

A Unity of Disunity: Ambivalence toward Modernity in Marcel Proust's *Swann's Way*

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Abstract

This article explores the contradictions and complexities intrinsic to modernity manifest in Proust's *Swann's Way* as a way of understanding not only how modernity is depicted, but also how this text engages in the notion of modernity by embracing it, critiquing it, and responding to it. The first part examines Proust's description of the changing mode of consciousness and the complex nature of reality in the modern society. The second part explores Proust's deep ambivalence toward modernity which forms a tension underlying his narrative. The third part discusses how Proust, rendering the momentary and the fleeting by means of memory and writing, extracts poetry from within modernity. Grappling with, and seeking not to subdue, the dissonance introduced by such ambivalence, Proust draws upon art to counter the contingency of time and history.

Keywords: Marcel Proust, *Swann's Way*, Modernity, Ambivalence, Art

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I. Introduction

In his provocative book *All That Is Solid Melts into Air*, Marshall Berman traces the divisions in intellectual field of modernity: “Modernity is either embraced with a blind and uncritical enthusiasm, or else condemned with a neo-Olympian remoteness and contempt” (24). The divergence of such distinctively positive and negative attitudes is partly due to “contradictions and complexities intrinsic to modernity itself” (Berman 40). As a stage in the history of Western civilization, modernity is a product of scientific and technological progress, of industrial revolution, of the sweeping economic and social change brought about by capitalism. As an aesthetic concept, modernity, or aesthetic modernism, reflects and at the same time criticizes the inhuman sides of modernization. Put differently, in the social and cultural context, modernity marks the shift from regulated and traditional structures to a social and experiential universe characterized by disorder, nonlinear complexity, and unpredictability. In artistic context, modernist artist is cut off from the normative past with its fixed criteria, and tradition has no legitimate claim to offer him/her examples to imitate or directions to follow.¹ Accordingly, in “The Painter of Modern Life,” Charles Baudelaire describes one half of modernity as being concerned with “the transient, the fleeting, and the contingent,” the other half records “the eternal and the immutable” (403). As one of the first artists to oppose aesthetic modernity not only to tradition but also to the practical modernity of bourgeois civilization, Baudelaire reveals manifestly contradictory attitude toward modernity: on the one hand, he proposes a rejection of the past and celebrates the beneficial possibilities of science and technology; on the other hand, he nostalgically evokes the loss of an aristocratic past and deplores the usurpation of a vulgar, materialistic middle-class present.

Because the path of modernity is full of risks and difficulties, Baudelaire regards it a heroic choice to be modern. In the essay mentioned above, he contrasts the modern painter with the idle spectator—though they both are involved in the present occasion, the painter looks for something more than the fleeting moment. “His business is to separate from contemporary fashion whatever it may contain of poetry

¹ A number of difficulties are encountered in the analysis of modernity, notably the presence of a constellation of related terms (‘modern’; ‘modernism’; and ‘modernity’) and a lack of agreed periodization. In this paper, I use the term by referring to how it is employed by Berman for the reason that his concern and argument are in closest relation to what I intend to discuss in this paper. For more contributions to debates on this issue, see Barry Smart, 1990 and Calinescu, 1987 (modernity and the present); Kroker and Cook, 1988 *Modernity’s emergence, development and current crisis*; Featherstone, 1985 *Modernity’s fate*; Habermas, 1981 *Modernity as a project*.

within history, to extract the eternal from the ephemeral” (Baudelaire 365). Berman praises Baudelaire for going beyond “rigid polarities and flat totalizations” and he theorizes, by turning to the great modernists of the nineteenth century, the ambivalence of modernity positively:

To be modern is to find ourselves in an environment that promises us adventures, power, joy, growth, transformation of ourselves and the world —and at the same time, that threatens to destroy everything we have, everything we know, everything we are. Modern environments are experiences cut across all boundaries of geography and ethnicity, of class and nationality, of religion and ideology; in this sense, modernity can be said to unite all mankind. But it is a paradoxical unity, *a unity of disunity*: it pours us all into a maelstrom of personal disintegration and renewal, of struggle and contradiction, of ambiguity and anguish. (15; my emphasis)

As one of the most brilliant writers gifted with kaleidoscopic consciousness, which Baudelaire has compared to a modern artist, Marcel Proust engages in this notion of modernity by responding to it, critiquing it, embracing it, and also problematizing it. In this paper, I'll examine the way Proust's novel *Swann's Way* displays a deep ambivalence toward modernity precisely through understanding itself as testament and response to modernity.² I'll first examine how Proust offers a valid contribution to an understanding of changes in and challenges to human perceptions in the modern society he depicts. The narrator plunges himself into the openness of multiple experiences and provides a fuller picture of the complex nature of reality. Through the kaleidoscopic lens worn on the narrator, we see how contradiction, fluidity, and fragmentation are directly connected to modern experience. In the second part, I aim to explore Proust's ambivalent attitude toward modernity—both deploring its destructions of the past while celebrating its dynamic novelty in creating the future. With the function like Bertolt Brecht's “alienation effect,” Proust's work challenges the readers to rethink their epistemological categories. The instability and mobility

² *Swann's Way*, published in 1913, is the first part of Proust's seven-part novel. In this paper, I'll limit my discussion within *Swann's Way*, which, though serving as the first part of *A La Recherche du Temps Perdu*, is itself a novel. Proust himself said: “I want to make it seem a little bit like a whole, even though it is a part,” he writes to Andre Beaunier. “It would be better not to call it the first volume, since I am pretending that all by itself it forms a small unity” (*Correspondence* 12: 295. Quoted from Compagnon 33).

bring forth exciting opportunities and brand new insights. However, while modernity opens up spaces for continuous individualization, anxiety comes to replace the security of tradition and of habit. Consequently, sense of fear resulted from dislocation, loss of being, and narcissistic self-absorption penetrates the novel. Bearing awareness of the fragmentary chaos that comprises the field of modern knowledge, Proust nevertheless feels a need for personal coherence by interpreting the contingent moments in the light of more permanent forms. Based on this viewpoint, in the third part, I'd further explore how Proust, by exercising his creativity, translates the modern fragmentary experience into art, and hence imposes order on the chaos of temporal flux. If the liberation of man is achieved in the process of mature use of reason at the moment of Enlightenment, for Proust, as it is for Baudelaire, it is accomplished through art, an art nevertheless characterized by the collaboration of intelligence and intuition, the conjunction of reality and symbolism.

II. A World of Kaleidoscopic Vision

“What we suppose to be our love or our jealousy is never a single, continuous and indivisible passion. It is composed of an infinity of successive loves, of different jealousies, each of which is ephemeral, although by their uninterrupted multiplicity they give us the impression of continuity, the illusion of unity” (404).³

In the opening pages of *Swann's Way*, the narrator, awakening in the night, does not know who he is because he has lost the means of relating both the moment and the place in which he now lives to all the other places and moments of his former experience. The walls and furniture of his room whirl silently about him in the dark, as they take the forms of various rooms where he has slept in the past. Times, places, and people are all mixed up together. The narrator's lengthy reveries on the verge of sleep are condensed into the image of “the kaleidoscope of darkness” (4). Confronted with the chaos of perception, the immobility of our categories and minds shatters. At the moment of dizziness, the narrator gains the insight:

Perhaps the immobility of the things that surround us is forced upon them by our conviction that they are themselves and not anything else, by the immobility of our conception of them. For it always happened that when

³ In the pages follow, all reference to *Swann's Way* will be designated only by page number.

I awoke like this, and my mind struggles in an unsuccessful attempt to discover where I was, everything revolved around me through the darkness: things, places, years. (6)

A few pages later, a magic lantern entertains the narrator by transforming his bedroom into a series of legendary and historical scenes. The projection of a sleeping man is analogous to the magic lantern's projection of Golo on the wall. The colors of the lantern slides suggest the fluidity of the apparently stable and the immateriality of what seems to be real. By manipulating the projector, the narrator is able to focus the magic lantern's slides on any part of his room with multiple shifting perspectives.

Roger Shattuck points out that it is principally through the science and the art of optics that Proust beholds and depicts the world: "Truth—and Proust believed in it—is a miracle of vision" (6). Optical images may imply changes in perspectives or points of views. The way in which we see the world is not determined, as in Kant, by a uniform array of transcendently necessary categories, but, following Nietzsche, by our specific constitution—our perspective or temperament—so that there may be as many arrangements as there are pairs of eyes.⁴ Indeed, in early twentieth century, reality is no longer regarded as material, unchanging, and regularly patterned, but as energetic, fluctuating, and chaotic. As Erickson puts it, "Our capacity to sum up the meaning of man and the universe by means of a few absolute presuppositions has become more and more meaningless in the post-Einsteinian world" (260).⁵ Everyone "sees," but optics are dictated by focusing angles. Optics are colored by assumptions—or, in popular diction—by the lens one wears. The same man thus projects different images for each viewer, but each image is a partial lie or an incomplete truth.

Framed in such a worldview, Proust's vision was not of a unified, comprehensible, and essentially motionless world like that of Renaissance art. The action of the story can be seen as consisting in Marcel's gradual discovery of the truth that no person, no action, no sentiment, no social phenomenon is ever simple or consistent. For instance, the narrator remembers Swann in many different perspectives. In his eyes, there is Swann the unwelcome visitor whose presence means banishment to his room. He is also the welcome visitor with stories and pictures of far-off places

⁴ In his study of the two discursive structures—philosophical and literary—in Proust's novel, Joshua Landy suggests that "Proust is closer to Nietzsche than to any other philosopher" (8). Edward Andrew further asserts that "Proust is a master of Nietzschean perspectivism" (18).

⁵ Shattuck traces a close parallel between the coordinate system of relativity theory and Proust's optics of time. See Shattuck, pp.43-57.

like Venice and Balbec. Then he emerges as the Husband of Odette. When the narrator falls in love with their daughter, Swann becomes for him the Father of Gilbert. In still another role, he is also a friend of The Guermantes. We are enabled to put together in a kind of mosaic the impressions Swann makes at various times and in many different situations.

If there emerges a changing sense of reality in early twentieth century, so does the sense of human nature change. Far from being the autonomous or transcendental ego, man was seen to be at the mercy of basic unconscious drives. For Proust, among errors initiating in the Renaissance is the idea of human perfectibility and the integrity of human personality. We may see many examples in *Swann's Way* about the discontinuity of personality and fragments of the self. Instead of being fixed entities, many characters reveal new, surprising and even mutually contradictory selves as the novel progresses. They are paradoxical mixtures of cruelty and kindness, sadism and altruism, always alternating between anger and affection. The family cook, Françoise, is one of the first to make Marcel aware of the complexity and many-sidedness of the most apparently simple human being. On the one hand, Françoise appears to be the perfect servant, so devoted to Aunt Leonie that she still loves her in spite of the way Aunt Leonie treats her. On the other hand, the narrator is so shocked to hear Françoise exclaim "Filthy creature!" while she is cruelly killing a chicken. While she is a person who always shed her tears in torrents when reading in a newspaper of others' misfortunes, she is reluctant to help the kitchen-maid on her confinement. The narrator later found that Françoise constantly fed the family asparagus because it gives the kitchen-maid asthma. In Françoise, as well as many characters in the novel, the cliché of a close connection between appearance and character is disavowed:⁶

I began to realize that Françoise's kindness, her compunction, her numerous virtues, concealed many of these kitchen tragedies, just as history reveals to us that the reigns of the kings and queens who are portrayed as kneeling with their hand joined in prayer in the windows of churches were stained by oppression and bloodshed. (132-33)

⁶ Proust's story opens with the narrator presupposing his problematic self. In fact, many of the characters in this novel embrace the subjective instability of the narrator himself: Odette, Swann, Block, Legrandin, the princesse de Guermantes, etc. Bernard Zelechow explores the modernist conception of self in Proust's novel wherein Proust "demolishes the absolute ego in favor of the paradoxical self which knows itself only in relation to otherness" (80).

Besides, in the case of Françoise and the kitchen-maid, the polarities of Truth and Error come to rotate and vacillate. In her failure to serve hot coffee or bring hot water, the kitchen-maid assumes the function of "Error." Her defects, by force of contrast, "made the superior qualities of Françoise shine with added luster" (89). Within the cycle of the Virtues and Vices of Combray, the kitchen-maid's function is to set off and enhance the triumph of Truth represented by Françoise. A hard and fast line between Good and Evil, Truth and Error, is blurred.

As such, the feeling that a stable category is incapable of encompassing various aspects of reality is central to modernity. Through the kaleidoscope which produces varicolored forms in ever-changing patterns and turns the narrator's boyhood bedroom into a theater of the imagination, the narrator learns that things are never merely what they seem. As suggested by the epigraph to this chapter, there is an infinite plurality of change behind the apparent but illusory unity of experiences. However, confined by habit, which Samuel Beckett regards as the "Time cancer" (20), we tend to confine our vision and permit the deliberate use of our faculties to lie dormant. Habit deadens everything and hence hobbles enchantment by enforcing relation. It normalizes and flattens experience. Habit is thus a mode for the dynamic that threatens the individuality of individuals and the originality of their perceptions and activity. To certain degree, habit is our greatest enemy because it not only controls our reactions but deprives us of the plastic power. In a blind combination of reflexes and reactions, all real life in us becomes extinguished, and our minds become cluttered up with stale images.

Worse even, habitually preconceived ideas can always permit us to remain in ignorance of "other truths". Accordingly, in Combray, the narrators' family fails to comprehend the high social position achieved by Swann. Mama, Papa, and various aunts had "built up for their purposes" (15) a version of Swann that suited their aim of avoiding the fact that Swann frequented high places and low places in addition to their own middle-class home. The "other truths" about Swann do not penetrate Combray because it contradicts the family's social beliefs and its sense of bourgeois hierarchies. The concept of class distinction prevails in the narrator's family, but it solidifies itself especially in the minds of the great-aunts, who always close their eyes and ears whenever the conversation changes to things which don't interest them. "Their sense of hearing...would leave its receptive channels unemployed, so effectively that they were actually becoming atrophied" (19). The truth, like a bothersome fly, keeps settling on the great-aunt's nose only to be flicked away. This conflict between the reality of Swann's social life and the narrator's family's conception of it leads to the

narrator's observation that "our social personality is a creation of the thoughts of other people" (20).⁷ The family's ignorance creates the Swann of Combray.

Through the description of Aunt Leonie, we may further discern how the pernicious devotion of habit paralyses our attention, drugs the perception, and makes us incapable of adjusting our organic sensibility to the conditions of the world. Since her husband's death, Aunt Leonie had gradually "declined to leave, first Combray, then her house in Combray, then her bedroom, and finally her bed, and now never came down" (53). She leads her "little jog-trot" day by day. The prayer books and medical prescriptions are all she needed "for the performance, in bed, of her duties to soul and body" (56). Aunt Leonie's daily routine never underwent any variation, except that every Saturday the whole household would have to have lunch an hour earlier because the servant Francois had to go to the market in the afternoon. But Aunt Leonie clung to this weekly exception as much as to the rest, "that if, on a Saturday, she had had to wait for her lunch until the regular hour, it would have 'upset' her as much as if on an ordinary day she had had to put her lunch forward to its Saturday hour" (119). The narrator compares his aunt to the water-lily which endeavors in a futile way to escape but only to actuate its mechanism. As a victim of neurasthenia, Aunt Leonie presents year after year the unchanging spectacle of "her odd and unaccountable habits" (184). She died at last, vindicating that her debilitating regimen ultimately killed her.

Of course, Aunt Leonie is not the only one who observes a mechanically rigid routine of existence; she is symbolic of life at Combray, which is utterly devoid of variety or adventure, stifled by what Proust calls the "anesthesia of habit" (11). The assembled family repeats the same cliché compliments, the same speculations on the weather. Nothing surprising or new can ever happen here in Combray. It is a familiar domain composed of the hero's family, its servants, and a few acquaintances, bound by domestic allegiances and by their common knowledge of "routines and practices" (110). The security of their shared familiarity also allows the family to assimilate alien elements. The narrator remarks this small-town intolerance of the unfamiliar: "at Combray, a person that we did not know was a being as scarcely credible as a god of mythology" (111). Whenever such a person is sighted, the servants must scurry to

⁷ Ricardou points that the narrator recounts things of the past sometimes in the light of his later discoveries but sometimes in the light of his initial misconceptions. At certain times, such as the case of "two Swanns," he allows his knowledge to intrude upon the retelling of past events. He is the only one who is capable of transcending divergent perceptions of the same object. Yet in other cases, such as his adolescent love for Mme Guermantes and Gilbert, the narrator and the reader experience the same misconception. In other words, although he is very perceptive at certain moments, he can be quite blind at other times. For details, see Ricardou, p.236.

find out his or her origins, and they always manage to prove that the foreigner really is “someone one knows” (111) such as a relative of one of the town’s residents. There are no real anomalies in this small-town world, where at least one agent is always able to interpret or recode a situation in a way that makes it familiar.

Indeed, the opposition between the comforting village habitus of the “closed society” (110) on the one hand, and the anonymity of modern life on the other is a theme in Proust as in much modernist writing. Balbec, the description of the hotel room there opens the third part of *Swann's Way*, is cast as the antitype of Combray. It offers an altogether different world, characterized not by the close-knit, stifling conformities of a bourgeois upbringing but by multiplicity, art and the unconscious. In contrast to Combray, it is a world of fluidity and movement full of magic and wonderment.⁸ For the narrator, it seems, it is life in such a world outside Combray the closed society that will unravel the fiction of the stable category and established assumption. Eager for adventure, the narrator is nonetheless ill equipped to cope with the discomforts of change. Combray, for all its monotony and homogeneity, has a smoothness of texture and aesthetic harmony corresponding to the anchoring of the narrative self in the security of childhood. It shies away from dangerous truths as a healthy organism refuses to digest something which would harm it. Everyone at Combray is his own censor; but this self-censorship, far from being painful, blends with the peace of Combray.

In other words, Proust is far from systematic about this demonstration of contrasting polarities between tradition and innovation, stability and mutability. While in Proust’s work we begin to grasp the insidious effects of habit, the ways in which our take on life is pre-scripted and blinding, we at the same time learn about the kinds of horrors that can jump out of the box when habit is routed, when familiar things leap out of their skins. In the Proustian world, we encounter a system where the protective devices (skin, custom) malfunction. When Habit is laid low, “I” collapses and risks dying. Accordingly, in Balbec, the narrator suffers a kind of terror at the prospect of new and unfamiliar surroundings. While the habitual is seen as a process of stultification, it can also serve as a source of solace. If the collapse of protective blinders can cultivate our capacity for seeing beyond the immediate, it can also deprive us of security and certitudes. Engaging in the notion of modernity as “a break

⁸ While Combray is a relatively closed world compared with Balbec, there are signs in Combray itself that the French social order is less stable than middle-class people in the early days of the Republic imagine. Pericles Lewis indicates that Combray is already “a site of competing social and psychological forces which threaten to destroy the narrator’s peace of mind” (133).

with tradition, a feeling of novelty, of vertigo in the face of the passing moment” (Foucault 39), Proust nevertheless reveals a deep ambivalence toward modernity which forms a tension underlying his narrative.

III. Ambivalence toward Modernity

As has been noted above, central to modernity is the dissolution of the ordered world of role-hierarchy and local tradition. As a post-traditional social order, modernity involves a continual overturning of previous collective assumptions and customs. While Michel Foucault describes the standard characterization of modernity as “breaking with the past” (38), Nietzsche also conceptualizes how the investment of the present by the past—in the form of tradition, custom, history, habit, style, and convention—colonizes the mind and restricts the creative potentiality of human beings. “The Use and Abuse of History” identifies the past as the origin of constraint. Proust’s intense commitment to “originality” really claims something similar. The degraded version of the past is the substance of what we remember through the deadening veil of habit. In Proust’s doctrinal project, such banal forms of recollection simply reproduce banality. They jam the diverse into identities, the unique into the accustomed. They turn experience into something not experienced at all, but only dully rehearsed and mechanically reviewed. So we might expect a systematic effort in the novel to eschew the habitual and the past. Nonetheless, in his narrative practice Proust does not really condemn habit or convention. Instead, his novel displays a deep ambivalence toward modernity which forms its subject and organizes its structure. There is comfort in the routine and the expected; they shield us from the shock of novelty and the need to respond to life in unwonted ways. The collapse of historical value, on the one hand, opens up new possibility for self-modification in regard to our emotions, desires, needs, and capabilities. On the other hand, we are plunged into a universe characterized by total disorder, unintelligibility, and disintegration of all established values. Dread of emotion life goes hand in hand with the hopes and beauty generated by transgression. The radical transition embedded in modernity is experienced in this novel ambivalently—as exciting opportunity and threatening risk.

The ambivalence manifests itself clearly in the narrator’s reaction to the projection of the magic lantern mentioned above. Though he finds plenty of charm in the projection, the discovery of the unstable character of places inspires in him a feeling of apprehension and horror. The pleasures of that fantastic world hence pose a dilemma: “Yet my unhappiness was deepened as a result of the magic lantern, since

the very alternation in lighting disrupted my habitual perception of my room" (10). Habit, even though a minister of dullness it is, can provide a condition of a comfortable and familiar concept. "But I cannot express the discomfort I felt at this intrusion of mystery and beauty into a room which I had succeeded in filling with my own personality until I thought no more of it than of myself" (11). In other words, the inner richness of our life might be robbed by routine, but values of continuity, predictable existence, the known and the familiar provide people sense of security. Mechanical routinization, which seems to lead to nothingness, has become parts of a reliable human society. Thus, habit can be both harmful, by closing off new impression, and protective, in shuttering out disturbing experience.

Patterns of ambivalence are also manifest in the horror concurrent to the act of challenging authority. One example is the episode of good-night kiss wherein the narrator, so desperately longing for his mother's kiss, makes up his mind to kiss her at all costs. The good-night kiss has always been repudiated by his father as a stupid habit, but that night the narrator does succeed in regaining his mother's kiss and even in getting her away from his father for the whole night. After the incident, the narrator's desperate need for his mother is no longer considered a punishable fault but as an involuntary illness. But at the same time he was overcome by guilt of what he had done. Images of persecution prevail in the whole drama of going to bed. Father is a tall figure, "standing like Abraham in the engraving after Benozzo Gozzoli which Swann had given me, telling Sarah that she must tear herself away from Isaac" (39). Infernal rites demonstrate both his anguish of being separated from mother and that of challenging Father's authority. He regards himself as committing the worst offense in the hierarchy sins that the next moment he would hurl himself out of the window.⁹

Consequently, a sense of anxiety and irresolution as such prevails in *Swann's Way*. The boulevard melodrama acted out by two women is another example. Along the Meseglise way, the way of known certainties, of common and settled experience, the narrator witnesses a profane scene—he sees Mlle Vinteuil enacting a sadistic lesbian ritual with her lover, consisting of desecrating the image of her dead father. In this lesbian scene, which opposes to the familial and territorial circle, the narrator sees

⁹ Quinones argues that "absence of father" is characteristic of modernity: "Young men began to feel the dominance of their fathers as oppressive and to denounce it as illegitimate not because their fathers were harsher or less affectionate than before but because fathers could no longer guarantee their sons a smooth entry into the society outside the home" (Quinones 1972: 206). That the father is outmoded is parallel to the Modernists' struggle to establish a new order of consciousness. Even though the narrator's father has supreme power in the family, we may nevertheless notice an "absence of father" in *Swann's Way* wherein the narrator scarcely mentions his father except in his traumatic experience of "bedroom drama."

a rupture with all conventional forms of affective relationships. Society offers no example of an intimate relationship between women. In order to arrive at their “erotic enjoyment”, they are forced to emigrate into unknown zone, to invent, to “disorient” themselves (160). Going beyond their own limits, the two women open up the field to transgressive experiences. This cruel theater of words, gestures, and silences becomes the artistic ritual without which pleasure cannot emerge. As a homosexual, Proust nevertheless inherited a double dose of homophobia in the tradition transmitted to him by his Jewish mother and Catholic father. As Rivers points out, “One side of Proust celebrated homosexual emotion and cultivated it as an important source of inspiration, but another side of Proust, the side conditioned by cultural and societal prejudice, shunned homosexuality as unnatural, degrading, and shameful” (107). Thus, while heterosexual feelings are not explained as due to conditioning, to heredity, or to any other causes, homosexuality is in need of an explanation. The narrator accounts for the lesbianism of Mlle Vinteuil by emphasizing the role of heredity:

[T]hey occur whenever a vice which Nature herself has planted in the soul of a child—perhaps by no more than blending the virtues of his father and mother, as she might blend the color of its eyes—needs to ensure for itself the room and the security necessary for its development. (162).

Therefore, even when the narrator speaks favorably about homosexuality, his words have a paradoxical and ambivalent ring. The fact that Proust drew on contemporary medical theory might illustrate his ambivalent attitude toward homosexuality.

Besides, Proust’s representation in the profanation of Vinteuil’s portrait combines a dynamic of violent repudiation of the parent with another of virtual assimilation. If desecration of the patriarch’s portrait becomes comprehensible as a precondition for selfhood, as the enabling mechanism of independence and originality, we also witness the fact that the father uncannily absorbs the child and the child unconsciously mimes the father. Beneath the playacted vulgarity of the gestures and intonations that Mlle Vinteuil adopts in the scene of erotic arousal she has scripted with her friend, the narrator recognizes the manner of her father, which she involuntarily reproduces, “unaware of how the memory of her own body rematerializes his absent presence” (160). To express her simulated surprise at discovering what she has left on the tale, the daughter then uses the very words her father habitually employed (162). Everything plays out the tensions of intergenerational influence in a pattern of ambivalence that works itself into the scene

at Montjouvain.¹⁰ Some irreconcilable elements intersect here and there, forming the precarious figure of impossible conjunction and impossible disjunction.

In addition to the anxiety generated by challenging authority and breaking the Law, the dissolution of traditional frameworks of meaning has been achieved at a substantial psychological cost. As Anthony Elliott has put it,

Selfhood and personal identity become increasingly precarious in conditions of modernity, as the individual loses all sense of cultural anchorage as well as inner reference pointsThe result is that personal life turns inward upon itself: a narcissistic preoccupation with self becomes central to psychic survival. (9)

Indeed, for Proust, the Self is defined as the accumulation of its consecutive states; at any given instant, we are the sum of an extremely large set of existences. In spite of the black evening sadness, Marcel would rise happy, next morning, and never think that the way would bring back the hour when he must leave his mother; and thus it is that on the Guermantes way he learns the “duality of states of mind” which is “so devoid of any communicating link, that I can no longer understand, nor even imagine, in the one state, what I have wished for, or feared, or manage to achieve, in the other” (199). Besides, as a man of “no quality,” the narrator assumes the “thousand-and-one” faces that form a fluid and unstable identity (Kristeva 121). Gilles Deleuze further equates the narrator’s absence of mind and body with “madness” (Deleuze 217) which serves as the catalyst that “mocks characterization, jeopardizes knowledge, initiates the search, and engenders time and interpretation” (Aynesworth 32). Nonetheless, this self does leave us in quite a predicament when it comes to discovering a unity amid the multiplicity, a Self beneath the selves. To begin with, the Self must be a Self, namely both coherent and unique, in order for there to be a distinctive essence at all. Accordingly, while the dissolution of a rigid personality might bring forth self-invention and self-creation, the narrator suffers greatly from his fragile sense of self. Fear of difference and indeterminacy and anxiety about loss of being pervade crucial episodes: the narrator’s dizzying flight from one identity to another during the midnight awakening, the child’s panic when he’s got to be separated from his mother, his horror at being surrounded by emptiness of personality in the hotel room.

¹⁰While the narrator’s father is, as has been noted above, seldom mentioned in the novel, the digenetic frame of the profanation scene invokes a second intergenerational pair: the narrator and his own father, or, we may say, Proust and his father.

An age in which ego suffered unprecedented attacks upon its pretension to be self-transparent and self-authorized is also, paradoxically, an age of narcissism. Swann is obviously the one who suffers from self-indulgence and self-absorption indicated above by Elliott. Due to his narcissism, Swann's love for Odette is merely a mirror he holds out to a woman without ever seeing in it anything but his own image. Love is inseparable from suffering because of the lover's egocentricity. Initially, Swann doesn't consider Odette attractive. A decisive moment in the early phase of their relationship occurs when Swann 'recognizes' in Odette another type, the physical type of Botticelli's preferred models (243). Once this recognition has taken effect, Odette's features acquire nobility and are assimilated to Swann's cult of the aesthetic. Apart from his delusion that he 'possesses' in Odette something of what he appreciates in the art of Botticelli, Swann identifies the little phrase of the sonata with Odette, establishing it as the national anthem of their love. Odette is an image created by his own mind through his sensitivity to painting and music. By investing Odette with identity completely of his own fabrication, Swann becomes the prisoner of the image created by himself. Moreover, attitude of narcissistic self-absorption and egotistic perverseness make jealousy the shadow of love. He endeavors desperately to figure out what remains unknown in Odette—all the people she knows, all her actions, all her desires. Yet, the nature of the information about Odette matters little to Swann since he interprets it differently depending on his mood. Furthermore, as has been discussed earlier, human nature is never simple and continuous. Thus Swann can never succeed in seeing Odette in all her aspects, or in unraveling the tangle of her complex relations in time and space. Odette's life escapes him on all sides. Swann can never know what the real story of his love with Odette was. The love object, like the fluctuating reality, becomes speculation and hypothesis, and Swann, the jealous lover, is deeply tortured by the elusive nature of love.

The narrator's adolescent love for Mme de Guermantes and Gilbert, serving as a counterpart of Swann's love, is also structured by a series of hopeful fantasies and fails. Odette as a living woman is completely out of Swann's image of her. Similarly, Mme de Guermantes doesn't provide the reality needed to make the notion of Merovingian mysteries come alive. At the first sight of Mme de Guermantes, the narrator is disillusioned by the distance between the production of his imagination and that of reality. The image leapt to his eyes was an image which was not of the same nature, was not colourable at will like others that allowed themselves to be impregnated by the amber hue of sonorous syllable, but was so real that everything,

down to the fiery little spot at the corner of her nose, attested to her subjection to the laws of life. (191)

In a like manner, the narrator falls desperately in love with Gilbert, but his obsession with Gilbert is based on the fascination and magic he finds in her name, like what he finds in the name of Swann or Mme de Guermantes. He writes her name and her address over and over again in his school notebook. Unfortunately, Gilbert is disappointing compared to the Gilbert he conjures up in his imagination. The common traits shared by the narrator's and Swann's love are that both are determined by something that is not there at all in the object selected, but in the mind of the selector. What they are really doing is to project on their lovers a state of themselves. The lover sees in imagination a creature of ivory, but the actual beloved is a being of flesh and is subjected to the vicissitudes and ailments of the flesh. Torture is thus inevitable to their love.

In fact, the theme of love in *Swann's Way* is closely related to man's incapability of getting contact with reality. The narrator compares love to the travel that would open for him the "gates of an unknown world" (93). Yet, just like there is no way he can get into contact with a real girl or woman, the narrator finds it very difficult to enter directly contact with reality. Steven Giles points out: "The modernists were afflicted by a greater or lesser sense of dislocation between the material, the human, and the metaphysical" (26). While nineteenth-century thinkers posited a consonance between the world of appearances and a higher world of absolute Beauty and Truth, modernists are haunted by a sense of dispossession, of not being at home. Giles illustrates this shift by giving two poems by Baudelaire: "Correspondences" and "The Setting of the Romantic Sun." Whereas in the former, man is at home in the temple of Nature, surrounded by forests of friendly symbols, in the latter that sense of harmony has been replaced by the smell of the grave. God is withdrawing and the irresistible night is coming on. Nietzsche at the end of the nineteenth century prophesied the advent of a period of nihilism with the death of God and demise of metaphysics and absolute knowledge. When it is recognized that the world cannot be understood in terms of the categories that traditionally have been applied to it, those who cannot conceive of it in any other terms will despair of being able to comprehend it at all.

The narrator similarly suffers from being unable to receive the secret of Truth and Beauty hidden behind appearances. He is not content with apprehending the object as phenomenon, but wishes to seize the thing-in-itself, the ultimate, irreducible particularity of the object behind the veil of appearance. Yet he feels constantly

frustrated because he cannot grasp the object, only to impel it toward still more distant ends. Self-consciousness hinders the perception of the object:

When I saw an external object, my consciousness that I was seeing it would remain between me and it, surrounding it with a thin spiritual border that prevented me from ever touching its substance directly; for it would somehow evaporate before I could make contact with it, just as an incandescent body that is brought into proximity with something wet never actually touches its moisture, since it is always preceded by a zone of evaporation. (90)

In other words, there exists a gap between what he feels and what he believes he should be discerning. Similarly, he'd like to possess the hawthorns, which have metaphorical association with girls, but into whose world he couldn't even penetrate. "But it was in vain that I lingered beside the hawthorns . . . Without letting me delve more deeply, like those melodies which one can play a hundred times in succession without coming any nearer to their secret" (151). He is constantly troubled by the elusive philosophical subject, which is half-felt and half-incomprehensible, but the full understanding of which is the permanent object of his pursuit. As an artist, the narrator (or, more specifically, Proust) endeavors to pierce through the veil placed between us and reality.

In the above discussion, I have explored how Proust has reflected the changing mode of consciousness in his time and the sense of anxiety and dislocation in the face of disintegration of established categories. Unlike the Romantics, who suggest a basic accord between themselves and the world, Proust nevertheless, like many other modernists, feels a need to preserve the integrity of his person in the face of the continuous shocks of modern life. In his essay "Modernism and the Aesthetic Crisis," Alan Wilde attempts to view modernism and postmodernism in terms of two varieties of irony: the disjunctive and the suspensive. Disjunctive irony portrays the world as fragmental but is propelled by an impulse towards resolution, transcendence, and coherence. Suspensive irony intensifies fragmentation and suspends the impulse towards coherence, with a willingness to tolerate and welcome a world seen as random and multiple (Wilde, 14). Therefore, many modern artists endeavor to seize and pin down as precisely as possible any epiphanic meaning unexpectedly presenting itself. In what follows, I'd like to discuss how the epiphanic experience of involuntary memory serves as a foundation of art which is not a mere reproduction of

life but a metaphorical expression of real life. Rendering the momentary and the fleeting, Proust has succeeded to extract poetry from within modernity, thereby man is liberated from the contingency of time and history.

IV. Extracting Poetry from within Modernity

We shall perish, but we shall have as hostages these divine captives who will follow and share our fate. And death in their company is somehow less bitter, less inglorious, perhaps even less probable. (381).

In his exploration of the changing concepts of time from the Middle Ages to Modern Age, Quinones points out that history has replaced myth from the Renaissance on. During the Middle Ages, neither time nor change appeared to be critical, and hence there was no great worry about controlling the future. Yet the Renaissance discovery of time carried with it a complex of values that could be called historical: "A new awareness of the preciousness of practical time—the time of action, creation, discovery and transformation—plunges man in a need to rescue himself from nothingness" (Quinones 1985: 30). Time is destructive in its action of forever replacing one moment with another which extinguishes the last. Experiences are destined to fall into the void of oblivion. In Proust's novel, we may discern the destructive aspect of time at the right beginning in the good-night kiss episode, wherein the narrator's anguish comes mostly from his feeling that the moment of happiness would suddenly sink into the past. Time is the force that slowly destroys everything—human relationship, the statues in the church, the illusion of happiness Swann builds from his love for Odette. But Proust's view of time is not merely replete with such "carpe diem." Besides its destructive aspect, time may on the other hand put distance between the events and the recollection of them. In such a way, the person remembering may perceive the significance of past events for the first time.

Proust deals with time most particularly in the working of memory. Time is constantly destroying the present, but memory is able to restore the past. For Proust, there are two ways of recalling the past: voluntary memory and involuntary memory. Proust associated voluntary memories with intellect or reason and involuntary memories with the irrational or sensuality. Being an act of intellection, voluntary memory is conditioned by the prejudice of intelligence, and hence its images of the past are flat, colorless, and without life. Though we rely a great deal on voluntary memory, it is less sound because it's the willful memory of intelligence. For the

narrator, the drama of going to bed is easily remembered because it is part of his conscious memory. But he can only remember a small part of his past, “as though all Combray had consisted of but two floors, joined by a slender staircase, and as though there has been no time there but seven o’clock at night” (47). The part of memory that is governed by intelligence might have provided factual information, but nothing of the essence. He wonders whether all the rest of Combray has been dead except the traumatic childhood.

An extension of perception, voluntary memory is limited to the presentation of an image that is little more than a “snapshot” or an “identity card photograph” used for practical purposes and suffering the vicissitudes of time. By contrast, involuntary memory is epiphanic and atemporal. At odd and unexpected moments, such as when the hero tastes the madeleine, the entire experiential context of the past moment is resurrected: “I feel something start within me, something that leaves its resting place and attempts to rise, something that has been embedded like an anchor at a great depth; I do not know yet what it is, but I can feel it mounting slowly; I can measure the resistance, I can hear the echo of great spaces traversed” (49). When nothing subsists from a long distant past, only the more fragile taste and smell remain and bear “the vast structure of recollection” (51). It is not accessible to the more transparently rational faculties:

It is a labor in vain to attempt to recapture it; all the efforts of our intellect must prove futile. The past is hidden somewhere outside the realm beyond the reach of intellect, in some material object (in the sensation which that material object will give us) of which we have no inkling. And it depends on chance whether or not we come upon this object before we ourselves must die. (47-8)

If voluntary memory is a willful memory by pure intellect, involuntary memory is gained through a relaxation of the willful consciousness and can be achieved only by chance.

One tendency which characterized the 19th-century metaphysics as a whole was to explain the world by the notion of intuition, and to downplay the importance of the rational intelligence. In search of the reintegration of the self and the authenticity of the revelation, the Moderns tend to value what comes unbidden or involuntarily by reducing the role of consciousness. Quinones makes clear how the Moderns proceeded to a higher poetry of the psyche:

[The] dissolution of character and of events, the multiple and reflexive perspectivism, the requirement of complexity, the tendencies toward comedy and irony, the opposition to standpoints and even emotional staying points — all are reflective of a philosophy of change and destructive of stability and identity. For these reasons, as Proust explains, the moments of illumination must come from outside, must be unavoidable and undeniable as lightning, and not susceptible to the tampering of consciousness. (1985: 179-80)

In other words, the involuntariness of the accidental recollection bears the attributes of deeper identity. Likewise, for Proust, passivity and unawareness is admitted as the precondition for the visitations of involuntary memory. Intellectual habits cover naked truth or dress up raw experience. On the contrary, the smell and taste of the Madeleine is the means of uncovering lost time and of reevaluating wasted time, wasted by the philistine standards of practical life.

Most importantly, the experience of involuntary memory may not only illuminate the chaos and futility of life, it is worthy to form the foundation of work of art for its non-intellectual quality. Fowlie indicates that the significance of the episode of the madeleine represents not only life experience but demonstrates “a basic principle in the method used in composing the novel” (57). Proust himself reveals the connection between involuntary memory and artistic creation:

You see, I believe that it is really only to involuntary memories that the artist should go for the raw material of his work . . . They alone bear the hallmark of authenticity. . . they give us its extratemporal essence . . . My book is not in any degree a product of the reason, for its least elements were supplied to me by my sensibility. (1988: 235-36)

In the closing pages of “Combray,” when he is losing hope of ever becoming a writer, the narrator speaks of the “particular pleasure” of certain sensations and of his ignorance of their significance. With heavy irony, he depicts his youthful ignorance in equating literature with intelligence: “It was not impressions of that sort, surely, that were able to restore my lost hope of one day being a writer and a poet, for they were all lined to a particular object of no intellectual value and led to no abstract truth” (179).

Though Proust makes clear his anti-intellectual attitude, his work, however, shows that he was not unaware of his ambivalent attitude toward human rational powers, which might be seen as parallel to his ambivalence toward modernity. While serving practical habits which soothe raw experience, rational powers supply the laws needed to order experience. Proust does not explain how much of the past he really reconstructs by involuntary remembering and how much by intellectual processes. Whatever his theories, Proust is constantly dragging his past triumphantly into the light and consciousness, and rearranging it in the fictionalized memories which we know. Therefore, intuitive inspirations cannot function alone; distance and perspective on one's revelations must be a part of the creative process too.¹¹ Richard Rorty calls Proust the ultimate ironist because he apprehended "the contingencies of life" (100). The smell of the Madeleine is not however a contingent happenstance, as Rorty imagines. The Madeleine is an imaginative and intelligent convergence of several life experiences. Therefore, if the Madeleine episode exhibits the contingency of life, it was also fabricated with consummate intelligence. Intelligence with its capacity to discriminate and to generalize can be a faithful guide along the path to discovery and create.

What the narrator realizes in the Madeleine episode is that although these "fragments of existence withdrawn from Time" have given him the only genuine and fruitful pleasure and made him a man who ceased to feel "mediocre, accidental, mortal" (45), they are essentially fleeting and unpredictable. The only way in which he can recapture them is by the creation of a work of art in which they are given permanent form. In other words, the narrator's only hope resides in certain brief moments packed with vivid sensations and inexplicable joy, but how can this momentary happiness be converted into lasting happiness, perpetual bliss? It is here that intellectual willpower, the will of the intellect, has its role to play. Thoughts concerning the nature of imagination and the nature of literary process are scattered in the novel. The outcomes of these early thoughts on the imagination and the creative process may be seen perhaps in Marcel's realization that a truly good artist, like a good cook, must always, like Françoise who loudly and bloodily kills the chicken that she will transubstantiate into a culinary masterpiece, be prepared to perform grubby preparatory tasks prior to executing delectable finished products (93). In consequence, the meaning or value of his imaginatively restored memories was artfully added to

¹¹In a letter Proust writes: "Ahead of the intellect I place the unconscious, which the intellect will eventually clarify, but which itself provides the reality and the originality of a work" (quoted from Mackenzie 150). This makes the interdependence and relative importance of ordering intelligence and unconscious material quite explicit.

what the scent of tea and biscuits disclosed. The artistic process and reprocessing and refining, furnished by the senses and memory, are what give it value. Put differently, aesthetic values are created as well as discovered, constructed voluntarily as well as disclosed involuntarily.

As such, the artist's function is to rejuvenate the impressions, to re-create reality and hence to recompose life. In the Martinville episode, wherein the young Marcel composes a description of three steeples he sees while riding in a carriage near Combray, three players are involved—the data of sense, faculty of intuition, and intellect. The impression Marcel sets out to translate at Martinville is not “three steeples seen from a carriage” but merely a group of “shifting, sunlit planes” (180). It is intuition that first seizes on inputs from the external world, and later intellect, presumably by applying certain laws of logic and nature, works back to the facts, the real-life sources of the confused sensations. In other words, the steeples provide the stimulus, for which Marcel must find a verbal equivalent:

Without admitting to myself that what lay hidden behind the steeples of Martinville must be something analogous to a pretty phrase, since it was in the form of words which gave me pleasure that it had appeared to me, I borrowed a pencil and some paper from the doctor and . . . composed the following little fragment. (181)

The young Marcel's exercise in writing produces essentially a series of metaphors, transforming the steeples into “three pivots, three flowers painted on the sky, and three maiden abandoned in a solitary place” (188). The exchange of signs between completely different things and the transformation of one into the other is exactly metaphorical. However, they are not just random snapshots but, in effect, metaphors for the real world.

Proust uses the metaphor as a more reliable transcription of reality than pure description. He considers realistic art as that miserable statement of line and surface, a note-taking literature. It has become a truism that modernist writers espoused an ideology that promoted the belief that the work of art is an autonomous, organically unified whole, transcending its historical moment to achieve a putatively universal, uniquely aesthetic value. However, unlike the aestheticism manifested in the pseudo-artist Swann who elevates the quest for beauty in life over all other intellectual and more virtues, Proust's work demonstrates a fundamental skepticism toward any aesthetic ideology. Art in Proust's world does involve a certain moving away from

life, but Proust's novel is certainly not a novel about the impossible distance between art and life. Through his narrator, Proust is identifying two levels of experience: the mundane and the artistic. Proust perceives the artist as a skin diver, probing beneath the surface of everyday experiences to find the denominator of real life. In order to reach this deeper level of experience, the writer must "undo" (*defaire*) the surface traits of habit, self-love, passion and even intelligence by which the world delimits him. Hence true art brings us close to a reality discovered and recreated by the artist's creative interference. The young Marcel is at first displeased by the discordance between the literal and the proper meaning of the fresco paintings, but the maturity of his literary vocation is dated by his ability to come to admire it:

But in later years I came to understand that the arresting strangeness, the special beauty of these frescoes derived from the great part played in them by symbolism, and the fact that this was represented not as a symbol (for the thought symbolized was nowhere expressed) but as a reality, actually felt or materially handled, added something more precise and more literal to the meaning of the work, something more concrete and more striking to the lesson it imparted. (88)

The narrator finally comes to appreciate the special kind of truth and beauty the fresco paintings convey because they are not strictly realistic but neither do they abandon reality for a strictly imaginary world.

Hence Proust's "mastery of reality" was an active quality, not a passive virtue. There is thus no gap between Proust's realism and his concern for general laws. Through metaphorical associations, Proust hence penetrates the banality of observable appearances into a world of "correspondences," where ephemerality and eternity are one. The material objects which inspire the work of art may vanish, but the intelligible essence remains. By thus translating the ecstatic experience into art, Proust uncovers his soul and liberates it from the constraints of the existence. For Baudelaire, one of the characteristics of modernity is the will to heroize the present, which refers to an attitude of recapturing something eternal that lies within the fleeting present. Likewise, Proust's recapturing of the past doesn't suggest a mere nostalgic retreat into the past. It bears an intimate relationship to the present. Shattuck is correct to argue

that Proust has found his youth not in the past but in the present (36).¹² In the episode of madeleine, Proust has heroized the most banal and fleeting hour of daily life, and hence resurrects the insignificant and discovers in it the real meaning. Thereby he “conquered the hopeless sadness within him, what he once called the incurable imperfection in the very essence of the present moment” (Benjamin 61). In his capacity to shape highly original generalizations about human conduct into a work of fiction as well as his highly developed poetic sensibility before nature, Proust reveals his religion of art (as revealed in the epigraph to this chapter) and enables us to realize the need of reading and writing the novel, or, in the widest sense, art and poetry.

V. Conclusion

Swann's Way, as we have seen, is a kaleidoscope: a multiplicity of forms and colors in constant movement, incessantly repeating different combinations. The world Proust depicts appears as the result of a significant transition: a society organized numerous, heterogeneous areas as opposed to one single system, complexity in social interaction and communication, time marked according to the mechanical and the punch-clock versus seasonal and biological clocks, differences among people marked in terms of their functions as opposed to given hierarchies, and concomitant challenges to perception in the arena of big cities. By exposing the unstable and unreliable consciousness, Proust seems to remind us that facts do not penetrate the world where our habitual beliefs reign supreme. Through his novel, we are made to see, touch, and feel what men by definition never see, touch, or feel: two perspective events which are as imperative as they are contradictory.

In such a way Proust sees the modern world in terms of difference, disjunction, and discontinuity. However, a rhythm of alternate disunity and unity, disjunction and conjunction, aversion and attraction, is at work in his novel. Proust was able to accommodate both the positive and negative aspects of modernity. Following the vein that modernity consists in an endless ambivalence and resistance to modernity itself, Proust's work is also composed of two distinct elements, one eternal, one circumstantial. Proust is aware of the fragmentary and transient character of experience, as opposed to an absolutist interpretation of all experience within a totalizing scheme. Yet, responding to his times, he advocates appreciation of the transient by means of aesthetic immediacy. He has set himself the task of exploring

¹²Deleuze further insisted that, since Proust's memory was not an end in itself but served the artistic process of interpreting the hieroglyphs of the past, his novel “is turned around towards the future, not

daily life and imposing some order upon it. By turning to art that gives existence an eternal and stable character, Proust has succeeded in his attempt to give meaning to his past and life. While his novel reflects the modern disintegration of values, it also offers the best hope we have of coming to grips with this disintegration.

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一統（的）失序：普魯斯特《史旺之路》中的現代性矛盾

張碧蓉*

摘要

本文擬從現代性的矛盾複雜特質來探討普魯斯特在其小說《史旺之路》中對現代性的描述、褒貶、批判與回應。第一部分耙梳普魯斯特描述的現代社會中感知意識模式的改變及真實愈趨複雜的現象。第二部份檢視普魯斯特在其小說中所顯現對現代性愛恨兩難的矛盾態度及此態度所形成的敘述張力。第三部份探討普魯斯特如何透過記憶與創作來對抗時間的無情與歷史的偶然性，在片刻與永恆交織的現代性中淬鍊詩與藝術的本質。

關鍵詞：普魯斯特、《史旺之路》、現代性、矛盾、藝術

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