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Swann, Vinteuil et Marcel, et la mémoire involontaire

Joseph S. Jenkins

“La petite phrase” from Vinteuil’s Sonata in F Sharp follows the movements of Swann’s love for Odette in *Un Amour de Swann*. The Phrase is also a figure through which *A la Recherche du temps perdu* performs both the movements of involuntary memory and the powerful images this memory can unveil. Swann’s revelations regarding Odette’s love, occasioned by a performance of the Sonata at the Sainte-Euverte (Guermantes) reception, parallel the narrator’s (Marcel’s) ecstatic realization, recounted in the work’s final volume, of the nature of artistic creation and his own vocation as a writer.

Marcel there “finds” that episodes of involuntary memory liberate the essence of things and thus make possible the work of artistic creation. A subject accidentally experiences a sensation similar to one experienced by that subject in its past; not only is the memory of that past sensation involuntarily stimulated, but so are the memories of sensations contiguous at that prior point in time. Because the subject’s perspective on all these prior sensations is one of extra- or a-temporality (it experiences them vividly—*as present*, but not *in the present*) the “reality” of prior impressions may be perceived. Unlike the *moi* of the temporal present, this essential, atemporal *moi* perceives “reality” (including its own) free of concerns for utilitarian means and ends (III, 872), the vicissitudes of the future, and death (873).

For this Marcel of the final volume, “reality” and the aesthetic ideal are practically identical: both are antidotes for the *ennui mondain* that is chronic in this text:

[J]’avais pu trouver le monde et la vie ennuyeux parce que je les jugeais d’après des souvenirs sans vérité, alors que j’aurais un tel appétit de vivre maintenant que venait de renaître en moi, à trois reprises [de mémoires involontaires], un véritable moment du passé. (872)

This moment of truth unleashes so strong a desire that its superlative importance cannot be denied. Marcel expresses no doubt that uncovering subjective “first impressions” may perhaps be less important than engaging in acts of direct political significance. For Marcel, political engagement is just an excuse to avoid more difficult work—that of plumbing the depths of the atemporal *moi* (878). It is those who plumb these depths who are rewarded. When impressions of the atemporal *moi* are discovered, intense (but ephem-

eral) joy, pleasure, felicity, beauty are achieved; the work of the artist then is to give expression to these impressions, to convert them to their spiritual equivalents (878).

Marcel speaks of an internal book of hieroglyphic characters, of unknown signs. Reading this book is an act of creation. But the book is relevant beyond the individual subject into which it is incised. The very fact that impressions leave their trace in the stuff of a subjectivity is the guarantee of their authenticity (878-79). Authentic traces mark a broader truth, a shared type of emotional experience, that is common to a segment of humanity, yet is beyond the power of logic to convey (880).

These revelations are occasioned in Marcel by an unprecedented multiple episode of involuntary memory that occurs in the final volume (*Le temps retrouvé*). We are invited there to consider Marcel's conclusions regarding involuntary memory in conjunction with the story of Swann's love recounted earlier in *Un Amour de Swann*:

Je sentais bien que la déception du voyage, la déception de l'amour n'étaient pas des déceptions différentes, mais l'aspect varié que prend, selon le fait auquel il s'applique, l'impuissance que nous avons à nous réaliser dans la jouissance matérielle, dans l'action effective. Et, repensant à cette joie extra-temporelle causée, soit par le bruit de la cuiller, soit par le goût de la madeleine, je me disais: "Était-ce cela, ce bonheur proposé par la petite phrase de la sonate à Swann qui s'était trompé en l'assimilant au plaisir de l'amour et n'avait pas su le trouver dans la création artistique . . . ? (877)

The happiness missed by Swann is that of artistic creation. Marcel will not repeat this mistake. Since Swann's story constitutes the past in the universe of this work, a retracing of this textual regression/deferral allows us to follow not only Swann's various experiences of subjective impression (including the actions of temporality on their significance) but also the text's performance of such impressions (its simulation of them in the reader). Both for Swann and the reader, the impressions of certain moments may be re-read through the perspective of others.

The reader's first exposure to the Phrase is in a scene at the Verdurin *arriviste* salon. Swann has been seated next to Odette, the pianist has been introduced, yet somehow between paragraphs we have missed the concert entirely (I, 207-08). We are told instead that Swann, after the music has been played, is extremely pleasant with the pianist because of an experience he has had with this music at a previous party. The bulk of the text's treatment of the Sonata in this scene concerns the impressions it made on Swann on that prior occasion. We shall see that it is those impressions that allow the Vinteuil Sonata to become the "hymn national" of Swann's love for Odette. As Marcel

states in the final volume, “les choses . . . deviennent en nous quelque chose d’immatériel, de même nature que toutes nos préoccupations ou nos sensations de ce temps-là, et se mêlent indissolublement à elles” (III, 885).

At this prior party, Swann begins by appreciating only the material qualities of the Sonata’s sound (I, 208), but he then experiences the Phrase as something other than this:

Mais à un moment donné, sans pouvoir nettement distinguer un contour, donner un nom à ce qui lui plaisait, charmé tout d’un coup, il avait cherché à recueillir la phrase ou l’harmonie—il ne savait lui-même—qui passait et qui lui avait ouvert plus largement l’âme, comme certaines odeurs de roses circulant dans l’air humide du soir ont la propriété de dilater nos narines. (208-09)

This opening of Swann’s soul upon hearing the Phrase is similar to the making accessible of truths by involuntary memory (as described in the final volume). Just as the Phrase is separate from the material qualities of the music, so are these emotional truths ideal, inaccessible to the earthly, utterly non-transcendental mechanics of logic.

The impression of the music on Swann is confused, irreducible to any other. Sensations formed by a part of the Phrase are quickly submerged in the tones following. The text marks Swann’s attempts to remember the Phrase, which consists no longer of music itself but is rather an architecture of thought designed to contain it (209). The music itself, however, prior to these attempts (such priority established by the use of the past perfect verb tense), proposes to Swann certain manners of voluptuousness that he has never before considered, that he feels can be made known to him only through the Phrase. Swann feels for the Phrase a profound new love (211).

The text here gives a description of the Phrase’s rhythm that can be read retrospectively (once the remainder of *Un Amour de Swann* has been internalized) as a musical metaphor for Swann’s love for Odette:

D’un rythme lent elle le [Swann] dirigeait ici d’abord, puis là, puis ailleurs, vers un bonheur noble, inintelligible et précis. Et tout d’un coup, au point où elle était arrivée et d’où il se préparait à la suivre, après une pause d’un instant, brusquement elle changeait de direction, et d’un mouvement nouveau, plus rapide, menu, mélancolique, incessant et doux, elle l’entraînait avec elle vers des perspectives inconnues. (210)

So too does Swann’s love for Odette (in the pages that follow) begin at a slow rhythm. The happiness toward which this love first moves is noble, unintelligible, and precise, but the reader cannot yet know this. Only retrospectively, after the episode of the Sainte-Euverte reception, will the Phrase have performed (for Swann, for three hundred bystanders indifferent to Swann’s

particular case, and for the reader as well) the importance, the dignity, the “charmes d’une tristesse intime” (349), like Swann’s love for Odette, regardless of its seeming lack of logic. Likewise will the change in direction of Swann’s love, adumbrated here in this musical metaphor, later be clear: the adjectives “rapide, menu, mélancolique, incessant et doux” will all find their justification in the story of Swann’s jealousy. And the remarks in the final volume on Swann’s mistaken impressions concerning the Phrase will have all the more force because the reader, like Swann himself, once deprived of a perspective gained through time, will him(her)-self not have been able to read the first time all the signs contained in the Phrase.

At the prior party, the Phrase raises in Swann new hopes of rejuvenation, of his setting and striving for ideal goals long forgotten. Swann has previously taken to the habit “de se réfugier dans des pensées sans importance qui lui permettaient de laisser de côté le fond des choses” (210). This habit is not unlike those of the realist novelists and political activists of whom Marcel complains in the last volume. Neither they nor Swann have engaged in the artistic work of exploring this “fond.” Even Swann’s vision of rejuvenation is only an insufficient, momentary glance. Unable to identify the author of the Sonata (until later at the Verdurin get-together), Swann soon forgets his new-found desire to consecrate his life to the “fond des choses” (211). The glimpse of “reality” occasioned by the Phrase has been wasted by Swann. He is soon to make the mistake of relating its profundity to the woman sitting next to him at his second hearing.

Following this lengthy regression concerning the prior party, the narrator returns to a moment within the “little pianist’s” Sonata performance at the Verdurin gathering:

[T]out d’un coup, après une note haute longuement tenue pendant deux mesures, il [Swann] vit approcher, s’échappant de sous cette sonorité prolongée et tendue comme un rideau sonore pour cacher le mystère de son incubation, il reconnut, secrète, bruisante et divisée, la phrase aérienne et odorante qu’il aimait. (211)

Introduced here is the imagery of the veil: a curtain of sound that works to conceal the mysterious origins of the Phrase. The new imagery speaks to the mystification of the subject on which the Phrase has already left an impression.

With respect to Swann’s hearing at the prior party, the essential, non-material aspects of the Phrase were expressed in terms of liquid: the mass of the piano part, which rises to overtake the lead line of the violin, is the “clapotement liquide” (208) of a gently rolling sea surface in the *clair de lune*. The Phrase provides its effects in a cluster of imagery involving sub-

mersion in water: “Et cette impression continuerait à envelopper de sa liquidité et de son ‘fondu’ les motifs qui par instants en émergent, à peine discernables, pour plonger aussitôt et disparaître” (209). Water, rolling, and submersion are figures of the ineffable, immaterial wave-like quality of the Phrase. But while this (prior) Phrase may be indescribable, the translucent imagery nonetheless represents the Phrase itself. This is not true of the imagery provided with respect to Swann’s second (Verdurin) hearing of the Phrase. The “rideau” represents not the Phrase but the veil that obscures it. This new imagery (representing a subtle shift from water submersion to veil—so subtle that the reader too, along with Swann, may fail to notice the change) figures as well Swann’s failure to hold onto the Phrase’s meaning after the prior party. Swann now recognizes aspects of the Phrase that make it “secrète, bruisante et divisée,” whereas the Phrase he “aimait” (a reference to his reaction at the prior party) was “aérienne et odorante” when he first encountered it. But Swann remains enchanted, as if the Phrase were a reintroduction to “une personne qu’il avait admirée dans la rue et désespérait de jamais retrouver” (212). The Phrase continues to seduce Swann, even while providing him with reflections of his own missed impressions (he has indeed “admired” the phrase, in the superficial sense of the word, despite the intensity of his emotions) and pointers toward the sufferings (*secrète, bruisante et divisée*) to which it is leading him.

The Phrase’s exit from chez les Verdurin is narrated as follows: “A la fin, elle s’éloigna, indicatrice, diligente, parmi les ramifications de son parfum, laissant sur le visage de Swann le reflet de son sourire” (212). Whereas once before “la petite ligne du violon” was “directrice” (208), the Phrase chez les Verdurin has become less assuring—*indicatrice*. The *parfum*, which has previously dilated the confines and opened the possibilities of Swann’s soul, now is the site of mystifying and ambiguous “ramifications.” Even Swann’s *sourire* (one of the traces that the last volume will tell us mark the authenticity of the subjective impression) is immediately surrounded by the banal commentary of the Verdurin arrivistes. Their quick contiguity marks Swann’s smile as the idiot’s grin. It is Madame Verdurin, the quintessentially superficial bourgeoisie, whose remark shifts the object of Swann’s words of love from the Sonata to Odette. Swann is delighted at the simplicity of Odette’s response; he is thus not only surrounded by platitudes, but taken in by them as well.

With textual hindsight it will be evident that Swann’s impressions are leading him into a state of mystification. Less clear is whether we, the readers, should be led (through our regression here) to refine our idea (from the final volume) of the subjective impression as mark of its own authenticity. Is the authentic impression then not necessarily a guidepost to a recom-

mended path, but rather the sign of a truly and intensely lived emotion, even one that may lead to pain and loss? Or are Swann's impressions here not authentic?

The subsequent (and climactic) appearance of the Phrase at the Sainte-Euverte reception is germane to consideration of these questions. This appearance follows, both textually and plot-chronologically, several other episodes in which Swann reads the Phrase as directly relevant to his love for Odette. He is agonized by aspects of the Phrase's meaning extrinsic to Odette and himself (218); the Phrase liberates blank pages of Swann's soul, onto which he is at liberty to inscribe the name of Odette (237); Swann turns to the Phrase as a confidante who can convince Odette not to take up with Forcheville (264). It is chez les Sainte-Euverte, however, that Swann for the first time feels his pity and tenderness for Vinteuil, for the suffering that brought that man to such heights of musical creation (348). This change in Swann's impression can be linked to the manner in which the Phrase here appears.

Swann has been absent from society for a time as a result of his infatuation with Odette. When he finally attends the Sainte-Euverte reception, he does so free of desire. This party means nothing to him because it is unconnected to his love. But the same lack of desire that frees Swann's perspective from temporal, practical constraints (that allows him, for example, to see the specifically ridiculous in the manner of each monocled luminary there assembled) also renders him susceptible to atemporal effects when the Phrase unexpectedly arises:

[T]ous ses souvenirs du temps où Odette était éprise de lui, et qu'il avait réussi jusqu'à ce jour à maintenir invisibles dans les profondeurs de son être, trompés par ce brusque rayon du temps d'amour qu'ils crurent revenu, s'étaient réveillés et, à tire-d'aile, étaient remontés lui chanter éperdument, sans pitié pour son infortune présente, les refrains oubliés du bonheur. (345)

Whereas in previous scenes the Phrase impressed Swann regarding the object of his then-current desire (at the prior party, the abandoned ideal quest; in subsequent appearances, Odette), only here does Swann experience impressions "à la fois dans le moment actuel et dans un moment éloigné, jusqu'à faire empiéter le passé sur le présent" (III, 871). While the Phrase has deeply moved Swann before, only here has it triggered *la mémoire involontaire*. The lengthy regression from the Verdurin scene to the prior party, which seemed to insert Swann's former hearing of the Phrase in the place of its actual performance by the Verdurins' "little pianist," was in fact a structural trap for the reader similar to the "siren's song" (I, 347) the Phrase has been for Swann.

The gap in the Verdurin scene (present) was indeed filled by impressions from the prior party (past), but Swann brought forward to the Verdurin gathering a voluntary architecture of memory that contained (and veiled) the Phrase he had heard. Only by a close rereading, following one of *Le Temps retrouvé*, can the reader see the lack of the “empiètement,” of overlapping extra-temporality, between these two scenes. After reading the final volume, the reader can deduce that the impressions Swann experiences are the effects of a previously created work. Approaching it with only his voluntary (architectural) memory, at each moment unable to see beyond (extra-temporally) his then-present desires, Swann falls prey to mystifications that seem profound, but are in fact self-absorbed. It is not until the Sainte-Euverte reception that Swann’s own episode of involuntary memory occurs. Only here does the “reality” become clear:

‘Qu’est-ce cela? tout cela n’est rien.’ . . . C’est que la petite phrase, au contraire, quelque opinion qu’elle pût avoir sur la brève durée de ces états de l’âme, y voyait quelque chose, non pas comme faisaient tous ces gens, de moins sérieux que la vie positive, mais au contraire de si supérieur à elle que seul il valait la peine d’être exprimé. Ces charmes d’une tristesse intime, c’était eux qu’elle essayait d’imiter, de recréer, et jusqu’à leur essence qui est pourtant d’être incommunicables et de sembler frivoles à tout autre qu’à celui qui les éprouve, la petite phrase l’avait captée, rendue visible. (348-49)

These “charmes d’une tristesse intime” that the Phrase renders visible, even to those who don’t happen to be hopelessly in love, are a shared type of emotional experience, a broader truth, of which the Marcel of the last volume will speak. There he will tell us that authentic trace impressions of involuntary memory will mark such broader truths, but he will do no more than posit this. Despite the relatively discursive style of the surrounding narrative, there will be no analysis of the distinction between subjective impressions of broader applicability and impressions interesting only to the subject into which they happen to be incised.

The earlier episodes of Swann and the Phrase serve as an illustrative parable that seems to address these issues. However, as Paul de Man remarks, a rhetorical mode (such as parable) may both assert and simultaneously deny its own authority (17). De Man’s point applies here, as Swann has been wrong on so many occasions, but here seems to be right. We too, in reading the novel linearly, at each moment trapped in the temporal present of its narrative flow, have probably been taken in along with Swann. The narrator’s lyric song is as enchanting and seductive as the Phrase’s siren call. And the novel’s structural decoys, such as the flashback to the prior party that *seemed* to be an episode of involuntary memory but was not, draw the reader further

into sharing Swann's mystification. The Sainte-Euverte scene seductively adds a series of apparently positive resolutions: Swann's new insights into the courtesan life that Odette has led all along; his sense of resignation that her love for him will never be again as he once experienced it; a direct intervention by a seemingly omniscient narrator claiming that Swann was right about the Phrase's existence; a description of Swann's aesthetic theory concerning the "clavier incommensurable" (349). But despite the aesthetic lure of this agglomeration of positive elements, it cannot be determined whether the overcoming of a prior mystification (by Swann and the reader) marks a true resolution or rather a gesture toward a continuing process of seeming comprehension and later demystification. And even if that indeterminacy were removed, there still has been no elucidation of the broader applicability issue left open in the final volume.

The parallel between Swann's conclusions chez les Sainte-Euverte and those of Marcel in the final volume is not one of resolution; it is a parallel of the impossibility of answer. De Man has described this novel's "rhetoricization of grammar" (17), in which thematic strategies are deconstructed by the grammar through which they are spoken, in which the announced priority (the pronounced necessity) of the metaphor is undermined by the subversive power of (merely contingent) syntactical metonymy. As de Man puts it, "persuasion is achieved by a figural play in which contingent figures of chance masquerade deceptively as figures of necessity" (67).

The structural decoy of Swann's prior-party flashback may too be viewed as such a figural play. But it is a juxtaposition of whole scenes rather than of figures within the syntax of a sentence or paragraph—a "rhetoricization" of structure rather than grammar. These two types of rhetoricization may be viewed as concentric elements of the novel's elaborate form. It may be that the coherence of that form, its strict adherence to its own necessities, is a surer guide to aesthetic practice than Marcel's theory of involuntary memory. For while Marcel's theory is both asserted and denied by the rhetorical strategies of the novel, this same novel performs a model of art more difficult to disown: a creative will that lifts form to a level of necessity within the universe of the work that is sufficient to challenge the paradigmatic necessity of the metaphors contained therein.

De Man's model points to similarities between Proustian and Valéryan aesthetics. Formal necessities are paramount to both: necessities dictated not by the conventions of culture at large, but by a particular poetic universe which affirms itself as emerging from an accident of sensory perception. Both writers attempt to transform the intimacy of the subject into a work of art. These

aesthetic views project the field of formal innovation in our own century: negotiating the relevance of a poetic universe to the world outside in terms not of boundary but coincidence.

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Sites of Memory

Tracing France's Cultural Self-Consciousness



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Special Issue

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*Selected Proceedings from
UCLA French Graduate Students'
Third Annual Interdisciplinary Conference*

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Tracing France's Cultural Self-Consciousness

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*Ce serait le moment de philosopher et de
rechercher si, par hasard, se trouvait ici
l'endroit où de telles paroles dégèlent.*

Rabelais, *Le Quart Livre*

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