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Impressions: Proust, Photography, Trauma

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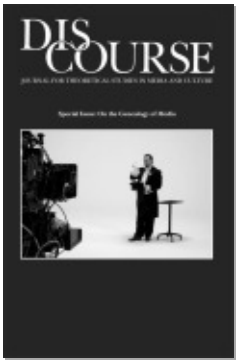

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I

A good enough place to begin is with the famous passage in "Intermittencies of the Heart"—alternatively titled in the manuscripts "La mort après-coup de ma grand-mère"—in which the narrator, arriving for the second time at Balbec, comes to touch himself and thereby presses the button that will reveal his own touch as the traumatic touch of the Other. Having arrived exhausted at a hotel whose unexpected familiarity evokes a feeling not of reassuring domesticity but of profound uneasiness, he collapses in his room and begins to undress. Despite its possible overexposure, this passage deserves to be read at length, beginning with its ungrammatical opening sentence—somewhat exceptional, I believe, in Proust—and ending with its oxymoronic appeal to a "complete and involuntary recollection":[1]

> Upheaval of my entire being [*Bouleversement de toute ma personne*]. On the first night, as I was suffering from cardiac fatigue, I bent down slowly and cautiously to take off my boots, trying to master my pain. But scarcely had I touched the topmost button [*le premier bouton*] than my chest swelled, filled with an unknown, a divine presence, I was shaken with sobs, tears streamed from my eyes. The being who had come to my rescue, saving me from barrenness of spirit, was the same who years before, in a moment of identical distress and loneliness, in a moment when I had nothing left of myself, had come in and had restored me to myself, for that being

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> was myself and something more than me (the container that is greater than the contained and was bringing it to me). I had just perceived in my memory, stooping over my fatigue, the tender, preoccupied, disappointed face of my grandmother, as she had been on that first evening of our arrival, the face not of that grandmother whom I had been astonished and remorseful at having so little missed, and who had little in common with her save her name, but of my real grandmother, of whom for the first time since the afternoon of her stroke in the Champs-Elysées, I now captured the living reality in a complete and involuntary recollection. (2:783)

If the refinding of the lost object will prove here to be the occasion of the latter's most irrevocable withdrawal—for it is "on finding her at last" that the narrator learns the unbearable truth that he has lost his grandmother "forever" (2:785)—such a paradox rigorously specifies just what is at stake in the temporal logic of *Nachträglichkeit*. The "anachronism" (2:783) that defines the most intimate encounter with the Other as essentially a missed encounter involves a moment of identification that fissures the self-identity of both parties concerned. At the most intimate moment of self-proximity, the narrator finds himself cast in the impossible role of substitute for his own substitute. As he assumes his dead grandmother's role—her role, precisely, of assuming for him his own role of undressing himself—the most familiar domestic ritual turns into a vertiginous spiral of self-divestment in which the heterological kernel of autoaffection is traumatically revealed.

Inside and outside thus form a chiasmus: the lost object forms a "container that is greater than the contained" (2:783) in which it simultaneously finds itself, such that the self is cast as an "empty apparatus" (3:1116) that is structurally equivalent to the container of its own container. Such a chiasmus inevitably disrupts every notion of consciousness as interiority or inwardness, and thus every model of memory as *Er-innerung*. Floating in the internal crypt that marks a kind of outside on the inside, the contents of consciousness find themselves suspended in an "unknown region" in which, Proust remarks, "it is perhaps equally inexact to suppose that they escape or return" (2:784) such that what is retained is secreted in an interior *extimité* described elsewhere as the "prolonged oblivion" of the archive (1:692).

What is striking is the way in which this scene of traumatic loss unmistakably evokes a certain trauma of seduction. The grandmother's spectral touch speaks simultaneously of the suffocating excess of her "divine presence" and of her irreparable withdrawal. Abandonment is nowhere more sharply underlined than in the exorbitance of a contact impossible precisely through its most

obdurate proximity—the primal *drame du coucher* already staged this exquisite aporia—whereby trauma is figured precisely as the relation with the nonrelational. The "refinding" of the lost object is in this sense the mortifying incorporation of a thing whose excessive presence signals at once its most catastrophic absence.

Such an "agonizing synthesis of survival and annihilation" (2:787) engenders the paradox of the subject's return-to-self at the moment of its own fading or self-evacuation. In dying, the narrator's grandmother effectively eradicates him—why? because she no longer registers him—such that the other's death marks the othering of the self in the endless "allegory" of its own demise (cf. 3:387).

Such reciprocity marks the limits of identification. The specular relation is exposed as the vacuous gleam of a mirror reflecting only the exchange of missed glances and the retroactive annulment of "our mutual predestination" (2:785). As the "bliss" (*félicité*) of recognition yields to the throbbing pain of separation, the narrator finds his grandmother "again, as in a mirror, a mere stranger whom chance had allowed to spend a few years with me, as she might have done with anyone else, but to whom, before and after those years, I was and would be nothing" (2:785). The Other's touch thus "carves out an emptiness in my heart" (2:789)—a void that marks the abyss of the subject's own self-annihilation. Self-stimulation equals seduction by the other equals mourning for the other equals, finally, mourning for the self—who is thus effectively established as nothing other than its own other.

What is striking in this compound equation is that the scene itself—despite or because of its originality—is in fact staged as a rigorous repetition of a previous one. This is not the first time the narrator will experience the postmortem of the Other's death. Such a trauma had already from the outset started to repeat itself. The narrator had begun to be late very early—had anticipated such lateness rather prematurely the day he returned home to find himself precisely not at home, to find his living grandmother reduced to an all-too-fleshly phantom of herself and thus to find himself cast in the curious role of voyeur of his own irrelevance—"spectator of [his] own absence." Crucially, such experience is equated with the uncanniness of photography.

> Alas, it was this phantom that I saw when, entering the drawing room before my grandmother had been told of my return, *I found her there reading*. I was in the room, or rather I was not yet in the room since she was not aware of my presence, and like a woman whom one surprises at a piece of needlework which she will hurriedly put aside if anyone comes

> in, she was absorbed in thoughts which she had never allowed to be seen by me. Of myself—thanks to that privilege which does not last but which gives one, during the brief moment of one's return, the faculty of being suddenly the spectator of one's own absence—there was present only the witness, the observer, in traveling coat and hat, the stranger who does not belong to the house, the photographer who has called to take a photograph of places which one will never see again. The process that automatically occurred in my eyes when I caught sight of my grandmother was indeed a photograph. (2:141f., emphasis mine)

II

It is surely crucial that this ghost scene is figured as a reading scene. In his proleptic mourning for the lost object the narrator here confronts the mirror of his own tomblike countenance—"like a sick man who . . . recoils on catching sight in the glass, in the middle of an arid desert of a face, of the sloping pink protuberance of a nose as huge as one of the pyramids of Egypt" (2:142)—a florid parody of vitality that mimes the hectic flush of the old woman who in her ponderous vacuity embodies the quintessential distracted reader: "For the first time, and for a moment only, since she vanished very quickly, I saw, sitting on the sofa beneath the lamp, red-faced, heavy and vulgar, sick, vacant, letting her crazed eyes wander over a book, a dejected old woman whom I did not know" (2:143).

Might such a reading scene prefigure the essential destiny of the entire book? This possibility will come to haunt the celebrated theory of "impressions" elaborated in the final scene of the *Recherche*. Numerous paradoxes are involved in Proust's enunciation of a theory whose very starting point would be the radical renunciation of all theory: "[A] work in which there are theories is like an object which still has its price tag on it" (3:916). If Proust will, at the moment of his most voluble theorizing, simultaneously condemn the intrusion of "theory" into literature as a "gross impropriety" (*une grande indélicatesse*), such a renunciation stems from neither simple anti-intellectualism nor some kind of pragmatism, and is only partially explicable in terms of the symbolist commitments to which Proust historically no doubt more or less adheres.

The performative impasse registers an essential aporia at the heart of "theory" as such. If Proust's anxiety regarding the very genre of his book—"a sort of novel,"[2] he concedes, but only sort of—is consistent with a general preoccupation with issues of homogeneity (unity, translucency, the intactness of the well-polished surface, etc.), such an aesthetic of purity will defend itself against the

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"intrusion of extraneous elements" (3:934) that must therefore be either ejected or fully absorbed. The incursion of theory into the novel marks the point of the book's own overflow and announces the work's fall into fragmentation and delay.

If "theory" injects heterogeneity into the pristine surface of the artwork, this is paradoxically because it infects the latter with the possibility of repetition—conceptualization, idealization—which signals the work's reduction to sheer fungibility or exchange. The very possibility of idealization would announce the work's self-coincidence while simultaneously signaling the threat of a debilitating deferral that would preempt this. Its ultimate "indelicacy" would be to introduce into the artwork the stigma of the commodity that in neglecting to disguise its own value fails to circulate freely as gift. Unsublimated "theory" thus functions as the fetish that in failing to erase its own traces threatens precisely to block the economy of salvation—*qui perd gagne,* triumph through defeat—which determines the very possibility of time's "refinding." This would be the ultimate scandal.

The entire calculus of loss and gain described in the matinee scene—the rehabilitation of misery into profit, despair into work, the incorporation of the writer's disintegrating corpse into the luminous cathedral of the completed corpus (cf. 3:944)—is a consolation that assumes a certain economy of transvaluation that the theory of involuntary memory would seem simultaneously to promise and, as we shall see (this is my argument), to undermine. If the whole pathetic package is redeemed in the end—the wasted time, the wasted money, the dinner parties, the love affairs, the pretexts—this is because the narrator while purporting to function "like a shopkeeper who cannot balance his books" (3:1024) manages precisely in *forgetting* the costs thereby miraculously to turn a profit.

How does Proust's "theory of literature" elaborate such a paradoxical economy of salvation? And why does photography in particular both exemplify and undermine such an economy? If "theory" here indeed protrudes with the manic insistence of an obsession (the narrator's illegitimate digression on literature manages to distend over two hundred pages, to interrupt at least two parties, at one of which he is not even present, and on which he strictly speaking has no business commenting, to bloat the swollen contours of the book to the point of irrecuperable fragmentation), this is ultimately because it is a theory in which the very claims of "theory"—the ideality of pure disinterested vision—are simultaneously advanced and undermined, if not indeed exposed as

contradictory. That is: the visual paradigm will here reach at once its apogee and its utter limit. This limit will ruin the "budget" of gain through loss by presenting the stain of an indelible remainder. Such will be its impropriety and, perhaps, its promise.

III

On the one hand: the official Proustian theory of aesthetic experience redeems repetition as idealization: "Ideas come to us as the successors of grief" (3:944). Familiarly enough, the aesthetic conversion of impression into expression (3:916) reveals the "general law" or "essence" (3:957) in the repeated instance. Such a trajectory defines the metaphorical movement from sense to sense, from matter to meaning, from accident to necessity: the retrieval of a "spiritual equivalent" for the recurrent sensory encounter (3:912). The very compulsion to repeat thus comes to signal not the supremacy of death but in fact its ultimate domestication—having died so many times, I indeed have nothing left to fear (3:1094)—such that what had previously functioned as a cipher of irreparable loss or trauma now promises the very possibility of symbolic binding. Repeated, the fugitive impression becomes the incarcerated metaphor: the retrieval or binding of phenomena "beaten together" and "linked forever" (*enchaîner à jamais*) (3:924; 4:468) within the "necessary rings of a beautiful style" (3:924f.).[3] Such an ideal of aesthetic binding not only promises to bring back all the escaped prisoners of love and war—the mother, the grandmother, the vanished Albertine—but cannot fail to recall the bondage games of Charlus in Jupien's brothel, *l'homme enchaîné,* fixed to the bed like a "consenting Prometheus" (3:868) to his rock, exposed simultaneously to the studded whip of his tormenter and to the fascinated peer of the narrator, who just so happens to find himself lurking in the darkened hall (3:843).

On the other hand: the very proximity of the "cruel law of art" (3:1095) to the sadomasochistic scenarios that precede it suggests a traumatic residue irresolvable within the official economy of salvation. If the narrator, in the brothel scene, operates essentially as cameraman—peering through the aperture of the *oeil de boeuf,* frozen stiff (cf. 3:858) by the sight of Charlus's own petrification—it is worth recalling that this bondage scene elsewhere elaborates itself in the apocalyptic vision of wartime Paris.[4] Beautiful in moonlight and under the "intermittent beams" of enemy airplanes and searchlights, the buildings themselves are seen to bend and sway

like so many submissive bodies prostrated before whatever blows might fall (3:828). The spectacle offers the narrator the strangely reassuring vista of a danger simultaneously enjoyed and parried: the threatening bomb is associated with the moonbeam that would expose it and in turn assimilated to the masturbatory spectacle of luminous fountains reflected in the clouds above the Champs Elysée or Place de la Concorde (3:829f.).

It is worth emphasizing here that this whole nocturnal phantasmagoria is itself explicitly referred to as the operation of a camera. A familiar enough logic (from Jünger to Virilio) will come to associate the ballistic apparatus of war with the optical apparatus of photography, the machinery of destruction with the machinery of preservation, annihilation with reproduction or retention. What Proust adds to this equation is that nature as a whole can function not only as the object but as the very instrument of photographic reproduction. Corresponding to the naturalized technology of the military light show—the "human shooting stars" and wandering galaxies of the planes and searchlights (3:828f.)—would be the technologized nature of a moon whose light has come to resemble the "soft and steady magnesium flare" (strange oxymoron, this "steady flare": it recalls Barthes's "floating flash")[5] of a cosmic camera recording images of a city marked in advance by the traces of its own destruction (3:830).

Moonlight is elsewhere everywhere associated with the melancholic illumination of a death prefigured photographically in the chiaroscuro of an "apparition without substance" (3:758). Paris under blackout becomes a glacial meadow etched with the delicacy of a Japanese painting (3:757): every fountain is a frozen crystal, every woman is a "vision," every shadow is imprinted on the bleached and polished ground like a soul entering the "dazzling" paradise of an endless winter.[6] Such a prolepsis of death has already been anticipated by the narrator well before the war (in a passage written after the war) in the perception of moonlit Paris as a framed and mounted drawing. Entering the Porte Maillot with Albertine, he observes how the buildings have already entered into the process of self-reproduction: every monument has become a drawing of itself, every memorial a memorial to itself—"pure, linear, two-dimensional"—as if "in an attempt to recapture the appearance of a city that had been destroyed" (3:414).[7] (Such a simulacral delirium inspires the narrator to fits of pedantry as he proceeds to subject Albertine to a stream of literary citations, footnotes, references involving lunar metaphors in Hugo, Chateaubriand, Baudelaire, and all the others.)

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Charlus himself will soon enough compare the nocturnal city to a Pompeii (3:834),[8] which is in turn conventionally enough assimilated to the figure of Sodom and Gomorrah. Whatever the precise chain of associations linking the optical inversions of the camera with the general logic of "inversion"—that the photographic subject in Proust is inherently a homosexual subject (and indeed vice versa), could, I believe, be easily established—the point of the analogy is here to draw attention to the mnemonic fixing or embalming of gestures "eternized" in midaction (3:834). The lava both recalls the biblical "fire from heaven" (3:864) and is repeated by the camera flash, which itself reiterates the original scene of beating or seduction. If the punishment here inevitably prolongs and arguably even stimulates the very crime it would expiate in memorializing—Charlus could indeed, for example, go to jail: why? for his incarceration fantasies (3:868)—such a continuity will be associated with the rhetorical convention of the *hysteron proteron:* the narrative contamination of cause and effect, before and after, attributed to a Dostoevsky (3:385) and in fact best exemplified by Proust himself. It points precisely to the contamination of jouissance and the law, and as such to an irreducible kernel at the heart of the symbolic.[9] Such an imbrication—the literary expression of *Nachträglichkeit*—indeed registers the perfect complicity of every inscription with its double.[10]

Such redoubling renders undecidable the difference between traumatic impression and expiating or idealizing expression. The inherent doubling of trauma to itself would not only blur the line between origin and repetition but may indeed come to blur any final distinction between trauma and its symbolic "binding." This perhaps includes the distinction between traumatic imprint and the printed volume that would contain it. The initial sight of the lurid red binding of *François le champi* in the Guermantes library at first "unpleasantly strikes" the narrator with the "painful impression" of a dissonance immediately evoking the unwelcome intrusion of an unmourned death, but is thereupon harmonized within the symbolic work of proper mourning:

> I had been taking first one and then another of the precious volumes from the shelves, when suddenly, at the moment when I carelessly opened one of them—it was George Sand's *François le champi*—I felt myself unpleasantly struck [*desagreablement frappe*] by an impression which seemed at first to be utterly out of harmony with the thoughts that were passing through my mind, until a moment later, with an emotion so strong that tears came to my eyes, I recognized how very much in harmony with them it was. Imagine a room in which a man has died, a man who has rendered

> great services to his country; the undertakers' men are getting ready to take the coffin downstairs and the dead man's son is holding out his hand to the last friends who are filing past it; suddenly the silence is broken by a flourish of trumpets beneath the windows and he feels outraged, thinking that this must be some plot to mock and insult his grief; but presently this man who until this moment has mastered his emotions dissolves into tears, for he realizes that what he hears is the band of a regiment which has come to share in his mourning and to pay honor to his father's corpse. Like this dead man's son, I had just recognized how completely in harmony with the thoughts in my mind was the painful impression which I had just experienced when I had seen this title on the cover of a book . . . for it was a title which after a moment's hesitation had given me the idea that literature did really afford us that world of mystery which I had ceased to find in it. (3:918f.; 4:461f.)

From here it is just one step to the consoling "chain" (*chaîne*) (3:920) of memories that will inspire the narrator to formulate his theory of poetic incarceration or "linkage" (*enchaînement*) (3:924).

Note here that the "joy" aroused by the final sight of *François le champi* in the Guermantes library both bypasses and indeed *precludes* any actual reading of the book itself (3:922): at the moment of its supreme vindication the book breaks away from the rule of the pleasure principle and the work of substitutive deferral. If, as Benjamin and Blanchot will in rather different ways insist, the ultimate book is the unread book, the out-of-work book, the unreadable book—this is perhaps the real significance of Proust's famous metaphor of the book as a "huge cemetery in which on the majority of the tombs the names are effaced" (3:940)—the erasure in this case announces not the pristine innocence of the tabula rasa but rather the very persistence of the trace as traumatic residue unassimilable to the interiority of *Er-innerung,* whether that of consciousness or of the book.

Such persistence points to something unspeakable within the very theory that would announce it. For in its very materiality (which is nothing other than the materiality of the book itself) it will undermine the ultimate possibility of idealization as the achievement of disinterested truth and essentiality by signaling the work's inextricable entanglement within the condition of loss (and excess) it would transcend. Such entanglement will complicate the metaphor of the literary "chain" or tether. And it may cast some light on the famous Proustian "joy." If in the course of reciting his final series of epiphanies the narrator is compelled with somewhat manic insistence to profess his "joie" no less than twenty-nine times, such an affirmation may of itself indicate less a regression to the comfortable banalities of the "joys of the spirit"

(Bergotte) (3:904) than point to a kernel of traumatic *jouissance* irreducible to the consoling calculus of pleasure-pain to which the official theory would seem most wed. If in stammering out his "joy" the narrator in fact never for a moment stops evoking something close to utter anguish (everything hits, everything hurts, everything blinds, everything carves itself into the poor limping body like the demonic writing machines of a Kafka or a Nietzsche), the delirium suggests a hypermnesic melancholia testifying to an unassimilable alterity—at once the pulsating pressure of the real and an infinite withdrawal or lack: the "festering wound" of which both Freud and Nietzsche speak.

According to the official Proustian theory of reminiscence, the "mark [*griffe*] of authenticity" (3:913) of involuntary memory is that it comes essentially from the outside as an inscription of the Other: a "little furrow" (*petit sillon*) (3:927) not "traced *by* us" but rather "printed *in* us" or "dictated *to* us" (3:914, emphasis mine) and in turn "prolonged in us" (3:927) through a painful labor of translation, which Proust compares to the loss of our virginity. The *célibataires* or "bachelors of art" are precisely those aesthetes (the critics, the concertgoers, the Verdurins, etc.) who inevitably appear like so many bungled experiments of nature—broken-down flying machines whose "morbid hunger" for "Art" expresses itself in the dutiful raptures ("Bravo! Bravo!") that betray just the "sterile velleity" of the unmarked surface (3:927f.).[11]

But if involuntary memory is determined thus as the traumatic incursion of the Other, there would appear to be little left to distinguish the "joys" of remembrance from the familiar agonies of *temps perdu*. The "little furrow" theorized in the Guermantes library recalls the "mysterious furrow" that death like a thunderbolt had carved earlier within the narrator's torn consciousness—the "supernatural graph" that had awakened him at Balbec to a maternal spectrality registered symptomatically by ghoulish visitations, haunting photographs, and night terrors (2:787ff.). The Balbec inscription had at the time provoked a grandly melancholic response—"I longed for the nails that riveted her to my consciousness to be driven yet deeper" (2:786)—which in its introversion of aggressivity into a triumphant masochism not only converted traumatic loss into the "rivet" of a paradoxical connection but indeed sought in pain itself the narcissistic solace of self-beatification: "My mother was to arrive the next day. I felt I was less unworthy to live in her company, that I should understand her better, now that a whole alien and degrading existence had given way to the resurgence of the heartrending memories that encircled and ennobled

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my soul, like hers, with their crown of thorns. So I thought, but . . ." (2:795).

IV

Does the guilty mnemotechnic I have been elaborating in fact forge the celebrated "rings of style" (3:924)? Are we indeed to understand the "darkness and silence" in which the work gestates itself—"real books should be the offspring not of daylight and casual talk but of darkness and silence" (3:934)—as a photographic darkroom?

Triggered by the haptic blow of the chance encounter; stimulated by the impression that arrives not once and for all but compulsively repeats itself (each time a shock, each time an assault, each time bringing back the memory of an "original" sensation barely if at all registered the first time round); announced by the "lightning flash" that signals the blinding simultaneity of past and present (3:906); revealing a stellar "radiance" emanating centuries after the extinction of the original fire (3:932); sequestered in the "long intervals of rest"—the sickroom, the sanitarium, the "Noah's ark"—of the work's gestation (3:945); drawing on the secret reserve of life like a seed or albumen harboring chemical changes only evident in hindsight (3:936); "developed" by the painstaking reading or "decipherment" that involves the translation of the hieroglyphs of feeling into thought (3:933), shadow into light (3:912f.), negative into positive, as if by a "special lamp" designed to reverse the values of darkness and light to the point of absolute illumination (3:933); bringing back the past as through a telescopic time-lapse lens (3:1098); revealing the infinite reproductive circuit that turns every original into an endless series of substitutions (every woman a model for every other, every love affair patterned on every other) (3:946); "fixed," finally, in an image in which will culminate the entire history of the "successive states" of each impression (3:916)—is the act of writing anything other than the event of photography?

The photographic metaphor, in these darkly luminous, never-ending pages, proves on inspection to be a profoundly incoherent one. Where does the photograph begin and end? Is "life" the referent of the photograph, its negative cliché and inversion, or always already from the beginning its own photographic inscription (in which case, then, why need literature in the first place)? Do the redoublings of *Nachträglichkeit* begin with life or literature?

Is translation or "development" an event of voluntary or involuntary memory? Is the accomplished work a product of photography (a finished image) or more like a photographic instrument (a lens, magnifying glass or spyglass)? Is the darkened bedroom a darkroom or a camera obscura? If such questions prove irresolvable within the text itself, the incoherence points to an aporia at the very heart of the Proustian endeavor.

V

A famous Proustian dictum declares that "style is not technique but vision" (3:531). What is at stake in this distinction? Rather more is involved than the familiar fin-de-siècle quarrel over the respective merits of art-versus-industry—the fear of the "hermaphroditic" confusion of the *arts et métiers* of which Benjamin, for one, speaks (in *Passagen-werk*).[12] Or rather, one should perhaps reconsider the force of Benjamin's metaphor.

In an earlier draft (1910), Proust had defined style—later, metaphor—as the synthesis of separate sensations "beaten together on the anvil" until a new object (fused, composite) is "taken out of the forge."[13] Whatever the sadomasochistic overtones here—a more or less contemporary letter speaks of the need to *attack* the mother tongue, to inflict on the maternal body of language the aggressive signature of a "unique accent"[14]—the definition suggests precisely the Nietzschean operation of a traumatic injury turned outward in being reproduced.

Proust will take every pain to distinguish such a beating from the mechanical blows inflicted by technology—here as so often associated with unsublimated death, prosthetic deferral, the banal repetitiveness of habit. The triumphal stiletto of Siegfried's hammer in the *Nibelungen* is rather nervously distinguished ("immortal youth" is at stake here) from the merely "skillful" pounding of a Vulcan (3:158). (One should perhaps here recall—as Proust himself strangely seems to forget—that it was Vulcan or Hephaestus himself who in the first place nailed Prometheus to the rock, thus staging the sadomasochistic ritual that inaugurates human history.) To substitute artifice for art is to undermine the very possibility of "fundamental, irreducible originality" (3:158): to replace Lohengrin's swan with the 120-horsepower airplane—"brand-name Mystère"—whose noisy engine roar blocks you from ever "enjoying [*gouter*] the silence of space" (3:159). Yes, a certain enjoyment is at stake here. In its "frank materiality," technology

is said to present precisely the residue of an inconsolable melancholy (*tristesse*) unconvertible into joy (*joie*) (3:158).

What is to be excluded in every case is the boring, empty repetition that in introducing substitution at the very kernel of identity only confirms the unbearable gap between desire and fulfillment. Such repetition would fragment and multiply any coherent, stable self that might survive the lost object and thus inevitably introduces the specter of a radically failed mourning. Life is in this sense presented as a "slow and painful suicide of the self" (1:657) whose attenuation or fading marks the recursive tendency of every mourning to compensatory intensification. Failing to sustain even my own grief, I now grieve that very grief, find in its inevitable attenuation a fresh despair (1:721), mourn the loss of my own initial sense of loss that like a phantom limb spreads out the immemorial "void" of my own self-evacuation (cf. 3:605ff.).

The subject in this sense becomes the "empty apparatus" (3:1116) or "empty frame" (3:509) that in facing not simply loss but the reflexive loss of loss finds itself stripped of its own solidity as ground, *sub-jectum* or *hupokeimenon:* on falling out of love with Albertine's corpse the narrator finds himself "utterly devoid of the support of an individual, identical, and permanent self" (3:607). The forgetful self proliferates through the syncopal event of self-division or fragmentation that Proust compares, variously and incoherently, to a process of self-exfoliation (3:545), self-grafting or self-parasitism (3:607), or to the inevitable molting of the living body into the shredded accretions of "dead matter" (1:722).

Failing to maintain the lost object, the wounded subject touches only itself as its own simulacrum or prosthetic double—a "substitute" (3:657) or "spare self" (3:608)—which it encounters like a white-wigged specter in the mirror (3:657), already anticipating the uncanny phantasmagoria of the final *bal de têtes*. Initial grief yields to the far more "shattering" (*cela bouleverse*) realization of the subject's own alterity—"I no longer love her" . . . "I no longer exist" . . . "*je suis un autre*" (3:657; 4:221)—until the reflexive circle closes and the narrator eventually comes, Heidegger-style, to forget the very fact of his own forgetting ("The caddish self laughs at his caddishness because one is the cad, and the forgetful self does not grieve about his forgetfulness precisely because one has forgotten" [3:657]).

Caught in this abyssal circularity the narrator is left recycling autobiography as allothanatography—monotonously quotes to himself his own story as the cast-off story of an other, narrates to himself as to a stranger his faded melodrama of "love at second hand":

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> It is not because other people are dead that our affection for them fades; it is because we ourselves are dying. Albertine had no cause to reproach her friend. The man who was usurping his name was merely his heir. We can only be faithful to what we remember, and we remember only what we have known. My new self, while it grew up in the shadow of the old, had often heard the other speak of Albertine; through that other self, through the stories it gathered from it, it thought that it knew her, it found her lovable, it loved her; but it was only a love at second hand. (3:608f.)

Cast into the role of its own Oedipus or self-usurper, the traumatized subject functions as a cipher floating in a sea of citational mass-media effects. Reduced to a ghost of himself in a rapidly decomposing Venice, the narrator hears his own self-alienation peddled back to him in the mocking banalities of tourist kitsch:

> I was no more than a throbbing heart and an attention strained to follow the development of *O sole mio*. . . . In this lonely, unreal, icy, unfriendly setting . . . the strains of *O sole mio,* rising like a dirge for the Venice I had known, seemed to bear witness to my misery. (3:668)

Trauma *is* this kitsch. Its essential delay or belatedness turns every mourning into a theatrical performance marked by the "unpunctuality" of the borrowed line:

> Like an actor who ought to have learned his part and to have been in his place long beforehand but, having arrived only at the last moment and having read over once only what he has to say, manages to improvise so skillfully when his cue comes that nobody notices his unpunctuality, my newfound grief enabled me, when my mother came, to talk to her as though it has existed always. (2:796)[15]

The inherent reduplication of trauma makes every inscription a palimpsest of itself, effaced by the very medium of transmission to which it owes its continued life.[16] Writing becomes the inevitable "self-plagiarism" (2:443) that blocks every possibility of self-recognition and self-return. The narrator's own handwriting seen traced on a postmarked envelope to Gilberte (1:437) is as opaque and unrecognizable to himself as is the newspaper article signed with the authority of his own proper name. Here is his early encounter with his own autograph text:

> I had difficulty in recognizing the futile, solitary lines of my own handwriting beneath the circles stamped [*imprimés*] on it at the post office, the inscriptions added in pencil by a postman, signs of effective realization, seals [*cachets*] of the external world, violet bands [*ceintures*] symbolic of life itself. (1:437, slightly modified)

(The beating and bondage scenario—*impressions, ceintures*—is already in place here.) And here, more or less repeated, is his late, long-deferred experience of publication:

> I opened the *Figaro*. What a bore! The main article had the same title as the article which I had sent to the newspaper and which had not appeared. But not merely the same title . . . why here were several words which were absolutely identical. This was really too bad. I must write and complain. But it wasn't merely a few words, it was the whole thing, and there was my signature. . . . It was my article which had appeared at last! (3:579)[17]

Thus the logic of the teletechnic regime: the postal superscription effaces what it relays, the newspaper alienates what it transmits, the inevitability of mechanical reproduction turns every act of self-reading into an event of misprision testifying to the radical illegibility of the original text. To read one's own work is to encounter the stigmatic alterity that marks the uncanniness of all self-return.[18]

The dream of specular transparency—the famous metaphors of the book as "cathedral" (3:1090), "optical instrument" (3:949), or "magnifying glass" (3:1089)—yields to the mortifying encounter with the opacity of the "clouded glass" (3:949). The homogeneous translucency of the vitreous surface shatters into a collage of fragments layered unstably in the opaque medium of the printed page. In an astonishing twist on the traditional trope of text and textile, Proust comes to associate writing with the weave of memory—a thickening "network of traversals" (3:1085f.)—forever entangled in its own revisions and straining at the seams:

> And—for at every moment the metaphor uppermost in my mind changed as I began to represent to myself more clearly and in a more material shape the task upon which I was about to embark—I thought that at my big deal table, under the eyes of Françoise . . . I should work beside her and in a way almost as she worked herself . . . and, pinning here and there an extra page, I should construct my book, I dare not say ambitiously like a cathedral but quite simply like a dress. Whenever I had my "paperies" near me, as Françoise called them, and just the one I needed was missing, Françoise would understand how this upset me, she who always said that she could not sew if she had not the right size thread and the proper button. (3:1090)[19]

In this endless bricolage the event of authorship becomes identified with an originary *Nachträglichkeit* that not only blurs the line between creation and supplementary re-creation—writing and revision—but thus blocks any access to the Book as redemptive

totality or consummation. Far from being an event of transfiguring redemption, the text rips under the weight of its own accretions and becomes stained by the inevitability of a self-correction that produces its essential blind spot as the very price and measure of its own success. The cathedral is degraded to a patchwork assemblage torn and blinded by its own paste-ins, which intrude like newsprint on a glassy surface and mark the irreducible opacity of a language shattered by its own repetition and citational effects:

> These "paperies," as Françoise called the pages of my writing, it was my habit to stick together with paste, and sometimes in this process they became torn. But Françoise then would be able to come to my help, by consolidating them just as she stitched patches onto the worn parts of her dresses or as, on the kitchen window, while waiting for the glazier as I was waiting for the printer, she used to paste a piece of newspaper where a pane of glass had been broken. And she would say to me, pointing to my notebooks as though they were worm-eaten wood or a piece of stuff which the moth had gotten into: "Look, it's all eaten away, isn't that dreadful! There's nothing left of this page, it's been torn to ribbons." (3:1091)

VI

"The real distress is the absence of distress" (Heidegger). The ultimate trauma is precisely the reflexive redoubling of trauma, which eventually comes to figure as the inevitable erasure of every figure and thus announces the final impossibility, which is the very possibility of writing. The "mortal blow" (3:475) not only destroys but simultaneously obliterates every residue of the lost object that now disappears without a trace within the infinite "blank" of the unrippled surface (3:519f.). The impossibility of picturing the lost object—the narrator systematically fails to form an image of the missing Albertine (3:439, 544, 548) just as his mother fails to form an image of her own dead mother (3:475)—congeals into a generalized *Bilderverbot* that threatens to block the work of symbolic substitution that is the very possibility of aesthetic recuperation.

Art seems to present itself precisely as a defense against such traumatic recursion and promises to negotiate the prohibition by charging it with productive force. The "empty space" left by a vanishing sensation is filled with the "general essence" released by the repetition of the same (3:957). In its projection of the "ideal void" (3:518) as a tabula rasa for the imagination, the artwork appears to present in Proust the one and only possibility of consolation. Such a defense may be mounted in a variety of fashions. On the one hand, the narrator will attempt to domesticate the trauma by

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aestheticizing the machine: thus Elstir's preachings regarding "*la vie profonde des natures mortes*"—the redemption of the banal sterility of the quotidian through the idealizing lens of art—the perception of the "*infiniment petit*" as "*infiniment grand*" and thus the organic fulfillment of the inorganic. Technology can in this sense be incorporated anachronistically as a special topic of the artwork: as he nervously awaits a fateful phone connection the narrator invents imaginary genre paintings—"At the Telephone"—which will subsume the invention within the decorum of eighteenth-century pictorial conventions (3:94f.).

Technology can in turn be refunctioned aesthetically as a beautiful artwork: the narrator learns to hear in the blare of morning traffic the swelling strains of a symphony (3:111); learns to hear in the sirens of an air raid the music of the Valkyries (3:781); learns to hear in the "whirr" of the telephone bell the shepherd's pipe in *Tristan* (2:757); learns indeed to hear in an old woman's death rattle the harmonious organ chant of reconciliation (3:356).

By the end the narrator will attempt to contain the threat by erecting the imagination itself as an "admirable machine" feeding off the very suffering that provides its essential kick start (3:946). It is in this context that we can begin to understand the official celebration of the writing machine as an optical instrument through which the reader (and writer) can refind himself—and time—as lost object (cf. 3:949, 1089). If, finally, art is said to "work" like a machine in its conversion of dead matter into living spirit, this is precisely insofar as it bears the very promise of abreaction: the conversion of trauma into knowledge, chance into necessity, the "dull pain in our heart" into the "visible permanence of an image." Photography here supplies the essential model of sublimation:

> Since strength of one kind can change into strength of another kind, since heat which is stored up can become light and the electricity in a flash of lightning can cause a photograph to be taken, since the dull pain in our heart can hoist above itself like a banner the visible permanence of an image for every new grief, let us accept the physical injury which is done to us for the sake of the spiritual knowledge which grief brings; let us submit to the disintegration of our body, since each new fragment which breaks away from it returns in a luminous and significant form to add itself to our work, to complete it at the price of sufferings of which others more richly endowed have no need, to make our work at least more solid as our life crumbles away beneath the corrosive action of our emotions. Ideas come to us as the successors of griefs, and griefs, at the moment when they change into ideas, lose some part of their power to injure our heart; the transformation itself, even, for an instant, releases suddenly a little joy. (3:944)

If every technology in Proust is a traumatic teletechnology insofar as while establishing contact it simultaneously introduces the very specter of nonfulfillment—the telephone disconnects what it connects, the gramophone recording mortifies what it reproduces, the cinema fragments what it presents, the electric current interrupts what it conveys, the railway train distances what it joins, and so on (all this could be quickly enough established)—it is the photograph above all that exemplifies this paradoxical pressure of a proximity so excessive as to signify precisely the absolute irreparability of loss. And, of course, vice versa. In its traumatic character as imprint or index of a wound that can never itself appear as such, the photograph poses at the same time the aporia of an excessive presence against which even "loss" itself comes to function as the ultimate defense. In marking the perpetual relay between loss and proximity, absence and enjoyment, the photograph announces the very limit of aesthetic recuperation. Jouissance and melancholia define its two essential poles.

As such it is photography that constitutes the "gravest of all objections" (3:960) to the enterprise formulated in the Guermantes library—at once both the most profound obstacle and the essential condition of possibility. This would not be the first or final blow to "theory."

Notes

[1] Marcel Proust, *Remembrance of Things Past,* trans. C. K. Scott Moncrieff and Terence Kilmartin (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin, 1983); hereafter cited by volume and page number in the text.

[2] Letter of around 20 February 1913 to Rene Blum.

[3] For this almost Nietzschean conception of style, see the 1910 draft to *Le Temps retrouvé* (Cahier 28 fls 33–34d).

[4] Charlus will himself elsewhere engage in similar rituals of photographic surveillance.

[5] Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida,* trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill & Wang, 1980), 53.

[6] The image resumes the fantasy of the "decanted springtime" in Venice: mineralized, virginal, "springlike without bud or blossom."

[7] The reduction of the nocturnal landscape to ruin is indeed already anticipated at Combray where the moonlight is perceived to work similarly devastating effects, most notably on the telecommunications industry:

> In each of their gardens the moonlight, copying the art of Hubert Robert, scattered its broken staircases of white marble, its fountains, its iron

> gates temptingly ajar. Its beams had swept away the telegraph office. All that was left of it was a column, half shattered but preserving the beauty of a ruin which endures for all time. (1:124)

[8] As will the narrator at 3:863f.

[9] Just as the original reading scene between mother and son at Combray was marked by a moment of radical erasure or nonreading—specifically, by the mother's elision of the incestuous passion between Francois and Madeleine. In this case, the traumatic coincidence of proximity and loss that announces the narrator's "puberty of sorrow"—the disastrous simultaneity of the mother's erotic presence (her "beautiful face shining with youth") and her incipient senescence (the "first wrinkle on her soul") (1:40) is crucially paralleled by a reading performance that interrupts itself and points to the very limits of symbolization. Trauma announces itself precisely by the syncopal blackout that is the unworking of the book:

> The plot began to unfold: to me it seemed all the more obscure because in those days, when I read, I used often to daydream about something quite different for page after page. And the gaps which this habit left in my knowledge of the story were widened by the fact that when it was Mama who was reading to me aloud she left all the love scenes out. And so all the odd changes which take place in the relations between the miller's wife and the boy, changes which only the gradual dawning of love can explain, seemed to me steeped in a mystery the key to which (I readily believed) lay in that strange and mellifluous name of *Champi,* which invested the boy who bore it, I had no idea why, with its own vivid, ruddy, charming color. If my mother was not a faithful reader, she was nonetheless an admirable one. (1:45)

[10] The vast disproportion between the intensity of each experience registered in the Guermantes' party—the jolt of the paving stones, the clink of the spoon, the swipe of the napkin, the shriek of the water pipe, the glare of the sun, and so on—and the negligible event that prefigured it suggests an unmistakable effect of *Nachträglichkeit.*

[11] In this overdetermined compound metaphor the line between birth and death, between food and toxin, is surely beginning already to unravel.

[12] Walter Benjamin, *Das Passagen-Werk,* ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1982).

[13] See note 2.

[14] Letter to Madame Straus, 6 November 1908.

[15] The nexus of incest and writing is elaborated in the narrator's initial perception of the statue of the Virgin of Balbec as already transformed into a "little old woman"—wrinkled, impure, defaced by the graffiti bearing the letters of his own name (1:710). Here as elsewhere the fantasy of the artist's proper signature is bound, paradoxically, to the object's mortifying fall into mechanical reproduction: the desecration of the tabula rasa into "corpse" or "stone semblance" of itself (1:709).

[16] Cf. Friedrich Nietzsche, first essay in *On the Genealogy of Morals,* trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1967).

[17] "At last this consenting Prometheus had had himself nailed by Force to the rock of Pure Matter" (3:868).

[18] Cf. Jacques Derrida, *La carte postale* (Paris: Flammarion, 1980).

[19] The text continues:

> And in yet another way my work would resemble that of Françoise: in a book individual characters, whether human or of some other kind, are made up of numerous impressions derived from many girls, many churches, many sonatas and combined to form a single sonata, a single church, a single girl, so that I should be making my book in the same way that Françoise made that *boeuf à la mode* which M. de Norpois had found so delicious, just because she had enriched its jelly with so many carefully chosen pieces of meat. (3:1091; cf. I 480, 493f.)

Compare Proust's letter of 12 July 1909 to Celine Cottin comparing the various ingredients of the work to the lucidity of jelly, the succulence of carrots, the freshness of meat.