is that the past, the love in his past, though itself inaccessible to him, can be relived in all the vividness of its details, through the play of involuntary, or affective memory, a play brought about by Vinteuil's little musical phrase. Here Proustian epistemology, recognition in involuntary memory, receives what is perhaps its most forceful confirmation, through the vitality of example, through the incarnation of theory" (1987, p. 66). Antoine Compagnon says this about Swann, implying that he is a decadent: "In the *Recherche*, Swann represents idolatry defined in this way: his love for Odette is inseparable from Botticelli's Zephora in the Sistine Chapel, inseparable from Vinteuil's little phrase" (1992, p. 32). Malcolm Bowie also sets the narrator above Swann and even some of the novel's artist counterparts: "Whereas aristocrats, in this social universe, have only the memory of power, and workers only the remotest foretaste of it, the narrator himself has the real thing. … He can lose himself in reverie, and find himself again in sententious utterance which projects his personal experience towards mankind at large. He can lose himself in mimicry as he travels back and forth between the speech habits of different social groups, and finds himself again in his own singular and obdurate vocal style. He triumphs where his fellow bourgeois Bergotte, Swann, Vinteuil and Elstir do not, for he has more staying power and single-mindedness than they have" (2000, p. 169). Joshua Landy writes that Swann "is surely more than the artistically impotent *alter ego* he is usually taken to be" (2001, p. 126).

is never quite "present"—being, itself, nothing *but* presence, without a discrete entity that *would be present*—it resists solidity and capture as a referent.

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Jacques Derrida's critique of metaphysics' priority of speech over writing is informative here. Firstly, Derrida criticizes how metaphysics—from Plato to Rousseau to Husserl—sees signification as an "ontotheological" circle tracing sign to signifier through a locked transit of a unified memory. This evocation of "the" signified, shining forth in its pure presence, is metaphorized by speech "as such", which appropriates an enclosed identity for the speaker to hold and represent as the fixed site of this unified message. The *idea* of speech, an enclosed whole of apprehensible meaning, matches the idea of (and indeed emerges from, like the pyramid from its night pit) the unified speaking subject. This subsequently anchors a whole system of meaning as what emerges in the neat transit of reason along expectant nodes constituting the metaphysical tradition, sweeping along the course of legal institutionalism, "sovereignty", colonialism, financialization, and information technology. A self-knowing speaker presents himself, and through his speech reason appears—*logos phainesthai*.

But under the subtle false floor of this critique (indeed vital to it, but so frequently overlooked in the industrial deconstruction that swept through Anglo-American literature departments), Derrida destabilizes what exactly this "presence" itself might mean. At the very opening—that is, in the "Exergue"—of his major first work, *Of Grammatology*, Derrida sets out the implications of taking up the total "presence" of a concept—that is, thinking in terms of wholes and unities, rather than traces, overlaps, mixings—as the form of thought, science, and memory (as inscription, or writing).

> The idea of science and the idea of writing—therefore also of the science of writing—is meaningful for us only in terms of an origin and within a world to which a certain concept of the sign (later I shall call it *the* concept of sign) and a certain concept of the relationships between speech and writing, have already been assigned (1997, p. 4).

These "relationships" are those that fix this imagined presence of identity that speech idealizes onto writing—thinking writing, endlessly open to the next interpretation, as instead closed around *the* form of memory it *should* indicate. This is why Derrida has used logocentrism and phonocentrism at times interchangeably—working with the complicated translational slippages latent in the Greek *logos*, holding all of the differing "reason", "speech", and "discourse" together indissociably under the same ideal meaning. That the speaker must be proximate to the listener for their speech to be heard lends to the belief in their unified presence, collapsing all differences within "the" presentation under a single, conformist idea.

> This notion remains therefore within the heritage of that logocentrism which is also a phonocentrism: absolute proximity of voice and being, of voice and the meaning of being, of voice and the ideality of meaning. […] What is said of sound in general is a fortiori valid for the phonē by which, by virtue of hearing (understanding)-oneself-speak—an indissociable system—the subject affects itself and is related to itself in the element of ideality (1997, pp. 11–12).

This is reason's capture and production of ideas as memory, as the presence of speech to writing, compressed and marked as "*the* concept of sign". This is also marked by a particular, closed form of temporality, as we will see later when examining the narrator's and Swann's respective relationships to the Vinteuil sonata with reference to the slippage between performer and listener: Derrida also ties the "linearist concept of time" as "one of the deepest adherences of the modern concept of the sign to its own history"—a linearism "inseparable from phonologism" (1997, p. 72). This ordering of temporality and signification together on a linear plane asserts the presence of ideas (even and especially those *heard*), distinct and hermetic in their reasoned unfolding, as what falls under and coheres to the idea of "the" concept.

Derrida's position emerges from deep within the idealist-phenomenological tradition: it relies on thinking sensitively and actively with temporality and temporization, asking exactly how this linearism captures, or reduces, differences along every horizon of diminishing presence. He thus explores the presupposition of "*theoretical* mathematics" as a kind of sensible inscription (or "*graphie*"), which "already presupposes an identity, therefore an ideality, of its form, which in principle renders absurd the so easily admitted notion of the 'sensible signifier'" (1997, pp. 9–10). This complete

writing—in terms of its formal, signifying identity—repeats the misnomer of metaphysics' will-to-presence, a presence that may be absented but remembered and therefore repeated, made present again at will. For Derrida, this "ideality is the very form in which the presence of an object in general may be indefinitely repeated as the *same*," an "ideality [that] is the preservation or mastery of presence in repetition" (1973, pp. 9–10). Why can't repetition be absent, or different, in its resonance—just as the recalled past idea still comes to memory in a *different* present?

It is necessary to write that here we are dealing with and even deconstructing "*the* concept of sign": that is, not a concept of the almost-sign, or part of a concept of the almost sign, or (and here "indicative" (Derrida 1973, p. 40), deictic-nominalist language might begin to fail us) non-part of not-all of sign. The point here is that the *failure to become* the sign, the object, thing, sensation that might be presented (even to thought) under *the* concept of *the* sign is what is at issue. How to describe some-"thing" that is not quite a thing? Or what can only be named under that sign, thing, or name that it fails to be? Given that deconstruction's effort to destabilize "presence" is to gesture to signification's incompleteness, in what follows we will explore how Proust's *excess* of signification in his descriptions conversely works to undo this unified wholeness of ideality, gesturing to the productive unfinishedness of all sensation as temporality. This excess signifies, by its overflow, its incompleteness—it can never say *enough*. We see one consequence of this when the narrator's auto-affective attempt in one passage to be both performer and listener of Vinteuil's sonata breaks down into a meditation about the formation of the work of art through accidental, improvisatory gestures made possible only by the artist's self-alienation from the work. Before turning in earnest to Proust, we want to explore further complications of this non-concept of sign, which is both excessive and incomplete.

We might set out something like this non-unified, or at least not-totally-present-to-itself, sign using the figure of the *noēteon*. This term is raised in passing by Gilles Deleuze, who describes it as "that which can only be thought" (2001, p. 141), where his account of this kind of thought diverges from the memorial-semiotic metaphysical

tradition with the same force as Derrida, but in a seemingly different direction[2]. The *noēteon*, as what exceeds signification (as what "can *only* be thought") is therefore *not* the sign (and therefore not inscription or writing), but the apparition, the motivation *to* sense provoked through Being. As Elizabeth Grosz puts it, describing with it the heart of Deleuze's revision to phenomenology: "Sensations are mobile and mobilizing forces [… that are] not fully objective or measurable in a way that material objects are" (2008, p. 57). The (non)properties of a *noēteon* (what exceeds and precedes such objectivity or measurement) constitute thought as something implicated in relation to the material or external world, but not confined to its explicative forms. It resists all conformity to representation. *Noēteon* is merely an absent signifier turning us towards this sensation stripped of all intelligible media: it is, Deleuze writes, "not the intelligible, for this is still no more than the mode in which we think that which might be something other than thought, but the being of the intelligible as though this were both the final power of thought and the unthinkable" (2001, p. 141).

The distinction between event and object, quality and mediation, sensation and its carrier (or revision from the first to the second) is crucial for Deleuze. We are dealing thus not with "a sensible being but the being *of* the sensible" an inversion from sign as concept to sign as encounter. Deleuze describes this as "imperceptible", but "imperceptible precisely from the point of view of recognition", insofar as this sense breaks open a uniform, repeatable signifying schema and stands only for itself, imperceptible "within the context of a common sense to an object which also must be apprehended by other faculties" (2001, p. 140). What emerges instead is the being *of* the sensible, not constrained by the faculties of description or even memory, but the *noēteon* of thought (and *only* thought) at its different speeds and intensities. Hence why it is so difficult not only to describe, but even to conceive of (in terms of anamnestic memory or intentional recall): it may only be inferred, incompletely, by a sensibility imperceptible using the faculties of language, concept, or recognition.

[2] Patrick ffrench and Thomas Baldwin have recently suggested that Deleuze's reading of Proust offers a "way out of the sign", for thinking beyond the kind of bounded signification we are critiquing here. They argue for the importance of approaching "Deleuze's Proust from the angle of a dismantling of semiotics", and that, despite the title of Deleuze's book on Proust specifically referring to signs, "semiotics is there only for the purpose of its dissolution" (2021, p. 16).

Proust's attention to what resists or lies beneath these faculties, pursued through the length and style of his writing, might be an apt way to think of the intelligible *as though* it were the final power of thought and the unthinkable. By using language to direct thought to language's incompleteness, to what it cannot signify as it does, his writing is unusually sonic, not least when he turns his attention to describing, analyzing, and evoking pieces of music. His prose stretches the ideality and "presence" of indicative language, gesturing to what cannot be thought, or signified, through the concept of sign. Recent scholarship has drawn attention to this inverting, a-signifying power in general. Thomas Baldwin and Patrick ffrench have elucidated Deleuze's reading of Proustian "signs" as exceeding conceptualization, insofar as they "develop in different ways, obey different laws, and have different temporalities according to the world in which they arise" (2021, p. 17). These signs resist systematization, so "that the only unity at work in *À la recherche* is the unity of each multiple", unities that are "permitted to communicate transversally without suppressing their 'différence ou distance'" (2021, p. 19). Hannah Freed-Thall has described what she calls "a secondary shadow constellation" of signification and thought in the *Recherch*e emerging alongside each identified "assemblage of decipherable objects" (2009, p. 897). In contrast to the madeleine and the paving stones, one example Freed-Thall offers is Proust's description of "the wind in a chicken's feathers and the reflection of light on a tool-shed and a pond" (2015, p. 49). She argues that this belongs to "the de-individuating space of the 'quelconque'—the ordinary, undistinguished, or 'whatever'", and while it is tempting to see this as a simple opposition to those exemplary, "canonical" moments of the *Recherche*, it in fact sheds light on how the limits of description, utterance, and conceptuality make up part of the "whatever" of sensation. What emerges to thought where this cannot be named—be it in the ordinary, the excessive, or even its banal repetitions—is what is at issue when considering Proustian aesthetic experience and what we have termed above as its quietness.

Such "shadow constellations", or traffics of the inexpressible marked *by* the decipherable, permeate so many of Proust's narrator's theoretical digressions. Importantly, this aesthetic current is not limited to reflections on works of art. A gamut of Proustian insights, mobilizable but not expressible through the density of his style, frequently rely on this resistance to formalized logic. To take one example on the subject of diplomacy (though one could collect many more from accounts of social behavior,

politics, race, sexuality, even weather and fashion), consider the narrator's commentary on the Prince de Faffenheim-Munsterberg-Weiningen's many unsuccessful attempts to achieve his "only one remaining ambition in life, to be elected a corresponding member of the Academy of Moral and Political Sciences" (Proust 2003a, p. 254). The *Recherche*'s arch representative of the diplomatic arts, the duplicitous M. de Norpois, holds the key to this goal through his influence and connections. But despite the Prince's many grandiose attempts to secure M. de Norpois's favour, from glowing citations in a prominent political essay to arranging his receipt of the Order of Saint Andrew, Norpois indirectly and continually avoids offering his assurance—citing instead the candidature's uncertainty for vague reasons related to his voting colleagues' potential opinions. For Proust, this "system of inference […] the method of reading beneath superimposed symbols" (2003a, p. 257) resides not only at the heart of diplomatic conduct, but also at the heart of intelligence—or rather, the traffic of vital communications that do not conform to a logic, but run underneath it, incomplete and resisting total exemplification.

His narrator, focalizing closely on the career and inner tribulations of a minor character who was only recently introduced, develops this out of the Prince's insights. Suggesting that people "who follow professions with long-established codes of procedure, are, with their lack of intuition", less likely to perceive these sensations because they fail to improvise an *ongoing* interpretation of signs (that is, as unfinished or incomplete), he instead points us to such anti-logos operating on two very differently scaled planes.

> You usually have to descend to the category of "kept" persons, male or female, to find ulterior motives behind actions or words that are ostensibly innocent, for purposes of self-interest or survival. What man is ignorant of the fact that when a woman he is going to pay says to him: "Don't let's talk about money", the words need to be taken as a "silent bar", as they say in music, and that if, later on, she declares: "You make me too unhappy, you're always keeping things from me. I can't stand it any more", he needs to understand it as: "Someone else is offering her more?" (Proust 2003a, p. 257).

That "self-interest or survival" is governed by inarticulable laws, or rather, laws exceeding (and not simply diametrically) the logic one might discern in their intention, gestures to the diverse thinking *in* signs. The lover's doubt as to not only the intention articulated in the words, but what the "silent bar" might in fact be, where it can be limited

and conceptually signified—marked by the telling question mark after his *understanding* of "'Someone is offering her more?'"—points to such understanding's resistance to closure. This theme, especially when it comes to the impossible finitude of jealousy's signification, winds up dominating long sections of the *Recherche*, and it is important to identify its place *beyond* the limits of signification as closed concepts. The mobility of thought insofar as it is incomplete—that *the* concept of sign is only a reduction of its formless workings that appear to sense as long, ungraspable tails of "signs" and their "memory"—iterates through intensity, complicating the narrow reductions performed by intentional, whole-intending signification—the latter, so Proust intimates, being of a quality reserved for simple, or mechanical, intercourse.

That Proust compares this signification to a "'silent bar', as they say in music" is striking. Music is in fact an excellent example of signifying incompletion: we might do our best to capture it "on" a score, but this does not include all of the increments, slippages, and imprecise differences *within the "same"* note—especially when we consider timbre and other accidents of music-making in every present moment—emerging and disappearing upon each performance. These do not emerge "later", or along the same durational plane, but "within the" iteration, altering "it" in kind. While potentially repeating the mistake Derrida criticizes, of imagining some ideal and full presence within speech, sound, or music being prioritized over writing, what this attention raises is the *absence* of any total, repeatable presence. And what makes Deleuze's formula for the *noēteon* here more interesting than simply a myth of the world as representation is how thought *comes* to thinking—and what it says about its involuntary nature *beyond* enclosed, subjective memory-idealization. Deleuze approaches his divergent "image of thought" with a first assertion that upturns the expectations of a logocentric-subjective presence. "Something in the world forces us to think", he writes, describing this something as "an object not of recognition but of a fundamental *encounter*" (2001, p. 139), and thereby intimating a dispersal of the power of thought that suspends, and potentially renders irrelevant, an enclosed subjectivity *doing* the thinking. Deleuze describes this encounter as a "violence that forces thought", violence in the effect this has on the borders of conceptuality and identity. Reflecting on this encounter encourages us to consider the emergent being *of* the sensible, where the distinction between faculties (or between every "the" claiming indicative identity) wears away.

> Each faculty is unhinged, but what are the hinges if not the form of a common sense which causes all the faculties to function and converge? Each one, in its own order and on its own account, has broken the form of common sense which kept it within the empirical element of doxa, in order to attain both its "nth" power and the paradoxical element within transcendental exercise (2001, p. 141).

The faculties of thought, and indeed representational thought itself, are hinged to common sense or doxa as their reproducibility, their memorial "presence". The sensation is held in by conceptual hinges so as to be identifiable *as such*—as *the* object of memory or articulation (in the sense of its occupying an article). But sensation "itself" breaks with these forms in order to implicate "both its 'nth' power and the paradoxical element"—that is, not memory as conceptual forms hinged to their reproducibility, but the full intensity of the "whatever" that is only ever sensible once such hinges are removed.

It is important here to reiterate Deleuze's Bergsonism in order to think of memory and temporal experience not as representative pictures of "the past", but rather as a contractive, "sensitive plate" of intensity. "Intensity is the form of difference insofar as it is the reason of the sensible" (2001, p. 222), Deleuze writes; in other words, intensity adumbrates sensible difference, not "contrariety in quality". The best way to think of this is Deleuze's account of Bergsonian memory, as revelations of intensity that we then mark and reduce into concepts. For Deleuze, Bergson shows how the sensible is a *product* of intensity, that memory is not made up of re-membered pasts but rather the present's different arrangement through continuation. "The whole of our past is played, restarts, repeats itself, *at the same time* on all the levels that it sketches out" (1988, p. 61), he writes: this explains the present, which "*is not*; rather, it is pure becoming, always outside itself. It *is* not, but it acts. Its proper element is not being but the active or the useful" (1988, p. 56). This might seem a confused account of the present, which surely *is*, or represents all that *is* insofar as "*is*" is the essence of the present tense. But this is a tension tied to its relation to past and future: Deleuze's point is that the present is altogether different to these categories, to memory, and the relation is only one that we hinge it to. The remembered (anamnestic) past is as different to the present imperceptible as time: the present, in its pure flow, has no need for temporal categories. What we have instead is *the* present, complicated in and by itself—it is different from nothing, and thus undefinable. The unhinged past (the "whole of our past") is actually this present.

> We have great difficulty in understanding a survival of the past in itself because we believe that the past is no longer, that it has ceased to be. We have thus confused Being with being-present (1988, p. 55).

"Being" as (and only ever *as*) the present envelops apparent temporal orders as the being of the sensible, which, like being, *is not*. Instead, it streams through Being, all and forever at once, arranging and piqued by intensities—difference "itself", "the reason of the sensible".

The problem of temporal quantities—that cinematically, it feels impossible to live all of the "times" of our lives over again as memory, and hence why we think in terms of "essences" or contracted "ideas" standing in for the full duration of an event, a day, a sensation—is solved by Deleuze's Proust, who doesn't think memory in pieces or conceptually-bound "essences", but rather all at once, spiking and overflowing the narrow tip of the cone *that we call* the present. This tip of the cone contains the whole cone, much like how Proust's narrator describes a castle in the early "magic lantern" passage: "it was only a section of castle" (Proust 2003d, p. 13). Or, rather, "it was *only* a *section* of *castle*": fragmented and incomplete while pointing at the same time to the remains of a monument. This is why we describe aesthetic experience, and involuntary memory, using such terms—overwhelming, fleeting, ephemeral—because the communicative problem of explaining, of capturing these *necessarily* disjunctive temporalities (those overlapping or self-contradicting and therefore resisting a conformist whole of identity) encourages us to try to capture them under *the* sign that best represents all of their parts (but which necessarily, for this reason, discounts or excludes others as the sensible apportions difference).

Deleuze suggests that Proust's efforts to feed time back into his novel, his descriptions and characterizations (indeed, it's a struggle to identify anything to do with the Proustian enterprise that could be called "short", or reduced in form[3]), is aimed at

[3] Though Malcolm Bowie, with characteristic virtuosity, reminds us of Proust's attention to writing short, compacted ideas or passing scenes—that "brevity too is a Proustian watchword" (2001, p. 216). By including "fierce local intensities" and "micro-dramas taking place in a grandly unfolding festal pageant" (2001, p. 229), Proust's novel points to how the seemingly brief or ephemeral can unfurl rich complications for thought and imagination. According to Bowie, such temporal diversities, opening at times within single narrative episodes or observations, "introduce an extraordinary air of rhythmic variety and syncopation into the reader's experience of the book" (2001, p. 226)—an important observation when taking note of the novel's signifying potential.

returning us to the beginning of that road where thought made closer contact with Being—the being *of* the sensible, not its reduction into unthinking forms. He notices a corollary between Proust's thinking and that of "[c]ertain Neoplatonists", who "used a profound word to designate the original state that precedes any development, any deployment, any 'explication'; *complication*, which envelops the many in the One and affirms the unity of the multiple" (2000, p. 45). We could say that Proust's seemingly contradictory gestures to ecstatic, indescribable or involuntary experiences are interested in trying to explore complication without unfolding it as ex-*pli*-cation. And because Proust does so using language—which we naturally identify as an explicative medium, a communicative tool to (attempt to) codify and share inner sense—he instead works to pile description on top of itself, complicating its meanings within the folds of forgetting it necessarily bunches together. Deleuze explains this:

> The least we can say is that Charlus is complicated. But the word must be taken in its full etymological sense. Charlus's genius is to retain all the souls that compose him in the "complicated" state: this is how it happens that Charlus always has the freshness of a world just created and unceasingly emits primordial signs that the interpreter must decipher, that is, explicate (2000, p. 46).

Explication can operate as the opening and closure to sensation, but only if we remain open to signification as unfinished, as productively complicated. Such "primordial signs" can be opened by the confusion of the *noēteon* always foreign to "itself"—to its ideal identity, or self-enclosed and full presence. The complication of Proustian signs effects a violence—the involuntary re-direction of our understanding away from universal rules and toward the world's particularity—and reveals, according to Baldwin and ffrench, "singular events and betrayals of a deeper operation of incessant partitioning and division" (2021, p. 20). The "complicated", remaining undeciphered in—and indeed *because of*—the act of interpretation, motivates the Proustian search.

Thinking with aesthetic experience such as that opened up by Proust's writing allows us to resist all thinking about thought, or "philosophy", as a zero-sum game of "understanding", or of knowledge as a nameable, self-enclosed commodity. This may invite complications when it comes to expression—but these are precisely the complications that enliven Proust's novel and its contributions to thought. Ideas do not need to be contracted as representable forms, or "finished", to have valency. And for this

reason, it is interesting that the *petite phrase* of Vinteuil is itself contracted or extracted from a larger unfinished work. As we will see, the fragmented nature of this phrase plays a large part in Swann's and the narrator's responses to it at different points in the novel.

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In his *Recherche*, Proust describes his protagonists' experience of the same piece of music in different extensions—the "little phrase" of his composer Vinteuil, which we discover is an excerpt from his sonata, which eventually shows up again, in altered form, as a section from a larger septet. The forms this piece takes are meaningful for each iteration—where the degrees of "completeness" both project and constrain potential meaning. Perhaps the most interesting of these is the long passage towards the end of "Un Amour de Swann", where Swann is caught unawares, shocked by a chance encounter (for the second time, narratively speaking at least) with Vinteuil's little phrase, being performed at a soirée he is attending at Mme de Saint-Euverte's. Anxious to leave but detained by the beginning of the musical performance, Swann "was suffering at having to remain shut up among these people whose stupidity and absurd habits struck him all the more painfully since being unaware of his love, […] they made it appear to him as a subjective state which existed only for him, whose reality was confirmed for him by nothing outside himself" (Proust 2003d, p. 347). That Swann's suffering is a product of this seemingly inaccessible subjective closure, where his love is a state without existence for anyone outside of himself, illustrates its complex temporal or aconceptual reality. Moments before this, Swann's conversations are derailed by his fixation on relating details back to Odette, and thus extending the singularity of this love outward, to have it reduced by, or hinged to, its component contradictions. Failing to tie their frantic intensity back to things "outside himself", which may have worked to disperse them, Swann feels reduced to the painfully overwhelming uncertainty of a love that is singular, inexpressible, but thus potentially also inaccessible.

It is at this point that the musicians begin to play, and "before Swann had time to understand", he is overcome by "all the memories of the time when Odette was in love with him, which he had managed until now to keep out of sight in the deepest part of

himself" (Proust 2003d, p. 347). These memories of Odette's love are also memories of Swann's first time hearing the sonata. This, more than anything else, is why it becomes the "anthem of their love". In fact, the "first time" that we as readers hear about is actually his second time hearing the sonata, meaning that what initially seems like the first time is actually his first *recognition* of the sonata. Because it is not representational, and yet because it possesses a degree of ideality, sound and music play a crucial role in the formation and activation of memory. Sound is at once local and global, partial and universal, fragmentary and conceptual, aphoristic and systematic. But there are tensions, and specifically there is a tension between ideality and iterativity, as well as the timbre or grain of the instrument, not to mention ambient sounds in the room, mirrored in while being complicated by the complex status that the sonata and its various performances have even just for Swann. Here emerges a complex dialectic between presence and absence, form and sensation—how we might understand re-membering and "forgetting". Swann, hearing the sonata for a second time, has *forgotten* the first time he had heard it, and this first time only emerges as a memory through the writing of the second. And interestingly, Proust frames this using language's signaling insufficiency, its placeholding that fails to account for the (involuntary, in this case) return of memory in its local, singular intensity, but for reason of this failure is spurred to new coordinates.

> In place of the abstract expressions "the time when I was happy", "the time when I was loved", which he had often used before now without suffering too much, for his mind had enclosed within them only spurious extracts of the past that preserved nothing of it, he now recovered everything which had fixed forever the specific, volatile essence of that lost happiness (2003d, pp. 347–348).

Following this, the text goes on to list extensive (in the context of a popular novel), but never developed, examples of these "times", these minor, symbolic "spurious extracts". The past, which is never *passed*, but lying enfolded in the complex contractions of the human psyche (that do not *reduce*, but "complicate" through time) as it is enacted through Being, reconfigures as intensity. The "specific, volatile essence" is the present, which is all we live through and therefore can never access, enacting and complicating intensities. Proust writes Swann's past in connection with the present of the sonata, the duration of Swann's listening, which explodes both backwards into "memory" and forwards into productive re-membering.

In doing so, it undoes and repositions this fixing, unspooling *the* composite signifier of what a "memory" was, and throws its aesthetic experience into the "present" of the singularity intensified by perception, by its "violence that forces thought". Pulling back and peeking through the blinds that organize "conceptual" memory, this "specific, volatile essence" can only be represented indexically, as Proust does with Swann's list of these "times". Rather than treat art as a present(able) representation of these indices, Proust's citation of Swann's contributive events mixes these colors in a rapid passage over the reader, compacting, in some ways flavoring, but also (and merely) interacting with the reader's *own* sensational index: in this way, the novel becomes like the sonata, putting us on the path to the complications of Being, of the present, because it asks us to resist completing these *as* finished, *as* concepts and reducing their potential for further "spurious extracts". It places us at the cliff of lost time, inviting a search, but only insofar as it will remain unpresentable, undertaken through a present that *is not*.

This is perhaps why the narrator frames his account of this intersection between Swann's experience and memory as, from the outset, resisting precise philosophical explication. It is as if, though "failing" to theorize this moment, Swann is nonetheless eminently aware of the tensions outlined above, and therefore his account of the sonata is also an account of these tensions, an account that embodies these tensions and mimetically evokes them, in always-different and prismatic forms, for each reader. "Doubtless the form in which it had codified them could not be resolved into reasoned arguments" (2003d, p. 351), Proust writes, acknowledging that to organize these into something communicable would be to mangle them, to strip them of their abstract sensuality. But while in the accepted discourses of this kind of precision and "reason" acknowledging this might be the point to pack up and move on, this is where Proust's narrator, or Swann, or the impulse affecting itself on Swann, wants to take the perception off from. It is because here, pressing up against the ugliness and boredom of representational "codes" and concepts, one might be forced to think beyond them.

Hence why "musical motifs", in this involuntary and sensational guise, are described as being for Swann "as actual ideas, of another world, of another order, ideas veiled in shadows, unknown, impenetrable to the intelligence". Musical "motifs" (themselves not limited to the representative or notational forms but revealing themselves unpredictably and trans-figurally as "actual ideas") can be written, *implied* in this manner

not to capture some conceptual form or essence, but to gesture to that sensible but aconceptual complication of what can only be thought, *noēteon*. And as Proust's narrator, Swann, and their reader are enveloped in this hybridity, the *Recherche* opens out a long passage about how the apparently fixed forms of representation—language, musical notes and their material instantiation (in the form of a key- or finger-board, for instance), and even the temporal re-presentation of the sensation "itself" as concept—only encourage us to turn away from the endlessly productive qualities of thought. What follows is only an excerpt from this beguiling passage: Swann

> knew that even the memory of the piano falsified still further the perspective in which he saw the elements of the music, that the field open to the musician is not a miserable keyboard of seven notes, but an immeasurable keyboard still almost entirely unknown on which, here and here only, separated by shadows thick and unexplored, a few of the millions of keys of tenderness, of passion, of courage, of serenity which compose it, each as different from the others as one universe from another universe, have been found by a few great artists who do us the service, by awakening in us something corresponding to the theme they have discovered, of showing us what richness, what variety, is hidden unbeknownst to us within that great unpenetrated and disheartening darkness of our soul which we take for emptiness and nothingness. Vinteuil had been one of those musicians. In his little phrase, although it might present an obscure surface to one's intelligence, one sensed a content so solid, so explicit, to which it gave a force so new, so original, that those who had heard it preserved it within themselves on the same footing as the ideas of the intellect (2003d, pp. 351–352).

We may take those universes hidden within the depths of our soul to be "emptiness and nothingness", but it is because the sonic phrase, the corresponding theme, can unlace some of the concepts and forms that extract and throw away what settles beneath these depths that their imprints and inexpressible preservations resume their intellectual footing. It is precisely because Swann can only index or codify these as obscure surfaces that we might be invited into their complicated potency, gesturing to—despite, and indeed *for* its Proustian excess—how much more there is to think beyond the miserable keyboard of seven notes, the limited million or so words of a *Recherche*. It is precisely the overturning of this idea of the "bad infinity," to evoke Hegel, that will concern us in what follows.

Swann's experience here exemplifies Deleuze's suggestion (from his thinking with Proust) that "there is only the work of art that lets us regain time". Something about

this, and certain phrases in Swann's account given above, may remind us of the narrator's aesthetic theory, and the way in which it relies on analogy to elevate itself to the philosophical. But this aesthetic-Proustian time that Deleuze refers to is not that of the dilettante or sentimentalist, but rather the *experience* of an aesthetic present exceeding, blowing the hinges off, the concept of sign in its mundanity, reproducibility, even universality. "What art regains for us is time as it is coiled within essence, as it is born in the world enveloped by essence, identical to eternity", writes Deleuze, a time coiled within essences, but escaping from them as these rare, bewildering and inexpressible experiences. Such time resists *chronos*, reproducibility and indeed perceptibility: it is the "nth power and paradoxical element" of sensation, sensationally regained, but only as "situated in a primordial complication, a veritable eternity, an absolute original time" (2000, p. 46). These transcendent contradictions, enveloping surfaces and sounds, expressions and darknesses, and drawing them beyond their formalities, are drawn out of us by the intermittencies of art, as it exacts "thought" from thinking.

*

As already mentioned, the narrator's aesthetic theory by the end of the novel is confident and developed. However, an earlier passage—where he hears the Vinteuil septet in *La Prisonnière*—gives us some initial gestures toward this theory. Mirroring the narrator's theory, and pointing us to the place of music in particular, Samuel Beckett writes: "Music is the catalytic element in the work of Proust. It asserts to his unbelief the permanence of personality and the reality of art. It synthesises the moments of privilege and runs parallel to them" (1931, p. 71). Though it is curious that we should imagine the narrator as primary with regards to a thinking of music within the *Recherche*, the scholarship has established, and reinforced, a rift between the narrator and Swann, a rift that exists critically at least as far back as Beckett's *Proust*. This rift does not come from nowhere; it is suggested in many places throughout the *Recherche*. Swann is naive, attentive only to love affairs and his own place in the social hierarchy; he "uses" the sonata—eventually domesticating it, along with Odette—to achieve a feeling he is after once he re-hears the sonata in "Un amour de Swann" and recognizes what that feeling is. On the other hand, the narrator is able to systematize his experience of Vinteuil's music—

only after a long process of working through his own Swann-like follies, of course—in a way that anticipates his final aesthetic theory. Swann has no theory, and this seems to seal the verdict. Beckett tells us that Swann "identifies the 'little phrase' of the Sonata with Odette, spatialises what is extraspatial, establishes it as the national anthem of his love" (1931, p. 72). Here we can see the anti-analogical bias that the narrator avows, though it is not always clear how he avoids analogy, or if such a thing is even possible, when encountering such pieces of music. At any rate, we cannot take for granted the Proustian disavowal of analogy, at least not before we examine what analogies (and metaphors) are mobilized in response to scenes of music.

In *La Prisonnière*, before he hears the septet, the narrator plays Vinteuil's sonata for himself at home while Albertine is out (Proust 2003c, pp. 141–145). The narrator playing the sonata for himself has odd echoes of Odette playing it for Swann—a crucial passage that we will discuss below—except that this time the narrator is performer and audience at once, perhaps hinting at an auto-affective dimension of his aesthetic sensibilities. This sets his attitude apart from Swann's: the latter's being incomplete requires the incompleteness of an other, which is related to his tendency to liken women to his favorite works of art in order to desire them. While it would be possible to read Swann's lack as a sort of failure, there is something of the virtual about this, an acknowledgement that the experience of a work of art and of desire alike are interstitial, subject to gaps. This would mean, in turn, that the narrator's idea that he can overcome his incompleteness through theory and art possesses its own sort of lack or infelicity.

In an immediate, literal sense, the scenario of the narrator playing the sonata to himself represents a shift in distance that affects and makes possible listening: as an audience member, Swann, no matter how close to the piano, has more distance than the narrator in two ways. First, physically—even if he is sitting on the bench beside Odette he is in a different space than her—and second, performatively. To hear the sounds one is making, versus those that another is making, is to participate differently in the economy of listening. This is not to say, however, that what has above been termed his auto-affective sensibility is triumphant here—far from it. And as we will see, even the ways that chance intervenes in his playing are more complicated than he can account for.

While playing the sonata—beginning from a random place, it should be noted—the narrator thinks about "the old days at Combray [...] when I myself had wanted to be

an artist" (Proust 2003c, pp. 141–142). Following closely on this, however, he hears something new in the sonata: "sometimes a shift of attention casts a new light on things we have known for a long time, and shows us aspects of them that we had never noticed before" (Proust 2003c, p. 142). The element of recognition is important here, and seemingly involuntary. At this point the narrator has heard the sonata any number of times; and yet, even playing it himself, he encounters new dimensions to it: hints of Wagner's *Tristan*, a recognition that launches him into a profound consideration of how the finishing of a work—no matter how thoroughly structured, how masterful, how *complete*—nevertheless may be improvisatory. As examples, he uses Wagner's *Ring* cycle, Michelet's prefaces, and Balzac's *Comédie humaine*. About Balzac in particular, he says that the pseudo-unity of his works is "perhaps all the more real for being an afterthought, born in a moment of enthusiasm when it is discovered between parts which only need to come together" (Proust, 2003c, p. 144). In other words, the artist himself is occasionally, by chance, able to see his works as both familiar and foreign, thereby seeing the way to a new arrangement, a new unity, or even simply a paratextual element that breathes new life into them. This passage from the novel is significant because, though it does contain a theory of the narrator's, it concerns incompleteness, it involves imaginary scenes of authorship, and, finally, it arises while the narrator is playing music. This passage suggests that the narrator's theories, even when they account for indecision, randomness, and incompleteness, themselves are subject to those forces.

When the narrator arrives at the Verdurins'—in whose company Swann heard the sonata many years before—the concert he hears features a new work by Vinteuil: an unpublished work, his septet. Initially, he finds himself "in unknown territory" and wonders who the composer is (Proust 2003c, p. 228). But quickly, within the space of less than a page, he recognizes something:

> just so I found my bearings in this music which was new to me, and recognized the landscape of the Vinteuil sonata; and, more wonderful than any girl, the little phrase, wrapped, caparisoned in silver, streaming with brilliant sonorities light and soft as scarves, came towards me, still recognizable under these new ornaments. My joy at meeting it again was increased by the familiar, friendly tone in which it spoke to me, so persuasive, so simple, yet allowing its rich, shimmering beauty to unfold in all its splendour. Its purpose this time, however, was simply to show me the way, a different path from that of the sonata, for this was a different, hitherto unperformed work by Vinteuil, where he had simply chosen to make an allusion (explained at this point by a note in the programme which we should have had before us) by introducing,

> just for a moment, the little phrase. Having been recalled for a moment in this way, it disappeared (Proust 2003c, pp. 228–229).

A few things should be noted here. Regarding Vinteuil's work, the fact of including the same "little phrase" in now a second piece of music points to an iterative quality in his composition, not unlike the iterativity of the works of an impressionist painter like Monet. The narrator is listening in time, and first recognizes the sonata, only for it to veer away and become another work entirely. And in Vinteuil the modularity of these compositions serves as a basis for two other modes of iteration. First are the necessary imperfections, varied dynamics, and timbral shifts that occur when live music is performed in different settings and by different musicians. Second is the ambient makeup of sound in the room where the music is being performed: people coughing, shifting in their seats, talking, or noises from outside. Perhaps the little phrase is a refrain not only for Swann, but for Vinteuil himself: something that re-emerges from time to time not only in his work, but in his life itself, making its inclusion in discrete compositions a matter of necessity rather than recycling.

As far as the narrator's recognition here—which instantly is narrativized, as he personifies the little phrase in the fashion of the genie in the *Arabian Nights*—it points to a complicated ideality of music. The little phrase is "recognisable in this new guise," that is, audible even with a new arrangement of instruments, perhaps with a new pacing or tempo, a new voice or set of voices. Furthermore, as he is listening in time—and, what's more, in a necessarily ephemeral performance that lends emphasis to the subjective nature of listening and not only to the objective, ideal quality of the work—the fact that he recognizes the sonata as if the septet were an adaptation only to have it turn away directly engages the phenomenon of memory as it works both internal to the narrative and on the readerly level, as we are confronted with the various resonances between Swann's and the narrator's encounters with Vinteuil's music.

Ironically, the septet is an unfinished work, compiled from Vinteuil's notes by a friend of his daughter—the same friend with whom the narrator caught the daughter in a scene of perverse passion earlier in the novel. This is another reminder of the theme of incompleteness, as well as how it cuts across the registers of art and life, mediated by

contingency and accident. Engaging in a similar cross-modal philosophizing as in the earlier passage on Wagner, Michelet, and Balzac, the text reads:

> Each great artist seems to be the citizen of an unknown homeland which even he has forgotten, different from the land from which another great artist will soon set sail for the earth. At most, Vinteuil seemed to have got nearer to this homeland in his last works. The atmosphere in them was not the same as in the sonata, the questioning phrases had become more pressing, more uneasy, the answers more mysterious; the damp breezes of its morning and evening seemed to exercise an influence even on the strings of the instruments. Morel was playing wonderfully, yet the sounds issuing from his violin seemed to me strangely piercing, even shrill. This sharpness was pleasing and one seemed to hear in it, as one does in certain voices, a kind of moral quality, as if of superior intelligence. But it could also be shocking. When an artist's vision of the universe changes, becomes purer, closer to the memory of the lost homeland, it is natural that that should be reflected in a general alteration of sound quality in the musician, as of colour in the painter.
>
> In any case, the most intelligent part of the audience understands, for it would later be said that Vinteuil's last works were his most profound. Now there was no programme here, no title to allow one to form an intellectual judgment. So one simply guessed that this was a transposition, into the realm of sound, of profundity (Proust 2003c, p. 235).

A sort of Proustian aesthetic dialectics continues to infect the text here: zig-zagging back and forth between metaphor and figurative language (which, though Beckett accuses Swann of this, is an instance of the narrator "spatialis[ing] what is extraspatial") to more direct descriptions of the music, the mediating force seems to be the atmosphere, which is again imaginary, a *scene* cooked up to account for the actual compositional alterations. And these changes affect the actual performance, perhaps giving the reason for Morel's shrill playing, whose harshness itself opens onto a further engagement with the dialectic in a stylistic sense.

Also at issue in this passage is the ability to sense the artist's vision. For as much as the narrator's theory seeks to articulate certain truths through a discourse on art, here he admits that he has run up against a task for which there is no model, no model on which to base an "intellectual judgment". This raises the question of origin, and its importance for not only our engagement with art in general but also of music in particular. In "*Archephonai*: The Dangers of Music", James Martell, taking a cue from Deleuze and Guattari, writes of the deep linkages between death, birth, and sound:

> These "original sounds" explain that experience we get when we fall for a song, thinking we not only have heard it before, but that it had always existed for us, perhaps was even made—as our own original sounds, our own private, idiomatic ritournelle—only for us. Perhaps,

> this desire and originary musical fantasy, in its foretaste of disappearance, is the secret of music as Deleuze (and Guattari) saw it, the open and loud dangerous secret of the desire and taste it gives to us all, of and for death (2021, pp. 226–227).

The narrator several times throughout the *Recherche* expresses a willingness to sacrifice himself or, at best, an indifference to death in the face of certain ephemeral experiences. Music, as a form of expression that tends to escape our understanding, not only gives rise to such experiences, but also serves as another, creative way of responding to them, not unlike the "babble" or indeed singing that Freed-Thall highlights in the face of certain moments where the narrator is overwhelmed, as in the above-cited chicken example. If we can speak of "original sounds" that point us toward our imagined birth as an origin, they point us also toward an extreme limit, the "final power of thought and the unthinkable", even our own death. In *Music and Belonging between Revolution and Restoration*, Naomi Waltham-Smith conceives of music "as a Derridean trace that refers to itself as a trace, and in doing so refers to other traces. There is not a choice but a complex solidarity between auto- and hetero-reference, between inside and outside" (2017, p. 14). In other words, in its originary nature, music both *is* and *is about*. This is why the narrator imagines a state of intense feeling in response to the atmosphere and sounds from the street earlier in *La Prisonnière*, for instance, in terms of an internal violin[4]. Such "performances" are both themselves *and* referential to the impossible moments of birth and death. And as such, they are transversal, splitting apart conceptual essences and modelling their fragments into plastic, self-contradictory intensities. In this sense the aesthetic experience of music is like Deleuze's account of the present, which *is not*, insofar as it envelops *and* externalizes all Being.

After the septet's *andante* ends and the musicians take a short break, we are immediately thrust back into the world of social hierarchies, and while he speaks with some attendees, the narrator has a hard time adjusting once more to this way of relating:

> what was I to make of their words, which like all spoken human words seemed so meaningless in comparison with the heavenly musical phrase that had just been occupying me? I was really like an angel fallen from the delights of Paradise into the most insignificant reality. And just as certain creatures are the last examples of a form of life which nature has

[4] For a discussion of this passage see Bryan Counter, *Four Moments of Aesthetic Experience: Reading Huysmans, Proust, McCarthy, and Cusk*, Chapter 2.

> abandoned, I wondered whether music were not the sole example of the form which might have served - had language, the forms of words, the possibility of analysing ideas, never been invented - for the communication of souls. Music is like a possibility which has never been developed, humanity having taken different paths, those of language, spoken and written. But this return to the unanalysed was so intoxicating that on leaving its Paradise contact with other, more or less intelligent beings seemed to me extraordinarily insignificant (Proust 2003c, p. 237).

Here he explicitly acknowledges the peculiar dynamic that occurs when we hear music: since music does not signify, since it is not of the realm of representation, since it is so intensely affective, it offers a more direct form of communication: it centers and disperses identities as it remodels them in its unique timbre. Following from this, Proust allows for the proliferation of representations in a bid to emphasize the impossibility of capturing what is proper to, and evoked by, music as an artform. This is a profoundly *philosophical* way of conceiving music and communication, and besides echoing Swann's distaste for the stupidity of his fellow soirée-goers in years past, these lines follow closely on Schopenhauer's account of music: "it exercises so powerful an effect within us, is understood so deeply and entirely by us as a wholly universal language whose clarity exceeds even that of the intuitive world itself [...]. [M]usic must in some sense relate to the world as presentation to presented, as copy to original" (2010, p. 283)[5]. Though he acknowledges that it cannot be proven, Schopenhauer calls music "the copy of an original that cannot itself ever be directly presented" (2010, p. 284).

If there is a difference between Swann and the narrator, then, it is arguably not quite a difference in principle. The narrator's "return to the unanalysed" is, nevertheless, analyzed and abstracted into a systematic theory that is personally motivated by his search for and research into the workings of time. Contrasted to this analysis of the unanalyzed and unanalyzable, Swann's behavior around the sonata suggests an immersion in the unanalyzed, one that both anticipates and clarifies many of the narrator's statements about the aesthetic.

[5] Schopenhauer also writes: "In every age, people have played music without being able to give an account of it: content with an immediate understanding of music, people did without an abstract conceptualization of this immediate understanding" (2010, p. 284).

In a recent essay, David Bather Woods reminds us of Proust's familiarity with Schopenhauer by pointing out that the *Recherche* not only refers to the philosopher twice, but in fact features an early passage that makes reference to the "Volonté en soi" or "Will-in-Itself". Woods lingers on this phrase, which is notable because it comes in the context of Swann listening to Odette perform the Vinteuil sonata on the piano. As Woods puts it, Swann tends to disagree with Schopenhauer, since for the former "music [...] evokes something personal, private, and local" rather than what is eternal and unchanging (2023, p. 385). In other words, whereas for Schopenhauer music and the world are analogical because each are copies of the Will, Swann's experience of the sonata evokes his "own reminiscence on the scenes of his early courtship with Mme Swann, which was set to the tunes of Vinteuil", a fact that Woods finds "ironic", given Swann's knowledge about art and status as an aficionado (2003, p. 385). Woods's gloss on Schopenhauer and his influence on Proust is instructive: "The truths that music reveals are [...] deep and timeless; it is not essentially evocative of specific times and places, as it is for Swann. [...] [I]n Swann's case, whenever he hears the Vinteuil sonata, it only brings *his* life flooding back to him, rather than life itself" (2003, p. 386). But there is more to this. Can Swann's life and life itself be opposed so easily? However faithful we want to be to Schopenhauer's discourse on music, to oppose his vision of the world to Swann's then-naïve experience of the sonata is as hasty as to take the narrator's "refusal" of analogy, and therefore his final aesthetic theory, at face value. More closely examining Swann's reminiscence is worthwhile, as it helps uncover what is at play in and beyond this opposition.

In the novel's second volume, we have a scene of aesthetic education that brings Swann and the narrator together around the sonata. Describing, in the iterative mode, various days spent with the Swanns, the narrative shifts into an account of Odette playing the Vinteuil sonata, "the part of the Vinteuil sonata with the little phrase that Swann had once loved so much":

> Listening for the first time to music that is even a little complicated, one can often hear nothing in it. And yet, later in life, when I had heard the whole piece two or three times, I found I was thoroughly familiar with it. So the expression 'hearing something for the first time' is not inaccurate. If one had distinguished nothing in it on the real first occasion, as one thought, then the second or the third would also be first times; and there would be no reason to understand it any better on the

> tenth occasion. What is missing the first time is probably not understanding, but memory (Proust, 2003b, p. 105).

With an implied nod to the story of Swann's earliest encounter(s) with the sonata, the narrator here elaborates some of the phenomenological aspects of listening to and comprehending music over time, acknowledging the iterative quality not only of music but also of our listening, our becoming familiar with particular pieces of music. If we can have many "first times" with music, we might perhaps preserve the wonder and the experience of not being overly studied in our listening. A few pages later, after an extended meditation about the sonata in which it is likened to "those indistinct fragments of a building which are all one can make out in the misty distance" (Proust 2003b, p. 106), we see what is perhaps the real rift between Swann and the narrator:

> 'That sonata of Vinteuil's is nice, isn't it?' Swann said to me. 'That moment of nightfall under the trees, when the violin arpeggios make everything feel cool. You must admit, it's very pretty. It's captured the whole static quality of moonlight, which is moonlight's most basic quality. It's not surprising that a sunlight-treatment such as my wife is taking at the moment should act on the muscles, given that moonlight prevents leaves from moving. That's what's so neatly caught by that little phrase - the Bois de Boulogne in a catatonic trance. It's even more striking by the seaside, because then you've got the muted responses of the waves, and they can be heard quite distinctly of course, since nothing else can move. In Paris it's just the opposite: merely a strange glow, barely noticeable, on the fronts of the great buildings, and that faint glare in the sky, like the reflection from a house on fire, colourless and dangerless, that hint of some immense but banal happening somewhere... I must say, though, that the little phrase, the whole sonata, for that matter, does take place in the Bois de Boulogne - I mean, in the gruppetto you can clearly hear someone's voice saying, '"There's almost enough light to read the paper by!"' (Proust 2003b, pp. 108–109).

The narrator reads these descriptions—decodes them—as referring to "the whole springtime of that past year which, in a fever of sorrow, he [Swann] had been too hapless to savour" (Proust 2003b, p. 109). We may judge him correct insofar as the work of involuntary memory grants us access to the unperceived of a past time. But his assessment of Swann's speech reads as somewhat pathologizing, with a dismissiveness that is heightened by the domestic banter that follows upon it. What we can sense *within it*, listening beyond the obscure surfaces presented by this passage, are the complicated ideas of the intellect, *noēteon*, that exceed formalist capture. If we resist resolving these codes

into reasoned arguments, we might trace for ourselves some of Swann's catalepsis, and the incomplete potential flowing out of the "music" of this passage.

In light of what we have argued thus far, there is something timeless, virtual, incomplete, and inarticulable that inheres in such descriptions as Swann's. If an abstraction is to be timeless, it cannot be so over and above an image—for such abstractions will always by their very nature be articulable only as and through images: the image of the eternal self, for example, that emerges in the narrator's aesthetic theory to explain the phenomenon of involuntary memory. Opposing the abstract and the concrete faces the threat of aligning the abstract, yet again, with the bad infinite, and risks losing sight of the fact that the subjective (for instance, Swann's memory that might simply be imagination) is imbricated with the impersonal. The asignifying nature of music and of sound at large leaves this possibility open, and at the same time demands that we respond to its call as it reaches us: resonant, pensive, aconceptual. What enlivens sound and makes it sensible (rather than "meaningful") is contradiction, which is mirrored in the dialectical task of tracing it out in thought. That the narrator returns to a moment of onrushing Swannian scenes, a seemingly meaningless (but nonetheless evocative) codex of "obscure surfaces" here is telling. That they are reported *to* the narrator, to us, included in the text as an incomplete signifier jutting out of its reading only to be folded back into it, is telling as well. The *Recherche* is replete with these unfinished excurses, and their aesthetic impulse elucidates our suggestion that knowledge might be more productively entered into as involuntary—not as *a* memory or concept, but as a time that is, always incompletely, complicated.

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