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Shawn Gorman

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## Proustian Metaphor and the Automobile

### Abstract

In Marcel Proust's *Sodome et Gomorrhe*, the automobile produces a transformation in the relationship between space and time and, by analogy, a parallel transformation in art. In Proust's famous notion of involuntary memory, the similarity of a past sense impression to a present one leads to transcendence of time and space, and ultimately to metaphor. The metonymical speed of the automobile endlessly chases the sort of metaphorical "simultaneity" at work in involuntary memory. Structurally, the automobile offers the possibility of bringing together two terms by eliminating the middle term (time, space) that separated them; yet the automobile is never fast enough to reach the atemporal perfection of metaphor, and the third term reappears. We therefore examine how the automobile in this and other texts by Proust exhibits both metaphorical and metonymical properties. The automobile creates unexpected connections and reveals, in a displaced form, surprising relationships among characters, emotions, objects, and symbols. In its role as metaphor, the automobile stands for processes that are negatively marked, like aesthetic fetishism, while in its role as metonymy, the automobile leads to pleasure and appeasement.

### Keywords

Marcel Proust, *Sodome et Gomorrhe*, automobile, space, time, space and time, art, involuntary memory, simultaneity, metaphor, characters, emotions, objects, symbols, fetishism, pleasure, metonymy

## Proustian Metaphor and the Automobile

Shawn Gorman  
*Boston University*

As means of conveyance, metaphor and transportation share a common structural function. Just as metaphor serves to bring otherwise distant semantic fields together, transportation brings two otherwise distant places closer. For a theory of art in which metaphor plays a privileged role, modifications in the technology of transportation would be accompanied by corresponding modifications in aesthetic practice. As Marcel Proust puts it in *Sodome et Gomorrhe* (*Sodom and Gomorrah*, 1922)—in reference to how surprisingly easy it is to travel in the newly invented automobile—. “Distances are only the relationship of space to time and vary with it. We express the difficulty we have reaching a place in a system of leagues and kilometers that becomes false as soon as this difficulty diminishes. Art is also modified by this . . .”<sup>1</sup> It is tempting to speculate how this notion might serve as a prolegomenon to a theory of literature.<sup>2</sup> If metaphor is truly a form of transport, it is an ideal one, since automobiles and other real forms of transportation cannot claim to transcend time and space. In fact, the ideal transport would be infinitely fast, and each new advancement in the technology of transportation (i.e., in art) would soon be seen as comparatively slower, and less perfect, than this ideal. A passage in George Bataille’s *L’abbé C* (*The Abbot C*, 1950) formulates this problem with such remarkable clarity that it merits citation here, as an introduction to the Proustian schema we will investigate in what follows: “In my weakness, my absurdity imagined a way to formulate exactly the difficulty literature confronts. I imagined its object, perfect happiness, as a car speeding down the highway.”<sup>3</sup> Bataille’s narrator envisions himself approach-

ing this speeding happiness-automobile in his own car. Just as he is about to catch and pass it, he realizes happiness possesses a much more powerful motor that allows it to pull away and disappear, unreachably far ahead in the distance. The author's transport proves inadequate to the ideal felicity literature would overtake. As we shall see, a similar formulation concerning the ideal literature pursues and the forms of transport or metaphor it employs can be found in Proust's *Sodome et Gomorrhe*.

To avoid confusion about why metaphor is structurally analogous to cars in Proust, some reference must be made to the notion of metaphor that is commonly used to summarize the unsummarizable *A la recherche du temps perdu* (*In Search of Lost Time*, 1913-1927).<sup>4</sup> In the first volume of that novel, the narrator bites into a small cake called a *madeleine* and its flavor unexpectedly reminds him of eating the same item as a child, provoking a rush of associated memories accompanied by the pleasant sensation of recovering not only the past, but an essence of things that transcends time. Proust dubs the procedure at work in this episode involuntary memory, spends over three thousand pages searching for essences, and later on specifies that involuntary memory accedes to the realm of essences through metaphor. Now, this idea of metaphor is particular to Proust in many ways, but I would like to argue that it functions in one crucial respect like any other rhetorical figure by that name.<sup>5</sup> Structurally speaking, metaphor involves an elision of time and space—a realm of essences if you will—that allows two otherwise distant terms to be joined.<sup>6</sup> Etymologically speaking, metaphor is also transport or translation, *Übersetzung*. But that etymological sense in which metaphor equals transport should be understood as a metaphysical abstraction and an unattainable ideal, because it would conjure away space, preferring to substitute a destination for a point of departure, and to eliminate time in favor of simultaneity. To examine this arrangement at work, we should turn now to the middle volume of Proust's novel, *Sodome et Gomorrhe*, where the automobile makes its brief but striking entry into the narrative.

In *Sodome et Gomorrhe*, the automobile alters the relative geometry of love and artwork by rearranging time and space; it is a technological *madeleine*. The effects of automobile travel are strikingly illustrated when Marcel is surprised to discover the actual proximity

of Balbec and a village that, until then, he had believed was totally isolated. By analogy, this realization makes him “think with terror” that he would not have known how to distinguish Madame Bovary or la Sanseverina from any other woman, had he met her outside the pages of a novel (3:385). Previously he had only traveled between Balbec and the village (Beaumont) by train. Arriving in the town by automobile is like meeting Emma Bovary face to face and finding her totally different from the way Flaubert describes her.<sup>7</sup> So the automobile is a vehicle for a certain critique of literature: at stake is Marcel’s dismayed realization that his experience with the novel / train inculcated a false sensibility that falls apart when confronted with real people / the automobile. Implicitly, Proust is asking whether a novel can function like an automobile instead of a train. If the automobile symbolizes Proust’s narrative technique, then the novels of Flaubert or of Stendhal are mere trains. Arrival by automobile means identity is complicated as speed transforms the appearance of space; literature would have to duplicate this effect.

However, as it travels from place to place, the automobile engages different points in a metonymical relationship just as experience does for a single object at different points in time. Here metonymy should be understood not merely as the substitution of contiguous terms, in the limited and often uncertain definition of metonymy as a rhetorical figure, but as a relationship of contiguity in the overall “nature of the semantic relationship” at stake, as metonymy is redefined by Gérard Genette in his classic essay, “*Métonymie chez Proust*” (58). The critical aspect of the term metonymy, for our purposes, is that of spatio-temporal as opposed to atemporal combinations. While this distinction can be ambiguous in liminal cases, our reading of Proust is intended to present metaphor as an ideal limit-case of metonymical contiguity, a semantic jump, so to speak, from one point to another unconnected in time or space to the first. Indeed, Genette proposes that a certain contiguity-metonymy is at work beneath what we are positing here as the discontinuous distance between vehicle and tenor in Proustian metaphor (55-56). Yet Proust also authorizes an explicitly atemporal conception of metaphor. Proust suggests that by rejoining two different images of a person, for example, memory allows us to transcend the continuity of time and measure otherwise imperceptibly gradual changes

(3: 410). The metonymical rapidity of the automobile suggests an opening on such metaphorical simultaneity; again, metaphor and transport are etymologically identical in meaning to “carry over,” *Übersetzung*. Strictly speaking, however, the appearance of metaphor’s transcendent perspective would require an infinitely fast automobile. In an abstract sense the automobile joins two distant points, but in practice the impression of simultaneity is just an accelerated version of the normal separation of things in time and space. It is only as a transcendent ideal that the automobile could truly function like a metaphor; like Bataille’s automobile, this unreachable ideal inevitably recedes over the horizon just as we are about to overtake it.

Nevertheless, Proust’s automobile represents an improvement over Stendhal and Flaubert. It also invites a certain manner of reading. Namely, Proust argues in favor of surprising, rapid juxtapositions as a method of reading literature in “En mémoire des églises assassinées” ‘In Memory of Murdered Churches’ originally published in *Le Figaro* in 1904. In that essay, Proust presents a theory for art criticism, but the theory applies equally to the analysis of the characters of a novel, or even to real individuals.

To read only one book by an author is to meet an author just once. And by conversing with a person just once you can discern singular traits in him. But it is only by their repetition in varied circumstances that one can recognize them [these traits] for characteristic and essential. For a writer . . . the variety of the works is the variation of circumstances which, through a sort of experimentation, permits the discernment of permanent traits of character. . . . And by bringing different works together we bring out the common traits whose assembly composes the artist’s moral physiognomy.<sup>8</sup>

Just as the structural function of transport / metaphor is to join points that are separated in space and time, “En mémoire des églises assassinées” enjoins readers to bring common traits together. Bringing together the shared characteristics of varied works allows inessential elements to be discarded.

Yet eliding spatio-temporal separation means imposing a binary form on an otherwise ternary structure. At another moment in “En mémoire des églises assassinées,” Proust makes a comparison

between the automobilist and the horseback rider “qui n’existait plus depuis les chemins de fer et que l’automobile a ressuscité” ‘who hasn’t existed since the railroads and whom the automobile has resuscitated’ (92). This resuscitated traveller links the most ancient to the most modern, and eliminates the middle term that occupied the historical space in the interval. Proust admires the independence of this traveller: “ce que l’automobile nous a rendu de plus précieux c’est cette admirable indépendance qui le faisait partir à l’heure qu’il voulait et s’arrêter où il lui plaisait” ‘the most precious thing the automobile has restored to us is this admirable independence that allowed him to leave at the hour of his choosing and to stop wherever he pleases’ (93). The independence the automobile allows would play a very specific role, affectively, in the Proustian universe: fleeing the displeasure caused by separation.

Those who will understand me . . . are those who know what can be, some evenings, the apprehension of closing oneself in for the whole night with one’s pain, all those who know what exuberance it is, after having fought for a long time against one’s anguish and as one began to go up to the bedroom holding his trembling heart, to be able to stop and say: “Hey! no, I won’t go up, let’s saddle the horse, let’s get the car ready,” and to flee the whole night, leaving behind the villages where our pain would have suffocated us, where we sensed it under every small sleeping roof, while we passed by at high speed without being recognized by it, out of its clutches.<sup>9</sup>

For those familiar with Proust, the agonizing moment when Marcel must “go up to the bedroom holding his trembling heart” is easy to recognize as one of the elements of the famous scene from “Combray” where the young hero must go to bed without having received his mother’s good-night kiss. In the scenario presented in “En mémoire des églises assassinées,” instead of waiting anxiously for the arrival of his loved one, Marcel could soothe himself by taking a little car ride. An analogy like this one between bedtime angst in “Combray” and the role of the automobile as it is defined in “En mémoire des églises assassinées” invites a comparison. While the automobile provides a way of fleeing “out of the clutches” of affective displeasure, the mother’s bedtime kiss in “Combray” suppresses the affective charge of longing, sadness, and jealousy that

comes from separation. By eliding time and space, Proust's theory of involuntary memory, that is to say, of metaphor, reproduces the latter effect.<sup>10</sup>

With these theoretical considerations on metaphor in mind, we should now turn to the role of the automobile in the plot of *Sodome et Gomorrhe*. Soon after he begins going out with Albertine in the seaside resort of Balbec, Marcel is stunned to discover that Albertine might be having affairs with other women. This realization makes Marcel intensely jealous.<sup>11</sup> He therefore tries to distract her by proposing little side-trips; he also advises her to take up painting (3: 249). The automobile serves above all to facilitate the "distraction" of painting. In this regard, the automobile offers Marcel a remarkable form of power. A metonymical shell-game allows him to disguise his motives; Marcel takes Albertine out in the car, drops her off to paint, departs on his own for a while (claiming he must visit someone), and returns to pick her up only after enough time has passed to convince her of his insouciance. The automobile projects Marcel's dreams and desires along the same roads they allow him to traverse physically, so desire finds satisfaction in a nimble manipulation of space. Notably, the moments Marcel and Albertine spend in the back seat of the car on the return trip to Balbec are among the few examples of erotic fulfillment in the entire novel. It is metonymy, rather than metaphor, that affords Marcel the opportunity to appease his anxieties and satiate his desires.

Similarly, the automobile's metonymical flexibility tends to demystify the abstract ideal represented by a name. This is a new formulation of the problem presented in Proust's "Noms de pays: le nom" 'Place-Names: The Place,' which forms the final chapter of *Du côté de chez Swann* (*Swann's Way*, 1913). The idea presented in those pages is that our desire for the person or place we only know by name is disappointed by social contact or travel. Direct experience destroys the hopeful illusions nourished by the abstract beauty of names; the allure of a far-off mystery fades as we come nearer to touching it. In "Noms de pays: le nom," travel is aligned with space and time, while names, on the other hand, are to be understood as the negation of time and space. Proust's formulation of the atemporal and non-spatial nature of names will be helpful for our understanding of metaphor and its relationship to the automobile. As



the narrator puts it in “Noms de pays: le nom,” “[O]n ne peut pas faire tenir dans un nom beaucoup plus de durée que d’espace” “You cannot make a name hold much more duration than space” (1:382), so the narrator’s etc. By substituting a name for the object of his desire, Marcel is able to renounce the project of actually attaining (and ruining) a place by arriving there (1: 382). When his father discusses the details of their upcoming trip to Venice and Florence, the threat that an actual journey will tear those cities away from their “abstract Space” and “imaginary Time” provokes such a strong presentiment of dread in Marcel that he is promptly overcome by nerves, falls ill, and is unable to depart (1: 385). Marcel’s hysterical illness thus allows him to keep the names of Venice and Florence isolated within the confines of his youthful imagination, uncontaminated by travel, where he can safeguard their aura of mystery and charm.

The sort of travel presented in “Noms de pays: le nom” can be replaced by a certain kind of reading, if we follow the reasoning of Proust’s early literary-critical writings; we travel to know places just as we read to encounter ideas. Since neither places nor people ever live up to their names when we encounter them first-hand, writes Proust in the essay “Journées de lecture” ‘Days Spent Reading,’ originally published in *Le Figaro*, March 20, 1907, the thoughtful person would do better to stay at home and read a social register or a train schedule (245).<sup>12</sup> Yet it is through excessive reliance on names, or more specifically through the belief that names and naming bestow aesthetic or social value, that the critic or artist fails to capture the truth and instead prefers to practice what Proust alternately calls idolatry or fetishism. These terms designate precisely the illusion fostered by the magical resonance of a name, especially when that illusion infiltrates and shapes one’s aesthetic or social experience. The characteristic structure of fetishism in the Proustian sense should not, as we shall see, be thought of as metonymy or synecdoche, as it generally is for the Freudian sense of the term, but rather, as atemporal and therefore aligned with metaphor.

In *Sodome et Gomorre*, as in “Noms de pays: le nom,” names offer the allure of a tidy ideal, like the resemblance on which metaphor is based. Arrival by automobile permits a more complex appreciation of what names represent.

It might seem that my love for fairy-tale train trips should have prevented me from sharing Albertine's marvel at the automobile that takes even a sick person wherever he wants, and prevents—as I had until then—considering emplacement as the individual mark, the essence without substitute of fixed beauties. And no doubt the automobile did not make this emplacement, as the train used to when I had come from Paris to Balbec, a goal abstracted from the contingencies of ordinary life, almost ideal on departure and that remained so on arrival, on arrival in this great residence where no one lives and that bears just the name of the city—the station—but that seems finally to offer its accessibility since it would be its materialization. No, the automobile didn't take us on this fairy-tale ride into a city we initially saw in the entirety that its name sums up, and with the illusions of the spectator in the audience. It let us go behind the curtain of the roads. . . (1988, 3: 394).<sup>13</sup>

Traveling by train leads Marcel to believe that the “essence without substitute of fixed beauties” lies in their “emplacement,” but traveling by car corrodes his belief in this type of essence. Instead, the automobile permits access to the spatial extension of the city, which cannot be discovered or seen all at once. A place no longer corresponds entirely to its name, with all its qualities compacted into an infinitely small concentration of space and time. The train would preserve the illusion by depositing the traveler at a station with a sign that offers only the abridged summary of a place. In Proust's analogy this abridgement is like the perspective of a spectator in a theater. The automobile is a backstage pass.

As the journey is repeated, the fixed destinations through which the train has to travel are stripped of their mystery. The automobile, on the other hand, offers the same spontaneity and relative freedom (in space) as traveling on horseback, recreating the freedom travelers enjoyed before trains existed. In another text, the comparison between horses and cars is a way of valorizing distance, and thus, metonymy.

And the individual charm, which is the charm of a country, we would feel more vividly if we didn't have at our disposition those boots of seven leagues, the express trains, and if, as before, in order to reach a piece of land we were obliged to cross landscapes more and more like where we're headed, like zones of graduated harmony which, in making it less easily penetrable to what is different from it, in protecting it with softness and mystery from its external resemblances, not only envelops it in nature,

but prepares it in our minds (*Pastiches*, 157).<sup>14</sup>

The term “graduated harmony” is opposed to metaphor in Proust’s terminology just as the delicate processes of etymology articulated in *Sodome et Gomorrhe* and “Noms de pays: le nom” are distinct from the brusque equivalencies of translation or from the resemblances of metaphor. The automobile revives the lost charm of travel because it respects the delicate stages of gradual change. Trains reproduce false appearances by establishing an inflexible correspondence between names and places. The city-names one sees in train stations are nothing more than a disguise, just like those of individuals in society, where they contribute to misunderstandings and incite jealousy. The automobile is aligned with metonymy and the incremental differences of gradual change, while the train is the ally of abrupt metaphorical equivalencies that suppress space and time.

Yet the affective charge from which Marcel would flee (the second term elided by metaphor) returns in displaced form—in the connections between the automobile and esthetic fetishism. For Proust, the term “fetishism” designates reliance on the deceptive stability of names, or in other words, a preference for signs over the abstract entity they designate. Fetishism means sustaining the illusion of “emplacement as the individual mark, the essence without substitute of fixed beauties” that is a perceptual side-effect of train-travel. This sort of fetishism becomes an issue during one of Marcel’s car-trips with Albertine in *Sodome et Gomorrhe*. The automobile primarily serves to transport Albertine every day from Balbec to Saint-Jean-de-la-Haise, where she paints. But one day, on their way back from Saint-Jean-de-la-Haise, Marcel and Albertine stop at the church of Marcouville. When she sees the restored portions of the church at Marcouville, Albertine says, “Elle ne me plaît pas, elle est restaurée” “I don’t like it, it’s been restored” (3: 402). According to Elstir, the beauty of the old stones is “inimitable” and “precious;” therefore, the church at Marcouville would not have pleased the painter. Marcel does not agree: “je trouvais que le grand impressionniste était en contradiction avec lui-même; pourquoi ce fétichisme attaché à la valeur architecturale objective, sans tenir compte de la transfiguration de l’église dans le couchant?” “I thought the great impressionist was contradicting himself; why this fetishism attached to the objective architectural value, without accounting

for the transfiguration of the church in the sunset?' (3: 402-03).<sup>15</sup> This difference of opinion between Marcel and Elstir reproduces the opposition between the perceptual side-effects of cars and those of trains. Concerning churches, Marcel seems to prefer, over the stable identity of the thing in itself, the modification produced by the relative qualities of its surroundings.

Proust's use of the term "fetishism" in *Sodome et Gomorrhe* is significant because it represents a refinement, in the sense of a slightly more restricted acceptance, of his closely-related use of the word "idolatry." The term "fetishism" is deployed in *Sodome et Gomorrhe* in a way so reminiscent of the context of Proust's 1904 essay on John Ruskin that the novel might be said to constitute its fictional counterpart. That essay was included as a "postscript" at the end of Proust's introduction to his translation of Ruskin's "The Bible of Amiens." There, Proust presents Ruskin's treatment of aesthetic issues as "idolatry," because Ruskin privileges the aesthetic over the moral while claiming to do the contrary. Despite the slight shift in terminology, the accusation of "fetishism" in this scene from *Sodome et Gomorrhe* closely parallels the critique of "idolatry" in the essay on Ruskin.<sup>16</sup> Idolatry becomes the master-trope of Proust's critique of Ruskin in his 1904 essay, and in significant respects, we shall see that this trope is structurally assimilable to metaphor. In art there always subsists, according to Proust's gloss of Ruskin, the danger of privileging "un signe dénué de sa signification" 'a sign stripped of its signification' over the proper object of intellectual or aesthetic desire (Proust, *Ecrits sur l'art*, 174).

Remarkably, Proust then turns the accusation of idolatry against himself, and explains the idolatrous origin of his passion for Ruskin's books with an analogy in which the relationship between critic and writer is compared to the relationship between a man and a woman with whom he falls in love. For a text written in 1904, the foreshadowing of the relationship between Swann and Odette in the novel of 1913 is remarkable enough, but of particular significance is Proust's use of a person (in this case, a woman) in a comparison where the corresponding term is a book; if idolatry consists of mistaking the sign for the signification, it is symptomatic of Proust's self-inculpation that in order to explain his meaning, he has recourse to what will become, in his novel, the archetypal

case of confusion between the letter and the spirit, the sign and the signification, or the aesthetic and the moral: "A man gets to know a woman because she can help him reach a goal that has nothing to do with her personally. Then, once he knows her, he likes her for who she is, and without hesitation sacrifices for her the goal that she was merely supposed to help him achieve. Thus in my love for John Ruskin's books, something self-interested was mixed in from the start, the joy of the intellectual profit I was going to take from it".<sup>17</sup> Because this passage appears in an essay about John Ruskin, the woman adduced in this analogy must be considered the figurative counterpart to the "literal" term, Ruskin's book. In the pages that follow this passage, and which form the conclusion of the essay, the analogy between intellectual and amorous desire is complicated by the notion that some degree of idolatry is the necessary first element in a process that leads to the realm of pure ideas, which is presented as the proper object of aesthetic or amorous passion.

As different forms of aesthetic fetishism or personal idolatry gradually fall apart over the course of the *Recherche*, others take their place. New and more complicated forms of fetishism make their appearance, and within this process, the automobile trips that bring Marcel and Albertine to Saint-Jean-de-la-Haise and Marcouville represent a critical juncture. In *A l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs* (*In the Shadow of Young Girls in Flower*, 1919), Marcel's first trip to Balbec was the occasion for the idolatrous illusion in a name to fall apart; the unity represented by a place-name was sundered by confrontation with the heterogeneous spatio-temporal contiguity of land, sea, and architecture in Balbec. The global effect of this confrontation is indicated by the opposition between the two inter-related titles, "Noms de pays: le nom," and "Noms de pays: le pays," in which metaphoric compaction (the "name") gives way to metonymic extension (the "country").

In *Sodome et Gomorrhe*, Marcel's second trip to Balbec serves as the occasion for a new dilation of space that further disentangles the threads knotted by idolatry. But whereas in *Du côté de chez Swann* and *A l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs*, it was Marcel who formed idolatrous illusions based on the imaginary resonance of the name "Balbec," in *Sodome et Gomorrhe* it is Marcel's lover, Albertine, who plays the role of aesthetic idolater. It should thus be noted that *Sod-*

*ome et Gomorrhe* simultaneously advances and repeats the “fictional working-out of the deconstruction of idolatry,” as David Ellison puts it, that occurred in the earlier volumes (88). In *Sodome et Gomorrhe*, the advance is mediated by the switch between train-travel and automobile-travel. The analogy between love and artwork formulated in Proust’s introduction to “The Bible of Amiens,” portrayed in the story of Swann’s love for Odette de Crécy, now springs to life in new spatial and inter-subjective complexity. Albertine is at once idolater and the object of idolatry. Through her, Proust poses the problem of love and artwork afresh. Marcel simultaneously lives through the same transformation of idolatry into love that overcame Swann, and observes Albertine repeating his own earlier idolatry of the sign stripped of its signification. As we shall see, the role Albertine plays in mediating both of these new permutations of aesthetic fetishism lies in her function as a substitute for John Ruskin, on one hand, and as a substitute for Proust’s onetime chauffeur, Alfred Agostinelli, on the other.

Despite having access to an automobile that frees him from the illusory promises of place-names and the fixity of immovable essences, when it comes to the woman Marcel loves, he is still subject to the vagaries of aesthetic fetishism. As they are visiting Marcouville, Albertine is wearing a fur cap and a veil Marcel recently gave her, and now the narrator remarks that these garments, “qui n’était qu’une partie récente, adventice, de mon amie, mais qui m’étaient déjà chère” “which were only a recent, adventitious part of my friend, but which were already dear to me,” have come to seem like part of her body (3: 402). Significantly, the fur cap and the veil are imitations of the driving outfit Mme de Luxembourg can be seen wearing in a portrait by Elstir.<sup>18</sup> The way these garments are integrated into Albertine’s being is reminiscent of Swann’s fetishistic idealization of Odette’s resemblance with a Botticelli: Marcel’s satisfaction comes from the modification of a woman through art (or artifice).

Yet Proust’s own reverence for the stones of a church is presented as the opposite of “fetishism” in the second and much longer section of “En mémoire des églises assassinées,” called “Journées de pèlerinage” ‘Days of Pilgrimage,’ which originally appeared in the *Mercure de France* in 1900 under the title “Ruskin à Notre-Dame d’Amiens.” This essay is essentially the story of Proust’s trip—by

train—to the Amiens church John Ruskin describes in “The Bible of Amiens.” Proust argues it is less meaningful to visit Ruskin’s grave, where his physical remains lie, than to see the stones of the Amiens cathedral he admired.<sup>19</sup> “We honor with a fetishism that is only illusion a grave that merely contains of Ruskin what was not himself, while we refuse to kneel before these stones of Amiens, from which he drew his thought, and which still preserve it,” writes Proust in dismay.<sup>20</sup> If the stones of the Amiens cathedral had been altered by restoration, like those of the Marcouville church Albertine and Elstir dislike, Proust would certainly not tell the reader he hopes “que vous irez à Amiens après m’avoir lu” “that you will go to Amiens after having read me” (*Pastiches*, 97). Proust’s eventual rejection of Ruskin’s aesthetic fetishism is only possible because of his initial infatuation with it; and the indispensability of this initial error ingrains itself in the structure of the *Recherche*.

Interestingly, Ruskin not only liked to spend his time writing descriptions of the churches he visited, but drawing them, as well: “Dans ces villes d’Amiens, d’Abbeville, de Beauvais, de Rouen, qu’un séjour de Ruskin a consacrées, il passait son temps à dessiner tantôt dans les églises (‘sans être inquiété par le sacristan’), tantôt en plein air” “In these towns of Amiens, of Abbeville, of Beauvais, of Rouen, that one of Ruskin’s trips had consecrated, he spent his time drawing either in the churches (‘without being bothered by the sexton’), or in the fresh air” (*Pastiches*, 155). As a painter of churches, Albertine obviously resembles Ruskin. In “John Ruskin,” originally printed in 1900 in the *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, Proust explains how reading Ruskin’s discussion of a statue in *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* (1849) inspired him to make a pilgrimage to Rouen exclusively to see it. Proust’s narrator calls Albertine’s and Elstir’s preference for original stones “fetishism,” but Proust himself is somewhat attached to “the objective architectural value” of cathedrals. Veneration for art (and for the artist) necessarily involves a measure of the “fetishism” Marcel rejects.

The first part of “En mémoire des églises assassinées,” entitled “Les églises sauvées” “The Churches Saved,” recounts Proust’s visit to another cathedral described by John Ruskin. Proust arrived at the cathedral by automobile after a breakdown (*accident de machine*) forced him to stop and spend the afternoon in Lisieux, a town near-

by, before continuing the drive to his parents' home. Wishing to see some "foliage" sculpted on the façade of the church "Ruskin speaks of," Proust has trouble seeing in the weak light of early evening. But suddenly, the façade is bathed in bright light: "It was my mechanic, the ingenious Agostinelli, who, by sending the old sculptures the salutation of the present whose light no longer served anything but to better read the lessons of the past, directed successively on all the parts of the portal, as I went to see them, the headlights of his automobile".<sup>21</sup> The automobile has arrived to help the effort to save the churches; the fact that Agostinelli is often considered one of the models for Albertine makes this passage particularly striking.<sup>22</sup> Like the artist who allows us to see a church through painting or writing, Agostinelli illuminates the venerable stones with his automobile.

Here one is tempted to make note of the congruence between Proust's variation on Ruskinian aesthetic fetishism and the theory of sexual fetishism articulated in a certain reading of Freud. The parallel forms of esthetic fetishism posited in Proust's introduction to "The Bible of Amiens" (one concerning a woman, the other concerning a book) come into contact here, and their permutations in Proust's writing are crystallized in an image that reverses the position of the literal and figurative terms in that essay. It will be recalled that in his 1904 critique of Ruskin, Proust employed an analogy in which a woman was the figurative term, and a book the literal one. By identifying Albertine / Agostinelli as the direct object of the energy deployed in, and necessary to, aesthetic contemplation, new lines of force emerge within the edifice of this Proustian metaphor. The problem that ensues is also reversed: instead of the need to find a realm of pure ideas, the issue now becomes how to fix in place (that is, to fetishize) the (mobile) affective charge that emanates from Albertine / Agostinelli.

Proust's translation of life into literature and of people into books (and indeed, of men into women) is sufficiently convincing for Jacques Lacan to have evoked Albertine as an illustration of a Freudian theory of perverse desire: "Recall the prodigious analysis of homosexuality that Proust develops through the myth of Albertine. It matters little that the character is female—the structure of the relation is eminently homosexual. The demand of this style of desire cannot be satisfied by anything but the inexhaustible harness-



ing of the other's desire. . .".<sup>23</sup> *Mutatis mutandis* for Lacan's identification of homosexual desire as more "perverse" than its ostensibly less-perverse heterosexual counterpart, the structure Lacan goes on to describe is congruent with an effectively sexual variant of aesthetic fetishism that emerges when we superimpose the Agostinelli of Lisieux and the Albertine of Marcouville. In both those Proustian scenes, desire for a person is diverted into an aesthetic interest in an inanimate object. And in the comments immediately following his evocation of Albertine / Agostinelli, Lacan offers what might be called the psychoanalyst's version of Bataille's allegory about literature and happiness. Citing Lacan below is therefore doubly motivated: our reading of Albertine can be returned, through the Lacanian text, to the passage from *L'abbé C* we offered, at the start of this essay, to illustrate the relationship between Proustian metaphor and the automobile. "Perverse desire finds its support in the ideal of an inanimate object. But it cannot content itself with realizing this ideal. Once it realizes it, at the very moment it meets up with it, it loses its object".<sup>24</sup> Just as Bataille's literary automobile cannot overtake happiness, Lacan's Marcel must either renounce his desire for Agostinelli / Albertine or destroy the object of that desire. Proust's automobile accomplishes both, first by facilitating access to the (diversionary) object of aesthetic contemplation, and then as a symbol of Agostinelli's death.

Veneration for the dead lends poignant overtones to the moment of esthetic fetishism when Agostinelli shines his headlights on the façade of the church in "Les églises sauvées." In a footnote added several years later, when that essay was reprinted in *Pastiches et mélanges*, Proust expresses a sentiment about death that is less abstract, and as we shall see, more uncanny than the mere poignancy of aesthetic fetishism: "I never imagined when I wrote these lines that seven or eight years later this young man would ask me to type one of my books, would learn aviation under the name Marcel Swann in which he had amicably associated my Christian name and the name of one of my characters, and would meet his death at the age of twenty-six, in an airplane accident, off the coast of Antibes".<sup>25</sup> After the death of his chauffeur, Proust reproached himself for having encouraged Agostinelli to become a pilot; several months before the airplane accident that killed him, Proust had purchased an airplane

as a gift for him.<sup>26</sup> The airplane makes a brief appearance in the third chapter of *Sodome et Gomorrhe*. As he is riding a horse on a trail near La Raspelière, Marcel sees:

between two great wings of steel that carried him, a being whose indistinct face appeared to me to resemble that of a man . . . I must have held myself back from crying, because I had understood . . . that what I was going to see for the first time was an airplane. But the aviator seemed to hesitate on his path; I sensed open before him—before me if habit had not made me a prisoner—all the routes of space, of life; he pushed on, glided a few moments above the sea, then suddenly made his pick, as if giving in to some attraction opposite to that of gravity, and as if returning to his native land, with a slight movement of his golden wings he headed straight for the heavens.<sup>27</sup>

Albertine is destined to vanish despite Marcel's best efforts, just as Agostinelli does: in a deadly accident.<sup>28</sup> The footnote about Agostinelli's fatal airplane crash intrudes into "Les églises sauvées" in a way that makes Proust's esthetic fetishism seem uncannily premonitory. Retrospectively, the moment when the headlights of Agostinelli's car illuminate the façade of the church at Lisieux now not only seems to inscribe / paint / sculpt / preserve artwork, but to function as a (fetishized) remnant of the volatile person who later disappears in his plane.

The description of Agostinelli at the wheel (*au volant*) in "En mémoire des églises assassinées" is a reminder of the fatal role the airplane will play:

most of the time he held only his wheel in his hands—his steering wheel [*qu'on appelle volant*]<sup>29</sup>—rather like the cross of consecration held by the apostles standing before the columns of the chancel in the Sainte-Chapelle in Paris, like the cross of Saint-Benoît, and in general like any stylization of the wheel in the art of the Middle Ages . . . thus saints, at the entrances of cathedrals, hold an anchor, a wheel, a harp, a scythe, a grill, a hunting horn, brushes. But if these attributes were generally designed to recall the art in which they excelled during their lifetimes, it was also sometimes the image of the instrument by which they perished; may the steering wheel of the young mechanic who drove me remain forever the symbol of his talent rather than the prefiguration of his demise.<sup>29</sup>

The ambiguity of the word *volant* (“steering wheel” ‘volant de direction’ is not far from “direction of flight” ‘direction du vol’) reflects the ambiguity of the feelings expressed by this pious wish. Saving and assassinating are accomplished in the same gesture. The automobile’s steering wheel has become the instrument of a saint’s martyrdom—in a metaphor concerning sculptures in medieval churches. Metaphor would fix in place what, by definition, flees from its grasp. This arrangement resonates oddly with a phrase from *Monsieur Teste* on the subject of train travel: “The inert and living body abandons itself to the dead and moving bodies that transport it” (Valéry, 77).<sup>30</sup> In the case of Proust’s automobile, we might say that life abandons itself to the transports that make it inert: the automobile’s ultimate destination lies outside space and time. Metonymy, like pleasure, is fleeting, while the fixity of metaphor is eternal.

### Notes

1 “Les distances ne sont que le rapport de l’espace au temps et varient avec lui. Nous exprimons la difficulté que nous avons à un endroit, dans un système de lieux, de kilomètres, qui devient faux dès que cette difficulté diminue. L’art en est aussi modifié. . .” (Marcel Proust, *A la recherche du temps perdu*, ed. Jean-Yves Tadié, vol. 3 [Paris: Gallimard, 1988] 385). All translations are mine.

2 Here we are following the lead of Denis Hollier, who proposes the automobile as metaphor in “Portrait de l’artiste en auto”: “Qui pourrait, par exemple, donner le moment précis où une automobile devient une métaphore? L’une et l’autre sont, à leur manière, des moyens de transport, un certain type de dispositif qu’on utilise pour produire des déplacements” (15).

3 The French reads: “Mon absurdité imaginaire, dans ma défaillance, un moyen de formuler exactement la difficulté que trouve la littérature. J’en imaginai l’objet, le bonheur parfait, comme une voiture qui foncerait sur la route” (63).

4 Unsummarizable, that is, in the sense that Gérard Genette’s classically succinct summary. “Marcel devient écrivain” ‘Marcel becomes a writer’ is the *nec plus ultra* of the untranslatable French rhetorical figure of *la litote*,

understatement in the service of irony. The Recherche is made of digressions; to thus summarize it is to reduce it to (laughable) irrelevance.

5 Confusion over the structural definition of metaphor has persisted in French theory at least since the *différend* on the topic between Jacques Lacan and Roman Jakobson; this problem has re-emerged recently in relation to Proust in Alain Costes, *Lacan, le fourvoisement linguistique: la métaphore introuvable*. In the course of a detailed refutation of Lacan, Costes claims that metaphor is a process of *de-condensation*; yet in his chapter on Proust, which ought to demonstrate this very point, metaphor is presented (quite correctly, in Proustian terms) as what unites two otherwise separate elements. Thus, Costes writes of Proust's analogies that "elles réunissent justement les deux fameux côtés" (159), then speaks of "une métaphore où il est question de dire ce 'miracle d'analogie' par quoi deux sensations, pourtant éloignées dans le temps, forment couple," (159), and goes on to mention that "la créativité du narrateur était suspendue depuis toujours à cette condition: *pouvoir penser ensemble le 'côté de papa' avec 'le côté maman'!*" (160, italics in the original). As a result, Costes is put in the difficult position of having to argue that metaphor can function through either condensation or decondensation.

6 Ferdinand de Saussure distinguishes temporal from atemporal on a system of coordinates where the vertical axis is "l'axe des contemporanéités (où on peut faire disparaître le facteur Temps)," and the horizontal axis is "l'axe des successivités (choses x Temps)" (333). For our purposes the vertical axis will correspond to metaphor, and the horizontal axis to metonymy.

7 In this analogy, Marcel's automobile is a forerunner of the magic cabinet that allows Professor Sidney Kugelmass to cavort with Emma Bovary in Woody Allen's "The Kugelmass Episode." Unlike Kugelmass, however, Marcel would be surprised by how different Emma is in person.

8 "Ne lire qu'un livre d'un auteur, c'est n'avoir avec cet auteur qu'une rencontre. Or, en causant une fois avec une personne on peut discerner en elle des traits singuliers. Mais c'est seulement par leur répétition dans des circonstances variées qu'on peut les reconnaître pour caractéristiques et essentiels. Pour un écrivain, comme pour un musicien ou un peintre, cette variation des circonstances qui permet de discerner, par une sorte d'expérimentation, les traits permanents du caractère, c'est la variété des oeuvres . . . Et du rapprochement des oeuvres différentes nous dégageons les traits communs dont l'assemblage compose la physionomie morale de l'artiste" (Marcel Proust, *Pastiches et mélanges* [Paris: Gallimard, 1919] 101.

9 “Tous ceux-là me comprendront . . . qui savent ce que peut être, certains soirs, l’appréhension de s’enfermer avec sa peine pour toute la nuit, tous ceux qui connaissent quelle allégresse c’est, après avoir lutté longtemps contre son angoisse et comme on commençait à monter vers sa chambre en étouffant les battements de son coeur, de pouvoir s’arrêter et se dire: ‘Eh bien! non, je ne monterai pas, qu’on selle le cheval, qu’on apprête l’automobile’, et toute la nuit de fuir, laissant derrière soi les villages où notre peine nous eût étouffé, où nous la devinions sous chaque petit toit qui dort, tandis que nous passions à toute vitesse, sans être reconnu d’elle, hors de ses atteintes” (*Pastiches* 93).

10 Here we should note that metaphor has a repressive side. The task of metaphor is to join together two things that are distant from each other, while metonymy respects or even valorizes distance (metaphor operates outside time and space, while metonymy is spatio-temporal). Roman Jakobson places repression on his metaphorical axis. Jean Laplanche aligns metaphor with repression, and metonymy with the movement of desire along a series of contiguous terms. The metaphorical side of the automobile’s structural function should, therefore, entail repression—and transport becomes metaphor when the automobile brings something nearer, instead of merely providing distance.

11 As Lucille Cairns explains, “Lesbians are depicted as corrupt, licentious, menacing; but this negative depiction is generated by his paranoid jealousy, a jealousy which he himself admits is akin to an illness” (50).

12 The French reads: “La sagesse serait de remplacer toutes les relations mondaines et beaucoup de voyages par le lecture de l’almanach de Gotha et de l’indicateur des chemins de fer. . .”.

13 “Il peut sembler que mon amour pour les féeriques voyages en chemin de fer aurait dû m’empêcher de partager l’émerveillement d’Albertine devant l’automobile qui mène, même un malade, là où il veut, et empêche—comme je l’avais fait jusque là—de considérer l’emplacement comme la marque individuelle, l’essence sans succédané des beautés inamovibles. Et sans doute cet emplacement, l’automobile n’en faisait pas, comme jadis le chemin de fer, quand j’étais venu de Paris à Balbec, un but soustrait aux contingences de la vie ordinaire, presque idéal au départ et qui le restait à l’arrivée, à l’arrivée dans cette grande demeure où n’habite personne et qui porte seulement le nom de la ville—la gare—mais qui a l’air d’en promettre enfin l’accessibilité comme elle en serait la matérialisation. Non, l’automobile ne nous menait pas ainsi féeriquement dans une ville que nous voyions d’abord dans l’ensemble que résume son nom, et

avec les illusions du spectateur dans la salle. Il nous faisait entrer dans la coulisse des rues. . . “ (3:394).

14 “Et le charme individuel, qu’est le charme d’un pays, nous le sentirions plus vivement si nous n’avions pas à notre disposition ces bottes de sept lieues que sont les grands express, et si, comme autrefois, pour arriver dans un coin de terre nous étions obligés de traverser des campagnes de plus en plus semblables à celle où nous tendons, comme des zones d’harmonie graduée qui, en la rendant moins aisément pénétrable à ce qui est différent d’elle, en la protégeant avec douceur et avec mystère de ressemblances fraternelles, ne l’enveloppent pas seulement dans la nature, mais la préparent encore dans notre esprit” (*Pastiches* 157).

15 “je trouvais que le grand impressionniste était en contradiction avec lui-même; pourquoi ce fétichisme attaché à la valeur architecturale objective, sans tenir compte de la transfiguration de l’église dans le couchant?”

16 In his classic study of Ruskin’s influence on Proust, David Ellison uses the terms “fetishism” and “idolatry” as near-synonyms (51-84). According to Ruskin, “Idolatry is, both literally and verily, not the mere bowing down before sculptures, but the serving or becoming the slave of any images or imaginations which stand between us and God, and it is otherwise expressed in Scripture as ‘walking after the Imagination of our own hearts’” (*Stones of Venice*, 386). In a similar vein, Ruskin defines an idol as the contrary of the proper object of aesthetic contemplation: the statue of Christ in the Amiens cathedral is not an “idol, in our sense of the word—only a letter, or sign of the Living Spirit. . . .”

17 “Un homme fait la connaissance d’une femme parce qu’elle peut l’aider à atteindre un but étranger à elle-même. Puis une fois qu’il la connaît il l’aime pour elle-même, et lui sacrifie sans hésiter ce but qu’elle devait seulement l’aider à atteindre. A mon amour pour les livres de John Ruskin se mêla ainsi à l’origine quelque chose d’intéressé, la joie du bénéfice intellectuel que j’allais en retirer” (*Ecrits sur l’art* 179).

18 I am referring here to a long passage that Tadié’s Pléiade edition excises from the beginning of the third chapter of *Sodome et Gomorrhe II*. This passage can still be found, for example, in *Sodome et Gomorrhe*, ed. Françoise Leriche. In it, Charlus recalls that a portrait of Mme de Luxembourg painted by Elstir shows her wearing a fur cap and a veil the painter had ordered for her. Albertine habitually wore them while in an automobile. In order to better describe the fur cap and veil to Marcel (“c’était une toque de chinchilla avec écharpe en mousseline de soie, faites par Calloté”), who is

interested by them, Charlus makes a drawing of them that “fit l’admiration de maman” (402). Thus, twice visually depicted, the fur cap and veil Marcel offers as a gift to Albertine are part of a group of aesthetic as well as social associations. Notably, the narrator refers to the “superstition” Elstir had inculcated in Albertine, in matters of dress, according to which she believes that between the products of first-rate clothes makers and those of their imitators, “il y a autant de différence qu’entre un amour délicieux de Clodion ou du petit temple de Trianon, et l’amour presque semblable d’une époque plus lourde” (403).

19 “Though Ruskin’s body had perished, his soul lived on, incarnated in the places he had loved and the works he had written. By visiting these places and reading his works, Proust believed, one might seek out Ruskin’s soul. . .” (Leonard, 44).

20 “Nous honorons d’un féktichisme qui n’est qu’illusion une tombe où reste seulement de Ruskin ce qui n’était pas lui-même, et nous nirions pas nous agenouiller devant ces pierres d’Amiens, à qui il venait demander sa pensée, et qui la gardent encore (*Pastiches*, 96).

21 “C’était mon mécanicien, l’ingénieur Agostinelli, qui, envoyant aux vieilles sculptures le salut du présent dont la lumière ne servait plus qu’à mieux lire les leçons du passé, dirigeait successivement sur toutes les parties du porche, à mesure que je voulais les voir, les feux du phare de son automobile” (*Pastiches* 91).

22 Critics almost universally agree with George Painter that “a little of the Albertine with whom the Narrator drives through the country near Balbec may come from Agostinelli” (Painter, 96).

23 “Souvenez-vous de la prodigieuse analyse de l’homosexualité qui se développe chez Proust dans le mythe d’Albertine. Peu importe que ce personnage soit féminin—la structure de la relation est éminemment homosexuelle. L’exigence de ce style de désir ne peut se satisfaire que d’une captation inépuisable du désir de l’autre. . .” (Jacques Lacan, *Le séminaire*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, vol. 1 [Paris: Seuil, 1975] 246).

24 “Le désir pervers se supporte de l’idéal d’un objet inanimé. Mais il ne peut pas se contenter de la réalisation de cet idéal. Dès qu’il le réalise, au moment même où il le rejoint, il perd son objet” (Lacan, 247).

25 “Je ne prévoyais guère quand j’écrivais ces lignes que sept ou huit ans plus tard ce jeune homme me demanderait à dactylographier un livre de

moi, apprendrait l'aviation sous le nom de Marcel Swann dans lequel il avait amicalement associé mon nom de baptême et le nom d'un de mes personnages et trouverait la mort à vingt-six ans, dans un accident d'aéroplane, au large d'Antibes" (*Pastiches* 91).

26 This is the basis for the yacht and Rolls-Royce Marcel offers Albertine in *Albertine disparue*. Concerning this purchase, see the letter dated May 30, 1914, in Proust, *Correspondance de Marcel Proust*, ed. Philip Kolb, vol. 13 (Paris: Plon, 1985) 217, and Jean-Yves Tadié, *Marcel Proust*, trans. Euan Cameron (New York: Viking, 2000) 615-16.

27 "entre deux grandes ailes d'acier étincelant qui l'emportaient, un être dont la figure peu distincte me parut ressembler à celle d'un homme . . . j'avais dû me retenir pour ne pas pleurer, car j'avais compris . . . que ce que j'allais voir pour la première fois c'était un aéroplane. Cependant l'aviateur sembla hésiter sur sa voie; je sentais ouvertes devant lui—devant moi si l'habitude ne m'avait pas fait prisonnier—toutes les routes de l'espace, de la vie; il poussa plus loin, plana quelques instants au-dessus de la mer, puis prenant brusquement son parti, semblant céder à quelle attraction inverse de celle de la pesanteur, et comme retournant dans sa patrie, d'un léger mouvement de ses ailes d'or il piqua droit vers le ciel" (3:417).

28 Albertine is killed in a fall from a horse. See Marcel Proust, *Albertine disparue* (Paris: Gallimard, 1992) 58.

29 "la plupart du temps il tenait seulement dans sa main sa roue—sa roue de direction (qu'on appelle volant)—assez semblable aux croix de consécration que tiennent les apôtres adossés aux colonnes du chœur dans la Sainte-Chapelle de Paris, à la croix de Saint-Benoît, et en général à toute stylisation de la roue dans l'art du moyen âge . . . ainsi les saints, aux porches des cathédrales, tiennent l'un une ancre, un autre une roue, une harpe, une faux, un gril, un cor de chasse, des pinces. Mais si ces attributs étaient généralement destinés à rappeler l'art dans lequel ils excellèrent de leur vivant, c'était aussi parfois l'image de l'instrument par quoi ils périrent; puisse le volant de direction du jeune mécanicien qui me conduit rester toujours le symbole de son talent plutôt que d'être la préfiguration de son supplice" (*Pastiches* 91-92).

30 "Le corps inerte et vivant s'abandonne aux corps morts et mouvants qui le transportent." The same chiasmus intertwines transportation and death in the Futurist manifesto when Marinetti climbs behind the wheel of a car for the first time: "Je m'allongeai sur la mienne comme un cadavre dans sa



qui menaçait mon estomac" (Valéry, 77).

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