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(Dis)Embodied Cognition: Phenomenology, Spirit(ual)ism, and Performance in Proust

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(Dis)Embodied Cognition: Phenomenology, Spirit(ual)ism, and Performance in Proust

Abstract

A psychical researcher among Marcel Proust's contemporaries called belief in the paranormal "the Dreyfus case of science." References to spirit-life abound in Proust's fiction, but critics have resisted readings that attend seriously to the numerous references in *À la recherche du temps perdu* to reincarnation, spirit-possession, and, especially, mediumship. The paper reads them through the lens of long-standing critical controversies, particularly concerning the relationship of Proust's aesthetics and ontology with those of Henri Bergson and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. The paper accepts Nathalie Aubert's finding in her 2011 essay "Proust et Bergson: La mémoire du corps" that Proust's insistence on embodiment validates the reluctance of critics since Georges Poulet to connect him with Bergson and makes him, in a sense, a phenomenologist *avant la lettre*. The paper argues, however, that for Proust a phenomenological interpretation neglects some varieties of experience, and it investigates ways metaphors, particularly in the context of musical performance, drawn from spiritualism inflect his phenomenology and address its limitations.

Keywords

Spiritualism, Spiritism, phenomenology, Proust, Bergson, Merleau-Ponty

(Dis)Embodied Cognition: Phenomenology, Spirit(ual)ism, and Performance in
Proust

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The modern novel, with its voice-throwing effects and promise of intersubjective experience, is a fundamentally spiritualist enterprise. Foundational criticism in narrative theory from Mikhail Bakhtin to Wayne Booth seeks to understand ways a unitary literary text may integrate wildly divergent voices: those of the author, the narrator, other characters, other texts. By attempting to account for narrational authority (or its absence), Booth's 1961 *The Rhetoric of Fiction* helps set the stage for Roland Barthes's "La mort de l'auteur" ("The Death of the Author") of 1967/1968, which begins with the almost paradigmatically spiritualistic interrogation, "Who is speaking?"¹ Representations of supernatural communication are, of course, as old as literature itself. Russell M. Goldfarb and Clare R. Goldfarb, however, make a crucial distinction with regard to spiritualism, which, they stipulate, "is concerned with the immortal souls of men, not with immortal beings called gods" (17). The Goldfarbs trace literary representations of communication with human spirits from Homer and Virgil through Dante and Shakespeare, noting as a crucial milestone the migration of such content, with the arrival of the Gothic novel, from poetry and drama to fiction (21). The publication of *The Castle of Otranto* in 1764 predates by a little under a century the birth of the modern spiritualist movement, generally understood to have begun, in America, with the 1848 "Rochester Rappings" confabulated by the Fox sisters of Hydesville, New York (Oppenheim 11). Tatiana Kontou and Sarah Willburn articulate as a "guiding principle" of the essays collected in their volume on nineteenth-century spiritualism the conviction that "spiritualism and the occult provide flexible allegories for many concepts that are distinctly modern—such as the permeability between remote places, instantaneous communication from afar, and the recording and reproduction of the historical past" (1). They further define spiritualism as a technology, one that occasions "a modern aesthetic that insists on commensurability between disparate people and things as well as the virtual immediacy enabled by many much more recent technical media" (1).

Kontou and Willburn's description of spiritualism's oddly au courant technical aesthetic and of its insistence on "commensurability" should prick up the ears of Marcel Proust's readers. Beginning with a reference to metempsychosis on the first page of *Du côté de chez Swann* (*Swann's Way*) and continuing across the seven volumes of *À la recherche du temps perdu* (*In Search of Lost Time*), the reader encounters a pattern of imagery that includes references not just to reincarnation but to totemism, transmigration, karma, mediumship, automatism,

telepathy, astral projection, oracular magic, sorcery, and the occult.² The functioning, as figuration, of these references is characteristically multivalent. In some ways, they are part and parcel of Proust's apparent determination, aptly substantiated by Malcolm Bowie, to account in his metaphors for every conceivable area of human inquiry (*Freud* 52). They advance Proust's project of conveying the fundamental strangeness of experience. They are also of a piece with the *Recherche*'s chronicling of the narrator's disenchantment (a process, notably, that parallels the evolution of the narrator's relationship with language). This last interpretation is complicated, however, by the fact that the references to spiritualism actually increase as the narrative progresses and reach maximum density in *La Prisonnière* (*The Captive*), the nadir of the narrator's capacity for enchantment. One potential explanation has not been developed extensively in Proust criticism: the possibility that Proust adopts, as the French had done throughout the nineteenth century, figures such as reincarnation and spirit-communication in order to signal possibilities for transcendence and communal experience, casualties of the ascendance of scientific materialism and Enlightenment individualism.

Spiritualism arrived in Europe during a century in which beliefs imported from the East increasingly interpenetrated post-Enlightenment rationalism. In *Secular Spirituality*, Lynn L. Sharp credits "contact with 'the Orient'" at least in part for introducing the idea of metempsychosis and for opening the Western mind to "new conceptions of time and progress" (8).³ Particularly in France, spiritualism and its distinctively French variant Spiritism coalesced contemporaneously with the erosion of and retrenchment by religious and political authority. According to John Warne Monroe's *Laboratories of Faith*, Spiritism's founder Allan Kardec "shared the existential doubts common among the period's free-thinkers, many of whom regretted the loss of their childhood Catholic faith" (98). Spiritism's codification of Anglo-American techniques of spirit communication and astute compounding of spiritualism's underlying beliefs with Eastern ideas like reincarnation occurred contemporaneously with an evolving understanding of consciousness as a consequence of embodiment; according to Spiritism's fundamental Law of Progress, on "more elevated planets, like Jupiter . . . the physical aspects of existence became less important" (106). The historical causes underlying the Spiritists' negotiation of an ascendant materialism and acknowledgement of the corporeal had by no means disappeared by the time Proust began writing. To demonstrate the significance of this fact, it is worthwhile to delve briefly into the history of Proust's relationship with the proto-phenomenology of Henri Bergson.

In an eve-of-publication interview with the journalist Élie-Joseph Bois, Proust had warned that *Du côté de chez Swann* would be dominated by the distinction between involuntary and voluntary memory, "distinction qui non seulement ne figure pas dans la philosophie de M. Bergson, mais est même contredite par elle" (Dreyfus 289) 'a distinction that not only does not appear in

Bergson's philosophy but is even contradicted by it.⁴ Nearly a century later, Nathalie Aubert undertook actually to substantiate how involuntary memory is "contradicted by" Bergson's philosophy. Aubert faults intertextual studies by Proust's and Bergson's contemporaries for their "psychologisme étroit" (133) 'narrow psychologism' and offers her own parallel reading "à la lumière de la phénoménologie" (134) 'in light of phenomenology.'⁵ While acknowledging that Bergson and Proust depart from a similar point in elaborating their independent theories of memory, Aubert shows that involuntary memory in Proust's works is not, paradoxically, effortless. As Bergson writes in *Matière et mémoire* (*Matter and Memory*), the memory files away perceptions "[s]ans arrière-pensée d'utilité ou d'application pratique" (86) '[r]egardless of utility or of practical application' (69). These perceptions may subsequently be brought to bear on specific physical situations and tasks through what Bergson calls "le souvenir-habitude" (91) 'habit-memory' (74). Otherwise, they either "reste[nt] sous la dépendance de notre volonté" (94) 'remain[s] dependent upon our will' (77) or they arise of their own accord in moments when the inhibiting function of the brain is suppressed, as when the subject is distracted, asleep and dreaming, or facing a mortal crisis. This latter phenomenon (along with the seemingly automatic filing-away of every experience) Bergson calls "la mémoire spontanée" (90) 'spontaneous memory' (73). Aubert corrects critics who, misled by an illusion of symmetry between the paired terms "voluntary/involuntary" and "habitual/spontaneous," mistake involuntary memory for a version of spontaneous memory (Aubert 142). Aubert correlates Proust's "monde de sommeil" 'world of sleep,' in which images from the past appear unbidden before the mind while the body is immobilized, with Bergson's spontaneous memory (143). But she insists that *mémoire involontaire* is not "spontaneous" in Bergson's sense but is rather a function of the human's dual status as subject and object of perception, a unity the phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty calls the "*champ phénoménal*" (66, italics in original) '*phenomenal field*' (62, italics in original). Like *souvenir-habitude*, *mémoire involontaire* is inextricably linked with the exigencies of a body navigating the material world.

Bergson's interest is in abstracting *mémoire-spontanée*, "la mémoire par excellence" (*Matière* 89) 'memory *par excellence*' (72), from *souvenir-habitude*; doing so is "à la fois la conséquence théorique et la vérification expérimentale de notre théorie de la perception pure" (*Matière* 265) 'both the theoretic consequence and the experimental verification of our theory of pure perception' (232). From a phenomenological perspective, therefore, the end at which Bergson arrives (or at which he drives) fits a term employed by Merleau-Ponty in his critique of Cartesian philosophy: "la pensée du survol" (Aubert 148) 'thought from above.' With this concept, Merleau-Ponty questions any ideal of perception liberated from the living body, which functions to inhibit the reaction to a stimulus received (Aubert 138). In contrast, Aubert writes, "Proust indique d'emblée les dangers d'une intelligence

qui croit pouvoir se libérer de son enracinement en substituant au sens équivoque de sa vie une signification idéale et peut-être mensongère” (146) ‘Proust emphasizes the fundamental risks of an intelligence that believes itself capable of transcending its rootedness by substituting a deceptive ideality for the equivocal apprehension of the senses.’ In Aubert’s account, Proust’s insistence on corporeality or “rootedness” places him more firmly than Bergson in the camp of the phenomenologists.

The extent to which Proust is a phenomenologist before the fact is clear from a passage that begins with the narrator’s initial encounter at Balbec’s Grand-Hôtel with “un personnage . . . qu’on appelait ‘lift’” (II.25) ‘a personage . . . known as “lift”’ (331). The metonymic identification of the human employee with the equipment he operates may result from a linguistic quirk, “une anglomanie mal informée” ‘an ill-judged piece of Anglomania’ of the sort that leads visitors in the Champs-Élysées to refer as “water-closets” to “ce qu’on appelle en Angleterre un lavabo” (I.483) ‘what in England they call a lavatory’ (88). In England the operator of the lift would have been called the lift-boy.⁶ Then again, it may reflect a willful conflation of person and machine. In any case, the narrator describes the lift operator “installé comme un photographe derrière son vitrage ou comme un organiste dans sa chambre” (II.25) ‘installed like a photographer behind his curtain [glass] or an organist in his loft’ (*Grove* 331), and his attempts to chat the latter up take the form of appeals (apparently at least partly sincere) to his professional vanity:

j’adressai la parole au jeune organiste, artisan de mon voyage et compagnon de ma captivité, lequel continuait à tirer les registres de son instrument et à pousser les tuyaux. Je m’excusai de tenir autant de place, de lui donner tellement de peine, et lui demandai si je ne le gênais pas dans l’exercice d’un art à l’endroit duquel, pour flatter le virtuose, je fis plus que manifester de la curiosité, je confessai ma prédilection. (II.26)

I addressed a few words to the young organist, artificer of my journey and my partner in captivity, who continued to manipulate the registers of his instrument and to finger the stops. I apologised for taking up so much room, for giving him so much trouble, and asked whether I was not obstructing him in the practice of an art in regard to which, in order to flatter the virtuoso, more than displaying curiosity, I confessed my strong attachment. (331)

The skill of the driver in manipulating the controls is indistinguishable from the graceful movement of the machine itself; at a summons from the hotel director, the lift operator “se mit à descendre vers moi avec l’agilité d’un écureuil domestique,

industrieux et captif” (II.25) ‘began to descend towards me with the agility of a domestic, industrious and captive squirrel’ (331). It is difficult to understand what the narrator intends with this curious image; a contemporary reader might visualize a pet hamster propelling itself from inside a transparent plastic sphere. Clearly, though, the impression of agility is based on the precision and alacrity of the machine, but the operator’s symbiosis with that machine is so complete it has become impossible to say to which the quality of agility pertains.

In *Phénoménologie de la perception* (*Phenomenology of Perception*), Merleau-Ponty considers the relationship of the body with the space and objects that surround it. When visual, tactile, and intellectual functions are properly integrated, their coordinated action is symphonic. Merleau-Ponty describes the relative indifference of a virtuosic organist to the instrument provided for a performance:

Entre l’essence musicale du morceau telle qu’elle est indiquée dans la partition et la musique qui effectivement résonne autour de l’orgue, une relation si directe s’établit que le corps de l’organiste et l’instrument ne sont plus que le lieu de passage de cette relation. Désormais la musique existe par soi et c’est par elle que tout le reste existe. (170)

Between the musical essence of the piece as it is shown in the score and the notes which actually sound round the organ, so direct a relation is established that the organist’s body and his instrument are merely the medium of this relationship. Henceforth the music exists by itself and through it all the rest exists. (168)

Such seamless integration is born of a familiarity conspicuously absent among the alien furnishings of the narrator’s hotel room: “Je levais à tout moment mes regards—que les objets de ma chambre de Paris ne gênaient pas plus que ne faisaient mes propres prunelles, car ils n’étaient plus que des annexes de mes organes, un agrandissement de moi-même” (II.27) ‘I kept raising my eyes—which the things in my room in Paris disturbed no more than did my eyelids themselves, for they were merely extensions of my organs, an enlargement of myself’ (*Grove* 334). As in Merleau-Ponty’s account of the organist, habit brings objects populating the perceptual field into the subject’s phenomenal field, nullifying any distinction between the body and its surroundings.

A phenomenological reading of the *Recherche* accounts for nearly all the experiential modalities reported by Proust’s narrator, whose understanding of the world is almost entirely mediated by language and the body and who subjects even those intuitions received through involuntary memory to rigorous intellectual analysis. It neglects, however (and Aubert seems to concede as much in her

acknowledgement of Proust's *monde de sommeil*), what William James calls the "hidden self" (Bramble 36), varieties of experience that transcend language and are recalcitrant to the scrutiny of the intelligence. Encounters with the ineffable are typically associated in the *Recherche* with musical performance, and in elaborating them Proust has recourse, particularly frequently and insistently, to the language of spiritualism. Aubert traces the *Recherche*'s narrative voice to an atemporal void and writes that "il faut moins dire qu'il [le langage] s'enracine dans le corps que reconnaître à ce dernier une présence pré-conceptuelle . . . non pas un alphabet complet, mais une possibilité d'émergence parmi les signes qui miment et invoquent le monde" (145) 'it is necessary less to say that it [language] is rooted in the body than to recognize in the latter a pre-conceptual presence . . . not a complete alphabet, but a possibility of emergence among the signs that gesture toward and invoke the world.' For Aubert it is through the offices of language, a function of the body, that the narrator escapes the condition of an animal or "l'homme des cavernes" (I.5) 'cave-dweller' (*Swann* 7) lost in the wilderness between sleep and waking and becomes inserted in time. Proust's conception of time may be different from Bergson's but for both time is "la condition même de l'existence humaine" (148) 'the very condition of human existence.' Being human in turn enables relations with the material world and with the incarnate minds that inhabit it, an exchange Aubert calls "cette relation réciproque de co-appartenance" (146) 'this reciprocal relationship of co-belonging.'

Before the non-human and the early human, Proust uses another image to illustrate the terrors of non- or almost-being: the revenant. Suddenly awakened, the narrator's confused dreams seem hopelessly obscure, "comme après la métempsycose les pensées d'une existence antérieure" (I.3) 'as the thoughts of a former existence must be to a reincarnate spirit' (*Swann* 5). Aubert's focus on language as the crux of the narrator's encounter with the phenomenal world promises to help elucidate this early reference to spiritual return. Spiritualism, after all, depends on language (at least once its practitioners have graduated from turning tables to the planchette and automatic writing) to facilitate the (re)insertion of disincarnate minds into human time, establishing on their behalf a meaningful relationship with the material world and allowing them to experience, at least momentarily, the reciprocal co-belonging to which Aubert refers. The narrator's identity is restored by his memory "non encore du lieu où j'étais, mais de quelques-uns de ceux que j'avais habités et où j'aurais pu être" (I.5) 'not yet of the place in which I was, but of various other places where I had lived, and might now very possibly be' (*Swann* 7), and he passes "en une seconde par-dessus des siècles de civilisation" (I.6) 'in a flash [over] centuries of civilization' (7). The narrator speaks here of the "grand mystère de l'anéantissement et de la résurrection" 'great mystery of extinction and resurrection' in which we are "initiés presque toutes les nuits" (II.177) 'initiated almost every night' (*Grove* 545); the cycle of death and rebirth is

so central to Spiritist teaching that it will be useful to consider the movement's role in the spiritual life of nineteenth-century France in order to help assess where in his subsequent references to spiritualism Proust has in mind its Kardecian variant.

According to Monroe, the years encompassing the erection of Kardec's tomb (1870), the Commune, and a gathering of Spiritists at Kardec's grave (1875) so large it brought down upon the movement the full repressive authority of the Third Republic represent the high-water mark of Spiritism (150-52). Since "Un amour de Swann" ("Swann in Love") recounts events that take place prior to the narrator's birth (around 1881), this is roughly the period of the earliest events represented in the *Recherche*. On three occasions, Proust uses *spirite*, a term of art coined by Kardec (Monroe 96) for spiritualist operators and originally used more or less exclusively by and about Spiritists, as a synonym for *médium* 'medium.' Otherwise, Spiritism is mentioned only once, when the Norwegian philosopher infelicitously emends his allusion to "séances de spiritisme" 'séances of spiritualism' as "évolutions spiritueuses" (III.322) 'spirituous evocations' (*Sodom* 448). However, given the conventions governing capitalization of proper nouns in French and the fact that after the mid-1860s the words *spiritualiste* and *spirite* were used interchangeably in France (Monroe 105, 118), it is impossible to conclude whether Proust has Spiritism in mind in any given reference to mediumship in the *Recherche*.

John Bramble notes that France was never as hospitable to spiritualism as were England and America, being otherwise disposed toward a pre- (or counter-) Revolutionary "tradition of irregular, Cabalistic Freemasonry" (63). Spiritism established continuity between spiritualist mysticism and these older "hermetic ideas" (Hess 72-73), possibly because it incorporated elements of a millenarian, charismatic cult as well as of a secret society (Cuchet 187-93). Spiritist concepts like *périsprit*, "a 'semi-material' link between" the "physical body" and "an immaterial soul" (Monroe 108), and *Esprit faux savant*, or "poseur spirit" (Monroe 134), are notably absent in the *Recherche* and, perhaps not surprisingly, Proust and the narrator generally incline toward the feminine, domestic spiritualism of the Anglo-Americans rather than the masculine, public Spiritism of the French.⁷ (The two strains meet in Charlus, a character marked by numerous forms of hybridity. Charlus both advocates an ideal of musical performance as a species of spirit-possession and claims affiliation with various arch-legitimist, homosocial, and mystically oriented secret societies.)⁸ Nevertheless, the occultic vocabulary of the *Recherche* imbibes from Spiritism a cosmology embracing both spirit communication and reincarnation and, crucially for the novel's theme of artistic apprenticeship, reposing a Utopian faith in the two as vehicles toward human perfection. Spiritualism, broadly defined, supplies some of Proust's most potent metaphors for artistic inspiration and expression but (in a seeming paradox, given the narrator's successive renunciations of romantic love, friendship, and society in

favor of the solitary pursuit of art) Spiritism's emphasis on social reintegration is also never entirely absent from Proustian supernaturalism.

A passage in *À l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs* (*Within a Budding Grove*) demonstrates that Proust's imagery often bears the imprint of spiritualism even when that imprint is not explicitly acknowledged. The narrator follows a train of thought that initially connects the unknowability of the beloved other, Gilberte, with her dynamism, expressing a decidedly un-Bergsonian wish to fix her image:

Peut-être aussi cette activité de tous les sens à la fois et qui essaye de connaître avec les regards seuls ce qui est au-delà d'eux, est-elle trop indulgente aux mille formes, à toutes les saveurs, aux mouvements de la personne vivante que d'habitude, quand nous n'aimons pas, nous immobilisons. (I.481)

Perhaps, also, that activity of all the senses at once which yet endeavours to discover with the eyes alone what lies beyond them is over-indulgent to the myriad forms, to the different savours, to the movements of the living person whom as a rule, when we are not in love, we immobilise. (84)

Fixity arrives only with the death of love. While love endures, the beloved's "mille formes" present to the lover's senses a bewildering nebula, and the "mouvements de la personne vivante" merge in a flow that indifference alone can stanch. Unlike Gilberte, Albertine's "gentil spectre" (Clermont-Tonnerre 229) 'charming ghost' passes into the spirit world in full nebulosity (*Bowie Stars* 2, *Freud* 59) ensuring that she will remain forever a creature in flight. For the narrator there has never been a single Albertine, only innumerable Albertines (IV.1067): "Chacune était . . . attachée à un moment, à la date duquel je me trouvais replacé quand je la revoyais" (IV.70) ' . . . each one was attached to a moment, to the date of which I found myself carried back when I saw again that particular Albertine' (*Captive* 659). The radical instability of the beloved produces a mental image not unlike that of the spectral presences in Spiritist photographs: "Le modèle chéri . . . bouge; on n'en a jamais que des photographies manquées" (I.481) ' . . . the beloved model does not stay still; and our mental photographs of it are always blurred' (*Grove* 84). The blurriness of these "botched photographs," like the "haziness" of Spiritist photographer Édouard Buguet's images, functions as a guarantor of their supernatural status (Monroe 176). Gilberte remains inaccessible even in the *monde de sommeil*, frustrating the narrator as might the failure of one bereaved to dream of the departed, "ainsi ceux qui ont perdu un être aimé qu'ils ne revoient jamais en dormant, s'exaspèrent de reconstruire sans cesse dans leurs rêves tant de gens insupportables et que c'est déjà trop d'avoir connus dans l'état de veille" (I.481) 'just as those who have lost a loved one whom they never see again in sleep, are enraged at meeting incessantly in their

dreams any number of insupportable people whom it is quite enough to have known in the waking world' (85).⁹ Even though Proust speaks here of the failure of the departed to contact the dreamer, the language is nevertheless consistent with the discourse of Spiritism. Monroe writes that articles published in the *Revue spirite* invoked oneiric encounters of the kind that elude the narrator both to decouple such visitations from exclusive identification with "rare, spectacular manifestations," connecting them instead with experiences relatable to all readers who have suffered a loss, and to give Spiritist "doctrine the emotional immediacy of sentimental fiction" (113).

The distance separating the youthful narrator's sentimentality from the reader's sense of the content of the narrative produces irony that also extends to passages where references to spiritualism are more explicit. In Proust's representations of spirit contact, the communications elicited run the gamut of inscrutability, which in one form is indistinguishable from inanity. By the time of the party at the home of the princesse de Guermantes, Legrandin's conversation has deteriorated with age until he utters only infrequent "paroles qui avaient l'insignifiance de celles que disent les morts qu'on évoque" (IV.514) 'remarks as trivial as those uttered by the spirits of the dead when we summon them to our presence' (*Regained* 358). Aviva Briefel writes in "'Freaks of Furniture': The Useless Energy of Haunted Things" of a more-or-less contemporary conviction among the Victorians of "[t]he uselessness of spiritualism" (214). One period commentator Briefel quotes complains of the "imbecile consequences" of table-turning (212). Proust's narrator adopts a ghostbuster's skepticism when he likens the contrast between the mummy before him and the Legrandin he had known to that between a spiritualist surrogate and the "homme brillant" (IV.514) 'man who in his life-time was brilliant' (359) being channeled. Notably, in both these instances, the unsatisfactory result of the spirit's encounter with materiality is a failure of language. Communication effected through impact with or apportionment of an object is limited to signaling the spirit's mere presence or, at best, answering yes-or-no questions by following a rudimentary code. Similarly, simulating the brilliant man's conversation calls for verbal flair and an actor's skill and commitment, for qualities, in short, that the average spiritualist stand-in could not be expected to bring to every performance.

When the secrets of the dead are not hopelessly inane, they may be, by contrast, too profound to be grasped by the living. In a passage earlier in *Le Temps retrouvé* (*Time Regained*) in which furloughed soldiers are said to resemble the summoned dead, the narrator conjectures that the experience of the front must be like physical death: so beyond the pale that it is incomprehensible in human terms. Saint-Loup is "comme ces morts que nous évoquons, qui nous apparaissent une seconde, que nous n'osons pas interroger et qui du reste pourraient tout au plus nous répondre: 'Vous ne pourriez pas vous figurer'" (IV.336) 'like phantoms whom we

summon from the dead, who appear to us for a second, whom we dare not question, and who could, in any case, only reply: “You cannot possibly imagine” (97). Here, notably, the narrator speculates what the spectral visitor might say could it but be induced to stay and speak. The content of this hypothetical message directly addresses the inadequacy of language to bridge the experiential gap separating the spirit from its summoner. The message fails because the messenger is unable, lacking a human host and therefore the instrument of language, to re-enter human time, and this durational incompatibility accounts in the first place for what the embodied human perceives as the spirit’s evanescence.

Less transient spirits, like the composer Vinteuil’s, may be privy to secrets that are equally profound; those secrets are not necessarily any more reducible to language, at least the verbal kind, than those kept by the veterans of the trenches. As spiritual presences go, however, Vinteuil’s seems particularly determined to make itself heard. What appears to be the very first mention of mediumship in the *Recherche* occurs during a party at the home of the marquise de Saint-Euverte, when Vinteuil’s “little phrase” shakes “comme celui d’un médium le corps vraiment possédé du violoniste” (I.346) ‘like a medium’s the body of the violinist, “possessed” indeed’ (*Swann* 325). In a passage that Merleau-Ponty cites in connection with the image of the organist quoted above, the performers of Vinteuil’s sonata seem to be “beaucoup moins jouaient la petite phrase qu’ils n’exécutaient les rites exigés d’elle pour qu’elle apparût” (I.342) ‘not nearly so much playing the little phrase as performing the rites on which it insisted before it would consent to appear’ (321). In Merleau-Ponty’s account, the musician, like “[I]’homme concrètement pris” ‘[m]an taken as a concrete being,’ is “ce va-et-vient de l’existence qui tantôt se laisse être corporelle et tantôt se porte aux actes personnels” (104) ‘the movement to and fro of existence which at one time allows itself to take corporeal form and at others moves towards personal acts’ (101). The performers of Vinteuil’s sonata, like the accomplished organist and the lift operator not only enact but embody the coordinated functioning of Bergson’s “deux mémoires, dont l’une *imagine* et dont l’autre *répète* [;] la seconde peut suppléer la première et souvent même en donner l’illusion” (*Matière* 87, italics in original) ‘two memories, of which the one *imagines* [spontaneous memory] and the other *repeats* [habit-memory][;] the second may supply the place of the first and even sometimes be mistaken for it’ (70, italics in original). The familiar stimulus of the instrument and its integration with the performer’s “champs perceptifs et pratiques” (Merleau-Ponty 462) ‘perceptual and practical fields’ (469) allow the performer to function simultaneously in two temporal registers, that of the music and that of the performance. Otherwise unassimilable temporal registers are brought into dialogue as well in the foundational experience of *mémoire involontaire*, as the push of intellectual analysis counters the pull of sensory stimulus: “L’épisode de la madeleine est un moment analytique . . . où l’effort pour retrouver la signification

du plaisir éprouvé est clairement signalé dans le texte” (Aubert 142) ‘the madeleine episode is a moment of analysis . . . where[in] the effort to recover the meaning of the pleasure experienced is clearly signaled in the text.’

As signs, the rites of supplication to Vinteuil’s spirit function almost as reverse misdirection; the habitual actions are presented as simply part of the show, expected but ultimately unnecessary except as a way of distracting the audience from the fact of the music’s primordial existence. Immediately prior to this passage, the narrator analyzes, generally, the sound of the violin. The analysis explores ways the listener’s experience with other violins in the past contrasts with and conditions the irreducible specificity of the violin in its present manifestation. In the passage, the visual image of the violin is said to modify the very sound of the instrument, not just the listener’s understanding of it. In a performance, the violin’s siren call becomes audible and, if the instrument itself is not visible, the listener might be deceived as to the source of its contralto voice, perhaps thinking that a singer has entered the ensemble. If the listener is able to see only the instrument’s case, then the listener might be fooled, as in an exhibition of voice throwing, into believing that humble accessory to be the source of the sound (I.341). The violin recapitulates the theme of Vinteuil’s sonata, the little phrase, and Swann hears it “lui disant ce qu’elle avait à lui dire et dont il scrutait tous les mots” (I.342) ‘telling him what she had to say, every word of which he closely scanned’ (*Swann* 321). What is spoken is the “parole ineffable d’un seul absent, peut-être d’un mort . . . , s’exhalant au-dessus des rites de ces officiants” (I.346-47) ‘ineffable utterance of one solitary man, absent, perhaps dead . . . , breathed out above the rites of those two hierophants’ (325). The sonata concluded, the two-hundred-ninety-nine or so other attendees appear stunned, and the impression may not be only Swann’s that Vinteuil’s genius “faisait de cette estrade où une âme était ainsi évoquée un des plus nobles autels où pût s’accomplir une cérémonie surnaturelle” (I.347) ‘made of that stage on which a soul was thus called into being one of the noblest altars on which a supernatural ceremony could be performed’ (325-26).

Even the comtesse de Monteriender, “célèbre par ses naïvetés” ‘famed for her imbecilities,’ recognizes that a visitation has taken place almost, but not quite, on par with a previous gathering’s “tables tournantes” (I.347) ‘table-turning’ (326).¹⁰ The irony of the entire scene is in one sense loaded against Swann. Vinteuil, still very much alive at this point, seems to communicate with Swann through the spiritual agency of his music. The contradiction of Swann’s scrutinizing the “words” of Vinteuil’s message even though its parole is ineffable passes without remark. Swann recognizes that the revelations of the music could not “se résoudre en raisonnements” ‘be analyzed into any logical elements’:

Mais . . . Swann tenait les motifs musicaux pour de véritables idées, d’un autre monde, d’un autre ordre, idées voilées de ténèbres, inconnues,

impénétrables à l'intelligence, mais qui n'en sont pas moins parfaitement distinctes les unes des autres, inégales entre elles de valeur et de signification. (I.343)

But . . . Swann had regarded musical motifs as actual ideas, of another world, of another order, ideas veiled in shadows, unknown, impenetrable by the human mind, which none the less were perfectly distinct one from another, unequal among themselves in value and in significance. (322)

Perhaps in this instance the imbecility of the comtesse resides less in her comparison of the performance to a séance than in her idea of the means by which the spirit has entered into materiality: the violin is less *table tournante* than *table parlante*, less a turning table than a speaking one. In the latter, rather than simply moving the table or causing its legs to rap the floor, the spirit creates vibrations in its wooden surface (as Vinteuil has done in the body of the violin) in order to communicate.

Music is inarguably more nuanced than even the most elaborate dictation transcribed by medianimic amanuensis, though in both a substantial part of the message is “I am here,” a statement that, as Barthes would have it in “Introduction à l’analyse structurale des récits” (“Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives”), takes place on “l’ordre performatif, selon lequel le sens d’une parole est l’acte même qui la profère” (97) ‘the performative plane, whereby the meaning of an utterance is the very act by which it is uttered’ (*Image* 114). Music, for Swann, is closer than *tables parlantes* to meeting the minimum requirements of a language, possessing as it does units of meaning whose individual significance is distinguishable, and therefore more conducive to expressing complex ideas. Yet the ideas remain veiled in tenebrous shadows. As Aubert has pointed out, however, the capacity for language latent in the body is not a complete alphabet; it is simply the potential for emergence into signification. The valences of Swann’s response to the music may be internally contradictory, but overall that response is consistent with Merleau-Ponty’s understanding of the musical versus the verbal utterance. For Merleau-Ponty, any difference in the communicative value of the two is illusory; the spoken phrase no less than the musical one communicates only itself (219).

Like the majority of the audience, the comtesse de Monteriender is impressed less by the spiritual dimension of the performance than she is “[é]merveillée par la virtuosité des exécutants” (I.347) ‘[d]azzled by the virtuosity of the performers’ (326). But virtuosity and mediumistic capacity are not substantially different, at least if one asks Charlus. For him the ability to channel the composer is crucial to musical performance: “[V]ous semblez ne pas apercevoir le côté médiumnique de la chose” (III.396) ‘[Y]ou seem not to be aware of the mediumistic side’ (552) Charlus tells an unimpressed Morel in *Sodome et*

Gomorrhe (Sodom and Gomorrah). By the time the narrator hears Vinteuil's septet for the first time in *La Prisonnière*, Vinteuil has entered the spirit realm and Morel, the soloist, has clearly grasped the "mediumistic" side of musical performance. On Spiritist mediumship, Monroe writes, "Like demonic possession or mystical ecstasy, the medium's trance was a state observers perceived as liminal" (129). Morel is in all ways a marginal character. The son of a valet, he is a relentless social climber. Polyamorous, he couples freely with men and women, *les invertis* (inverts) and *les gomorrhéennes* (Gomorreans). The narrator observes of him that he "ressemblait à un vieux livre du Moyen Âge, plein d'erreurs, de traditions absurdes, d'obscénités[;] il était extraordinairement composite" (III.420) 'resembled an old book of the Middle Ages, full of mistakes, of absurd traditions, of obscenities; he was extraordinarily composite' (*Sodom* 587). It is precisely his fluidity that makes Morel such a gifted interpreter. An errant lock of Morel's hair announcing the *allegro vivace* is this unfixed quality's objective correlative. "[A]lors . . . la Mèche!" '[T]hen, the Forelock!' Charlus enthuses, calling it "le signe de la révélation, même pour les plus obtus" (III.791) 'a revelatory sign even for the most obtuse' (*Captive* 383).

Morel's mediumship is abetted both by a text and, notably, by a lesbian. Indeed, the role of Mlle Vinteuil's girlfriend in rescuing the septet from oblivion is difficult to understand without taking into account that, as a *gomorrhéenne*, she shares with Morel powers that assist her in deciphering the scribblings, "plus illisibles que des papyrus ponctués d'écriture cunéiforme" (III.766-67) 'more illegible than strips of papyrus dotted with a cuneiform script' (*Captive* 349-50), discovered posthumously in Vinteuil's grimoire. Merleau-Ponty comments on the status of the text and its relation to the signifiatory value of the work:

Un roman, un poème, un tableau, un morceau de musique sont des individus, c'est-à-dire des êtres où l'on ne peut distinguer l'expression de l'exprimé, dont le sens n'est accessible que par un contact direct et qui rayonnent leur signification sans quitter leur place temporelle et spatiale. (177)

A novel, poem, picture or musical work are individuals, that is, beings in which the expression is indistinguishable from the thing expressed, their meaning, accessible only through direct contact, being radiated with no change of their temporal and spatial situation. (175)

Merleau-Ponty's insistence on the radical equivalence of systems of signification (fiction, poetry, painting, music) is a natural outcome of his refusal to acknowledge an ideal realm in which the work exists separately from its material embodiment,

and it helps ensure that the creative act resides permanently in Barthes's "performative plane."

During the concert at the Verdurins the narrator reflects that it is when Vinteuil strives for variety of expression that the consistency of his voice is most apparent. Vinteuil's distinctive voice is "une preuve de l'existence irréductiblement individuelle de l'âme" (III.761) 'a proof of the irreducibly individual existence of the soul' (341). His artistic signature is separated from that of other musicians by "une différence bien plus grande que celle que nous percevons entre la voix de deux personnes" 'a difference far greater than that which we perceive between the voices of two people':

[U]ne véritable différence, celle qu'il y avait entre la pensée de tel musicien et les éternelles investigations de Vinteuil, la question qu'il se posa sous tant de formes, son habituelle spéculation, mais aussi débarrassée des formes analytiques du raisonnement que si elle s'était exercée dans le monde des anges, de sorte que nous pouvons en mesurer la profondeur, mais pas plus la traduire en langage humain que ne le peuvent les esprits désincarnés quand, évoqués par un médium, celui-ci les interroge sur les secrets de la mort. . . . (III.760)

[T]he real difference that exists between the thought of this or that other composer and the eternal investigations of Vinteuil, the question that he put to himself in so many forms, his habitual speculation, but as free from analytical forms of reasoning as if it were being carried out in the world of the angels, so that we can gauge its depth, but no more translate it into human speech than can disembodied spirits when, evoked by a medium, they are questioned by him about the secrets of death. (341)

Note that the spirits in question are, like the taciturn combat veterans, *désincarnés*. The narrator, in his nascent capacity as author and impelled by the insights made available through involuntary memory, is by contrast able through translation to convey those insights in human language. As the narrator says in *Le Temps retrouvé*, "Le devoir et la tâche d'un écrivain sont ceux d'un traducteur" (IV.469) 'The function and the task of a writer are those of a translator' (291).

The narrator shares with the spiritualists his sense of the nobility of translation. In a study of Anna Mary Howitt's spirit drawings, Rachel Oberter writes:

Translation was a common metaphor during the second half of the nineteenth century . . . but it had particular resonance for spiritualists, for whom it had multiple valences. Not only did it mean to decode, to mediate

between different systems of meanings, but it also meant to change state, to transmute, to leave the mortal self behind. . . . “Translate” was thus a dynamic term for the spiritualists, implying a creative act, one filled with hope for transformation. To translate the spirit language into terms that humans could understand was thus less about debasing the message and more about elevating the messenger. (342-43)

Oberter reports that the middle-class intellectuals of Howitt’s circle distinguished between “spirit descending into matter” and “the sublimation of matter into spirit,” associating the first with theatrical spiritualist manifestations and the latter with clairvoyance and spirit-drawing (338). Oberter discusses the frailty of Howitt’s drawings, positing their evanescence as a function of their status as intermediaries between the spirit and human worlds, their status as matter undergoing sublimation. The texts of the *Recherche* are likewise intermediaries: material evidence of a communication with the spirit-world of memory and the physical trace of an ideal text toward which they eternally gesture (though, as Aubert reminds us, the ideal signification of one’s life might be deceptive¹¹). The Celtic belief that a chance encounter can free a soul from its prison in a material object (I.43-44) is likewise an account of the sublimation of matter into spirit, exemplary not so much of the spiritualist’s need to concretize, and thus make demonstrable, emanations from the spirit-world as of the spirit’s desire to access the consciousness and linguistic capacity latent in matter. In Merleau-Ponty’s account, a poem is trapped in the materiality of the written text, where it “serait irrémédiablement perdu si son texte n’était exactement conservé; sa signification n’est pas libre et ne réside pas dans le ciel des idées: elle est enfermée entre les mots sur quelque papier fragile” (176) ‘would be irrecoverably lost if its text were not preserved down to the last detail. Its meaning is not arbitrary and does not dwell in the firmament of ideas: it is locked in the words printed on some perishable page’ (174-75).

The narrator’s twin insights that the immortality of involuntary memory persists “après la mort des êtres, après la destruction des choses” (I.46) ‘after the people are dead, after the things are broken and scattered’ (*Swann* 44) and that his own “livres eux aussi, comme mon être de chair, finiraient un jour par mourir” (IV.620) ‘books too, like my fleshly being, would in the end one day die’ (*Regained* 524) define the limits of Proust’s exaltation of art in the *Recherche*. Charlus is the poet of the salons, “celui qui avait su dégager de la mondanité ambiante une sorte de poésie où il entraînait de l’histoire, de la beauté, du pittoresque, du comique, de la frivole élégance” (IV.345) ‘the man who had been able to extract from the world of fashion a sort of essential poetry, which had in it elements of history, of beauty, of the picturesque, of the comic, of frivolous elegance’ (*Regained* 110), but he is ultimately an *artiste manqué*; his failure as an artist lies in the fact that he does not re-inscribe the poetry he detaches from the fashionable world in the materiality of

a text. The artwork is emphatically material and, being material, it is destined for oblivion. In *Proust Among the Stars*, Bowie writes that “[t]he work of art . . . is open pore by pore to its own extinction. . . . The artist trapped inside a death-shadowed mind-world . . . seems at first to have two mutually exclusive futures: he can seek death . . . or he can seek to rejoin that world as an object among objects” (120). Curiously, Bergson had already suggested a bridge between these otherwise contradictory poles. On May 28, 1913, six months or so before the appearance of *Swann*, he delivered his inaugural lecture as president of the Society for Psychical Research. Published as “‘Fantômes de vivants’ et ‘recherche psychique’” (“Phantasms of the Living’ and Psychical Research”), the talk outlines some implications of Bergson’s philosophy, particularly as it is expressed in *Matière et mémoire*, for the work of the society. Since the perceptions that the individual consciousness files away are not stored in the brain,¹² it is reasonable to believe they might be shared, if not among the living and the dead, then at least between two living beings, validating the sort of extrasensory perception Mme Cottard claims on behalf of Odette near the end of “Un amour de Swann”: “Rien n’est impossible à l’œil d’une amie” (I.370) ‘Nothing is impossible to the eye of a friend’ (347). As Bergson puts it, “Entre les diverses consciences pourraient s’accomplir à chaque instant des échanges, comparables aux phénomènes d’endosmose” (78) ‘Between different minds there may be continually taking place [ex]changes analogous to the phenomena of endosmosis’ (97). The porous membrane that separates the work of art from the rest of the material world allows intersubjective exchange of the sort Bergson describes even as it admits the same forces of decay that destroy every human body.

In *Le possible et le réel* (“The Possible and the Real”) Bergson challenges the value of the possible as an ontological category. “[L]’artiste,” Bergson writes, “crée le possible en même temps que du réel quand il exécute son œuvre” (15) ‘[T]he artist in executing his work is creating the possible as well as the real’ (121). In turn, the reader, viewer, performer, or listener participates in “cette création continue d’imprévisible nouveauté” (17) ‘this continuous creation of unforeseeable novelty’ (123) that Bergson insists on throughout his work. One need only contemplate the singularity of “Combray I” to find an unparalleled example of an artist simultaneously creating the possible and the real. Proust’s incantatory prose functions in the way that the performative utterance does for Barthes, speaking only itself. Its creator is no less “composite” than Morel; see Robert Dreyfus on “ses bizarreries” and “sa grâce” (74) ‘his eccentricities’ and ‘his charm.’ Like Merleau-Ponty’s music, the *Recherche* exists for itself and through it everything else exists. But its fulfillment is the opportunity it provides to enter into symbiosis with the mind of a “passé maître” (III.420) ‘past master’ (*Sodom* 587)—one is tempted to say an ascended master. Such a moment is envisioned by the narrator during his epiphany in *Le Temps retrouvé*: “[C]e livre essentiel, le seul livre vrai, un grand

écrivain n'a pas, dans le sens courant, à l'inventer puisqu'il existe déjà en chacun de nous, mais à le traduire" (IV.469) "[T]he essential, the only true book, though in the ordinary sense of the word it does not have to be "invented" by the great writer—for it exists already in each of us—has to be translated by him' (291). For Walter Benjamin, Proust's achievement recovers for modernity the Bardic role of the public storyteller (113). One effect, if not aim, of Proust's osmotic art is a revival in collective life of the sort for which Kardec and other Spiritists had looked to the world beyond.

Notes

1. The question is as it appears in *S/Z* (begun in February 1968 [*Œuvres* 549]): "Qui parle?" (582) 'Who is speaking?' (41). "La mort de l'auteur" (first published in 1967 in English as "The Death of the Author" [*Œuvres*, Table du tome II (1751)]) includes an adverb: "Qui parle ainsi?" (491) 'Who is speaking thus?' (*Image* 142).

2. Totemism: "la croyance celtique que les âmes de ceux que nous avons perdus sont captives dans . . . une chose inanimée" (I.43-44) 'the Celtic belief that the souls of those whom we have lost are held captive . . . in some inanimate object' (*Swann* 42); transmigration: "la transmigration des âmes" (II.176) 'the transmigration of souls' (*Grove* 545), "c'était, transmigrée en moi, . . . ma tante Léonie" (III.586) 'a person . . . had transmigrated into me . . . my aunt Léonie' (*Captive* 95-96); karma: "tout se passe dans notre vie comme si nous y entrions avec le faix d'obligations contractées dans une vie antérieure" (III.693) 'everything is arranged in this life as though we entered it carrying a burden of obligations contracted in a former life' (*Captive* 245); mediumship in at least eight passages of which the more significant are cited and discussed in the body of the essay; automatism: "le vieillissement d'une pensée moins maîtresse que jadis de ses réflexes et qui dans des instants d'automatisme laisse échapper un secret si soigneusement enfoui pendant quarante ans" (III.715) 'the ageing of a mind less master of its reflexes than in the past, which in moments of automatism lets out a secret that has been so carefully hidden for forty years' (*Captive* 273); telepathy: "Si cela avait été, malgré ses radiotélépathies, comment Françoise l'aurait-elle su?" (III.606) 'If this had been so, how, in spite of her telepathic powers, could Françoise have come to hear of it?' (*Captive* 122-23); astral projection: "traverser les régions voisines de la vie . . . et atterrir brusquement au réveil" (III.370-71) 'to . . . traverse the regions bordering on life . . . and come to earth suddenly at the point of awakening' (*Sodom* 517), "un système plus vaste où les âmes se meuvent dans le temps comme les corps dans l'espace" (IV.137) 'a vaster system in which souls move in time as bodies move in

space' (*Captive* 751); oracular magic: "ronde de sorcières ou de nornes qui me prosait ses oracles" (II.78) 'a ring of witches or of Norns who would propound their oracles to me' (*Grove* 407); sorcery: "les murs et les divans répétaient des emblèmes de sorcellerie" (III.466) 'the walls and couches everywhere repeated the emblems of sorcery' (*Sodom* 654); the occult: "cette influence s'étendit naturellement à mes rêves d'occultisme" (IV.110) 'that influence naturally extended to my thoughts about occultism' (*Captive* 713).

3. Sharp acknowledges that metempsychosis is not anathema to the Enlightenment, being present, in another form, in the writings of Wilhelm von Leibniz (8).

4. Unattributed translations from the French are the author's own.

5. Aubert's critique echoes in certain respects that of Georges Poulet, though the latter's was advanced in the service of distinguishing Proust's and Bergson's conceptions of time. As Aubert does, Poulet notes the frequency with which "la mémoire proustienne" 'Proustian memory' has been identified with "la mémoire affective des psychologues" 'the affective memory of the psychologists,' but he insists that for Proust the sensory trigger only "nous ouvre un chemin en profondeur . . . [;] c'est à nous d'y avancer" (374) 'opens to us a road through the depths . . . [;] it is up to us to advance on that road' (298).

6. Later this individual will be called "le lift" or "le liftier" in the French text (see, for example, IV.325) and "the lift-boy" in the English (*Regained* 81).

7. Sharp is less inclined to problematize Spiritism's in-part self-proclaimed feminine gendering than are Monroe and Cuchet. See for example her consideration of ways the movement's female-identification provided an easy handle for critics in the scientific and religious press (68).

8. Monroe suggests that between the dimensions of gender and politics that of gender is the more important in determining such affiliations. He writes of the Spiritist demographic that "[a]mong French men . . . —particularly those with republican sympathies—anticlerical skepticism was a defining characteristic of masculinity, and sociability revolved around secular organizations such as Masonic Lodges or *sociétés savantes*" (121-22).

9. Following her departure, Albertine is, by contrast, continually present in the narrator's dreams: "Je pensais tout le temps à Albertine en dormant" (IV.31) 'I thought all the time of Albertine while I was asleep' (*Captive* 604).

10. Admittedly, Mme Monteriender's statement is ambiguous. Possibly she means something more along the lines of "since the days of the *tables tournantes*."

11. Bowie offers an alternative formulation of the same idea: "The redemptive power of art and the vanity of art are both to be recognised and no resolution between them is to be sought" (*Stars* 318).

12. "[À] mon sens, le cerveau ne conserve pas les représentations ou images du passé ; il emmagasine simplement des habitudes motrices" (73) 'In my view, the brain does not preserve the ideas or images of the past, it simply stores motor habits' (90).

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