

UNPUBLISHED TALK: DO NOT CITE!

Early in the fourth volume of *À la recherche du temps perdu*, Proust's narrator goes to a party at the home of the Prince de Guermantes, where he sees a fountain designed by the eighteenth-century architect Hubert Robert. His description of the fountain is one of the novel's (admittedly many) ekphrastic setpieces:

It could be seen from a distance, slender, motionless, rigid, set apart in a clearing surrounded by fine trees, several of which were as old as itself, only the lighter fall of its pale and quivering plume stirring in the breeze. The eighteenth century had refined the elegance of its lines, but, by fixing the style of the jet, seemed to have arrested its life; at this distance one had the impression of art rather than the sensation of water. Even the moist cloud that was perpetually gathering at its summit preserved the character of the period like those that assemble in the sky round the palaces of Versailles. But from a closer view one realised that, while it respected, like the stones of an ancient palace, the design traced for it beforehand, it was a constantly changing stream of water [Its] continuity, apparently complete, was assured, at every point in the ascent of the jet where it must otherwise have been broken, by the entering into line, by the lateral incorporation, of a parallel jet which mounted higher than the first and was itself, at a greater altitude which was however already a strain upon its endurance, relieved by a third. From close to, exhausted drops could be seen falling back from the column of water, passing their sisters on the way up, and at times, torn and scattered, caught in an eddy of the night air, disturbed by this unremitting surge, floating awhile before being drowned in the basin. They teased with their hesitations, with their journey in the opposite direction, and blurred with their soft vapour the vertical tension of the shaft that bore aloft an oblong cloud composed of countless tiny drops but seemingly painted in an unchanging golden brown which rose, unbreakable, fixed, slender and swift, to mingle with the clouds in the sky. [IV, 75-76]

This conspicuously emblematic description offers terms for articulating a number of issues concerning seriality in *À la recherche*. Hayden White has analyzed this paragraph as a miniature demonstration of the tropes of historiographic rhetoric *tout court*.¹ Again, considered generically, the description represents a brash manifesto for the *roman fleuve*, the fictional form in which destinies high and low are relayed and transmuted through a series of generations and where, for example, a single character may recycle under serial names or titles, while a single name or title can be forwarded by a series of distinct characters.²

From the point of view of iconography, the Robert fountain links to earlier fountains in European literature, art, and landscape to invoke a tradition that is specifically Neoplatonic. Originating with Plotinus in the third century A.D., the philosophical and spiritual discourse of

Neoplatonism holds that, in Proust's words, "there exists but a single intelligence of which everyone is the co-tenant" (II, 194-5), toward the plenitude of which souls ceaselessly rise and merge, and from which they just as naturally fall and individuate. To quote Plotinus: "[T]he cosmic content is carried forward to its purpose, everything in its co-ordinate place, under only one Reason-Principle operating alike in the descent and return of souls and to every purpose of the system" (266). The Neoplatonic fountain offers an emblem for the possibility of non-oppositional relations between pattern and contingency, the eternal and the ephemeral, the universal soul and that of the individual.

That Proust tends to have reincarnation on his mind is clear from his mention of it in the opening paragraph of his novel; and among the Neoplatonic associations of this fountain perhaps the most pointed, in the career of the individual water drops anthropomorphized by Proust in terms of their exhaustion and transmutation, involves a narrative of reincarnation. As Plotinus describes the reincarnation narrative, "The sufferer, all unaware, is swept onward towards his due, hurried always by the restless driving of his errors, until at last wearied out by that against which he struggled, he falls into his fit place and, by self-chosen movement, is brought to the lot he never chose" (277). Among the series represented by this fountain is the possibility of souls' enacting serial lives.

And at the most literal level, the Guermantes' fountain, like any fountain, is a machine for animating and recirculating water. Simultaneously a spring and a fall, and with the narrator's repeated emphasis on the state-changes of condensation and cloud formation, it offers a stylized, artificial epitome of the unending processes by which water is propelled through its lifegiving round of physical metamorphoses.

Both as a representation of the rebirth cycle and of the water cycle, then, the Guermantes' fountain, with all its eighteenth-century elegance, might be taken as representing a novelistic vision that combines flexibility with an extraordinary economy, in an endlessly mutable but ultimately closed system where what goes around comes around, where linear narrative is propelled through the perpetual, zero-sum recycling of elements, lives, positions, structures, and desires. In the framework of reincarnation, such a system might be called strictly karmic; in a more familiar Western mythology, Oedipal. But compelling as this vision may be, it is no sooner finely articulated than it goes wastefully, farcically off course as the full-scale weather comes athwart the condensed version: as Mme d'Arpajon crosses the garden in search of her errant lover, suddenly "a strong gust of warm air deflected the jet of water and inundated the fair lady so completely that, the water streaming down from her low neckline inside her dress, she was as thoroughly soaked as if she had been plunged into a bath" (IV.79). Sometimes things that come around don't go around, and vice versa.

The important question in Proust of how open systems relate to closed ones, or perhaps better put, of how systems themselves move between functioning as open and closed, seems like an invitation to explore some literary and psychological connections to the scientific insights that are nowadays popularly grouped under the rubrics chaos and complexity. In fact, in beginning this discussion with the hydrological miniature of the Hubert Robert fountain I am marking a debt to a 2001 book by Rodney Farnsworth entitled *Mediating Order and Chaos: The Water-Cycle in the Complex Adaptive Systems of Romantic Culture*. In this book, Farnsworth offers a very productive heuristic by framing what we used to call the "water imagery" or "nature imagery" of the Romantic period much more systemically in terms of historical achievements in

mapping the hydrological cycle: the transformations of the “the heat/water/steam machine we call *weather*” (Farnsworth, 330). He points out that “the heyday of Romantic culture was the heyday of meteorology” (23), and that only in the early nineteenth century were the processes of hydrological state-change--evaporation, cloud formation and movements, convection, condensation, and precipitation--analyzed, measured, and brought comprehensively under the aegis of a physics that had already been able to account for the movements of water on and under the earth’s surface.

Not until the late twentieth century study of chaos/complexity has it been possible for science to conceptualize together the absolutely rule-bound cyclical economy of these processes, on the one hand, and on the other hand the irreducibly unpredictable contingency of, for example, the actual weather. Yet this kind of juncture is the matrix, the growing point, of narrative and reflection in Proust.

Rather than trying to bring Proust into explicit relation with the science of chaos and complexity, however, or with the science and technology of his own day, I’m trying in the present project to use these topics in contemplating some characteristically Proustian modes of being, of relation to self and the world. Like, I think, many readers of Proust, I especially want to understand his continuing access to a psychology of surprise and refreshment, as well as his nourishing relation to work. It may seem like an unearned provocation to refer to these subjects together as his mysticism. But it is just the quotidian, unspecial, reality-grounded structure and feel of Proust’s mysticism that draw my attention. It becomes visible less through set-pieces of “mystical experience”--though of course these occur--than through a habitual style of relationality in the novel as a whole. One could refer to this aspect of Proust as a kind of simplicity, but it would be in the particular sense of, for instance, the title of Pierre Hadot’s *Plotinus: or The Simplicity of Vision*, an unsimple book that I think is full of useful formulations for thinking about Proust. Certainly we can say, to begin with, that Proust’s mysticism--if that’s the right term--owes nothing at all to the occult or esoteric. And rather than calling on belief of any kind it emphasizes, instead, the transformative potential of the faculties of attention and perception.

At the same time one would need to ask about the relation of such a mysticism to Proust’s unresting practice of demystification. Proust is famous for his scouring determination to unearth what he calls “laws” or “truths” of human desire, self-deception, and limitation. René Girard for instance writes with some justice, “Proust’s laws are identical with the laws of triangular desire” (1965, 25). But the order of these plural, propositional laws and truths, delineating at most a grid on which to map the ground of reality, seems distinct from the non-propositional, environmental order of Proust’s reality orientation, which coincides with his mysticism. I note the radical narrowing of focus, the stereotypy of terms that characterize Proustian demystification--as when any character’s search for “the truth” about a lover always and only means demanding to know whether or not that person is unfaithful. No one is better than Proust at giving the sense that the true interest of a psyche, a landscape, or indeed a sentence may be actually inexhaustible. Yet the grounded reality-level of surprise and plenitude, like the fulness of his sense of place, is radically different from the demystifying, propositional level of knowingness and lack. As Pierre Hadot writes in *Plotinus*, at the propositional level “nothing can be found until it has been searched for; . . . the only way to build is to put various pieces together; and . . . it is only by using means that one can obtain an end.” Reality, by contrast, “is

able to find without searching, invents the whole before the parts, and is end and means at the same time” (41).

At a methodological level, at least in a certain ongoing critical allegory of psychoanalytic theory, it seems to make some kind of sense to understand Proust’s demystifying “laws” and “truths” through a version, however queer, of an Oedipal narrative: that is to say, one whose primary motives are sexual rivalry, sexual desire, and the impossibility of their direct satisfaction; whose psychoeconomics are zero-sum; and whose logic is rigorously that of either/or. Yet the psychology of surprise and refreshment to which I’ve alluded, so compelling to many Proust readers, falls outside such a logic. Leo Bersani and Julia Kristeva are among readers who have tried to use a different strand of psychoanalytic thought, organized around object relations, to do more justice to a Proustian reality that far exceeds Oedipal law, and some of my ambitions in this project are related to theirs. It is striking that the issues of mysticism and of object-relations psychology seem to be closely intertwined. In the comments that follow, discussing a conjunction of rebirth and of the meteorological cycle, I am not aiming to arrive at a synthesis of Proust’s or his novel’s propositional laws or truths. Instead I’m hoping to pursue a meditation on Proustian reality, through the “translucent and changing medium” of his novel’s cosmologies and weathers (V, 191 of Moncrieff).

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Rebirth, transmigration, metempsychosis, metamorphosis, reincarnation, and one might add, as Proust certainly would, resurrection: these terms form a Venn diagram of concepts whose overlaps cluster around two sometimes-conjoined notions: the soul’s survival after death, on the one hand, and on the other hand its occupation of differing bodies at different times. As surely as this space of insistent reference in Proust exceeds Christianity, it also exceeds a conventional French Classicism and his own less conventional Ovidian preoccupation. And, as we’ll see later, it fits in with a Proustian atmosphere in which every act and landscape brims with a proliferation of genii, demigods, Norns, and other such ontologically exceptional beings: no shadow or spring without its nymph, no phone exchange without its goddesses. Proust is unusual among French modernists, not in the frequency or suavity with which he invokes Christian and Classical ontologies of death and the soul’s survival and transfer, but in also explicitly bringing in dozens of Celtic, Persian, Egyptian, northern European, and Asian citations among others on the same subjects.

Reading Proust over the last few years with something of a Buddhist eye, I’ve continually been surprised by what seemed like invocations of and meditations on Hindu or Buddhist notions of reincarnation and karma. Actually it would be no more surprising to find them in Proust’s very orientaling cultural context than in our own. What seems truer, though, as in the example of the Hubert Robert fountain, is that the Neoplatonic tradition remained for Proust the profoundest reservoir of such ideas and images, as it also was for such of his favored authors as Emerson, Bergson, and the Hardy of *The Well-beloved*.³

It’s been hard for twentieth-century and later readers to know how to take Proust’s irrepressible interest in rebirth. The scientific certainties of modernity have undermined any space in which a notion of literally successive lives could be reflectively received. Christian humanism, the principal form in which Neoplatonic philosophy survives in mainstream modern

thought, jettisoned the belief in reincarnation many centuries ago. And in many ways Proust reflects a modern refusal to take reincarnation “seriously.” One kind of acid test: although there are scores of invocations of metempsychosis throughout *À la recherche*, the narrator never responds to the two deaths most closely affecting him--his grandmother’s and Albertine’s--with so much as a speculation that the souls of those whom he has lost might reincarnate in new bodies.

The main reason it is easy to de-supernaturalize Proust’s interest in reincarnation, though, is that he finds such a wealth of uses for it in describing the psychology of one lifetime. As Hardy does in *The Well-beloved*, Proust’s narrator describes the different people with whom he falls in love as successive embodiments of the same spirit, “the apparition which . . . each time, leaves [our heart] overwhelmed by fresh incarnations” (V, 79). Family resemblance--any resemblance, in fact, including those between people and animals or objects--is a ground for invoking some version of metempsychosis. And while Proust describes different beings as incarnations of the same soul, he also envisions an individual’s lifetime as a narrative encompassing many deaths and many unrecognizable rebirths. Not only the end of a love but every self-alienating aspect of the passage of time, through processes both acute and chronic, points to “the death of the self, a death followed, it is true, by resurrection, but in a different self” (II, 340).

Besides love, Proust writes in this way especially often about sleep and dreams, the regular punctuation of oblivion and strangeness structuring the illusion of the everyday. The epitomizing version of Neoplatonic rebirth for the nineteenth century is surely Wordsworth’s use of this image,

Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting:
The Soul that rises with us, our life's Star,
Hath had elsewhere its setting⁴

Proust, more rococo, describes “that deep slumber in which vistas are opened to us of . . . disincarnation, the transmigration of souls, the evoking of the dead, the illusions of madness, retrogression towards the most elementary of the natural kingdoms . . . , all those mysteries which we imagine ourselves not to know and into which we are in reality initiated almost every night, as into the other great mystery of extinction and resurrection” (II, 545).⁵

Another great engine of transmigration for Proust’s narrator, maybe more surprising than sleep or romantic love, is a change in the weather, “sufficient to create the world and ourselves anew” (III, 472). Some readers find the narrator’s father a rather underdrawn character, since most of what we see him do is examine the barometer and speculate on when the weather will change. But he defends his obsession--“As if there could be anything more interesting!” (I, 127)--and in adulthood his son inherits it, “to the extent of not being satisfied like him with consulting the barometer, but becoming like an animated barometer myself” (V, 96). This is quite a startling but, apparently, a true remark. In particular, for the narrator, waking from sleep to find changed weather is a way of being “born again” (III, 472). And paradoxically, the very ordinary seriality of weather offers a kind of daily, groundtone pulsation of the *mémoire involuntaire*--anachronistic by definition--that elsewhere sets off a very few moments of gemlike preciousness. “Atmospheric changes, provoking other changes in the inner man, awaken

forgotten selves” (V, 662)--”It is because we relive our past years not in their continuous sequence, day by day, but in a memory focused upon the coolness or sunshine of some morning or afternoon” (III, 544). It would be more than a pun, though not an equivalent, to translate the title of this novel *In Search of Lost Weather*.

What does the narrator mean in calling himself an animated barometer? For one thing it feels, he says oddly in *La Prisonnière*, like having a little mannikin inside him, “a certain intermittent little person” (V, 1), “very similar to another whom the optician at Combray used to set up in his shop window to forecast the weather, and who, doffing his hood when the sun shone, would put it on again if it was going to rain” (V, 5-6). This “little person inside me, the melodious psalmist of the rising sun”--and let’s note here that to *be* an animated barometer seems to involve *containing* an animated barometer inside one--this mannequin, however mechanical and comic, has no superficial relation to the narrator’s ontology. In fact, it may be a more enduring feature than is his faculty for metaphor itself.

Of the different persons who compose our personality, it is not the most obvious that are the most essential. In myself, when ill health has succeeded in uprooting them one after another, there will still remain two or three endowed with a hardier constitution than the rest, notably a certain philosopher who is happy only when he has discovered between two works of art, between two sensations, a common element. But I have sometimes wondered whether the last of all might not be this little mannikin I know how selfish this little mannikin is; I may be suffering from an attack of breathlessness which only the coming of rain would assuage, but he pays no heed, and, at the first drops so impatiently awaited, all his gaiety forgotten, he sullenly pulls down his hood. Conversely, I dare say that in my last agony, when all my other "selves" are dead, if a ray of sunshine steals into the room while I am drawing my last breath, the little barometric mannikin will feel a great relief, and will throw back his hood to sing: “Ah, fine weather at last!” [V, 5-6]

And while the animated barometer may represent some last residue of supra-individual identity that persists at the moment of death, it is also a site of metempsychosis where, within a single lifetime, “a change in the weather outside” becomes “the substitution [for myself] of another person” (V, 24-5).

No casual invention, then, the happily impersonal “little person” pops up several times in the latter volumes of *À la recherche*. What can we make of the Proustian narrator’s self-description as an “animated barometer,” crystallizing in the image of this buoyant internal homunculus? To begin with, it’s interesting that the narrator, qua barometer, responds specifically to atmospheric pressure. Compared to the much more obvious alternatives--temperature, wind, precipitation, even humidity--air pressure is a subtle, invisible, and indivisibly systemic index of weather. A thermometer, whether mechanical or human, responds to a quality, heat, that’s easy to perceive and interpret in isolation. The measure of barometric pressure, on the other hand, means nothing at all outside a dynamic interpretive context: it requires a full sense of how changes in the weight of a given column of air, relative to the weight of other near and distant columns of air, will affect both the vertical movement of heat and thus the air’s

temperature and ability to hold moisture, and also the horizontal travel of air masses that circulate “fronts” of pressure difference, and thus major weather systems, across the earth’s surface. Attending to air pressure to any extent at all seems to presume an expert sensitivity--however amateur--to the entire working of “the heat/water/steam machine we call *weather*” (in Farnsworth’s phrase). In fact, among the myriad of descriptive *tours de force* that so give the note of Proustian inexhaustibility, it’s remarkable how many invoke the air as a site of alchemical state change: the air and its light are described as melted, glazed, unctuous, elastic, fermenting, contracted, distended, solidified, distilled, scattered, liquid, woven, brittle, powdery, crumbling, enameled, embalmed, congealed, gummy, flaked, squeezed, frayed, pressed, percolated, volatilised, or even burning.⁶

Invisible for all its pervasiveness, atmospheric pressure--like the air itself--is easy for most people most of the time to take for granted. But under some circumstances it is also possible or necessary not to. Proust’s narrator offers at least one reason for his own barometric aptitude: he is prone to “attacks of breathlessness” which also respond to atmospheric pressure. Asthmatic crisis both feels and in fact is life-threatening. Evidently the mannekin is not a direct proxy for the narrator’s asthma, since the same pressure drop that delights one exacerbates the other. Still what might be called the mannekin’s aesthetic response, an access to happiness, is intimately linked with the narrator’s simplest drive, the drive to breathe, and the threat to its satisfaction.

In this connection I can borrow an image from the Hungarian-born psychoanalyst Michael Balint (1896-1970), who studied with Sandor Ferenczi and was, following Ferenczi, a pioneer in what is now called object relations psychology. In his final book *The Basic Fault* (1969), Balint distinguishes between two forms of transference relation, one malignant (in his terminology) and the other benign. The one he calls malignant is essentially the transference described by Freud: Oedipally structured, essentially rivalrous, “aimed at gratification by external action” of the transference object, and based, like neurosis, on the conflicts surrounding an already salient genital desire. I assume the reason Balint calls it malignant, given the medical implication of that word, is that it is, like cancer cells, immortal, self-replicating, and insatiable, involving the “constant threat of an unending spiral of demands or needs, and of development of addiction-like states” (146)--resembling Oedipal dynamics, at least a Lacanian version of them, in each of these respects. Freud prescribes that this transference must be frustrated; in fact, being insatiable, it’s unable to be other than frustrated. This malignantly spreading, Oedipal transference corresponds in many ways to the excruciating erotic situation of Proust’s narrator, who--as in his relationship with Albertine--can desire another only as she makes him jealous, but experiences jealousy as the spiraling demand for a total control that cannot be achieved and would terminate his desire if it ever were. Swann’s desire for Odette and Charlus’s for Morel seem, as both Girard and Barthes make clear, to follow the same laws.

While for Freud the only model of transference is this malignant one, Balint envisions an additional kind of transference which he calls benign. It doesn’t develop from or into the other, malignant kind of transference; it differs from that by nature, and in Balint’s account it emerges from a different level of the psyche. It is called benign because its requirements do not expand: it is satiable. Once its needs have been met, this kind of transference allows the subject’s attention to turn elsewhere, including inward, “leading to a true new beginning, and ending in a real new discovery” (146).

Neither competitively nor genitally organized, the benign transference does not demand to

be gratified by “external action” on the part of its object. Instead, Balint writes, what it requires from its object is a mode of being, specifically the mode of being that characterizes the natural elements. It “presupposes an environment that accepts and consents to sustain and carry the patient like the earth or the water sustains and carries a man who entrusts his weight to them. In contrast to ordinary objects, especially to ordinary human objects, no action is expected from these primary objects or substances; yet they must be there and must--tacitly or explicitly--consent to be used, otherwise the patient cannot achieve any change: without water it is impossible to swim, without earth impossible to move on.” (145) It’s worth noting here the subject requires not only support from the elements. There is also an implicit claim on their ability to resist the pressure of the subject--as when pressure against the earth permits us to walk, or air pressure permits flight--and also to resist being damaged by the subject.⁷ In Barbara Johnson’s paraphrase, “The object becomes real because it survives, because it is outside the subject’s range of omnipotent control” (Johnson, 57). Elsewhere Balint uses air and even fire, in addition to water and earth, to exemplify the “friendly substances” (146) for this purpose. “It is difficult to say,” for example, “whether the air in our lungs or in our guts is us, or not us; and it does not even matter. We inhale the air, take out of it what we need, and after putting into it what we do not want to have, we exhale it, and we do not care at all whether the air likes it or not. It has to be there for us in adequate quantity and quality” (136)--adequate, Balint would emphasize, as opposed to infinite.

The human need for air is satiable because, like the needs to drink, eat, and excrete, but unlike the libido, it is a biological drive in the strongest sense of the term.⁸ Unlike sexual desire, for example, its satisfaction is necessary to sustain individual life, and unlike Oedipally-structured sexuality, it is not intrinsically organized around rivalry or mediation. The need to breathe, to eat and drink, to have one’s weight supported are non-negotiable, but being finite they are not zero-sum: one is rarely deprived by the satisfaction of another’s need. Balint’s interest in such existential or survival-implicating functions, which he links to the weather elements--air, water, earth, and fire--is held in common by the pioneers of object relations psychology. Like Ferenczi and D. W. Winnicott, Balint likes to attach friendly language to such “benign” or satiable object relation--what he also calls “the harmonious mix-up,” and Winnicott calls the “holding environment.”⁹ But as the work of Melanie Klein, among others, reminds us, the truth or phantasy that the conditions of actual survival are at stake can also inject the kind of terror attached to survival into situations that traditional psychoanalysis would read in the more structurally mediated, less affectively drenched terms of anxiety. A drive-based terror may be assuageable, or “benign,” exactly *because* it is more concretely grounded than the abstract affect of Oedipal anxiety.

Hence, the lacerating quality of Proust’s narrator’s inability to sleep in an unfamiliar space--as though the environment threatened not his desires but his life--feels less like the fear of having to share someone’s love than like the asthmatic’s fear of being unable to breathe.¹⁰ I would argue that even the mortal dread he feels, in childhood, at having to go to bed without his mother’s kiss derives its quality and rhythm much more from a threatened existential function, such as breathing, than from a frustrated second-order drive, such as libido.¹¹ Which is to say, even the undoubted centrality of Oedipal issues in Proust may owe much more than has been obvious to an unattenuated emphasis on the existential functions, the simple need for the elements of life “to be there for us in adequate quantity and quality,” in Balint’s words--“to consent to be

used.”

As Barbara Johnson points out in her essay on Winnicott, there is no simple way to read this as a recipe for ethical intersubjectivity à la Levinas. *Used*--an inauspicious word in human relationships! I will be content at this point if we can agree that it describes an aspect of object relations that remains crucially important, both threatened and full of promise, throughout *À la recherche*.

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What kind of intersubjectivity--of object relation--is apt to characterize a human barometer like Proust's narrator? To begin with, as we noted earlier, *to be* a human barometer seems to involve *containing* a human barometer, the little mannekin inside. And even the simplest mechanical barometer, with its pressure-indexing column sequestered by a vacuum, reproduces this structure of "X within X" or "an X surrounded by X." In this respect the barometer, whether mechanical or human, is like "the glass jars which the village boys used to lower into the Vivonne to catch minnows . . . filled by the stream, in which they in their turn were enclosed, at once >containers' whose transparent sides were like solidified water and >contents' plunged into a still larger container of liquid" (I, 237). In a certain Gothic tradition and in, for example, the parts of Proust that emphasize the melodramas of sexual privacy, there is a lot of uncanny stress attached to a rigid, maybe impassable barrier between the inner X and the outer.¹² More characteristically in Proust, though, a creature is seen as plunging vitally into, navigating through, or resting in the midst of an element--water, air--that constitutes as well as surrounds and supports it. The intervening membrane represents a minimal obstruction if any. In this more relaxed view, as Balint says, "It is difficult to say whether the air in our lungs or in our guts is us, or not us; and it does not even matter" (136).

There's a powerfully resonant instance of this inner/outer flow when the narrator's dying grandmother, struggling to breathe, is attached to an oxygen tank:

When I returned I found myself in the presence of a sort of miracle. . . . [M]y grandmother's breath no longer laboured, no longer whined, but, swift and light, glided like a skater towards the delicious fluid. Perhaps the breath, imperceptible as that of the wind in the hollow stem of a reed, was mingled in this song with some of those more human sighs which, released at the approach of death, suggest intimations of pain or happiness in those who have already ceased to feel, and came now to add a more melodious accent, but without changing its rhythm, to that long phrase which rose, soared still higher, then subsided, to spring up once more, from the alleviated chest, in pursuit of the oxygen. [III 463-464]

But it isn't only the release of near-death that stimulates such a flow; the grandmother has been identified as a fresh-air fiend (and fellow animated barometer) in innumerable ways since we first met her "pacing the deserted rain-lashed garden, pushing back her disordered grey locks so that her forehead might be freer to absorb the health-giving draughts of wind and rain. She would say, 'At last one can breathe!' and would trot up and down the sodden paths. . . her keen, jerky little step regulated by the various effects wrought upon her soul by the intoxication of the storm . . ." (I, 12).

At once stoutly distinctive as a personality and endowed with an unusual osmotic gift, the grandmother is far from being only a consumer of natural forces--at least in the narrator's eyes. She embodies an entire ecology of loving energy that animates *him* from both inside and out, assuaging his vulnerable sense of bodily borders not by consolidating them but by supporting their flexibility and permeability. When he first arrives at the hotel in Balbec, for example, "Having no world, no room, no body now that was not menaced by the enemies thronging round me, penetrated to the very bones by fever, I was alone, and longed to die. Then my grandmother came in, and to the expansion of my constricted heart there opened at once an infinity of space" (II, 334). And as they are staying in adjacent hotel rooms, the wall between them, on which they knock softly to communicate in the mornings, becomes as eloquent a membrane as if it demarcated the chambers of single ear, or heart: "sweet morning moment which opened like a symphony with the rhythmical dialogue of my three taps, to which the thin wall of my bedroom, steeped in love and joy, grown melodious, incorporeal, . . . responded with three other taps, eagerly awaited, repeated once and again, in which it contrived to waft to me the soul of my grandmother, whole and perfect, and the promise of her coming, with the swiftness of an annunciation and a musical fidelity" (II, 338).

Whatever else we make of such elastic, permeable boundaries of individuation in Proust, they are exactly the right medium in which to articulate the Plotinian understanding of a universal soul, reality, *Nous* or Good that both surrounds and animates the individual. "The Universal circuit is like a breeze, and the voyager, still or stirring, is carried forward by it."¹³ It's true that the Neoplatonic universe is characterized by an un-Proustian hierarchy of levels of derivation and value. But the most distinctive thing about Neoplatonic hierarchy is that it arises from the very fullness of its highest terms as they permeate the universe, rather than--as in Gnosticism or Christianity--from a scarcity of the good or a struggle with evil.¹⁴ And as we'll see, Proust has an unusual aptitude (shared, for that matter, with Plotinus) for replotting linear, genetic narratives as images, instead, of synchronic profusion and companionship--most especially, self-companionship.

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Like Buddhism, Neoplatonic thought can be framed in terms associated with atheism, deism, monotheism, polytheism, or pantheism, depending on how one understands deity. Proust makes the most of all these possibilities except monotheism. After Plotinus's death some of his followers such as Iamblichus, consciously trying to construct a syncretic pagan metaphysics, further proliferated and further distinguished more-or-less-divine entities at multiple ontological levels, including the nonsentient: in the Iamblichian theurgy, as Gregory Shaw writes, "anything that received the god and mediated its presence functioned as a sacred receptacle whether it was a stone, a plant, a smell, or a song."¹⁵ This complex, cosmopolitan field of divinity became influential again in the Renaissance through the humanism of the Florentine Academy, through iconographies of architecture and art, and through poets like Ronsard, who was said to "welcome all divinities--whether from Asia, Greece, Rome, or Egypt, whether primitive, classical, or decadent."¹⁶

It's hard to convey through a few examples how this divinity-field, the unsystematized proliferation of ontologically intermediate beings loosely attached to places, persons, families,

substances, ideas, music, buildings, machines, emotions, and natural elements, feels as one immerses oneself in reading Proust. Surprisingly pervasive, surprisingly easy to lose sight of, like the weather, it characterizes the vital atmosphere of Proust-reading more than its landmark moments. Sometimes it sounds like a kind of throwaway erudition, a sublimed version of the honking mock-heroic cant that emanates from the narrator's friend Bloch. Sometimes it sounds like a fine French gallantry, where every woman is a goddess and most men too. Often it makes a shimmering play of capturing as if in motion the very processes of condensation and precipitation that animate any imaginative project of writing. As when

I suddenly discerned at my feet, crouching among the rocks for protection against the heat, the marine goddesses, . . . the marvellous shadows, sheltering furtively, nimble and silent, ready at the first glimmer of light to slip behind the stone, to hide in a cranny, and prompt, once the menacing ray had passed, to return to the rock or the seaweed over whose torpid slumbers they seemed to be keeping vigil, beneath the sun that crumbled the cliffs and the etiolated ocean, motionless lightfoot guardians darkening the water's surface with their viscous bodies and the attentive gaze of their deep blue eyes. [II, 689]

This embodied divinity-field overlaps in a myriad of ways, at many different angles, with both the Neoplatonic and the even more varied Proustian understandings of reincarnation. It shows, in fact, that for Proust the interest in reincarnation is often fed much less by a focus on succession and causation than by one on simultaneity, recognition, and above all companionship. Among the ontologically exceptional beings, besides plain vanilla gods and goddesses, that the divinity-field comprises in Proust are giants, phantoms, chimeras, sirens, devils, demi-gods, fairies, Nereids, Oceanides, witches, Norns, monsters, nymphs, peris, shawabti, sorceresses, Danaids, Furies, fire-spirits, magicians, Arabian rocs, Sphinxes, sibyls, dryads, household gods, river-gods, druids, Pythian priestesses, Parcae, Brahmas, prophets, apostles, angels, the incarnate Word, the Eternal Father, and the universal spirit, to name a few.¹⁷

In addition, there is a family of particularly interesting beings that can be traced through a cluster of words around *daimon* in Greek, *genius* in Latin, and the obviously but obscurely related *jinni* in Arabic. Over many centuries of transmission and displacement, these terms have come to indicate varied, even contradictory meanings--think of how *daimon* stands for both a malevolent demon, on the one hand, and on the other the tutelary spirit that repeatedly arrives to warn Socrates of hidden dangers. Plotinus, like Proust, has a special interest in these spirits, especially in their guardian or tutelary functions. In Plotinus, each creature in each new incarnation, whatever its spiritual level, has an accompanying *daimon* or genius who represents the next higher spiritual level. He describes "the relation of this guiding spirit to ourselves: it is not entirely outside of ourselves; is not bound up with our nature; is not the agent of our action; it belongs to us as belonging to our Soul."¹⁸ The Latin phrase *genius loci*, or spirit of the place, is the only form in which English-speakers still hear "genius" used in this sense: a spiritual familiar, like the "guardian" shadows in the passage I've quoted above, who, like the air and water that we

breathe and drink, both animates from within and stands as distinct from the person or place to whom it belongs. A few examples of the many: the wind that is the “tutelary genius” (*le génie particulier*) of Combray (I, 204/I, 143). The invisible familial “genie” who, in the face of the Duchesse de Guermantes’s socialist beliefs, nonetheless “reminded the servants of this woman who did not believe in titles to address her as ‘Madame la Duchesse,’ and reminded this woman herself, who cared only for reading and was no respecter of persons, to go out to dinner with her sister-in-law when eight o’clock struck, and to put on a low-necked dress for the occasion” (III, 602-603). The “Venus Androgyne” (IV, 434) that, for the likes of M. de Charlus, “is always the spirit of a relative of the female sex, attendant like a goddess, or incarnate as a double, that undertakes to introduce him into a strange drawing-room” (IV, 414). There are even genii to explain the mystery of gaydar: “Each man’s vice . . . accompanies him after the manner of the tutelary spirit who was invisible to men so long as they were unaware of his presence. . . . Ulysses himself did not recognise Athena at first. But the gods are immediately perceptible to one another, like as quickly to like, and so too had M. de Charlus been to Jupien” (IV, 17-18).

And if our familiars consent to such everyday offices, it is no surprise that they also continually mediate our experience of art. As when, recognizing the “little phrase” of Vinteuil’s sonata, “Swann felt its presence like that of a protective goddess, a confidante of his love, who, in order to be able to come to him through the crowd and to draw him aside to speak to him, had disguised herself in this sweeping cloak of sound. And as she passed, light, soothing, murmurous as the perfume of a flower, telling him what she had to say, every word of which he closely scanned, regretful to see them fly away so fast, he made involuntarily with his lips the motion of kissing, as it went by him, the harmonious, fleeting form” (I, 493-495).

*

In the early reception of *À la recherche* there was a mainstream critical consensus according to which Proust, exemplifying many writers in a modern secular world, was seen as smuggling the remnants of a repudiated religion into his work under the name of Art. Edmund Wilson writes in 1928 that as Proust “is equipped, like many modern travelers, with moral passion but no religion, he will be compelled . . . to make a religion of art” (144). And in *Natural Supernaturalism* (1971), M. H. Abrams offers Proust as the supreme modern instance of “conversion to the religion of art. . . . [H]is vocation is to be an aesthetic evangelist” (81). In fact, as I have been trying to show, there is no question of smuggling. Proust is overt in his mysticism, not despite but through the bubbling current of different tonalities and contexts in which he invokes it.¹⁹ But while art is certainly a distinguished term in Proust, it is not, as we have seen, set apart as a focus of mystical relationality. Even its distinction depends on a view of the entire universe, whether in its sublime or quotidian aspects, as instinct with value and vitality.

That the universe along with the things in it are alive and therefore good: here, I think, is a crux of Proust’s mysticism. Moreover, the formulation does not record a certainty or a belief but an orientation, the structure of a need, and a mode of perception. It is possible for the universe to be dead and worthless; but if it does not live, neither do the things in it, including oneself and one’s own contents. So put it comparatively: the universe itself is *as* alive as anything it holds. This formulation is always true for Proust, and for the reason we have discussed: The beings *in*

the universe are filled, in turn, like human barometers, with the stuff *of* the universe. This is as true for art as it is for the irreducibly complex systems and substances that constitute the weather.

In terms taken from Melanie Klein, you could say that everything in Proust depends on the ratio or relation between an internal object and an ambient surround. Inequality between them, or a collapse of either of them, leads to a collapse of the whole ecology of value and vitality. For example, the debacle of the narrator's first attempt to kiss Albertine occurs because his excitement has "destroyed the equilibrium between the immense and indestructible life which circulated in my being and the life of the universe, so puny in comparison" (II, 701 or prev.). Similarly during his breakdown in Venice, "I saw the palaces reduced to their basic elements, lifeless heaps of marble with nothing to choose between them, and the water as a combination of hydrogen and oxygen, eternal, blind, anterior and exterior to Venice." The direct result of this vastation of his surroundings is a vastation of self. "I could no longer tell it anything about myself, I could leave nothing of myself imprinted upon it; it contracted me into myself until I was no more than a beating heart and an attention strained to follow the development of *O sole mio*." (V, 888 or prev.)²⁰.

That the universe is as alive as anything it contains: The sustained story of the narrator's vocation, far from representing a wishful or sacralized exception in Proust's view of the universe, has just the same structure. What's most notable about "the problem" of his vocation is that it is never simply about his internal faculties--his wealth or littleness of talent, his ability to focus or the apparent waste of his early years. With the persistence of these questions he always hungers to know at the same time that art itself has a life and value that are independent of him ("I abandoned myself to this hypothesis that art might be real") and beyond the direct will of any artist. In fact, it is impossible--not metaphysically but, for Proust, psychologically so--for either of these questions to stand alone in *À la recherche*. Nor, evidently, can the sense of art as an inward supply imply that he is in competition with the vitality of an artistic surround; the narrator has no fear of being diminished by art that is not his. His fear, again, is of his own talent, unliving, being held within a dead ecology of art.

For Proust, the ultimate guarantee of the vitality of art is its ability to surprise--that is, to manifest an agency distinct from either its creator or its consumer. "It pre-exists us" is one of the ways he describes the autonomy of the work (VI, 276-77), and only for that reason is it able to offer "celestial nourishment" to our true self (VI, 264-65). At the same time, that already existing, maternal plenitude is also gestated internally like a child: "I felt myself enhanced by this work which I bore within me as by something fragile and precious which had been entrusted to me" (VI, 514). Reincarnation is one way to delineate this balance of agency between the internal and external, where the true self becomes, perhaps uncannily, "this being that had been reborn [with]in me" (VI, 264-65). "The writer feeds his book, he strengthens the parts of it which are weak, he protects it, but afterwards it is the book that grows, that designates its author's tomb and defends it . . . for a while against oblivion" (VI, 508).

Readers of object relations psychology will recognize in these passages of Proust the subtle criss-crossings of agency, interiority, and priority that also characterize certain crucial situations in accounts of early, generative object relations. Winnicott's concepts of the good

enough mother, the holding environment, and the transitional object, like the benign transference described by Balint, each outside the omnipotent control of the subject, each nonetheless--or for that reason--involves a vital way of environing the subject, one that inspires and permits the subject's ability, in turn, to hold its own vital contents and support a wealth of self-relation.²¹ Correspondingly, for many readers of Proust, an immersion in *À la recherche* seems to give access to a radically fruitful double movement: into an acutely enriched space of reverie, and outward with an enriched interest in the daily-changing climates of reality.

Hence also the double function of surprise in the argument I've been making about Proust. Surprise is the mark of reality, insofar as what is real--what surrounds the subject, the weather of the world--has to exceed the will of the subject, including its will to arrive at truths. At the same time, surprise with its promise of an ever-refreshed internal world is the mark, not only of reality, but of the mystical orientation that allows Proust to cherish that reality. It's in this context that one might compare Proust's love of the weather with the more overtly philosophical *amor fati*, the love of fate or necessity, that Nietzsche declared to represent his own "inmost nature."²²

Perhaps it isn't feasible to say whether a reader of Proust assumes a position inside or outside the world of *À la recherche*, held by its amplitude or supporting it in a web of continuous attention. Pierre Hadot's *Plotinus* offers some elementary formulations that together give a good idea of how these osmotic differentiations work in Proust:

"When it passes from one level to another, the self always has the impression that it is losing itself" (32).

"Yet these levels do not cancel each other out; rather, it is the interaction of all of them together which constitutes our inner life" (34).

"Although the spiritual world is within us, it is also outside us" (35).

Like the weather.

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Notes (still totally rough):

Thanks!! --Josh, Greg, Jenny, Hal, MM, et al.

¹"In a word, in the sequence of tropological modes which leads from an original metaphorical characterization of an *interpretandum*, through a metonymic reduction and a synecdochic identification, to an ironic apprehension of the figurality of the whole sequence, we have something like the plot of all possible emplotments--the meaning of which is nothing but the process of linguistic figuration itself" (White, 271).

2. As Proust writes, "for ever and ever, without interruption, there would come, sweeping on, a flood of new Princesses de Guermantes--or rather, centuries old, replaced from age to age by a series of different women, of different actresses playing the same part and then each in her turn sinking from sight beneath the unvarying and immemorial placidity of the name, one single Princesse de Guermantes, ignorant of death and indifferent to all that changes and wounds our mortal hearts" (IV, 388-389).

3. Not to suggest that Plotinian and Buddhist-Hindu reference are mutually exclusive. Plotinus himself, for example, joined the Roman army in middle age in order to travel, because "he became eager to investigate the Persian methods and the system among the Indians" (Porphyry in Plotinus, civ).

4. [Cite Intimations Ode]

5. This is also the context of his only mention by name of Plotinus, along with his follower/amanuensis Porphyry. "[I]f I am awakened and go out after an artificial slumber it is not the system of Porphyry or Plotinus which I can discuss as fluently as on any other day, but the answer that I have promised to give to an invitation, the memory of which has been replaced by a pure blank. The lofty thought remains in its place; what the soporific has put out of action is the power to act in little things, in everything that demands exertion in order to recapture at the right moment, to grasp some memory of everyday life. In spite of all that may be said about survival after the destruction of the brain, I observe that each alteration of the brain is a partial death. We possess all our memories, but not the faculty of recalling them." (V, 521)

6. Citations: melted (V, 100-01), glazed (V, 533), unctuous (V, 533), elastic (V, 554-55), fermenting (V, 555-56), contracted (V, 803), distended (V, 803), solidified (VI, 19), distilled (II, 387), scattered (II, 387), liquid (II, 565), woven (III, 474), brittle (III, 474), powdery (II, 567), crumbling (II, 567), enameled (II, 229-30), embalmed (II, 730), congealed (IV, 720-21), gummy (I, 88), flaked (I, 88), squeezed (I, 120), frayed (I, 214), pressed (I, 235), percolated (I, 387), volatilised (II, 656), burning (IV, 534).

7. [examples re:airplanes] [also examples re: equilibrium]

8. [From Intro to Touching Feeling]: For Tomkins, the difference between the drive system and the affect system is not that drive is more rooted in the body than affect; he understands both to be thoroughly embodied, as well as more or less intensively interwoven with cognitive processes. The difference instead is between more specific and more general, more and less constrained: between biologically based systems that are less and more capable of generating complexity or degrees of freedom. Thus, for example, the drives are relatively narrowly constrained in their aims: breathing will not satisfy my hunger, nor will sleeping satisfy my need to excrete waste. The drives are also relatively time-constrained, inasmuch as I need to breathe

within the next minute, drink something today, and eat within the next few weeks in order to sustain life. Most importantly, their range of objects is also relatively constrained--only a tiny subset of gases satisfy my need to breathe, or of liquids my need to drink. In these and several other ways, sexuality is clearly the least constrained (most affect-like) of the drives. “Had Freud not smuggled some of the properties of the affect system into his conception of the drives, his system would have been of much less interest,” Tomkins writes, and he also sees Freudian theory as damaged by using sexuality to represent drives in general. (49)

⁹. [Balint; Winnicott]

¹⁰. [examples of unfamiliar space]

¹¹. [quotes]

¹². [Cite *Coherence of Gothic Conventions*] [especially true in De Quincey, who I’m convinced was an important influence on Proust]; [cite *Epistemology*]

¹³. Plotinus, *Enneads*, III.4.5, p. 172.

¹⁴. “Every Kind must produce its next; it must unfold from some concentrated central principle as from a seed

“To this power we cannot impute any halt, any limit of jealous grudging; it must move for ever outward until the universe stands accomplished to the ultimate possibility. “It, thus, is produced by an inexhaustible power giving its gift to the universe, no part of which it can endure to see without some share in its being.”

¹⁵. Shaw, p. 50.

¹⁶. P. Laumonier, *Ronsard, poète lyrique* (Paris, 1910), pp. 379-80; quoted in Seznec, p. 309. On pagan reference across Renaissance media including landscaping, see Goodwin. On European interactions between monotheism and polytheism, especially in relation to gender, see Newman.

¹⁷Page citations by first appearance: giants (I, 168), phantoms (I, 326), chimeras (I, 56-7), sirens (I, 493), devils (I, 493), demi-gods (II, 356), fairies (II, 358), Nereids (II, 387), Oceanides (II, 408), witches, Norns (both II, 406-8), monsters (II, 423), nymphs (II, 724), peris (II, 510-11), shawabti (III, 39), sorceresses, Danaids, Furies (all III, 173-74), fire-spirits, magicians (both III,

122-23), Arabian rocs (III, 548), Sphinxes (III, 711-12), sibyls (V, 334), dryads (V, 345), household gods ((V, 705), river-gods (VI, 244), druids (VI, 520), Pythian priestesses (IV, 119), Parcae ([III, 263) Brahmas (IV, 481-2), prophets, apostles, angels, the incarnate Word, the Eternal Father (all IV, 597), universal spirit (VI, 302).

¹⁸. Plotinus, *Enneads*, III.4.5, p. 170.

¹⁹. The question of whether, and how far, “mysticism” may be coextensive with “religion” has, of course, a dense and contentious history, in which I would be content not to meddle. That it was in the air *as* a question at the turn of the twentieth century, however, is attested by the 1902 publication date of William James’s *Varieties of Religious Experience*. One also does not want to reify mysticism. Proust’s closeness with Neoplatonism is patent, but he does not have, like Yeats, hermetic or esoteric interests; and the historical/epistemological question of whether his Plotinian sense of reality puts him in touch with a “perennial philosophy” obviously does not excite him.

20. [note on equilibrium]

21. One could add the transformational object described by Christopher Bollas (1987), leading to his introduction--also very suggestive as applied to Proust--of the concept of genera (1992).

22. [Epilogue of *Nietzsche contra Wagner*]