

**WRITING FROM FINITUDE:  
LOVE, DESIRE, AND THE NOSTALGIAS OF MODERNISM**

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In this dissertation I show that nostalgia, conceived as an emotional, ethical, and ontological structure, is the operative link between finitude, desire, and love as they develop in the aesthetic trajectory of High Modernist literature. Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* shows how the pain of loving in the face of finitude can lead to desire, which rejects love in favor of a delusional investment in solipsistic comfort. Samuel Beckett's oeuvre, by contrast, shows that love manifests in a temporal and interpersonal immediacy that cannot be achieved or represented in literature. R.M. Rilke's *Duino Elegies* provide images that help to frame my analysis of Beckett and Proust.

Nostalgia is a painful sense of not being "at home" that results from the consciousness of finitude. Desire is the attempt to deny nostalgic pain; it searches for complete certainty and safety, and pursues fulfillment by appropriating its object. Love manifests as the joyous ability to trust and touch that depends on human finitude. Desire dominates the aesthetic conclusions of Proust's text, which proposes that displacing time and consciousness to representative art can achieve the fulfillment of desire. Although Marcel loves his grandmother early in the text, her death is so devastating that in his relationship with Albertine he rejects love's risks in favor of desire's promised fulfillment. In my analysis, Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* and *Minima Moralia*

help to distinguish between desiring and loving forms of representation, and Walter Benjamin's *The Arcades Project* shows the ethical pitfalls of proposing that representation can redeem the historical fact of death.

Beckett's novels and plays portray the bleakness of representation itself, and demonstrate that narrative fails to achieve love or fulfillment. His attention to "the old style" in *Happy Days* shows that words themselves have a desiring and nostalgic structure, and the lost possibilities for love in *Krapp's Last Tape* and *Molloy* show how representation fails to capture the past. Finally, Ben Lerner's *Didactic Elegy* shows the continued relevance of concerns about nostalgia, love, desire, and representation, by applying these terms to 9/11 and its aftermath.

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## **1.0 THE MODERNIST NOSTALGIAS OF PROUST AND BECKETT**

Nostalgia incorporates some of the most basic problems facing human beings: death, solitude, uncertainty, and their accompanying psychic pain. It also, however, provides a way of experiencing this pain as a sort of joy, of translating the painful confinement of our borders into a sense of shelter as these same borders surround us. Each of these aspects of nostalgia animates the experience of wanting, which is intimately intertwined with narrative and artwork – we tell ourselves stories about how and what we want, and we deal with our drive to control the things we want by representing them. Nostalgia is the emotional facet of this representation – it drives, constitutes, and results from works of art. Investigating nostalgia helps us understand expressions of wanting develop over time – how artworks function both historically and historiographically, particularly over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The blunt finitude that nostalgia exposes tempts us to reject or deny it in favor of the comforts of eternity. This is desire: the mode of wanting that crushes its object in pursuit of an unattainable feeling of fulfillment. The sheltering aspect of nostalgia tends to be conscious of its own nature, accepting our inability to fulfill our wanting. This is love: the mode of wanting that touches and trusts its unobtainable object with a joyful absorption in the present moment.

This dissertation argues that a critical re-envisioning of love and desire is essential to understanding Modernist nostalgia. I assert this position against longstanding accounts of Modernism that characterize memory as impersonal or abstract and that focus discussions of loss

around spatial figurations like exile and expatriatism. Nostalgia exposes temporality, belief, and potential, as well as artwork, language and narrative, as concerns inextricable from love and desire. With its etymological focus on imaginative narratives of return like the Greek *Nostoi* and its inherent affectivity, nostalgia is a vector for memory, emotion, and imagination, topics that critics often separate despite their centrality to Modernist studies. Critics typically restrict discussions of love and desire to conventions of romance or the social institution of marriage. Considered broadly, however, love and desire illustrate the temporality of exile, the affectivity of political possibility, and the fear and joy that drive a secular account of time. Nostalgia reconceived through love and desire is thus not only essential to understanding Modernist literature, but it also resonates with current concerns in literature and the humanities.

The works of Marcel Proust and Samuel Beckett focus and emblemize the differing approaches to love and desire in Modernist literature.<sup>1</sup> As a result of their historical contexts, these authors demonstrate the importance of choosing love instead of desire as a way of being while we move through the world as artists, critics, and humans. Modernist literature both reflected and reacted to the political and social impacts of WWI and WWII. It has become a commonplace that the early 20<sup>th</sup> century gave rise to an unprecedented sense of alienation, resulting in part from a broad sense of cultural uncertainty. Although art, philosophy, and science have always questioned the certain existence of the religious divinities, the early 20<sup>th</sup> century is the first time that secularism replaced it as an underlying cultural fact – religious belief became a

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<sup>1</sup> All translated references to Proust, unless otherwise noted, are to Marcel Proust, *In Search of Lost Time* ed. Christopher Prendergast (London: Penguin Books, 2002). They are noted parenthetically by volume number and page. Translated passages are from Marcel Proust, *À la recherche du temps perdu*, ed. Jean-Yves Tadié (Paris: Gallimard, 1988). They are noted parenthetically by volume number and page. All translated references to Beckett, unless otherwise noted, are to Samuel Beckett, *The Grove Centenary Edition*, ed. Paul Auster (New York: Grove Press, 2006). They are noted parenthetically by volume roman numeral and page.

choice rather than an assumption, which revealed the vast abyss that it had once covered. Reconsidering works of Modernist literature as they attempt to revise love and desire in the wake of the losses of industrialization and war reveals its deeply personal and affective facets. This work shows that we can best understand art and narrative in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century not as a struggle against a stagnant formal tradition, but rather as striving to respond to the alienation of finitude in an age of uncertainty.

Proust's work is distinctively his own, but at the same time it makes visible the conflicting mentalities that bridged the mechanization of slaughter in WWI. His work encapsulates a range of reactions to nostalgia for a better historical moment, as well as nostalgia for a different experience of time itself – as fulfilled and meaningful, rather than the site of incomprehensible losses. Proust's lesson is that art must replace god as the force that answers our fundamental human problems. Our wanting must take the form of desire, because only desire allows the artist to fully subsume his object in the pursuit of a mode of representation that can respond to the terror of dying. Proust's work experiments with the precariousness of love, but finds it intolerable – the border that enables love's joy yawns too darkly with the inevitable death. Although Proust's friendships and his reactions to contemporary political events indicate that he privileged trust and human kindness in his life, how his aesthetic conclusions belie the same desirous nostalgic force that drove the history of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Beckett learns from Proust and his cohort; his work still struggles with the same modernist conditions that their art could never fully answer. Particularly after the apotheosis of dehumanization that characterized WWII, Beckett focused his work on the failure of aesthetic forces – not only story and representation, but also the word and individual identity. Although many critics read Beckett's oeuvre as expressing nihilism in the face of modernity's pressures, I

believe that his work both structurally and materially reveals the failures of representation to answer the problems of finitude. In doing so, he turns us away from the first mode of nostalgia and into the second; we experience his art not as an answer to finitude but as an incomprehensible object to touch and trust. Thus, the ruin of past and representation demonstrates how accepting our temporal and interpersonal limits can turn our attention towards the immediate living present of the people and experiences around us. Although Beckett insisted that his art was not political, this message opens a space in which the political resonates, particularly during the aftermath of WWII. Its possibilities extend into contemporary politics, as it encourages individuals to cultivate a mentality that greets what is other not with apprehensiveness and aggression, but instead with a joyful sense that its incomprehensibility provides an inexhaustible opportunity for learning.

### 1.1 *NOSTOS*, NOSTALGICALLY

The underlying concept of *nostos* is “surviving lethal dangers,”<sup>2</sup> rooted in the Indo-European \**nes-*, to save oneself, and cognate with Old English *nesan*, to escape or be saved.<sup>3</sup> Unlike the more general concept of escape or survival, however, *nostos* identifies safety specifically with what is known, and what is known with the past – the safest moment is the moment one has already survived. The term designates not only the drive towards return and safety, but also the work of returning, the completed return, and the story of the return. These may remain separate

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<sup>2</sup> Anna Bonifazi, “Inquiring into *Nostos* and its Cognates,” *American Journal of Philology* (Winter 2009) 481.

<sup>3</sup> OED, *nostos*.

or mingle; as Anna Bonifazi points out in her careful philological investigation of the term, in a *nostos* “coming is also going, returning is also heading for somewhere other than home, homecoming is also having survived death, and, finally, experiencing is also telling or singing.”<sup>4</sup>

The *nostos* is thus deeply entangled with narrative and artistic representation and the forces that drive us to create. The *nostos* can contain several levels of storytelling: at some moments in the most archetypal of the *nostoi*, the *Odyssey*, Homer tells the story of Odysseus who tells the story of Odysseus telling the story of his journey. What we read is at once the journey and the story of the journey as recounted to audiences along the way, a journey that, according to the structure of Homer’s account, begins with its own interruption.<sup>5</sup> The fulcrum of the *nostos* is always interruption or deferral, emphasizing the fundamental incompleteness of something already in progress. Although the *Odyssey* is the major epic of successful *nostos*, the end of the narrative hangs open. After revealing his identity and reclaiming his home, having lain for only one night in his home with his wife, Odysseus awakens to begin the work of recouping his flocks and fighting the fathers whose sons he killed in his wrathful restoration of his home. The process of *nostos* implies a conclusion; how else could one say that survival or safety had been achieved? Human life, however, defers the fulfillment of complete closure until death. The safety of a completed *nostos* occurs only with the final failure of *nostos*. Beckett’s characters, in their weariness, face this paradox lucidly: silence is rest, solace, and the enveloping home, but it is also both the end of the journey and the end of the story.

To those returning home from the siege of Troy the *nostos* is a physical journey; the safety they hope to find is still part of linear temporality: for them, coming is precisely going.

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<sup>4</sup> Bonifazi, “Inquiring into *Nostos*,” 506.

<sup>5</sup> The *nostoi* were the stories of the returns of the Greek fighters from the Trojan War. *The Odyssey* is the best known, but there is also a lost epic poem titled *The Nostoi*.

Odysseus's safety is always beyond the next obstacle: arriving in Ithaca, revealing himself to Penelope, exterminating the suitors. For Odysseus, in the divine tautology of Homer's world, each of these deferrals is yet another adventure and the will of the gods. He has gloriously completed his *nostos* story, and the comfort of fulfillment comes not from the putting an end to deferral, but rather from the cultural fact of divine fate. At this historical moment, uncertainty and injustice on the scale of human life, within human time, had a higher explanation in the will of the gods. Analyzing Vico, Beckett alludes to the depth of the gods' reality during this period: "we know that the actual creators of these myths gave full credence to their face-value. Jove was no symbol: he was terribly real. It was precisely their superficial metaphorical character that made them intelligible to people incapable of receiving anything more abstract than the plain record of objectivity" (IV.502). The gods were not metaphors for what lay beyond human comprehension; rather, their power to explain what lay beyond comprehension verified their immediate existence.

The event, content, and form of the *nostos* thus all mirror and support one another. They all measure the distance between presence and absence in terms of the human movement in time, both physically and imaginatively. The journey home is a *nostos*, and so is the journey of the story towards the past event of the journey home, and so is the journey of the signifier towards the signified that tells the story of the journey home. They all long for unity, completion, and fulfillment, and they are all structurally unable to achieve it, precisely like the human who speaks the words that tell the story of the journey home. The *nostos*'s inherent incompleteness has motivated humans since Homer, but belief in the divine used to bridge the gap between presence and absence. *Nostos* involved pain, but this pain was limited to our sense that we could not control what the gods controlled for us.

The young doctor who coined the term *nostalgia* in 1688, Johannes Hofer, does not seem to have deeply considered the rich literary history he was invoking. His explanation of his choice is brief; he first mentions that the word *Heimweh* already exists, but that there is no medical name for the phenomenon of a painful longing to return home. For that purpose, he says, nothing seemed better than “the word *Nostalgias*, Greek in origin and indeed composed of two sounds, the one of which is *Nosos*, return to the native land; the other, *Algos*, signifies suffering or grief; so that thus far it is possible from the force of the sound *Nostalgia* to define the sad mood originating from the desire for the return to one’s native land.”<sup>6</sup> He isn’t particularly dedicated to nostalgia – “nosomania” or “philopatridomania,” he says, would also be fine names for the phenomenon he describes.<sup>7</sup>

Homesickness or *Heimweh* makes sense – one aches for home, one is sick with the memory of home. With nostalgia, one is not just sick *for nostos* – for the completion of the nostos, but also sick *with nostos* – with the incomplete process of *nostos*. The return and the story of the return are both disease and cure. Without a full understanding of *nostos*, Hofer’s coining was, in some ways, a stroke of luck – he gave his disease (and by extension the category of memory and wanting it became) a name befitting both its complexity and its centrality to literary art. Conversely, however, his incomplete understanding of the word led him to imply that *nostos* was little more than a synonym for *Heim* or *Patria*. Hofer’s mistake has persisted – nostalgia theorists often follow him in translating *nostos* as simply “return home” and *algos* as

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<sup>6</sup> Johannes Hofer, *Dissertatio Medica de nostalgia* (Basel 1688), trans. Carolyn Kiser Anspach, *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 2 (1934).

<sup>7</sup> The most complete history and review of literature on nostalgia is Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001). For nostalgia’s history as a medical condition, see Charles Zwingman, “‘Heimweh’ or ‘Nostalgic Reaction’: A Conceptual Analysis and Interpretation of a Medico-Psychological Phenomenon” (PhD diss., Stanford University, 1959).

pain, and then facilely adding desire, so that *nostalgia* becomes the painful desire to return home. This tendency abstracts the drive from the return, underestimating their entanglement. Modernist studies has particularly followed this omission, focusing heavily on the return but neglecting the human wanting that drove it. Considered fully, however, memory, safety, story, and wanting come together to constitute *nostos*, each characteristic constituting and constituted by the others.

## 1.2 THE ALGOS OF MODERN NOSTALGIA

Once, uncertainty was seated with the divine; the idea of *hubris* or the phrase “God’s will” veiled the unexplainable. This is not to suggest that this comfort took the same form between cultures and across time; as Erich Auerbach meticulously demonstrates in “Odysseus’ Scar,” the *Odyssey* and the Bible stylistically express almost diametrically opposed views of divinity. “It would be difficult, then, to imagine styles more contrasted than those of these two equally ancient and equally epic texts.”<sup>8</sup> Nonetheless, both styles of narrative are each, in their particular historical moments, the most effective reflection and enrichment of divine comfort. Deep conflict “is impossible for any of the Homeric heroes, whose destiny is clearly defined and who wake every morning as if it were the first day of their lives.” Homer gives us “simply the quiet existence and operation of things in accordance with their natures.”<sup>9</sup> The Old Testament personages “are bearers of the divine will, and yet they are fallible, subject to misfortune and humiliation—and in the midst of misfortune and in their humiliation their acts and words reveal the transcendent

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<sup>8</sup> Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 11.

<sup>9</sup> Auerbach, *Mimesis*, 5.



majesty of God.”<sup>10</sup> In Homer, the absolute clarity of fate eclipses the inexplicable. All is presence, so there is no need to worry about absence. As Odysseus says as they journey to the land of the dead, “It broke my shipmates’ hearts. / They sank to the ground, moaning, tore their hair. / But it gained us nothing—what good can come of grief?”<sup>11</sup> In the Old Testament, the work of interpretation demands and creates faith. God’s sublimity permeates known and unknown, closing the distance between them. In both cases, Auerbach’s analysis demonstrates how the Homeric and Biblical uses of style actually create the forms of divinity they describe. These too, then, are *nostoi* of a sort – they search for safety and also attempt to construct safety in their searching.

The *nostos*, buoyed by divinity, remains in a relatively similar form up through Dante’s *Divine Comedy*. Even during the Enlightenment, science was conducted largely by the grace of God; the focus on human reason did not, for many thinkers, preclude an underlying religious comfort. Additionally, as Nietzsche later points out in *On the Genealogy of Morals*, religion and science at this time share an “ascetic” focus on eternal truths; even with Enlightenment’s intellectual shift we do not lose the sense that a powerful force keeps chaos at bay. Although the development of the novel, particularly works like *Don Quixote* and *Tristram Shandy*, raises important questions about the relationship between fantasy, narrative, and event, these works neither provoke nor focus on the painful aspect of *nostos*. Shakespeare’s *King Lear* may be the earliest text that clearly takes this unrelenting alienation as its topic. It is perhaps unsurprising that audiences rejected its darkness, and until the 19<sup>th</sup> century it was performed almost exclusively in a revised version in which Cordelia and Lear survive.

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<sup>10</sup> Auerbach, *Mimesis*, 18.

<sup>11</sup> Homer, *The Odyssey*, trans. Robert Fagles (New York: Penguin, 1996), 248.

With industrialization, Western society settles into the time of clocks and train timetables rather than sunrises and harvest cycles. The beginning of a deeper and more thorough secularization comes with Charles Darwin's work, which acts as a cultural catalyst for skepticism more than as a scientific truth. Nietzsche can soon state as a foregone conclusion, "God is dead,"<sup>12</sup> although the work of secularization has not yet reached critical mass.

After the void that the French Revolution left in Enlightenment hopes, nature and spirit come to rule the cultural imagination; the artistic landscape is rife with mysticism and romantic nature worship. With Yeats, Wordsworth, and Blake, our yearning for presence and certainty moves to the woods, makes appearances at séances, and hides in the shadows of the worlds between. *Nostos* appears in the idealization of unspoiled nature, innocence, and the new vision of childhood's pastoral perfection. Finally, it exists as part of elegy and mourning.<sup>13</sup> 19<sup>th</sup> century *nostos*, although largely shifted from physical to conceptual return, retains an understanding of reasonable worldly possibility. We mourn visibly and carry mementos of the dead because death is ubiquitous and unavoidable. The impossible desire to return stings, but it does not itch. Wordsworth, who shaped the character of nostalgia for childhood in this period, wrote with fondness and longing of childhood's purity and nature's innocence, but always ultimately sided with his present ability to hear the still-sad music of humanity.

Though nothing can bring back the hour  
Of splendor in the grass, of glory in the flower;

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<sup>12</sup> "Sollte es denn möglich sein! Dieser alte Heilige hat in seinem Walde noch Nichts davon gehört, dass *Gott todt ist!*" Friedrich Nietzsche, *Also Sprach Zarathustra*, (New York: E. Steigler & Co., 1968), 8.

<sup>13</sup> For a detailed investigation of this development (though framed as an investigation of nostalgia, instead of exclusively *nostos*,) see Linda Austin, *Nostalgia in Transition: 1780-1917* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2007).

We will grieve not, rather find  
Strength in what remains behind...<sup>14</sup>

Much of the work of this period separates the desire to return to the places or attitudes of the past from the pain of the past's inaccessibility. The most intense descriptions of *nostos* portray homesickness much like Odysseus's – a desire physically to return to the home.

There is, however, a particular *algia* associated with *nostos* that only becomes fully visible at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This is the point at which nostalgia's distinction from *nostos* truly becomes relevant, describing a new category of frustrating and paradoxical pain and a return entangled with imagination and uncertainty. My use of "we" throughout this dissertation refers to those having entered the conditions of this pain, which are the conditions of modernity precipitated by WWI. We feel lack as loss, not just as absence but as the sense that once there must have been presence. We are confronted constantly by "what often / overwhelms us: a memory, as if / the element we keep pressing toward was once / more intimate, more true, and our communion infinitely tender." In the face of all our lack nostalgia drives us to go on, but the losses sting more deeply and we have lost our balm. This is a problem of *nostos*: "Here all is distance; / there it was breath. After that first home, / the second seems ambiguous and drafty."<sup>15</sup> It is also, however, the point at which the *algia* suffix actually becomes productive. The pain that

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<sup>14</sup> William Wordsworth, *Intimations ode*, lines 178-181.

<sup>15</sup> Rainer Maria Rilke, *Ahead of All Parting: The Selected Poetry and Prose of Rainer Maria Rilke*, trans. Stephen Mitchell (New York: The Modern Library, 1995), 379.

"was uns  
oft überwältigt,--die Erinnerung,  
als sei schon einmal das, wonach man drängt,  
näher gewesen, treuer und sein Anschluß  
unendlich zärtlich. Hier ist alles Abstand,  
und dort wars Atem. Nach der ersten Heimat  
ist ihm die zweite zwitterig und windig."

used to be encapsulated by *nostos* alone finally exceeds its boundaries. Our perception of time continues to change, as telephones and cars make journeys home and conversations with far-away family easier, but disturb existing models of presence and absence. Freudian trauma attempts to resolve some of these concerns, but also contributes to the sense that the past is both broken and unavoidable. The American pragmatists develop a view of the past that emphasizes its utility for the present and the future, but begin to realize by WWII that in the face of the atrocity that humankind can perpetrate, their perspective falters.

The word *nostalgia* shifts; by the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century medical and psychological advancements make it obsolete as a diagnosis. No longer a medical name for the pain already integral to *nostos*, *nostalgia* instead names the sense that there has been a loss that is simultaneously irretrievable and unacceptable. The medical establishment discards *nostalgia*, and the humanities retrieve it to designate the exile and alienation that soon become dominant themes of 20<sup>th</sup> century literature and philosophy.

Kant's mention of Hofer's nostalgia in his *Anthropology*, published in 1798, makes the difference between historical *nostos* and 20<sup>th</sup> century nostalgia manifestly conspicuous. He surmised that someone for whom a return home was unsatisfying would still have found his cure for nostalgia:

The homesickness of the Swiss ... is the result of a longing for the places where they enjoyed the very simple pleasures of life -- aroused by the recollection of images of the carefree life and neighborly company in their early years. For later, after they visit these same places, they are greatly disappointed in their expectations and thus also find their

homesickness cured. To be sure, they think that this is because everything there has changed a great deal, but in fact it is because they cannot bring back their youth there.<sup>16</sup>

Odysseus fits this description; his return does not bring him back to the home he left, but to a house overrun with suitors. Even when he restores his home by killing the suitors, he causes a rift in his formerly peaceful city that remains only tenuously healed at the end of the epic. At the same time, despite the years that have passed, neither he nor Penelope has aged. The change does not feel like a loss; coming is going. His *nostos* is complete, and his weeping finished.

The pain of late Western modernity, however, does not find itself cured by evidence that the past is past. We never finish weeping. When the present is barely tolerable and the future seems broken, the past's irretrievability becomes unacceptable. At this point in history we have reached a state of ongoing belatedness; we have lost so much that loss defines us. We are too far from home to return, but still too close to let it go.

Whether "home" is located in the womb, heaven, the ancient past, the recent past, or childhood, this sense of nostalgic secondariness is the feeling that time's unjust passage has stolen the truth, intimacy, and union that would otherwise have been ours. John Patrick Diggins summarizes:

What, specifically, is modernism? As a way of reacting to the modern world, modernism is the consciousness of what once was presumed to be present and is now seen as missing. It might be considered as a series of felt absences, the gap between what we know is not and what we desire to be: knowledge without truth, power without authority,

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<sup>16</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, trans. Robert B. Loudon (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 71. Kant calls nostalgia "the homesickness of the Swiss" because Hofer's original description of the disease focused on young Swiss men who descended from the Alps to serve as soldiers.

society without spirit, self without identity, politics without virtue, existence without purpose, history without meaning. Such dualisms and gaps had been known since Plato, but traditionally it had been assumed that the faculties of mind or the forces of faith would enable humankind to resolve them.<sup>17</sup>

In the upheaval and despair of WWI, nature and spirit are no longer enough to contain the cultural need for meaning. The structures we once used to make sense of the world lay ruined in the trenches, alongside a generation of young men. Science and technology, aligned with philosophical pragmatism, filled some of this hole. Focusing on action and progress, these modes worked to either resolve or discard the great unanswerable questions. Rather than striving for some distant eternal truth, they focused on concrete useful knowledge and its applications. Many of the artists of the period, however, continued to struggle with the deep sense of loss that modernity had exposed. The weight of the ubiquity of death collapsed the carefully maintained Romantic separation of longing for the past and the pain of the past's inaccessibility, effectively mixing memory and desire. Odysseus' model of *nostos*, which had stretched and twisted to accommodate the changes in human consciousness since Homer's time, finally became obsolete. The simplicity of the epic time was over, and "the distant landscapes of childhood have ceased to be a living comfort...They have become a mirage."<sup>18</sup> The past took on the characteristic that James Hart calls "more-than-imagined,"<sup>19</sup> borrowing its hallucinatory attractiveness from the

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<sup>17</sup> John Patrick Diggins, *The Promise of Pragmatism: Modernism and the Crisis of Knowledge and Authority* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 8.

<sup>18</sup> Christopher Clausen, "Tintern Abbey to Little Gidding: The Past Recaptured." *The Sewanee Review* (Summer 1976), 417.

<sup>19</sup> James Hart. "Toward a Phenomenology of Nostalgia," *Man and World* (November 1973): 406. "With the advent of nostalgia the losses and hopes of our strewn-out life are brought together in such a way that the nostalgic noema does not appear as merely imagined or as the "as if"...Thus

sense that it really happened, while nonetheless remaining entirely inaccessible. All of this left many artists with a profound sense of loss, a desire to return to the time before the loss. The yield of this endeavor was the art and literature of modernism.

In *Minima Moralia*, Theodor Adorno discussed this problem from the perspective of both a writer and an émigré – “For a man who no longer has a homeland, writing becomes a place to live.” As Modernism discovers, however, the nature of writing is itself implicated in the threat of finitude. “New” forms of writing that proliferated to the size of a world, broke down and rebuilt the history of literature, or tinkered with the word in an attempt to bring it closer to its object – they all re-inscribed the problems of the past even as they were productively elaborating them. I said earlier that the story resembles a homecoming, which is still true – but in modernity, the complicated nature of resemblance has revealed itself, and to ignore its implications is to tacitly support them. The text was not a haven. “In the end, the writer is not even allowed to live in his writing.”<sup>20</sup>

### 1.3 RILKE AND FINITUDE

Rainer Maria Rilke elaborated many of the key terms of my analysis in his oeuvre. Particularly in *Duino Elegies*, he develops a lexicon that elaborates the enduring influence of “the old style,” in Beckett, and that also gently refutes the Proustian conclusions that art redeems time and suffering. He shows the pressures of eternity, the nature of human want, and the ways that desire

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the nostalgic noema presents itself with the thickness of the more-than-imagined; but it does not have the original givenness of the actually really existing” (406).

<sup>20</sup> Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, (New York: Verso, 2005) 87.

and love work through different modes of relationship and representation to help us find a way forward in the world.

The crux of the differentiation between desire and love is finitude. As I see it, human finitude has two major axes; the vertical and the horizontal. The vertical axis is temporal, informed in part by the mythic residue of a sky-heaven-future association, and in part because when one looks up, there are usually no spaces one could immediately move across. It is still distance, but gravity prevents it from appearing spatially traversable. This is very like how time works – we think of it in distance metaphors, but those metaphors give us time as something that simultaneously demands and refuses definition in spatial terms.

The horizontal axis is not finite in terms of distance so much as consciousness. In this interpersonal finitude, I can look across a room at another person, but I cannot fully close the space between that person and myself. In the poem that anchors the film *Wings of Desire*,<sup>21</sup> Peter Handke formulates this as the questions of childhood: “Why am I me, and why not you? / Why am I here, and why not there?”<sup>22</sup> These seemingly disparate questions are actually two ways of considering the same problem of distance – although we think of “you” interpersonally and “there” spatially, our inability to answer the questions comes from the same place. He then reformulates the idea in terms of the vertical axis, time – “How can it be that I, who I am, / didn’t exist before I came to be, / and that, someday, I, who I am, / will no longer be who I am?”<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> “The genesis of the idea of having angels in my Berlin story is very hard to account for in retrospect. It was suggested by many sources at once. First and foremost, Rilke’s *Duino Elegies*. Paul Klee’s paintings too. Walter Benjamin’s Angel of History.” Wim Wenders, “An Attempted Description of an Indescribable Film,” *Wings of Desire* (Criterion Collection, 2009 DVD insert), 17.

<sup>22</sup> “Warum bin ich ich and warum nicht du? / Warum bin ich hier and warum nicht dort?”

<sup>23</sup> “Wie kann es sein, daß ich, der ich bin, / bevor ich wurde, nicht war, und daß einmal ich, der ich bin, / nicht mehr der ich bin, sein werde?”



Time, memory, and finitude combine to give us questions of identity: “Why am I this me here, now, and not that me there, then?”

As Vladimir Jankelevich points out, this problem of distance also has an aspect of justice. It feels like a basic right to move about in space – immobilization is tantamount to imprisonment. “The human wants to move through time as freely as he moves through three-dimensional space; a human worthy of the name of human wants to come and go, to wander in every direction. This is why the possibility of movement has always been considered by humans as the most precious and the most characteristic of all the liberties.”<sup>24</sup> Even though we know that temporal and interpersonal distances are unbridgeable, the spatial metaphors that are our only ways of understanding those distances still give that fact a sense of injustice – we know we cannot travel in time or occupy someone else’s mind, but this inability feels, particularly with all the freedoms that the technology of late modernity affords to us, oddly confining.

We desire and love because the other is simultaneously so close and so far—the touch, skin to skin, demonstrates both proximity and distance. Rilke says, “We can go this far, / *this* is ours, to touch one another *this* lightly.”<sup>25</sup> Our finitude both constitutes and circumscribes us. We are trapped in our mind and moment; anything beyond is nominally imaginable but ultimately unknowable. Death, the archetype of all finitudes, is unthinkable and indescribable, even as we try to find ways to domesticate it with the grammar of living. The past *seems* very accessible; it

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<sup>24</sup> Vladimir Jankélévitch. *L’Irréversible et la nostalgie* (Paris: Flammarion, 1974) 15. “L’homme voudrait se déplacer à travers le temps aussi librement qu’il se meut à travers l’espace tridimensionnel: un homme digne du nom d’homme veut aller et venir, se promener en tous sens...C’est pourquoi la possibilité de se mouvoir a toujours été considérée par les hommes comme la plus précieuse et la plus caractéristique de toutes les libertés.”

<sup>25</sup> Rilke, *Ahead of All Parting*, 343. “so weit sind wirs / *dieses* ist unser, uns *so* zu berühren”

“presents itself with the thickness of the more-than-imagined,”<sup>26</sup> even though it exists only as trace and memory. It has a different mental texture than fantasy, but is equally as absent. Other people, similarly, exist only as “a look and a voice, then darkness again and a silence.”<sup>27</sup> We are alone; trying forever to say something genuine or authentic into an uncertain void composed of the dead past, unknowable other people, and the broken future. At the same time, however, we get the best potentials of humanity’s uniqueness as a result of our reaching from this isolation. Specifically, language and trust, along with all the beauty of touching and being touched, result from existing in this form of isolation.<sup>28</sup>

In the attempt to solve the problem of finitude, we may desire to be so perfect and whole that we are like Rilke’s angels, “*mirrors*: which scoop up the beauty that has streamed from their face / and gather it back, into themselves, entire.”<sup>29</sup> We want to possess what we have lost, so fully and certainly that it is a part of ourselves – so that it becomes properly ours. With no loss, however, there is nothing to hope for. The angels’ world is gorgeous but terrifyingly sterile. They can witness, but they have no immanent motivation.<sup>30</sup> Lacking lack, they realize that absence makes the space for possibility, without which there is nothing but infinite boredom. A world in which every desire has been fulfilled is bleak indeed.

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<sup>26</sup> James Hart, *Phenomenology of Nostalgia*, 406.

<sup>27</sup> Longfellow, *Tales of a Wayside Inn*, *The Theologian's Tale*, Elizabeth, section IV

<sup>28</sup> As Rilke points out, “We know what is really out there only from / the animal’s gaze; for we take the very young / child and force it around, so that it sees / objects—not the Open, which is so / deep in animals’ faces. Free from death. / We, only, can see death; the free animal / has its decline in back of it, forever.” Rilke, *Ahead of All Parting*, 377.

<sup>29</sup> Rilke, *Ahead of All Parting*, 339. “*Spiegel*: die die entströmte eigene Schönheit / widerschöpfen zurück in das eigene Antlitz.”

<sup>30</sup> This problem is beautifully captured in *Wings of Desire*, Wim Wenders and Peter Handke’s 1987 cinematic response to Rilke’s *Duino Elegies*.

## 1.4 DESIRE: FATE AS BROKEN LOVE

Desire describes what one is fated to have; it is *de sideribus* – from the stars. It is the wager on a “sure thing” – one makes a wager both because one expects to win and because the possibility of losing is thrilling. Specifically, desire wagers possibility for the prize of fulfillment. As with gambling, the risk that is initially a thrill becomes, after a loss, an injustice – the implicit promise of possession was never a contract. Should desire ever seemingly come to possess its object, the extent of its impossibility becomes clear. The tragic paradox of desire is that it wants simultaneously to possess its object and to continue desiring it. An approximated possession cannot fulfill the promise, but a total or certain possession leaves no space for continued desire. Desire is thus unfulfillable – once possessed, the object loses the glamor of inaccessibility. As Proust will show, when the object is apparently possessed and then lost again, desire wanes and then jealously flares.

Desire is also paradoxical. The object of desire is cloaked by absence; it looks different in one’s own hands. Because we now are so defined by our losses, we imagine that desire’s fulfillment is always the satisfying moment in which wanting tips into having, and we imagine that infinite appropriation would infinitely extend this moment of satisfaction instead of infinitely foreclosing on it. We see the beauty streaming forth from the angels’ face and think of it as children think of fountains, as a spilling forth of something constantly replenished, a miraculous bowl always just reaching the moment of fullness. Ourselves broken bowls that never fill all the way, we covet such fullness. We do not realize that the angelic fountain is a closed system – the bowl never lacks and therefore never *becomes* full, never reaches that satisfying moment of surface tension.

In contrast to the angels' self-gathering, we "evaporate; we breathe ourselves out and away." Our mode of creation is loss, and our response is often to desire, to try to possess what we have lost. In our desperation our "eyes are turned / backward, and surround plant, animal, child / like traps, as they emerge into their freedom." Desire strives for total possession of its object. It is dedicated to fulfillment, and the only way it may be fulfilled is by making its object into property. We desire most the things that human finitude prevents us from having – the past, knowledge of death, the innermost hidden parts of other people – because having them would disprove our own finitude. Whatever we cannot possess and control taunts us with our mortality; the inner voice that says "you cannot return to your past" or "you will never truly know what she is thinking" actually is saying "you are alone and dying." Desire is the belief that we can and must silence this voice: that the conclusive appropriation of the surrounding world can heal the pain and solve the problem of finitude.

We can most accurately call desire's solution to finitude "obliteration." Obliteration is destruction or erasure, but it is specifically a matter of writing – it is a movement against (*ob-*) the letter (*litterare*).<sup>31</sup> It is specifically connected to causing something to be forgotten, or erasing a memory. The appropriations of desire eclipse the story of a person or a thing – even if those stories are private – in favor of the appropriating narrative. Desire thus transforms the unpredictable echoes of a mysterious void into the suffocation of forced fullness. This fullness, as we see in Proust, can give us moments of breathless ecstasy, or long stretches of drowsy dizziness. Just as ecstasy and dizziness result from oxygen deprivation, Proustian fullness is figuratively killing brain cells, entrenching a habit of mind that often, if indirectly, leads to anti-intellectualism. It is particularly essential to point out this tendency in Proust because of his

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<sup>31</sup> OED, *obliterate* (v).

masterpiece's renowned insight and beauty. Damaging habits of mind often conceal themselves within the seemingly self-evident or formally beautiful, and this tendency only increases as mass-market entertainment and focus group consumerism become increasingly devious and canny.

Jean-Luc Nancy argues that desire is a direct result of modernity's inability to accept finitude. He writes, "Desire is unhappiness without end: it is the subjectivist reverse of the infinite exposition of finitude. Desire is the negative appropriation that the dialectic tries indefinitely to convert into positivity. It is infelicitous love and the exasperation of the desired happiness."<sup>32</sup> Desire is the infinite elision of finitude, subjectivist because the imagination can only gain the strength to supersede the concrete in a world constituted entirely by a single perspective. This relativism, however, is hollow, because the purity of perspective that might fulfill the desire to elide finitude also excludes other people as anything but objects. The unknowable core of another human being's consciousness exposes finitude, and thereby destroys desire's balance – so desire denies the existence of that unknowability, attempting to replace it with one's own vision. In most cases, jealousy is the sense that this attempt has been insufficient.

"Negative appropriation" describes the void that the object of desire would fill, if it could be obtained. The dialectic tries desperately to make that void into plenitude. It may turn to subjectivity, which concocts delusions that can only assuage the pain of the void's existence if one believes in them with even more fervor than the concrete world. Unfortunately, this structure feeds the overriding idea that the void has a solution. This kind of desire distances its object as it reaches for it, pushing the desired happiness further away as it clings ever tighter to the futile formula for it.

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<sup>32</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, *A Finite Thinking*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 263.

The crux of this passage is the way Nancy describes the difference between desire and love. Desire is a figure that has the potential and shape of love but rejects love's underlying structure. This is because love is not a solution to the paradox of desire; instead it sustains that paradox in the balance of the present moment. As Nancy quotes René Char: "The poem is the fulfilled love of desire remaining desire." He then comments, "This sentence, in effect, does not only speak the truth of the poem, according to Char; it speaks the truth of love."<sup>33</sup> The infelicity of desire is not fundamental to the structure of presence and absence that constitutes it; it is rather a result of the belief that desire can be solved, that fulfillment is possible. The tenuous equilibrium of love is to experience the limited fulfillment of touching the borders of finitude while simultaneously admitting that it is impossible to cross them. Desire is broken love, broken because it cannot accept that love is itself a manifestation of human brokenness.

### 1.5 *EROS, OIKOS, AND NOSTALGIC DESIRE*

Anne Carson's discussion of *eros* in *Eros the Bittersweet* supports this definition of desire. Her definitions and etymologies are rather liberal, but provocative and effective. "The Greek word *eros* denotes 'want,' 'lack,' 'desire for that which is missing.'"<sup>34</sup> It involves not only recognizing this wanting, but also despising it. "Infants begin to see by noticing the edges of things. How do they know an edge is an edge? By passionately wanting it not to be. The experience of *eros* as

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<sup>33</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 87.

<sup>34</sup> Anne Carson, *Eros the Bittersweet* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986) 10.

lack alerts a person to the boundaries of himself, of other people, of things in general.”<sup>35</sup> The sense of boundaries as simultaneously inevitable and unacceptable leads us, through eros, back to ourselves. That we are finite limits us, even as it shores us up. This is another perspective on Rilke’s angels with their mirrors; the angels find themselves reflected back, entire, but humans only see the loss that was always already there. “If we follow the trajectory of eros we consistently find it tracing out this same route: it moves out from the lover towards the beloved, then ricochets back to the lover himself and the hole in him, unnoticed before. Who is the real subject of most love poems? Not the beloved. It is that hole.” This hole, our brokenness, leads us to believe that perhaps by bridging the gap between ourselves and others, by extending ourselves beyond our boundaries, we could become complete. “When I desire you a part of me is gone: my want of you partakes of me. So reasons the lover at the edge of eros. The presence of want awakens in him nostalgia for wholeness. His thoughts turn towards questions of personal identity: he must recover and reincorporate what is gone if he is to be a complete person.”<sup>36</sup>

This reincorporation manifests as appropriation, the making-proper-to-oneself of something beyond the boundary of the self. “Desire for an object *that he never knew he lacked* is defined, by a shift of distance, as desire for a necessary part of himself. Not a new acquisition but something that was always, properly, *his*.” Carson cites Plato’s *Lysis* as an example:

He takes up the question whether the desire to love or befriend something is ever separable from lack of it. His interlocutors are led to acknowledge that all desire is longing for that which *properly belongs to the desirer* but has been lost or taken away somehow—no one says how...This part of the discussion depends upon an adroit use of

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<sup>35</sup> Carson, *Eros the Bittersweet*, 30.

<sup>36</sup> Carson, *Eros the Bittersweet*, 31.

the Greek word *oikeios*, which means both ‘suitable, related, akin to myself’ and ‘belonging to me, properly *mine*...It is profoundly unjust of Sokrates to slip from one meaning of *oikeios* to another, as if it were the same thing to recognize in someone else a kindred soul and to claim that soul as your own possession, as if it were perfectly acceptable in love to blur the distinction between yourself and the one you love. All the lover’s reasoning and hopes of happiness are built upon this injustice, this claim, this blurred distinction.<sup>37</sup>

This blurred distinction manifests desire’s slippage from risky wager to implicit promise. By desiring, the desirer does the work of appropriation, bringing the object within the borders of himself by wholly silencing its voice with his own. *Oikeios* indicates not only proper possession, but also familiarity. It is from *oikos*, which means home, hearth, or household. The *oikos* is the object of the *nostos*; it is the space of familiarity and safety towards which the nostalgic return is directed. It is similar to the *Heim* of *Heimweh* – it designates the familiar, the known, the closely-held. The slippage makes the other into home not in the sense of unity, but rather home in the sense of belonging to oneself. It also does violence to its object, particularly when that object is another human being.

Finally, Carson explicitly elaborates the dangers of desire, specifically in the context of Plato’s *Phaedrus*. She focuses on the danger that those who desire pose to their object, and that those who write pose to those who read.

Why does he set these two sorts of damage beside one another? Plato appears to believe that they act on the soul in analogous ways and violate reality by the same kind of misapprehension. The action of eros does harm to the beloved when the lover takes a

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<sup>37</sup> Carson, *Eros the Bittersweet*, 33. All emphasis in original.



certain controlling attitude, an attitude whose most striking feature is its determination to freeze the beloved in time. It is not hard to see that a similar controlling attitude is available to the reader or writer, who sees in written texts the means to fix words permanently outside the stream of time.<sup>38</sup>

Both desiring and writing demand a choice about how to apply the force of the imagination.

We love the activities that are placed within suspended time, like festivals and reading, for their essential unseriousness. This love worries Plato. A person seduced by it may think to replace real time with the kind of time appropriate only in rituals or in books. That would be a serious, damaging mistake...The person who mistakes symbol for reality is left with a dead garden, or with a love affair such as Lysias prescribes for the nonlover. Something is missing from such a love affair, as life is missing from the garden...<sup>39</sup>

Similarly, Frank Kermode says we must not allow fiction to turn into myth, and Adorno says we must not make the mistake of attempting to transfer artistic potential into the world of the actual. In all cases, we are in danger of attempting to survive the lethal danger of living by refusing to accept anything that has the character of death – anything beyond the borders of our finite selves. Carson says that it is eros that is missing from the garden, but I would claim that it is instead love. The trust upon which love is built demands the acceptance of a space beyond our understanding; destroying this space or refusing to believe in its existence ironically creates precisely what we were afraid of: a darkness, again, and a silence. We end up in a realm of obliterating solipsism in which we can make puppets speak in self-justifying echoes of our own voices. Should we allow this logic to move further towards the forms it takes in the wars of the

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<sup>38</sup> Carson, *Eros the Bittersweet*, 130.

<sup>39</sup> Carson, *Eros the Bittersweet*, 146.

20<sup>th</sup> century, we make the same puppets dance on the bodies of the slain whose deaths we delusionally deny.

In addition to elaborating further the nature of desire, Carson's analysis demonstrates that these concerns are not necessarily new. The problems of eros, imagination, and paradox have animated philosophical and literary thought for a very long time. The uniqueness of modernity's problem with these issues is that we lack a culturally unified story of consolation and explanation. The romantic "natural supernaturalism" of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Deism and intellectual idealization during the Enlightenment, the concretely hagiographic periods of the middle ages, the messiahs, commandments, and heavens of Christianity and Islam, the cycles of karma, rebirth, and nirvana of Buddhism and Hinduism, hubris, Hades, and the ancient Greek pantheon, the Sumerian underworld and the Epic of Gilgamesh, Hindu reincarnation – they are all religions as cultural systems that help to construct a way of dealing with our finitude via beliefs and actions in everyday life.

## 1.6 ON LOVE

Desire's temporality is bound by constraints that it fears and denies. Desire treats what it likes as inevitable or fated, and what it dislikes as changeable and unjust, even when it occurred in the past. In desire, time necessarily implies time found again. Love, by contrast, arrives at the present moment from an impenetrable past on the way to an uncertain future. It imagines towards the past to learn and towards the future to accomplish, but the work is in the present, not in any projected attainment of past or future.

Love displays what Adorno calls “enigmaticalness;” it demonstrates a potentiality born of the ability to allow the imaginary to remain imaginary. Desire demands satisfaction; love eschews total satisfaction while finding the joy of touching what it cannot understand. The idea of total satisfaction has, at its heart, the sense of safety from mortal danger inherent to completing the *nostos*. This mortal danger is tantamount to finitude; uncertainty, otherness, and the passage of time are threatening because they are microcosms of death, before which we are helpless. Desire’s goal is to transcend finitude, to moot the passage of time and appropriate the other, to eradicate powerlessness and uncertainty. Love touches the border of the infinite, which will recede infinitely from the lover’s grasp. Lovers find their reward in the process, the experience and insight it affords, rather than in the result. If existing in time is the way in which humans are broken versions of the angels, desire deludes itself into believing it is angelic, while love finds ways to play within the break.<sup>40</sup>

In love, we reach towards and dream about what we want, rather than attempting to surround and entrap it. Desire insists on complete success, which means that unfulfilled it exists as fear (manifesting as jealousy), with fulfillment deferred it exists as disappointment, and fulfilled it exists as momentary satisfaction, and then emptiness. Whatever satisfaction might occur is restricted to the fraction of a moment between disappointment and emptiness.

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<sup>40</sup> It is helpful to consider Derrida’s elaboration of *la brisure*, which is the break that joins, the hinge that allows for the movement of two parts, but is itself empty. This site of difference is the trace, and “the trace is in fact the absolute origin of sense in general. Which amounts to saying once again that there is no absolute origin of sense in general.” Here is the “point of worldlessness” that occurs in the process of articulation – the lack or absence of an absolute center, which is exactly what makes possible the shell of experience. Though we are brought towards the moment of worldlessness, however, we do not actually lose the world. To lose the world would be to abandon articulation for habit or consolation. Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1997), 165.

Love embraces lack, because lack is the surface it leans against. Existing at finitude's limit is love's key component – we cannot have what we desire, but we can touch the border it shares with us. “Lovers, gratified in each other, I ask *you* about us,” Rilke says. “You hold each other. Where is your proof?” Lovers have no proof; they can never possess each other, they only approach and trust each other, reveling in the gravity of proximity – neither possession nor meeting, but mutual orbit. In fact, proof would destroy the lovers; in modernity, now that the gods are no longer a cultural fact, there can be no love without uncertainty.

Lovers come to know finitude because they trace and occupy their limits, coming so close to the infinite in and through the guise of the beloved. “You touch so blissfully because the caress preserves, / because the place you so tenderly cover does not vanish, / because underneath it you feel pure duration. / So you promise eternity, almost, from the embrace.”<sup>41</sup> In these dense lines, Rilke demonstrates the intertwining of love and temporality, as well as the importance of the touch. The lovers' bliss is only possible because the beloved's unprovable blood, secret beneath the caress, speaks in “pure duration.” The embrace simultaneously promises almost eternity, and almost promises eternity, leaving the lovers separated from a promise and an eternity by the skin-to-skin contact of “almost.” The appropriative aspect of desire ruins the delicate balance of touch, as Marcel learns during the *drame de coucher*. He convinces his mother to stay in his bedroom with him, but discovers that in doing so, “with an impious and secret hand, I had just traced in her soul a first wrinkle and caused a white hair to appear” (1.41). His caress does not preserve; the place he covers vanishes because he has made it his own, and

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<sup>41</sup> Rilke, *Ahead of All Parting*, 341. Ihr berührt euch so selig, weil die Liebkosung verhält, / weil die Stelle nicht schwindet, die ihr, Zärtliche, / zudeckt; weil ihr darunter das reine / Dauern verspürt. So versprecht ihr euch Ewigkeit fast / von der Umarmung.

the incomprehensibility of pure duration recedes. Desire comes to know finitude only as the breaker of promises, not as a loving touch.

Rilke's lines about the caress are from the Second Elegy; there is a similar sentiment in the Eighth Elegy, as he discusses what he calls the Open: "Lovers, if the beloved were not there / blocking the view, are close to it, and marvel... / As if by some mistake, it opens for them / behind the other... But neither can move past / the other, and it changes back to World." To love, to behave as a lover, in the face of finitude is no easy task. The pressures of modernity close around us, emphasizing the depth and darkness of the chasm of "almost" that lovers must face and hinting that desire is the only possible response to our world. Only the pleasure of touch and the difficult balance within the limit keep love within the realm of tolerability. Touch, here, includes not only the skin, but also the touch that the world makes on all of our perceptive faculties – we can embrace the thing with eyes and ears just as well as we can embrace the beloved with our arms.

"Love offers finitude in its truth; it is finitude's dazzling presentation." It is Zeno's paradox applied to human emotion, "love is the impossible, and it does not arrive, or it arrives only at the limit."<sup>42</sup> The arrival is Rilke's preserving caress, blissful *because* it simultaneously approaches the beloved and reinforces the intervening distance. The fulfillment of love is always deferred, but the fulfillment is also *in* the deferral; love "does not stop coming and going, never simply being present."

The lover does not require a partner. Although the beloved brings us closer to finitude, she also stands between ourselves and the open abyss – lovers "keep on using each other to hide their own fate." Rilke accounts for this: "Isn't it time that we lovingly / freed ourselves from the

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<sup>42</sup> Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, 99.

beloved and, quivering, endured: / as the arrow endures the bowstring's tension, so that / gathered in the snap of release it can be more than /itself. For there is no place where we can remain."<sup>43</sup> To behave lovingly even without a beloved is to hear the world calling for attention. It is to engage with Things in their mysteriousness, to accept otherness in the forms not only of humans but also of things. It is to begin understanding that the angels, with their "glorious emotion," will never understand the fragile and flawed joy that humans can know, the way that love and loss mutually constitute each other. They cannot experience

...how happy a Thing can be, how innocent and ours,  
how even lamenting grief purely decides to take form,  
serves as a Thing, or dies into a Thing—, and blissfully  
escapes far beyond the violin.—And these Things,  
which live by perishing, know you are praising them; transient,  
they look to us for deliverance: us, the most transient of all.<sup>44</sup>

Being human enables us to love the world by experiencing it in its transience and grief and communicating about it with words that themselves exist largely in the transience of their saying and their uncertainty, as cracked bottles lobbed into the void.

For Rilke, humans are naturally desirous, "spectators, always, everywhere, / turned toward the world of objects, never outward." Of the humans, Rilke implies that only those in intimate erotic relationships know the attitude of lovers, those who "lift yourselves up / to each

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<sup>43</sup> Rilke, *Ahead of All Parting*, 333. Ist es nicht Zeit, daß wir liebend / uns vom Geliebten befreien und es bebend bestehn: / wie der Pfeil die Sehne besteht, um gesammelt im Absprung / mehr zu sein als er selbst. Denn Beleiben ist nirgends.

<sup>44</sup> Rilke, *Ahead of All Parting*, 387. ...wie glücklich ein Ding sein kann, wie schuldlos und unser, / wie selbst das klagende Leid rein zur Gestalt sich entschließt, / dient als ein Ding, oder stirbt in ein Ding—, und jenseits / selig der Geige entgeht.—Und diese, von Hingang / lebenden Dinge verstehn, daß du sie rühmst; vergänglich, / traun sie ein Rettendes uns, den Vergänglichsten, zu.

others' mouths and your lips join, drink against drink." Nancy and his ilk imply a more general love, but their philosophical abstraction dampens its immediacy and physicality, dulling the imperative to apply it. Placing Rilke and Nancy side by side demonstrates that we must treat the world, people, and the past all as beloved. We must caress our memories and the everyday objects that surround us like the beloved's skin, deriving what bliss we can from the tissue of lived and living time that keeps us from dissolving into pure duration. Rilke ends the Eighth Elegy by asking,

Who has twisted us around like this, so that  
no matter what we do, we are in the posture  
of someone going away? Just as, upon  
the farthest hill, which shows him his whole valley  
one last time, he turns, stops, lingers—,  
so we live here, forever taking leave.

After love, Nancy discusses joy as a verb – “the verb of love.” He says, “To joy is not a fulfillment, and it is not even an event. Nonetheless, it happens, it arrives—and it arrives as it departs, it arrives in departing and it departs in the arrival, in the same beat of the heart... This is joy, and this also reflects on the essence of chagrin and of pain. For joy is not appeasement, but a serenity without rest.”<sup>45</sup> Rilke's stanza aches with chagrin and pain, the loss of being human, “twisted” into “going away,” “forever taking leave” for “one last time.” This is the pain of all nostalgia, the fact that “no matter what we do” finitude keeps us from the restful certainty of returning to what we have lost – the past, the other. There is also serenity, though, in how we stop and live here. Rilke leaves the “turn” undefined – we are both taking leave of the hill, seeing

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<sup>45</sup> Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, 106.

the whole valley for one last time before we go home to live there, and also turning away from the valley, lingering in the last moment before exile. The turning away is also turning towards, and the only space we have for rest and joy is in the constant moment of turning.



## 2.0 DESIRE AND OBLITERATION: THE PERPETUAL APPROPRIATION OF ALBERTINE

Ultimately, nobody elaborates the relationship between desire, love, and finitude more thoroughly than Marcel Proust. Everything after Proust bears the imprint of *In Search of Lost Time*, however faint or dilute. Despite beginning his project long before WWI, Proust pinpointed the major question of Modernism, which Eliot would later condense the most succinctly: How do we respond to a world that stuck in a perpetual April, mixing memory and desire? Proust's answer is art, but his art exists as an emotional and aesthetic pedagogy unmatched before or since, in part because it feels so true, and in part because the truth that it captures is so dangerously nostalgic.

In Proust, we watch a man desperately trace the boundaries of his own finitude, and then conclude that he has solved finitude's puzzle. Marcel stands as an example of desire's overwhelming power to direct the evolution of a self-sustaining worldview, particularly when paired with literature's unique ability to appear as a virtual space in which to work out the ethical necessities of relating to other people and oneself as time passes, and then to convert into a mechanism that rewrites the world to support its own conclusions. Most critics and commentators of Proust allow his combination of evocatively minute observation and staggeringly sweeping worldview to become convincing in its own right – as Marcel says of involuntary memory, their work implies that reading the text they find themselves in “an

unknown state which brought with it no logical proof, but only the evidence of its felicity, its reality, and in whose presence the other states of consciousness faded away” (1.48). We can see this as part of the text’s pedagogical impact – its self-justifying conviction serves as an analysis of textual manipulation and the beguiling temptation of a solution to finitude.

In this chapter, I will investigate the relationship between desire, writing, and finitude in *In Search of Lost Time*. By referencing critics including Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin, Frank Kermode, I will show that Proust’s worldview turns play into delusion, history into past, communication into appropriation, fiction into myth, and finally love into desire. Nostalgia functioning in the mode of desire fits into the historical trajectory of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, particularly WWI and WWII. Proust was a transitional figure, suspended between the idealisms of Romanticism and the experiments of Modernism. His striking and seemingly disjunctive combination of naiveté and cynicism is potently convincing, even as its conclusions are problematic and dangerous. By tracing the relationship between finitude, desire, writing, and ethical obligation in Proust’s *Search*, I hope to demonstrate that we must be alert to the habits of mind that can develop from fear and drive us away from love.<sup>46</sup>

## 2.1 MARCEL’S MANIPULITIVENESS

The degree to which Marcel is convincing is precisely the degree to which we should resist being convinced. The aesthetic theory of redemption that the *Search* promotes is terrifically attractive, which is precisely its danger. In his book *L’Irreversible et la Nostalgie*, Vladimir Jankelevitch

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<sup>46</sup> I will abbreviate Proust’s *In Search of Lost Time* as *Search* throughout, which refers both to the text and the work of the text – the *Search* is thus similar to a *nostos*.

says “There is no temporality that is not irreversible, and no pure irreversibility that is not temporal. The reciprocity is perfect.”<sup>47</sup> Involuntary memory, however, tells us that time can momentarily be reversed, and that it is within art’s power to bring meaning and order to the models of uncontrollable senselessness, death and temporality. Adorno deals with this topic at length in much of his oeuvre, particularly the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, but he summarizes the ethical root of the problem in *Minima Moralia*: “Even the past is no longer safe from the present, whose remembrance of it consigns it a second time into oblivion.”<sup>48</sup> Marcel believes he can outwit finitude by appropriating the past and the people he desires, but in the process he literally obliterates them by creating a work of literature that replaces them with his own fantasies.

Moreover, Marcel constantly stresses chance and passivity, implying that involuntary memory and love are natural phenomena. Conveniently, their laws exist as a truth external to him, even as the impressions that these laws create are purely mental. Marcel escapes responsibility for both the laws and the impressions – they sustain each other, he is only their host and translator. The most unreliable kind of narrator, Marcel manipulates not only the reader, but also himself. The madeleine scene, for example, he begins with the natural world, the “Celtic belief” that the animal, plant, or inanimate object holds captive or imprisons what has been lost. The initial unidentified ecstasy comes from outside; it “invaded and isolated” him. By the time that Marcel mentions “the truth I am seeking is not in the drink, but in me,” adding that it is only the mind’s potential, “something that does not yet exist and that only it can accomplish, then bring into the light,” the reader and Marcel are both hopelessly enmeshed in the previous external characterization of the memory.

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<sup>47</sup> Jankelevitch, *L’Irreversible et la Nostalgie*, 5. “Il n’y a pas de temporalité qui ne soit irréversible, et pas d’irréversibilité pure qui ne soit temporelle. La réciprocité est parfaite.”

<sup>48</sup> Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 47.

Rhetorically, Marcel's mind exists independently of his own volition, and he portrays himself as the recipient or even the vehicle of the memory. This misdirection hides his role as not only the architect and artisan of his supposedly involuntary memories, but also the designer of the scaffolding that enables their construction. At the end of the text, he reaffirms this passivity, applying it as well to the work of art. "I had already come to the conclusion that we have no freedom at all in the face of the work of art, that we cannot shape it according to our wishes, but that it pre-exists us, and both because it is necessary and hidden, and because it is, as it were, a law of nature, we have to discover it" (6.189). This is not a matter of accessing a truth that is external to us, though – "the essential book, the only true book, was not something the writer needs to invent, in the usual sense of the word, so much as to translate, because it already exists within each of us. The writer's task and duty are those of a translator" (6.199). This is a tautological evasion of responsibility – it effectively makes truth and the ethics of truth a matter of taste. It makes the truth objective insofar as it exists independently of the author, and subjective insofar as the author is the only one who can verify it.

Individual involuntary memories redeem time by causing a moment of remembering that is not remembering, a perfect familiarity that applies itself to and thereby rescues the present moment, suffusing the present's originality with the past's safety. At the end of the text, however, when Marcel has extrapolated the experience of individual involuntary memories to fit the artistic enterprise in general, the redemption requires a bigger counterbalance than familiarity. By this point, Marcel has begun to realize that his book also constitutes a sacrifice of his emotions for the people he remembers; he burns his remembered Albertine and Grandmother on the pyre of art so that he can write with the ashes. Time, however, is still unredeemed – time's transfer to art does not, in itself, undo or "make good" its passage. The book that constitutes an

“intellectual equivalent” of time itself makes the relationship of art and time paradoxical, but not redemptive.<sup>49</sup>

Instead, the mechanism of redemption is the altruism that Marcel repeatedly expresses. That he is writing general laws for other people to find, and that the book will provide other potential artists with the tools of insight to have their own *dejeuner sur l'herbe* – this is what endows his art with the power to redeem time. By the end of the *Search*, Marcel consistently reiterates the importance of the “general laws” and “truths” he wants to illustrate in his nascent text. The redemption he discovers with the madeleine and elaborates in the Guermantes’ library is, he concedes in an often-overlooked passage, a “selfish pleasure,” but once he believes he has discovered “something of permanent value,” he can justify his project as altruistic. It does not cease to be selfish, for, echoing his views on the conflict between friendship and art, “human altruism that is not selfish is sterile, like the altruism of a writer who breaks off his work to see a friend in trouble.” In a critical move consistent with the rest of the text, though, he claims it is a selfishness that “is of a kind that is useful for other people” (6.346).

This dynamic of appropriation and implied altruism is why the *Search*’s effect on the reader intertwines with the text’s own theories. Walter Benjamin said he needed to stay away from the *Search* lest he risk “straying into an addictive dependency”<sup>50</sup> that would compromise his own writing. Theodor Adorno, to whom Benjamin wrote those words in a letter, later wrote in *Minima Moralia*, “It is Proust’s courtesy to spare the reader the embarrassment of believing

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<sup>49</sup> Joshua Landy’s *Philosophy of Fiction* is relevant here. I follow his meticulous distinction between Marcel’s book and Proust’s, and by referring to “the book” here I am not eliding the two, but allowing that whichever text we apply this to, it probably fits this characteristic.

<sup>50</sup> Peter Szondi, “Hope in the Past: On Walter Benjamin” *Critical Inquiry*, (Spring, 1978) 492.

himself cleverer than the author.”<sup>51</sup> Virginia Woolf stated it more immediately and emotionally: “Such is the astonishing vibration and saturation he produces—there’s something sexual in it—that I feel I *can* write like that, and seize my pen and then I *can’t* write like that.”<sup>52</sup> Many other authors, including his publisher and reader André Gide, express similar reactions – the idea that Proust is somehow inescapable or paralyzing, looming over their own work. I, too, have experienced this feeling, that Proust is always intellectually there first (no matter where “there” is). Writing on Proust, I often found myself subsumed into the text, performing minute analyses of his ideas rather than using his text to illustrate my own work. Occasionally, I have wanted to “write” by stringing together extended quotations from the *Search* with only the most minimal of contextualization – Proust, after all, had already stated it (no matter what “it” was) so perfectly that any paraphrase or abridgement would destroy the ideas. The *Search* is strangely insidious, its logic and mechanism vividly convincing, even drug-like – it at first provides a revelatory clarity and brilliance, and soon everything else, even one’s own thoughts, seem dull and meaningless in comparison.

A moment in the middle of the madeleine scene gives a hint about the way the text achieves this effect. The unidentified ecstatic feeling of simultaneous familiarity and novelty is “this unknown state which brought with it no logical proof, but only the evidence of its felicity, its reality” (1.48).<sup>53</sup> This is consistent with the aesthetic theory at the end of the *Search* – that a sense of familiarity and veracity is a valid form of evidence. Tautologically, impressions verify the general laws that created them, and general laws verify the impressions that adhere to them.

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<sup>51</sup> Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 49.

<sup>52</sup> Virginia Woolf, *The Letters of Virginia Woolf: Volume 2, 1912-1922*, (Boston: Mariner Books, 1973) 525. May 6, 1922, letter to Roger Fry.

<sup>53</sup> ...cet état inconnu, qui n’apportait aucune preuve logique, mais l’évidence de sa félicité, de sa réalité...

Proust has an uncanny skill for the depiction of felt psychological experience – as Woolf put it, he “solidified what has always escaped,” and he “searches out these butterfly shades to the last grain.” Marcel’s prose often seems evoke the same experience in readers as the madeline did in him – “no logical proof...only the evidence of its felicity, its reality.” Within the self-sustaining web of the *Search*, a reader who finds some of Marcel’s descriptions of psychological experience deeply familiar concedes the logic of the laws he has derived from these descriptions, and soon the entire edifice of the text follows.

Although this might seem simply a side effect of wisdom and art, the *Search* can be devastatingly, selfishly addictive – and the structure of its redemption assumes and depends on it.<sup>54</sup> By the end, in the *Bal des Têtes*, time’s passage impresses itself on Marcel more deeply than the preceding flurry of involuntary memories, and he has to set his newfound discovery of artistic redemption alongside his renewed and revised knowledge of time’s irreversibility. His conclusion, of course, is that he will write a book that will redeem time by turning it into art, a book that applies the mechanics of involuntary memory to memory itself – the art of an involuntary memory of time’s passage. This would merely be an egocentric project if he did not make it self-perpetuating; at this point he has turned time into art, but if he does not turn art into truth, the redemption is incomplete.

If we cease to read Proust, indeed if we cease to allow his lenses to bring our lives into focus, if we are no longer the echo chambers and amplifiers for the “laws” he has discovered, his

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<sup>54</sup> Of course, it is primarily only so addictive to those who read it carefully and completely. Many casual readers who invoke Proust’s name and theories have never finished the text. Commentary suffers either way – paralysis on one side, ignorance and carelessness on the other.

entire project falls apart.<sup>55</sup> If other people live in the world he has created, he appears as an architect and a visionary, not a hermit and a solipsist. As with any instrument, the textual lens simultaneously enhances and diminishes us; it augments the range and depth of our thinking, but also weakens our ability to do without the augmentation. For the text to succeed, readers must become believers – or addicts, depending on one’s perspective.

Both Proust’s theory and Marcel’s narrative function on the same desirous and possessive model that Marcel uses as he relates to the other characters within the *Search*. He treats almost all of us – his mother, his lovers, and his readers – as objects to control and possess. He also refuses to admit to this appropriation; he views it, in all cases, as either altruism or coercion by external forces. The world, the readers, and the characters all entice Proust with their need for his ownership. Even Marcel, the character who engages in so much of this behavior himself, beguiles the author Proust into controlling him.

Proustian redemption is vampiric immortality. Within the text, Marcel sucks the emotional lifeblood of his lovers and friends and then reanimates them, emptied, to walk his pages. Outside of the text, from beyond the grave, Proust feeds on the lives of his readers, relying on their belief in and propagation of his truths to justify the redemption he espouses. The intertwining of these aspects of the text is what makes it so pedagogically powerful, as well as dangerous. It is a sealed and self-sustaining worldview, which demands we privilege it over our own world, reshaping our texts, our critical lenses, and ultimately our lives to fit its tenets. Desire becomes the driving philosophical force behind not only Marcel’s world, but also our own. This desirous worldview supports our existing alignment with Marcel’s insights, finding ways to deny

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<sup>55</sup> Ironically, Marcel condemns people who read and study texts without experiencing and consuming them as “celibates at the shrine of art” (6.200). It seems like Marcel is the inverse of these people, the temple prostitute of this shrine.



death and its accompanying terror, believing that renouncing love for artistic solitude is a productive choice.<sup>56</sup> We see the cruelty and shortsightedness of some of Marcel's decisions, and indeed, often Proust intricately and self-consciously shows us Marcel's deep flaws. Nonetheless, the emotional logic that causes the decisions remains familiar and, again based on the worldview of the text, therefore valid.

Proust's self-consciousness does not defuse but rather enhances the danger of his aesthetic. Ingrid Wassenaar gives a beautiful summary of his command of our conundrum:

We cannot quite dispense with the knowledge that this is a first-person text, that all of the characterization that we witness, while fictionalized, comes from a controlling narratorial source. Redemption or its possibility turns out to depend on Marcel's powers as a narrator. And so we cannot rid ourselves of the knowledge, however repellent, that *all* of the grandiose moral speculations, psychological explanations, and justifications in the novel come from one mind, and can be returned to it, refuted, and denounced as utterly subjective whimsy. Proust will not allow us to forget this threat, and this is why he is a great writer.<sup>57</sup>

Prendergast interprets this to mean that Proust's greatness lies in his ability to make us see and even mirror his vast self-knowledge,<sup>58</sup> but I think Wassenaar is getting at something much more subtle. The "threat" here is two-layered, coded in the passiveness of "can be returned to [one mind]." Who threatens the return? The undertone of the *Search*, its dependence on

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<sup>56</sup> The critical literature supports this contention, from Joshua Landy's well-researched contentions about Proustian pedagogy in *Philosophy as Fiction*, to Kristeva's *Time and Sense* to Alain de Botton's humorous self-help book *How Proust Can Change Your Life*.

<sup>57</sup> Ingrid Wassenaar, *Proustian Passions: The Uses of Self Justification for À la recherche du temps perdu* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 213.

<sup>58</sup> Christopher Prendergast, *Mirages and Mad Beliefs* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 43.

involuntariness and chance, implies that threat is part of the “truth” of subjectivity. In this sense, Proust’s greatness is his brave willingness to continually render this threat visible, despite its unflattering implications for himself. This is the most common reading, consistent with Rose and Prendergast’s interpretations, and with the consistent reference to subjectivity, truth, and reality, it is also the way that the text implies we should read it.

On the other hand, *everything* in the text depends on Marcel’s powers, and so *he* must also ultimately be behind the threat. In this case, his greatness is in his breathtaking mastery of such a complex hall of mirrors. He not only makes us accept his text’s “repellant” subjectivity, but also brings us to huddle with him against a threat that he has made. He is the gunman, but he also successfully insists that he, with us, is just another hostage.

This is why the *Intermittences of the Heart* scene, which I will discuss in chapter 2, is so essential. It is the culmination of a subtext that runs through the *Search*, emerging occasionally as a break in the overall aesthetic’s structure. Although it supports desire by demonstrating that love is too painful to bear, it also models the functional workings of love. Even though the tension between want and finitude is similarly at the emotional center of Marcel’s portrayal of his “great love” Albertine, she is an emblem of desire rather than love. Albertine’s death marks the midpoint of his desire for her and is a fundamental part of his desire’s trajectory, but the possessive nature of the relationship makes acceptance of her otherness, and therefore love, impossible. He experiences a terrible want for her, but from the opposite side as his grandmother – he cannot reconcile his grandmother’s seeming presence with her incontrovertible absence, whereas he cannot reconcile Albertine’s seeming absence with her incontrovertible presence. Albertine is (and then was) a plant, a doll, the smell of the sea – an object or projection, not a human being with a nucleus of unknowability, and therefore Marcel’s imagined version of her is

more real to him than her own self. Errant readers who comment on Albertine's 'vacuousness' have succumbed to Marcel, whose interest in portraying her as a beguilingly and irresistibly controllable object is to create just such readers—lest his audience recognize his cruelty and see him as a monster. Using similar rhetorical obfuscation as in the madeleine scene, he implies that it is *she* who possesses *him*. He wishes to obscure the fact that it is his failure, not hers, that he cannot love her in a way that also allows him to accept that he cannot possess her.

Even the *drame de coucher*, which appears to portray Marcel's intense love for his mother, ends as desire. Beginning with love's sense of the beloved's unknowable, unpredictable otherness and the probable failure of possessing her, and emphasized by the child's lack of control over his environment, it nonetheless concludes with Marcel realizing "if I had just gained a victory, it was over her." This is the first moment of his incipient adulthood, because it is his first experience of the possession that will define his adult life. As he recognizes in the last volume, this is when his life started, it is the act of possession that foreshadows all the others.

Both his relationship with his mother and with Albertine are physical, rooted in the implicit or explicit erotic touch. As we saw in the introduction, in Rilke's case the caress is an appreciation of the boundary, the limit between skin and skin or self and other. Marcel, by contrast, follows Carson's reading of *eros*; the touch is a mark of control, the proof against jealousy and the evidence that the beloved is within his grasp. In Rilke's poetry, the lovers are completely general figures, existing only in the perfect moments that give flesh to his ideas. For Marcel, we see the operational difficulties of embodying this kind of love in the context of life's pressures. Touch is often, for him, an insurmountable temptation to regard the other as a possible

possession, and therefore desirable rather than lovable<sup>59</sup>. The caresses Marcel best remembers occur while Albertine sleeps. Her quiescent body, its subjectivity dormant and unthreatening, is Marcel's ideal lover.

In most cases, Marcel in his capacity as narrator has no qualms about making his characters into his property. Bergotte is perhaps the best example; his is the only death we see in detail besides Bathilde Amedée's, and Marcel gives us his most private and mundane final thoughts. (Although we witness the effects of Albertine's death, the actual event is just another of her moments that is forever inaccessible). Marcel also describes his mother's thoughts, particularly in the time shortly after the *Intermittences* central scene, as he considers her grief for her own mother.<sup>60</sup> Although he only occasionally describes Albertine's thoughts, there is no sense of respect for her or understanding of her subjectivity; instead, he deplores her impenetrability and seeks to obliterate it, or portrays her as empty, an intellectual and aesthetic vessel. By contrast, he allows his grandmother the subjectivity and otherness she needs to protect and comfort him, and he maintains a slightly sarcastic distance from her, as when he insults what he misinterprets as her coyness when Saint-Loup takes her photograph. His description of her death cements his respect for her otherness; the observational evidence from which he draws his conclusions accompanies each thought he imputes to her.<sup>61</sup> He does not, at this point, attempt to

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<sup>59</sup> The major exception is in his love for his grandmother, whose touch he devours with an infant's "placid gluttony." The metaphor of infancy is telling; in his relationship with his grandmother, Marcel has the simultaneous trust and limited knowledge that an infant displays.

<sup>60</sup> He compares his mother's grief to his later grief for Albertine, placing it in a different category from his "ephemeral" grief for his grandmother.

<sup>61</sup> Marcel surmises that his grandmother had "ceased to will, to regret" from the way she "began meticulously to pick off the hairs left on her night-gown;" and describes her last moment of hope as he sees it in her "lovely smile" and feels it in the gentle pressure of her hand (3.332). By contrast, we see Bergotte thinking about Vermeer's patch of yellow wall and weighing his life

possess her as he does everyone else in his life; he needs her to be external so that she can serve as the boundary between himself and the unknown, the presence on the other side of the Balbec hotel's wall that makes its enclosing less forbidding.

## 2.2 DESIRE AS APPROPRIATION: MYSTERIOUS THINGS

We have looked at Marcel, who appropriates and possesses his characters, and Proust, who does the same with his readers. Possession is, however, a relationship between possessor and possessed. Before we can truly understand possession, we also have to determine the status of that which is to be possessed. The common terminology for the relationship of possession is subject/object, which colloquialism translates as person/thing. Bill Brown interrogates the distinction between the definitions of object and thing: "We look through objects because there are codes by which our interpretive attention makes them meaningful, because there is a discourse of objectivity that allows us to use them as facts. A *thing*, in contrast, can hardly function as a window. We begin to confront the thingness of objects when they stop working for us."<sup>62</sup> Thingness is something in excess of objects' physical being; it is "their force as a sensuous presence or as a metaphysical presence." The thing, for Brown, is an object simultaneously outlined with sparkling detail and hiding something. As a thing, the object is naked, isolated in an interrogation chamber, revealing little, and made more conceptually mysterious by its sensual

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against it, guessing as he falls that "those potatoes were undercooked," and then dying in the next line.

<sup>62</sup> Bill Brown, "Thing Theory," *Critical Inquiry*, (Autumn 2001) 4.

clarity. Even as it loses its work-value transparency as an object, the thing has something unknowable about it.

If this is the nature of things, what does it mean for a person have or own an object or a thing – is ownership even possible? Jean-Luc Nancy brings this question, through the idea of property, straight to the very being of the subject and object: “Property is an ontological determination. It does not designate the object possessed, but the subject in the object. ‘Matter, for itself, is not proper to itself’ (Hegel), it can therefore become my possession. But in this possession, it is I myself, as subject, that finds myself realized, it is my subjectivity (*me* as will, need, desire, consciousness—of *me*), and in this respect possession properly becomes property.”<sup>63</sup> Here, Hegel treats all matter as object, leaving it ethically open to be appropriated. Brown’s “thing,” however, has properties that constitute its own nature or special character, which implies self-ownership – it is proper to itself. Properties and “thingness” are equivalent, both indicating a special character outside of fact or use. Properties constitute the object in itself, for itself.

An inanimate object, however, cannot assert or voice its ownership of itself. Whether or not Hegel is correct that “matter, for itself, is not proper to itself,” it has no way to make any possible propriety-to-itself manifest. It has no voice to defend its thingness from an encroaching subject, and so a person who desires it can stop confronting its mystery and instead make it his property. No longer proper to itself, the object instead becomes proper to the desiring subject, its special character entangled with the subject’s own. By making the object his property, the subject replaces the things hidden in the object’s recesses, strange and threatening because they

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<sup>63</sup> Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, 95.

are unknowable, with himself. The subject alters his very being as well as the object's being; this indicates that desire is not only ethical but also ontological.

The object of involuntary memory in Proust is a victim of appropriation; the ecstasy only arrives if Marcel treats objects as property. The sense impressions of the past object and the present object can mingle and elide time only because he *has* both of them, because they have their existence only through his purview. This frees the essence of the memory from the two human finitudes that govern the destiny of the *Search*: independent consciousness and mortality. Even though his perception of the object of involuntary memory has mysterious corners, those mysteries are centered not in the object but in him: "Seek? Not only that: create" (1.48). The object has no voice but Marcel's own; it is (literally, in the case of the madeleine) only a shell. It has the appearance and structure of thingness, with mystery at its center, but the mystery is always already solved: a space reserved for Proust's elaboration.

As we saw in the introduction, Marcel, as one who desires, wants to be like Rilke's angel, a mirror that gathers up the beauty he has streamed into the world. Instead, he makes the world into the mirror. In Rilke's terms, "Forever turned towards objects, we see in them / the mere reflection of the realm of freedom, / which we have dimmed... / This is what fate means: to be opposite, / to be opposite and nothing else, forever." The difference is one of perspective – the angel's perspective gathers, and the subject's perspective only verifies itself in the objects he has appropriated. Beyond and around the beauty that it gathers, the angel, with its sterile perfection, can still see the world; the subject believes he sees the world but actually sees nothing but his own thoughts as they pretend towards freedom. Our mortal fate, and our knowledge of that fate, drives us towards appropriation.

The thing and thingliness is not just a theoretical concern. Brown cites Theodor Adorno, who “understood the alterity of things as an essentially ethical fact. Most simply put, his point is that accepting the otherness of things is the condition for accepting otherness as such.”<sup>64</sup> Appropriation has as its goal the eradication of otherness, or the belief that one has effectively eradicated otherness, in its object. Otherness, here, means the incomprehensible. Existing beyond our limits, we perceive otherness is a lack that beckons us to destroy it by appropriating it – and the name of this feeling of being beckoned is desire. Brown intimates that despite our desire to treat objects as clear and simple, mysterious thingness remains at their hearts; I think that perhaps the more ethically immediate concern is not whether the “thingness” that shapes the mystery exists, but how we treat that mystery. If we treat objects as though they contain nothing beyond us, as though otherness is merely a question of attention, we still gravely harm our ability to accept otherness in general. As merely a matter of perspective, this thinking seems almost harmless, or even simply delusional. As I will discuss later, however, a delusion that gains power has the ability to reshape the world, and a powerful delusion that does not accept the validity of otherness and mystery is poised to become horrifically destructive.

Adorno himself directly implicates Proust in this issue of love and possession: “Proust gave an allergic account of what was about to befall all love. The exchange relationship that love partially withstood throughout the bourgeois age has completely absorbed it; the last immediacy falls victim to the distance of all the contracting parties from all others. Love is chilled by the value that the ego places on itself.”<sup>65</sup> The “allergy” metaphor here is apt; Proust’s prose reacts to desire’s itch like an autoimmune response gone haywire, exacerbating and elaborating the threat

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<sup>64</sup> Brown, “Thing Theory,” 12.

<sup>65</sup> Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 167.



in an attempt to react to it. He attacks the problem with a thoroughness that he was perhaps uniquely historically poised to provide; writing both before and into WWI, he is simultaneously caught in the utopian aesthetics of the century's first decade and unspooling his project with the rigor demanded by that aesthetics' failure in the face of war. It is a perspective that, in retrospect, looks almost like naiveté, but placed in its historical context is more like a skewed sort of precognition.

### 2.3 ADORNO, ENIGMA, AND ARTWORK

Adorno's elaboration of the relationship between the unknowable (what he calls "enigmaticalness") and truth in artworks can help us to mine the subtleties of Proust's aesthetic goals in the *Search*. Proust's and Adorno's aesthetic theories are very similar, but they have foundational differences that make them inversions of one another. In both cases, art is a paradox. Adorno wishes simply to investigate the sustainment of the paradox. Proust investigates the same paradox and has similar insights, but follows them to very different conclusions, the most essential of which is that the paradox must be solved.

Adorno, like Proust, holds the view that artwork is a bridge between imagination and reality. "By virtue of the self-reflection of genius, what once seemed to be reality emigrates into imagination, where it survives by becoming conscious of its own unreality. The historical trajectory of art as spiritualization is that of the critique of myth as well as that toward its

redemption: The imagination confirms the possibilities of what it recollects.”<sup>66</sup> “What once seemed to be reality” is the other, the double, who we once thought we knew. It is also our memory and history of the past (but not the past itself). The emigration of reality into imagination may leave one with nostalgia for the simplicity of the seemingly real – but that reality was only the comfort of habit. This nostalgia is the pain of not being “at home” in one’s surroundings, not being habituated to them, not in-habiting them. This emigration is not only natural, it is also necessary to confirm and even preserve “the possibilities of what it recollects.”

This sounds almost like what Proust is saying in his final apotheosis, when he says “the only true paradise is a paradise that we have lost,”<sup>67</sup> or even his later statement that “real life, life finally uncovered and clarified, the only life in consequence lived to the full, is literature” (6.204). They resemble each other, however, only as much as terrifying breaks in habit resemble involuntary memories. The breaks in habit demonstrate the sublime contingency of the world at the moments when we realize that reality is a tenuous construction, whereas involuntary memory demonstrates the power and control that memory, and later art (and by extension artists), exert over reality. In Proust, the only true paradise is the paradise we have lost because his art *converts* loss into finding, whereas in Adorno, the true paradise is the paradise we have lost because the only paradises that exist are the ones that are, and remain, in the imaginary realm that houses everything we lose. For Adorno, “the fact that artworks exist signals the possibility of the nonexisting. The reality of artworks testifies to the possibility of the possible. The object of art’s

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<sup>66</sup> Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 118.

<sup>67</sup> “les vrais paradis sont les paradis qu’on a perdus.”

longing, the reality of what is not, is metamorphosed in art as remembrance.”<sup>68</sup> Proust observes and describes this phenomenon, but refuses to accept it.

Part of Proust’s finding has to do with understanding, uncovering the “eternal truths” that his work displays. Adorno argues,

the difference between truth and intention in artworks becomes evident to critical consciousness when the object of the artist’s intention is itself false, those usually eternal truths in which myth simply reiterates itself. Mythical inevitability usurps truth. Innumerable artworks suffer from the fact that they lay claim to being a process of constant self-transformation and development and yet subsist as an atemporal sequence of what is ever-the-same.<sup>69</sup>

Proustian aesthetics depends on this “mythical inevitability” – his generalization is the reiteration of myth as it purports to expose eternal truth. Recognizing that Proust’s work is perhaps the most complex of those works that “lay claim to being a process of constant self-transformation” is important; it in many ways *appears* to be consistent with the outlines that Adorno is giving for effective artwork, but it is actually claiming these modes for the purpose of enacting its own ever-the-same redemption.

Although the doubt that Proust evinces throughout the text is essential to the whole *Search*, the “*Temps Retrouvé*” of the final volume depends on art’s ability to redeem or solve all of these uncertainties. For Adorno, the whole idea of understanding is much more pliable. “Understanding is itself a problematic category in the face of art’s enigmaticalness. Whoever

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<sup>68</sup> Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 135. Adorno is (not quite explicitly, although he references Beckett shortly after this) describing the lesson that Beckett will draw from Proust and then supersede, asking what happens if imagination and death are not protective spaces for the possible.

<sup>69</sup> Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 130.

seeks to understand artworks exclusively through the immanence of consciousness within them by this very measure fails to understand them and as such understanding grows, so does the feeling of its insufficiency caught blindly in the spell of art, to which art's own truth content is opposed."<sup>70</sup> This is why the end of the *Search* is disconcerting. It affects to incorporate human finitude and death into its structure, but it does so on the model of artwork as a way of *knowing*. The better we understand and read Proust, the more caught we are by it, but at the same time the more it feels like something in it is eluding us. Many critics<sup>71</sup> argue that this is a structural component that Proust incorporates into the *Search*, but I don't think it is, quite. Of course the *Search* is self-consciously complex, undermining its dominant narrative of desire with incursions of love. Nonetheless, even Proust's attempt to bring the imagination into reality (rather than vice-versa) demonstrates this need for knowledge. Instead of allowing what we have lost to exist in all its incomprehensible possibility, Marcel needs to bring it under the umbrella of reality and comprehensibility. His text works to appropriate loss itself, a desire that only emphasizes the insufficiency of what he actually obtains.

Accepting finitude and incomprehensibility does not mean that we can or should stop striving. "Enigmaticalness peers out of every artwork with a different face but as if the answer that it requires – like that of the sphinx – were always the same, although only by way of the diversity, not the unity that the enigma, though perhaps deceptively, promises."<sup>72</sup> "By demanding its solution, the enigma [of artwork] points to its truth content. It can only be achieved by philosophical reflection. This alone is the justification of aesthetics...Grasping truth

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<sup>70</sup> Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 121.

<sup>71</sup> Christopher Prendergast's *Mirages and Mad Beliefs* takes this as its main premise, and Joshua Landy's *Philosophy as Fiction* creates a more subtle but still similar version of the same argument.

<sup>72</sup> Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 127.

content postulates critique.”<sup>73</sup> The demand for a solution is not always a question of desire – the feeling that one *deserves* or is *fated* to find a solution. Sometimes the always already broken promise is enough for philosophical reflection, a reflection on the other and on the enigma of art itself. Proustian aesthetics demands the unity that the enigma promises – it attempts to reorganize the entire relationship between the world and the imaginary (literally “move heaven and earth”) to make some form of unity possible. It is the unity of the past and present, self and other. According to Adorno’s aesthetics, the work of grasping at the artwork – i.e. longing, yearning, extending towards and imagining – is the work of effective critique, and it is a work that does not end.

Some of the enigmaticalness and truth of artworks inheres in them in the form of history. “Truth content is not external to history but rather its crystallization in the works.”<sup>74</sup> If the *Search* uncovers truths, it binds them like an ornate (but broken) jug through which time flows as wine, collecting the sediment of years.

Adorno says that “artworks are a priori negative by the law of their objectivation: They kill what they objectify by tearing it away from the immediacy of its life. Their own life preys on death.” Marcel makes himself into the repository of the artwork’s life; the aesthetic redemption he elaborates will not grant him literal immortality, but it will convert time, and by extension death, into a living force. To investigate the depths of time, his artwork must have its objects – particularly Albertine and his grandmother. Unfortunately, Proust attempts to rescue art by pushing it into life. Artwork usually allows for the existence of possibilities precisely by keeping them unreal; instead of desiccating them to file between bank holidays and laundry banality, or

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<sup>73</sup> Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 128. Den Wahrheitsgehalt begreifen postuliert Kritik. (194)

<sup>74</sup> Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 133.

bottling them to wait for their involuntary resurrection, it brings them into Elstir's sheltered but carefully fenced imaginary garden to flower. The *Search*, however, never follows the other direction this imagery could take; it only counterposes fertility and sterility, the plant and the stone. Proust wants to bring this same process outside of the fence, where fertility becomes invasiveness, a thorny vine overwhelming and choking the native life. Rather than a cathartic death in the play of imagination, then, Proust's artwork preys on reality.

## 2.4 BENJAMIN AND THE ETHICAL IMAGINATION

Marcel's relationship with Albertine, particularly when he has her captive in Paris, demonstrates desire as delusion – such a strong belief in desire's promise that the desirer takes possession of the world, destroying and reshaping it to try to satisfy his desire. *Ludens* is play, so de-lusion is to be cheated or “played false;” it is malignant or malfunctioning play. John Huizinga points out that play is a “well-defined quality of action which is different from ‘ordinary’ life.”<sup>75</sup> Poiesis is play, insofar as it “proceeds within the play-ground of the mind, in a world of its own which the mind creates for it.”<sup>76</sup> Thinking, as well, resembles play: “Essential to it is an element of exaggeration, of over-shooting the object, of self-detachment from the weight of the factual, so that instead of merely reproducing being it can, at once rigorous and free, determine it. Thus every thought resembles play, with which Hegel no less than Nietzsche

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<sup>75</sup> John Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955), 4.

<sup>76</sup> Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, 119.

compared the work of the mind.”<sup>77</sup> Delusion is dangerous because it functions like play, according to its own rules, but instead of supplementing the world it supplants it. Adorno addresses this issue as it pertains to Proust:

Art’s imago is precisely what, according to Bergson’s and Proust’s thesis, seeks to awaken involuntary remembrance in the empirical, a thesis that proves them to be genuine idealists. They attribute to reality what they want to save and what inheres in art only at the price of its reality. They seek to escape the curse of aesthetic semblance by displacing its quality to reality.<sup>78</sup>

In his relationship with Albertine, and later, more explicitly, in his aesthetics, Marcel transposes the rules of artistic play into the world. The unknowable, which we have the power to construct only within art and which “inheres in art only at the price of its reality,” becomes destructive rather than creative.

The particular sort of world-making play that is possible in the open spaces of nonexistence must, when it seeks to make space to function “in the empirical,” obliterate whatever sits on the ground it would use for its creation. Marcel would argue that this obliteration only occurs with voluntary memory – the original experience filed, accessed, and re-accessed until its original spark goes out. He believes that involuntary memory, created from the raw material of life, cannot overwrite an experience that the mind has not yet synthesized. This synthesis also functions as appropriation; the madeleine, Albertine, his entire past as it manifests

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<sup>77</sup> Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 126.

<sup>78</sup> Der Bildcharakter der Kunst aber, ihre imago, ist eben das, was unwillkürliche Erinnerung nach der These von Bergson und Proust an der Empirie zu erwecken trachtet, und darin freilich erweisen sie sich als genuine Idealisten. Sie schreiben der Realität das zu, was sie erretten wollen, und was nur in der Kunst um den Preis seiner Realität ist. Sie suchen, dem Fluch des ästhetischen Scheins zu entgehen, indem sie dessen Qualität in die Wirklichkeit versetzen. Adorno, *Ästhetische Theorie*, (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2003), 200.

in the text are all *his*. I would argue that the past, what has occurred, is empirical, and that the history, imagination, and remembrances that interpret the past are imaginary. Proust reverses this; for him, what has occurred is effectively imaginary until the artist interprets it.

There is a difficult slippage here, in part as a result of the language. What was once present becomes past, continuing to exist only in the form of traces, the empirical effects it leaves behind. The other ways we think about the past, as history and memory, function on a different plane. They do not manifest what they recall; they memorialize and interpret. They are tremendously powerful forces, usually more powerful than the past itself. Nonetheless, we must not confuse them for the past, lest they become an avenue for believing that our interpretive work has the redemptive force to transcend the limitations of time's passage and solve our finitude.

Walter Benjamin demonstrates the connection between confusing history with the past and ahistorical redemption in a passage of *The Arcades Project*. He begins by quoting a letter from Horkheimer, and then he provides his response.

On the question of the incompleteness of history, Horkheimer's letter of March 16, 1937: "The determination of incompleteness is idealistic if completeness is not comprised within it. Past injustice has occurred and is completed. The slain are really slain . . . If one takes the lack of closure entirely seriously, one must believe in the Last Judgment..."  
...The corrective to this line of thinking may be found in the consideration that history is not simply a science but also and not least a form of remembrance. What science has "determined," remembrance can modify. Such mindfulness can make the incomplete (happiness) into something complete, and the complete (suffering) into something incomplete. That is theology; but in remembrance we have an experience that forbids us



to conceive of history as fundamentally atheological, little as it may be granted us to try to write it with immediately theological concepts.<sup>79</sup>

By distinguishing between history as a science and the determination of this science, Benjamin implies that the determinations are more fundamental or empirical – that they *constitute* the past. Remembrance’s modifications would therefore change more than the story about the past; they would change the past itself. The distinction between history as science and history as memory is valid, and the claim that memory can change the determinations of science is also valid. The transubstantiative belief that science’s determinations are equivalent to the past, however, is as absurd as saying that  $E=MC^2$  is relativity, rather than describing it, and that a consensus for the change of this theory would *itself* change the functioning of relativity. This is how Benjamin dodges Horkheimer’s point that “the slain are really slain,” (*Die Erschlagenen sind wirklich erschlagen*) as well as the implication that a serious denial of this fact is tantamount to arguing that the dead will rise again. Even Benjamin’s more direct phrasing of the same point in *Theses on the Philosophy of History* tries to elude the issue: “Only that historian will have the gift of fanning the spark in the past who is firmly convinced that *even the dead (auch die Toten)* will not

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<sup>79</sup> Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2002) [N8,1], 471. *Das Passagen-Werk* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1983), [N8,1]. Über die Frage der Unabgeschlossenheit der Geschichte Brief von Horkheimer vom 16 März 1937: “»Die Feststellung der Unabgeschlossenheit ist idealistisch, wenn die Abgeschlossenheit nicht in ihr aufgenommen ist. Das vergangene Unrecht ist geschehen und abgeschlossen. Die Erschlagenen sind wirklich erschlagen ... Nimmt man die Unabgeschlossenheit ganz ernst, so muß man an das jüngste Gericht glauben...« Das Korrektiv dieser Gedankengänge liegt in der Überlegung, daß die Geschichte nicht allein eine Wissenschaft sondern nicht minder eine Form des Eingedenkens ist. Was die Wissenschaft »festgestellt« hat, kann das Eingedenken modifizieren. Das Eingedenken kann das Unabgeschlossene (das Glück) zu einem Abgeschlossenem und das Abgeschlossene (das Leid) zu einem Unabgeschlossenem machen. Das ist Theologie; aber im Eingedenken machen wir eine Erfahrung, die uns verbietet, die Geschichte grundsätzlich atheologisch zu begreifen, so wenig wir sie in unmittelbar theologischen Begriffen zu schreiben versuchen dürfen.”

be safe from the enemy if he wins.”<sup>80</sup> Horkheimer and Benjamin have each chosen their words for death carefully here, in ways that reinforce their respective points. *Die Erschlagenen* implies a past violent action; in the present the slain exist primarily as evidence that the slaying has occurred. *Die Toten* is more simply a status; although the dead testify that a death has occurred, the word focuses on the present existence of the dead.

This part of Benjamin’s point, in itself, is valid. To believe that changing our understanding of history has a profound effect on history itself, that one can “blast open the continuum of history” by viewing it as a constellation rather than as a progression, even that a past death can be reinterpreted – these all make space for hope within the context of a bleak history. I want to be clear that I am not promoting the kind of empty, progressive historicism that Benjamin rightly criticizes. The work of historical allegoresis that Benjamin promotes throughout his work is both critically productive and creatively responsible – as long as we remember that it is *fictional*. The connotations of “play” are perhaps too jovial for this matter, but the underlying logic persists: this kind of critical work follows the rules of art, unfolding into nonexistence. His invocation of theology and messianism, however, makes clear that he wants to go beyond the reinterpretation of history as an intellectual and aesthetic enterprise that keeps its bearing on politics by evidencing nonexistence’s potential. Instead, he wants theology to effect a redemption that, like the messiah, crosses from nonexistence into the empirical – and whatever it obliterates in its path is just collateral damage. The historical constellation becomes a literal manifestation of desire’s stars (*de-sidus*), promising the messiah’s arrival.

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<sup>80</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken, 1968) 255. “Nur dem Geschichtsschreiber wohnt die Gabe bei, im Vergangenen den Funken der Hoffnung anzufachen, der davon durch drungen ist: auch die Toten warden vor dem Feind, wenn er siegt, nicht sicher sein.”

Posed as a “corrective” to a view like Horkheimer’s, Benjamin’s theologically inflected historical materialism begins to look like an attempt to rewrite not only history, but the past itself. Sans any kind of messianism, as a wholly secular critical stance, Benjamin would argue that even those who died in the Holocaust are not safe from contemporary manifestations of that particular evil. This idea – giving a voice to the dead – plays out in the open space of artistic and critical inquiry, opening history (but not the past) to constellations of productive reinterpretation. Contra Horkheimer’s position, however, the stakes shift; now under Benjamin’s logic it becomes possible to argue for the delusion that those slain in the Nazi death camps were not really slain. This validates the obliteration of those bodies: it says that they, their pain, and the slaying itself never existed. What at first appears idealistic, the attempt to “escape the curse of aesthetic semblance by displacing its quality to reality,” belies a terrifying habit of mind that chooses intellectualization and aesthetic comfort over cultivating a connection to humanity, and by extension, human suffering. When one with this intellectual stance gets too close to human ruination and pain, he privileges his own desire for emotional safety, sanitizing suffering under the banner of “redemption.”

This is the price of the “vampiric immortality” that underlies Proust’s aesthetics of redemption. It may appear that Marcel’s relationship with Albertine is productively imaginative, functioning within the realm of fictional nonexistence. We must remember, however, that each aspect of the *Search* supports the others. Proust intends the intra-textual porosity between fiction and life to become inter-textual, to spill from the *Search* into the world. Marcel’s generalization of Albertine in the book he begins at the end of the *Search* is a model for the reader to generalize the people in his own life, and Proust’s appropriation through Marcel of the fictional Albertine is, if we follow Proust’s logic, justified by the story’s influence on us, the readers.

Marcel's sphere of direct influence, the book, focuses on the perceptions of a single consciousness and the people it encounters. Marcel is the arbiter and focus of the ethical dimension; his narcissism dwarfs his compassion. Proust's views are well-known on the futility and vacuity of friendship and its antithetical relationship to art; the book's astonishing web of insights and the text's own linguistic beauty seem to justify this self-centeredness as the artist's necessary prerogative.<sup>81</sup> As Beckett says of Proust, "Surely in the whole of literature there is no study of that desert of loneliness and recrimination that men call love posed with such diabolical unscrupulousness" (IV.534). The *Search* is like an alternative version of Thomas Mann's *Doctor Faustus*, with Marcel playing Adrian Leverkühn through the same trajectory but as the triumphant hero. Mann uses Adrian's dedication to aesthetic perfection to demonstrate the dangers of fascism. Perfection without human emotion, without love for other people, can be phenomenally beautiful, but at what cost? Even beauty that *addresses* emotion without *feeling* that emotion is subtly inhuman. In this situation, Mann makes his aesthetic criticism extremely clear. The devil pushes Adrian from brilliance to productive genius, but in the end he also destroys Adrian. The ethical stakes of Marcel's relationship with Albertine and his broader aesthetic project, then, extend even beyond the capacious boundaries that Marcel set for himself.

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<sup>81</sup> "Even conversation, which is friendship's mode of expression, is a superficial digression, through which we can make no acquisition. We may converse our whole life away without speaking anything other than the interminable repetitions that fill the vacant minute; but the steps of thought we take during the lonely work of artistic creation all lead us downward, deeper into ourselves, the only direction that is not closed to us, the only direction in which we can advance, albeit with much greater travail, toward an outcome of truth" (2.483).

## 2.5 HYPOTHESIS, TRUTH, AND *THE SENSE OF AN ENDING* <sup>82</sup>

Frank Kermode more closely addresses the same issues as Adorno and Benjamin through the language of fiction, myth, and ending in his book *The Sense of an Ending*. He outlines in more concrete terms the problem that Adorno abstractly discusses and the conceptual pitfall that Benjamin takes. He demonstrates the mechanism by which the misuse of fiction can become atrocity. I want to compare Kermode's perspective to those of Christopher Prendergast and Joshua Landy, who are both (albeit in different ways) beguiled by Proust's self-professed altruism about the nature of art.

Kermode begins by extolling the importance of fiction: "After Nietzsche it was possible to say, as Stevens did, that 'the final belief must be in a fiction.'" Such a fiction is "like infinity plus one and imaginary numbers in mathematics, something we know does not exist, but which helps us to make sense of and to move in the world." At first this sounds similar to Christopher Prendergast's contention in *Mirages and Mad Beliefs* that "the discursive machine of *Le Temps retrouvé* is itself working overtime to shore up a belief that defies rationality, a "mad belief," vital to sustaining "life," perhaps, but doing so as a pure fiction, somewhat in the spirit, if not the manner, of Nietzsche's life-protecting fictions...a spellbinding illusion, but illusory nonetheless."<sup>83</sup> Kermode, however, has finer and more consequential distinctions to make, attending more closely to the same Nietzsche passage:

The falseness of an opinion is not...any objection to it," says Nietzsche, adding that the only relevant question is "how far the opinion is life-furthering, life-preserving, species-

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<sup>82</sup> Much of this analysis first appeared in my article "Proust among the Politicians," *boundary 2* 42 (2) (May 2015): 177-193.

<sup>83</sup> Prendergast, *Mirages and Mad Beliefs*, 4.

preserving.” A man who thinks this is in some danger of resembling the Cretan Liar, for his opinion can be no less fictive than the opinions to which it alludes. He may be in worse danger; he may be encouraging people who hold the fictive view that death on a large scale is life-furthering and species-preserving. On the one hand you have a relatively innocent theory, a way of coming to terms with the modern way of recognizing the gulf between being and knowing, the sense that nature can always be made to answer our questions, comply with our fictions...But on the other hand you have the gas-chambers...If the value of an opinion is to be tested only by its success in the world, the propositions of dementia can become as valuable as any other fictions. The validity of one’s opinion of the Jews can be proved by killing six million Jews.

Knowing that a belief is fictional is not enough; a hypothesis is a consciously fictional belief, but at the same time it makes a claim to truth, demanding its validation by application in the world. Combined with political power, this mentality easily slips towards abomination. It sediments into myths, which “call for absolute, fictions for conditional assent. Myths make sense in terms of a lost order of time...fictions, if successful, make sense of the here and now.” Myths are heavily nostalgic and, at the same time, concerned with their timeless validity.<sup>84</sup> They brook no dispute, often standing as edifices to their own powers of insular self-justification.

Prendergast’s restatement of his thesis makes its resonances with hypothesis clearer: “While believing in it, to the point of sacrificing the entirety of a creative life to it, Proust himself is aware of the frailty of the belief.”<sup>85</sup> Frailty is not invalidity or untruth; it is a form of weakness

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<sup>84</sup> For a useful discussion of the relationship between myth and nostalgia, see Svetlana Boym’s discussion of “restorative nostalgia” in *The Future of Nostalgia*.

<sup>85</sup> Prendergast, *Mirages and Mad Beliefs*, 15.

that requires careful protection. In situations like these, a myth's rigidity is often directly proportional to the fragility of the belief it surrounds.

Kermode continues:

There may even be a real relation between certain kinds of effectiveness in literature and totalitarianism in politics. But although the fictions are alike ways of finding out about the human world, anti-Semitism is a fiction of escape which tells you nothing about death but projects it onto others; whereas King Lear is a fiction that inescapably involves an encounter with oneself, and the image of one's end...The fictional *as if* is distinguished also from a hypothesis because it is not in question that at the end of the finding-out process it will be dropped. We are never in danger of thinking that the death of King Lear, which explains so much, is *true*.<sup>86</sup>

The fictional *as if* figures reading as play; we adopt rules for the duration of the game but we are in no danger of thinking that these rules will apply once the game ends. Kermode is cautioning us about the dangers of delusion, of forgetting that we are playing a game and instead allowing the hypothetical rules to govern life-or-death decisions.

Proust does with Albertine exactly the inverse of what Shakespeare does with Lear and Cordelia. Although we are never in danger of thinking that Albertine's death is true, Proust's account of it is wholly a fiction of escape. His extension of the telling takes us straight from denial into forgetfulness; there is no moment in *The Fugitive* for the reader to cry. Throughout their relationship Proust portrays Albertine as primarily a figment of Marcel's imagination; after her death she can still be alive within him because the unknowability that characterizes other humans is an infuriating obstacle, as opposed to an essential fact in which it is possible to

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<sup>86</sup> Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 36-41.

rejoice. Marcel's suffering is real, but nonetheless it feels as far as possible from the rending agony of Lear's "Howl, howl, howl! O, you are men of stones!" In Marcel's profound denial the reader finds an exhaustive examination of what the mind cannot tolerate, but it is spiked with self-justification. In the *Search*, Proust does not force the reader to face the futility of impossible hope as in Lear's "Do you see this? Look on her, look, her lips, / Look there, look there!" Although Proust makes a great deal of his text as an "optical instrument" with which the reader can look into himself, he so clearly defines the terms of this looking that the reader simply populates the pre-structured thoughts with his own names and images – everywhere a reader of Proust turns he encounters, not himself, but Proust's lens, which simultaneously focuses and distorts.

The "true" is also much more fraught in the *Search* than in *King Lear*. Proust's final aesthetic hinges on his repeated claims that everything is in the mind, that true life is in literature. He purposefully mixes autobiography and imagination, perhaps nowhere more than in the figure of the author-narrator. It is no coincidence that Joshua Landy's book *Philosophy as Fiction*, perhaps the most careful chronicle of the distinction between Proust's narrator and author, also categorizes the *Search* as a work of philosophy. The ruling concept of Landy's text is "lucid self-delusion," which is very similar to Prendergast's "skeptical mad belief." In both cases, the "true" is not only a question within the text, but also across the border between text and reader. Although Proust disdains intellectual theories as such ("Gross unscrupulousness. A work in which there are theories is like an object with its price-tag still attached" [6.190]."), his work ultimately attempts to make experience occupy a space between fiction and reality, the space of the philosophical or theoretical. Proust constantly pushes us to think that the truths he explicitly outlines in the text are the same truths that exist in the world.



The elaboration of these “general laws” is the foundation of the *Search* – perhaps most importantly the foundation of what Proust calls his altruism. “Certainly what I had experienced in the library and was trying to protect was still pleasure, but it was no longer selfish pleasure, or at least its selfishness (for all the fruitful altruisms in nature develop in a selfish way, human altruism that is not selfish is sterile, like the altruism of a writer who breaks off his work to go see a friend in trouble, or to accept a public office, or to write propaganda articles) is of a kind that is useful for other people” (6.346). The artist’s altruism is a function of egotism, not its opposite. In order to offer readers the “optical instrument”<sup>87</sup> he means his text to be, he must turn inwards, not only refusing distractions and social invitations, but also focusing exclusively on his own perspective (not excepting, of course, his own perspective’s vagaries and limits). The particulars and othernesses that enable love are counterproductive to the good he will do with his art. A worldview built on desire is the path to redemption. His stated altruism ensnares the reader in his world – it effectively renders his truths into Kermodé’s hypotheticals. He demands that we test out his text as a lens, and the logic with which he links the text’s emotional veracity with his “general truths” gives us very little room to turn away.

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<sup>87</sup> “They were not, as I saw it, my readers, so much as readers of their own selves, my book being merely one of the magnifying glasses of the sort the optician at Combray used to offer his customers; my book, but a book thanks to which I would be providing them with the means of reading within themselves” (6.342). For a very useful exhaustive account of the optical metaphor, see Roger Shattuck, *Proust’s Binoculars: A Study of Memory, Time, and Recognition in A la recherche du temps perdu*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1967)

## 2.6 CAPTIVE ALBERTINE

The Albertine saga is the most pointed example of desire and its relationship to nostalgia in the *Search*. Albertine is a cipher in both senses of the word: she is a code as well as a zero. Even the figure of the zero as the circumscription of a void resembles Marcel's description of Albertine as "a stone enclosing the salt of immemorial oceans or the light of a star... the closed outer casing of a being which on the inside was in touch with the infinite" (5.357). Albertine's physical form, the "bloom of the face, flowering like a water-lily only on the surface," is opaque and ambiguous (5.421). Like any cipher she is both present and absent, visible in a way that simultaneously implies and defers readability.

Before the relationship truly begins Albertine is overtly elusive. Although Marcel's pursuit, with its focus on appropriation, foreshadows the rest of the affair, Albertine is still only potential. They are in the promising stage of desire; Marcel is not yet under the delusion that he owns her. This lends the early days their sweetness, and also underscores the naiveté of Marcel's pronouncements on love. When he talks in *In the Shadow of Young Girls in Flower* about the beloved's inaccessibility, he often speaks in philosophically general terms, obscuring the fact that his point is grounded in the literal. His seemingly sage insights about the impossibility of human connection become, when contextualized, the present-focused pining of infatuation; he calls her unknowable because he does not yet know her.

Marcel's first sighting of Albertine in Balbec presages the rest of their relationship, particularly the "negative appropriation" that provides the driving force for his untenable desire. "I knew I would not possess this young cyclist if I did not also possess what was in her eyes. And it was consequently her whole life that inspired my desire, a painful desire because I sensed it was unrealizable, but also intoxicating, because what had been my life until that moment had

suddenly ceased to be my entire life...”<sup>88</sup> The logic of “if” implies possibility, which supersedes Marcel’s sense of his desire’s impossibility and emphasizes its alternative: the intoxicating potential of an unknown world. That “if” will dominate the next several years of Marcel’s life, as he works constantly at the impossible task of possessing Albertine.

His feeling remains after repeated encounters with the band of girls: “Having a liking for someone is one thing; but to be afflicted with the sadness, the feeling of something irreparable having happened, the anguish which all accompany the onset of love, what is necessary is the risk – which may even be the object to which passion in its fretfulness tries to cling, rather than to a person – of an impossibility” (2.411). This passage, like the last, hinges on possibility masked as impossibility.

Once he brings her to Paris, Albertine’s sleeping form, inert as a flower, allows Marcel into thinking that he can appropriate her completely, owning her as one might own an object. Indeed, the fertility imagery that permeates the *Search* is botanical. The plant world lives, but cannot respond. He obsessively reiterates his feeling of ownership: “by closing her eyes, by losing consciousness, Albertine had put off, one by one, the various masks of humanity which had so disappointed me in her, from the day that we first met...Watching her, holding her in my hands, I felt that I possessed her completely, in a way I never did when she was awake” (5.61). Again, “Every time she moved her head, she created a new woman, often undreamed of by me. I felt that I possessed not one, but innumerable young girls” (5.62). And yet again, as he brings himself to climax by rubbing against her sleeping body, “it seemed to me at those moments that I

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<sup>88</sup> “Je savais que je ne posséderais pas cette jeune cycliste si je ne possédais aussi ce qu’il y avait dans ses yeux. Et c’était par conséquent toute sa vie qui m’inspirait du désir; désir douloureux, parce que je le sentais irréalisable, mais enivrant, parce que ce qui avait été jusque-là ma vie ayant brusquement cessé d’être ma vie totale...” (2.152). My translation.

had possessed her more completely, like an unconscious and unresisting part of dumb nature” (5.63). As she sleeps, she becomes nothing more than an unresisting plant. “What I experienced then was a love for something as pure, as immaterial, as mysterious as if I had been before those inanimate creatures that we call the beauties of nature” (5.61). Her sleep literally releases Marcel from responsibility – “I did not have to answer her” (5.65).

Marcel loves not Albertine, but his vision of Albertine. “For it was inside me that all Albertine’s actions took place. For every being that we know, we possess a double” (5.232). Marcel’s doubles are profoundly influenced by the spatially associative nature of his imagination. “What he seeks in Mme de Stermaria is the *île de Bretagne*; what he seeks in Gilberte is...the Tansonville hawthorns; and what he seeks in Albertine is, in good measure, the sea at Balbec.”<sup>89</sup> The “promise of love” is, for Marcel, nothing more than the beloved’s perfect consistency with her double. Her breathing and sleepy movements verify that she is still alive, but she has no voice or will that might break Marcel’s illusion of her perfect submission. In this form, he can feel like he appropriate her just as he appropriates the objects of involuntary memory – she speaks no more than a madeleine. Instead of surmounting time, however, in this case he feels that he surmounts the other finitude – the one that delineates between individual human consciousnesses.

When she is awake, her body changes from a marker of her fertile, floral inhumanity to a stony barrier. “I could stroke her, run my hands all over her, but, just as if I had been handling a stone enclosing the salt of immemorial oceans or the light of a star, I felt that I was touching only the closed outer casing of a being which on the inside was in touch with the infinite” (5.357).

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<sup>89</sup> Joshua Landy, *Philosophy as Fiction: Self, Deception, and Knowledge in Proust* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 74.

The language of plants, which Marcel also uses to describe involuntary memory and art, gives way to the language of fossils and physics. The object of desire, what the stars have foretold, is as simultaneously visible and as elusive as their light.

Marcel understands that “there must be something inaccessible in what we love,” but for him this inaccessibility has the character of “something to pursue” (5.355). Critics often ignore this entanglement between inaccessibility and pursuing. They read Marcel’s detailed and insightful account of Albertine’s inaccessibility as a recognition of its inevitability rather than as an outline of its intolerability. For Marcel, inaccessibility is tantamount to jealousy; what he cannot have is the thing he most wants to own. Returning to Adorno, “The desire to possess reflects time as a fear of losing, of the irrecoverable. Whatever is experienced in relation to its possible non-being. This alone makes it fully a possession.” Each moment is a threat, for it contains a potential loss. Marcel’s fear of losing Albertine makes his appropriation of her the most important facet of their relationship. From the conclusion of their initial courtship until the affair is over, she is never simply the beloved – she can only be *The Prisoner* or *The Fugitive*.

The fear of loss permeates the *Search* so thoroughly that desire can only exist as a function of jealousy. When Marcel is confident that Albertine is his property, he becomes bored and wants to leave. “Indeed, to tell the truth, when I began to see Albertine as an angel-musician, a wonderfully patinated statue, a prized possession, I soon became indifferent to her, presently I was bored in her company” (5.355). When she eludes him, his entire world narrows to the suffering that this sudden consciousness of time as loss causes. “I could feel that my life with Albertine was nothing but, on the one hand, when I was not jealous, boredom, and on the other, when I was, suffering. Even supposing it contained happiness, it could not last” (5.364).

Marcel's appropriation of Albertine is similar to his appropriation of the objects of involuntary memory. His metaphors for Albertine, whether he makes her accessible or inaccessible, are all inhuman. Like the objects of involuntary memory, she cannot speak for herself. Involuntary memories form from stored abstractions, and time ceases to matter because this abstraction that spans time, this thing that is the basis of knowledge, is all in one's head. People, however, insistently cling to their voices. Marcel knows this – he knows that people register and manifest time, and talks about it in the *Bal des têtes*. Nevertheless, he does not want to appropriate those *people*, but their doubles. His artistic representations of people, like his involuntary memories because and the sleeping Albertine, feel like they live, but do not talk back. This recalls James Hart's idea that nostalgia has "the thickness of the more-than-imagined; but it does not have the original givenness of the actually really existing."<sup>90</sup> In this case, "original givenness" signifies not only empirical truth, but also the naked opacity of Things. Albertine, the involuntary memories, and Marcel's art all feel "more than imagined," but he rejects "original givenness," preferring instead to argue that the "more-than imagined" is the only real world.

Tautologically, he can make them into his properties because they exist only insofar as he possesses them. This fear of losing is so great in Marcel that it defines his life; in his search for lost time, he loses, without even realizing it, his love. The logic of involuntary memory, that everything is in the mind, destroys the sense of inaccessibility on which love depends. It does not actually make the object accessible, but the delusion it cultivates destroys the possibility of accepting and appreciating inaccessibility.

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<sup>90</sup> Hart, "Phenomenology of Nostalgia," (406). "With the advent of nostalgia the losses and hopes of our strewn-out life are brought together in such a way that the nostalgic noema does not appear as merely imagined or as the "as if"... Thus the nostalgic noema presents itself with the thickness of the more-than-imagined; but it does not have the original givenness of the actually really existing."

## 2.7 FUGITIVE ALBERTINE

Usually, we think of death as completely inaccessible, even as it is also inevitable. The deaths of other people remind us of their otherness and our mortality, as well as the limits of our knowledge; they make clear that by witnessing death we do not come to understand it. Our experience of death is precisely a non-experience insofar as death is always beyond us; we are only ever adjacent to it. Heidegger points out that death marks the loss of the capacity for experience, and so one can never experience one's own having-come-to-an-end.<sup>91</sup> Proust, however, binds death to time and identity rather than the physical ending of function that characterizes biological death. "I understood that dying was not something new but quite the reverse, that since my childhood I had already died a number of times" (6.347). "Passing" is the kind euphemism that recalls death as a concretization of temporality; each moment's passing is its death, the point after which it becomes irretrievable. By experiencing the loss of our successive selves as deaths, Proust believes we gain some modicum of a more visceral access to oblivion. We feel the loss and absence of our past selves almost as keenly (and also as surprisingly mildly) as the deaths of other people.

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<sup>91</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (New York: SUNY Press, 1996) 222. "The more appropriately the no-longer-being-there of the deceased is grasped phenomenally, the more clearly it can be seen that in such being-with the dead, the real having-come-to-an-end of the deceased is precisely *not* experienced. Death does reveal itself as a loss, but as a loss experienced by those remaining behind. However, in suffering the loss, the loss of being as such which the dying person "suffers" does not become accessible. We do not experience the dying of others in a genuine sense; we are at best always just "there" too."

In his discussion of thingliness, Brown highlights how the object/thing distinction interacts with death. “Why, Michael Taussig asks as he reads Sylvia Plath’s last poems, does death have the capacity to turn people into things and to bring inanimate objects to life?”<sup>92</sup> This dynamic is key to the workings of involuntary memory. In *Proust and Signs*, Deleuze talks about the similar concept of “internalized difference.” It is this difference that enables involuntary memory by marking the ecstatic distinction between past and present:

*The essential thing in involuntary memory is not resemblance, nor even identity, which are merely conditions, but the internalized difference, which becomes immanent.* It is in this sense that reminiscence is the analogue of art, and involuntary memory the analogue of a metaphor: it takes “two different objects,” the madeleine with its flavor, Combray with its qualities of color and temperature; it envelops the one in the other, and makes their relation into something internal.<sup>93</sup>

Both “becoming immanent” and “internalization” here are equivalent to appropriation; the immanence of the objects consists of their mutual status as the internalized properties of the subject. The perceptual identity of two different objects over time demonstrates a difference that *simulates* death by calling attention to time’s irreversible passage but does not actually *testify* to death. This simulation, revived by the overwhelming power of subjective perception, gives the impression of miraculous life: the “dead” inanimate object pulses with soul. Just as an inanimate object cannot assert its possession of its own properties against the appropriative subject, so the ghost or trace of an inanimate object cannot assert the absence of any of its integral qualities against the remembering subject. The otherness of the madeleine is the same in current

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<sup>92</sup> Brown, “Thing Theory”, 7.

<sup>93</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Proust & Signs* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 60. Emphasis in original.



experience and in memory; it is as accommodating of Proust's voice in the present as in the past. Even though the object's soul is actually part of the subject himself, manifesting in the weak object through the "miracle" of appropriation, the appearance of life nonetheless remains convincing.

By contrast, as I will discuss more thoroughly in chapter 2, the *Intermittences of the Heart* scene depends on death's capacity to "turn people into things." Marcel's ghost-memory of his grandmother consists exclusively of his perception, his "double" of her. His memory has the same depth as an inanimate object. Whereas the object's inherent muteness enables its vivification by proxy, the grandmother's new and surprising inability to limit the scope of Marcel's appropriative tendencies manifests as a silent testimony to her own absence. His voice cannot recreate hers; the otherness that gave her life is gone. She is as imaginary as the past madeleine, but because the imaginarieness is unexpected, it manifests as a *bouleversement* rather than ecstasy. As a figment of his mind, she lacks intangibles and voids, and therefore has the uncanny hallmarks of ghostliness – she casts no shadow, makes no reflection in the mirror. Marcel cannot reconcile her seeming presence, the ghost that rises up in front of him, with her incontrovertible absence, proven by her existence only as an appropriated memory. She lacks the lack that once proved her life.

Albertine, as a cipher of desire, functions in much the same way as the madeleine and the other involuntary memories, so her death's dynamic of presence and absence is the inverse of his grandmother's. He cannot reconcile her seeming absence, the nonexistence of her physical self, with her incontrovertible presence, his memories of her that constituted, for him, her entire self. Although there have always been parts of her that are inaccessible, Marcel has never regarded these as essential or even mundanely ignorable parts of her selfhood, as he did with his

grandmother. They have always been maddeningly dead spaces to him, absolutely impenetrable no matter what capering he does to try to access them. Impossibilities, superseded by the logic of “if.” What he calls his love for her is a mixture of appropriative drive and suffering about the aspects of her he does not yet possess. Aside the fact of her not being there, she remains unchanged; she consists of his imagined version of her punctuated with those unacceptably inaccessible bits.

When the object of desire dies, the desirer psychologically manifests the old problem of the irresistible force meeting the immovable object. Desire grimly chases its promised fulfillment, which is always tantalizingly close in the thickness of the remembered past, or deferred by the feral resonances of touch and voice in the mind of the desired person. As long as a desire has not yet faded, a desire will go on – even when its object dies and shifts desire’s impossibility from paradoxical and subtle to overt and obvious.

Despite our individual closeness with death in Proust’s cosmology, a relationship with one’s past selves does not have the additional complex bind as a relationship with a dead object of desire. “The idea that we shall die is more cruel than dying itself, but less cruel than the idea that someone else is dead” (5.475). We are beguiled by our grammar into considering death in terms of presence. Roland Barthes in his *Journal de Deuil*, written as he grieved his beloved mother, poignantly asks “In the phrase ‘she no longer suffers,’ to what, to whom does ‘she’ refer? What does the present mean here?”<sup>94</sup> We understand death in terms of life – the only terms we have, and the terms that are fundamentally the worst equipped to describe it.

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<sup>94</sup> Roland Barthes, *Journal de Deuil* (Paris: Éditions de Seuil/Imec, 2009), 25. “Dans la phrase « Elle ne souffre plus », à quoi, à qui renvoie « elle »? Que veut dire ce présent?”

Marcel's incantatory repetition of the statement "Albertine was dead" first reiterates his narrative distance from the event; inscribing not only her death but also her deadness in the past. When he recounts his thought that "Albertine was dead," he is remembering a past moment when he thought, "Albertine is dead." He simultaneously cites his need and his inability to release her; he cannot say, "Albertine is dead" without first admitting that, for him, Albertine still *is*. This is why she is *fugitive* or *disparu*, and not absent; this is why the title "The Sweet Cheat Gone" is such a strange moment in this volume's translation history – for Marcel, when she dies she is not yet gone.

In the initial crisis of Albertine's departure, Marcel acts as though that her absence is temporary, by which he means reversible. He wants her departure to be on a different trajectory than the mortal, the same goal his aesthetics will ultimately pursue. Her death only distills this desire to its essence. In retrospect, he understands the similarity between departure and death: "I would have liked not to be deprived by death for ever more of those pleasures which death is not alone in taking from us" (5.478). At the time, though, the conditional is absent: "because this was my desire, I believed that she was not dead; I started to read books about turning tables, I started to believe in the possible immortality of the soul" (5.478).

The death of the current self that feels a particular way, such as loving Albertine or Gilberte, is a terrifying prospect – but once that self is dead, the desire to *be* that self is also dead. When, instead, the object of desire dies, one remains the self who loved her. "People do not die immediately for us, they remain bathed in a kind of aura of life which bears no relation to real immortality but which continues to occupy our thoughts in the same way as it did when they were alive. It is as if they had left on a voyage" (5.477). The central paradox of the death of an object of desire is an intensification of the paradox that underlies desire and nostalgia; "I felt

coexist within me the certainty that she was dead, and the ceaseless hope of seeing her walk through the door” (5.479). The end of their relationship mirrors the beginning, when the impossibility of knowing what was behind his bicycle-girl’s eyes was predicated on the “if” that indicated its possibility. This is why in the throes of love Albertine is Marcel’s “great goddess of Time,” a feeling that exposes its core when the self who was so attached to Albertine withers: “my love for Albertine had been only a passing form of my devotion to youth” (5.608). Marcel’s desire for Albertine is not itself the basis of this dynamic, but it is the clearest microcosm. Unlike the classic *Liebestod* in *Romeo and Juliet* or *Tristan and Isolde*, which stand self-enclosed as monuments to finitude, Albertine’s death remains open. It is a problem looking for a solution, a dangerous invitation to engage in Benjamin’s historical theology, making “the incomplete (happiness) into something complete, and the complete (suffering) into something incomplete.”

## 2.8 GENERALIZED ALBERTINE

If Marcel insists on holding past sufferings open, if he does not accept the otherness of things, and therefore does not accept otherness as such, how could he accept the otherness of the people we desire or love? As time passes, he forgets Albertine. The relationship is meaningful, but only as the last one in a string of desires, the one who caused the most suffering and was therefore the most useful for his art. Marcel’s appropriation of her (and the others with whom he populates his book) becomes explicitly a question of use value. The dead “appeared to me to have lived lives which had profited only myself, and to have died for my benefit” (6.211). When he generalizes them, he is “making out of those who are no longer with us, in their truest essence, an acquisition

of lasting value for all human beings” (6.212). Profit, benefit, acquisition, value – drained of their individuality, Marcel’s former lovers are reduced to exchangeable properties.

Adorno’s explicit elaboration of this issue is worth quoting at length, especially because he intertwines it with the problem of temporality, and therefore death, at its center.

Historically, the notion of time is itself formed on the basis of the order of ownership. But the desire to possess reflects time as a fear of losing, of the irrecoverable. Whatever is, is experienced in relation to its possible non-being. This alone makes it fully a possession and, thus petrified, something functional that can be exchanged for other, equivalent possessions. Once wholly a possession, the loved person is no longer really looked at. Abstraction in love is the complement of exclusiveness, which manifests itself deceptively as the opposite of abstract, a clinging to this one unique being. But such possessiveness loses its hold on its object precisely through turning it into an object, and forfeits the person whom it debases to ‘mine’. If people were no longer possessions, they could no longer be exchanged. True affection would be one that speaks specifically to the other, and becomes attached to beloved features and not to the idol of personality, the reflected image of possession. The specific is not exclusive: it lacks the aspiration to totality. But in another sense it is exclusive, nevertheless: the experience indissolubly bound up with it does not, indeed, forbid replacement, but by its very essence precludes it. The protection of anything quite definite is that it cannot be repeated, which is just why it tolerates what is different. Underlying the property relation to human beings, the exclusive right of priority, is the following piece of wisdom: After all, they are all only

people, which one it is does not really matter. Affection which knows nothing of such wisdom need not fear infidelity, since it is proof against faithlessness.<sup>95</sup>

To be attached to “beloved features” implies not that love is only a surface affection, but rather that the lover knows and appreciates that the personality behind those features remains unknowable. The loved person, like the thing, retains her enigmatic otherness. Viewing the object of desire as property, by contrast, replaces her secret self with the “idol of personality,” nothing more than the desirer’s imaginative construction of his object’s internal life. The “aspiration to totality,” the drive to the utter exclusivity of perfect unity and certainty, characterizes desire.

Marcel explicitly describes how in writing literature, but also in life, each desired person is but a substitution for the last one. “These substitutions add something disinterested, something more general, to the work, something which at the same time is an austere lesson that it is not to individuals that we must attach ourselves, that it is not individuals who really exist and are consequently capable of being expressed, but ideas” (6.217). Proust’s idea of the beloved is precisely the opposite of Adorno’s; her “beloved features” are nothing but a placeholder, and the “idol of personality” is her “truth.” Marcel’s abstractions have the deceptive quality that Adorno cites, the veneer of “clinging to this one unique being.” The only way to hold onto Albertine, when “I was no more capable of the effort of remembering that would be necessary if I were still to love Albertine than I was of continuing to mourn my grandmother” (6.211), is to make her a vessel for the “truths” he has discovered about suffering and (what he calls) love.

Marcel’s jealousy makes Albertine a very effective instance of the dangerous possessiveness that Adorno describes, but it is important to recognize a difficult subtext here.

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<sup>95</sup> Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 79.

Adorno has ignored mortality altogether in this passage; “losing” only implies that the beloved has moved on to the next person in a sequence of lovers. The emotional tone of losing someone to unfaithfulness, however, is very different from losing someone to death. The assertions that “the desire to possess reflects time as a fear of losing” and “whatever is, is experienced in relation to its possible non-being” equate infidelity with loss and nonbeing. His conclusion, that “affection which knows nothing of such wisdom need not fear infidelity, since it is proof against faithlessness,” comes close to implying that eschewing the desire to possess other people will release us from the fear of losing.

Actually, such a moral stance requires a radical acceptance of mortality and lack. Cultivating an understanding of things and people as truly specific requires our unequivocal acceptance that when they are gone, they are irretrievably gone. The sting of “time as a fear of losing” comes from the constantly disappointed hope that desirous possession might relieve us of our losses. If the loss is inevitable and what is lost will be irreplaceable, there is no hope to sting. Adorno’s subtle de-emphasis of this bleakness highlights the importance of loving the particular, but it also reflects the deep emotional difficulty – nearly unacceptability – of facing interpersonal losses. Proust’s turn to desirousness and appropriation is all the more important to investigate because it is such an understandable reaction. I disagree with his conclusion and the world it both implies and creates, but with unmatched clarity he makes both visible and understandable the emotional logic that brings him to his conclusions.

Marcel’s choice to generalize Albertine is particularly insidious because Proust also generalizes the artist’s work throughout his final apotheosis – he discusses not *his* insights, but *the* truths he is discovering about art. When he repeatedly underscores that “everything is in the mind,” he means that everything is in *his* mind. As in the rest of the text, he intimates his

humbleness; his life is but a seed for his work, and “like the seed, I would be able to die when the plant had developed” (6.208). He is, he implies, but a tool for the truths, for his work.

He alludes again to the dangers of his work (in addition to when he admits its selfishness) when he almost feels guilty about the generalization, about the devaluation and elision of his original loves into shapes that each of his readers can populate with his or her loved or desired ones. Marcel can be an artist only when his loves have all receded so far into the past that they never confront him, even as ghosts. Only automata populate the vistas of the regained past, people with as much structure as a little cake. Just as he moves immediately from selfishness into his altruism, though, he elaborately justifies his generalization with what he portrays as psychological inevitability, as well as the exigencies of the work. In this way, he obscures the problems with inaccessibility that he has had with both of them, which manifested through love as “intermittences of the heart” with his grandmother, and through desire as jealousy with Albertine.

## **2.9 DESIRE AND SUFFERING: WRITING AS OBLITERATION**

Desire has suffering at its heart. Desire does not treat this suffering, however, as a limit to be occupied, but as an obstacle to be solved or surmounted. “Where life walls us in, the intellect cuts a way out” (6.214). By the end of the *Search*, the lesson Marcel has taken from his grandmother is that sorrow is continually “forcing us to take things seriously, and uprooting each time the weeds of habit, skepticism, levity, and indifference. Admittedly this truth, which is not compatible with happiness, or with health, is not always compatible with life either. Sorrow kills



in the end” (6.215). This is, in many ways, a reasonable lesson. The pain of finitude, the existential loneliness of realizing just how transitory, contingent, and limited we are, is almost too much to bear. The only consolation is love, itself an occupation of suffering, a lilac bred out of the dead land. Proust comes to the conclusion that April is, indeed, too much, the lilac’s fragrance too evocative of present cruelties and its future: a dried echo, crumbling. His solution is to forsake genuine, trusting love for such redemption as art can afford. Unfortunately, he reads art in part as human exchangeability in the form of generalization. He uses his novel to “make incomplete” the lives of his characters, particularly Albertine, in the Benjaminian sense, “since nothing can last until it is generalized” (6.214). Unfortunately, this has the implications that Horkheimer cites and Kermode reinforces. Although he ostensibly understands the finality of death, still Marcel argues that slain might not really be slain, that the possibilities of artwork should function as hypotheses in the world. Anne Carson, in a discussion of Plato’s *Phaedrus*, aptly describes this aspect of Marcel:

It is a deadly stinginess by which the nonlover eludes desire. He measures his emotions out like a miser counting gold. There is no risk entailed in his transaction with eros because he does not invest in the single moment that is open to risk, the moment when desire begins, ‘now.’ ‘Now’ is the moment when change erupts. The nonlover declines change, as successfully as the cicadas do, enclosed in a carapace of *sōphrosynē*. He is secure in his narrative choices of life and love. He already knows how the novel will end, and he has firmly crossed out the beginning.<sup>96</sup>

Marcel engages in two kinds of risk aversion throughout the *Search*. For much of the text, he confuses wagers with promises. There is risk, but he does not admit to it, and feels it as an

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<sup>96</sup> Carson, *Eros*, 150.

injustice when he must face the results of his losing wagers. Later in the text, he takes control of the entire game – he is still confusing wagers with promises, but his delusions ensure that he experiences those promises as kept. This can only occur, as Carson describes, when he has enough command over his narrative to have created a myth of ends and beginnings. He can be secure in his choices of life and love because he has used the tools and structures of desire to create the narratives that define them. Nonetheless, the aesthetic solution, finding the beauty of “eternal truths” in loss, cannot give the people he describes, colossal as they are, occupying the space of their years, the respect or love of unknowability.

In most fiction this would not be as necessary; the play-space of imagination allows us ethically to consider the minds of other people. Proust’s uncanny closure of the distance between text and world, his attempt to solve Adorno’s “curse of aesthetic semblance, which is precisely its nonexistence, by displacing it to reality,” places a greater ethical onus on his treatment of his characters. His obsessive desirousness, which he uses to protect himself from the terror of finitude, makes humans both in and out of his texts nothing more than characters, and what is to stop an artist from appreciating the pain of a character for its aesthetic value? Proust’s writing promotes the obliterative power of stories, the way that generalization may not only provide certain philosophical insights, but also how it may make us forget the angst that finitude evokes. This is, of course, not what Proust promotes within the text, but the textual structures themselves show how dangerously seductive such a mindset can be, even with the best intentions. These structures are predictions of the “allergy to love” that would underlie so many of the Western world’s dangers in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and the solution that would beguile some of the Modernists towards the aesthetically formalized, world-makingly mythological direction of Fascism.

### 3.0 LOVE, DEATH, AND THE *BOULEVERSEMENT* OF THE HEART

The structure of desire governs the *Search*, twining through Proust's aesthetic theories and the human relationships between characters as they evolve towards his final conclusion. Desire instigates appropriation, the work of making everybody and everything in the environment so thoroughly known that his readers can most properly understand them as extensions of Marcel's own consciousness. Marcel's relationships with the other characters, particularly Albertine, and even with the objects in the text, particularly those associated with involuntary memory, demonstrate his dedication to trying to obliterate otherness and uncertainty in his environment. These tendencies are a result of Proustian nostalgia's refusal to accept the painful incompleteness of the life's *nostos*, turning instead to a consolatory theory of art's relationship to life that promises the redemption of loss. This redemption depends on the proliferation of a breathtakingly broad-ranging solipsism, which Marcel presents to his readers as an altruistic demonstration of "general truths."

On the way to his redemptive finale, however, Marcel has several experiences that elucidate an opportunity for an alternative to desire, centering on his relationship with his grandmother. Marcel's grandmother is unique in the text; she is the only character to whom he relates as a separate human being, rather than as an object. His experiences with her oscillate between moments in which the border between them comforts and supports him, and moments in which his perception breaks his stabilizing assumptions about her. These breaks expose finitude

at its rawest and most devastating, and personal identity at its most contingent, but also love at its most tender. The culmination of these experiences is the *Intermittences of the Heart* scene, in which Proust combines several of the major ideas in the *Search* – involuntary memory, love, and both temporal and interpersonal finitude – to create a volatile compound so overwhelming that it literally knocks Marcel unconscious, but so essential that its complex echoes resound throughout the entire *Search*.

Although the text shows moments of this kind of love, Proust does not present love as a viable alternative to his final aesthetic insight. Marcel consistently chooses desire and appropriation over love and longing. From Proust's famous letter to Jacques Rivière, we know that his view is consistent with Marcel on this topic: "It is only at the end of the book, at a time when the lessons of life are understood, that my thinking will unveil itself. If one deduced from it [the end of *The Way By Swann's*] that my thinking is a sort of disenchanting skepticism, it would be exactly as if a spectator having seen the end of the first act of Parsifal...supposed that Wagner had meant to say that the simplicity of the heart leads to nothing."<sup>97</sup> Marcel's disenchantment in the Bois de Boulogne at the end of *The Way By Swann's*, as well as some of his aesthetic naiveté during his first meetings with Elstir and the devastating encounter with his dead grandmother in Balbec, exist as moments in the "evolution of a belief system," not as standalone conclusions that contradict, undermine, or even significantly complicate the final aesthetic.

Many critics conclude that the rigor and range of Proust's intellect and his text's philosophy negate his own clear statement of motivation. They argue that moments Proust portrays as evolutionary dead ends are actually more like discussion questions or counterpoints. Treated as such, these moments (as well as the episodes they change via recontextualization)

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<sup>97</sup> Marcel Proust, *Correspondence XIII, 1914* (Paris: Librairie Plon, 1985) 99.

become explicit examples of enduring skepticism, rather than discarded alternative theories. They support the idea that the text's overall investment in desire is provisional and uncertain, rather than desperately (although, by the end, carefully nonchalantly) wholehearted. Texts like Antoine Compagnon's *Proust Between Two Centuries*, Christopher Prendergast's *Mirages and Mad Beliefs*, and Vincent Descombes' *Proust: Philosophy of the Novel* use various strategies to arrive at similar conclusions: that the text's theory is distinct from the progress of the narrator. For them, *Search* becomes a triumph of skepticism, uncertainty, and limitation, rather than a paean to the redemptive power of art. This tendency is widespread; even texts as idiosyncratic and careful as Roger Shattuck's *Proust's Binoculars*, Julia Kristeva's *Time and Sense*, and Malcom Bowie's *Proust among the Stars* show signs of the same impulse.<sup>98</sup>

My point is in some ways similar; like these critics, I also do not read *Le Temps Retrouvé* as the *Search*'s uncomplicated lesson. Rather than abstracting the text's overall aesthetics from the entirety of the narrator's experience, or treating various theoretical forays throughout the novel as equally-weighted components of a philosophical whole, however, I want to argue that Marcel's elaboration of love, uncertainty, and trust is essential to his concluding aesthetic architecture primarily insofar as he ultimately rejects it. It is the spur and counterpart to his decision to pursue desire as a path to aesthetic redemption. This allows the *Search* to show that love, considered as an uncertain extension from mortality and aloneness into the limit-space of human finitude, is too risky. Without Proust's lucid and thorough explications of Marcel's errors, we could not understand the degree to which they both judge that love's inevitable loss is too painful to be enfolded into the final aesthetic.

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<sup>98</sup> In the extended introduction to *Philosophy as Fiction*, Landy gives a very informal annotated bibliography of sources that make a variety of similar errors.

Despite the persuasiveness of Proust's prose and argument, his conclusion need not be ours. If we believe that Proust's insight into human fear and motivation is accurate but that his conclusions are ethically unsupportable, his description of love becomes a meticulous illustration of the profound pain of really loving people who will inevitably die, and the way that this pain can lead a person to conclusions based on desire that are aesthetically lucid but loveless and untrusting – and, as we have seen, ultimately socially and politically devastating. Not only Marcel's, but also Proust's own entanglement in the text's cruel and near-inexorable emotional logic makes the delusion that *Le temps* can be *retrouvé* even more poignant, and underscores the necessity of considering both how love could be historically responsible, and how this specific way of considering love addresses the pressures that generally shaped Modernist literature in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Love, in this sense, means extending oneself towards another person or a thing while allowing it to remain a mystery, as well as allowing finitude to circumscribe oneself without succumbing to nihilism. Love asks us to live simultaneously in states of uncertainty and generosity; it asks us to trust rather than appropriate. It is not only a way of acting, feeling, or knowing; it is a way of being. It is thus not only an ethical, erotic, and critical mode, but also ontological. In considering how to define this love, I considered the classical Greek designations, but they all seemed to be incomplete. *Eros* is too highly sexual and physical, and throughout its history it has usually implied the tumultuous, dramatic, painful, and appropriative form I call desire. *Storge* implies an unequal power dynamic, inappropriate for my purposes here. *Agape* has the right resonance insofar as it is charitable and altruistic, but its overtones are too religious – it seems more Godly or angelic than the entirely human love that I want to discuss here. It focuses on the eternal and the infinite, whereas the love I want to discuss not only accepts, but can even

love finitude itself. Finally, *philia* is yet closer, but it seems more like a catch-all that sweeps up all of the leftover aspects of love. It can be brotherly or erotic, affectionate or fetishistic, tender or compulsive. It ranges from affinity to obsession. In its Aristotelian sense it does allude towards love between equals, but mutuality is not fundamental to its definition. None of these major Greek definitions take on the tension between trust and death as their main focus.

I found Denis de Rougemont's *Love in the Western World* useful to focus my thinking on trust and its relationship to love. As he points out, the value of a love story is often a matter of drama; "passion" is both etymologically and narratively rooted in the pain that drives dramatic conflict. The romantic love that constitutes a good marriage is not necessarily passionate in this sense – it is not boring to experience, but it makes a boring story. Unfortunately, because we learn so much from stories, Western ideas of intense or enduring love have become entangled with the components of an effective romantic narrative. In this way, the history of romantic love is very much like the *nostos*, which incorporates the process of return, the completed return, and the story of the return's process and/or completion. Romantic love is usually both a pursuit and the story of that pursuit. Like the *nostos*, if the story is to continue, love's ostensible completion can only be a deferral of completion. Like the *algia* aspect of *nostalgia*, the passion of a love story is the pain that drives the story of wanting to continue.

As I demonstrated in the introduction, however, pain is already integral to the structure of the *nostos*. The pain of insecurity drives us to search for the most secure place possible, which is enfolded in familiarity – the home in the past. The pain of being alone and finite is integral to the structure of love, but this is more like the Greek *pathos*, which implies the experience of suffering or the communication of that experience to the other, than passion's root in the Latin

translation of *pathos* to *patio*, which more strongly implies the withstanding of suffering that the other inflicts upon one, as a martyr or Christ figure.

The problem I have with De Rougement's idea of love is its emphasis on marriage. For him, passionate love drives change, story, thought and pain, whereas married love rests in a comfortable mutuality. This comfort seems to err on the side of religious stasis's *agape*; it is successful not because it has found a way to balance the exigencies of doubt and human finitude with the pleasures of understanding and touch, but because it uses fidelity to stop the oscillations of doubt. Although fidelity and trust are rooted in the same set of concerns, fidelity has more to do with loyalty and sexual monogamy, whereas trust is more abstract. Fidelity is part of a particular social institution and contract, rather than a more general way of relating to other people or even objects and the world. As we see in Marcel's jealousy about not only Albertine's possible lesbian dalliances, but also about the mental space in which she would plan, experience, and remember these occasions, sexual possessiveness has a visceral drive that Marcel's trust for his grandmother need not negotiate. Nonetheless, as Adorno discusses in his fragment on the temporality and morality of love, the drive behind sexual possessiveness and the trust that would make it obsolete allows romantic or sexual love to be a sub-category of the love I describe, rather than being its erotic and desirous contrast.

The Proustian categories of habit and the breaks in habit help to elucidate the difference between love and desire, as well as the ways that they manifest in the world. In the *Search*, habit is largely consistent with desire and appropriation, obliterating the strangeness of one's environment by replacing all of the Things with objects – even people lose their mystery and become objects as habit has its way. Most of the time, habit is a way to keep from facing finitude, and it governs desire and involuntary memory. The breaking of habit, then, allows us to



face finitude. Habit dulls our faculties and rests in the comfort of the familiar, and the breaking of habit suddenly demands that we work to give shape to an environment made radically, beautifully, and terrifyingly unfamiliar.

There is one major inversion of these categories, however, which occurs when Marcel and his grandmother are in Balbec the first time. The breaking of habit, which usually exposes the beauty and strangeness of the world, becomes a sense of apathetic hopelessness. The environment becomes monstrous and *unheimlich*, pinpointing the jarring juncture between familiar and unfamiliar, turning the obliterating force of appropriation onto Marcel's own identity. In such a world the loss or finding of time is of no consequence – Marcel welcomes and wishes for death. When Marcel's grandmother enters the room, her unique presence restabilizes Marcel; his familiarity with her brings back enough habit for him to regain his equilibrium. In this instance habit, usually a force of sickly, comforting dullness, becomes a revitalizing sense of trust. When Marcel and his grandmother touch, they each obscure the terror of finitude for the other. This is not a denial of finitude, but rather an absorption in the pleasure of the present moment combined with the pleasure of trusting another person. This is only possible because Marcel's grandmother uniquely embodies for him the presence of absence. In Balbec, she stands between Marcel and his mortality; her touch brings him close to otherness in the guise of loving acceptance. His trust of her, as it stands in for habit, quiets the terrible incomprehensibility of the world when the breaking of habit becomes too overwhelming.

The beautiful and rare comfort of trust is, however, ephemeral. In *The Intermittences of the Heart* Marcel's grandmother demonstrates the necessary other side of love and trust. A moment of memory that would normally, in the Proustian cosmology, elide the passage of time, instead rips apart the habit that has allowed Marcel to forget his grandmother's death. He

experiences the depth of finitude as it manifests in the haunting memory of his grandmother, wrenching because she contains only the echo of a soul, generated from Marcel's memory. In this moment he suffers the full force of both temporal and interpersonal finitudes; now his trust is the mode by which time gives the knife of nostalgia another wrenching twist.

Although Marcel commits wholly to a redemptive ethos that seemed to many artists to have potential during 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century but has proven devastating throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> and beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, he also chronicles the reasoning behind his commitment with such rigorous minuteness that we come to understand intricately the sense of fear and loss that drive him to his conclusion. From this fear and loss, the inverse and contrast to Proust's "allergic account of what was to befall all love" in his relationship with Albertine and his final aesthetic theory, we can not only uniquely examine a key moment in the history of feelings, but also work on developing a foundation from which to find a way of being alternative to desire. Although Proust concluded that loving is ultimately intolerable, in tracing the boundary between love and desire he still gives a vivid account of its beauty and intensity. Before he turns away from love and its entanglement with finitude, he illuminates its potential. The bottomless vulnerability that he discovers as he faces his dead grandmother, the depth of his lack of control, and the negotiating between understanding and imagination, dream and lucidity, past and future, self and other, all expose both the threat and the creative potential of love.

### **3.1 LOVING FALLIBILISM: HABIT AND PRAGMATISM**

Habit as it relates to human experience is a tremendously capacious term. It designates the mediation between memory, knowledge, action, and identity. It has a long history as a

philosophical category, which many commentators have amply chronicled.<sup>99</sup> Although most of these commentators treat both the mechanical and sensational aspects of habit, Proust frames habit almost entirely as a matter of sensation and perception. Even physical habits become a matter of mental experience, like the opening of his bedroom door as a child: “that doorknob of my room, which differed for me from all other doorknobs in the world in that it seemed to open of its own accord, without my having to turn it, so unconscious had its handling become for me” (1.14). In the *Search* habit only matters insofar as it affects how Marcel perceives and senses the world; Proust is less interested in the philosophy of body mechanics than in the ways that routine affect consciousness and identity.

This is interesting in part because one of the great French commentators on habit, whom Proust read and met, Felix Ravaisson, specifically disentangles sensation from perception. In his 1838 book *De L’Habitude*, Ravaisson argues that that habit has a “double law,” which is “based on the distinction between activity and passivity, or between voluntary movement and sensation.” For Ravaisson, habit improves voluntary movement and its associated perceptions, even though it also dulls the sensations that one absorbs passively. This allows him to argue that what Proust might criticize as the inertia of habit is actually a matter of will and intelligence, though it is beyond consciousness and mental intellect. It is a kind of intelligence beyond the brain that craves the things to which it has already been habituated when faced with the absence of them. For Ravaisson, the dulling of sensation and the corresponding enhancement in perception is not a diminishment of choice; it is choice becoming located closer to the things that are chosen and the physical work of choosing them.

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<sup>99</sup> One list specifically tailored to the Modernist context comes from Lisi Schoenbach, *Pragmatic Modernism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 152.

Bergsonian habit, to which many critics compare Proustian habit, takes a similar structure as Ravaissonian habit but values it in the tradition of Ravaisson's predecessor, Maine de Biran. They both agree with Ravaisson that body, present, and automatic habits belong together, and that mind, past, and conceptual habits belong together. They disagree on the value of these categories; Bergson and de Biran value the consciousness that conceptual and past habits enable, and argue that automatic habits are less conscious, whereas Ravaisson argues that the different sorts of habit emphasize different, but equally valuable, sorts of consciousness.

Proustian habit is closer to Ravaisson than the philosophers like Bergson who argue that habit "functions as a low-order memory: 'Habits formed by repeated actions are amassed in the body; these do not *re*-present the past, they merely act it.'"<sup>100</sup> Proust hovers between Bergson and Ravaisson by personifying habit while also giving Marcel "ownership" of it. Unless he is discussing it as a general law, he tends to refer to habit possessively, but he also attributes to it a capacity for will and decision outside of his own ideas and preferences: "Habit! – that skillful but very slow housekeeper" (1.12), or "My habit, which was sedentary and unused to morning hours" (2.235).

In her book *Pragmatic Modernism*, Lisi Schoenbach argues that Proust is not part of the "long tradition of condemnations of habit." Instead, she contends that in the *Search* "habit is presented as a constant and dialectical movement rather than a static state of existence. While moments of disorientation are important, they are not privileged in Proust's schema. Habit enables as much as it numbs or deadens."<sup>101</sup> Although I agree that habit enables much in Proust and that moments in which habit breaks are less crucial than many commentators argue, I think

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<sup>100</sup> Ulrika Maude, "Beckett and the Laws of Habit," *Modernism/modernity* 18 (4) (2012): 815. Maude quotes Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory*.

<sup>101</sup> Schoenbach, *Pragmatic Modernism*, 139.

that this is *despite* Proust's schema, rather than being part of it. As I will demonstrate, involuntary memories are much more habitual than Proust would have us believe, and habit is also central to the final Proustian aesthetic as a force of desire and generalization.

Schoenbach cites the moment in which Marcel's grandmother saves him from a particularly barren and threatening break in habit as an instance of habit's power to enable. Without analyzing the reasons that this moment of habit is so different than the others, nor its relationship to the *Intermittences* scene, however, her work cannot clearly demonstrate why we should treat all of habit as a single category, rather than distinguishing habit in the context of love from habit in the context of desire. The habits that Marcel develops with his grandmother function differently than the ones he develops in other parts of the text, because she is the only person he truly trusts. Usually, habit leads to nothing but dullness, jealousy, or boredom. Only with Marcel's grandmother, and then only because of his love for her, can habit transmute into trust and become enabling.

Schoenbach frames her analysis of Proustian habit as an example of what she calls "pragmatic modernism." She is clearly an avid proponent of pragmatism as a critical lens, arguing that "pragmatism's great insight...was that habit could be generative and productive on the one hand, and potentially stultifying and disabling on the other; pragmatism as a philosophical movement was distinguished by its active, dialectical understanding of habit, its ability to maintain a critical stance towards mindless repetitions while refusing to romanticize moments of shock or conflict."<sup>102</sup> In Proust, she finds one of the "tradition of thinkers who seriously and in good faith explored the best ways to reintegrate the released energies of shock and defamiliarization back into the social fabric" (13). I think that "in good faith" is a limited

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<sup>102</sup> Schoenbach, *Pragmatic Modernism*, 6.

standard here; as I discussed in Chapter 1, his redemptive conclusion – in part based on his ideas about habit and his obscuring of its role in involuntary memory and art – is ultimately solipsistic and socially dangerous. His altruism is self-justifying, it can be paralyzing, and it is consistent with a worldview that has caused tremendous damage throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> and into the 21<sup>st</sup> century – but at the same time, his intentions seem to have been “in good faith” to discover and share general laws governing the experience of humanity. Part of the lesson of Proust’s work is that “good faith” and even lucidity are often not enough to save an idea from being damaging – it must also be ethically and ontologically responsible.

The analysis of pragmatism and its relationship to modernism that Schoenback provides hinges on one facet only: the dialectic between repetition and shock. There are, however, far richer veins of the connection between pragmatism and modernism for us to mine. The phrase “habit of mind,” which C.S. Peirce used in his essay “The Fixation of Belief,” opens many of these, as it extends into an inquiry about the nature of doubt and belief, thought and action. The goal of Peirce’s essay is to establish the principles of logical inference, and one of his founding assertions is “That which determines us, from given premisses, to draw one inference rather than another, is some habit of mind, whether it be constitutional or acquired.” Peirce distinguishes the process of logical inference from the thinking that leads someone “to have his mind filled with pleasing and encouraging visions, independently of their truth.”<sup>103</sup> As I used the phrase in Chapter 1 to indicate, however, often the problem with a habit of mind is that it becomes, in Kermode’s words, a myth. Peirce has several terms for the methods of fixing a belief – or making a belief habitual – that are consistent with myth. He describes tenacity, which is the

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<sup>103</sup> Charles Sanders Peirce, “The Fixation of Belief,” *Philosophical Writings of Peirce*, ed. Justus Buchler (New York: Dover, 1955), 8.

steadfast assertion to oneself that a belief is the truth regardless of outside evidence; authority, which is the ignorant support of a belief propagated by those in power; and the *a priori*, which is a sort of moral relativism that proposes that consensus will follow the law of nature. Finally, there is scientific reasoning, which differs from the others inasmuch as it pursues “Real things, whose characters are entirely independent of our opinions about them.”<sup>104</sup> It is possible to think that one is following the scientific method when one is really following one of the others; “The only test of whether I am truly following the method is not an immediate appeal to my feelings and purposes, but, on the contrary, itself involves the application of the method.”<sup>105</sup> In Proustian terms, we could say that rather than appealing to something like involuntary memory, “this unknown state which brought with it no logical proof, but only the evidence of its felicity, its reality,” (1.48) one must pursue logical investigation of the perception.

He elaborates in his next essay, “How to Make Our Ideas Clear”: “And what, then, is belief? It is the demi-cadence which closes a musical phrase in the symphony of our intellectual life. We have seen that it has just three properties: First, it is something that we are aware of; second, it appeases the irritation of doubt; and, third, it involves the establishment in our nature of a rule of action, or, say for short, a *habit*...The essence of belief is the establishment of a habit.”<sup>106</sup> For Peirce, this habit is intimately related to action. “If there be a unity among our sensations which has no reference to how we shall act on a given occasion, as when we listen to a piece of music, why we do not call that thinking. To develop its meaning, we have, therefore, simply to determine what habits it produces, for the what a thing means is simply what habits it

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<sup>104</sup> Peirce, “The Fixation of Belief,” 18.

<sup>105</sup> Peirce, “The Fixation of Belief,” 20.

<sup>106</sup> Charles Sanders Peirce, “How to Make Our Ideas Clear,” *Philosophical Writings of Peirce*, ed. Justus Buchler, 28.

involves.”<sup>107</sup> This raises a problem in the case of literature, because literature involves the art of sensation, like music, but it also helps us determine how we shall act.

Kermode’s category of fiction helps us understand how literature relates to the positive aspects of both scientific belief and doubt, as Peirce postulates them. “ Both doubt and belief have positive effects upon us, though very different ones. Belief does not make us act at once, but puts us into such a condition that we shall behave in some certain way, when the occasion arises. Doubt has not the least such active effect, but stimulates us to inquiry until it is destroyed.”<sup>108</sup> As in a fiction, we use doubt to help us come up with the beliefs that we use to act, but we do not allow them to sediment into myth: “The force of habit will sometimes cause a man to hold on to old beliefs, after he is in a condition to see that they have no sound basis...let it be considered that what is more wholesome than any particular belief is integrity of belief, and that to avoid looking into the support of any belief from a fear that it may turn out rotten is quite as immoral as it is disadvantageous.”<sup>109</sup>

We may rely, then, on the habits that allow us to move through the world, without allowing habit’s inertia to keep us so comfortable that we stop being stimulated towards inquiry. Rather than desiring certainty and knowledge so much that we fall into the errors of tenacity or authority, we must, as Peirce says, fall in love with both the critical method and the results of that critical method, as well as loving truth itself, even in its unobtainability.<sup>110</sup> This is what he means when he discusses the idea of fallibilism – that “we cannot in any way reach perfect

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<sup>107</sup> Peirce, “How to Make Our Ideas Clear,” 30.

<sup>108</sup> Peirce, “The Fixation of Belief,” 10.

<sup>109</sup> Peirce, “The Fixation of Belief,” 21.

<sup>110</sup> Peirce exhorts us to love the method as a bride at the end of “How to Make Our Ideas Clear, and he speaks of learning in terms of passion and love at the beginning of “The Scientific Attitude and Fallibilism.”



certitude nor exactitude.”<sup>111</sup> At the same time, he says that we cannot block the way to knowledge by claiming that certain things may not be known or explained. This perfectly mirrors the necessity of trust in love. Desire finds itself tempted into appropriation, which Peirce would call an error of logic, by the drive towards certitude; by contrast, the desirous mentality finds itself bored or despairing if it accepts that the way to perfect knowledge of the truth is blocked. Love exists between these poles, in trust, the form of habit that accepts fallibilism, and in *bouleversement*, the doubt that devastatingly proves the depth of our uncertainty, even as it drives us further into thinking about it, until, in Marcel’s case, the problem of loss becomes too emotionally intolerable.

Peirce differs from some of the other pragmatists, most notably William James, in his understanding of the relationship between ideas and the world. “I only desire to point out how impossible it is that we should have an idea in our minds which relates to anything but conceived sensible effects of things. Our idea of anything *is* our idea of its sensible effects; and if we fancy that we have any other we deceive ourselves, and mistake a mere sensation accompanying the thought for a part of the thought itself.”<sup>112</sup>

John Patrick Diggins, in his book *The Promise of Pragmatism*, describes the conflict between Peirce and James about the relationship between habit and the sensible world. “James’s theory [of “radical empiricism”], which gave priority to the raw stuff of “pure experience,” seemed to Peirce to locate all knowledge in and within experience itself, even the life-history of a single individual.”<sup>113</sup> Similarly, Diggins argues, for John Dewey “experience meant the

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<sup>111</sup> Peirce, “The Scientific Attitude and Fallibilism,” *Philosophical Writings of Peirce*, ed. Justus Buchler, (New York: Dover, 1955), 58.

<sup>112</sup> Peirce, “How to Make Our Ideas Clear,” 31.

<sup>113</sup> Diggins, *The Promise of Pragmatism*, 165.

interaction of agency with its environment, of mind operating on sense data in a continuous process of moving toward a world that is knowable to the extent it is amenable to our desire to control it.”<sup>114</sup>

Proust’s work allows us to see the implications of these views. Proust demonstrates the emotional intolerability of the unknowable, and his formulation of literature as the solution to *Lost Time* demonstrates his desire to have a world that is completely amenable to control, completely knowable, and therefore also not subject to strictures like contingency and mortality. To create this world, he locates knowledge within the life-history of a single character-author hybrid, who demonstrates the permeability between literature and the world, and therefore the feasibility of an aesthetic solution that does not stay in the realm of imagination. Diggins describes how “in his early years James convinced himself that the mind could impose, or “engender,” truth upon reality.” Albeit with a capacious intellect and eye for minutiae, this is precisely what Proust’s aesthetic wants to demonstrate.

Adorno’s analysis of Proustian representation, which I discussed in Chapter 1, further emphasizes the similarity between Proustian aesthetics and Jamesian pragmatism – for Proust, literature is the mode by which a pragmatist agency can best be achieved, but this agency attributes “to reality what they want to save and what inheres in art only at the price of its reality. They seek to escape the curse of aesthetic semblance by displacing its quality to reality.”<sup>115</sup> The curse of aesthetic semblance is similar to the philosophical curse that the pragmatists were trying to solve, and the risks of destructiveness that the solution poses are also similar. This becomes

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<sup>114</sup> Diggins, *Promise of Pragmatism*, 48.

<sup>115</sup> Sie schreiben der Realität das zu, was sie erretten wollen, und was nur in der Kunst um den Preis seiner Realität ist. Sie suchen, dem Fluch des ästhetischen Scheins zu entgehen, indem sie dessen Qualität in die Wirklichkeit versetzen. Adorno, *Ästhetische Theorie*, 200.

particularly clear because James and Dewey also want to measure the validity and effectiveness of pragmatist habits by treating them as hypotheses, a proposal the limits of which Kermode makes completely clear in *The Sense of an Ending*. “If the value of an opinion is to be tested only by its success in the world, the propositions of dementia can become as valuable as any other fictions.” This is not to say that James, Dewey, or Proust, for that matter, would make the calamitous propositions of dementia that Kermode discusses. Nonetheless, we can return to Peirce to consider the implications of a pragmatist habit of mind: “Now, the identity of a habit depends on how it might lead us to act, not merely under such circumstances as are likely to arise, but under such as might possibly occur, no matter how improbable they may be.”<sup>116</sup> The wars of the 20<sup>th</sup> century seem, in retrospect, both improbable and, considering the trajectories of thought in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, tragically likely.

In the end, pragmatism’s views on habit undervalue the importance of emotion and interpersonal relationships. Not in the sense of the self-justifying *a priori* habit that Peirce discusses, but instead the sort of deeply emotional and incomprehensible touch that brings us close to the unknowable in a way that scientific inquiry cannot quite explain. As Diggins says, “Pragmatism promised to take creatures of ‘desire’ and show them how to reach the ‘desirable.’”<sup>117</sup> Although I cannot fully take on Diggins’ rich analysis of Henry Adams’ intellectual relationship to American pragmatism, one moment of his discussion ties together the problem of pragmatism (and therefore belief and habit), with power, love, and contemporary politics.

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<sup>116</sup> Peirce, “How to Make Our Ideas Clear,” 30.

<sup>117</sup> Diggins, *The Promise of Pragmatism*, 209.

Neither the radiance of spirit nor the pleasure of beauty would be felt as force in an America deadened by the mechanisms of science and industry and devoted to increasing horsepower. Unable to identify with a source of power beyond itself, the soul has no object for its inward passions. ‘No American had ever been truly afraid of either,’ Adams observed of the Virgin and Venus, realizing that if we are to experience the sublime mysteries of love we must also be prepared for the sudden terrors of fear. America would do neither.<sup>118</sup>

After experiencing the sublimity and terror of love in the safe (neither fertile nor erotic) form of his grandmother, Marcel rejects both for desire, which promises him that it may make him suffer boredom and jealousy, but it will not actually bring him into emotional contact with death. Contemporary America does the same, both literally as the desire for medical solution replaces the caring uncertainty of hospice and death-rituals, and figuratively as our political and economic systems sink further and further into the mire of apathy, resignation, and delusional hope.

The moment of *bouleversement* in the *Intermittences* scene reveals the inadequacy of pragmatism to the conditions of modernity by showing that our sense of loss and fear can easily go beyond our ability to simply regard the use value of a proposition, idea, or philosophy, and then rebound into a form of pragmatism that is consistent with the worst tendencies of modernity, the kind that instrumentalizes the imagination, regarding mental, theoretical, imaginary space as valid only insofar as it has a use value. This recalls my discussion of illusion and delusion in chapter 1 – when the theoretical or imaginary game-space, with its correspondent set of hypothetical rules, is transferred into the everyday world, it often occurs at the cost of existing spaces and their populations.

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<sup>118</sup> Diggins, *The Promise of Pragmatism*, 104.

### 3.2 PROUSTIAN HABIT AND ITS BREAKING

In Chapter 1 I considered finitude primarily as the circumscription that terrifies people into the appropriative behaviors of desire – I looked at what happens when we turn away from finitude. In Chapter 2, I want to consider what happens when we instead move towards finitude, however momentarily or involuntarily. The moments in Proust that most clearly expose finitude, and thereby the tragically limited side of love, are the breaks in his habit.

Habit is, in Proust, the way that our minds bring us into congruence with our environment. Habit takes the entire world's mocking unfamiliarity, its constant stream of reminders of how our identity is fragmented by time's passage and our own finitude, and shushes it into dullness. Habit works to make the things and people around Marcel into puppets, so that he can replace their strangeness with his own story about their purpose. Habit's work is not just external; it is essential to Marcel's development into each of his successive identities. As the world seems to settle and quiet itself into shapes that are no longer disturbing, it also changes Marcel into the person who knows the shapes, and can therefore no longer be disturbed by their unfamiliarity.

Habit in its most malignant form, the form that Proust usually gives it, is the conceptual parent of the appropriation I discussed in Chapter 1. It consists of making the mysterious things in one's environment so proper to oneself that the line between self and environment blurs. At the beginning of *Swann's Way*, projectively recalling his first night in his Balbec bedroom, Marcel describes how "my mind, struggling for hours to dislodge itself, to stretch upwards so as to take the exact shape of the room and succeed in filling its gigantic funnel to the very top, had suffered many hard nights...until habit had changed the colour of the curtains, silenced the clock, taught pity to the cruel oblique mirror..." (1.12). As he remembers it, the work of habit and

appropriation involves filling the room with himself, bringing his environment into line with his wishes – and thereby making the room a part of him, familiar as a memory within him.

The magic lantern scene describes this phenomenon in reverse; the lantern disturbs Marcel because the “that doorknob of my room, which differed for me from all other doorknobs in the world in that it seemed to open of its own accord, without my having to turn it, so unconscious had its handling become for me, was now serving as an astral body for Golo” (1.14). For a long time, the doorknob had no will but Marcel’s, until the lantern suddenly broke habit’s spell, making his own bedroom seem threatening, but also, at least as Marcel remembers it, strange and beautiful. Marcel’s habit had appropriated the doorknob to the degree that it seems almost as though his will animated it.

This appropriation helps habit cast a veil over finitude; an object that has no voice but ours cannot testify to the disjunction of its own identity as time passes. This is the reason that habit’s disappearance so often personifies the things Marcel encounters. Habitually, we move through an environment of objects that have no voices of their own. When habit’s absence exposes finitude, objects take on the inaccessibility of people. Suffused with the images of Golo, his horse, and Genevieve de Brabant, the curtains and doorknob of Marcel’s childhood bedroom take on the impenetrable mystery of human beings.

### **3.3 HABIT, GENERALIZATION, AND INVOLUNTARY MEMORY**

It seems clear, then, that habit’s destruction, which leads to a form of suffering born of defamiliarization, cannot be a part of involuntary memory, which leads to a form of ecstasy born of radical familiarity. Nonetheless, Proust presents involuntary memory as a part of the world of

broken habit – he implies that involuntary memories are moments in which an association with a past experience shatters an object’s commonplaceness, suspending the rule of habit. Proust’s major critics who discuss habit follow him in this alignment between involuntary memory and breaks in habit.<sup>119</sup> In practice, however, involuntary memories do not include the overwhelming particularity that pervades the environment during breaks in habit. Rather, involuntary memories are instances of profound generalization. Instead of the uniqueness, mystery, and trust that characterize love, involuntary memories are consistent with the appropriative tendencies of desire. With close investigation, involuntary memory takes on more of the same characteristics of habit – and more clearly demonstrates how art born of involuntary memory is problematically desirous.

Although the trope of involuntary memory is well known, critics who analyze its mechanism often follow Proust in slipping into the language of magic and ecstasy. Actually, it is a convenient lag of mental identification. Involuntary memory is purely and necessarily solipsistic, and the crux of its structure is that until the midpoint of the experience, after the transformational bliss has largely faded, Marcel has not yet realized that he is having a memory.

The most famous and detailed account of a single involuntary memory, the madeleine scene, is the paradigmatic example. It begins with a meditation on the way memory can be sparked by a chance encounter with an object. The reader goes into the scene knowing that its hidden cause is a memory, along with Proust, who wrote this as a literary account of a memory of a memory. After the event itself begins, Proust does not mention anything related to the past

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<sup>119</sup> Amy Ross Loeserman mentions Charles Blondel, Jacques Zéphir, and Sybil De Souza as the few critics who discuss habit as central to the Proustian project, and notes that they all see “habitude as the foe of involuntary memory.” Amy Ross Loeserman, “Proust and the Discourse on Habit,” (PhD diss., University of Maryland, College Park, 2004) 67.

for almost two pages, and within the experience there is no indication that Marcel in that moment realizes he's dealing with memory. Once he tastes the tea-soaked little cake, Marcel begins with a feeling of extraordinary pleasure. He feels that the taste has an unmistakable sense of novelty or originality, but it also, strangely and beautifully, brings feelings of safety and certainty. Attempting to trace the feeling, he senses that his joy "was connected to the tea and cake," and then uses inquiry to push away from these concrete objects: "Where did it come from? What did it mean? How could I grasp it?" Openly seeking, he determines his perimeter is the "obscure country" of the mind, but "face to face with something that does not exist," he decides he must create his desired object out of the void. Without knowing what to create, though, he returns to seeking, clearing "an empty space" and concentrating until he feels something come unanchored, "shift, try to rise." It is only from the concreteness of this quivering "something," this stored knowledge, that he finally infers that "undoubtedly, what is fluttering this way deep inside me must be the image, the visual memory which is attached to this taste and is trying to follow it to me" (1.48). Although he identifies the event much earlier during the other involuntary memories, it is never quickly enough to pre-empt the defining momentary sense that the present moment is both beautifully familiar and excitingly novel.

This essential lag in identification, Marcel's momentary apparent blindness to the pastness of the past, is a function of habit. On the wave of generalization, Marcel does not immediately identify this as an experience of temporality. Pastness and presentness disappear; the generalization of an essence takes priority over time. This is precisely consistent with the way that habit deprives objects of their mystery, filling familiar spaces with echoes of one's own voice.



Proust implies that the defamiliarization that occurs as habit breaks or dies is tantamount to a kind of particularization. Habit does its work by looking for patterns and desensitizing us to people and objects that fit those patterns – we no longer have to look at them because we can form basic conclusions from their general categories. Logical inference tells us that a lack of habit would imply a similar lack of pattern – each object particular and proper to itself. As Proust describes in *Le Temps Retrouvé*, however, generalization is necessary to his understanding of artistic creation. It is a different species of generalization than the one demanded by habit – far more rigorous, as well as intellectually and emotionally more challenging – but of the same genus. Thus, Albertine’s selfhood becomes not an aspect of her human otherness, but a trope of inaccessibility to Marcel. We, the readers, experience the far corners of her as effectively empty, rather than as the site of unknowable plenitudes. Marcel wants her to be as simultaneously blank and full of potential as the madeleine – and he represents her to the reader as infuriatingly, temptingly close to that hollowness.

The Adorno passage I discussed in Chapter 1 is again helpful here, as it demonstrates how generalization can disguise itself as particularity: “Abstraction in love is the complement of exclusiveness, which manifests itself deceptively as the opposite of abstract, a clinging to this one unique being...True affection would be one that speaks specifically to the other, and becomes attached to beloved features and not to the idol of personality, the reflected image of possession.”<sup>120</sup> Marcel portrays involuntary memory’s solipsistic “exclusiveness” as a connection with the “one unique being” of an experience across time. This unique being is actually, however, merely an “idol of personality” – an imagined version of the desired person’s being that can animate any appropriate shell. “Beloved features,” like the opaque nakedness of

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<sup>120</sup> Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 79.

“thingness,” are the locus of actual particularity. Rather than functioning as a goad towards a solution, the opacity itself of these features offers a “weak” form of the ecstasy of involuntary memory. Rather than eliding the “mediocre, contingent, mortal” aspects of the human, these features partially obscure the void of finitude and offer themselves up for touch, like Rilke’s lovers as they offer preserving caresses and stand between each other and eternity.

### **3.4 ARRIVAL AT BALBEC: TOUCH, TRUST, AND INTERPERSONAL FINITUDE**

Marcel’s initial arrival in Balbec, in *In the Shadow of Young Girls in Flower*, is the preface to his later experience in *Intermittences*. It provides an important, although much subtler, account of the way that love functions before it exposes finitude so violently in the *Intermittences of the Heart*. *Intermittences* shows us the breaking of habit as love, and habit as a deadening force. This first night in Balbec, by contrast, shows us the breaking of habit as a deadening force, and habit, albeit in the form of trust, as love. The difference is that the recipient of love is alive in Balbec, and her loving touch allows Marcel to tolerate finitude in two ways. First, her overt care allows Marcel to trust her, figuring her unknowability as a secure boundary rather than as an infuriating trap. Her familiarity and his habits with her remind him that he is an individual that he is proper to himself, when he feels like his environment is on the edge of obliterating him. Second, the pleasure of trusting her focuses Marcel’s attention on the present moment. Thus, the present becomes the very human “eternity, almost” of Rilke’s caress and embrace, rather than aspiring to some form of fulfilled, dead, divine eternity.

I have generally united interpersonal and temporal finitudes under one category, but in this case, interpersonal finitude is unique. The trust that between people is a possible alternative

to appropriation becomes, applied across time to objects, a mode that *resembles* trust but shares more characteristics with the damaging aspects of habit. The ecstasy of involuntary memory disrupts suffering and does not seem to occupy the same role as everyday habit, but it is specifically about conquering time, moving across borders – eliding the “mediocre, contingent, mortal.” By contrast, moments of love reinforce these very human characteristics – Marcel is mediocre when he needs his grandmother, his happiness is contingent on her presence and support (which he trusts but can never be certain about) and of course, he feels his mortality acutely – he is fragile, bounded by other people and his habitless environment.

Marcel recounts his initial confrontation after arriving at his hotel room. As we saw earlier in the magic lantern scene, a break in habit can personify the environment, giving objects the same inaccessibility that so disturbs Marcel in the people he desires. In the magic lantern scene, however, the personification is connected with the intensely unfamiliar beauty that a break in habit can expose. Here, the personification is much more sinister: “In some unfamiliar tongue, the clock...went on making comments about me, which must have sounded offensive to the tall violet curtains, for they stood there without a word in a listening posture” (2.245). The curtains make a tall, thin, impassive figure, and the clock’s ticking not only marks finitude, but also speaks with the relentless voice of time losing and lost. Instead of existing in the safe realm of Marcel’s habit, the things in the room seem to converse in ways that implicate Marcel but that he nonetheless cannot understand. He cannot appropriate them immediately, and it seems to him as though they might destroy him – he is “deprived of my universe, evicted from my room, with my very tenancy of my body jeopardized by the enemies about me” (2.246). This is the reverse of his usual appropriation – his environment threatens even his own nature as proper-to-himself.

Marcel’s encounter with this terrible room demonstrates that not every break in habit

provides a privileged opportunity to exercise the “atrophied faculties” (IV.516) Marcel’s distress and suffering here do not spark creativity, they shrivel his heart. As he says, bluntly and without his usual intricate exploration, “I was alone and wished I could die” (2.246). There is no sense of strange beauty; the world is so overwhelming that it has become completely hostile. This illustrates the necessity of some degree of habit – the destructive aspects of habit are primarily a result of its unchecked growth, not fundamental to the structure of knowing. This unchecked growth, in Proust, seems to be a result of the entire world’s susceptibility to appropriation, and the drive, inspired by desire, to possess.

The rarest face of habit is trust. This, like all habit, is a form of familiarity that quiets the raucous and uncertain world, but it is unique in that it depends on a mutual love, uncomplicated by desire, jealousy, or the death of the beloved. It becomes visible as Marcel’s grandmother saves him from the terrible, unfamiliar room.

I knew with my grandmother that, however overpowering any cause of my sorrow might be, its expression would be met by a sympathy that was even greater, that whatever was in me, my cares, my wishes, would rouse within my grandmother a desire, even stronger than my own, for the protection and betterment of my life; and my thoughts became hers without alteration, passing from my mind to hers without changing medium or person. So – like a man in front of a mirror wrong-handedly trying to do up his bow-tie, without realizing that the end he can see must cross to the other side, or a dog snapping at the fluttering shadow of an insect – misled by the appearance of the body, as we are in this world where souls are not directly perceptible, I fell into my grandmother’s arms and pressed my lips to her face as though that were how to take refuge in the greatness of

heart she offered to me (2.246).<sup>121</sup>

The passage is rife with images of borders and sympathy, as opposed to appropriation and obliteration veiled as empathy. Marcel exposes his sorrow, and his grandmother meets it with mercy. The wishes and cares within Marcel make his grandmother want to protect and help a life that nonetheless remains “*ma proper vie*” – Marcel’s own life, proper only to himself.

Some moments in the passage at first seem to recall Marcel’s description of his desire for Albertine. “My thoughts became hers without alteration, passing from my mind to hers without changing medium or person” sounds dangerously close to the way Marcel interacts with Albertine when she is asleep, happy that in these moments that she has become a shell that he can populate with his thoughts. Re-examining his description of Albertine, though, we find key differences. With Albertine, Marcel’s thoughts do not pass from him to her, but instead “it was inside me that all Albertine’s actions took place” (5.232). His thoughts passing to his grandmother “without changing medium or person,” indicates that imagining communication moving from one body to another does not do justice to the trust and understanding that cross the borders between them, not that the borders are – or should be – nonexistent.

Some of the greatest comfort he finds in Albertine is not from the understanding between two people; rather, “the image I sought...was an Albertine who did not reflect a distant world,

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<sup>121</sup> Je savais, quand j’étais avec ma grand-mère, si grand chagrin qu’il y eût en moi, qu’il serait reçu dans une pitié plus vaste encore; que tout ce qui était mien, mes soucis, mon vouloir, serait, en ma grand-mère, étayé sur un désir de conservation et d’accroissement de ma proper vie autrement fort que celui que j’avais moi-même; et mes pensées se prolongeaient en elle sans subir de deviation parce qu’elles passaient de mon esprit dans le sien sans changer de milieu, de personne. Et – comme quelqu’un qui veut nouer sa cravat devant une glace sans comprendre que le bout qu’il voit n’est pas placé par rapport à lui du côté où il dirige sa main, ou comme un chien qui poursuit à terre l’ombre dansante d’un insect – trompé par l’apparence du corps comme on l’est dans ce monde où nous ne percevons pas directement les âmes, je me jetai dans les bras de ma grand-mère et je suspendis mes lèvres à sa figure comme si j’accédais ainsi à ce cœur immense qu’elle m’ouvrait (2.28).

but instead desired nothing – nothing but to be with me, to be exactly like me” (5.65). This is nothing like his grandmother’s care – Marcel’s recollection that he fell into her arms “as though” that were how to take refuge works, again, like the lovers in the *Duino Elegies*, who promise “eternity, almost, from the embrace.” Marcel and his grandmother are not the same, and he does not want for them to be. To appropriate his grandmother would ruin their trust. He expresses and she sympathizes; he wishes and she offers. When human otherness looks at him with the infinitely caring face of his grandmother, he feels neither the impulse to pursue nor the impulse to back away – he simply wants to enjoy her touch. With Albertine, he feels “there must be something inaccessible in what we love, something to pursue; we love only what we do not possess, and soon I began once more to realize that I did not possess Albertine” (5.355). With his grandmother, however, “Whenever my mouth was on her cheeks or her forehead, I drew from them something so nourishing, so beneficent, that I had all the immobility, gravity and placid gluttony of an infant on the breast” (2.247).

This touch is contact with the same particularity that Adorno attributes to real affection. He presses his lips to her “beloved features,” without attempting to generalize her into an “idol of personality.” His trust for her allows him to appreciate her opacity. Rilke helps to illustrate some of the underpinnings of Marcel’s relationship with his grandmother. When we look towards finitude, we usually see the unknowable and uncontrollable, and it looks to us like loss. Those who love, though, in their trust of each other, find something that helps them tolerate finitude, and almost makes the unknowable visible as something else. As Rilke says, “Lovers, if the beloved were not there / blocking the view, are close to it, and marvel... / As if by some mistake, it opens for them / behind each other...But neither can move past the other, and it turns

back to World.”<sup>122</sup> What Marcel cannot isolate behind the body of his grandmother, like a dog fixated on an insect’s shadow, is what he calls “ce coeur immense qu’elle m’ouvrait,” which more literally translates to “the immense heart that she opened to me.” She could not do this if she were merely an echo chamber for Marcel’s thoughts – in fact, when does become only an echo, in the *Intermittences* scene, it is precisely the lack of this immense heart and her agency to open it that feels so devastatingly wrong. There is no trust, no need for trust because she is nothing but his memory of her, and the trust is the testament to her human otherness which defines the capacity for the relationship to be one of love.

The partition between Marcel’s room and his grandmother’s is a metaphor of the interpersonal finitude that makes love possible. To alleviate his fear and loneliness, she tells him to “be sure to knock on the wall if you need anything during the night.” When he does, she gives “three answering knocks, quite different in their intonation from my own” (2.248). The difference in her knock, with its “tone of serene control,” fulfills the stabilizing role of habit without dulling Marcel’s emotions and perception. Rather than allowing him to control the world, she makes it possible for Marcel to live in a world that he cannot control. Of course, just as the basic and grounding “truths” that the intelligence discovers<sup>123</sup> do not constitute any great insight, this kind of love does not rip the veil from finitude. Instead, it provides a form of stable comfort in the face of finitude that does not slide towards appropriation. The partition itself is the space of joy and tenderness; it does not afford him any certain access to his grandmother, but it does give him the opportunity to trust her. The underpinning of this trust is a confidence born of

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<sup>122</sup> Rilke, *Ahead of All Parting*, 377.

<sup>123</sup> “These truths which the intelligence derives directly from reality are not to be despised completely, for they could provide a setting, in a material less pure but still imbued with mind, for those impressions which are conveyed to us outside time by the essence common to both past and present sensations” (6.207).

a limited habit; without a sense of familiarity, trust and love would be impossible.

The spiritual language that suffuses the passage demonstrates another facet of habit functioning as love. Spirit in this passage is always figurative, illustrating very human interactions. Marcel fondly describes the “rhythmic dialogue between my three knocks and the answering three, ardently desired and twice repeated, given back by the partition full of love and joy, its solid substance turned into happy harmonies and singing like an angels’ chorus, filled by the whole soul of my grandmother and the promise of her coming, sounding its glad annunciation with the fidelity of music.”<sup>124</sup> His grandmother wears a nightgown that “was her nun’s habit;” but rather than signifying belief it signifies dedication to human kindness. Finally, Marcel describes his impression of her face, “illuminated from within by its tenderness...Anything which could be said to be still a part of her being, was thereby so spiritualized and sanctified that, in smoothing under my hands her lovely hair which was hardly grey yet, my touch was as respectful, careful, and gentle as though it were her goodness itself I was handling” (2.247). Her tenderness, protecting him from outside the borders of his proper self, is as simultaneously trustworthy and unknowable as the sacred once was.

In some ways, this is Proust as a late Romantic, in the tradition that M.H. Abrams analyzes in *Natural Supernaturalism*, which tends “to naturalize the supernatural and humanize the divine.”<sup>125</sup> According to Abrams, these writers, following Wordsworth, “undertook to save the overview of human history and destiny, the experiential paradigms, and the cardinal values of

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<sup>124</sup> “Le dialogue rythmé de mes trois coups auquel la cloison pénétrée de tendresse et de joie, devenue harmonieuse, immatérielle, chantant comme les anges, répondait par trois autres coups, ardemment attendus, deux fois répétés, et où elle savait transporter l’âme de ma grand-mère tout entière et la promesse de sa venue, avec une allégresse d’annonciation et une fidélité musicale (2.30).

<sup>125</sup> M.H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1973) 68.



their religious heritage, but reconstituting them in a way that would make them intellectually acceptable, as well as emotionally pertinent, for the time being.”<sup>126</sup> In this tradition, Marcel attempts to redeem the spiritual or religious mindsets by reinventing them in the guise of secularity. We have already explored this tendency as it relates to desire; it is the mindset of Marcel’s final epiphany. We also saw how this tendency can manifest even in a critic as attentive to the problems of temporality and ruin as Walter Benjamin. The age in which it was critically feasible to transfer supernatural religious values into the semi-secular spaces of nature and mind ended, however, with the profound and almost incomprehensibly concrete desolation of WWI. As Abrams admits at the end of his text, the 20<sup>th</sup> century is “an age of profounder dereliction and dismay than Shelley and Wordsworth knew.”<sup>127</sup>

Even though in this case habit rescues Marcel rather than anesthetizing him, even though his trust brings his lips to finitude on the face of his grandmother, his sense of presentness has an infant’s “placid gluttony.” This love has a completely different ethical undercurrent than habit and desire – it is about trust rather than appropriation, accepting interpersonal finitude rather than rejecting it. Love like this, however, contains within itself an inevitable direct encounter with death. For a sense of presentness that brings him into blinding and devastating contact with the past’s pastness, we must turn to the break in habit that is also a thwarted involuntary memory, and Marcel’s only encounter with death that makes him understand love and finitude rather than desire, jealousy, and delusion.

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<sup>126</sup> Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism*, 66. Patricia Bucknall analyzes this phenomenon as it applies specifically to Proust in much greater depth in her book *The Religion of Art in Proust* (University of Illinois Press: Urbana, 1969).

<sup>127</sup> Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism*, 462.

### 3.5 LONGTEMPS, TEMPS, AND THE BOULEVERSEMENT

The first sentence of *The Way by Swann's* and therefore the entire *Search* has a famously careful and intentional awkwardness: “*Longtemps, je me suis couché de bonne heure.*” Clearly, even at the cost of his trademark textual sinuousness, the work had to begin with the word *Longtemps*. Similarly, the long final sentence of *Le Temps Retrouvé*<sup>128</sup> progresses with a tortuous syntax that almost parodies Proust’s usual structures, to make sure that the text ends on the word *Temps*. At this concluding word, the structural *Recherche du temps perdu* has been successful; Proust has progressed from the memory, past, and lost time of *Longtemps* to art, the present and future, and generalized *Temps*, which he portrays as Time itself, all Time and times as they coalesce into the present moment of experience and the work of art. Both of these words function under the sign of desire in Proust: the boredom of time lost to voluntary memory, the ecstasy of time regained with involuntary memory, and the satisfaction of Time generalized or essentialized in art. In context, both terms work to order and structure time and experience.

At somewhere around the midpoint of the text, during the journey from *Longtemps* and *Temps*, we arrive at the *Intermittences* scene with another awkward sentence – or fragment – designed to emphasize its first word: “*Bouleversement de toute ma personne*” (4.158, III.152). The work of this word occurs neither in the *Longtemps* realm of time lost, or the *Temps* realm of time regained. *Bouleversement* simultaneously signifies chaos or disorder, complete reversal,

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<sup>128</sup> Si du moins il m’était laissé assez de temps pour accomplir mon oeuvre, je ne manquerais pas de la marquer au sceau de ce Temps dont l’idée s’imposait à moi avec tant de force aujourd’hui, et j’y décrirais les hommes, cela dût-il les faire ressembler à des êtres monstrueux, comme occupant dans le Temps une place autrement considérable que celle si restreinte qui leur est réservée dans l’espace, une place, au contraire, prolongée sans mesure, puisqu’ils touchent simultanément, comme des géants, plunges dans les années, à des époques vécues par eux, si distantes – entre lesquelles tant de jours sont venus se placer – dans le Temps.

and a profoundly troubled or violently emotional reaction. Most of the translations of *bouleversement* as “confusion” or “convulsion” miss its sense of violent upheaval and disjunction. Confusion seems relatively minor, and a convulsion is usually a relatively short-lived spasm that returns its sufferer back to the original state. *Bouleversement* implies that a projected path, like the arc of a ball thrown in the air, is reversed or chaotically interrupted. The projected path is habitual, moving in the same arc as the turning doorknob and the opening door in Marcel’s childhood bedroom – without thought or attention.

From the beginning, Marcel connects *bouleversement* with the magic lantern, his first visit to his room in Balbec, where his *bouleversement* will later take its most forbidding form,<sup>129</sup> and perhaps most importantly with the vicissitudes of habit. The first instance of *bouleversement* in the *Search* occurs within the first few pages, (1.9)<sup>130</sup> and refers to the feeling upon waking at an unexpected time and place, when habit is at a loss, when time, environment, and identity appear catastrophically heaped at one’s feet, like a past chain of events appears to Benjamin’s angel of history.<sup>131</sup> As Antoine Compagnon points out, the beginning of the *Search* before the madeleine scene occurs in an in-between space of memory.<sup>132</sup> Most of the first section has this

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<sup>129</sup> There are several other moments of *bouleversement*, notably (6.238), (5.606), and (5.400) that follow a similar pattern – but these tend to be in retrospect or in analysis.

<sup>130</sup> Que s’il s’assoupit dans une position encore plus déplacée et divergente, par exemple après dîner assis dans un fauteuil, alors le **bouleversement** sera complet dans les mondes désorbités, le fauteuil magique le fera voyager à toute vitesse dans le temps et dans l’espace, et au moment d’ouvrir les paupières, il se croira couché quelques mois plus tôt dans une autre contrée.

<sup>131</sup> “This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned towards the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet.” Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 258) Der Engel der Geschichte muß so aussehen. Er hat das Antlitz der Vergangenheit zugewendet. Wo eine Kette von Begebenheiten vor uns erscheint, da sieht er eine einzige Katastrophe, die unablässig Trümmer auf Trümmer häuft und sie ihm vor die Füße schleudert.

<sup>132</sup> Antoine Compagnon, *Proust between two centuries*, trans. Richard E. Goodkin (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 5. “Between the narrator’s voluntary memory and the hero’s

memory serving as a kind of floating narrative recall, its liminality allowing for a kind of dreamy enjoyment and free-association that is more will-able than involuntary memory, and less desiccated than voluntary memory. Marcel uses these dreamy initial moments to introduce the idea of habit and its breakage. Memory and identity coalesce out of darkness, first in tension with one another and then in harmony. The sleeper becomes a colossus, creating and destroying worlds with a shift in position or a snore. Proust eases us into the idea with humor – we only find out later that the defamiliarization of the “magic armchair,” zooming through time and space to deposit a sleeper years before and miles away, is the precursor to the phenomenon that makes him want to die in Balbec.

Although he uses *bouleversement* several more times, including discussing his experiences with Albertine, they refer to memories or conditionals. After his relationship with her has ended, Marcel muses that Albertine had caused a *bouleversement* in his life, and later still he thinks that upon discovering that he no longer loved her he should be (but is not) *bouleversée*. Nonetheless, almost every use of the word concerns some aspect of dealing with finitude.

### 3.6 THE INTERMITTENCES: LOVE, DEATH, AND ABSENCE

The madeleine scene is Proust’s touchstone, and the final group of involuntary memories forms the aesthetic scaffolding of the *Search*, but he returns again and again to the *Intermittences*, as though it were as much a trauma as an involuntary memory. Proust even introduces the passage with a flourish, ending the previous paragraph with “We had in any event arrived” (4.158). At

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involuntary memory, between watchfulness and sleep, a third kind of memory intervenes: the spontaneous memory of the sleeper as he is waking up.”

what have we arrived? I have investigated the reasons that most of the involuntary memories, particularly those near the end of the text, are consistent with habit. *The Intermittences of the Heart* is, however, a strange exception to the rules of involuntary memory – a reflection of the exception to the rules of habit posed by the original experience. This involuntary memory twists back in on itself, trapping Marcel in his solipsism. In the other involuntary memories, he takes pleasure in sitting still and making time and people revolve and unfold around him. In this case, time maintains its irrevocability and the central aspect of the other person only testifies to her inaccessibility, and so Marcel tumbles, disoriented, in the world of broken habit. Instead of describing the environment, he must turn towards the vagaries of his own identity to explain the feeling that has just convulsed him. Here, he finds time's passage reinforced twofold: he cannot return to the past to interact with his true, living grandmother, nor can the version of his grandmother that he remembers give him a sense of fulfillment. The version of his grandmother that habit constructed, the memory of an invalid, is stripped away, and Marcel must face the paradigmatic case of the incomprehensible and unfamiliar: death. Despite his vertigo, Marcel thinks through this moment, searching for some resolution. Crucially, nothing resolves. He sleeps, dreams, wakes, mourns, and then distracts himself with Albertine. In Albertine, as he realizes later, he found the inverse of his grandmother – someone who he did not trust at all, but who would not force him to face death in the same way.

To see how finitude rules the *Intermittences*, it is necessary to understand how the scene differs from other involuntary memories. Each involuntary memory is an experience composed of a past object that caused a sense impression, a present object that causes a sense impression,

the fused sense impressions that tie them together, and finally the remembered object.<sup>133</sup> Let us take for example the madeleine (1.55), and the “stiff, starched towel (2.251)” on his first trip to Balbec. The sense impression that sparks involuntary memory is the “voice” that he has appropriated to himself, which suspends the rule of time: the taste and smell of the madeleine and the physical texture of the towel. In both of these cases, the sense impression of the past maps precisely onto the present. Even when it is a napkin’s texture rather than a towel, Marcel cannot distinguish between the sense impressions of the past and present. This is what allows the lag in identifying the memory as a memory – both sensations are generalized, existing in the realm of habit, where Marcel can use generalization to construct a world in which he can neutralize time’s threat.

The description of the remembered object during the later involuntary memory always differs slightly from the text’s original description of the object. The later memory subtly emphasizes its object’s voicelessness. In the course of Marcel’s experience in Combray, Aunt Leonie “would hold out to me” the madeleine after waiting for it to become “sufficiently softened” (1.55). In the involuntary memory, Marcel compresses the moment; Aunt Léonie becomes merely part of a background that conveys the madeleine to him. The little cake is always already softened in the spoon, and she does not hold out the madeleine, but rather she always already “would give” it to him. Marcel’s habit gently obliterates her agency, and the

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<sup>133</sup> This is a general rule; there are many minor deviations but none so great as the *Intermittences* scene. For example, the “two uneven flagstones in the baptistery of St Mark’s” in Venice are absent in *The Fugitive*, and so this involuntary memory lacks a past object. This is a result of unfinished editing: the revisions and editions are explained in Nathalie Mauriac Dyer, “Genesis of Proust’s “Ruine de Venise,” *Proust in Perspective: Visions and Revisions*, eds Armine Kotin Mortimer and Katherine Kolb (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2002), 67-84. Similarly, the “workman’s hammer” that he remembers from the sound of a spoon (6.176) is so deeply buried under his musing about his lack of talent as a poet that he does not even mention it during the initial experience a few pages earlier (6.163).

focus shifts to the scene as he has arrested it. Similarly, when Marcel dries himself in front of the window in Balbec, the towel is “inscribed with the name of the hotel” (2.251). In his involuntary memory, it instead “displayed, spread across its folds and creases, the plumage of an ocean green and blue as a peacock’s tail” (6.177). He has emptied the original object of its mystery, its thingness, and it functions now as a projection screen for his memories. Although the involuntary memories surprise him, they are also docile and obedient, like the doorknob in his childhood bedroom.

In the *Intermittences*, the *bouleversement* results in part because the sense impression that sparks it is multifaceted. The sense impression would seem to be the physical movement when “I bent down slowly and cautiously to remove my boots” (4.158). Unlike the other involuntary memories, in which the past object may be different but the sense impression is precisely the same, here Marcel’s physical movement is complicated by the proximity of a person he loves. During his first visit to Balbec, his grandmother’s nearness and care completely enfolds his bent posture: “She took such pleasure in any trouble that spared me trouble, such delight in a moment of rest and peace for my weary limbs, that when I tried to prevent her helping me untie my laces and get ready for bed, making as though to undress myself, her pleading glance halted my hands, which were already on my boots and the first buttons of my jacket” (2.247). The second moment emphasizes Marcel’s solitude: “as I was suffering from an attack of cardiac fatigue, trying to overcome the pain, I bent down slowly and cautiously to remove my boots” (4.158). Rather than a simple impression, this scene contains a “framework of sensations” (4.159). His first time in Balbec, although the physical posture is the same, he is only “making as though to undress myself.” His grandmother’s presence and care animates his movement.

The memory that takes shape for him is thus not, as in the other involuntary memories, oriented towards the specific object that caused the sense impression – in this case it might be the boot, his hand reaching to unbutton, or his bent posture. Her face, obviously, functions differently from his Aunt Leonie’s hand during the madeleine scene – Marcel cannot make it into a part of the landscape. Instead, everything is focused on the remembered emotional core of the moment, “the tender, concerned, disappointed face of my grandmother” (4.158).

It makes sense, then, that Marcel would analyze the experience by focusing on his own identity’s role in involuntary memory, rather than on the substance of the memory itself. The ecstasy of involuntary memory results in part because in these moments the correspondence between mind and world allows him to believe that the vagaries of his mind determine the world. His focus on Combray unfolding from the taste of the madeline, or the color of the ocean in texture of a napkin, are part of how his appropriative delusions entrench and justify themselves. Rather than recalling a world for him, the framework of sensations recalls only a past self. “I was nothing more than the being who had sought refuge in his grandmother’s arms, to erase the traces of her sorrows by giving her kisses” (4.159). Habit had buried this past self, and the break in habit that results from the thwarted involuntary memory reveals it.

So the past self, the past being, has a disjunction with the contemporary world – the world in which all this time has passed. Rather than a sensation, with which “the actual shock to my senses of experiencing the sound, the touch of linen, etc., had added to the dreams of the imagination the thing which they were habitually deprived of, the idea of existence” (6.180), this memory is based on an emotion that another person evoked, which can only have the shock of the real world denying its current validity. Even though he detours through this focus on the subjectivity of his own identity, it is not enough to assuage the sense of loss.



The first time in Balbec, his grandmother's face is "glowing, illuminated from within by its tenderness." By the *Intermittences*, the illuminating tenderness, the figurative "spirit" of her goodness, has gone dark. He sees the tender expression on her remembered face, and its gesture towards "my true grandmother," but her care for him is gone, and so too his trust in that care, and the border between them that made love possible. Her love helped assuage the pain of finitude because rather than looking into the void of a too-deeply broken habit alone, he looked into her face and she looked back at him. She presented him with an absence that allowed him to trust her – under her skin was uncertainty and eternity, but infused with a kindness and warmth that were all the more valuable for also being unverifiable. Now, he encounters in her face the absence of presence. Her presence, for him, was defined by the life of her inaccessibility. Now, every corner of his ghost-grandmother is accessible, because there is nothing to her that was not generated from his own mind. In the other involuntary memories, predicated on objects that he never loved, his appropriation raised no alarms. The lack of his grandmother's characteristic unknowability brings into radical focus not only the irreversibility of time, but also the profoundly cruel irrefutability of human loss.

His grandmother's absolute accessibility breaks his habit, which had ossified into a fond but vague memory of trust hidden by the sickness of "a crushed old woman" (3.138) and the death of someone who has become "only a beast" (3.334). The break in habit exposes him to the mercilessness of chronology outside his sphere of appropriation. "I had made the discovery only now because I had just, on being aware of her for the first time, alive, real, swelling my heart to bursting, on meeting her again that is, realized that I had lost her for ever. Lost for ever; I could not understand and I applied myself to suffering the pain of this contradiction..." (4.160) This sentence echoes the structure of "It was all really quite dead for me. Dead forever? Possibly."

that commences the madeleine scene (1.46), and foreshadows “He was dead. Dead forever? Who can say?” that accompanies Bergotte’s death (5.170). The implication in the other scenes is that these deaths are cursory or temporary, only waiting for their aesthetic redemption. In the *Intermittences*, the phrase changes slightly. First, it is not a rhetorical question but an irrefutable fact that Marcel can only try to understand. The question marks of “Dead forever?” provide an ironic closure: death, previously the ultimate conclusion, is now conclusively under questioning.<sup>134</sup> By contrast, the semicolon mirrors the intolerable restlessness that “lost forever” evokes from Marcel, mercilessly catapulting him into uncertainty and pain. The prose does not even afford him the momentary rest and comfort of a period. Second, the word “dead” changes to “lost;” Marcel is discovering that his grandmother is not only dead but also lost to him – not only gone, but also unreachable. This is not the same “lost” that Marcel invokes at the end, when he says, “the only true paradise is a paradise that we have lost” (6.179). By that point, according to the logic that Proust uses in his letter to Ranciere, the belief system of the text has evolved. In fact, the *Intermittences* scene precipitates this change; his encounter with the depthlessness of loss leads him into the relationship with Albertine that will help him redefine loss as redeemable.

During the *Intermittences*, though, he has not yet “solved” the problem of loss; he has not yet figured out how to convert the ephemeral redemption of involuntary memory into an entire aesthetic and literary worldview. His memory cannot revive her; rather, the intensity and thoroughness of his memory can only testify to its emptiness. His description of the painful contradiction is long, but essential to understanding the intolerability of this moment.

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<sup>134</sup> Although this might at first seem to evoke some of Beckett’s work, particularly *Play*, Beckett breaks open the conclusiveness of death without allowing the reader even the certainty or condolence of a question mark.

On the one hand, an existence, a tenderness, surviving in me such as I had known them, that is to say created for me, a love in which everything so much found in me its complement, its object, its constant direction, that the genius of great men, all the geniuses who may have existed since the world began, would have counted for less with my grandmother than a single one of my faults; and on the other hand, as soon as I had relived, as though present, that felicity, to feel it traversed by the certainty, springing up like a repeated physical pain, of a nothingness that had erased my image of that tenderness, which had destroyed that existence, abolished retrospectively our mutual predestination, made of my grandmother, at the moment when I had found her again as if in a mirror, a mere stranger whom chance had led to spend a few years with me, as it might have been with anyone at all, but for whom, before and after, I was nothing, would be nothing.

“Felicity” (*félicité*) is the same word that Marcel used in the madeleine scene, and he will repeat it several times during the epiphanic flurry of involuntary memories in *Le Temps Retrouvé*. He finds himself “imperiously required to seek out the cause of this felicity<sup>135</sup> and the nature of the certainty with which it imposed itself, an enquiry I had hitherto postponed,” and concludes that it occurs because “the actual shock to my senses” of the impression “had added to the dreams of the imagination the thing which they were habitually deprived of, the idea of existence” (6.179-181). This concluding restatement of involuntary memory’s mechanism also serves as an eloquent justification of the tautology I discussed in chapter 1. Marcel even restates it circularly: “One minute freed from the order of time has recreated in us, in order to feel it, the man freed

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<sup>135</sup> In the Penguin (2002) edition of *Finding Time Again*, Ian Patterson chooses to translate *félicité* as “happiness” throughout this scene.

from the order of time.” He continues, “And because of that we can understand why he trusts his joy...we can understand how the word ‘death’ has no meaning for him; situated outside time, what should he fear from the future?” (6.181). The ecstasy of the sense impression validates the laws of involuntary memory, and the laws of involuntary memory validate the ecstasy of the sense impression. The sense of certainty solves the nostalgia paradox, and the solution to the nostalgia paradox creates a sense of certainty.

In the *Intermittences*, the absence of Marcel’s grandmother’s unknowable self, the absence of the presence of her absence, breaks the tautology. As in the first Balbec scene, the tenderness functions in the mode of complementarity rather than synthesis. As he remembers, Marcel even figures his own qualities as the “object” of her love for him. Critically, though, the “existence” that he feels is from the beginning a reconstruction, containing only things “such as I had known them.” By *Le Temps Retrouvé* Marcel will claim that “such as I had known” is the definition of reality, but this context brilliantly outlines the limits of such a claim. His sense of love and presence occurs in the conditional perfect, but Marcel omits the “if” clause, leaving unsaid that the genius of great men would have counted less for his grandmother than one of his faults *if she were alive*. Everything in this half of the contradiction is hollow.

He feels the felicity of her tenderness and love, but then realizes that the border between them, finitude, which enabled his trust for her, is gone. She is nothing but a figment of his imagination. His trust is erased by its sudden irrelevance; now that she is all memory and nothing unknowable, there is nothing to trust, no space for trust. In the absence of the uncertainty that gave life to her tenderness, she is like any stranger Marcel might meet – just a receptacle for his projection of her.

The conclusion of the passage reinforces the division between his identity and hers, and demonstrates the implications of his acceptance of her agency. As time destroys the current possibility of his trust, it also destroys her supportive perspective of him. He “was nothing, would be nothing,” and she is a “mere stranger” driven by “chance.” His first time in Balbec, and throughout his life, the evidence of her tenderness sustains his trust from the outside. It relieves the pressure of his solipsism by assuring him that she will hold up the other side of the border between them – there is no need for him to obliterate it; in fact to do so would be self-defeating. In the absence of her agency, though, he realizes that now there is nothing but his trust sustaining itself, and it is utterly temporal and finite. Her temporal finitude, her death, has highlighted Marcel’s interpersonal finitude – without her unknowability to enable trust, he suddenly realizes what “for whom, before and after, I was nothing, would be nothing” means. It is a succinct and devastating summary of finitude – for her, interpersonally, he is nothing, and before and after, temporally, he was and will be nothing. These two aspects of finitude are each difficult to face, but as they mingle, they potentiate one another. The continuous losses of time are worse because they have a concrete embodiment in her death, and the loss of her sustaining trust is worse because it is absolutely irreversible.

Marcel feels that the only solace would be “retouching the past, to lessen the sorrows my grandmother had once experienced.” After the soured involuntary memory, he wants to redeem this moment, to find a way to route it back into the suspension of mediocrity, contingency, and mortality that the memory almost evoked. Without the elegant solution to the nostalgia paradox that he attributes to the redemptive powers of involuntary memory, he simply fantasizes about living the moments of his grandmother’s preventable sorrows “again for the first time.” Although he cared for his grandmother, his care ultimately loops back towards himself. He knows he has

spoken words that wounded his grandmother, but “it was me whom they were lacerating now that the consolation of a thousand kisses was forever impossible” (4.161).

As the intolerability of time’s irreversibility begins to mount towards a fever pitch, Marcel gives perhaps his clearest description of the relationship between time, death, and the agency of other people. “Since the dead exist only in us, it is ourselves that we strike unrelentingly when we persist in remembering the blows we have dealt them (4.160-161). As he wades through his suffering, attempting to find a way to make sense out of it, Marcel counterpoises her absence, her existence only as a memory, against her former individuality. “I had not sought to make the suffering any easier, to embellish it, to pretend that my grandmother was only absent and momentarily invisible, by addressing words and entreaties to her photograph...as though to a being separated from us but who, having remained an individual, knows us and remains joined to us by an indissoluble harmony” (4.161). The indissoluble harmony, trust, is predicated on not only his knowing her, but also her knowing him.

As he vacillates within “this strange contradiction between survival and oblivion,” he reflects on his helplessness against not only death, but also against the unknowable itself.

I knew not, certainly, whether I might one day isolate some element of truth in this painful and at present incomprehensible impression, but that, if I were ever able to extract that element of truth, it could only be from this same impression, so particular, so spontaneous, which had been neither traced by my intellect, nor inflected or attenuated by my pusillanimity, but which death itself, the abrupt revelation of death, had hollowed out in me, like a thunderbolt, in accordance with some inhuman, supernatural diagram, like a double and mysterious furrow (4.162).

Let us not forget the specific nature of the impression. Contextually, Marcel implies here that it is an impression of death, or of the contradiction between life and death. The impression that caused the *bouleversement*, however, is of love: his grandmother's tenderness, and his trust of that tenderness. The sense of a contradiction between survival and oblivion reveals very little about death when it is separate from love; instead, it hides the nature of death under a veneer of discovery. After Albertine becomes *The Fugitive*, Marcel obsesses over her death, but he never confronts it, and although he propounds the "truth" of art and imagination, and argues that these truths supersede or animate the others, he never isolates the truth of human love and death.

### 3.7 MARCEL UNBOULEVERSE

While Marcel is in Venice with his mother, he receives a garbled telegram that appears to be from Albertine: "I managed to read the following: 'DEAR FRIEND YOU BELIEVE ME DEAD, MY APOLOGIES NEVER MORE ALIVE WOULD LIKE TO SEE YOU TO DISCUSS MARRIAGE, WHEN DO YOU RETURN? AFFECTIONATELY ALBERTINE'" (5.605). This letter surprises Marcel primarily because he is completely unmoved. The memory of his grandmother devastated him because even though his affection had faded for the ill old woman who dominated his memory, the part of her that he loved and had lost belonged to the same realm as death – the incomprehensible, the unknowable. The void that used to extend such tenderness towards him is in the *Intermittences* scene truly empty, and so he sees for the first time what he has lost. By contrast, the part of Albertine for which he felt the greatest affection is the one that he had appropriated – the version that had outside of it no tenderness, only an infuriating "something to pursue." Her momentary seeming revivification does not tell him anything new about what he

has lost. There is very little functional distinction between a living and a dead Albertine in the material world, because “Albertine had been for me but a bundle of thoughts, she had survived her material death as long as those thoughts remained alive within me; on the contrary now that these thoughts were dead, Albertine did not come back to life for me along with the resuscitation of her body” (5.606).

Just as the slow decline of his grandmother prevented him from absorbing the truth of her death, so he believes that Albertine’s sudden death may have prevented it in the opposite way.

Death functions only as absence. The monster whose appearance had made my love tremble, oblivion, had indeed finally, or so I believed, devoured it. Not only did the news that she was alive not reawaken my love, not only did it allow me to note how far I had travelled down the road to indifference, but it instantaneously accelerated the process so abruptly that I wondered retrospectively if formerly, the opposite news, that of Albertine’s death, had not acted inversely, by completing the process of her departure, exciting my love and delaying its decline (5.607).

Albertine’s sudden death after she has departed from Marcel leaves him unable to distinguish between her being away and her being dead. Her voicelessness teeters between ideal and intolerable; dead, she behaves the same as when she was asleep, except that her body happens to be elsewhere. He can still impute everything and know nothing. This is perhaps why he repeats so many times throughout *The Fugitive* “she was dead,” or “Albertine was dead” – without convincing his habit of the fact, he can barely remember that it is true.

Albertine generally functions as the inverse of Marcel’s grandmother, and this moment is a very condensed inverse of the *Intermittences* scene. Because he trusted his grandmother, Marcel loved what was inaccessible about her. Because he did not trust Albertine, he desired



what was inaccessible about her, and he only felt affection for the version of her that he had appropriated. “I should have been more overwhelmed...” Marcel muses. For what Peter Collier translates as “overwhelmed,” Proust uses the word *bouleversé* as in the *Intermittences*, but here it is negated, designating only an absence of feeling. The *bouleversement* with his grandmother resulted from his love for her – he paid for her tenderness with a confrontation of finitude. As nothing more than “a bundle of thoughts” to him, Albertine provided Marcel with jealousy and boredom, but very little tenderness and no trust. Marcel’s sense that he should have been *bouleversé* is slightly disingenuous; his entire relationship with Albertine has been an exercise in shoring up his defenses against the kind of *bouleversement* his love for his grandmother forced him to experience.

### **3.8 DREAM, AWAKENING, AND THE REJECTION OF LOVE**

The thunderbolt of death almost seems to knock Marcel unconscious. It is as though his intellect is so unable to deal with the incomprehensibility of death that he must flee into sleep’s world of emotion and metaphor; falling unconscious, “my intellect and my will, momentarily paralysed, could no longer contend with the cruelty of my genuine impressions” (4.162). He describes the descent into dream as a form of involuntarily imposed courage – he surmises that awake, his intellect was working to shield him from sorrow by recalling his grandmother’s judgments “as if she were still able to pass them, as if she existed, as if I continued to exist for her,” (4.162) but that the dream would force him into contact with the “inner knowledge” of her absence. In the dream, though, his dead grandmother stays in a small apartment, sad that he never writes or comes to visit her. Marcel’s sense of her continued existence, in the internal world of sleep,

manifests as a refusal to accept her death. “But tell me, you who know, it’s not true that the dead are no longer alive. It just can’t be true, despite what they say, since grandmother still exists” (4.163). In the space of the dream, her continued existence in Marcel’s mind lends her a body and a location.

After Marcel wakes up, he completes the scene by musing on the two major aspects of finitude – the partition between people, and the futile desire to not only escape one’s own death, but also to prevent the death of those beloved to us. As he awakens, his sensations all remind him of her absence. Even the objects in his environment, which he can often appropriate to support his worldview, testify to the inevitability of time’s passage: “everything seemed to be saying to me, like the paths and the lawns in the public gardens where I had once lost her, when I was very young: ‘We haven’t seen her,’ and beneath the roundness of the pale, heavenly sky I felt oppressed, as if beneath an immense blue bell-jar, shutting off a horizon where my grandmother was not” (4.164). Again, Marcel reminds us of her double absence. In previous moments he has either been shut off from the horizon where his grandmother was, or been at the horizon where his grandmother was not. This trade-off is most visible in his trip home from Doncierres. At first, when he hears her voice over the telephone, he is shut off from her physical location (3.132); once he walks into the room, her body is there but the continuity of identity with the woman he trusts has momentarily disappeared (3.137). Now, after her death, the truth of her inaccessibility rescues the truth of finitude: he cannot know her (or anyone) because she has reached her end (as he will, and so too everyone else he knows).

Turning towards the wall, which would usually provide at least a comforting blankness that even habit has trouble defamiliarizing, he instead feels her absence in the form of the absence of his trust that she will respond to his knocking. The wall that once signified love can

now only signify death, “that nothing could again wake her, that I would not hear any response, that my grandmother would never again come” (4.165). The memory of love makes time’s passage both more certain and more poignant. His sense of finitude is complicated by his longing to keep its interpersonal form while rejecting its temporal form. After Albertine dies, he wishes not only to bring her back, but also to know everything about her private life, everything she might have kept from him. With his grandmother, he wants the partition to remain; more than anything else he misses touch, communication, and his trust for her tenderness. He cannot strive for a total solution to the problem of finitude, as he can when he loses Albertine. Instead, he is caught within a form of doubt that he would not wish to become certainty, but which he also finds emotionally intolerable.

Although Marcel will continue intermittently musing about his *bouleversement*, the scene effectively ends when the manager “handed me a brief note from Albertine,” (4.165) who will become the object of his desire. The suffering that he experiences from their relationship and her death, like his suffering from his relationship with Gilberte and the countless other moments of suffering that other women cause for him, will ultimately help him come to his conclusions in *Le Temps Retrouvé* – but this is because these forms of suffering are specific to desire, and his seeming solution to the problem of lost time is the same solution that he pursued throughout his relationships with these women. The suffering of desire, he feels, gave him the material to find his insight, and ultimately much of the material for the book itself.

Marcel pointedly excludes his grandmother from the list of women who caused him to suffer. She teaches him grief, and even generalization, but he cannot include her in the list of those who caused the suffering that ultimately fertilized his art. This suffering taught him the validity of the trade-off: object of desire or appropriation for art or inspiration. At the end of the

*Search*, although time's passage enables his generalization of his grandmother to become part of his book, it nonetheless does not allow his representation of her to become fully an appropriation. The impression of love that he felt for his grandmother, and the truths that he set out to discover during the *Intermittences* scene, remain hidden to him. Although Marcel says that this is simply the result of time's passage, it makes more sense that it is also the result of the depth of grief and pain he experiences from the *bouleversement*. His pursuit of "general truths" cannot extend to the truth of death, not only because he cannot re-experience the impression of his grandmother's tenderness, but also because he refuses to engage with that feeling. His conclusions thus demonstrate the apex of a belief system's evolution, but this is a conclusion derived from a habit of mind that could not tolerate the premise of finitude. In the conclusion to "How to Make Our Ideas Clear," Peirce says "It is certainly important to know how to make our ideas clear, but they may be ever so clear without being true."<sup>136</sup> Proust's conclusions are ever so clear, even clear enough that many of his commentators take much of his logic as given – but as we have seen in these two chapters, his habit of mind is ethically unsupportable. His first night in Balbec, he shows us a form of love that is unique in the *Search*, and in the *Intermittences* scene he shows us the intolerable impact of that love – the acceptance of irredeemable finitude. Although Proust could not follow this scene to its logical conclusion, he exerted a profound influence on the writer whose work would stand as a corrective to his most skewed conclusions. In my last chapter, I will discuss how the work of Samuel Beckett manifests the problems of love, death, and intolerability that Proust skirts in the *Intermittences* scene. Specifically, I will address how some of his discussion and use of language itself works on the scaffolding of presence, absence, and touch that characterizes the love-death dynamic.

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<sup>136</sup> Peirce, 40.

### 3.9 *SUCH SAD THINGS: THE NECESSITY OF LOVE*

In the magic lantern scene, Marcel gives a childish microcosm of the *bouleversement* of *The Intermittences of the Heart*. The familiar meets the unfamiliar, and it thereby becomes uncanny – the doorknob, which is the most *Heimlich* thing imaginable, becomes, overlain with Golo and his horse, suddenly *unheimlich*. The doorknob has not changed, but the circumstances and context have changed what it means. Unable to appropriate the doorknob, seeing it suffused with the mystery of thingliness, Marcel effectively discovers for it a weak precursor of love he feels for his grandmother in the *Intermittences* scene. Just as in the *Intermittences* scene, it the mystery of otherness throws Marcel back upon himself. “I cannot express the uneasiness caused in me by this intrusion of mystery and beauty into a room I had at last filed with my self to the point of paying no more attention to the room than to that self. The anaesthetizing influence of habit having ceased, I would begin to have thoughts, and feelings, and they are such sad things” (1.14).<sup>137</sup>

The breaking of habit, the encounter with mystery, the sense of uniqueness – these infuse the world with a sense of sadness, because they show us what we have to lose. Facing our losses is difficult, but as we see over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, refusing to face loss, particularly without the cultural fact of a natural or supernatural higher power to comfort and ground us, can lead to a devaluation of human life that scales from individual to massive atrocity. Proust shows us the intricate ontology of rejecting love in favor of an aesthetic solution to finitude. We also see, however, that in doing so Proust still rejects the “sad things” that made him so uneasy in his

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<sup>137</sup> Je ne peux dire quel malaise me causait pourtant cette intrusion du mystère et de la beauté dans une chambre que j’avais fini par remplir de mon moi au point de ne faire pas plus attention à elle qu’à lui-même. L’influence anesthésiante de l’habitude ayant cessé, je me mettais à penser, à sentir, choses si tristes.

childhood home in Combray. He develops a massively successful closed system of self-justification that argues that this rejection is actually a turn towards a deeper understanding of art and communication, but with close examination we see that he trades tenderness, trust, and touch for the fulfillment of this solution.

Turning to Beckett, now, demonstrates how we can use an understanding of these losses to face our own finitude and develop a loving perspective. Beckett breaks all of our habits and pushes us constantly to doubt, but he does not do this to drive us into the kind of nihilistic apathy that overtakes Marcel his first night in Balbec. Many critics argue that Beckett's worldview crystallizes in the lives of his characters, but I would argue that he undertakes a project similar to Proust's, insofar as it crystallizes between the characters and the world. Unlike Proust, however, Beckett's project leads us to consider how to continue to touch, love, and remember humanly in the face of the losses he shows us and the limits of the stories we tell in response to them,

#### 4.0 BECKETT'S FAILED *NOSTOS*: THE LIMITS OF REPRESENTATION

In the famous letter to Axel Kaun, Beckett discusses how he wants to use language in his art:

More and more my language appears to me like a veil which one has to tear apart in order to get to those things (or the nothingness) lying behind it. Grammar and style! To me they seem to have become as irrelevant as a Biedermeier bathing suit or the imperturbability of a gentleman. A mask. It is to be hoped the time will come, thank God, in some circles it already has, when language is best used where it is most efficiently abused. Since we cannot dismiss it all at once, at least we do not want to leave anything undone that may contribute to its disrepute. To drill one hole after another into it until that which lurks behind, be it something or nothing, starts seeping through – I cannot imagine a higher goal for today's writer.<sup>138</sup>

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<sup>138</sup> Und immer mehr wie ein Schleier kommt mir meine Sprache vor, den man zerreißen muss, um an die hinterliegenden Dinge (oder das hinterliegende Nichts) zu kommen. Grammatik und Stil! Mir scheinen sie ebenso hinfällig geworden zu sein wie ein Biedermeier Badeanzug oder die Unerschüttlichkeit eines Gentlemans. Eine Larve. Hoffentlich kommt die Zeit, sie ist ja Gott sei Dank im gewissen Kreisen schon da, wo die Sprache da am besten gebraucht wird, wo sie am tüchtigsten missgebraucht wird. Da wir sie so mit einem Male nicht ausschalten können, wollen wir wenigstens nichts versäumen, was zu deren Verruf beitragen mag. Ein Loch nach dem andern in ihr zu bohren, bis das Dahinterkauernde, sei es etwas oder nichts, durchzusickern anfängt – ich kann mir für den heutigen Schriftsteller kein höheres Ziel vorstellen. Samuel Beckett, *The Letters of Samuel Beckett Volume 1: 1929-1940* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009) 512-521. September 7, 1937 letter to Axel Kaun.

That which lurks behind is the inaccessibility of objects, time, and other people – an inaccessibility that, due to the unstable and oscillatory nature of semblance, sometimes appears to be something, and sometimes appears to be nothing.

Beckett's texts work towards facing, as well as answering (without giving an answer) and solving (without giving a solution) the problem of love that turns Proust away from it and towards the *Search's* redemptive conclusion. Beckett does this in many ways, but largely structurally – his investments in narrative, silence, death, the unknown, and the ruin of language all attack the same problem that Proust has such trouble solving, though necessarily Beckett uses his tools in very different ways to achieve this result. Beckett's work extends the structure of presence and absence as a human driving force that I have been investigating with the term "desire" to its microcosm in the word, and its macrocosm in all representational art.

Adorno concisely shows the relationship between desire, language, and artwork: "What is wants the other; the artwork is the language of this wanting, and the artwork's content is as substantial as this wanting."<sup>139</sup> Artwork is the language of wanting, and so desire and love are modes of wanting; they determine how "what is" conceives of and therefore relates to "the other." The signifier wants the signified and the artist wants the object of art just as the one who desires wants the object of desire and the lover wants the beloved. In desire, "what is" attempts to possess and appropriate "the other," because the other's mystery and inaccessibility are a threat to its safety. The semi-successful appropriation is delusional, but also damaging – played out in the world, it obliterates its object in the interest of making it "proper to" the one who desires.

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<sup>139</sup> Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 132.



By contrast, two manifestations of human finitude, touch and trust, define love. Touch finds joy in the sensations of limit between “what is” and “the other,” and trust allows the incomprehensibility of mortality and other people to free us from the obligation to know and control everything. With worldly power, language becomes law and artwork becomes definition; when fear of finitude motivates language and the artwork, law crushes the rights of those who are not in power, and artwork verifies culturally the premises of those laws. When motivated instead by trust of the unknown, law protects and artwork helps us question and uncover our inevitable remaining fears.

This does not mean that love finds the beauty or joy in death, for this would be to bring it into comprehensibility. Hearing of the death of Barbara Bray’s estranged husband, Beckett wrote to her:

...And I have so little light and wisdom in me, when it comes to such disaster, that I can see nothing for us but the old earth turning onward and time feasting on our suffering along with the rest. Somewhere at the heart of the gales of grief (and of love too, I’ve been told) already they have blown themselves out. I was always grateful for that humiliating consciousness and it was always there I huddled, in the innermost place of human frailty and lowliness. To fly there for me was not to fly far, and I’m not saying this is right for you. But I can’t talk about solace of which I know nothing. And beyond all courage and reasonableness I am sure that for the likes of you and me at least it’s the “death is dead and no more dying” that makes it possible (just) to go on living.<sup>140</sup>

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<sup>140</sup> Samuel Beckett, *The Letters of Samuel Beckett Volume 3: 1957-1965* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014) 119. March 17 1958 Letter to Barbara Bray. SB had learned of the death in Cyprus of Barbara Bray’s estranged husband.

More concisely, upon hearing that his onetime beloved Ethna MacCarthy was dying, Beckett simply wrote, “Fucking fucking earth.”<sup>141</sup> The “humiliating consciousness” of the nature of time and the earth, which at least means that death cannot occur more than once, is no comfort or solace, but it at least barely allows us to go on. Beckett does not turn away from death, from “human frailty and lowliness.” He does not try to redeem it; art cannot ameliorate or mitigate the suffering that led to it. The slain are really slain.

Beckett’s art is nostalgic, in the sense that it expresses the pain of the always-incomplete return home, but it is also relentlessly lucid about the impossibility of the *nostos*. Time moves ever on, and no certainty appears on the horizon. Clov may leave or stay, Godot may or may not appear, the earth may or may not release Winnie to float up into the sky, and, as we see first in *The Unnamable* and perhaps most clearly in the urns and mouth of *Play* and *Not I*, even death may or may not result in an end to consciousness.

Rather than attempting to complete the *nostos*, Beckett makes his art carry all the futility and uncertainty of nostalgia. Rather than making language hold and convey more and more, as Joyce and Proust work to do, he strips bare language’s shortcomings, its failure to make anything present and thereby end the waiting and going on that plague and drive us, postponing the silence. Beckett’s work portrays Adorno’s “curse of aesthetic semblance”<sup>142</sup> – the inability to communicate or to be certain in the empirical world. Beckett focuses on the “curse” aspect of this aesthetic problem, making his reader feel the terrible weight of art. He characterizes this weight in his oft-quoted *Three Dialogues* in 1949: “there is nothing to express, nothing with

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<sup>141</sup> Beckett, *Letters 1957-1965*, 219.

<sup>142</sup> Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 132.

which to express, nothing from which to express, no power to express, no desire to express, along with the obligation to express” (IV.556).

Given all this nothing, even friendly critics and readers consistently indict Beckett’s work as nihilistic and the less friendly find it boring and mean-spirited. Georges Duthuit, for example, whose part in *Three Dialogues* Beckett wrote in recollection of their conversations, says in 1957 “I have received Beckett’s latest play, *Fin de Partie*, which I find mindless and nasty, not in the sense that he hoped this play would be...This is one man that is really too long a-dying, and talks too much for one given to silence. He sent me a dedicatory note with the word “friend” in it, but there’s a choice to be made: either ordinary feelings are valid, or, as he sees it, they are no more than a macabre and shameful absurdity, as he sees it, to his own advantage.”<sup>143</sup> Duthuit here makes the mistake that so many critics make when dealing with Beckett’s work: he interprets the views in the art as Beckett’s views about daily life, rather than the views of his “creatures,” who can only see and react to the world of narrative and representation.

Linda Ben-Zvi makes the same point in a less personal way, arguing that although Beckett’s characters “talk of the most mundane things—food, clothing, the weather, sex—they are always aware that their words are used only to fill time, to ward off silence. Even the two tramps in *Waiting for Godot*, for all their resemblance to the average man, are aware of their inability to gain insights into the world through the words they use.”<sup>144</sup> Ben-Zvi emphasizes the similarity of Didi and Gogo to the average person, but the whole point is that Beckett’s characters are precisely *not* the “average man,” and they never will be. They are *figures* for the

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<sup>143</sup> Beckett, *Letters 1957-1965*, 30. Footnoted in March 13, 1957 letter to Jacques Putman. January 16, 1957 letter from Georges Duthuit to Mary Hutchinson.

<sup>144</sup> Linda Ben-Zvi, “Samuel Beckett, Fritz Mauthner, and the Limits of Language,” *PMLA* (March 1980): 195.

artist doing art, not for the person doing living – and there are two essential differences in this comparison. First, the artist doing art is not precisely the person doing living, although obviously the artist is also a person who lives. The work of doing art *resembles* the work of living, but the difference (and necessity for difference) between a representation and its object is precisely what is at stake here. Second, the representation or figure of the artist doing art is not, particularly in Beckett's work, the same as Beckett himself or any of his many artist friends; his "creatures" work according to a fundamentally different set of rules than humans. They both perform and consist of language's failure. Made of words that the author has already written (sometimes explicitly, as in the case of the Unnamable), they do not have a present. For Proust's narrator, art finds and saves the "paradise that we have lost." In Beckett's defining oeuvre (beginning with Molloy), paradise is usually multiply lost – a memory lost in the mind of a fiction lost in the rubble of language.

Considered historically, Beckett looks at the attempts that the modernists made to escape the losses of WWI and the ways that those aesthetic tendencies could feed into the mentalities of WWII. The "modern" sensibilities and their consideration of "the human" that he criticizes in "La Peinture des Van Velde (1946)" are a prime example. The "human" is

un vocable, et sans doute un concept aussi, qu'on reserve pour les temps des grands massacres. Il faut la peste, Lisbonne et une boucherie religieuse majeure, pour que les êtres songent à s'aimer, à foutre la paix au jardinière d'à côté, à être simplissimes...Cela pleut sur les milieu artistiques avec une abondance toute particulière.

C'est dommage. Car l'art ne semble pas avoir besoin du cataclysme, pour pouvoir s'exercer.<sup>145</sup>

With a limited and overly zealous concept of “the human,” Beckett sees what most people would call “socially engaged” art as deeply destructive. His description of what will happen to painting that is human in quieter or subtler ways, of which “la moindre parcelle contient plus d'humanité vraie que toutes leurs processions vers un bonheur de mouton sacré,” is both dire and an accurate assessment of the mentalities that led to and drove the war that had just ended: “Je suppose qu'elle sera lapidée.” Beckett does not indict a concern with the human; he says that the brothers Van Velde are concerned with “la condition humaine,” and that their work contains more “d'humanité vraie” than most other art. Rather, the diversion of “humanity” towards the idols of “understanding” or “happiness” bothers Beckett.

Beckett's description of this more subtly human art sounds very much like the mentalities of love that I have discussed in Rilke and Nancy. It is “solitaire de la solitude qui se couvre la tête, de la solitude qui tend les bras.” This does not mean, necessarily, that this art portrays solitude, but rather that it takes as its foundation the likely (but uncertain, always uncertain) solitude of the human condition. I have been calling this solitude “finitude.” Although solitude evokes primarily interpersonal finitude, aloneness, it extends as well to temporal finitude; our solitude is in part our isolation from our past and future selves and the immediacy of their experiences.

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<sup>145</sup> Samuel Beckett, *Disjecta*, ed. Ruby Cohn (New York: Grove Press, 1984), 131. Beckett allowed Cohn to publish *Disjecta* on the condition that this and the other work collected therein remain untranslated. Therefore, despite generally using translated text in this dissertation, I present quotations from the texts in *Disjecta* only in the original.

Although Beckett rarely refers directly to his art's historical position, he alludes to it constantly. "All that should concern us is the acute and increasing anxiety of the relation [between the artist and his occasion] itself, as though shadowed more and more darkly by a sense of invalidity, of inadequacy, of existence at the expense of all that it excludes, all that it blinds to" (IV.562). That the anxiety is "acute and increasing" and the shadow grows "more and more" dark indicate that Beckett's analysis is specific to that moment in time; art's relationship to the world has reached a crisis, due both to the state of art and the state of the world. With the publication of *Three Dialogues* in 1949, Beckett sees that this kind of relation between artist and occasion, perceiver and perceived – a relationship I have called appropriation – is untenable.

Commentators often use this passage to demonstrate Beckett's focus on failure, but neglect to consider Beckett's reasoning about *why* it is so important to fail, and why it is so important that art is the medium to communicate this failure. The escapism of the history of painting is very much like Proust's escapism; the "more authentic, more ample, less exclusive relations between representer and representee" is much like the generalization that Proust believes is necessary to creating artwork. The untenability of this generalization manifests as a shadowy sense of anxiety about the relationship between artist and object, specifically how the relation has its "existence at the expense of all that it excludes, all that it blinds to." This phrase is the key to the dialogues; the artistic failure that Beckett spends his career writing and revising is important because this failure exposes how art occurs at the expense of what it excludes and blinds us to, namely, the self-determination of the object of perception. It excludes and blinds us to the validity of what occurs outside of the scope of representation and understanding. It gives us Albertine, emptied. Namely, Beckett is saying that representational art, by its nature, excludes love.

This is not to say that *all* art excludes love. Beckett's call for an art of failure is also a call for art that the reader or audience may encounter, experience, and appreciate under the same conditions as daily life. Like death and other people, art reconsidered this way need not "mean" or successfully "say" anything. As Winnie sneers in imitation of Shower or Cooker<sup>146</sup> who passes by her hill, "What does it mean? he says—What's it meant to mean?" The response, from his companion: "And you, she says, what's the idea of you, she says, what are you meant to mean?"(III.294). Winnie's condition, stuck in her narrative, gives her no more responsibility to "mean" than her observer does. Giving her this responsibility is the first step to using representation to dehumanize its object. Similarly, Molloy addresses the impossibility of saying: "And truly it little matters what I say, this or that or any other thing. Saying is inventing. Wrong, very rightly wrong. You invent nothing, you think you are inventing, you think you are escaping, and all you do is stammer out your lesson, the remnants of a pensum one day got by heart and long forgotten, life without tears, as it is wept" (II.27).

As Molloy implies here, for art to purport to "mean" and "say" is a delusion, pushing us into the habit of mind that confuses memory with the past, narrative with living, words with things. The artist is driven to say, but at this point in modernity and in art history, the only saying that functions is of a kind that shows the limits of saying. The narratives that Beckett gives his "creatures" indicate that he believes of art what he says of painting:

il reste trois chemains que la peinture peut prendre. Le chemin du retour à vieille naïveté, à travers l'hiver de son abandon, le chemin des repentis. Puis le chemin qui n'en est plus un, mais une dernière tentative de vivre sur le pays conquis. Et enfin le chemin en avant

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<sup>146</sup> "Shower and Cooker are derived from schauen & Kuchen (to look). They represent the onlooker (audience) wanting to know the meanings of things." Beckett, *Letters 1957-1965*, 429. August 17, 1961 letter to Alan Schneider.

d'une peinture qui se soucie aussi peu d'une convention périmée que des hiératismes et préciosités des enquêtes superflues, peinture d'acceptation, entrevoyant dans l'absence de rapport et dans l'absence d'objet le nouveau rapport et le nouvel objet."<sup>147</sup>

In his earlier essay on the painters, Beckett asks and answers, "A quoi les arts représentatifs se sont-ils acharnés, depuis toujours? A vouloir arrêter les temps, en le représentant."<sup>148</sup> Thus, the way forward is not crawl back into the naïveté of certainty and safety supported by cultural fact of the Gods, nor is it to live in this same land knowing, but unable to accept, that time has conquered and erased it. In Proustian terms, the way forward is neither to live in the appropriative desire that Marcel has for Albertine, nor is it to live in the temporal world that the work of art has redeemed, delusionally. Instead, it is to accept that the artist always fails to stop or redeem time with his relationship to the object, and to still, nonetheless, make art – preferably some form of art that accepts the inability and failure of representation to move us beyond our finitude.

Inability and failure are different, insofar as inability describes the present moment, and failure, for Beckett, is a historical term. Literature, more than any other art, is tied to the "old words" and "old style" that necessarily compose language. From taking clear shape with Watt's confounding plot to the tidal searching of his final poem, "What Is the Word," Beckett's work concerns itself with the belatedness of the words we have, how cracked and empty they are, how they were made, filled, and broken by other people in other eras, and now we have only shells to speak.

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<sup>147</sup> Beckett, "Peintres de l'Empêchement," *Disjecta*, 137.

<sup>148</sup> Beckett, "La peinture des van Velde ou le Monde et le Pantalon," *Disjecta*, 126.



Beckett's narratives and plays indicate that to caress us bewildering and deadpan, with rough and withered words, is all that a loving art could do – for itself and for him, its maker. “Wordstorming in the name of beauty,” he calls it in his letter to Axl Kaun. We see Beckett's drive towards this kind of art both in his notorious refusals to interpret his own art, often citing the autonomy and incomprehensibility of “his creatures” to him, and his insistence on fidelity to the text. A letter to Alan Schneider about a Berlin performance of *Krapp's Last Tape* clearly demonstrates this insistence: “I dream sometimes of all German directors of plays with perhaps one exception united in one with his back to the wall and me shooting a bullet into his balls every five minutes till he loses his taste for improving authors”.<sup>149</sup>

The landscapes and events within Beckett's texts do not strive to represent life, as most artworks in the “realist” vein do; they also do not attempt to expand the possibilities of representation, as Beckett sees the artists Tal Coat and Matisse doing, “they never stirred from the field of the possible, however much they may have enlarged it. The only thing disturbed by the revolutionaries Matisse and Tal Coat is a certain order on the plane of the feasible” (IV.556). Beckett's narratives do not attempt to overwrite life, as desirous forms of art do. Rather, by showing us the failure of art and language, Beckett lets us see what has become of representation: a wasteland, barren, full of suffering. Moments in his texts allude to love – Moran's bees, Krapp's girl in the punt, and Winnie's “old style” – but they are always lost to the point of ruin. Even within the fiction of the text, representation, not immediate living, destroys love – Moran's report, Krapp's burning intellectual project, and Winnie's “day,” an arbitrary and failed representation of the sun's revolutions. Beckett's work, therefore, shows us that the explication and representation of love are tantamount to generalization, and therefore love will

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<sup>149</sup> Beckett, *Letters 1957-1965*, 277. April 1, 1960 letter to Alan Schneider.

always remain outside of it, primarily in the past. The artwork can, however, stir the experience of loving in the audience, and reward the audience with its own love. In the failure to know and represent, it can touch and be touched.

In the *Search*, we see the many ways that Proust blurs the lines between his own views and those of his character Marcel. A great part of the danger of Proust's text, as I argued in chapter 1, is that his work not only performs, but also encourages and even conceptually necessitates the acceptance of its premises as truths by which one should both create art and live life. Beckett's work does the opposite – it subverts and undermines the premises of artistic representation, including knowledge, language, identity, finitude, and beauty. By lucidly showing the unequivocal failure of the artist, however, Beckett opens space for modes of experience and relation that enable otherness and uncertainty. His texts work as a form of “play” that counters artistic delusions – including the delusion that art itself is functional. As Lawrence Harvey states, “art, in such a view, becomes both more arbitrary and more serious than ‘play.’ It points to man's deepest nature, but in itself it is wholly meaningless and futile.”<sup>150</sup>

Allowing the artistic compulsion rigorously and relentlessly to portray the failure of linguistic and aesthetic representation, Beckett preserves the possibility of all that art eclipses. His work is difficult in part because its flat absurdity maims and mocks our use of habitual representational categories to avoid sensing and feeling the present moment. Beckett proposes no general truths; instead, the experience of his art is radically particular. The disclosure and

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<sup>150</sup> Lawrence Harvey, “Samuel Beckett on Life, Art, and Criticism,” *MLN* (Dec. 1965) 554. Beckett's approval is in a letter to Harvey from October 28, 1963: “Your essay on my ‘aesthetics’ seems to me the very best and most indulgent that could be made of such wild and wretched material.” *Letters 1957-1965*, 577. Of course, we must always remember that Beckett was often rather liberal with praise of his friends' work and their analysis of his work.

performance of representation's failure in Beckett's work reorients us to the possibilities, finite though they are, of the present moment in the world.

Beckett's work – not the characters, and not Beckett speaking through the work, but the work itself – teaches us to love by functioning like a lover – incomprehensible, inaccessible, rewarding trust and touch, resisting generalization and definition. One of Jean-Luc Nancy's statements on love sounds like a comment on Beckett's plays: "at once the promise of completion—but a promise always disappearing—and the threat of decomposition, always imminent."<sup>151</sup> Proust's work treats its readers as objects even as it encourages its readers to treat other people and the world as objects; even though it shows us the relationship between love, death, and the breaking of habit, it also rejects engaging with them in favor of the delusional redemptions that artwork can offer. Beckett's work shows us how this redemption fails, how the habits that make up art and language are (whether or not we acknowledge it) broken, and it engages us in the practice of loving. It demands our generosity and patience, it disappoints, confuses, and bores us, but given care and trust, it shores us up with a strange, uncertain, and fallible but deeply touching compassion.

#### **4.1 THE OLD WORDS**

The structure of language itself is bound up with the dynamics of presence and absence. The signifier is present, but it has absence at its core. It is visible, sayable, immediate, but also innately empty. As a sense impression on its own – little black marks on a page, a set of

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<sup>151</sup> Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, 93.

vibrations against the eardrum – it has almost no inherent meaning, certainly even less than the colors of a painting or the tones of a symphony. The signified, inversely, is absent, but it has presence at its core. Perfect certainty of meaning, substance, the fulfillment of immediacy in the Thing or person not appropriated but giving itself wholly – invoked, but impossibly absent, perhaps even nonexistent.

Words thus play out the drama of human finitude. The signifier wants the signified, with a nostalgic sense that unity has been lost to a rupture. Divinity or supernaturalism used to bind this rupture, but in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the anxieties of modernity finally overtook the divine as a cultural fact. Thus, the anxieties about love and desire in modernity, about interpersonal and temporal finitudes, are intertwined with the structure of language – and conversely, anxieties about the representational work of language extend into the problem of nostalgia. The drive to return home is, in part, a drive to *say* home in such a way as to evoke and verify it.

Susan Stewart, discussing her specific formulation of nostalgia, discusses its relationship to the structure of the word.

The crisis of the sign, emerging between signifier and signified, between the material nature of the former and the abstract and historical nature of the latter, as well as within the mediated reality between written and spoken language, is denied by the nostalgic's utopia, a utopia where authenticity suffuses both word and world. The nostalgic dreams of a moment before knowledge and self-consciousness that itself lives on only in the self-consciousness of the nostalgic narrative. Nostalgia is the repetition that mourns the inauthenticity of all repetition and denies the repetition's capacity to form identity.

This “crisis” has much in common with the “sense of invalidity, of inadequacy” that Beckett discusses with reference to the relationship between artist and occasion. What Stewart calls this

“utopian” view of art defines her limited sense of nostalgia, the idealistic sense that this “crisis” never existed or that the power of representation might solve it. Although I use nostalgia much more broadly in this dissertation, to refer to a spectrum of kinds of pain and different reactions to the *nostos*, Stewart’s description helps to knit the structure of the word together with the structure of nostalgic wanting.

The possibilities of desire and love therefore are encoded directly into the structure of the word. Adorno investigates the way desirous language works using the highly political example of the émigré’s past:

...the life that cannot be directly actualized; anything that lives on merely as thought and recollection. For this a special rubric has been invented. It is called ‘background’ and appears on the questionnaire as an appendix, after sex, age, and profession. To complete its violation, life is dragged along on the triumphal automobile of the united statisticians, and even the past is no longer safe from the present, whose remembrance of it consigns it a second time to oblivion.<sup>152</sup>

The appropriative language of nationalism deeply based in fear of the unknown and a desire to control obliterates the ghost-memories of the absent past. The statisticians and a few words on a rubric replace the particularities of memory with the general law of national, racial, and religious category. Romantic desire works very similarly; in the *Search*, Marcel finds solace whenever he can grasp a moment of Albertine’s past with a definition or a corroborating witness account. Albertine’s own private memories are utterly beside the point; Marcel only cares about them insofar as he wants to make them his own. He does this with words – once he learns how to describe corners of her experience that she did not share with him, he can discard the entire

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<sup>152</sup> Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 47.

package – signifier and signified – and move on to the next mystery to be pursued. Although this treatment of language is not explicitly political, I have discussed in chapter 1 (albeit in slightly broader terms) how it functions as a habit of mind that can support politically devastating conclusions.

The trust and touch that define love also have the structure of the word. Rather than functioning appropriately, the word can exist as a sense impression that reaches towards meaning but accepts failure inherently in its usage. This failure is a prerequisite for trusting the words' speaking, a boundary between "what is" and "the other" that prevents the wanting of "what is" from obliterating "the other." In 1961, Beckett closes a letter to Brian Coffey with the wish that they "might touch foreheads again"<sup>153</sup> – communication mediated by finitude, by the boundary of skull and skin. The kind of relationship that the touching of foreheads implies can only exist in person, in the stream of daily life. Human presence that interacts with artwork must always contend with the extra failure that characterizes representation, whether or not the artwork admits it. Immediate conversation occurs between two humans and within the stream of time – it is not imaginary until it has passed into memory. Artwork, by contrast, as representation, is endlessly iterable. It refers to both an absent other and an absent moment – fictional, past, or projective. Even the word in a letter is similarly iterable; this is why via letter Beckett anticipates the "touching of foreheads" that implies direct (as direct as possible, which is to say knocking on a wall) communication.

Anne Carson, in *Eros the Bittersweet*, gives a sense of the deep connection between reading and the inability to reach an original experience: "We should note that the Greek verb 'to

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<sup>153</sup> Beckett, *Letters 1957-1965*, 443. Footnoted in November 9, 1961 letter to George Reavey on November 9, 1961, p. 443. Letter from Beckett to Brian Coffey sometime after October 11, 1961.

read' is *anagnōskein*, a compound of the verb 'to know (*gignōskein*) and the prefix *ana*, meaning 'again.' If you are reading, you are not at the beginning." Vladimir Jankelevitch shows how a similar logic extends to thinking of the past outside of the realm of representation: "the sentiment of déjà vu itself implies that the second time is not identical with the first; the man of the second time is one who experienced the first time, and consequently 're-knows' it in the second."<sup>154</sup> Structurally, memory and reading both contain within themselves their own belatedness – but fear of the unknown, fear of encountering a *bouleversement*, often prevents us from seeing this structure.

Beckett's discussion of James Joyce's *Work in Progress* (the incipient *Finnegans Wake*) and his analysis of Proust's *Search* soon after demonstrate the evolution of his views on failure and language. Early in his career, Beckett appreciates the simple sensuous immediacy of Joyce's writing and the simultaneous complexity and clarity of Proust's style. Later, however, he realizes he must back away from the influence of both authors because their views on representation, at least to Beckett's reading, reflect the identification between subject and object that becomes particularly untenable after WWII.

In *Dante . . . Bruno . Vico . . Joyce*, Beckett says of *Work in Progress*, "Here form is content, content is form...His writing is not *about* something; *it is that something itself*" (IV.503). In late Joyce, the word's concreteness has a kind of ecstatic wallowing excess – the text purports to restore fullness to language by showing the word succeeding brilliantly at being a word. The writing "is a quintessential extraction of language and painting and gesture, with all the inevitable clarity of the old inarticulation. Here is the savage economy of hieroglyphics"

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<sup>154</sup> Jankélévitch, *L'Irréversible et la nostalgie*, 46. Le sentiment du déjà-vu implique lui-même que la seconde fois n'est pas identique à la première; l'homme de la seconde fois est celui qui a connu la première fois, et par conséquent la "reconnaît" dans la deuxième.

(IV.505). This is an economy similar to the one that Vico describes of early language: “When language consisted of gesture, the spoken and written were identical. Hieroglyphics, or sacred language, as he calls it, were not the invention of philosophers for the mysterious expression of profound thought, but the common necessity of primitive peoples” (IV.502). The immediacy of this hieroglyphic-style writing demands a style of reading that Beckett at first portrays as fundamentally present – deeply, tactilely immediate:

...a sensuous untidy art of intellection. Perhaps “apprehension” is the most satisfactory English word. Stephen says to Lynch: “Temporal or spatial, the esthetic image is first luminously apprehended as selfbounded and selfcontained upon the immeasurable background of space or time which is not it... You apprehend its wholeness.” There is one point to make clear: the Beauty of *Work in Progress* is not presented in space alone, since its adequate apprehension depends as much on its visibility as on its audibility. There is a temporal as well as a spatial unity to be apprehended (IV.504).

This apprehension of aesthetic wholeness is an epiphany, roughly comparable to the transubstantiation of the Proustian involuntary memory – a mundane moment elevated by the work of art. Joyce describes it in *Stephen Hero*:

First we recognize that the object is *one* integral thing, then we recognize that it is an organized composite structure, a *thing* in fact: finally, when the relation of the parts is exquisite, when the parts are adjusted to the special point, we recognize that it is *that* thing which it is. Its soul, its whatness, leaps to us from the vestment of its appearance.



The soul of the commonest object, the structure of which is so adjusted, seems to us radiant. The object achieves its epiphany.”<sup>155</sup>

The object of epiphany, firmly lodged in time, transcends temporality. The image appears “upon the immeasurable background of space or time which is not it,” but it is also simultaneously “the most delicate and evanescent”<sup>156</sup> of moments. As in Proust, this moment is out of time, but simultaneously manifests “a little bit of time in its pure state” (6.180).

In his short book on Proust, Beckett’s reading of the *Search* gives it similar goals. “For Proust the quality of language is more important than any system of ethics or aesthetics. Indeed, he makes no attempt to disassociate form from content. The one is a concretion of the other, the revelation of a world” (IV.551). Both Proust and Joyce both resemble Vico’s poet: “The only reality is provided by the hieroglyphics traced by inspired perception (identification of subject and object)” (IV.549). Once again, signifier embodies signified, artist appropriates occasion.

The sensuous immediacy of the text is bound to abstractions across and outside of time and space. This conflation of different modes of thinking about time and representation resembles Benjamin’s conflation of history and past, which I discussed in Chapter 1. “That is theology,” Benjamin says, and we can say the same of the Joycean epiphany and the Proustian transubstantiation. The use of artwork to create an aesthetic image that redeems the past or freezes time depends the sacredness of the word, not its structural resemblance to a hieroglyphic. As Beckett says of Vico’s early poets: “We know that the actual creators of these myths gave full credence to their face-value. Jove was no symbol: he was terribly real. It was precisely their superficial metaphorical character that made them intelligible to people incapable of receiving

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<sup>155</sup> James Joyce, *Stephen Hero*, (New York: New Directions, 1963) 211.

<sup>156</sup> James Joyce, *Stephen Hero*, 211.

anything more abstract than the plain record of objectivity” (IV.502). For the Joycean hieroglyphic’s sacredness to be anything other than a nostalgic delusion, both he and his readers would still have to be as incapable of abstraction as the first poets.

Beckett stops just short of making a similar point about Proust, regarding his “complete indifference to moral values and human justices” (IV.552). He argues that Proust’s characters are so botanical that

they seem to solicit a pure subject, so that they may pass from a state of blind will to a state of representation. Proust is that pure subject. He is almost exempt from the impurity of will. He deplors his lack of will until he understands that will, being utilitarian, a servant of intelligence and habit, is not a condition of artistic experience. When the subject is exempt from will the object is exempt from causality (Time and Space taken together). And this human vegetation is purified in the transcendental apperception that can capture the Model, the Idea, the Thing in itself (IV.552).

Of course, the purity of Proust’s subjectivity is a self-justifying pose, which allows him to use his artistic objects to achieve this seeming suspension of causality. He is not somehow naturally exempt from the impurity of will, which would make him much more like the first poets. Instead, he represents a character with this exemption, Marcel, and then purposely breaks down the boundaries between author and character. As Beckett implies, Proust portrays the people here as already vegetally deformed, “victims of their volition, active with a grotesque predetermined activity” (IV.552). They are always already inhuman, and so Marcel’s dehumanizing and amoral mode of representation appears almost as a sacred fire of purification.

This early idealization of the project of representation fades quickly. This blithe synthesis of form and content is, particularly after WWII, “shadowed more and more darkly by a sense of

invalidity, of inadequacy, of existence at the expense of all that it excludes, all that it blinds to” (IV.562). In Proust, particularly, the mentality that makes people nothing more than “human vegetation” is invalid, and blinds us to the unique subjectivity of each person. In his own work, Beckett dismantles representation by making the audience encounter the word (or later the performance of the play) on its own terms – that is to say, failing to communicate, but failing concretely, in the present. Beckett realized “that Joyce had gone as far as one could in the direction of knowing more, [being] in control of one’s material. He was always adding to it; you only have to look at his proofs to see that. I realised that my own way was in impoverishment, in lack of knowledge and in taking away, in subtracting rather than in adding.”<sup>157</sup> This enables Beckett pursue what he respects in Joyce and reject what he finds troubling. His words have the clarity of the “old inarticulation,” but they demonstrate their own age and limitation. He also pursues the aspects of failure he sees in the *Search* – the intolerable problems that Proust portrays so evocatively. “We are alone. We cannot know and we cannot be known” (IV.540).

We notice in Beckett what he says, early on, of Joyce: “that there is little or no attempt at subjectivism or abstraction, no attempt at metaphysical generalization. We are presented with a statement of the particular” (IV.505). Joyce’s statement still has faith in the power of the word to make present what is absent, to say words such that the signified radiantly fills the signifier, such that the thing’s mystery, “its soul, its whatness, leaps to us from the vestment of its appearance.” Beckett’s art, by contrast, shows the particularity resulting from art’s failure to freeze time or to mean. The moment of reading the novel or witnessing the play has, therefore, the luminously uncertain particularity of any other moment.

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<sup>157</sup> James Knowlson, *Damned to Fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett* (New York: Touchstone, 1997), 319.

The failure of words themselves is one of the most foundational aspects of the failure of representation in Beckettian narrative. His characters use words because they must speak and words are what they have for speaking, but the words have lost their essential cohesiveness. They do some vague work, but they can no longer comfort. Beckett investigates this most explicitly in and with *Watt*. “Looking at a pot, for example, or thinking of a pot, at one of Mr. Knott’s pots, of one of Mr. Knott’s pots, it was in vain that Watt said, Pot, pot. Well, perhaps not quite in vain, but very nearly” (I.232). This “very nearly” is all that is left of communication; it is the empty shell of the word. It is perhaps enough to get by in the world, but only minimally. “For it was not a pot, the more he looked, the more he reflected, the more he felt sure of that, that it was not a pot at all. It resembled a pot, it was almost a pot, but it was not a pot of which one could say, Pot, pot, and be comforted.” Proust wants badly to solve this curse of aesthetic semblance. Proust’s aesthetic conclusion begins at the end of this phrase and works its way back; it exhorts us: “say, Pot, pot, and be comforted. Now, what does it matter if it was not a pot at all? For it resembled a pot, it was almost a pot.” The desire for it to be a pot is enough, for Proust. For Watt, however, “It was in vain that it answered, with unexceptionable adequacy, all the purposes, and performed all the offices, of a pot, it was not a pot. And it was just this hairsbreadth departure from the nature of a true pot that so excruciated Watt.” Watt’s linguistic habit has been broken, and the inability to use language to generalize objects leaves his world in flux. This is not just a momentary condition or easily reversible condition; it is a change that speaks to the passage of time. He wishes to see “things appear, and himself appear, in their ancient guise, and consent to be named, with the time-honoured names, and forgotten.” He longs for “the old words, the old credentials.” It would not make sense to impute Watt’s longing to Beckett, though – “the author seems perfectly well aware of what he is doing, as he makes Watt

apply the causality of the rationalists to problems that lead eventually only to paradox.”<sup>158</sup> Watt’s wanting is also not without its gaps. Like almost all of Beckett’s creatures, Watt is torn between the two poles of language – the nearly empty presence of words, and the unknowable fulfillment of the absent silence.

With *Watt*, Beckett is still working through the legacy of Joycean excess. He tackles meaninglessness and the problem of the word with the absurdity of permutation, language dissolving into the meaningless narratives of symbolic logic. *The Unnamable*, by contrast, is the complete execution of this excess – execution insofar as the text simultaneously fulfills and destroys it. The beginning is a preface of masterful undermining: “Where now? Who now? When now? Unquestioning. I, say I. Unbelieving. Questions, hypotheses, call them that. Keep going, going on, call that going, call that on” (II.285). He begins with the foundations: space, identity, and time. Three ghosts that we take for granted, but of which we can never be certain, particularly in the “now” that functions both to designate presence and to invoke a dialogic informality. The other three of the classic inquiries, What, Why, and How, remain unspoken. The event, the motivation, and the mechanism – or, more to the point, the story, the wanting, and the word – these are the materials with which the *Unnamable* will work. They have the givenness of presence, but they are all empty at the core. They reach for the absent anchors of space, identity, and time.

“Where now? Who now? When now?” creates a blank representational plane that the reader anticipates these inquiries will fill. “Unquestioning.” decisively breaks the inquiry, with its blunt period, but leaves the plane open, waiting for a character, and so, “I, say I.” Another blank plane, but this time it opens the first person voice. Undermined as before, but this time

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<sup>158</sup> Knowlson, *Damned to Fame*, 304.

even more circularly. The Unnamable pithily answers Descartes, showing that the I who says “I” is possibly, by virtue of its own subjectivity and capacity for representation, lying or deluded. Saying, as Beckett first established with Watt, works in vain to verify the true nature of what it says. The Unnamable’s use of “call” echoes “say;” it emphasizes the presence/absence structure of every word. The repetition in “Keep going, going on” is weary, but “call that going, call that on” is an order of magnitude wearier, conceding that “going” and “on” are nothing but words, that to *say* “going on” is doubly futile, accessing neither what “going on” signifies, nor what it would achieve in the world if it were done instead of said – the irreversible passage of time.

The Unnamable uses the rueful “call that” formulation throughout the text. “When I think of them, that too, you must go on thinking too, the old thoughts, they call that thinking, it’s visions, shreds of old visions, that’s all you can say, a few old pictures, a window...” (II.398). He is hyper-conscious of the absent signified and the broken signifier. Additionally, the signifier’s brokenness is not fundamental, but rather a function of age. Old thoughts, old visions, and old pictures have lost the capacity for full meaning that characterized the words of Vico’s first poets. The unnamable is left “saying Where do these words come from that pour out of my mouth, and what do they mean, no, saying nothing, for the words don’t carry any more...” (II.363). The words carry neither sonically nor volumetrically; nobody can hear, but the words mean nothing, anyway.

At the same time, the words have become so socially habitual that they are sometimes unfamiliar and threatening, like the furniture during Marcel’s first night in Balbec. The pieces of furniture, like the Unnamable’s words, are so secure in their propriety to themselves that they encroach upon the sense of subjectivity. Marcel feels almost obliterated before his trusting love for his grandmother reasserts the minimum of habit he needs to maintain his subjectivity; the

unnamable, by contrast, undermines his own voice further and further. The words are violently present, but also profoundly impoverished by too much speaking. The Unnamable's story underscores the depth of the *nostos* drive; even as "my," "safe," "return," and "home" lose their meaning he continues to pursue some wrecked and hollow version of what would be from his perspective (call that perspective) "my safe return home." Mostly emptied out, each of these words is a half-unfinished parody of itself.

Throughout *The Unnamable*, words are placeholders, inadequate references to things no longer valid. "One of these days, I'll challenge him. I'll say, I don't know, I'll say something, I'll think of something when the time comes. There are no days here, but I use the expression" (II.286). "Worm hears, though hear is not the word, but it will do, it will have to do" (II.352). These words are ruined, but Andreas Huyssen would specifically call them "authentic ruins," because they have been neither preserved nor sanitized; they do not deny the passage of time.<sup>159</sup> They pretend neither to be young, nor always already old. That they have *become* old reinforces their failure to confront or redeem time.

We must always remember, however, that the language of Beckett's creatures is the language of representation, not life. The characters lack the forms of trust and touch that allow us to encounter each other and the things around us. Within the barren, wasted landscape of representation, there is no simple present moment. To think that the push and pull of presence and absence in a word can somehow approximate the work of human touch is to reduce people and their lives to statistics. The "fucking, fucking earth" that killed Ethna MacCarthy is not the "corpsed" earth that killed Nell. Hamm, believing himself alone as *Endgame* concludes, says, "Old endgame lost of old, play and lose and have done with losing." It recalls Beckett's

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<sup>159</sup> Andreas Huyssen, "Nostalgia for Ruins," *Grey Room*, Spring 2006, 6-21.

comment to Barbara Bray that “death is dead and no more dying,” itself a quotation of Shakespeare’s Sonnet 146, “And death once dead, there’s no more dying then.” Once dead on the earth, there’s no more dying. Hamm is one degree further, though – as a representation made of language, he manifests the “old endgame lost of old:” the successful representation, lost long ago, when it was already old. We learn of playing and losing from Beckett, but we must first learn, and not forget, that the teaching game is broken. Knowing the game is broken, we must remember that we can also learn from touch and trust, from each other and the world.

#### 4.2 WINNIE’S “OLD STYLE”

Winnie refers, with an ephemeral smile, to “the old style” nine times throughout the course of the play. In a letter to Alan Schneider, who was directing the world premiere of *Happy Days*, Beckett explained Winnie’s reference to “old style” and the accompanying smile:

‘Old style’ and smile always provoked by word ‘day’ and derivatives or similar. There is no more day in the old sense because there is no more night, i.e. nothing but day. It is in a way an apologetic smile for speaking in a style no longer valid. ‘Old style’ suggests also of course old calendar before revision. ‘Sweet old style’ joke with reference to Dante’s ‘dolce stile nuovo.’<sup>160</sup>

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<sup>160</sup> Samuel Beckett and Alan Schneider, *No Author Better Served: The Correspondence of Samuel Beckett & Alan Schneider* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 102.



The joke on Dante illuminates the general purpose of the “old style” reference. The sweetness of Dante’s new style is a matter of language “(the illustrious vernacular being the sweetest).”<sup>161</sup> Beckett addresses this development in Dante’s style in *Dante . . . Bruno . Vico . . Joyce*. Dante was like Joyce insofar as “both saw how worn out and threadbare was the conventional language of cunning literary artificers, both rejected an approximation to a universal language” (IV.506).

The newness of the style “most probably refers to the poet’s inventive variations on traditional poetic themes,”<sup>162</sup> including “faith that love is an ennobling influence on the lover,” and praise for the idealized angelic beloved who “activates the lover’s inborn disposition toward good.” The joke (following many Beckettian jokes) is what was once potential has decayed; language is now not a site of possibility, unity, and idealization, but a memorial to their long-dead possibility in representational art. The sweetness of an aesthetic vernacular becomes nostalgically mournful, scatologically and ruefully funny, or a combination of both – and threaded through the analysis in *Dante . . . Bruno . Vico . . Joyce*, this serves as a mild rebuke to Joycean idealism about the sonic possibilities of language as well. Similarly, the newness of idealized courtly love withers, becomes the terrestrial banality of Winnie and Willie’s marriage. Dante’s descriptions of Beatrice, idealized feminine to the point of abstraction, contrast with comments like Winnie to Willie: “Oh I see, you still have some of that stuff left. [*Pause.*] Work it well in, dear. [*Pause.*] Now the other” (III.279).

The references to “day” that evoke Winnie’s comments on “the old style” are not strictly a matter of the lack of night, but rather the inability to determine the passage of time with any

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<sup>161</sup> “Dolce Stil Nuovo,” Alex Preminger and T.V.F. Brogan eds, *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 302. Dante elaborates his ideas on style, language, form, and meter in *De vulgari eloquentia*.

<sup>162</sup> “Dolce Stil Nuovo,” *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, 301.

clarity. In some instances this is time over several days, as in “daily,” “not a day goes by” and “all day long. Day after day.” At other points, “the old style” refers to time within a day, as in “all together at the end of the day” and “the day is now well advanced.” The association between time’s passage and mortality becomes particularly clear when “the old style” follows after the phrase “if you were to die.” In this world, with no day, with a sense of time passing but no evidence, death is not even hypothetical – it is nothing more than a linguistic residue, signifying absence.

Without even the structure of days, Winnie uses two things to organize her time: habit, and language. Winnie’s habit is an interesting case, because it can only barely “dull” the world into a comprehensible shape. Her consolations are rare and contrived, and she turns them immediately into a habitual form; “that is what I find so wonderful” and “that is what I always say” imply that something has occurred and will reoccur. Trying to remember what a “hog” is, she even gestures at something like involuntary memory, its veracity resulting from its unbiddenness. “Oh well what does it matter, that is what I always say, it will come back, that is what I find so wonderful, all comes back. [Pause.] All? [Pause.] No, not all. [Smile.] No no. [Smile off.] Not quite. [Pause.] A part. [Pause.]. Floats up, one fine day, out of the blue. [Pause.] That is what I find so wonderful” (III.281).

Immediately underneath this habit, however, there is utter chaos. The “breaking” of habit in *Happy Days* always resembles the instance of Marcel his first time in Balbec; rather than productively defamiliarizing an overly dulled life, it opens uncertainty too far and begins to verge on madness. Often, moments of broken habit occur suddenly. Winnie allows the mental aspect of her habit to fade, and it becomes merely physical and mechanical, as she wipes her glasses or pats the mound of earth around her. She skirts the edge of hopelessness, “Ah yes—

[wiping]—many mercies—[wiping]—great mercies—[stops wiping, fixed lost gaze, brokenly]—prayers perhaps not for naught—” (III.277). Later, immediately after Winnie’s parasol catches on fire, she begins a slower and more deliberate descent into one of these moments. She begins by wondering whether she might fit this into a recognizable set of events; “I presume this has occurred before, though I cannot recall it.” She then tries to fit it into a trajectory; “With the sun blazing so much fiercer down, and hourly fiercer, is it not natural things should go on fire never known to do so, in this way I mean, spontaneous like.” This does not seem right to her, though, because she cannot recall a more temperate time. She has two intertwined reactions; she feels as though the present must determine the past, and as though her ability to speak of a past different from the present undermines the validity of language.

I speak of temperate times and torrid times, they are empty words. [Pause.] I speak of when I was not caught—in this way—and had my legs and had the use of my legs...and they are all empty words. [Pause.] It is no hotter today than yesterday, it will be no hotter tomorrow than today, how could it, and so on back into the far past, toward the far future. [Pause.] And should one day the earth cover my breasts, then I shall never have seen my breasts, no one ever seen my breasts” (III.291).

If the present moment determines the past, then the idea of “occurrence” becomes meaningless. Cause and effect are broken. “Yes, something seems to have occurred, something has seemed to occur, and nothing has occurred, nothing at all, you are quite right, Willie. [Pause.] The sunshade will be there again tomorrow, to help me through the day” (III.292). If occurrence, cause, and effect are meaningless, so too is action. “I take up this little glass, I shiver it on a stone—[does so]—I throw it away—[does so far behind her]—it will be in the bag again tomorrow, without a scratch, to help me through the day. [Pause.] No, one can do nothing”

(III.292). She has gone too far, and she has accidentally proven that the perfect stabilization of habit is actually a meaningless hell. “That is what I find so wonderful, the way things . . . [*voice breaks, head down*] . . . things . . . so wonderful. [*Long pause, head down*]” (III.292). She finds things wonderful in order to understand them in terms of uniformity and predictability – and what could be more uniform and predictable than an endless day, in which nothing ever changes, cause and effect are broken, and action has no result?

The only comfort that can bring her back is, as for Marcel in *Balbec*, love and trust. Of course they are deeply undermined and ironic here; love is signified by a music box playing the waltz duet from “The Merry Widow,” which Willie accompanies, raucously and wordlessly. There seems to be a moment of genuine delight from Winnie, which ends when Willie will not sing for her again. Nonetheless, it reaches her as something like caring, which allows her to remember that, however uncertain and incomprehensible, Willie is on the other side of the hill, like Marcel’s grandmother on the other side of the wall. She will sing the song at the end of Act II, underscoring the incompleteness of this love – words are inadequate, only “every touch of fingers” can communicate love, and Winnie and Willie never touch.

The Unnamable uses the phrase “I, say I” to undermine identity. The comma ensures that the reader emphasizes “I.” The mechanism for undermining identity is the uncertainty of “say,” but the focus remains on the eponymously uncertain “I.” In *Happy Days*, Winnie adds “I say” to anything that occurred in the past throughout Act II, and Billie Whitelaw, in performances Beckett directed, heavily emphasized the word “say.” She does not call her identity into question, but rather her memory. “I used to think . . . [*pause*] . . . I *say* I used to think that I would learn to talk alone” (III.300, my emphasis). To say, particularly for Beckett’s characters, avatars of representation, is to tell a story. The Unnamable undermines the speaking self and

with it the past – if the self has no authority, its stories of the past are unreliable. Winnie, by contrast, undermines the past and with it the self – she only has confidence in her present thoughts and feelings, not her memories of her thoughts and feelings.

Winnie illustrates the importance of balancing a focus on the present with an understanding of the past’s pastness. She falls into the trap of Benjamin, who wants to open the past: “What science has ‘determined,’ remembrance can modify. Such mindfulness can make the incomplete (happiness) into something complete, and the complete (suffering) into something incomplete.”<sup>163</sup> We can juxtapose Kermode, who reminds us that “if the value of an opinion is to be tested only by its success in the world, the propositions of dementia can become as valuable as any other fictions.”<sup>164</sup> Winnie teeters at the edge of dementia; “I have not lost my reason. [Pause.] Not yet. [Pause.] Not all. [Pause.] Some remains. [Pause.] Sounds. [Pause.] Like little . . . sunderings, little falls . . . apart” (III.302). Winnie lives in a world that itself evokes dementia. If delusional games have drastically influenced the world, only delusions will “test” successfully in the world. We must be able to revise science’s determinations, but this is not “theology” or remembrance, it is science’s own inherent doubt.

### 4.3 MORAN’S BEES

Jacques Moran’s bees signify joy in distance, love and loss. Before he sets out to find Molloy, he sits contentedly in his garden, “watch[ing] absently the coming and going of my bees.” The garden setting itself, the “tranquil sounds” and “the scent of my lemon-verbena” occupy more of

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<sup>163</sup> Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, [N8,1] 471.

<sup>164</sup> Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending*.

his attention than the bees, which come and go like Marcel's grandmother restlessly comes and goes from the garden table in Combray.

Moran's garden has similar characteristics to Marcel's madeleine, which he possesses so fully that it cannot attest to the passage of time. "I offered my face to the black mass of fragrant vegetation that was mine and with which I could do as I pleased and never be gainsaid...My trees, my bushes, my flowerbeds, my tiny lawns, I used to think I loved them" (II.122). His garden comforts him with the familiarity of habit, which he mistakes (or, in one of the earlier of the increasingly frequent indications of how changed the reader supposes he will have become by the time he is recounting this story as its narrator, mistook) for love.

The bees, though – we only encounter the bees again when they are already doomed, as Moran thinks about their dancing near the end of his journey. "For my bees danced, oh not as men dance, to amuse themselves, but in a different way" (II.162). They dance to communicate, as it seems to Moran, but their communication is devoid of representation. Its immediacy has more in common with gesture, but with a complexity that belies how little the human knows of communicating immediacy. Thinking about these bees is Moran's greatest comfort, but not comfort in the sense of his lazy Sunday habits. "I said, with rapture, Here is something I can study all my life, and never understand. And all through this long journey home, when I racked my mind for a little joy in store, the thought of my bees and their dance was the nearest thing to comfort" (II.163). Most of all, he will not appropriate the bees, as he has been to do with everything else, even the divine, as we see in the early communion scene. "And I would never do my bees the wrong I had done my God, to whom I had been taught to ascribe my angers, fears, desires, and even my body" (II.163). In his former instrumentalizing bureaucratic life, he had made even God into a habit, but the bees, in their simultaneous proximity and

incomprehensibility, escaped. Like Marcel's grandmother, they cultivate in Moran a habitual trust. He loves them, and he finds their unknowability comforting rather than disconcerting.

This makes it even more difficult when he returns home. "I went towards my hives. They were there, as I feared" (II.168). Their presence is forbidding because he can anticipate the encounter with finitude that they contain, the inevitable loss of what he once loved.

I put my hand in the hive, moved it among the empty trays, felt along the bottom. It encountered, in a corner, a dry light ball. It crumbled under my fingers. They had clustered together for a little warmth, to try and sleep. I took out a handful. It was too dark to see, I put it in my pocket. It weighed nothing. They had been left out all winter, their honey taken away, without sugar. Yes, now I may make an end. (II.168)

The loss of these bees cuts more deeply than any moment of loss in the entirety of *À la recherche du temps perdu*. Their clustering together for warmth is strikingly and viscerally melancholy, almost to the point of sentimentality. It stops short, though, in tension with the dancing – the clarity of emotion is necessary to offset the bees' otherness. Moran cannot understand their dance, cannot even understand what finitude means to them, but they too are mortal. Once Moran leaves, the bees are doomed by influences greater than they are. They therefore demonstrate not only love and loss, but also susceptibility to power. They are subject to the representation of immediate lived time within the text, and the care of those with more resources. These bees thus demonstrate how an individual's investment in love can matter. If the powerful do not withhold resources and freedom from those with less power, the dance continues. If the powerful take the fruits of their labor and leave, the result is death. A "dry light ball" of hollow bodies, crumbling away.

The mental states Proust describes can spark a deep sense of recognition – this is how he convinces us that his truths are general. Even his accounts of involuntary memory, however, commit the same misdeed against life that he ascribes to voluntary memory: desiccation in the interest of preservation, emptiness in the present in the interest of correspondence between past and future. Proust’s accounts of loss are always oriented as memory or projection, deeply representational, or formulated as a temporary state on the way to redemption. Even his acceptance of mortality at the *Bal des têtes* occurs within the framework of redemption that the text creates. Proust’s landscapes represent the success of representational art, so even moments of finitude are already solved by virtue of their inclusion in the narrative.

There is no redemption in “a little dust of annulets and wings” (II.169). Even within the novel, the incomprehensible dance is a memory. The desiccation of narrative becomes literal, the joy, or at least “the nearest thing to comfort” (II.163), concentrated into a handful of crumbled bees. This recalls lines near the beginning of T.S. Eliot’s *The Wasteland*: “I will show you something different from either / Your shadow at morning striding behind you / Or your shadow at evening rising to meet you / I will show you fear in a handful of dust.”<sup>165</sup> The shadows of past and future, of representation, are not as relevant as the experience of the concrete present even as it signifies mortality. It is Beckett’s gift to show us the beauty of this dust without for a moment aestheticizing or formalizing it. The experience of its presentness, and what it means about us, matters most. Encapsulating failure, mortality, and the love of an unbelievably complex and incomprehensible dance, a site of absence that opens the opportunity for something like joy, the handful of bees functions as a microcosm of the novel that contains it, and the oeuvre that contains the novel.

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<sup>165</sup> T.S. Eliot, *Collected Poems 1909 – 1962* (London: Faber and Faber. 2002, 53.



#### 4.4 KRAPP'S GIRL IN THE PUNT

Krapp's last tape is perhaps the most clearly poignant of Beckett's plays, and the one that most openly addresses the relationship between representation, love, and loss. In her book *On Longing*, Susan Stewart's analysis of nostalgia has much in common with my discussion of desire and love, particularly the focus on presence, absence, and writing. Considering the ways that Krapp diverges from Stewart's description of nostalgia makes Beckett's position clearer relative to Proust. She begins with two possible assumptions:

First, the assumption that immediate lived experience is more "real," bearing within itself an authenticity which cannot be transferred to mediated experience; yet second, the assumption that the mediated experience known through language and the temporality of narrative can offer pattern and insight by virtue of its capacity for transcendence. It is in the meeting of these two assumptions, in the conjunction of their *symptoms*, that the social disease of nostalgia arises. By the narrative process of nostalgic reconstruction the present is denied and the past takes on an authenticity of being, an authenticity which, ironically, it can achieve only through narrative.<sup>166</sup>

Proust certainly makes both of these two assumptions, and therefore he risks falling into the mournful sadness that characterizes nostalgia for Stewart. He attempts to short-circuit the process, however, by playing with the semantics of the first assumption. In Proust, the authenticity of "immediate lived experience" certainly cannot "be transferred" by some unnamed agent – Proust would call this agent voluntary memory. If immediate experience occurs so absently that it does not qualify as "lived," however, it can appear involuntarily in a mediated

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<sup>166</sup> Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985), 23.

form. Immediacy remains in the first assumption, but “lived” is displaced to the second, which at least superficially solves the “curse of semblance.” Proust wants to say that conceiving of certain events in the past as “raw materials” that are not lived until they are mediated means that the past’s authenticity does not deny the present. I have argued that this is his delusion, that the solipsism of his aesthetic theory appropriates the present – a fate that is, considered politically, even worse than denial. Appropriation is a combination of denial and power.

Krapp, from within the dark room of Beckett’s play, is neither powerful nor in denial. The use of tape here plays with time and narrative in unique ways, to demonstrate his lucidity about time’s passage from the present moment. The recording of the earlier Krapp allows the later Krapp to play back his voice – a voice that simultaneously testifies to its former presence in a particular moment, and gives a narrative that recalls previous moments. The tape is thus another instance of doubled absence – both a record that indicates the past’s absence, and a narrative that fails to make its object present. Krapp’s goal is not to make the past present, though – whatever pattern or insight the tapes offer has nothing to do with transcendence. Rather, the play focuses on his lived experience of remembering.

Krapp is a strange hybrid – his way of preserving the past, like voluntary memory, demonstrates its inaccessibility. Unlike voluntary memory, though, Krapp seems to understand the limitations of the form. His weary exhortation to “be again” neither idealizes the past and “all that old misery,” nor does it seriously fall into the nostalgic dilemma – the desire to have the past “again for the first time.” The repetitions of the tapes, like the memory-dreams of the past, wandering propped up in the dark, will always lack originality. “Once wasn’t enough for you.” For Krapp – and Beckett – the irreversible passage of time is the closest thing to a fundamental

law. The question is not how to get back to the past or redeem what is lost, but rather how to navigate the residues and ruins that our past selves bequeath to us.

For Krapp, the major set of ruins is a series of lost women: Bianca, the dark nurse, and the girl in the punt. The latter marks what he calls, with an almost Hamm-like hesitation, “Farewell to—[*he turns page*—]love.” He chooses the insight of his “memorable equinox” over her, the realization “at last that the dark I have always struggled to keep under is in reality my most— [*Krapp curses, switches off, winds tape forward, switches on again*]—unshatterable association until my dissolution of storm and night with the light of the understanding and the fire...” (III.226). Dark and light imagery governs the play. Darkness implies finitude, particularly insofar as it invokes both death and sensation. Light implies both release and understanding – something like trust. Dark and light constantly orbit and meet one another – the white dog with the black ball, and the dark nurse “all white and starch but “with a big black hooded perambulator.” In a production of the play Beckett specified “The eye is the organ of interruption between light and dark, therefore it is important.”<sup>167</sup> Krapp remembers these absent women by their eyes – “incomparable,” and “like chrysolite,” Each woman is a former locus of possibility for happiness, existing on the other side of both finitude and trust, and each is herself a combination of light and dark. Each woman is also nothing more than a memory; Krapp does not make the mistake of thinking that his memory somehow constitutes her – “What remains of all that misery? A girl in a shabby green coat, on a railway-station platform? No?” (III.224). The image obviously remains, and then it is repeated as an impression on the tape, but it makes no claims to appropriate its object or occasion. The description remains as a site of emptiness,

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<sup>167</sup> James Knowlson ed., *Theatre Workbook 1: Samuel Beckett, Krapp’s Last Tape* (London: Brutus Books, 1980), 134.

something that must do for now, like many of the Unnamable's words. All that exists is his current moment of remembering, facilitated by the tape – even the voice on the tape is a ghost, an irretrievable absence.

The girl in the punt is perhaps more complicated, because the experience that the tape evokes is more intense. Light and dark circle each other again, the sun blazing behind him, until he casts a shadow on her and she can open her eyes, which remain completely inscrutable. “I bent over her to get them in the shadow and they opened. [*Pause. Low.*] Let me in. [*Pause.*] We drifted in among the flags and stuck. The way they went down, sighing, before the stem!” (III.227). “Let me in” is our reaction to finitude; it is our reaction to boundaries. It is poignant in its impossibility. Although Krapp narrates the scene in the past tense, “Let me in” has no narrative frame. The low intensity of the phrase implies that the narrating Krapp is lost for a moment in his experience of the memory, simultaneously recalling the moment in the punt when he wanted to cross the boundary between himself and the girl, and wanting in the moment of narration to cross the boundary between present and past. This is not wanting with a sense of possibility, however – Krapp's longing is a futile extension, and he engages in it as such.

The moment with the girl stands in direct contrast to Krapp's revelation of his work. His vision occurs in a wild storm, “great granite rocks the foam flying up in the light of the lighthouse and the wind-gauge spinning like a propeller,” and his memory with her is on a lake, where “under us all moved, and moved us, gently” (III.227). His vision depends on “the fire that set it alight,” (III.226) and it kindles “the fire in me now,” but the “now” of the tape, of Krapp at 39 (III.230). On the lake, they sit “with the sun blazing down” and her “eyes just slits, because of the glare” (III.227). Both Krapp's work and his loves involve these borders between light and dark, fire and water – but his work is both solipsistic and a matter of abstraction, in the moment's

“unshatterable association” with the storm and the “light of the understanding” (III.226). In the boat, particularly after he comes up against the border between them at her eyes, all is touch. “I lay down across her with my face in her breasts and my hand on her. We lay there without moving. But under us all moved, and moved us, gently, up and down, and from side to side” (III.227). As he narrates, Krapp allows the text to lilt like the water, gently. He takes pleasure in the memory, but also in the way the words feel to say, as he remembers. At the end of the play, he does not repeat the intensely focused “let me in;” he says “Lie down across her” (III.229). The imperative mood here works in the same way as “be again” – repeat it, he says; “once wasn’t enough for you.” These repetitions are not representations; each one reiterates its belatedness, its distance from the event. The part of the memory to which he returns is not the futile reach into the boundary, but the experience of touch, allowing himself the abandon of resting against her body.

In the caress, they are close to finitude, as we remember from Rilke: “Lovers, if the beloved were not there / blocking the view, are close to it, and marvel.../As if by some mistake, it opens for them / behind each other...But neither can move past the other, and it changes back to World.”<sup>168</sup> In the memory of the gentleness of moving, Krapp can see the lost potential for marveling – but as in all Beckett, the moment is already absent. The moment also resonates with a lost version of the solitude that Rilke describes in *Letters to a Young Poet*. “And this more human love (which will fulfill itself with infinite consideration and gentleness, and kindness and clarity in binding and releasing) will resemble what we are now preparing painfully and with great struggle: the love that consists in this: that two solitudes protect and border and greet one

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<sup>168</sup> Rilke, *Ahead of All Parting*, 377.

another.”<sup>169</sup> The difference is that Rilke proposes pursuing the work of art before engaging in this kind of love, almost as a sort of preparation. Krapp, on the other hand, has already rejected this love at the age of 39, in favor of the more intense and burning solitude of his intellectual work.

The moments that we see Krapp experiencing the greatest happiness manifest in the musicality and discovery of his words. After his lengthy pantomime, the first words we hear, as he searches through his tapes, are “Box . . . three . . . spool five. [*He raises his head and stares front. With relish.*] Spool! [*Pause.*] Spooooo! [*Happy smile.*]” The word evokes the same reaction a few lines later, after he finds it. “Box three, spool five. [*He bends over the machine, looks up. With relish.*] Spooooo! [*Happy smile. He bends, loads spool on machine, rubs his hands*]” (III.222). He seems struck anew each time with the pleasure of the word itself, the sound and the feel of it.

James Knowlson surmises that this is part of Krapp’s silliness; “From being a writer who took great satisfaction in finding the appropriate word, Krapp is now reduced to taking an infantile pleasure in mere sound.”<sup>170</sup> Even Krapp himself is somewhat rueful about his fun: “Revelled in the word spool. [*With relish.*] Spooooo! Happiest moment of the past half million”

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<sup>169</sup> Rainer Maria Rilke, *Letters to a Young Poet*, trans. Stephen Mitchell (New York: Modern Library, 2001), 78. Beckett was not overfond of Rilke, as he demonstrates in an early review of a translation. He critiques “the breathless petulance of so much of his verse (he cannot hold his emotion) and the overstatement of the solitude which he cannot make his element.” As Mark Nixon points out, however, “It is difficult not to suspect that Beckett’s disavowal of Rilke’s enterprise in fact stems from a similarity of concern as well as from the discovery of echoes of his own earlier fiction and poetry. After all, Beckett’s own feelings of petulance pervade his first novel, *Dream*. Additionally, in a contemporaneous letter, Beckett admits that “in part, those problems causing him to seek psychoanalysis arose from a sense of otherness deliberately cultivated through solitude and indifference.” Beckett, “Poems. By Rainer Maria Rilke.” *Disjecta*, 67. Mark Nixon, *Samuel Beckett’s German Diaries, 1936-1937* (New York: Continuum, 2011), 120.

<sup>170</sup> Knowlson, *Theatre Workbook 1, Krapp’s Last Tape*, London: Brutus Books Ltd. 1980, 24.

(III.228). The tape that the older Krapp records near the end of the play, however, refutes this possibility that his pleasure is infantile. The younger Krapp chooses his words carefully, and his strong voice initially sounds much more eloquent than the old man who stares vacantly at the audience with a banana in his mouth and smiles foolishly as he makes funny noises. As he records a new tape, however, his sense of the younger Krapp as “that stupid bastard I took myself for thirty years ago” unfolds as completely believable to the audience. Where the previous Krapp’s articulateness felt projective, predicated on a glorious future of success and literary discovery, the older Krapp’s voice is present-focused. It might appear nostalgic at first, but his remembrances are not *for* or *about* the past or the future, they are entirely about what is happening in precisely the present moment. This is not like Proust’s redemption of the past in the present – there is no implication that the past was but “raw material” for the present’s discovery or aesthetic unity. Instead, the past is gone, it was experienced and it exists only as absence, as memory – but as memory it allows for a different experience, an experience of its pastness, its absence, and the inability of his words or thoughts to bring it back.

On the new tape, his words and syntax are simpler, but his imagery is also clearer and more emotionally evocative. “This old muckball, all the light and dark and famine and feasting of [*hesitates*] . . . the ages!” “The sour cud and the iron stool.” “Crawled out once or twice, before the summer was cold. Sat shivering in the park, drowned in dreams and burning to be gone.” There is also Fanny, his description of whom has an ironically poetic musicality – “Bony old ghost of a whore” (III.228). The pleasure of language remains for Krapp, but not as a sense of intellectual discovery or accurate representation. Instead, language has its pleasure in the saying and remembering.

James Hart inadvertently describes this mode of nostalgia as he elaborates its opposite. He says, “The nostalgic noema presents itself with the thickness of the more-than-imagined but it does not have the original givenness of the actually really existing...In nostalgic imagination, because the transformed past is more real than the actual present of the constituting act of reverie, the real I recedes in the background.”<sup>171</sup> For Krapp, and for Beckett, the real I (call that I) never recedes, and the actual present of remembering always remains more real than the transformed past. For Krapp, the past is perhaps even more absent for being recorded on tape; there is no blurring the line between his past and present selves. The tape short-circuits the function of the Proustian intermittences of the heart; in *Krapp’s Last Tape* the past self can never reconstitute its surrounding context as present again.

Although the entire play is suffused with the process of coming to terms with absence, there are two contrasting moments that highlight the process of letting-go. First, when he gives the ball to the dog after his mother dies. “All over and done with at last. I sat on for a few moments with the ball in my hand and the dog yelping and pawing at me. [*Pause.*] Moments. Her moments, my moments. [*Pause.*] The dog’s moments. [*Pause.*]” (III.226). His mother’s moments are now completely beyond understanding. We recall again Roland Barthes discussing his mother’s death; “In the phrase ‘she no longer suffers,’ to what, to whom does ‘she’ refer? What does the present mean here?”<sup>172</sup> Once the shade has gone down, Krapp’s mother’s moments are meaningless as such; having died, she is no longer subject to the mortal order of time, measured by moments as it runs out.

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<sup>171</sup> James Hart, *Toward a Phenomenology of Nostalgia*, 406.

<sup>172</sup> Barthes, *Journal de Deuil*, 25. “Dans la phrase « Elle ne souffre plus », à quoi, à qui renvoie « elle »? Que veut dire ce présent?”



The reference to the dog's moments is blackly funny – the possible sentimentality of the scene, the wistful pauses, offset by the absurdity of doggy time. It also, however, recalls Rilke's discussion of the animal in the Eighth Elegy. "We, only, can see death; the free animal / has its decline in back of it, forever, / and God in front, and when it moves, it moves / already in eternity, like a fountain."<sup>173</sup> Unlike humans, for animals the present moment, eternity, and "pure time" can all mean the same thing. The dog's whiteness identifies it with spirit and abstraction, as well as the object of understanding, which one always fails to obtain. The dog, in his whiteness, bears away the ball, black and densely concrete, with the same immediate and indisputable reality as death. "In the end I held it out to him and he took it in his mouth, gently, gently. A small, old, black, hard, solid rubber ball. [*Pause.*] I shall feel it, in my hand, until my dying day. [*Pause.*] I might have kept it. [*Pause.*] But I gave it to the dog" (III.226). Krapp, listening, does not stop the tape at this moment to brood – he has given away the concreteness of this moment like he gave away the ball. He will not say to this memory, however knowingly futilely, "Let me in." Once was enough for him, of this occasion.

The second moment of letting-go is more complicated – it is his second repetition of the punt recording, and the play concludes, Krapp standing motionless with the words "No, I wouldn't want them back" hanging in the air (III.230). At 69, Krapp knows what "the fire in me now" will yield – "Seventeen copies sold, of which eleven at trade price to free circulating libraries beyond the seas. Getting known" (III.228). The intellectual fire sputters in the economic reality of publishing. Memories of the intense moment in the punt and with the rejection of such moments seem to strike Krapp at the same time. Writing to Pat Magee, for whom he wrote the play, Beckett says "He is overcome at the memory of his 'farewell to love' (renouncement of

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<sup>173</sup> Rilke, *Ahead of All Parting*, 377.

Bianca and the girl in the punt) as liable to interfere with ('get in the way of') his intellectual activity."<sup>174</sup> This is not precisely nostalgia or regret, as Krapp's pose at the end indicates. "[*Krapp motionless staring before him. The tape runs on in silence*]" (III.230). The past is past, and he is lodged in the present as his tape runs out. At 69 the question of whether he would want those years back, "when there was a chance of happiness," is completely irrelevant; the passage of time has mooted it (III.230). He is living with the ruin of his memory, and with the inability of an epiphany to solve time's passing.

Krapp is, effectively, living in the wake of a Proustian decision to bid farewell to love. It is worth remembering that Proust the author was still writing on his deathbed. Jean-Yves Tadié says, "According to Céleste, it was in the spring of 1922 that Proust, smiling and looking weary, summoned her: 'I have important news. Tonight, I wrote the word "end"... Now, I can die.'" "<sup>175</sup> Like Odysseus's *nostos*, however, the satisfaction of this authorial homecoming is only momentary; what appears to be the end of the journey is really only a deferral of the end. He edited and revised until the final possible moment, about 16 hours before his death.<sup>176</sup> The Proustian redemption depends in part on the vampiric immortality of living on in the reader, but it also works because Proust did not have a chance to see it fail. The "fire" for which he bid farewell to love stayed with him until he died; at the end of his life he did not have to stand alone, waiting.

Krapp shows the decay of the Proustian dream and the Proustian artist. Krapp's tapes, like the *Search*, secret away his insights "against the day when my work will be done and perhaps no place left in my memory, warm or cold, for the miracle that . . . [*hesitates*] . . . for the

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<sup>174</sup> Beckett, *Letters 1957-1965*, 129. April 11<sup>th</sup> 1958 letter to Patrick Magee.

<sup>175</sup> Jean-Yves Tadié, *Marcel Proust: A Life* (New York: Viking, 2000), 762.

<sup>176</sup> Tadié, *Proust*, 777.

fire that set it alight” (III.226). Marcel’s book depends on the safe transmission of that miracle, its proliferation that will keep his fire alight after his death – and Proust writes until there is no chance that he could see a “farewell to love” result in the pathos of “getting known” to the pathetic degree of seventeen copies. At the end of Krapp’s last tape, he faces a much quieter version of the *bouleversement*. Marcel approaches – but then retreats from – finitude when he realizes that his dead grandmother is truly nothing more than his memory, that she lacks the unknowability that allowed him to touch and trust her. This is his farewell to love, which finds its justification at the *Search*’s completion. Krapp, by contrast, stands in the static of his finitude, knowing that the girl in the punt is nothing more than a memory, but so too his farewell to love, which never found its justification, and never will.

Most of Beckett’s creatures, but particularly Krapp, function along the lines with which Rilke concludes his Eighth Elegy.

And we: spectators, always, everywhere,  
turned toward the world of objects, never outward.  
It fills us. We arrange it. It breaks down.  
We rearrange it, then break down ourselves.

Who has twisted us around like this, so that  
no matter what we do, we are in the posture  
of someone going away? Just as, upon  
the farthest hill, which shows him his whole valley  
one last time, he turns, stops, lingers—,  
so we live here, forever taking leave.

Turned towards his tapes and his habits, Krapp arranges and rearranges his life as it breaks and he breaks – as it has always been breaking and so has he. He is forever taking leave of his memories, both those he has let go like the black ball, given to the dog, and those that pull at him despite their presence only as magnetic grooves on the tape's substrate.

As one of Beckett's demonstrations of representation's failure, the play is itself one of humanity's many many tapes, which all come together to degenerate into "the old style" and continue profaning the silence. The play tells us that if we are going to play with words, we might do so in the manner of saying "spoooool," with the pleasure of touching the present surface of a broken word. If we can avoid the words, perhaps we might find an occasion to watch our bees, touch foreheads with a friend, or lay down across her, not again, but for the first time.

## 5.0 DIDACTIC ELEGY: LOVE IN THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY

Ben Lerner's "Didactic Elegy," from his early book *Angle of Yaw*, both summarizes the issues I have been elaborating and illustrates their continued relevance in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. He demonstrates how the closure of distance between event and artwork manifests in the contemporary news cycle and how it shapes our ability to understand violence. Poetry and criticism, with their ability to challenge the premises of representation, could potentially help us revise the direction that representation is taking our cultural reaction to political events. Via Beckettian themes of failure, "Didactic Elegy" addresses the errors of Proustian aesthetic redemptiveness as they have persisted in the development of history and representation. It proposes that the violence that representation perpetrates on its object can, when the structure of representation reflects the limitations of human finitude, more closely resemble love. Lerner thus builds on Beckett's oeuvre to postulate a reversal of Marcel's decision in *The Intermittences of the Heart*. In Proust, the intolerability of love as it intersects with death drives Marcel into his desire of Albertine and his redemptive conclusions. In Lerner, the intolerability of redemption as it manifests in destructive cultural narratives drives the poet into the elegiac mode that teaches the skill and terms of reading lovingly. Reconsidering Lerner's work in light of this dissertation's analysis of nostalgia, finitude, desire, and love in the writing of Marcel Proust and Samuel Beckett shows how essential these writers and themes continue to be.

The poem first establishes a figure for the artwork: “Intention draws a bold, black line across an otherwise white field.”<sup>177</sup> The simplicity here immediately recalls the relationship between darkness and light that underlies *Krapp’s Last Tape*. Like the spirit, incomprehension, or letting-go of whiteness in the play, “the field is apprehension in its idle form.” The line, similarly, is concrete and worldly. Interpretation happens immediately, almost involuntarily; “The eye constitutes any disturbance in the field as an object. / This is the grammatical function of the eye. To distinguish between objects, / the eye assigns value where there is none.” To create a habit that allows us to navigate the world, we – both audiences and artists – invest the objects of artworks with value. The intention of the artist has a bearing on the work of art, but it is not determinative; “Even if the artist is a known quantity, interpretation is an open struggle. / An artwork aware of this struggle is charged with negativity. / And yet naming negativity destroys it.”

Both Proust and Beckett create artworks aware of this negativity and struggle. Proust wants to destroy this negativity, and so the object of the *Search* is to state negativity’s name as irrefutably as possible. This is the meaning of the famous lost paradise passage, claiming that involuntary memory “suddenly makes us breathe a new air, new precisely because it is an air we have breathed before, this purer air which the poets have tried in vain to make reign in paradise and which could not provide this profound feeling of renewal if it had not already been breathed, for the only true paradise is a paradise that we have lost” (6.178). By naming the lost paradise as a site of renewal, in the context of art as a renewing force and the feeling of renewal as evidence of its certain attainment, Proust converts the lost paradise’s negativity into redemption.

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<sup>177</sup> All Lerner quotations are from Ben Lerner, “Didactic Elegy,” *Angle of Yaw* (Port Townsend: Copper Canyon Press, 2006), 59-67.

Beckett, by contrast, traces the graph of negativity along its asymptote, forever approaching zero but never reaching it. He outlines his refusal to name negativity at the end of the last of the *Three Dialogues*. After sketching the failure of the relationship between artist and occasion, he says

I know all that is required now, in order to bring even this horrible matter to an acceptable conclusion, is to make of this submission, this admission, this fidelity to failure, a new occasion, a new term of relation, and of the act which, unable to act, obliged to act, he makes, an expressive act, even if only of itself, of its impossibility, of its obligation. I know that my inability to do so places myself, and perhaps an innocent, in what I think is still called an unenviable situation (IV.563).

Lest even this abdication become solidified into the clarity of a theory, Beckett undermines himself one last time – he starts his argument in the last dialogue by pledging that he will state both his point and then affirm the likelihood of its opposite. At the very end, the voice of Duthuit having reminded him, he says, “(*remembering, warmly*) Yes, yes, I am mistaken, I am mistaken” (IV.563). Lerner, similarly, says “a poem can seek out a figure of its own impossibility. / But when the meaning of such a figure becomes fixed, it is a mere positivity.” A figure of impossibility must include doubt; otherwise its fixed negativity becomes a figure of certainty, rather than impossibility.

Lerner then raises the problem of history. The occasion of an artwork is also an event. A historical event can cause the reevaluation of artworks, even as it can also become an object of representation.

Events extraneous to the work, however, can unfix the meaning of its figures, thereby recharging it negatively. For example,

if airplanes crash into towers and those towers collapse,  
there is an ensuing reassignment of value.

Those works enduringly susceptible to radical revaluations are masterpieces.

The phrase *unfinished masterpiece* is redundant.

The defining political event of America so far in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, 9/11 recontextualized the history of artwork – as has every war and major political event. The works of Proust and Beckett are to some degree “unfinished” in this way, particularly because they are continually helpful for interpreting both their own moments in light of history’s unfolding, and the contemporary moment as the crest of that unfolding.

“Masterpiece” indicates the value of the artwork over time. When Benjamin first elides the difference between the past and history in his exchange with Horkheimer, and then insists on the importance of keeping history incomplete, he is attempting to make the events of the past into a masterpiece in this sense – unfinished and enduringly susceptible to radical revaluation. This is very much how Proust functions; his redemption depends on the *Search*’s status as a masterpiece. Even the text’s title invokes this openness; it is, ongoingly, “*In Search of Lost Time*.”

The artwork that accepts failure still becomes meaningless if the acceptance of failure becomes a foregone conclusion. “If artworks are no longer required to account for their own status, / this poem’s figures will then be fixed and meaningless.” This way of thinking about the artwork as a past event implies something much more like Horkheimer’s perspective. If the past is past, then it is “fixed” insofar as it is inaccessible, and it is “meaningless” in itself, like the deaths of the slain. History constructs the meaning, but confusing history with the past imputes



meaning onto something meaningless. This is much more on the order of Beckett's work. He refused to interpret his artworks, lending them the opaque meaningfulness of events.

Lerner says "meaninglessness, when accepted, can be beautiful / in the way the Greeks were beautiful / when they accepted death. / Only in this sense can a poem be heroic." The implication is that the acceptance of death and meaningfulness can be heroically beautiful, which opens the acceptance of dying as a heroic event. "The hero makes a masterpiece of dying / and even if the hero is a known quantity / there is an open struggle over the meaning of her death." It might at first appear that Beckett's work is aligned with the acceptance of death, and Proust's with death's rejection. In this redemptive context, though, the orientation reverses. To make a masterpiece of dying is to leave it unfinished, and thereby redeemed from loss. Rather than existing as a microcosm of the unknown, death becomes part of a narrative. This heroism exposes the possibility for it to function like Proustian altruism, which pursues the production of a masterpiece at all costs, including death. "I understood that dying was not something new but quite the reverse, that since my childhood I had already died a number of times" (6.347). Proust actually accepts death in a very similar way to the Greeks, for whom the story of their exploits far outweighed the fear of death. To die gloriously and to have a story that proliferated broadly was far better than living ignominiously through a battle. As we have seen from Beckett's reading of Vico and Auerbach's reading of Homer the Greeks thought of meaning very differently than the modernists or the artists and critics of late modernity. The Greek acceptance of death was predicated on fate and story; even if arbitrary, it was suffused with divine meaning. The cultural fact of the gods lent fullness to the story; because modern humans are more capable of abstraction and we lack the underlying fullness of divinity, to behave with a Greek orientation towards story may be beautiful, but it is also delusional.

Even though Beckett's creatures exist in an apocalyptic wasteland of ruined representation, they still "hesitate to . . . to end. Yes, there it is, it's time it ended and yet I hesitate to—[*he yawns*—to end" (III.93). They cling visibly to their stories. Knowing that they have been born by a woman standing astride a grave, they still feel the wind of mortality as gravity pulls them down. "We alone / fly past all things, as fugitive as the wind."<sup>178</sup> They react like the man falling from the twin towers, who, "captured on tape, flapped his arms as he fell." Beckett's acceptance of this hesitation and his portrayal of it in his artwork helps him to resist the problematic identification of artwork and occasion.

Lerner makes the importance of this mindset clear when he invokes the contemporary 24-hour news cycle. "The critic watches the image of the towers collapsing. / She remembers less and less about the towers collapsing / each time she watches the image of the towers collapsing." The critic engages with the towers falling like a Proustian voluntary memory, the original event fading away as the memory replaces it. This does not mean, however, that the Proustian framework is valid. "The critic feels guilty viewing the image like a work of art, / but guilt here stems from an error of cognition, / as the critic fails to distinguish between an event / and the event of the event's image." Proustian involuntary memory is predicated specifically on the failure to distinguish between an event and the event's image. As we saw, Proust's descriptions of involuntary memories differ significantly from the initial occasion in context; he has already incorporated them into the structure of his story.

Proust has made the initial event into a masterpiece, but as Beckett demonstrates, this is not necessarily responsible. Lerner continues, "The image of the towers collapsing is a work of art / and, like all works of art, may be rejected / for soiling that which it ostensibly depicts. As a

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<sup>178</sup> Rilke, "The Second Elegy," *Ahead of All Parting*, 341.

general rule, / if a representation of the towers collapsing / may be repeated, it is unrealistic.” Repetition that makes the “error of cognition” mistaking an event for the event’s image is unrealistic because it occurs outside of time; in reality, as opposed to in narrative or artwork, time is irreversible. Repetition is only “realistic” insofar as it portrays itself precisely as a repetition. *Krapp’s Last Tape* shows this in action; every replay of the tape is realistic because it reiterates the pastness of the tape’s moment.

Lerner’s portrayal of hope closely follows the work of the Beckettian oeuvre. “Formalism is the belief that the eye does violence to the object it apprehends. / All formalisms are therefore sad. A negative formalism acknowledges the violence intrinsic to its method.” We remember Beckett’s similar statement from the dialogues; “All that should concern us is the acute and increasing anxiety of the relation [between the artist and his occasion] itself, as though shadowed more and more darkly by a sense of invalidity, of inadequacy, of existence at the expense of all that it excludes, all that it blinds to” (IV.562). Lerner takes Beckett’s anxiety one step further. Instead of concern about the increasing shadow over the relationship between artist and occasion and worry about the artwork’s existence at the expense of what it excludes, Lerner explicitly says that this existence does violence to the object, and that this violence is such a foregone conclusion that has progressed from anxiety to sadness.

As I have argued, Beckett’s landscapes portray the ruin of representation, rather than the ruin of the world. To read one of Beckett’s novels or watch one of his plays is to experience a portrayal of the failure of representation, not a failure of the world. Lerner describes this project as he sees it occurring in his own poetry: “Negative formalisms catalyze an experience of structure. / The experience of structure is sad, / but, by revealing the contingency of content, it authorizes hope.” The content, or the object of the artwork, remains unknowable. Experiencing

the structure of representation as it does violence to its object and still fails to make it present helps us to understand that artwork cannot, and should not, defeat the “curse of aesthetic semblance.” To experience the failure of art to appropriate its object means that the Proustian redemption cannot occur – time continues passing, and our deaths are opaque and meaningless.

Lerner all but calls Adorno by name in this section of the elegy. “This is the role of artwork—to authorize hope, / but the very condition of possibility for this hope is the impossibility of its fulfillment. / The value of hope is that it has no use value. / Hope is the saddest of formalisms.” He is summarizing Adorno’s *Aesthetic Theory*, but making explicit the damage that pervades it via *Minima Moralia*. Most importantly, this section highlights the simultaneous violence and sadness that desire seeks to avoid or solve. Hope is the saddest mode of “belief that the eye does violence to the object it apprehends,” because hope sees the futility in resisting this violence, and the complicity that we have with this violence by virtue of our humanity.

By 2006, Lerner asks with an irony that can only grow as time passes, “Should we memorialize the towers’ collapse? / Can any memorial improve on the elegance of absence? / Or perhaps, in memoriam, we should destroy something else.” In memoriam, of course, America went on a destructive rampage. It created a threateningly incomprehensible “other,” played a delusional game so powerful that it reshaped the course of history, and destroyed whatever threatened its self-justifying story. As I have shown, this trajectory is desirous; perhaps it is unsurprising, then, that this was retrospectively an act of appropriation. The totalitarian possibilities of the Patriot Act, the senseless torture and violations of the rule of law at Guantanamo Bay, the resurgence of religious radicalism in politics – in what amounted to a desirous affair with Al-Qaeda and the Taliban in Iraq and Afghanistan, the American

government operated in a mode of appropriation and therefore, as it has done many times before, made proper to itself the legacies it had reviled the most.

Violence that respects the incomprehensibility and inappropriability of the other begins to lose its ability to damage. As he concludes the “Didactic Elegy,” Lerner summarizes the case he has made for the relationship between artistic representation, nostalgia, desire, love, and politics.

The key is to intend as little as possible in the act of memorialization.

By intending as little as possible we refuse to assign value where there is none.

Violence is not yet modern; it fails to acknowledge the limitations of its medium.

When violence becomes aware of its mediacy and loses its object  
it will begin to resemble love.

Love is negative because it dissolves

all particulars into an experience of form.

Refusing to assign meaning to an event is to interpret it lovingly.

Lerner tells us explicitly what Beckett’s work, read carefully and lovingly, helps us to experience. Violence is mythic and desirous, a destructive force of appropriation. It fails to acknowledge the limitations of its medium because they are the same as human limitations – it is finite, self-contained, unable to control time or other people. Violence is felt as pleasure when it gives the impression of control. Involuntary memory is an act of violence against the past, and the vampirism of Proustian redemption is an act of violence against the reader. Even the *bouleversement*, which demonstrates the possibility of love, ultimately turns its back on finitude. It reacts to what it perceives as the violence of finitude with the violence of representation.

Art’s limitation is that it plays in the realm of imagination; its possibility is predicated on its impossibility. Playing that fails to acknowledge the game’s limits becomes a delusion. A

delusion backed by power becomes a hypothesis, and when the testing of such a hypothesis involves the obliteration of human life, it becomes violence. Artwork creates the conditions for violence when it disregards the limitations of imagination, encouraging fear of the unknown or nostalgic myths that purport to assuage such fear. *In Search of Lost Time* is beautiful, even “in the way Greeks were beautiful / when they accepted death,” but we are no longer Greek, and to make a masterpiece of dying in the age of the machine gun and the trench, or the gas chambers and the atom bomb, or the unmanned aerial vehicle, is to risk either glorifying or missing the flapping of our arms as we all fall.

Violence that has lost its object is fiction; *King Lear* is such a form of violence. It presents unknowability and helplessness to us; it shows us the incompleteness that would have us protect ourselves with desire. Violence is the drive outwards from ourselves; without an object and within the limitations of finitude, it helps us trace our boundaries and know our failures. Knowing our finitude makes us capable of love. As Jean-Luc Nancy says, the other, from beyond the bounds of finitude, “breaks the heart: this is not necessarily bloody or tragic, it is beyond an opposition between the tragic and serenity or gaiety. The break is nothing more than a touch, but the touch is not less deep than a wound.”<sup>179</sup> The form of violence that shows us our brokenness, our failure, solitude, and mortality, also enables love. It strips us bare, which allows us to touch skin to skin, forehead to forehead. Love dissolves particulars into an experience of form as limited and immediate; form as an attachment “to beloved features and not to the idol of personality, the reflected image of possession.”<sup>180</sup> Thus, what Lerner calls love’s dissolving of

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<sup>179</sup> Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, 98.

<sup>180</sup> Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 79.

particulars is really a non-appropriative form of particularization, a focus on surface as a way of trusting the lost object who is now her own subject, another I to say I.

Beckett performs for us the refusal to assign meaning to the events of his novels and plays; he shows us love and many critics call it nihilism. In his letters and stage directions, we see the attention to surfaces, to the particularity and “beloved features” of his broken creatures. To interpret an artwork lovingly, we experience it each time in the present moment, as an event; but we also experience its awareness of its own violence. It violates the silence by speaking, and it violates language by re-inscribing the emptiness of the “old words.” This awareness is painful, nostalgic, and not less deep than a wound, but it also touches us and trusts us to touch it. It shows us how to learn from a slaying without making a masterpiece of the slain. In a world of scarcity, full of fear and desire, it touches us and says, “you must go on.” It says to us that, in this mind and in this moment, we have found the only home we will ever have.

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