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True to Life: A Study of Lifelikeness in Fiction
through Proust, Austen, Nabokov, and Joyce

By

Jonathan Bricke Rowan

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Comparative Literature

in the

Graduate Division

of the

University of California, Berkeley

Committee in charge:

Professor Robert Alter, Chair

Professor Eric Naiman

Professor Steven Botterill

Fall 2014

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Abstract

True to Life: A Study of Lifelikeness in Fiction
through Proust, Austen, Nabokov, and Joyce

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Doctor of Philosophy in Comparative Literature

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Professor Robert Alter, Chair

The subject of this dissertation is verisimilitude, or lifelikeness, in fiction: the impression a work of fiction can give a reader that a scene or a character or any other one of its elements is remarkably real-seeming, remarkably “true to life.” By studying works by four writers who were masters at creating this effect—Marcel Proust, Jane Austen, Vladimir Nabokov, and James Joyce—I attempt to reveal its sources.

Chapter one is entirely focussed on a single type of lifelikeness: the ability of a work of fiction to make us more aware of our experience by capturing what Proust calls “general essences”: subtle general phenomena we have experienced in our own lives but that have never before been the objects of our full conscious awareness. In moments when this capturing takes place, the characters and events it involves are imbued with a striking “realness.” In the chapter’s first half, I show that this kind of lifelikeness is at the heart of Proust’s aesthetics; several key scenes of the *Recherche*—including the famous encounter with the towers of Martinville in “Combray”—express a philosophy of art in which the capturing of “general essences” is art’s main source of value. In the chapter’s second half, I argue that the *Recherche* is true to its own philosophy—that it lives up to Proust’s ideal of literature as “a kind of optical instrument that [the author] offers to the reader to enable him to discern what, without this book, he would perhaps never have seen in himself.”

From a work that many consider the high point of realism in the novel, we now go back a hundred years to one of its most important early innovators. Chapter two is a study of *Pride and Prejudice* that attempts to explain the impression so common among Austen’s readers that her characters are extraordinarily “alive.” It does this in the form of a typology of verisimilitude—a study of four different ways a novel can be true to life. In *Pride and Prejudice* we find again the “illuminative” verisimilitude we found in Proust and distinguish from it three other types. First there is “plausibility,” in which the writer is akin to the juggler—he keeps the apple of compelling storytelling in the air without dropping the orange of believability. Next there is “inclusive” verisimilitude, produced when the representation of a certain object includes features the object has in real life but that are typically left out when the object is represented in art. And finally there is “rightness,” which comes from certain writers’ great skill at imaginatively inhabiting the minds and bodies of characters.

My chapter on Nabokov has two sections. The first is an investigation of the relationship between literature and reality in Nabokov's ideas about literature. We find in his published lectures two important caveats for thinking about verisimilitude in fiction: first, that plausibility means adherence to the rules of a novel's world, which may differ in certain respects from those of the real one; and second, that truth to life in fiction is less a mirror than a prism: not just a reflection of the world, but the world as it appears through the medium of a writer's consciousness. The second section of the chapter is an analysis of Nabokov's novel *Invitation to a Beheading* that explores the ways fiction can be lifelike in its depictions of the sensory world.

Finally, in my chapter on *Ulysses*, I round out this inquiry by exploring some methods of lifelikeness I haven't yet discussed: verisimilar obscurity; the interweaving of the fictional with the real; verisimilar cross references; the depiction of "low" realities; and the "stream of consciousness" technique in its ability to bestow on characters a full mental life. Joyce did not invent these techniques, but he carried them much further than any other writer had done; *Ulysses*, the most "patterned" of novels, is also in certain ways the most lifelike, and much of what is distinctive in its style comes from these new extremes.

For my father, James A. Rowan

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I also owe thanks to other professors at Berkeley who in courses and conversations helped me sharpen my ideas when this project was still in early stages. They are Dori Hale, Stephen Booth, and the late Michael Bernstein.

Finally I thank Erica Roberts for years of friendly assistance in the department's Graduate Office, Albert Ascoli for his benevolence and humanity, and the friends who have read my chapters and given me valuable suggestions: Derek Sanger, Mark Middlebrook, Jen Loeb sack, and Jim Rowan. I promise them that I will try to talk less about verisimilitude in the future.

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Introduction

The subject of this dissertation is verisimilitude, or lifelikeness, in fiction: the impression a work of fiction can give a reader that a scene or a character or any other one of its elements is remarkably real-seeming, remarkably “true to life.” By studying works by four writers who were masters at creating this effect—Marcel Proust, Jane Austen, Vladimir Nabokov, and James Joyce—I will try to reveal its sources; for something we will see early on is that fictional verisimilitude is brought about in several different ways.

Lifelikeness in itself, of course, does not belong only to fiction. All the representational arts—painting, sculpture, literature, theater, and film to name a few—are able to create this effect, precisely because they are representational: these arts create likenesses, and a likeness of a thing can strike us as more or less faithful than others to the thing as we would experience it in life. This is true even for things of a class that has never existed; Waterhouse’s sirens, for example, are more real-seeming for most viewers than those of the Attican vase. Fantastical things are always constructed of elements from the real world, and those elements are always susceptible to depictions that are more or less faithful to the ways they appear to us in life.



The Siren Vase, 480BC-470BC (circa)



John William Waterhouse, *Ulysses and the Sirens* (detail), 1891

Let us begin with lifelikeness in general, then—as it is found across all the arts. Its characteristics are on display in a passage from *Speak, Memory* in which Nabokov describes a model train car he admired in St. Petersburg as a child.

In the early years of this century, a travel agency on Nevski Avenue displayed a three-foot-long model of an oak-brown international sleeping car. In delicate verisimilitude it completely outranked the painted tin of my clockwork trains. Unfortunately it was not for sale. One could make out the blue upholstery inside, the embossed leather lining of the compartment walls, their polished panels, inset mirrors, tulip-shaped reading lamps, and other maddening details. Spacious windows alternated with narrower ones, single or geminate, and some of these were of frosted glass. In a few of the compartments, the beds had been

made.¹

Nabokov's admiring description captures three important features of the experience of verisimilitude in art—no matter the artistic medium. First, the lifelikeness is comparative: it is in comparison to his painted tin trains that the young Nabokov finds this one so strikingly realistic. The meticulous fidelity of its details to those of a real wagon-lit (some of the beds even have linens) fills him with wonder precisely because he didn't expect it; and the reason he didn't expect it is that the model trains of his experience were never so true to life. Whenever an artwork strikes us as remarkably true to life, it does so in relation to others of its kind we have experienced, even though we are usually unaware of this. Second there is the element of pleasure: the pleasure the boy derives from contemplating the verisimilar model is reflected in his desire to own it. It was contended long ago—more than two millennia ago, in fact—that “universal is the pleasure felt in things imitated.”² Even things “which in themselves we view with pain,” Aristotle continues, “we delight to contemplate when reproduced with minute fidelity.” I do not know whether he is right that all human beings share this trait, but certainly a great many do. Third there is the fact that, despite the model's great verisimilitude, there is never any question in the passage of the boy's losing awareness that what he is looking at is not a real train. Verisimilitude can pull us in that direction—it can make us *less* aware that what we see is only a likeness—but except in the rare case of trompe-l'oeil, we never fully lose that awareness. We need not share the worry of the “mechanicals”—the workmen who stage the play in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*—that the actor who plays a lion will be mistaken by a terrified audience for a real one. And indeed the pleasure of lifelikeness depends on our continued awareness that what we see is only a depiction—we marvel that a mere depiction is able to look so real.

Since lifelikeness is always comparative, it is susceptible in certain cases to being erased by the passage of time. Vasari, in his *Lives of the Artists*, recounts the difficulty painters had in the early Italian Renaissance in convincingly depicting human feet.³ Until the early fifteenth century, he tells us, standing figures would often seem on tiptoe because painters had not yet discovered the methods for foreshortening feet that are to any degree angled toward the viewer (for example in the fresco at right). The first painters to master these techniques painted feet that must have seemed to their viewers remarkably realistic, since the only feet they had ever seen in a painting were done in the old style. But as the methods of foreshortening became commonplace, feet that seemed flat on the ground became something viewers expected, thus losing their original impressiveness. In my chapter on Jane Austen, we will encounter a similar



Giotto di Bondone (?), *Legend of Saint Francis* (detail), 1297-1299

¹ Nabokov, *Speak, Memory*, 107.

² Aristotle, *Poetics*, 15.

³ Vasari, 106 (in the section on Masaccio).

change in her novels' effects on their readers.

I have said that by “verisimilitude” and “lifelikeness” I mean an effect an artwork has on a viewer or reader or listener—a likeness seeming remarkably “real” to him. This definition invites the question of whether the effect is always brought about by an objective resemblance between the depiction and our experience of the depicted thing, or whether it can come from something else that does not involve resemblance at all. In literary theory, the idea that verisimilitude *never* involves any resemblance between depiction and depicted thing came into vogue with Roland Barthes’s 1968 article “L’effet de réel” (“The Reality Effect”) and continues to exert an influence. Interestingly enough, the same line of argument was traced in the same year for the visual arts, in Nelson Goodman’s *Languages of Art*. Let us turn first to that version.

Goodman makes the claim that all pictorial images are signs—they signify the things they represent, and our impression that they resemble those things with varying degrees of fidelity is simply an illusion.⁴ Like the letters we use in writing, they are based entirely on convention—on an agreement among the members of a culture that certain signs will stand for certain things, and not on any intrinsic relationship between the sign and the thing it stands for. The problem with this notion of images is spelled out by Ernst Gombrich in his preface to the 2000 edition of *Art and Illusion* entitled “Images and Signs.” He observes that, when we interpret a sign, what we do is pick out a few essential characteristics. There are many different ways people write the letter “P”—it looks different in each font on your computer and in every person’s handwriting. To recognize the mark on the page as the letter means to pick out the essential traits all these different versions have in common—the upright and the loop at the top and right-hand side. Once we have accomplished this, we have done all there is to do in treating the sign as a sign. Thus the mental procedure we go through when interpreting signs is very different from the one we adopt when we examine a representation; “the first is a finite task that is soon performed, the second is what we would call ‘open-ended,’ for it mobilizes our imagination.”⁵ Images can *be used* as signs—as in, for example, the little man or woman on the restroom door—but to respond to such an image *as a sign* is very different from responding to it as a likeness or representation.

In “L’effet de réel” Barthes applies an argument similar to Goodman’s to the notion that depictions in literature—the “images” literature places in our minds—can resemble real-life experiences to greater and lesser degrees. This is only an illusion, he says; the only difference between a narrative that strikes us as “realistic” and one that does not is that the former contains what he calls “useless details”—details that serve no narratological purpose, such as moving the action forward, bringing out the personalities or social status of the characters, etc. Much like Goodman, he tries to reduce images to signs; he treats narrative details (a barometer in a story by Flaubert; a little door in an account by Michelet) not as what they clearly are—images that may or may not be faithful to milieux like the ones in question as they existed in real life—but as signs that signify, by their “uselessness” alone, “the category of the ‘real,’” claiming that this alone is what creates the impression that a narrative is true to life.⁶

⁴ See in particular the section entitled “Realism” (34-39), which begins, “This leaves unanswered the minor question what constitutes realism of representation. Surely not, in view of the foregoing, any sort of resemblance to reality.”

⁵ Gombrich, *Art and Illusion*, xxxiii.

⁶ Barthes, “Reality Effect,” 16.

One sometimes hears it said that our impression that a work of art is true to life is an illusion created by “ideology”—by cultural or group prejudice and received opinion.⁷ And indeed, in the history of literature, there are many recorded assertions that a character or event is implausible that are clearly the products of ideology. The seventeenth-century writer La Mesnardière, for example, declares in his treatise *La Poétique* that brave female characters are implausible because brave women are almost never found in life.⁸ And the novelist Maria Edgeworth exercises class prejudice when she objects, in a letter to a friend, to Jane Austen’s depiction of General Tilney: “The behaviour of the General in *Northanger Abbey*, packing off the young lady without a servant or the common civilities which any bear of a man, not to say gentleman, would have shown, is quite outrageously out of drawing and out of nature.”⁹ But can we conclude from such examples that ideology is *always* what determines a reader’s sense that a fictional event or character is or is not true to life? When Elizabeth Bennett feels mortified at Darcy’s coming home to Pemberley and finding her a tourist there; when Buck Mulligan at the start of *Ulysses* “speaks himself into boldness” while defending himself against Stephen’s sense that he has treated him disrespectfully; or when Bloom, having entered a restaurant and decided that he doesn’t want to stay, pretends to have come in looking for someone (“His eyes said: —Not here. Don’t see him.”), is there any reason to believe that ideology is behind our sense that the event is believable as something the character might feel or do if she or he were a real person? We judge these events true to life because we recognize in them phenomena from our own real-life experience. Everyone carries with him a great store of unconscious knowledge—built up bit by bit in the experience of living in the world. This knowledge is always in the background as we read a work of fiction. It is the same with the other arts; our lifelong experience of hands is what makes us see the impressive “rightness” in Leonardo’s depictions of them, even if we lack full awareness of what exactly this “rightness” consists in. When we put this together with the fact that the question “Is this true to life?” applies not only to depictions of things ideology could conceivably warp our vision of, but to every single likeness in any representational work of art—every feature of every object, every character’s every emotion, thought, or action—we see that the province of ideology is a rather restricted one in the vast open country of judgments about truth to life.

We have just heard two objections to the notion that lifelikeness in art can be a matter of genuine resemblance between depiction and depicted thing, between a likeness created by art and our experience in



Leonardo da Vinci study of a woman’s hands, c. 1490

⁷ For a statement of this idea in literary theory, see Gérard Genette, “Vraisemblance et Motivation,” in *Figures II* (Paris: Éditions du seuil: 1969), 71-99.

⁸ La Mesnardière, *Poétique*, 137.

⁹ Southam, *Jane Austen: The Critical Heritage*, 17.

real life of the thing the likeness is of: first, the objection conflating images with signs, and second, the objection that our sense of truth to life is always a matter of ideology. There is one more objection we need to reckon with, and here we must leave the arts in general to consider the special implications of literature's medium being words; it is the notion that literary depictions can never be true to life because language itself can never really refer to reality. The impetus of this idea is the observation made by Saussure in his *Cours de linguistique générale* that different languages partition the world in different ways; the ensemble of concepts of a language, in other words, is not simply given by reality but reflects decisions on the part of a culture to categorize the things of experience in certain ways. This observation has been taken by some to imply that the concepts of language are created entirely by culture—that they lack any correspondence with the world as it objectively exists.¹⁰ But when we look at semantic differences carefully, we find that the concepts of a language are products not simply of the community that speaks it but of an interaction between the community and the world.

Different languages partitioning the world in different ways is the subject of a recent article by the linguists Melissa Bowerman and Soonja Choi titled “Shaping Meanings for Language: Universal and Language-Specific in the Acquisition of Spatial Semantic Categories.”¹¹ The article presents the following illustration of differences between English and Korean in the categorization of actions of placing one object in contact with another:

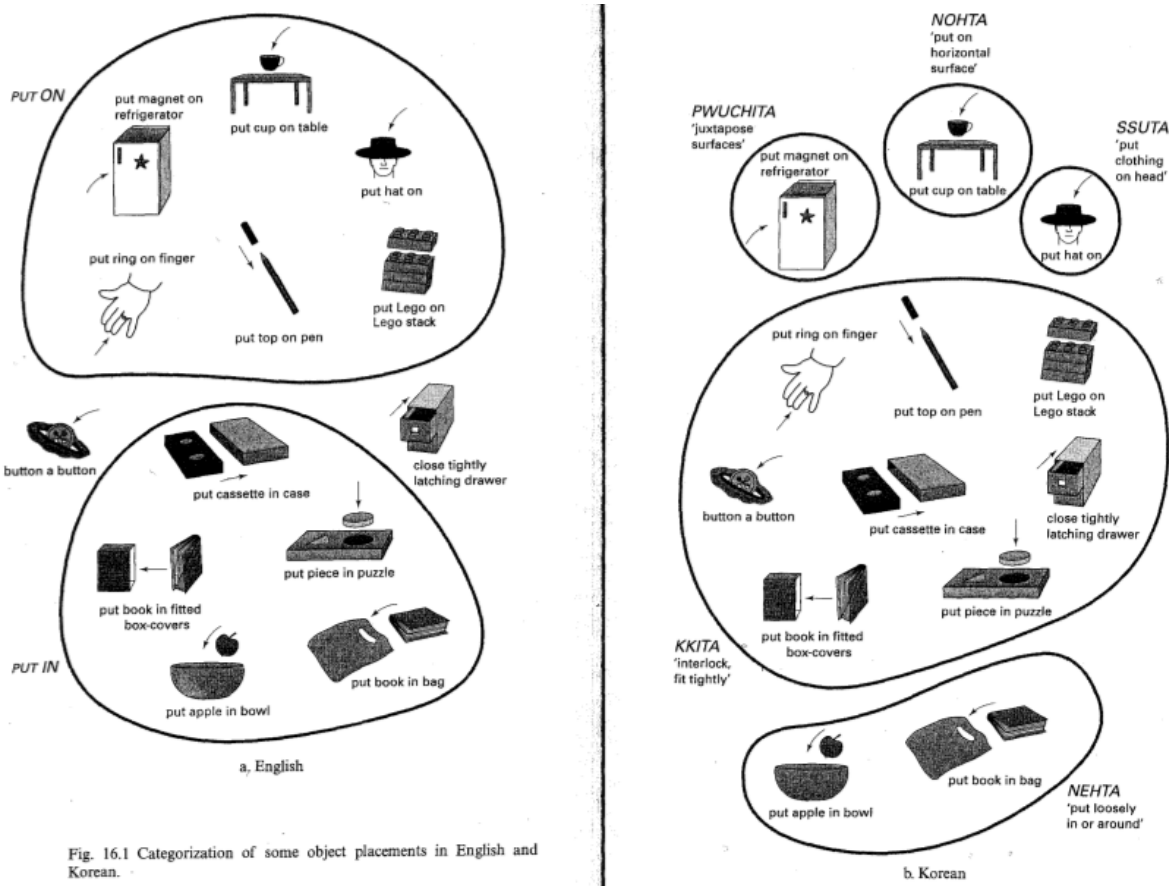


Fig. 16.1 Categorization of some object placements in English and Korean.

¹⁰ See for example Jaques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974).

¹¹ In *Language Acquisition and Conceptual Development*, ed. Melissa Bowerman and Stephen C. Levinson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 475-511.

Each side shows the same set of actions, as categorized by one of the languages—English is on the left, Korean on the right. English puts the actions in question mainly into two categories: that of the phrase *put on* and that of the phrase *put in*. *Put on* is used for placing an object in contact with an external surface that then typically supports it, while *put in* is used for placing an object in some sort of container. Korean, on the other hand, categorizes the same set of actions in a surprisingly different way. There is not a word or phrase in Korean corresponding to *put on* or *put in*; instead most of the actions are expressed by the verb *kkita*, which means to place an object into contact with another object in such a way that the two interlock. This category cuts across the *put on* / *put in* divide: putting a book in fitted box-covers, for example, and putting a cap on a pen are both expressed by *kkita*. And the category also includes actions that in English are expressed neither by *put in* nor *put on*, such as buttoning a button or closing a tightly latching drawer. Then there is the verb *nehta*, which, contrasting with *kkita*'s tight fit, means to put loosely in or around, and three verbs whose functions are more specialized: *nohta* for placing objects on a horizontal surface, *ssuta* for putting clothing on the head, and *pwuchita* for joining an object to another so that non-horizontal surfaces are juxtaposed. So how do English and Korean children learn these language-specific concepts? The only plausible explanation is that “children construct spatial semantic categories over time on the basis of the way they hear words used in the input [i.e., in the speech of the people around them]. . . . Language input helps the learner decide which kinds of similarities and differences among referent situations are important for purposes of selecting a word.”¹² A child learning English gradually comes to understand that all the situations he or she hears the phrase *put in* applied to—that ball being placed in that box; his or her own self being placed in the bath; etc.—are similar in that they involve containment, and that this marks the difference between these and situations to which *put in* is not applied. Likewise a child learning Korean gradually comes to understand that the defining similarity for *kkita* is the interlocking nature of the fit between the objects that are joined. The point for my own discussion is that this would obviously not be possible if the similarities and differences in question did not exist in the world independently of language. This is the basic link between language and reality; even if a word's category is language-specific (and the categories of many words are not—for example that of *horse*) the word refers to reality if the similarities and differences it is based on exist in the real world.

Because they are made with words and because words stand for categories, literary representations differ in important ways from those of the visual arts. Let us return for a moment to that barometer in Flaubert's story “Un coeur simple.” It is part of Flaubert's description of the sitting room where Mme Aubain “would stay all day long, seated close to the window, in a wicker armchair. Against the white-painted paneling was a rank of eight mahogany chairs. An old piano supported, under a barometer, a pyramidal stack of boxes and cartons. Two upholstered wing chairs flanked the Louis XV chimney of yellow marble.”¹³ These words give rise in our minds to a likeness of a room, but even with all the details Flaubert provides (the armchair is wicker, the paneling is painted white, etc.), that likeness is far less detailed than the one we would see in a realist painting of the same scene. How clearly do we see the woman's face? How clearly do we see the armchair, or the barometer? No doubt a reader familiar with the Normandy of the early 1800s might imagine these things more

¹² Bowerman and Choi, 497.

¹³ Flaubert, “Un coeur simple,” 53-54 (my translation).

sharply, but the images would still be indistinct compared to the ones he would see if he were looking at these objects in real life, or at their likenesses in a realistic painting. Even if Flaubert were to describe them for as long as a reader could bear, he would still not be able to convey the amount of visual information that the painter can, and it would mean that he would have to forgo a similarly detailed depiction of many other objects in the room. The painter, in this way, can compete with human vision; the writer, by contrast, cannot—his images are more akin to those of memory.

Not only does the painter present more detailed images than the writer; he *must* do this if he is to achieve his basic form of truth to life. The realist painter's advantage is also his shackles: his likenesses will always be compared to the images we see with our eyes, and so, if he paints a barometer, he has no choice but to delineate its every curve and even the grains of its wood if the viewpoint of the painting is such that we would see them if the scene were real. The writer, on the other hand, works under no such constraint. His basic task is not to mimic human vision but to pretend to tell a truthful tale, and so the "fact" that there was a barometer by the piano does not compel him to render all we would see of it were we in the room (which indeed he could never do) or even to mention it at all (surely there are objects in Mme Aubain's sitting room besides those mentioned by Flaubert). Because of this state of affairs, lifelikeness works differently in fiction than it does in the visual arts. In fiction it is not a matter of rendering an entire scene or an entire perception of an object, but of capturing, in textual moments, isolated elements of experience. How exactly this works, and what it is about these bits of experience that allows the effect of lifelikeness, is what this dissertation will explore.

Chapter one is entirely focussed on a single type of lifelikeness: the ability of a work of fiction to make us more aware of our experience by capturing what Proust calls "general essences": subtle general phenomena we have experienced in our own lives but that have never before been the objects of our full conscious awareness. In moments when this capturing takes place, the characters and events it involves become imbued with a striking "realness." In the chapter's first half, I will show that this kind of lifelikeness is at the heart of Proust's aesthetics; several key scenes of the *Recherche*—including the famous encounter with the towers of Martinville in "Combray"—express a philosophy of art in which the capturing of "general essences" is art's main source of value. In the chapter's second half, I will argue that the *Recherche* is true to its own philosophy—that it lives up to Proust's ideal of literature as "a kind of optical instrument that [the author] offers to the reader to enable him to discern what, without this book, he would perhaps never have seen in himself."¹⁴

From a work that many consider the high point of realism in the novel, we now go back a hundred years to one of its most important early innovators. Chapter two is a study of *Pride and Prejudice* that attempts to explain the impression so common among Austen's readers that her characters are extraordinarily "alive." It does this in the form of a typology of verisimilitude—a study of four different ways a novel can be true to life. In *Pride and Prejudice* we find again the "illuminative" verisimilitude we found in Proust and distinguish from it three other types. First there is "plausibility," in which the writer is akin to the juggler—he keeps the apple of compelling storytelling in the air without dropping the orange of believability. Next there is "inclusive" verisimilitude, produced when the representation of a certain object

¹⁴ Proust, *À la recherche du temps perdu*, 2296-97 (my translation).

includes features the object has in real life but that are typically left out when the object is represented in art. And finally there is “rightness,” which comes from certain writers’ great skill at imaginatively inhabiting the minds and bodies of characters.

My chapter on Nabokov has two sections. The first is an investigation of the relationship between literature and reality in Nabokov’s ideas about literature. We will find in his published lectures two important caveats for thinking about verisimilitude in fiction: first, that plausibility means adherence to the rules of a novel’s world, which may differ in certain respects from those of the real one; and second, that truth to life in fiction is less a mirror than a prism: not just a reflection of the world, but the world as it appears through the medium of a writer’s consciousness. The second section of the chapter is an analysis of Nabokov’s novel *Pnin* that explores the ways fiction can be lifelike in its depictions of the sensory world.

Finally, in my chapter on *Ulysses*, I will round out this inquiry by exploring some methods of lifelikeness I haven’t yet discussed: verisimilar obscurity; the interweaving of the fictional with the real; verisimilar cross references; the depiction of “low” realities; and the “stream of consciousness” technique in its ability to bestow on characters a full mental life. Joyce did not invent these techniques, but he carried them much further than any other writer had done; *Ulysses*, the most “patterned” of novels, is also in certain ways the most lifelike, and much of what is distinctive in its style comes from these new extremes.

Chapter One: *À la Recherche du Temps Perdu*

In *Le côté de Guermantes*, the subject of Proust's great opus is named for the first time; the narrator refers to "the invisible vocation of which this book is the history" (2:412).¹ That the *Recherche* is the story of a vocation seems clear enough: at its end Marcel at last understands that the joy we have watched him search for in places and in people can be realized only through art, and that writing a novel is the way he must deepen and probe the impressions involuntary memory has restored to him. What is less clear, however, is what exactly Marcel is called *to*. What is art for Proust? What gives an artwork value? And in what does Marcel's "calling" consist? In this chapter's first half, I want to explore these questions by examining Marcel's encounters with three artistic creations: the Goncourt journal, the paintings of Elstir, and the sketch Marcel himself composes of the towers of Martinville. I will show that Proust's depictions of these encounters express a philosophy of art that provides an explanation of how art can illuminate life. The chapter's second half will try to determine whether Proust's own art—the *Recherche* itself—does what this philosophy says it should.

The Goncourt Journal

The *Académie Goncourt's* website proudly affirms that "The pastiche of the Goncourts' Journal by Marcel Proust in *À la Recherche du Temps Perdu* is without a doubt the finest homage paid to the two brothers."² But while it is true that Proust makes mention of "the most piquant anecdotes, which form the inexhaustible material of the Goncourt Journal and provide the reader with entertainment for many solitary evenings" (3:740), his assessment of the work is overwhelmingly negative. For Proust, the Goncourts' book is *mere* entertainment that fails to illuminate life.

Marcel has returned to the neighborhood of Combray to stay with Gilberte, his childhood love, with whom he has renewed his friendship. On the final evening of his stay, she lends him the unpublished journal of the Goncourt brothers to read before going to sleep. The journal is a historical text—the celebrated diary in which the sibling men of letters recount their social lives—but Proust has Marcel discover in it an account of a dinner at the home of the Verdurins (fictional inhabitants of the *Recherche*), where Marcel has dined many times. The narrator quotes several pages of this account—as much as he was able to read, he tells us, before feeling ready to sleep. They begin with Monsieur Verdurin showing up at Edmond Goncourt's house to take him to his own for dinner; and they end in the midst of a conversation in the Verdurins' Venetian smoking room after the meal. What they give us in between these two points is a highly detailed report of objects Goncourt encountered and anecdotes he heard on his outing. The first half focuses on objects: Goncourt describes in

¹ References to *À la recherche du temps perdu* are to the 1982 three-volume Vintage edition of the Moncrieff/Kilmartin translation titled *Remembrance of Things Past*. For quoted passages in their original French, see the appendix on p. 103 of this dissertation.

² "Le journal des Goncourt," Académie Goncourt, <http://www.academie-goncourt.fr/?article=1229173796> (February 25, 2014). My translation.

detail, for example, the flowers on the table, the beautiful vases and plates, and the excellent food. Then the focus shifts to things that were said by the guests. We get, for example, a story from Monsieur Swann about the pearl necklace Madame Verdurin is wearing having turned black in a fire, and his avowal that he has seen the necklace in a portrait of Madame de La Fayette, to whom it used to belong. Dr. Cottard recounts that the handwriting of the Verdurins' valet was also transmuted by the fire, in which the man nearly lost his life. Everything Goncourt depicts, whether object or anecdote, is clearly something that charmed him—something he found beautiful or interesting.

Marcel longs to be a writer, but ever since childhood he has been convinced that he lacks the talent for it. The pages he reads in the journal make him think that his lack of talent is perhaps “something less to be regretted, since literature, if I was to trust the evidence of this book, had no very profound truths to reveal: and at the same time it seemed to me sad that literature was not what I had thought it to be” (3:728). The pages also leave him disturbed by how attractive the Verdurins and their guests seem in Goncourt's depiction of them, since, with the exception of Swann, they have always seemed to Marcel to be vulgar and ridiculous:

Certainly, I had never concealed from myself that I knew neither how to listen nor, once I was not alone, how to look. My eyes were blind to the sort of necklace an old woman might be wearing, and the things I might be told about her pearls never entered my ears. All the same, I had known these people in daily life, I had dined with them often, they were simply the Verdurins and the Duc de Guermantes and the Cottards, and each one of them I had found just as commonplace as my grandmother had found that Basin of whom she had no suspicion that he was the darling nephew, the enchanting young hero, of Mme de Beausergent, each one of them had seemed to me insipid; I could remember the vulgarities without number of which each of them was composed. (3:737)

Marcel concludes that the reason the journal makes the Verdurins and their guests seem attractive is also the reason it fails to reveal profound truth: its observation is superficial—what it records is mere surface detail. Marcel's observation, by contrast, is an observation of “general essences,” which lie below the surface of experience. The passage that explains this is long, but the importance of its ideas to Proust's aesthetic makes it worth quoting in full.

In so far as my own character was concerned, my incapacity for looking and listening, which the passage from the Journal had so painfully illustrated to me, was nevertheless not total. There was in me a personage who knew more or less how to look, but it was an intermittent personage, coming to life only in the presence of some general essence common to a number of things, these essences being its nourishment and its joy. Then the personage looked and listened, but at a certain depth only, without my powers of superficial observation being enhanced. Just as a geometer, stripping things of their sensible qualities, sees only the linear substratum beneath them, so the stories that people told escaped me, for what interested me was not what they were trying to say but the manner in which they said it and the way in which this manner revealed their character or their foibles; or rather I was interested in what had always, because it gave me specific pleasure, been more particularly the goal of my investigations: the point that was common to one being and another. As soon as I perceived this my intelligence—until that moment slumbering, even if sometimes the apparent

animation of my talk might disguise from others a profound intellectual torpor—at once set off joyously in pursuit, but its quarry then, for instance the identity of the Verdurin drawing-room in various places and at various times, was situated in the middle distance, behind actual appearances, in a zone that was rather more withdrawn. So the apparent, copiable charm of things and people escaped me, because I had not the ability to stop short there—I was like a surgeon who beneath the smooth surface of a woman’s belly sees the internal disease which is devouring it. If I went to a dinner-party I did not see the guests: when I thought I was looking at them, I was in fact examining them with X-rays. And the result was that, when all the observations I had succeeded in making about the guests during the party were linked together, the pattern of the lines I had traced took the form of a collection of psychological laws in which the actual purport of the remarks of each guest occupied but a very small space. But did this take away all merit from my portraits, which in fact I did not intend as such? If, in the realm of painting, one portrait makes manifest certain truths concerning volume, light, movement, does that mean that it is necessarily inferior to another completely different portrait of the same person, in which a thousand details omitted in the first are minutely transcribed, from which second portrait one would conclude that the model was ravishingly beautiful, while from the first one would have thought him or her ugly, a fact which may be of documentary, even of historical importance, but is not necessarily an artistic truth? (3:737-39)

This formulation of the difference between Goncourt’s way of looking and listening and Marcel’s own is one of the *Recherche*’s most important aesthetic statements. It encapsulates Proust’s own vision of the nature and purpose of art. Reality, Proust tells us, is composed of two realms. First there is the realm of particularity and individuality, of “a thousand details,” which Proust imagines to be the “surface” of reality. This, in the terms of this passage, is the domain of “*observation*” and “*apparence*”—of the kind of noticing practiced by Goncourt, and the kind of thing his journal records. In this domain, the Verdurins and their guests are charming, in their anecdotes and the objects that surround them. Then there is the deeper realm of “general essences”—general qualities and phenomena that appear in many different particulars—and of general laws and truths. In this realm, the Verdurins and their guests appear ugly, in their characters and foibles. This is the domain of the kind of looking and listening Marcel has always engaged in, which is the basis for genuine art. For Proust, a piece of writing is not “art” unless it captures general essences, as is clear from this passage much later in *Le temps retrouvé* that is a companion to the one I’ve just quoted:

Impelled by the instinct that was in him, the writer, long before he thought that he would one day become one, regularly omitted to look at a great many things which other people notice, with the result that he was accused by others of being absent-minded and by himself of not knowing how to listen or look, but all this time he was instructing his eyes and his ears to retain for ever what seemed to others puerile trivialities, the tone of voice with which a certain remark had been made, or the facial expression and the movement of the shoulders which he had seen at a certain moment, many years ago, in somebody of whom perhaps he knows nothing else whatsoever, simply because this tone of

voice was one that he had heard or felt that he might hear again, because it was something renewable, durable. There is a feeling for generality which, in the future writer, itself picks out what is general and can for that reason one day enter into a work of art. And this has made him listen to people only when, stupid or absurd though they may have been, they have turned themselves, by repeating like parrots what other people of similar character are in the habit of saying, into birds of augury, mouthpieces of a psychological law. He remembers only things that are general. By such tones of voice, such variations in the physiognomy, seen perhaps in his earliest childhood, has the life of other people been represented for him and when, later, he becomes a writer, it is from these observations that he composes his human figures, grafting on to a movement of the shoulders common to a number of people—a movement as truthfully delineated as though it had been recorded in an anatomist's note-book, though the truth which he uses it to express is of a psychological order—a movement of the neck made by someone else, each of many individuals having posed for a moment as his model. (3:937)

The passage is clearly a twin of the passage about the Goncourt journal; the ways of looking and listening it contrasts (that of the true artist and that of everyone else) are those of Marcel and Goncourt. And here we get examples of what the artist notices when he observes other people: a tone in which something is said, a facial expression, or a movement of the shoulders or neck. All of these need to be “general”—they capture the writer's attention only if he has seen them before in different people (or believes that this will be so). Each time he encounters them, they are clothed in particularities of the individual human beings who produce them. But behind these differentiating particularities, the writer detects something “general,” something abstract, such as a “tone” that multiple utterances, heard in the different voices of different people, share in common. And in depicting such general essences, the writer “expresses” or “reveals” (“met en évidence”) psychological truths and laws that underlie them.

What these passages leave unclear is exactly what kind of psychological law or truth manifests itself in a general essence of this type, and why Proust seems to believe that all such general essences are manifestations of laws and truths. I'm afraid that these questions are never really answered, but there is a scene much earlier in the novel (in *Le côté de Guermantes*) that might help us hazard some guesses. It shows Marcel discovering the very sort of general essence described in the passages above. At an afternoon party at Madame de Villeparisis's, a historian of the Fronde rebellion suggests to the ambassador Norpois that he (Norpois) give a talk at the French Institute based on his research. Motivated by his desire for the acclaim such a talk would bring him, the historian nonetheless pretends to have Norpois's own interests in mind:

“You haven't thought of giving the *Institut* an address on the price of bread during the Fronde, I suppose,” the historian of that movement timidly inquired of M. de Norpois. “It might be an enormous success” (which was to say, “give me a colossal advertisement”), he added, smiling at the Ambassador with an obsequious tenderness which made him raise his eyelids and reveal eyes as wide as the sky. I seemed to have seen this look before, though I had met the historian for the first time this afternoon. Suddenly I remembered having seen the same expression in the eyes of a Brazilian doctor who claimed to be able to

cure breathless spasms of the kind from which I suffered by absurd inhalations of plant essences. When, in the hope that he would pay more attention to my case, I had told him that I knew Professor Cottard, he had replied, as though speaking in Cottard's interest: "Now this treatment of mine, if you were to tell him about it, would give him the material for a most sensational paper for the Academy of Medicine!" He had not ventured to press the matter but had stood gazing at me with the same air of interrogation, timid, suppliant, and self-seeking, which I had just wonderingly observed on the face of the historian of the Fronde. Obviously the two men were not acquainted and had little or nothing in common, but psychological laws, like physical laws, have a more or less general application. And if the requisite conditions are the same, an identical expression lights up the eyes of different human animals, as an identical sunrise lights up places that are a long way apart and that have no connexion with one another. (2:232-33)

The expression Marcel has encountered on the faces of the historian and the doctor is exactly the kind of general essence described in our two passages from *Le temps retrouvé*: it is a "point that was common to one being and another," a "facial expression," a matter not of "what [people] were trying to say but the manner in which they said it and the way in which this manner revealed their character or their foibles." And here, too, there is the idea that the general essence manifests a psychological "law." Now, it may be that this term "law" is ill-chosen, and that the passage implies an overly mechanistic view of human behavior. But the essence of the idea is that Marcel has just discovered a pattern, a regularity, in human behavior, and this is a kind of truth. Not only does the facial expression repeat itself in different people; it repeats itself in conjunction with a general circumstance and a general motive, and it is indicative of certain traits of personality (a certain pusillanimity, for example, and a certain shortcoming in social intelligence). To become aware of this pattern is to discern a bit of truth about reality—to know human behavior and psychology a little better than one knew it before.

Elstir, the Anti-Goncourt

If Goncourt is a representative of the false art of superficial observation, Proust's fictional painter Elstir is an example of the type of artist whose work lays bare general essences. When Marcel visits his studio in Balbec (the Norman seaside resort where Marcel and his grandmother have been summering), almost all the paintings he sees there are seascapes Elstir has painted in the area, and "the charm of each of them lay in a sort of metamorphosis of the objects represented" (1:893). The metamorphosis in question transforms things we see in the world into things for which we sometimes mistake them. Elstir is intent on capturing visual illusions of a type almost all of us experience. We can call them "first-glance" illusions, since they take place only for a second, when we first turn our eyes toward something, before our minds reinterpret the image. Marcel remembers having experienced this type of illusion, which can sometimes be aural instead of visual:

Sometimes . . . I had been led by some effect of sunlight to mistake what was only a darker stretch of sea for a distant coastline, or to gaze delightedly at a

belt of liquid azure without knowing whether it belonged to sea or sky. But presently my reason would re-establish between the elements the distinction which my first impression had abolished. In the same way from my bedroom in Paris I would sometimes hear a dispute, almost a riot, in the street below, until I had traced back to its cause—a carriage for instance that was rattling towards me—that noise from which I now eliminated the shrill and discordant vociferations which my ear had really heard but which my reason knew that wheels did not produce. (1:893-94)

“How often, when driving,” Proust writes in a later volume, “do we not come upon a bright street beginning a few feet away from us, when what we have actually before our eyes is merely a patch of wall glaringly lit which has given us the mirage of depth” (2:435). These momentary illusions that our minds immediately correct “prove to us that we should never succeed in identifying objects if we did not bring some process of reasoning to bear on them. . . . Surfaces and volumes are in reality independent of the names of objects which our memory imposes on them after we have recognized them” (2:435). Perception, in other words, even when instantaneous and automatic, is always a two-step process: first an image hits the retina and then the mind interprets it.

An illuminated patch of wall being taken for a country road is an unambiguous misinterpretation; the mind momentarily and automatically mistakes the patch of wall for a road. There are other first-glance illusions that are not so fully deceptive. These are *incipient* illusions—strongly aroused impressions that a thing is another thing that do not go so far as to create an outright misidentification. In many of his paintings at Balbec, Elstir captures the sea’s ability to look like rural land, a phenomenon beautifully described in this passage from *Sodome et Gomorrhe*:

“On the days, few and far between, of really fine weather, the heat had traced upon the waters, as though across fields, a dusty white track at the end of which the pointed mast of a fishing-boat stood up like a village steeple. A tug, of which only the funnel was visible, smoked in the distance like a factory set apart, while alone against the horizon a convex patch of white, sketched there doubtless by a sail but seemingly solid and as it were calcareous, was reminiscent of the sunlit corner of some isolated building, a hospital or a school. And the clouds and the wind, on the days when these were added to the sun, completed, if not the error of judgment, at any rate the illusion of the first glance, the suggestion that it aroused in the imagination. For the alternation of sharply defined patches of colour like those produced in the country by the proximity of different crops, the rough, yellow, almost muddy irregularities of the marine surface, the banks, the slopes that hid from sight a vessel upon which a crew of nimble sailors seemed to be harvesting, all this on stormy days made the sea a thing as varied, as solid, as undulating, as populous, as civilised as the earth with its carriage roads over which I used to travel and was soon to be travelling again.” (2:811-12)

This impression that the sea is rural land (doubtless helped along by the regularity with which Marcel has been looking at rural land in his visits to the environs of Balbec) is a “suggestion . . . aroused in the imagination,” an “illusion of the first glance” that does not go so far as to make us mistake the one thing for the other.

In the passages that compare Goncourt's way of looking and listening with Marcel's, we have seen that Proust believed that, in capturing general essences, the artist also expresses general laws and truths that underlie them. Elstir expresses laws in his depictions of first-glance illusions. There is a popular type of photograph, Proust tells us, that

will illustrate a law of perspective, will show us some cathedral which we are accustomed to see in the middle of a town, taken instead from a selected vantage point from which it will appear to be thirty times the height of the houses and to be thrusting out a spur from the bank of the river, from which it is actually at some distance. Now the effort made by Elstir to reproduce things not as he knew them to be but according to the optical illusions of which our first sight of them is composed, had led him precisely to bring out certain of these laws of perspective, which were thus all the more striking, since art had been the first to disclose them. A river, because of the windings of its course, a bay because of the apparent proximity to one another of the cliffs on either side of it, would seem to have hollowed out in the heart of the plain or of the mountains a lake absolutely landlocked on every side. In a picture of a view from Balbec painted upon a scorching day in summer an inlet of the sea, enclosed between walls of pink granite, appeared not to be the sea, which began further out. The continuity of the ocean was suggested only by the gulls which, wheeling over what seemed to be solid rock, were as a matter of fact sniffing the moist vapour of the shifting tide. Other laws emerged from the same canvass, as, at the foot of immense cliffs, the lilliputian grace of white sails on the blue mirror on whose surface they looked like sleeping butterflies,³ and certain contrasts between the depth of the shadows and the paleness of the light. (1:897)

Elstir illustrates laws by capturing the general in the particular. A painting can represent only one particular impression—one particular image—but the impressions Elstir depicts contain general phenomena we repeatedly encounter. Thus, even if one has never seen that particular bay from that particular angle, one may recognize in Elstir's painting of it something one has seen before: the general phenomenon of a continuous body of water seemingly cut in two by cliffs that adjoin it. This is a general *phenomenon*, not what one would call a "law," but Proust apparently believed that an artist reveals laws by capturing the general phenomena they produce. It is enough that a painting or photograph captures the phenomenon of a cathedral's seeming, from a cliff that overlooks it, to be closer to a nearby river than it actually is; the law of perspective that stands behind the phenomenon is thereby "brought to light" ("mis en lumière") or "expressed." We encountered the same idea in the passages that contrast Goncourt's and Marcel's ways of seeing—in the notion that, by depicting general phenomena of behavior (a certain tone of voice or gesture, for example) the writer is able to express psychological "laws" that stand behind them. And so, when Proust speaks of Elstir's depictions, he speaks as often of "effects" (a synonym of "phenomena") as of "laws." For example, he compares a certain tendency of Marcel's imagination to "Elstir engaged upon rendering some effect of perspective without reference to the notions of physics which he might quite well possess" (2:590). And when an acquaintance tells Marcel that, when seen from the top of a cliff, the river that runs next to Balbec "runs close under the spires of the church, which is

³ Butterflies rest while hanging upside down from leaves or twigs, usually with their wings closed.

actually a long way from it, and seems to be reflecting them,” he replies that “it’s an effect that Elstir is very fond of. I’ve seen several sketches of it in his studio” (2:969-70).

The Towers of Martinville

General truths or laws beneath a surface of particulars are precisely what Marcel senses, and what gives him great joy, when he observes from a moving carriage the steeples of Martinville. This is not obvious, however; the scene is notoriously opaque and has given rise to a large number of competing interpretations.⁴ But by examining the episode in the light of passages we’ve just been analyzing, we will see that it expresses the same philosophy of art that we have found in Proust’s depictions of the Goncourt journal and the paintings of Elstir.

If *À la recherche du temps perdu* is the story of a literary vocation, then the Martinville bell towers scene is one of its most important, for it is here that Marcel creates his first work of literary art. The young Marcel yearns to become a writer but believes that he lacks the talent for it, since he completely draws a blank whenever he tries to come up with a “philosophic theme for some great literary work” (1:195). This belief leaves him despondent, so much so that, in order to counteract his despair, he pushes from his mind all thoughts of novels and poems and the shining literary future he has dreamed of. Meanwhile, “quite independently of all these literary preoccupations and in no way connected with them, suddenly a roof, a gleam of sunlight on a stone, the smell of a path would make me stop still, to enjoy the particular pleasure they gave me, and also because they appeared to be concealing, beyond what my eyes could see, something which they invited me to come and take but which despite all my efforts I never managed to discover” (1:194-95; translation modified). The idea, of course, is that this has *everything* to do with Marcel’s literary preoccupations; it is a manifestation of his calling. We have now re-entered the language of Marcel’s reaction to the Goncourt journal: the “particular pleasure” (“plaisir particulier”) should remind us of the “specific pleasure” (“plaisir spécifique”) Marcel feels when he discerns a general essence, and the mysterious content of these impressions being “beyond what my eyes could see” (“au-delà de ce que je voyais”) brings us back to general essences being “in the middle distance, behind actual appearances (“au-delà de l’apparence elle-même”), in a zone that was rather more withdrawn.”

“It was certainly not impressions of this kind,” Marcel says, in reference to these strange impressions that seem to hide something precious behind their surface, “that could restore the hope I had lost of succeeding one day in becoming an author and poet, for each of them was associated with some material object devoid of intellectual value and suggesting no abstract truth” (1:195). These lines are from the perspective of the young Marcel, who does not yet understand that particular objects can have intellectual value by instantiating general truths; and it is precisely general truths that he is sensing behind the surface of certain particulars. The subjects of genuine art, Proust is telling us, are not abstract philosophical

⁴ Judith Ryan, for example, says that the thing Marcel thinks he senses behind the surface of the bell towers is a Kantian “thing-in-itself,” and that the episode is meant to assert that no such thing exists (Ryan, *Vanishing Subject*, 183); while for Charles Du Bos, the episode depicts an illusion to which we fall prey when we contemplate a material object persistently and passionately: the mind projects onto the object “the very spirituality that the mind sends in its direction,” which it then mistakes for a “state of immateriality within matter itself” (Du Bos, “Creative Impulse,” 174). For Margaret Gray, the episode is about the mind’s imposition, through metaphor, of “images of fixedness and immobility” upon “a moving, evolving world” (Gray, *Postmodern Proust*, 122).

ideas generated wholly by the intellect, but truth that presents itself in experience, in “impressions.” In *Le temps retrouvé*, he puts it thus: “The ideas formed by the pure intelligence have no more than a logical, a possible truth, they are arbitrarily chosen. . . . Only the impression, however trivial its material may seem to be, however faint its traces, is a criterion of truth and deserves for that reason to be apprehended by the mind, for the mind, if it succeeds in extracting this truth, can by the impression and by nothing else be brought to a state of greater perfection and given a pure joy” (3:914).

Marcel would like to go “beyond the image or the scent” (“au-delà de l’image ou de l’odeur”), to perceive “that unknown thing enveloped in a form or a scent” (1:195; translation modified). But the task is an arduous one, and he continually puts it off, so that “my mind would become littered (as my room was with the flowers that I had gathered on my walks, or the odds and ends that people had given me) with a mass of disparate images—the play of sunlight on a stone, a roof, the sound of a bell, the smell of fallen leaves—beneath which the reality I once sensed, but never had the will-power to discover and bring to light, had long since perished” (1:196). But “once . . . I received an impression of this sort which I did not abandon without getting to the bottom of it to some extent.” Traveling at high speed in the carriage of a family acquaintance, “At a bend in the road I experienced, suddenly, that special pleasure which was unlike any other, on catching sight of the twin steeples of Martinville, which were bathed in the setting sun and which the movement of our carriage and the bends in the road seemed to make move, and then of a third steeple, that of Vieuxvicq, which, although separated from them by a hill and a valley, and rising from rather higher ground in the distance, appeared none the less to be right next to them” (1:196; translation modified). We are now back in the realm of visual illusions and phenomena of perspective we entered in the paintings of Elstir. In fact, the bell tower of Vieuxvicq seeming, from Marcel’s vantage point, to be right next to the towers of Martinville (“tout voisin d’eux”) directly recalls the river that runs next to Balbec that, when seen from the top of a cliff, “runs close under the spires of the church” (“voisine les flèches de l’église”), “which is actually a long way from it, and seems to be reflecting them.” This is, Marcel remarks, “an effect that Elstir is very fond of. I’ve seen several sketches of it in his studio” (2:969-70). A general phenomenon—an effect of perspective—is the thing Marcel senses behind the particular image of the Vieuxvicq tower’s seeming next to the other two. And this is also the case for the other two images he sees: the towers of Martinville seeming to move, and the sun’s reflected light “playing and smiling,”⁵ as Marcel goes on to say, on the variegated surfaces of the towers’ sloping spires because of the carriage’s rapid changes in position.

“In noticing and registering the shape of their spires, their shifting lines, the sunny warmth of their surfaces, I felt that I was not penetrating to the core of my impression, that something more lay behind that mobility, that luminosity, something which they seemed at once to contain and to conceal” (1:196). This, once again, is a notion we found in Proust’s discussion of the Goncourt journal: that general essences lie “beyond the surface” of observed particulars. The task for the young Marcel is to penetrate the surface of particulars—these particular lines, this particular movement, this particular sunny warmth (“ensoleillement”)—to get to the general essences that lie behind them. He does this by force of intellect; he concentrates on his memory of the towers (they have now moved out of sight), and “presently

⁵ “Smiling” is here a metaphor for “brightening.” At Montjouvain Marcel sees “upon the water, and on the surface of the wall, a pallid smile respond to the smile of the sky” (1:169-70; translation modified).

their outlines and their sunlit surfaces, as though they had been a sort of rind, peeled away; something of what they had concealed from me became apparent; a thought came into my mind which had not existed for me a moment earlier, framing itself in words in my head; and the pleasure which the first sight of them had given me was so greatly enhanced that, overpowered by a sort of intoxication, I could no longer think of anything else” (1:197). Through force of intellect—by “intellectualizing” what he has sensed, converting it into thoughts, into words—Marcel is able to penetrate beneath the surface of particulars to the general phenomena that lie behind it. This process is revisited in *Le temps retrouvé*, when Marcel, now middle-aged, finally grasps the significance of his experience of the Martinville towers and of all the other objects encountered on his childhood walks that seemed to hide a treasure behind their surface; after contemplating involuntary memory—the experience Marcel has had several times of a sensation in the present moment (the taste of a madeleine dunked in tea, a sensation of uneven paving stones underfoot, etc.) making him relive a moment from his distant past in which he felt the same sensation—he remembers that

“in another fashion certain obscure impressions, already even at Combray on the Guermantes way, had solicited my attention in a fashion somewhat similar to these reminiscences, except that they concealed within them not a sensation dating from an earlier time, but a new truth I remembered . . . that already at Combray I used to fix before my mind for its attention some image which had compelled me to look at it, a cloud, a triangle, a church spire, a flower, a stone, because I had the feeling that perhaps beneath these signs there lay something of a quite different kind which I must try to discover, some thought which they translated after the fashion of those hieroglyphic characters which at first one might suppose to represent only material objects. . . . In fact, both in the one case and in the other, whether I was concerned with impressions like the one which I had received from the sight of the steeples of Martinville or with reminiscences like that of the unevenness of the two steps or the taste of the madeleine, the task was to interpret the given sensations as signs of so many laws and ideas, by trying to think—that is to say, to draw forth from the shadow—what I had merely felt, by trying to convert it to its spiritual equivalent. And this method, which seemed to me the sole method, what was it but the creation of a work of art?” (3:912)

Truths, laws, ideas: these are what lie behind the surface of the Martinville towers, and the way to discover these—to bring them into the light—is to express them in a work of art. Like the paintings of Elstir, this work will express them by capturing the general phenomena they underlie. The sketch Marcel composes while still in the moving carriage (1:198) does exactly that, starting with the towers’ seeming “lost in that expanse of open country” (1:198) (“perdus en rase campagne”), a detail that captures the phenomenon of towers on the horizon seeming all alone even though in reality they are surrounded by lower buildings. The “bold leap” (“volte hardie”) with which the Vieuxvicq tower joins the others nicely expresses the kind of vigorous swing in position a distant object can seem to make when seen from a vehicle moving swiftly on curving roads. And, as I’ve mentioned, there is the phenomenon, captured also by Elstir, of a distant point of view making an object (the Vieuxvicq tower) seem adjacent to another (the towers of the church at Martinville) when in fact they are far apart, and that of sunlight on a variegated surface brightening and playing as the viewer rapidly changes position. These are

the general essences underlying what Marcel saw when “At a bend in the road I experienced, suddenly, that special pleasure which was unlike any other.” But the sketch goes further than this, capturing other general phenomena—other illusions of perspective—he experienced as the carriage ride continued, such as the way, when you approach something far in the distance, you can seem to make almost no progress toward it (“The minutes passed, we were travelling fast, and yet the three steeples were always a long way ahead of us”) until all of a sudden the progress seems to rapidly increase even though your speed hasn’t changed: “We had been so long in approaching them that I was thinking of the time that must still elapse before we could reach them when, of a sudden, the carriage turned a corner and set us down at their feet.”⁶ And in the image of the towers after sunset resembling flowers “painted upon the sky,” there is captured the illusion of flatness the atmosphere can give to distant buildings that are not directly lit by the sun (see the photo at right⁷). When Marcel has finished his sketch, it “had so entirely relieved my mind of its obsession with the steeples and the mystery which lay behind them, that . . . I began to sing at the top of my voice” (1:198-99).



Panorama of Caen, France, with the bell towers of Saint-Etienne Church

Perhaps you suspect that, in extracting these “general essences,” I am really just playing a game that can be played with any text—that any description of anything will capture general phenomena. In a sense this objection is correct; almost any depiction of a tree will capture the general phenomenon of trees having branches, for example; and any depiction of church bell towers will capture the general phenomenon of churches having bell towers. But the general essences Proust had in mind are subtle, non-obvious ones, phenomena that many people go their whole lives without ever fully being aware of, and these are by no means captured by every text. The pastiche of the Goncourt journal captures plenty of obvious phenomena: that of men conversing in a carriage, that of flowers placed in vases, that of foie gras served at dinner, etc. What makes the pastiche the opposite of Elstir’s paintings and Marcel’s written sketch is its failure to capture phenomena that are easy to overlook. In its detailed description of the dinner—packed with objects Goncourt admired and anecdotes told him by the guests—there is nothing that perceptively transcends the array of surface

⁶ Flaubert captures a kindred phenomenon in his beautiful description of a horserace in *L’Education sentimentale*: “At a distance their speed did not appear to be exceptional; at the far end of the Champ de Mars, they even seemed to slow down . . . However, coming back quickly, they increased in size; they cut the air as they passed; the earth shook; pebbles flew” (*Sentimental Education*, 207).

⁷ The photo shows the original Martinville towers—those of “Journées en automobile,” an article Proust wrote for *Le Figaro* and reworked for the Martinville towers scene (Dr. Percepied’s speeding carriage was originally a motor car that took Proust to Caen, and the article’s coupled bell towers are specified as those of Saint-Étienne Church). The pinnacles that flank the main spires help us understand why the towers seem to the narrator (in both the article and the *Recherche*) like birds and flowers; from a distance they bear some resemblance to petals or folded wings.

particulars. As interesting as the anecdotes may be, Goncourt fails to avail himself of what to Proust is literature's main source of value and delight: its ability to illuminate life. For Proust would surely have agreed with Matthew Arnold's description of art as a "criticism of life"—with the idea that, just as criticism at its best illuminates an artwork—shows us something about it that we otherwise might never have noticed—literature at its best illuminates our experience, focusing our attention on things we have experienced in life but that have never been the objects of our full conscious awareness. This is the gist of Proust's statement in *Le temps retrouvé* that "In reality, every reader is, while he is reading, the reader of his own self. The writer's work is merely a kind of optical instrument which he offers to the reader to enable him to discern what, without this book, he would perhaps never have seen in himself" (3:949; translation modified). Let us accept Proust's offer; let us peer through his lens and consider whether what it shows us is indeed our own lives.

The Recherche Itself

The pages Marcel reads in the Goncourt journal are not just any pages; they happen to recount an evening with the Verdurins and their circle, people Marcel knows well. He himself has been to dinner many times at the Verdurins' in the company of the very same guests. In making this the pages' subject, Proust enables Marcel to compare his way of seeing with Goncourt's, by way of the instructive experience of finding the Verdurins and their guests much more attractive in these pages than he found them in real life. But since the Verdurins and their circle are also familiar to *us*—since Proust himself has depicted them elsewhere in the *Recherche*—this choice also involves an implicit invitation: it invites us to compare Goncourt's depictions of these characters with Proust's. If the *Recherche* lives up to the philosophy of art it espouses, then its depictions of these same people capture subtle phenomena of the kind the journal's do not. To find out whether this is true, let us go in search of five of Goncourt's fellow diners: Swann, the Verdurins, Dr. Cottard, and Princess Sherbatoff. But first, a note on method.

There are some general essences in Proust that also appear in photographs. Consider for example the one captured in the very last image of *Sodome et Gomorre*, volume 1, the "vallonnements lointains et bleuâtres" ("far and bluish valleys") that hold some flooded meadows Marcel points out to Albertine. Proust here captures a phenomenon that appears in the photo at right: that of hills in the far distance sometimes appearing blue. (The effect is brought about by a process called Rayleigh scattering, in which blue and violet light, since their wavelengths are shorter, are scattered by the atmosphere more than are the other components of sunlight. The farther you are from the



Carpathian Mountains, Romania

hill, the more atmosphere there is in between, and so, the more pronounced the blueness.) I am aware that a photograph is not simply a copy of what we would have seen had our eye been in the place occupied by the camera's lens at the moment the photo was snapped; it is an image created by the interaction of light and photo-sensitive chemicals, or, if the photo is digital, by the camera's converting the light signals into a code of zeros and ones and re-expressing it as an image made of pixels, each one a solid square of a certain brightness and a certain color. In both chemical and digital photography, the image that is created differs in important ways from the image we would have seen with natural vision, starting with the fact that the colors and contrasts in brightness are merely approximations of those we would have seen. But despite these differences, a photo does convey information about what we would have seen had we "been there," and in the photo we have before us, the blueness of the distant hills is part of that information. The blue in the photo could be brighter or more saturated than it would have appeared to our eye, but blue we would have seen. I can thus use the photograph to show you that Proust's description of what Marcel and Albertine see captures something real—a phenomenon encountered in life and not just in the pages of Proust's novel. But with all the general essences I'm about to point out, I have no such luxury. These phenomena are internal ones, and thus I need to resort to the much inferior approach of simply pointing them out, trying to explain my reaction to them and hoping that you, too, will recognize the phenomena in question as ones you've encountered in life. For an example of such phenomena of inner life, let us stay with Marcel and Albertine but travel back in time to one of their first encounters. After having daydreamed for weeks of meeting the seemingly inaccessible girls of the "little band," Marcel, out walking with Elstir, suddenly finds himself about to be introduced. But as he waits for Elstir to call him over to where the painter and the girls are standing, he finds himself thrown off, discombobulated, by how differently the event is unfolding from the way it has unfolded in his daydreams:

What diminished the pleasure which I was about to feel was not merely the imminence but the incoherence of its realisation. Laws as precise as those of hydrostatics maintain the relative position of the images which we form in a fixed order, which the proximity of the event at once upsets. Elstir was about to call me. This was not at all the way in which I had so often, on the beach, in my bedroom, imagined myself making the acquaintance of these girls. What was about to happen was a different event, for which I was not prepared. I recognised in it neither my desire nor its object; I regretted almost that I had come out with Elstir. (1:915)

Here Proust does for me what Ruskin did for Proust: in the words of Alain de Botton, "in Ruskin, he found experiences that he had never been more than semiconscious of raised and beautifully assembled in language."⁸ The special kind of discombobulation Marcel experiences in this passage, a feeling of being thrown off, caught unprepared, by how differently an event is unfolding from the way it has unfolded in our daydreams, is something I too have experienced. (And in my case too, the discombobulation has foiled to a certain degree my enjoyment of the dreamed-of event.) But as is usually the case with life's more subtle occurrences, the experience was never more than semi-conscious. Upon finding it depicted in this passage, I felt with great delight a kind of resonance—a kind of sympathetic vibration deep

⁸ De Botton, *How Proust Can Change Your Life*, 174.

in some corner of my memory. It was a feeling of simultaneous recognition and discovery: I recognized in Proust's description a phenomenon I had experienced in life, but I was also, in a sense, discovering it, since only now had it become the object of my full, conscious awareness and attention. And that is all I can say; since the phenomenon is purely internal, I cannot point to a photograph to show that the phenomenon exists outside the pages of Proust's novel. But that is the only difference; the phenomenon is no less real—no less “concrete”—than that of blueness in distant hills. And in the context of the *Recherche*, it is also more important, since it belongs to that other terrain, the vast inner world of subtle feelings and emotions, that is Proust's main realm of exploration. That the things of this realm cannot be photographed might make us shy away from discussing whether Proust's depictions of them are accurate, for fear of becoming vulnerable to the charge that our work is “impressionistic.” But this would be as perverse as studying a masterpiece of cartography and refusing to take up the question of how well the map matches up with the terrain it was meant to depict—of how well it does the thing it was primarily designed to do. For Proust, the question of whether his novel succeeds in capturing subtleties of inner life was *the* question; it is this, above all else, that he designed the *Recherche* to do. “They would not be ‘my’ readers,” says Marcel, envisioning his future readers, “but the readers of their own selves, my book being merely a sort of magnifying glass like those which the optician at Combray used to offer his customers—it would be my book, but with its help I would furnish them with the means of reading what lay inside themselves. So that I should not ask them to praise me or to censure me, but simply to tell me whether ‘it really is like that,’ I should ask them whether the words that they read within themselves are the same as those which I have written” (3:1089). The general essences I'm about to lay out all have elicited in me that combination of recognition and discovery that makes me say of Proust that “the words I read in myself are indeed the ones he has written.” I hope that at least some of them will have this effect on you. Inevitably not all will: perhaps I have misunderstood some of them, while others may simply have not been a part of your experience, or may have been reached long ago by the light of your conscious awareness (blueness in distant hills is itself a revelation to some and old, familiar knowledge to others). But regardless of whether they resonate, these essences will serve us as trail heads, points of entry to some of the themes that run through different sections of the novel.

SWANN AND THE PATHOLOGY OF LOVE. In “Un amour de Swann,” Proust repeatedly imagines Swann's jealous passion for Odette as an illness. “This malady which Swann's love had become,” we are told at a certain point, has infiltrated his life so thoroughly that, “as surgeons say, his love was no longer operable” (1:336). And in the midst of his jealous preoccupation with Odette's daily whereabouts and activities, Swann, “examining his complaint with as much scientific detachment as if he had inoculated himself with it in order to study its effects, . . . told himself that, when he was cured of it, what Odette might or might not do would be a matter of indifference to him” (1:327). If jealous, obsessive love is like an illness, then Proust is akin to a pathologist: his depiction of Swann's love for Odette is a brilliantly perceptive study of the trajectory and various symptoms of this “disease.”

At the start of their acquaintance, Odette is enamoured of Swann far more than he is of her. He considers her beautiful, but her beauty is not of the sort he instinctively finds attractive, and so he feels no strong desire for her. His feelings for her are not exclusive—she is only one of several women who inhabit his romantic daydreams. But this, Proust tells us,

could change: “if, thanks to some accidental circumstance . . . the image of Odette de Crecy came to absorb the whole of these daydreams, if the memory of her could no longer be eliminated from them, then her bodily imperfections would no longer be of the least importance, nor would the conformity of her body, more or less than any other, to the requirements of Swann’s taste, since, having become the body of the woman he loved, it must henceforth be the only one capable of causing him joy or anguish” (1:217). What such a circumstance might be that could change Swann’s feelings so dramatically we find out as the story progresses. It becomes a daily habit for Swann to arrive at the Verdurins after dinner and to escort Odette home in his carriage. But one evening, when he comes unusually late so as to enjoy as long as possible the embraces of another woman, he finds that Odette has left without him. “Seeing the room bare of her, Swann felt a sudden stab at the heart; he trembled at the thought of being deprived of a pleasure whose intensity he was able for the first time to gauge, having always, hitherto, had the certainty of finding it whenever he wished which (as in the case of all our pleasures) reduced if it did not altogether blind him to its dimensions” (1:247). This is the fateful moment in which Swann contracts his disease, and in describing what Swann feels, Proust means to capture a general psychological phenomenon—a way obsessive love can be born:

Among all the methods by which love is brought into being, among all the agents which disseminate that blessed bane, there are few so efficacious as this gust of feverish agitation that sweeps over us from time to time. For then the die is cast, the person whose company we enjoy at that moment is the person we shall henceforward love. It is not even necessary for that person to have attracted us, up till then, more than or even as much as others. All that was needed was that our predilection should become exclusive. And that condition is fulfilled when—in this moment of deprivation—the quest for the pleasures we enjoyed in his or her company is suddenly replaced by an anxious, torturing need, whose object is the person alone, an absurd, irrational need which the laws of this world make it impossible to satisfy and difficult to assuage—the insensate, agonising need to possess exclusively. (1:252)

Now that Swann is infected—now that his feelings for Odette have become exclusive and intense by way of a desire to possess her (to be master, as Proust says later, of “even the tiniest particles of her heart” [1:296])—we may study the behavior of his disease. One of its strange effects is the unique, addictive charm it confers on the sensations of Odette’s presence. He experiences “a taste for the sensations which Odette’s person gave him, for the pleasure he took in admiring as a spectacle, or in examining as a phenomenon, the dawn of one of her glances, the formation of one of her smiles, the emission of a particular vocal cadence. And this pleasure, different from every other, had in the end created in him a need of her, which she alone by her presence or by her letters could assuage” (1:331). But he also is racked by jealousy, especially with regard to Odette’s relations with Monsieur de Forcheville, a new addition at the Verdurins’ dinners for whom she seems to feel some romantic interest. Proust’s depiction of Swann’s jealousy captures a typical feature of jealous imaginings—the image of the person we love mocking us together with our rival. When after a dinner at the Bois de Boulogne Odette accepts a ride home without him in a carriage together with Forcheville, Swann expresses his displeasure (“I thought you were coming with me!”), and afterwards his

jealousy keeps presenting him with an image it has created of Odette and Forcheville laughing at him for this in the carriage (1:327).

The nature of Swann's new condition is that he continually swings back and forth between a state of jealous anguish and one of relative calm in which he feels great tenderness for Odette. Much of Proust's interest in "Un amour de Swann" lies in rendering the precise nature of such swings, capturing their various triggers and manifestations. In an amusing instance of this, Swann, alone and in a state of calm, knows that when he sees Odette again she will likely do or say something that will trigger his jealousy. And so, to lengthen his period of calm, he decides to postpone their next date and writes her a letter in which he says that for the next few days he will unfortunately be too busy to see her. But on receiving her assenting reply, his calm is at once destroyed, since her assent is something that his jealousy is able to interpret as a sign of indifference towards him and of desire to spend the time with someone else (1:332-33). Later, in one of his fits of jealousy, Swann is able to calm himself by pretending to break with her. "At once he could imagine Odette puzzled, anxious, distressed at having received neither visit nor letter from him, and this picture of her, by calming his jealousy, made it easy for him to break himself of the habit of seeing her" (1:333).

Jealous, obsessive love installs a new set of pleasures and pains in our lives, and this, too, is something Proust explores. He depicts, for example, the pain such a lover can feel in finding himself in an environment where his beloved would never be found; at a concert at the home of the Marquise de Saint-Euverte, Swann "suffered above all, to the point where even the sound of the instruments made him want to cry out, from having to prolong his exile in this place to which Odette would never come, in which no one, nothing was aware of her existence, from which she was entirely absent" (1:375). And we also find in Swann the pleasure a lover can receive from hearing his beloved speak, in the presence of other people (and especially people he imagines as potential rivals for the beloved's affection), in a way that displays their intimacy. When Odette addresses Swann in such a way in front of Forcheville and everyone else at the Verdurins' table ("Yes, I know you have your banquet tomorrow; I shan't see you, then, till I get home; don't be too late") Swann "felt an exquisite pleasure on hearing her thus avow in front of them all, with that calm immodesty, the fact that they saw each other regularly every evening, his privileged position in her house and the preference for him which it implied" (1:296).

In Swann's opinions of Madame Verdurin, Proust beautifully captures a way love can warp our vision:

Since Mme Verdurin often gave Swann what alone could constitute his happiness—since, on an evening when he felt anxious because Odette had talked rather more to one of the party than to another, and, irritated by this, would not take the initiative of asking her whether she was coming home with him, Mme Verdurin brought peace and joy to his troubled spirit by saying spontaneously: "Odette, you'll see M. Swann home, won't you?"; and since, when the summer holidays were impending and he had asked himself uneasily whether Odette might not leave Paris without him, whether he would still be able to see her every day, Mme Verdurin had invited them both to spend the summer with her in the country—Swann, unconsciously allowing gratitude and self-interest to infiltrate his intelligence and to influence his ideas, went so far as to proclaim that Mme Verdurin was "a great and noble soul." (1:271)

But if Swann's love makes him see the Verdurins as much nobler than they really are, it later makes him see them as worse than they are (he sees their "little clan" as the vilest possible milieu) when, snubbing Swann, they give Odette a ride home with Forcheville (1:314).

The fading of Swann's attachment to Odette comes about as a result of her absence. She goes away on long cruises on the Verdurins' yacht. "Whenever she had been away for any length of time, Swann would feel that he was beginning to detach himself from her" (1:406). Then, when one of these trips has lasted as long as a year, he feels "perfectly at ease and almost happy" (1:406). Swann is on his way to being cured, but Proust will again take up the pathology of obsessive love in Marcel's jealous passion for Albertine.

THE VERDURINS AND SOCIAL PRETENSE. If the nature of obsessive love is one of Proust's special topics of inquiry, so is social pretense—the various subtle forms of playacting and pretending we employ in our social interactions. Madame Verdurin and her husband, who are almost constantly preoccupied with winning admiration and allegiance, are characters particularly well-suited to the author's exploration of this theme. Madame Verdurin burns with envy towards people more fashionable than herself, and at her dinners there is a tacit injunction against mentioning such people's names. The newcomer Forcheville does not know this, and at one of the Verdurins' dinners he mentions before all the "faithful" that Swann spends most of his time with the fashionable La Trémoilles and Laumes, in a tone that casts this company as something to be desired. In the passage that describes Madame Verdurin's reaction, Proust nicely renders an act people sometimes put on when they don't want to have to respond to something said in their presence:

In her determination not to take cognizance of, not to have been affected by the news which had just been imparted to her, not merely to remain dumb, but to have been deaf as well, as we pretend to be when a friend who has offended us attempts to slip into his conversation some excuse which we might appear to be accepting if we heard it without protesting, or when someone utters the name of an enemy the very mention of whom in our presence is forbidden, Mme Verdurin, so that her silence should have the appearance not of consent but of the unconscious silence of inanimate objects, had suddenly emptied her face of all life, of all mobility; her domed forehead was no more than an exquisite piece of sculpture in the round, which the name of those La Trémoilles with whom Swann was always "ensconced" had failed to penetrate. (1:282)

Pretenses are often aimed at concealing something; Madame Verdurin makes her features go blank, pretending to have "zoned out," in order to conceal her having heard what Forcheville has just said. Another species of pretense whose aim is concealment is the feigned fear of lateness. In most of its manifestations, this performance is common and fairly obvious—we are at some social gathering, and in order to conceal our true reason for taking leave, we look at our watch and pretend to be surprised at the lateness of the hour, and to feel compelled to attend to some inescapable obligation. But the species has subtler varieties, such as pretending to be worried about lateness for the people we want to escape. After a dinner at La Raspelière, the house the Verdurins rent in Normandy, Monsieur Verdurin is saying goodbye to his guests through the window of the carriage that will take them to catch their train. He wants to end the leavetaking because he is uncomfortable in the humid night air, but without revealing this reason. "Then, looking at his watch, doubtless so as not to prolong the leave-taking in the

damp night air, he warned the coachmen not to lose any time, but to be careful when going down the hill, and assured us that we should be in plenty of time for our train” (2:1009).

We are told in “Un amour de Swann” that one of the reasons Swann falls out of favor with the Verdurins is his refusal to use a pretense they employ to hide (or at least smooth over) their malice when they malign someone:

In reality there was not one of the “faithful” who was not infinitely more malicious than Swann; but they all took the precaution of tempering their calumnies with obvious pleasantries, with little sparks of emotion and cordiality; while the slightest reservation on Swann’s part, undraped in any such conventional formula as “Of course, I don’t mean to be unkind,” to which he would not have deigned to stoop, appeared to them a deliberate act of treachery. (1:290)

Much later in the novel, Madame Verdurin uses the mentioned pretense (in the version “I don’t want to say anything against him”) in a conversation with Marcel. After thoroughly maligning Swann, calling him sly, unlikable, and dull, she says, “It’s the truth. I don’t want to say a word against him since he was your friend, indeed he was very fond of you, he spoke to me about you in the most charming way, but ask the others here if he ever said anything interesting, at our dinners” (2:1004). This trick is as observable today, in 2014 America, as it was in Proust’s France.

My favorite example in the *Recherche* of a pretense employed to hide something does not involve the Verdurins. It occurs at the moment when Marcel is out walking with Elstir and suddenly, at the end of the avenue, there appears the “little band” of girls he has fantasized about meeting. Believing that Elstir will introduce him, he suffers an attack of nerves, convinced in his insecurity that the girls are presently engaged in passing some ironic judgement on him, and to rescue his self-confidence he tries to hide his interest in the girls by pretending to be very interested in the window display of an antiques shop:

I stopped dead and, leaving my illustrious companion to pursue his way, remained where I was, stooping, as if I had suddenly become engrossed in it, towards the window of the antique shop which we happened to be passing at that moment. I was not sorry to give the appearance of being able to think of something other than these girls, and I was already dimly aware that when Elstir did call me up to introduce me to them I should wear that sort of inquiring expression which betrays not surprise but the wish to look surprised—such bad actors are we all, or such good mind-readers our fellow-men—, that I should even go so far as to point a finger to my breast, as who should ask “Are you calling me?” and then run to join him, my head lowered in compliance and docility and my face coldly masking my annoyance at being torn from the study of old pottery in order to be introduced to people whom I had no wish to know. (1:914)

Part of the humor here is that we recognize this charade; in laughing at Marcel’s behavior we are also laughing at ourselves. We know the feigning of interest in some object near at hand (a bus schedule displayed at a stop? something we pretend to be searching for in our pockets?) to alleviate self-conscious embarrassment, or so as not to let on to a person we’re romantically attracted to that really we are focussed on them. And it is all so perceptively rendered. Consider, for example, the way Marcel leans toward the window to make it absolutely clear

that he is staring at something behind it, and the look of fake surprise he will wear when Elstir calls him (a convincing expression of surprise is indeed almost impossible to pull off, and yet we are always attempting it). And as he runs to be introduced, his face, Proust is careful to explain, will simulate not simply annoyance but annoyance's dissimulation.

Pretenses in the *Recherche* usually serve one of two motives. The one we've seen so far is concealment; the second is self-flattery. Here we are dealing exclusively with utterances: a person says something to display himself in a flattering light, but this motive lies hidden behind an obvious or pretended one. In the years of the Great War, Madame Verdurin spends much of her time talking about the war to her guests. Her obvious purpose in these speeches is to convey information about the war, but in her use of certain abbreviations (such as G.Q.G. for Grand Quartier Général, the headquarters of the French Army) there is also the ulterior purpose of displaying herself as someone connected and in the know: "in all her stories there was constant mention of G.Q.G. ("I telephoned to G.Q.G."), an abbreviation which gave her, as it fell from her lips, the pleasure that in former days women who did not know the Prince d'Agriente had got from asking with a smile, when his name was mentioned, so as to show that they were in the swim: "Grigri?" (3:750). For essentially the same motive—to display himself as socially well-connected—Marcel's friend Bloch fabricates a story about his (Bloch's) having dined with a friend of Odette's. He is conversing with Marcel and Cottard, and

While we were all talking, Bloch having mentioned that he had been told by a lady with whom he had been dining the day before, and who was a great friend of Mme Swann's, that the latter was very fond of me, I should have liked to reply that he was most certainly mistaken, and to establish the fact . . . that I did not know her and had never spoken to her. But I did not have the heart to correct Bloch's mistake, because I realized that it was deliberate, and that, if he had made up something that Mme Swann could not possibly have said, it was simply to let us know (what he considered flattering to himself, and was not true either) that he had been dining with one of that lady's friends. (1:541)

So here we have two layers of pretending: Bloch pretends to say what he says to complement Marcel in front of Cottard, and he pretends that his story is true.

Just as important as pretenses used to show oneself as well-connected or in the know are those used to show that one is intelligent, cultured, or quick-witted. Princess Sherbatoff comments on one of Dr. Cottard's puns "to show that Cottard's 'quip' had not passed unperceived by her" (2:1085). The scholar Brichot, speaking to Marcel ostensibly to fill him in on what he will find at the Verdurins', has as his primary motive the display of his learning and intelligence: "If this is your first appearance at Mme Verdurin's, Monsieur,' Brichot said to me, anxious to shew off his talents before a newcomer, 'you will find that there is no place where one feels more the "*douceur de vivre*," to quote one of the inventors of dilettantism, of pococurantism, of all sorts of "isms" that are in fashion among our little snobbesses—I refer to M. le Prince de Talleyrand"' (2:905). And Monsieur de Cambremer has a habit of quoting fables to "to show the men of science who were not members of the Jockey that one might be a sportsman and yet have read fables. The unfortunate thing was that he knew only two. And so they kept cropping up." (2:946).

The point I want to make with all this is that Proust did not invent these behaviors; each of the examples I've cited is a specimen of a species of pretense that exists in human behavior. But they are also hard to notice, not only in other people but even in ourselves—only

rarely do we engage in such pretenses with full awareness. By studying them here in Proust's display case, we can sharpen our ability to perceive them in our lives. This affords us the deep satisfaction of better understanding our experience, but there is also a practical side: if we find some of these pretenses ridiculous and want to erase them from our own behavior, there is no better place to start than learning to catch them in ourselves as they arise.

DR. COTTARD AND OUR MUTABLE SELVES. Toward the end of *Le temps retrouvé*, Marcel understands that the novel he intends to write will accord a good deal of attention to the changes wrought by time on human beings (3:974). This is one of Proust's great themes, and one of the ways he treats it is by a device we might call the "Proustian time gap." He will let us get to know a character and then remove him from our sight, only to reintroduce him after a gap of many years in the character's life. The author then meticulously takes stock of the ways in which time has changed him. This is what Proust does with Dr. Cottard, who is one of the *Recherche's* more extreme examples of change in a person's behavior. When we meet him in volume two, he is many years older than he was when we last saw him, when he was a regular at the Verdurins' when Swann went there with Odette. He is now one of France's top physicians. Proust gives this description of a way the man's behavior has changed:

Cottard's hesitating manner, his excessive shyness and affability had, in his young days, called down upon him endless taunts and sneers. What charitable friend counselled that glacial air? The importance of his professional standing made it all the more easy for him to adopt. Wherever he went, save at the Verdurins', where he instinctively became himself again, he would assume a repellent coldness, remain deliberately silent, adopt a peremptory tone when he was obliged to speak, and never failed to say the most disagreeable things. He had every opportunity of rehearsing this new attitude before his patients, who, seeing him for the first time, were not in a position to make comparisons, and would have been greatly surprised to learn that he was not at all a rude man by nature. Impassiveness was what he strove to attain, and even while visiting his hospital wards, when he allowed himself to utter one of those puns which left everyone, from the house physician to the most junior student, helpless with laughter, he would always make it without moving a muscle of his face. (1:468)

In this description of how Cottard has changed, Proust captures the phenomenon of a person intentionally taking on a new social manner, which he wears like a kind of shield to protect himself from social discomfort (in Cottard's case, the "taunts and sneers" to which he used to be subjected).

Cottard does not wear his mask of impassivity at the Verdurins', "where he had, because of the influence that past associations exert over us when we find ourselves in familiar surroundings, remained more or less the same" (2:901). We each tend to think of ourselves as one person, one personality, but the truth is that we are many. Not only do we change over time, between one period of life and another; we slip in and out of a wardrobe of different personalities hour to hour and day to day, and who we are at a given moment can depend on whom we are with. Automatically, without even noticing, Cottard becomes again his old self in the company of the little clan, thanks to a kind of inertia his past associations with them exert on him. It is essentially the same phenomenon as that of a grown up person falling back into old behaviors in interactions with a parent or sibling.

Our illusion of a stable self is built into the conventions of our language. We say, “So and so is intelligent,” or “Mr. X is a great man,” when in reality neither intelligence nor greatness can belong to a person as a whole. We are intelligent in some moments—and in certain areas of our lives—and decidedly unintelligent in others. Cottard’s greatness as a doctor exemplifies precisely this truth, that “a man may be illiterate, and make stupid puns, and yet have a special gift which no amount of general culture can replace—such as the gift of a great strategist or physician” (1:467).

During these brief moments in which he deliberated, in which the relative dangers of one and another course of treatment fought it out between them in his mind until he arrived at a decision, this man who was so insignificant and so commonplace had something of the greatness of a general who, vulgar in all things else, moves us by his decisiveness when the fate of the country is at stake and, after a moment’s reflexion, he decides upon what is from the military point of view the wisest course, and gives the order: “Advance eastwards.” (2:333)

Kindness and cruelty, too, can cohabit a single soul more fully than we like to admit. The cruelty of the Verdurins is on display at several of their dinners, especially when they bully the shy and socially awkward Saniette, intentionally humiliating him simply because they find it fun. But we discover much later in the novel that, Saniette having lost all his money and had a stroke from his resulting distress, the Verdurins, cutting back their own spending, have secretly given him an endowment that will support him for the rest of his life. Upon hearing this Marcel regrets that he did not find out sooner, because

the knowledge would have brought me more rapidly to the idea that we ought never to bear a grudge against people, ought never to judge them by some memory of an unkind action, for we do not know all the good that, at other moments, their hearts may have sincerely desired and realised. And thus, even simply from the point of view of prediction, one is mistaken. For doubtless the evil aspect which we have noted once and for all will recur; but the heart is richer than that, has many other aspects which will recur also in the same person and which we refuse to acknowledge because of his earlier bad behaviour. . . . and I concluded that it is as difficult to present a fixed image of a character as of societies and passions. For a character alters no less than they do. (3:331-32)

Among the forms of human change that Proust is out to capture are changes that happen in a person’s state of mind when certain external conditions are removed. When Albertine leaves Marcel, for example, her value in his mind grows immensely as she is raised from object of indifference to the one thing he can’t live without. And whenever Odette has been away for some length of time, Swann finds his heart beginning to detach itself from her, but then, “as though this moral distance were proportionate to the physical distance between them, whenever he heard that Odette had returned to Paris, he could not rest without seeing her” (1:406). In Cottard we find a similar transformation, albeit in a passing detail. On his way to act as second in a duel, he is so overtaken by fear that he has to keep stopping at farms and cafés along the route to use the toilet. When he finally arrives, he is told that the duel will be called off, and, “Now that the prospect of danger had receded, Cottard was disappointed. He was indeed tempted for a moment to give vent to anger” (2:1107). I like this little detail both for its humor and for the way it captures a subtle psychological phenomenon: the way

sometimes our belief that we want something dangerous to happen depends on our certainty that it won't.

PRINCESS SHERBATOFF AND PREEMPTIVE REJECTION. In his depiction of Princess Sherbatoff—an exiled Russian who, for reasons we never learn, is estranged from her family and has been ostracized by the aristocracy—Proust nicely captures a phenomenon one encounters in people who are socially insecure and have a history of being rejected and rebuffed: the preemptive rejection. Marcel and the princess have a perfectly amicable rapport; at dinners at La Raspelière and in carriages and compartments en route, their exchanges have always been marked by a reciprocal attentive politeness. But an incident one day while the two are together on a train suddenly brings this friendliness to an end. Having noticed that his grandmother's friend Madame de Villeparisis has just entered the train, Marcel feels it his duty to go talk to her, and politely excuses himself with the princess. But upon his return, he finds that she has suddenly become cold towards him. She barely replies to his questions and does not lift her eyes from her magazine. "When I bade the Princess good-bye, the customary smile did not light up her face, her chin drooped in a curt acknowledgement, she did not even offer me her hand, and she never spoke to me again" (2:1080). What has happened, the narrator explains, is "a cataclysm frequent among people who are socially insecure and afraid that one may have heard something to their discredit and hence may despise them" (2:1079-80). In her extreme social insecurity, the outcast feared that Madame de Villeparisis had spoken ill of her to Marcel, and that the latter would now reject her. And to avoid having to deal with the pain of yet another rejection, she has preempted it by rejecting him first.

Perhaps to give us a sense of the range of different ways preemptive rejection manifests itself, Proust gives a second example:

I ought not to judge Princess Sherbatoff severely. Her case is so common! One day, at the funeral of a Guermantes, a distinguished man who was standing next to me drew my attention to a slim person with handsome features. "Of all the Guermantes," my neighbour informed me, "that is the most astonishing, the most singular. He is the Duke's brother." I replied imprudently that he was mistaken, that the gentleman in question, who was in no way related to the Guermantes, was named Journier-Sarlovèze. The distinguished man turned his back upon me, and has never even bowed to me since. (2:1080-81)

Here, in contrast to the case of Madame Sherbatoff, there is not any question of Marcel's having heard from a third party something negative about the person who preemptively rejects him. Feeling humiliated by his error about the identity of Fournier-Sarlovèze (an error that has exposed him as the opposite of what he was trying to seem—an insider), the man simply fears that Marcel will reject him for it. His response is to reject him first.

In his depiction of Princess Sherbatoff, Proust carries out a small study of social insecurity; he is out to sketch from life a group of behavioral phenomena that are typical of the socially insecure. Preemptive rejection is one; another, more general, is the way some people build up a kind of protective behavioral wall around themselves. When Marcel first encounters the princess (without yet knowing who she is) she is alone in the compartment of a train, reading the *Revue des Deux Mondes*. She wears an air of "extreme dignity" and self-importance, and seems to be looking down on him. Two days later, when, on their way to the Verdurins',

Marcel and other invitees go in search of Princess Sherbatoff in their train, they find her in the same position: sitting alone in a compartment buried in her *Revue des Deux Mondes*. They enter the compartment, but it is not until Cottard addresses her, asking her if the group may join her, that she raises her eyes from her magazine. We learn from the narrator that this is a habitual defense: a behavior she has adopted to protect herself from being rebuffed: “She had long ago, from fear of rebuffs, acquired the habit of keeping her place, or remaining in her corner, in life as in trains, and of not offering her hand until the other person had greeted her” (2:921). She engages with people only when she is sure that they want her to, thus avoiding rejection; until then she pretends not to notice them.

Madame Sherbatoff’s pretended unawareness is not the only deception she employs to defend against rejection. She pretends—even to herself—that her narrowly restricted social life is the result of her own free will:

In front of strangers—among whom we must always reckon the one to whom we lie the most because he is the one whose contempt would be most painful to us: ourselves—Princess Sherbatoff took care to represent her only three friendships—with the Grand Duchess, the Verdurins, and the Baroness Putbus—as the only ones, not which cataclysms beyond her control had allowed to emerge from the destruction of all the rest, but which a free choice had made her elect in preference to any other, and to which a taste for solitude and simplicity had made her confine herself. (2:907)

To make this pretense convincing, she gives herself an air of “intense coldness” (2:908), an attitude of haughty indifference toward making the acquaintance of other people (hence Marcel’s impression, in their first encounter on the train, that the woman is looking down on him). Like Cottard when he adopts his “glacial air,” she exemplifies the truth that “the rule among the human race—a rule that naturally admits of exceptions—is that the reputedly hard are the weak whom nobody wanted, and that the strong, caring little whether they are wanted or not, have alone that gentleness which the vulgar herd mistakes for weakness” (2:1080).

Not everything the princess says or does, however, is an expression of her social insecurity. We also find in her, for example, a general essence unrelated to that quality: an attitude toward scenic beauty that is easy to mistake for indifference: “She professed that she too loved this area [the Norman coast] more than any other. But I could see that to her as to the Verdurins the thing that really mattered was not to gaze at the view like tourists, but to partake of good meals there, to entertain people whom they liked, to write letters, to read books, in short to live in these surroundings, passively allowing the beauty of the scene to soak into them rather than making it the object of their conscious attention” (2:927; translation modified).

In its depictions of these five characters—Swann, the Verdurins, Dr. Cottard, and Princess Sherbatoff—*À la recherche du temps perdu* captures subtle “general essences,” phenomena of psychology and behavior that, while common in human experience, are subtle enough to escape our full awareness. And what is true for its portrayal of these characters is true for the book as a whole: like the novel Marcel plans to write, the *Recherche* is a kind of optical instrument, a lens that allows us to see—in ourselves, in our own experience—subtleties of inner life that without it we might never have discerned. How it is able to do this is explained

by the theory of art we have found in its own pages—in its depictions of the Goncourt journal, the paintings of Elstir, and Marcel's written sketch of the towers of Martinville. Reality as we humans experience it has a surface and a depth. The surface is the realm of the particular and individual; the depth is that of general essences—general phenomena that manifest themselves over and over in different particulars. A writer and a reader may have no particular experiences in common—they may never have come into contact with the same person, the same thing, the same place. And yet by capturing subtle general essences, that writer can nonetheless illuminate that reader's experience, eliciting in him a feeling of simultaneous recognition and discovery. This is what for Proust gives literature artistic value; and it is the thing that, above all else, he designed the *Recherche* to do.

We may well disagree with the notion that, in order to have value as art, a work of literature must illuminate life. (And indeed we may question the usefulness of speaking of value as an objective quality of an artwork.) The idea I want to propose is more modest; it is that the experience of illumination so important to Proust's aesthetic is one of literature's central pleasures—it is one of the major reasons people fall in love with works of fiction. This is not to say that every reader feels this pleasure (or feels it to the same degree), or that the books we become enamored of all have this feature in common. Not only are there multiple reasons for our attachment to any one book, but different books can attach us to them for entirely different reasons, and different people can have different reasons for being attached to the same book. But with certain well-loved books, *À la recherche du temps perdu* included, one of the major reasons a great many people become attached to them is that these books have a special power to make us more aware of our lives.

In Proust's idea of general essences we have found verisimilitude's ontological foundation. Now, with the help of Jane Austen, we will begin to discern its typology.

Chapter Two: *Pride and Prejudice*

To try to imagine today how the novels of Jane Austen must have struck their original readers is a bit like trying to imagine how Florentines of the early fifteenth century experienced the paintings of Masaccio. Giotto, a century before him, had taken the otherworldly representations of Gothic and Byzantine art and made them distinctly more “natural,” lending to his figures more lifelike poses and expressions, and using techniques like foreshortening and chiaroscuro to create a greater impression of three-dimensional bodies and space. It was Masaccio, however, who was felt to have really bridged the gap between the world of painterly depictions and the world of the viewers’ experience. His figures reflected, as none had done before, a precise understanding of anatomy, and he was the very first painter to use the system of linear perspective, which he combined with a mastery far greater than Giotto’s of proportion, chiaroscuro, and foreshortening to create an illusion of real space. He was also the first painter since ancient Rome to paint cast shadows, which he did with great sensitivity to



Masaccio's "St. Peter Enthroned" (detail), 1425

the way they appear in real life. These and other features of his art must have given to Masaccio's contemporaries an arresting impression of lifelikeness that is impossible for us to fully experience, since we cannot help seeing his work through the filter of later painting and of photography, which make us intuitively aware—far more than were Masaccio's fellow citizens—of the ways in which his paintings are *not* true to life. With Jane Austen, too, we are in something of a similar situation: reading her as we must through the filter of later fiction that carried verisimilitude further in certain ways than did her own, we are unable to fully experience the illusion of real life she gave to her original readers. These readers were accustomed to novels whose worlds were distinctly different from that of their own experience. The characters tended to be idealized, and the events were extraordinary adventures. In an 1816 review of *Emma*, Walter Scott interestingly discusses how the English novel until Jane Austen was recognizably the descendant of medieval romance. Though it no longer dealt in knights or magic wands,

still the reader expected to peruse a course of adventures of a nature more interesting and extraordinary than those which occur in his own life, or that of his next-door neighbors. The hero no longer defeated armies by his single sword, clove giants to the chine, or gained kingdoms. But he was expected to go through perils by sea and land, to be steeped in poverty, to be tried by temptation, to be exposed to the alternate vicissitudes of adversity and prosperity, and his life was a troubled scene of suffering and achievement. . . . The heroine was usually condemned to equal hardships and hazards. She was regularly exposed to being forcibly carried off like a Sabine virgin by some frantic admirer. And even if she escaped the terrors of masked ruffians, an insidious ravisher, a cloak wrapped forcibly around her head, and a coach with the blinds up driving she could not conjecture whither, she had still her share of wandering, of poverty, of obloquy, of seclusion, and of imprisonment, and was frequently extended upon a bed of sickness, and reduced to her last shilling before the author condescended to shield her from persecution.¹

The novel's inheritance from the romance lay also in the sentiments of its characters, especially in matters of love. Scott observes that

In the serious class of novels, the hero was usually 'A knight of love, who never broke a vow.' And although, in those of a more humorous cast, he was permitted a license, borrowed either from real life or from the libertinism of the drama, still a distinction was demanded even from Peregrine Pickle, or Tom Jones; and the hero, in every folly of which he might be guilty, was studiously vindicated from the charge of infidelity of the heart. The heroine was, of course, still more immaculate; and to have conferred her affections upon any other than the lover to whom the reader had destined her from their first meeting, would have been a crime against sentiment which no author, of moderate prudence, would have hazarded, under the old *régime*.²

Against this background of romance—of strings of extraordinary events and idealizations of character—the novels of Jane Austen seemed amazingly true to life; like the paintings of

¹ Southam, 60.

² Southam, 62.

Masaccio to the eye of his fellow Florentines, they seemed to present a world that was continuous with the reader's own. Having just read *Mansfield Park*, a certain Lady Gordon puts it thus:

In most novels you are amused for the time with a set of Ideal People whom you never think of afterwards or whom you the least expect to meet in common life, whereas in Miss A---'s works, & especially in *M P* you actually *live* with them, you fancy yourself one of the family; & the scenes are so exactly descriptive, so perfectly natural, that there is scarcely an Incident, or conversation, or a person, that you are not inclined to imagine you have at one time or other in your Life been a witness to, borne a part in, & been acquainted with.³

In the reactions of Austen's contemporaries, this is the common theme—how “natural” her novels were in comparison to the ones they knew. Placing the emphasis on events rather than characters, Lady Noel Byron wrote in 1813, “I have finished the novel called *Pride and Prejudice*, which I think a very superior work. It depends not on any of the common resources of novel writers, no drownings, no conflagrations, nor runaway horses, nor lap-dogs and parrots, nor chambermaids and milliners, nor rencontres and disguises. I really think it is the *most probable* I have ever read.”⁴

The onflow of time, then—“Time in which, as in some transforming liquid, men and societies and nations are immersed”—has faded the bold colors of Austen's realism. Her unidealized treatment of love, so striking to an audience bred on romance, is what we have come to expect, and the dirt on Elizabeth Bennet's stockings after she has walked from Longbourn to Netherfield no longer stands out against the foil of the many Gothic heroines who ran through country fields without seeming to dirty a stitch. We moderns are, moreover, more sensitized to the ways these novels are *not* true to life. Our experience of works of fiction that feature more lifelike dialogue, for example, makes us more likely to be aware of how the speech of Jane Austen's characters is more polished, more elegant and correct, than can be the extemporaneous speech of even the most brilliant among us. And of course, as the novels have aged, much of the physical and social reality that appears in them has disappeared from the direct experience of their readers; what used to be features of a familiar everyday world are now just a window on the past. Yet through all this historical change that has blunted the effect of her realism, the impression has remained among readers that there is something truly extraordinary—even for us now—in Austen's truth to life. It is the impression described by Edith Wharton when, writing in 1929, she named Austen as one of only five novelists (the others being Balzac, Thackeray, Tolstoy, and Proust) whose characters have such “aliveness” that they “have broken away from the printed page and its symbols, they mix with us freely, naturally.”⁵ In this chapter I will try to explain how it is that Jane Austen's characters have seemed so alive for so long. Using the example of *Pride and Prejudice*, I will do this by way of a typology of verisimilitude—a study of four different ways a novel can be true to life. What all of these have in common is that they exploit the double nature of reality we have found expressed in Proust; they mirror the general world that lies “behind the surface” of particulars.

³ Southam, 51.

⁴ Southam, 8.

⁵ Wharton, “Visibility in Fiction,” 483.

Plausibility

Verisimilitude in its most basic form is a keeping within the boundaries of the plausible. One can ask, “Is this plausible?” of everything a novel depicts, from its objects and events to the emotions and thoughts of its characters. But it is in reference to characters’ actions that plausibility is most often discussed, since it is here that writers of fiction most often step out of its bounds. To see why this is so, let us consider the scene in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* when the monster kills Elizabeth, the woman Frankenstein loves and has married that very day. The creature has threateningly promised to be “with him on his wedding-night,” and the novel asks us to believe that Frankenstein, while knowing that the creature has killed both his (Frankenstein’s) brother and his closest friend as a way of avenging himself on his creator, fails to consider the possibility that, on this night when it has promised to come to him, it will want to kill Elizabeth. Assuming that it will attack only him, he sends Elizabeth to bed (she is ignorant of the creature’s threat) and searches for it through the house. The creature enters the bedroom through a window (presumably Elizabeth is asleep) and strangles her.

To handle the scene in this way had clear dramatic advantages. The physical confrontation between Frankenstein and the creature that will come later in the story gets more dramatic force from not being anticipated by a similar fight here. And with Victor out of the bedroom, the wedding-night murder takes on a haunting suggestiveness: it is as if the monster, alone with the bride in the bedchamber, were taking Victor’s place, consummating the wedding himself in a cruel parody of the act, literalizing the metaphoric death of the girl who becomes a woman on her wedding night, and giving death in place of the new life—Victor and Elizabeth’s child—which Victor himself might have given her. In order to reap these advantages, Shelley sacrificed psychological plausibility—she could not find a way to make Frankenstein’s lapse believable. She does her best by making him explain (it is he who narrates the story) that “as if possessed of magic powers, the monster had blinded me to his real intentions.”⁶ But that the monster should have magic powers doesn’t make any sense in light of the book’s portrayal of the creature as a product of science; and if he does not have these powers, the explanation really explains nothing. If we notice this breakdown of plausibility, it works in the opposite direction of making the character seem alive—it focusses our attention on the fact that Frankenstein is a man of ink and paper, subject to no other laws than those of the author’s imagination.

This example from *Frankenstein* points to a tension that often arises, in the act of writing fiction, between plausibility in characters’ actions on the one hand and dramatic effects and exigencies on the other, and hence to the difficulty involved in creating a dramatically effective novel while staying within the bounds of plausibility. The writer of plausible fiction is like a juggler: we enjoy his or her virtuosity in keeping the orange of plausibility in the air along with the apple of engaging storytelling.

In *Pride and Prejudice*, Jane Austen shows great deftness at this. Lydia’s elopement with Wickham, for example, is a turn in the plot that has great dramatic value: it comes as a great surprise and constitutes a genuine crisis, it deftly conjoins two themes (Wickham’s turpitude

⁶ Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 175 (chap. 22).

and Lydia's craze for soldiers), and it sets up the ultimate test of whether Darcy has overcome his pride: to persevere in his love for Elizabeth, he must now become Wickham's brother-in-law. But since Austen has set herself the task of creating a verisimilar fictional world in which actions and motivations are believable, she must ensure that the event seems plausible—that the orange of plausibility doesn't come tumbling to the ground. On Lydia's side this is easy; her impulsiveness, naiveté, and unconcern for propriety, combined with her craving for amorous attention and her longstanding attraction to Wickham, make us instantly accept her fleeing with him. For Wickham's reasons, however, explanation is certainly required. Why would an intelligent man so careful of his own self-interest give up his post in the regiment to elope with, of all people, Lydia? Austen must provide a convincing explanation for this behavior, or else we readers won't swallow it. She does this in the following passage, in which Elizabeth meditates on her impressions of Lydia and Wickham after their return to Longbourn:

Wickham's affection for Lydia, was just what Elizabeth had expected to find it; not equal to Lydia's for him. She had scarcely needed her present observation to be satisfied, from the reason of things, that their elopement had been brought on by the strength of her love, rather than by his; and she would have wondered why, without violently caring for her, he chose to elope with her at all, had she not felt certain that his flight was rendered necessary by distress of circumstances; and if that were the case, he was not the young man to resist an opportunity of having a companion. (241)

The explanation is in part confirmed in Mrs. Gardiner's letter to Elizabeth: "He confessed himself obliged to leave the regiment, on account of some debts of honour, which were very pressing" (245). With imaginative ingenuity, Austen makes convincing what on the surface seemed implausible. The example shows how verisimilitude defined as plausibility is not simply a matter of excluding implausible things from one's narrative; it is also a chess-like game between writer and reader in which the former anticipates objections and defuses them.

Another element of the novel where exigencies of plot threaten to come into conflict with psychological verisimilitude is Elizabeth's decision to visit Charlotte at Hunsford. The visit, like the trip to Pemberly later in the novel, functions as a solution to the problem of how to bring Elizabeth and Darcy back into each other's presence. But, at least on the surface, it is a solution that seems to challenge credibility. Elizabeth's regard for her friend has been dealt a significant blow by Charlotte's acceptance of Mr. Collins. She has sacrificed, as Elizabeth sees it, "every better feeling to worldly advantage" (96), and "Elizabeth felt persuaded that no real confidence could ever subsist between them again. Her disappointment in Charlotte made her turn with fonder regard to her sister, of whose rectitude and delicacy she was sure her opinion could never be shaken" (98). These feelings of estrangement from Charlotte, combined with her great antipathy for the company of Mr. Collins, are likely to give a reader some doubts as to why Elizabeth would agree to a lengthy stay at Hunsford. But these objections are deftly defused by Austen's imaginative prowess:

[Elizabeth] had not at first thought very seriously of going thither; but Charlotte, she soon found, was depending on the plan, and she gradually learned to consider it herself with greater pleasure as well as greater certainty. Absence had increased her desire of seeing Charlotte again, and weakened her disgust of Mr. Collins. There was novelty in the scheme, and as, with such a mother and

such uncompanionable sisters, home could not be flawless, a little change was not unwelcome for its own sake. The journey would moreover give her a peep at Jane; and, in short, as the time drew near, she would have been very sorry for any delay. (116-17)

As we saw her do in connection with Wickham's elopement with Lydia, Austen has anticipated our attack—our objection that an action is implausible—and has parried it with convincing explanations. Here we see again that verisimilitude defined as plausibility is more than just a matter of excluding implausible things from one's narrative—Elizabeth's decision is plausible, but since on the surface it may seem otherwise, the plausibility must be demonstrated. This is done with great finesse. The idea that absence and the passing of time have blunted Elizabeth's aversions is for me (and, I suspect, for many other readers) a particularly delightful piece of delicate psychological insight.

Our pleasure in Austen's ability to so deftly keep things convincing surely derives in part from the mysterious human affinity for lifelike artifice of which Aristotle speaks in the *Poetics*. But it also has to do with our lifelong experience as readers. We have encountered many novels where the game is played less well, and even though we do not consciously remember all of these while we read Jane Austen, they are there in our mental background, affecting the way we respond to the novel at hand. What allows us to recognize the virtuosity of Austen's performance is our experience of other, less impressive performances—of works of fiction where this kind of verisimilitude is attempted but unachieved. And our experience of fictional characters whose actions are not made plausible is part of what makes her characters seem so convincingly real.

"Inclusive" Verisimilitude

The idea that, as we read a novel, our response is in part determined by our experience of other novels brings us to a second form of verisimilitude in *Pride and Prejudice*: the impression of lifelikeness that is produced when the representation of a certain object includes features the object has in real life but that are typically left out when the object is represented in art. Let me start with an example in Henry James. In a scene in *The Ambassadors*, Strether has found himself alone with Mamie, who alone among the second wave of "ambassadors" from Woollett is sensitive to Europe's charms. The two are discussing young Jeanne, a model of maidenly manners and the daughter of Mme de Vionnet.

"Nothing," she said of Jeanne, "ought ever to happen to her—she's so awfully right as she is. Another touch will spoil her—so she oughtn't to be touched."

"Ah but things, here in Paris," Strether observed, "do happen to little girls." And then for the joke's and the occasion's sake: "Haven't you found that yourself?"

"That things happen—? Oh I'm not a little girl. I'm a big battered blowsy one. I don't care," Mamie laughed, "*what* happens."

Strether had a pause while he wondered if it mightn't happen that he should give her the pleasure of learning that he found her nicer than he had really dreamed—a pause that ended when he had said to himself that, so far as it at all mattered for her, she had in fact perhaps already made this out. He

risked accordingly a different question—though conscious, as soon as he had spoken, that he seemed to place it in relation to her last speech. “But that Mademoiselle de Vionnet is to be married—I suppose you’ve heard of *that*.”⁷

The exchange between Strether and Maimie is obviously within the range of what is possible in life, and thus possesses that first, most basic form of truth to life, the form I have been calling *plausibility*. But it also has something more; in passages such as this, James is among the first to convincingly capture the messiness of thought and communication. Consciousness, James observed, is seldom a straight line from A to B; it swerves and turns back on itself. Strether, in the course of his exchange with Mamie, considers telling her something (“that he found her nicer,” etc.), but then thinks better of it, and when he has uttered something else instead (his question whether she knows Jeanne to be engaged), he realizes that she is likely to take it as a follow-up to the last thing she said—he realizes, that is, that he seems to be suggesting that she too might get engaged during her sojourn in Paris, which was not his intended meaning. This sort of thing—these two phenomena of consciousness (the rejection of a considered utterance and the realization that something one has just said seems to connect in an unintended way with something that was said before)—goes on all the time in life but rarely in art. For this reason, James’s incorporation of such phenomena in his portrayal of the minds of his characters makes these characters seem impressively more real than those of most other writers.

The phenomena in question—phenomena that are present in life but that are typically excluded from art—need not be psychological, as they are in our example from James. In the first scene of *Hamlet*, the same type of verisimilitude, which I will call “inclusive” verisimilitude, is achieved with elements that are external (as opposed to internal, or taking place inside the minds of characters). Barnardo has just arrived on the walls of Elsinore Castle to replace Francisco as sentinel. “For this relief much thanks,” says the latter. “’Tis bitter cold, and I am sick at heart.” What is strange about this pronouncement is that this is the last we hear of Francisco’s “heart-sickness” (depression and despondence). After greeting the other men who arrive the next moment, Francisco leaves the scene and we are left completely in the dark as to why he is depressed. This is strange not because it would be unusual in life for such a statement to go unexplained, but because this is unusual in art. Art tends to be tidier than life, and one of the manifestations of this tidiness is that, when a character in a work of fiction makes a statement such as “I am depressed” that begs for explanation, ninety-nine times out of a hundred a reason will be supplied, whether explicitly or by context. The moment thus infuses into the scene a dose of realistic messiness, an effect that is also achieved in moments that quickly follow. After Francisco exits and Barnardo, Marcellus, and Horatio have greeted one another, Marcellus asks, “What, has this thing appeared again tonight?” The question is put in such a way as to leave the audience in the dark: what “thing” is Marcellus referring to? As the exchange continues, our knowledge is increased bit by bit:

BARNARDO I have seen nothing.

MARCELLUS Horatio says ‘tis but our fantasy,
And will not let belief take hold of him
Touching this dreaded sight twice seen of us.
Therefore I have entreated him along

⁷ James, *Ambassadors*, 253-54 (bk. 9, chap. 3).

With us to watch the minutes of this night,
That if again this apparition come
He may approve our eyes and speak to it.

After we learn that the thing is “dreadful,” it is only with the word “apparition” and the notion that someone might speak to it that we are likely to guess that the topic of discussion is a ghost. And only later, after the ghost has actually appeared, do we learn whose ghost it may be, when Marcellus asks Horatio, “Looks it not like the King?”. This gradual move from ignorance to understanding—from not knowing what the characters are talking about to understanding that the subject of discussion is a ghost resembling the dead king of Denmark—is typical of life, of our experience of overheard conversations, but unusual in works of fiction, where it is generally the case that, when characters discuss something, the audience is either already equipped to recognize what it is they are referring to or is given an explanation on the spot. As with Francisco’s unexplained depression, the verisimilitude is produced by an infusion of real-life messiness. And this is also the effect of at least one more detail in the scene, which continues as follows from the portion I have quoted above:

HORATIO Tush, tush, ‘twill not appear.

BARNARDO Sit down a while,
And let us once again assail your ears,
That are so fortified against our story,
What we two nights have seen.

HORATIO Well, sit we down,
And let us hear Barnardo speak of this.

BARNARDO Last night of all,
When yon same star that’s westward from the pole,
Had made his course t’illumine that part of heaven
Where now it burns, Marcellus and myself,
The bell then beating one—

Enter the GHOST [in complete armour, holding a truncheon, with his beaver up]

MARCELLUS Peace, break thee off. Look where it comes again.

BARNARDO In the same figure like the King that’s dead.

With the appearance of the ghost, Barnardo’s explanation, a speech just begun which promises to reveal, to Horatio and to us the audience, exactly what Barnardo and Marcellus have seen, is interrupted and rendered unnecessary: the apparition its purpose was to describe is now present. This, too, is a moment of realistic messiness that overthrows the normal tidiness of art. The messiness consists both in the interruption, with no subsequent continuance, of a speech a character has just begun, and in the fact that the speech in question poses, until the interruption, as a recognizable dramaturgical trope: a speech the dramaturg has one character make to others because he (the dramaturg) wants to inform the audience of a backstory. The dramaturgical purpose we think we detect behind the speech belongs not to lifelikeness but to artifice, and I think it is fair to say that the “realness” of the scene is enhanced when this purpose is thwarted—when what we thought was artificially purposeful turns out to be as useless as if it were real.

As with many other aspects of art, we need not be consciously aware of how these details work in order for them to have their effect. Without our needing to ponder them, they

give their impression of “realness,” and this, for many readers, is a delight. Note as well that the verisimilitude I am now discussing depends on our awareness that what we have before us is an artistic representation and not the represented thing—not life but a simulacrum thereof. Fictional characters and events can vividly live within us (or before us upon a stage) without our ever forgetting that what we are seeing isn’t real.

What I am proposing with regard to Jane Austen is the simple idea that if her characters strike us as impressively real-seeming—more real-seeming, that is, than most other characters in novels—it is partly because incorporated into their portrayal are elements of psychological life that are usually left out from fiction. Let me give some examples.

A cornerstone of psychology in Austen is the notion that we humans are able to have feelings or aims of which we are unaware. Sometimes it is a matter of not wanting to own up, even to ourselves, to having feelings we imagine as beneath us, as seems to be the case in Darcy’s mistaken image of his emotions as he writes his letter to Elizabeth after she refuses him at Hunsford. “When I wrote that letter,” he later confesses to Elizabeth, “I believed myself perfectly calm and cool, but I am since convinced that it was written in a dreadful bitterness of spirit” (282). Jane, too, when Bingley pays a visit to Longbourn for the first time since leaving the country a year earlier, is unaware of her emotions because they conflict with what she would like to believe about them. She would like to believe that her love for Bingley is over, that feelings of friendship are all that remain, and that therefore, in this moment, she is calm. Elizabeth, however, sees the truth: “In spite of what her sister declared, and really believed to be her feelings, in the expectation of his arrival, Elizabeth could easily perceive that her spirits were affected by it. They were more disturbed, more unequal, than she had often seen them” (252-53). Elizabeth herself, in her love for Darcy, is for a while unaware of her feelings. She tries to discern them while lying awake in bed after a visit Darcy pays her in Lambton:

As for Elizabeth, her thoughts were at Pemberley this evening more than the last; and the evening, though as it passed it seemed long, was not long enough to determine her feelings towards *one* in that mansion; and she lay awake two whole hours, endeavoring to make them out. She certainly did not hate him. No; hatred had vanished long ago, and she had almost as long been ashamed of ever feeling a dislike against him, that could be so called. The respect created by the conviction of his valuable qualities, though at first unwillingly admitted, had for some time ceased to be repugnant to her feelings; and it was now heightened into somewhat of a friendlier nature, by the testimony so highly in his favour, and bringing forward his disposition in so amiable a light, which yesterday had produced. But above all, above respect and esteem, there was a motive within her of good will which could not be overlooked. It was gratitude. —Gratitude, not merely for having once loved her, but for loving her still well enough, to forgive all the petulance and acrimony of her manner in rejecting him, and all the unjust accusations accompanying her rejection. (201-02)

The gratitude Elizabeth feels toward Darcy, and the heightened respect and esteem, are feelings she has to discover; they are there inside of her, but it is only through sleepless hours of self-examination that they enter her conscious awareness. And even at this moment, the full extent of her feelings remains unknown to her. It is only when she receives the news that Lydia has absconded with Wickham—when she mistakenly reads in Darcy’s air of preoccupation (he is absorbed, we later learn, in planning to search for Wickham in London) a

sign that, disgusted by the disgrace the event will bring to her family, he is resolving to give her up—that she sees the degree of her attachment:

[Darcy] seemed scarcely to hear her, and was walking up and down the room in earnest meditation; his brow contracted, his air gloomy. Elizabeth soon observed, and instantly understood it. Her power was sinking; every thing *must* sink under such a proof of family weakness, such an assurance of the deepest disgrace. She could neither wonder nor condemn, but the belief of his self-conquest brought nothing consolatory to her bosom, afforded no palliation of her distress. It was, on the contrary, exactly calculated to make her understand her own wishes. (210)

Elizabeth's initial unawareness of feelings she has toward Darcy is reiterated shortly after, again in connection with Lydia's disgrace: "Elizabeth, *who was by this time tolerably well acquainted with her own feelings*, was perfectly aware that, had she known nothing of Darcy, she could have borne the dread of Lydia's infamy somewhat better" (227: my emphasis).

Darcy, too, in his love for Elizabeth, is initially unaware of his feelings. He tells her after their engagement, "I was in the middle before I knew I had begun" (291). And in another example involving Darcy, this sort of self-unawareness has as its object not an emotion but an aim: later in the same conversation, when Elizabeth asks Darcy why he returned to Netherfield, he admits that his true purpose was different from what he believed at the time: "My real purpose was to see *you*, and to judge, if I could, whether I might ever hope to make you love me. My avowed one, *or what I avowed to myself*, was to see whether your sister were still partial to Bingley, and if she were, to make the confession to him that I have since made" (292: my emphasis).

What is special about all of these moments is that they bestow on the characters involved an element of psychological life recognizable from our experience of ourselves or of other people that does not normally appear in fictional personages. They thereby give to the characters a compelling lifelike complexity.

In some of the examples above, the unawareness of a feeling or an aim seems to have its origin in desire. Darcy's conviction while he writes his letter to Elizabeth that he is perfectly calm and cool is presumably motivated by a desire to see himself as above the feelings of bitterness in rejection he in fact is harboring. These moments participate in a second verisimilar theme in Austen's representation of the psyche: emotion's subtle commerce with reason—the myriad subtle ways it interferes with, or evades, our ability to reason and to see. In another example involving Darcy, we are told that he had formed a plan for his sister to marry Bingley, and "without meaning that it should affect his endeavor to separate him from Miss Bennet, it is probable that it might add something to his lively concern for the welfare of his friend" (204). Here it is not a matter, as it is in our previous examples, of Darcy having feelings he is unaware of: what seems to escape his awareness here is the interference of one desire with another. His desire for the one marriage subtly insinuates itself into, "adds something to," his desire to prevent the other, without his awareness and despite his scrupulous intention.

A similarly subtle moment of interference of emotion with reason comes during the visit to Derbyshire. Darcy has just visited Elizabeth and the Gardiners at their inn and has introduced them to his sister, and the Gardiners are now convinced, from what they have observed of his attentions to Elizabeth, that he is in love with her. The conviction gives the

Gardiners an emotional stake in thinking well of Mr. Darcy: “Of Mr. Darcy it was now a matter of anxiety to think well” (200). And this new emotional stake leads them to see something they weren’t seeing before, namely that the praise of Mr. Darcy given by the old housekeeper as she showed them the rooms at Pemberly should really carry more weight than they have thus far assigned to it: “There was now an interest, however, in believing the housekeeper; and they soon became sensible, that the authority of a servant who had known him since he was four years old, and whose own manners indicated respectability, was not to be hastily rejected.”⁸ Part of the complexity of emotion’s interactions with reason is that sometimes a quite rational consideration can be triggered by an emotional stake.

A comical instance of interference between emotion and judgement is Mr. Collins’s conviction that, in seeking a wife among the Bennet sisters, he is acting purely from a disinterested, benevolent desire to benefit the family whose estate he will someday inherit. He considers his plan to be “excessively generous and disinterested on his own part” (53), even though it is contingent on his finding them “as handsome and amiable as they were represented by common report.” It is part of this man’s weak-mindedness that he easily believes about himself what he wants to believe. His desire to see himself as a model of Christian generosity determines his self-appraisal, blinding him to his real motivations. We see this again when Collins first sees Jane: “Miss Bennet’s lovely face [...] established all his strictest notions of what was due to seniority” (53). While motivated in fact by Jane’s being prettier than her sisters, he is amusingly able to believe that in choosing her he is led by principle, by a justness in choosing the eldest.

Our minds have a tendency to leap to conclusions irrationally, and often the conclusions we leap to are projections of our fears or anxieties. This phenomenon, another manifestation of emotion’s influence on judgement, is captured in the scene when Elizabeth, having just learned from Jane’s letters that Lydia has eloped with Wickham, reveals the event to Darcy. To her lament that she should have exposed Wickham’s character to the world, “Darcy made no answer. He seemed scarcely to hear her, and was walking up and down the room in earnest meditation; his brow contracted, his air gloomy. Elizabeth soon observed, and instantly understood it. Her power was sinking; everything *must* sink under such a proof of family weakness, such an assurance of the deepest disgrace” (210). At this point in the novel, Elizabeth has begun to love Darcy, and she fears in this moment that the disgrace Lydia’s elopement will bring on all her family will make him no longer want to marry her. This fear, as fears tend to do, projects itself onto the scene before her, giving rise to her unwarranted interpretation of Darcy’s distracted reticence as a sign that he considers her lost to him. The true cause of his reticence is revealed at the end of the book: “she soon learnt that his resolution of following her from Derbyshire in quest of her sister, had been formed before he quitted the inn, and that his gravity and thoughtfulness there, had arisen from no other struggles than what such a purpose must comprehend” (283).

Another instance in the novel of fear-induced misinterpretation (but one that requires a bit more weak-mindedness from the interpreter) is Mrs. Bennet’s projecting onto the behavior of Charlotte and Mr. Collins her anxiety about losing Longbourn through the entail: “Whenever Charlotte came to see them she concluded her to be anticipating the hour of possession; and whenever she spoke in a low voice to Mr. Collins, was convinced that they

⁸ The term “respectable,” which today is used priggishly to mean “of good social standing or reputation,” meant for Austen and her contemporaries “worthy of respect.” (See Stokes, *Language of Jane Austen*, 97-98.)

were talking of the Longbourn estate, and resolving to turn herself and her daughters out of the house, as soon as Mr. Bennet were dead” (100).

The influence of emotion on our ability to reason and to see is one of this novel’s most central concerns. After the ball in Meryton, in the scene when Elizabeth and Jane exchange their impressions of the evening, we are told of Elizabeth’s dislike for Bingley’s sisters: “with more quickness of observation and less pliancy of temper than her sister, and with a judgement too unassailed by any attention to herself, she was very little disposed to approve them” (10). The notion that “attention to herself” from the sisters might have “assailed” her judgement—might have prevented her from seeing them as they are—anticipates the failures of judgement that are the novel’s central events: Elizabeth’s misjudgements of Darcy and of Wickham. These misjudgements are caused by “vanity,” which, as Mary Bennet says pedantically but correctly, relates “to what we would have others think of us” (14). Here is Elizabeth’s epiphany after she reads Darcy’s letter at Hunsford:

Had I been in love, I could not have been more wretchedly blind. But vanity, not love, has been my folly.—Pleased with the preference of one, and offended by the neglect of the other, on the very beginning of our acquaintance, I have courted prepossession and ignorance, and driven reason away, where either were concerned. Till this moment I never knew myself. (159)

What Elizabeth refers to as “the preference of one” and “the neglect of the other” are Wickham’s flattering attentions and Darcy’s insulting snub. At the party at the Phillipses, Wickham singles her out from the other young women in the room. “Mr. Wickham was the happy man towards whom almost every female eye was turned, and Elizabeth was the happy woman by whom he finally seated himself” (57). He talks for a while exclusively with her, and later, with the appearance of the card tables, he again chooses a spot next to Elizabeth. “They continued talking together with mutual satisfaction till supper put an end to cards; and gave the rest of the ladies their share of Mr. Wickham’s attentions” (64). His special attention to Elizabeth, which of course signals romantic interest, continues on their next encounter, when he accompanies her and her sisters back home from a visit to Meryton: “and during the walk he particularly attended to her. His accompanying them was a double advantage; she felt all the compliment it offered to herself, and it was most acceptable as an occasion of introducing him to her father and mother” (88). Wickham’s attentions continue in this direction until they change rails toward Miss King. So much for the “preference of the one.” The “neglect of the other” is Darcy’s insulting remark about Elizabeth at the Meryton Ball: “She is tolerable; but not handsome enough to tempt *me*; and I am in no humour at present to give consequence to young ladies who are slighted by other men” (7-8).

Elizabeth’s misjudgements of these men might appear at first blush to boil down to some trite admonition for “young adults” such as “don’t be too quick to judge” or “appearances can be deceiving,” as if Elizabeth’s failure were simply a sort of rashness. (Perhaps one of the reasons “First Impressions” was changed to “Pride and Prejudice” is that the original title seems to encourage such a misunderstanding.) The reason for her mistake is in fact much subtler than this, and much more interesting. Like the moments we have just been examining, Elizabeth’s failure of judgement is part of Jane Austen’s investigation, reflected in all of her novels, of emotion’s subtle commerce with reason. The “attention to herself,” payed in this case by Wickham, is the thing that “assails her judgement.” His attentions flatter her vanity, that emotional investment most if not all of us have in being appreciated as something special by

others. In so doing, these attentions make Elizabeth eager to think well of Wickham, and this eagerness skews her judgement by preventing her from perceiving certain negative signs of Wickham's character—signs she would be able to see were it not for the emotional stake she has in thinking well of him. In his conversation during the card game at the Phillipses, when he tells her his mendacious tale of mistreatment at the hands of Mr. Darcy, Elizabeth fails to perceive “the impropriety of such communications to a stranger” (158). Then she fails to notice the hypocrisy in Wickham's open condemnation of Darcy as soon as the latter has left Netherfield—his telling openly in society the story he has told Elizabeth, despite his avowal in that same conversation at the Phillipses that his respect for the memory of Darcy's father bars him from exposing the son. And when Wickham courts Miss King, Elizabeth fails to see how base and mercenary this is, even though she has seen and condemned the similar mercenary motive of Charlotte's acceptance of Mr. Collins:

The sudden acquisition of ten thousand pounds was the most remarkable charm of the young lady to whom he was now rendering himself agreeable; but Elizabeth, less clear-sighted perhaps in his case than in Charlotte's,⁹ did not quarrel with him for his wish of independence. Nothing, on the contrary, could be more natural; and while able to suppose that it cost him a few struggles to relinquish her, she was ready to allow it a wise and desirable measure for both, and could very sincerely wish him happy. (115-16)

Just as Wickham's attentions make Elizabeth eager to think well of him, Darcy's snub makes her eager to think poorly of Darcy, and these two forces work together to make Elizabeth accept Wickham's version of his history with Darcy without having any real evidence that Wickham is telling the truth. And she realizes later that she has failed to register the way the following list of observations speaks in favor of Darcy's character:

that Mr. Bingley, when questioned by Jane, had long ago asserted his [Darcy's] blamelessness in the affair; that proud and repulsive as were his manners, she had never, in the whole course of their acquaintance, an acquaintance which had latterly brought them much together, and given her a sort of intimacy with his ways, seen any thing that betrayed him to be unprincipled or unjust—any thing that spoke him of irreligious or immoral habits. That among his own connections he was esteemed and valued—that even Wickham had allowed him merit as a brother, and that she had often heard him speak so affectionately of his sister as to prove him capable of *some* amiable feeling. That had his actions been what Wickham represented them, so gross a violation of every thing right

⁹ Critics have imagined that Austen was not in agreement with Elizabeth's condemnation of Charlotte's decision to marry Mr. Collins, but here is the evidence that supports what most readers feel to be the case even if, as often happens, they cannot remember what passage or passages gave them their impression. The narrator (and the author behind her) clearly suggests that Elizabeth's condemnation of Charlotte is “clear-sighted.” It is true that Charlotte's apparent contentment at Hunsford surprises Elizabeth at first. (She “looked with wonder at her friend that she could have so cheerful an air, with such a companion” [120]; “Elizabeth in the solitude of her chamber had to meditate upon Charlotte's degree of contentment, to understand her address in guiding, and composure in bearing with her husband, and to acknowledge that it was all done very well” [122].) But Elizabeth's final assessment of the reason for Charlotte's present contentment and of her chances for a lasting happiness is not to be dismissed: “Poor Charlotte!—it was melancholy to leave her to such society!—But she had chosen it with her eyes wide open; and though evidently regretting that her visitors were to go, she did not seem to ask for compassion. Her home and her housekeeping, her parish and her poultry, and all their dependent concerns, had not yet lost their charms” (165).

could hardly have been concealed from the world; and that friendship between a person capable of it, and such an amiable man as Mr. Bingley, was incomprehensible. (159)

Thanks to the influence of vanity, all of these considerations fail to have their proper weight with Elizabeth. She fails, in other words, to see the way they speak forcefully in favor of Darcy's character, something she would perceive were it not for vanity's influence.

All of these events—from Darcy's desire for Bingley to marry Georgiana “adding something” to his concern over Bingley's relations with Jane, to Elizabeth's misjudgements of Darcy and Wickham—and other similar events I won't take time here to discuss, exemplify psychological phenomena that exist in real life but that are rarely to be found convincingly instantiated in fiction. And this partially explains why so many of the novel's readers find its characters so impressively true to life; if we recognize these phenomena from life, their inclusion in Austen's depiction of the lives of her characters is likely to make these characters seem more vibrantly real to us than do most other fictional figures. What makes such recognition possible is the double nature of reality we found expressed by Proust. Reality is composed not only of particulars (this particular person, this particular tree, this particular love affair, etc.) but also of things that are *general*—things, that is, that are shared among many particulars. The phenomenon that is captured in Elizabeth's failure of judgement—the phenomenon, that is, of flattering attentions or insulting slights interfering with one's ability to evaluate the person who is their source—is one we encounter in ourselves and in people we know, just as Jane Austen encountered it in herself and the people *she* knew. And as we also saw in Proust, literature's ability to capture general phenomena has the power to produce in a reader more than simple recognition.

Illuminative Verisimilitude

Art in its mimetic dimension is, as Mathew Arnold said of poetry, a criticism of life: while criticism can illuminate art, art can illuminate life—it can bring to our conscious awareness things we encounter in life that can easily escape our notice. For here is the crucial point: most of what we experience escapes our conscious awareness. This is necessarily so—the mind can only focus on one or two things at a time, and it is often given over to practical exigencies of the moment. And even when one reflects on experience, it is no easy task to separate the general from the particular—to discern the general phenomena that manifest themselves in particular cases. Moreover, we experience life's phenomena amid a welter of simultaneous impressions that makes it difficult to bring them into focus. Literature has the ability to isolate atoms of experience and thereby render them perspicuous. Our experience of moments in literature that do this—that accomplish this “illuminative realism”—is at its best a sensation of simultaneous recognition and discovery: the element of experience that is captured is something we have seen before, and therefore we experience recognition, but since it has never been the object of our full conscious observation, we discover it only now. This sensation of recognition and discovery can impart a heightened “realness” to the fictional characters it involves.

Toward the end of *Lost Illusions*, Lucien Chardon's egoism has put his family on the brink of ruin. He has forged a bill in his brother-in-law's name which the man is unable to

pay. When Lucien returns home from Paris, Balzac gives the following description of the effects of Lucien's presence on his sister Eve's state of mind:

Personal presence acts like a charm and transforms the starkest hostility between lovers or members of a family however strong the motives for discontent may be. . . . A beloved person's glances, gestures and actions revive a lingering tenderness in those he has most offended, grieved or ill-used. The mind may be loath to forget, self-interest may still feel the hurt, but the heart becomes enslaved anew in spite of everything. And so poor Eve, as she listened until lunch-time to her brother's confidences, could not mask the expression in her eyes when she looked at him, nor her tone of voice when she spoke from her heart.¹⁰

The phenomenon Balzac describes need not be universal—it may not always be the case (as Balzac seems to suggest it is) that, when we have been angry with a beloved person in his absence, his presence cools the enmity we might feel towards him. It is enough that this happens *sometimes*—that it is a phenomenon that exists in the world, and that it is something that is difficult to see; we may easily pass through life without ever making it the object of our full conscious observation. If we have encountered it this way in life, when we encounter it again in Balzac, so clear, so luminously focussed, it will resonate in us, and this resonance will likely make Eve seem all the more vibrantly real.

Any example of this third kind of verisimilitude is necessarily also an example of the second. A passage that seems to us to illuminate an element of life will of necessity be something works of fiction don't normally capture. Several of the examples I have given under the heading "inclusive verisimilitude" are for me examples also of the illuminative kind. For instance, the novel's psychological centerpiece, Elizabeth's misjudgement of Darcy and Wickham, concretely lays bare a phenomenon I had certainly experienced but had never fully perceived until reading *Pride and Prejudice*: the way vanity can interfere with judgement by making us eager to think either well or poorly of someone. But this effect can vary from reader to reader—different people have different levels of acquaintance with this or that aspect of life, and so what is for me a striking moment of illuminative verisimilitude may not be such a moment for you, and vice versa. So here as in my chapter on Proust, I mean to give examples not of moments in the novel that *necessarily* bring about this effect, but of moments that are capable of doing so.

When Elizabeth and the Gardiners are on their way to Lambton, Mrs. Gardiner proposes a visit to Pemberley. Elizabeth is greatly distressed; she would be mortified if they encountered Darcy there. Since she would rather not reveal to her relatives her reasons for not wanting to go (they are in the dark about what has happened between her and Darcy at Hunsford), she leaves this as a last resort, deciding first to ask a chambermaid whether the family is at Pemberley for the summer. "A most welcome negative followed the question—and her alarms being now removed, she was at leisure to feel a great deal of curiosity to see the house herself" (184). But when the moment of the visit arrives the next day, Elizabeth's relief vanishes: "They descended the hill, crossed the bridge, and drove to the door; and, while examining the nearer aspect of the house, all her apprehensions of meeting its owner returned. She dreaded lest the housekeeper had been mistaken" (185). This is a particular moment in the

¹⁰ Balzac, *Lost Illusions*, 586 (pt. 3, chap. 21).

life of a particular human being. But beneath this surface of particulars is something we all can recognize: the way anxiety-soothing confidence (here, Elizabeth's confidence that the chambermaid who says the Darcys are not at Pemberley for the summer is someone who would know) sometimes suddenly disappears when the event to which it refers comes about. It is only when she is about to enter the house that Elizabeth's anxiety floods back to her and she worries for the first time that the chambermaid may not be well-informed.

In Lydia, one finds a mode of romantic attachment frequent among the young that very many readers will recognize. After learning of her elopement with Wickham, Elizabeth reflects that "She [Elizabeth] had never perceived, while the regiment was in Hertfordshire, that Lydia had any partiality for him, but she was convinced that Lydia had wanted only encouragement to attach herself to any body. Sometimes one officer, sometimes another had been her favourite, as their attentions raised them in her opinion. Her affections had been continually fluctuating, but never without an object" (212). Our recognition of this phenomenon—this mode of romantic attachment in which one's affection flutters from person to person, attracted in each case by attentions that eventually wane—does not necessarily mean that it has ever been the object of our full, conscious observation.

Early in the novel, Charlotte Lucas gives voice to an intriguing idea about the nature of romantic attachment: "There is so much of gratitude or vanity in almost every attachment, that it is not safe to leave any to itself. We can all *begin* freely—a slight preference is natural enough; but there are few of us who have heart enough to be really in love without encouragement" (15). We need not agree with Charlotte that this is true of "almost every" attachment to feel that she is on to something, and that this something is subtly perceived. Lydia's early feelings toward Wickham, as described by Elizabeth to Mrs. Gardiner, instantiate the phenomenon in question: "When first he entered the corps, she was ready enough to admire him; but so we all were. Every girl in Meryton was out of her senses about him for the first two months; but he never distinguished *her* by any particular attention, and, consequently, after a moderate period of extravagant and wild admiration, her fancy for him gave way, and others of the regiment, who treated her with more distinction, again became her favourites" (216).

"Vanity," of course, is one of this novel's themes, and it appears in some of the book's more interesting psychological insights. When Elizabeth's eyes are opened to the mercenary motive behind Wickham's courtship of Miss King, she surmises that, in his earlier courtship of herself, he either "had been deceived with regard to her fortune, or had been gratifying his vanity by encouraging the preference which she believed she had most incautiously shewn" (158-59). This is at once a convincing explanation for Wickham's attentions to Elizabeth—a parrying of our possible objection that his apparent intention to marry rich makes these attentions implausible (why would he waste his time on Elizabeth?)—and an interesting psychological observation. Gratification of vanity can indeed be the driving motive of a courtship.

There are two moments in the novel that brilliantly capture particularities of the behavior of children. On her way to Hunsford, Elizabeth stops at the Gardiners' residence in London. As her carriage pulls up to the door, we are told that "On the stairs were a troop of little boys and girls, whose eagerness for their cousin's appearance would not allow them to wait in the drawing-room, and whose shyness, as they had not seen her in a twelvemonth, prevented their coming lower" (117). I enjoy this little detail for the way it captures the shyness,

extreme by adult standards, of many children when faced with relatives they remember but have not seen in a good while. The second moment I have in mind occurs much earlier in the novel, at the end of a scene at the Bennets the day after the Meryton ball. Charlotte Lucas has come to Longbourn to trade impressions of that event with Jane, Elizabeth, and their mother. They discuss Mr. Darcy's pride, and there occurs the following exchange:

"If I were as rich as Mr. Darcy," cried a young Lucas who came with his sisters, "I should not care how proud I was. I would keep a pack of foxhounds, and drink a bottle of wine every day."

"Then you would drink a great deal more than you ought," said Mrs. Bennet; "and if I were to see you at it I should take away your bottle directly."

The boy protested that she should not; she continued to declare that she would, and the argument ended only with the visit. (14)

Here, too, the writer brilliantly renders traits that are typical of children. Surely there is something typically childlike—especially "little-boy-like"—in this boy's illogical notion of "not caring how proud he would be," in his idea of what he would do if he were wealthy, and in his indefatigable launching of you-would-nots against Mrs. Bennet, made possible of course by the fact that there is something amusingly child-like in her personality as well.

Lest it be objected that the sort of reaction I am describing is a distinctly modern phenomenon—that a person of Jane Austen's own day, for example, would not have experienced her novels in this way—here is Richard Whateley writing in 1821 about a passage he found in *Persuasion*:

The following touch reminds us, in its minute fidelity to nature, of some of the happiest strokes in the subordinate parts of Hogarth's prints: Mr. C. Musgrove has an aunt whom he wishes to treat with becoming attention, but who, from being of a somewhat inferior class in point of family and fashion, is studiously shunned by his wife, who has all the family pride of her father and eldest sister: he takes the opportunity of a walk with a large party on a fine day, to visit this despised relation, but cannot persuade his wife to accompany him; she pleads fatigue, and remains with the rest to await his return; and he walks home with her, not much pleased at the incivility she has shown.

[Anne] joined Charles and Mary, and was tired enough to be very glad of Charles's other arm; but Charles, though in very good humour with her, was out of temper with his wife. Mary had shewn herself disobliging to him, and was now to reap the consequence, which consequence was his dropping her arm almost every moment to cut off the heads of some nettles in the hedge with his switch; and when Mary began to complain of it, and lament her being ill-used, according to custom, in being on the hedge side, while Anne was never incommoded on the other, he dropped the arms of both to hunt after a weasel which he had a momentary glance of, and they could hardly get him along at all."¹¹

¹¹ Southam, 102.

In his enjoyment of what strikes him as a “minute fidelity to nature,” what is Whateley responding to if not the way this amusing passage convincingly instantiates a phenomenon he recognizes from life and which strikes him as subtly perceived. It captures the way certain people, when they are angry or have had their feelings hurt and do not wish for the moment to confront the offender directly, find indirect, ambiguous ways to express their discontent.

“Rightness”

From plausibility, “inclusive” verisimilitude, and illuminative verisimilitude, we now move to the fourth and last form of lifelikeness important to *Pride and Prejudice*. This is the sense of impressive “rightness” produced in certain moments of the novel by Austen’s uncanny ability to imaginatively inhabit the minds and bodies of her characters—by the virtuosity with which she intuits what a certain character might do, think, feel, or say in a given situation. At the end of the novel, Darcy explains to Elizabeth that Lady Catherine’s visit to him, in which she divulged Elizabeth’s responses to her interrogations concerning rumors that Darcy and she were engaged, gave him hope that Elizabeth might still have him: “I knew enough of your disposition to be certain, that, had you been absolutely, irrevocably decided against me, you would have acknowledged it to Lady Catherine, frankly and openly” (280). This is not a moment of illuminative or inclusive realism; what is remarkable here is the way Austen has been able to inhabit Darcy’s mind. It seems perfectly right that Darcy should have this thought; from what he and the reader know of Elizabeth’s frankness, independence, and willingness to speak her mind, she would indeed have told Lady Catherine that she had no intention of marrying her nephew had this in fact been the case; and it makes perfect sense that this reflection would occur to Mr. Darcy, who is both intelligent and in love with Elizabeth. But this is the sort of thing most of us, had *we* been writing this novel, would never have thought of. It takes an author of imaginative genius—someone with an extraordinary ability to inhabit the minds of characters and to see and think as they would—to make this kind of discovery. This ability to so perceptively intuit what a certain character might feel, think, or do in a certain situation is another form of Austen’s truth to life that bestows a beguiling “aliveness” on her characters.

Take as another example a scene on the grounds of Rosings. On one of her solitary walks, Elizabeth has encountered Colonel Fitzwilliam, and their conversation has brought them to the subject of Fitzwilliam’s being a younger son and the financial constraints of this position. “A younger son,” he says, “must be inured to self-denial and dependence.” Elizabeth expresses skepticism, saying that the younger son of an earl can know very little of either, and asks him exactly what privations he himself has suffered. He explains, “Our habits of expense make us too dependent, and there are not many in my rank of life who can afford to marry without some attention to money.” Here is Austen’s rendering of what Elizabeth feels, thinks, and says in the moments that follow:

“Is this,” thought Elizabeth, “meant for me?” and she coloured at the idea; but, recovering herself, said in a lively tone, “And pray, what is the usual price of an Earl’s younger son? Unless the elder brother is very sickly, I suppose you would not ask above fifty thousand pounds.”

He answered her in the same style, and the subject dropped. To interrupt a silence which might make him fancy her affected with what had passed, she soon afterwards said,

“I imagine your cousin brought you down with him chiefly for the sake of having somebody at his disposal. . . .” (141)

In “The Art of Fiction,” Henry James makes reference to the impression of “felt life” given by the minute, second-to-second rendering of a succession of feelings, words, and thoughts of a character. I think he would have agreed that this is a fine example. And part of the brilliance here is the way Austen is able to inhabit Elizabeth’s mind, to imagine what it might feel like to be Elizabeth in this situation and faced with these words of Colonel Fitzwilliam’s. The thought that, given the interest they have shown for each other, Fitzwilliam’s comment about the limitations on his choice of a wife might be his way of telling her that he would but cannot choose her; the blush that attends this thought; the impulse she feels in her embarrassment to mask her emotion, to give him the impression that she is unfazed by what he has said; the way she recovers herself with wit; her urge to fill the silence because she thinks it might make him believe her “affected by what has passed,” are all inspired discoveries. Their effect on the scene is a “rightness” that makes Elizabeth come wonderfully alive.

Austen’s remarkable skill at imagining how a certain character might feel, think, and behave in a certain situation is just as strongly in evidence in her portrayal of Elizabeth’s distress when she reads in a letter from Jane the news of Lydia’s elopement. The scene takes place in Lambton, at the inn where she is staying with Mr. and Mrs. Gardiner, who have just gone out for a walk.

“Oh! where, where is my uncle?” cried Elizabeth, darting from her seat as she finished the letter, in eagerness to follow him, without losing a moment of the time so precious; but as she reached the door, it was opened by a servant, and Mr. Darcy appeared. Her pale face and impetuous manner made him start, and before he could recover himself enough to speak, she, in whose mind every idea was superseded by Lydia’s situation, hastily exclaimed, “I beg your pardon, but I must leave you. I must find Mr. Gardiner this moment, on business that cannot be delayed; I have not an instant to lose.”

“Good God! what is the matter?” cried he, with more feeling than politeness; then recollecting himself, “I will not detain you a minute, but let me, or let the servant, go after Mr. and Mrs. Gardiner. You are not well enough;—you cannot go yourself.”

Elizabeth hesitated, but her knees trembled under her, and she felt how little would be gained by her attempting to pursue them. Calling back the servant, therefore, she commissioned him, though in so breathless an accent as made her almost unintelligible, to fetch his master and mistress home, instantly.

On his quitting the room, she sat down, unable to support herself, and looking so miserably ill, that it was impossible for Darcy to leave her, or to refrain from saying, in a tone of gentleness and commiseration, “Let me call your maid. Is there nothing you could take, to give you present relief?—A glass of wine;—shall I get you one?—You are very ill.”

“No, I thank you;” she replied, endeavouring to recover herself. “There is nothing the matter with me. I am quite well. I am only distressed by some dreadful news which I have received from Longbourn.”

She burst into tears as she alluded to it, and for a few minutes could not speak another word. Darcy, in wretched suspense, could only say something indistinctly of his own concern, and observe her in compassionate silence.
(208-09)

What is impressive about this scene is Austen’s ability to imagine in such precise and convincing detail the way Elizabeth might behave upon receiving such distressing news. Among the symptoms of Elizabeth’s distress are her stumbling syntax in “Oh! where, where is my uncle?”; her “pale face and impetuous manner” (note the precision of “impetuous”), and the way these startle Darcy; the way her distress clouds her mind, making her fail to realize what is obvious to Darcy, that she should send the servant after the Gardiners instead of going herself; Elizabeth’s trembling knees and the breathlessness that garbles her speech as she gives the order to the servant; and finally the way her effort to calm herself is defeated as soon as she tells Darcy the cause of her distress, as if her words give the disaster a new concreteness in her mind that causes the tears to burst forth. And note that in all this Elizabeth remains Elizabeth: her high level of distress reflects her intelligent understanding of the gravity of Lydia’s situation—her realistic assessment of the chances that Wickham intends to marry her sister, which distinguishes Elizabeth from Jane, who is optimistic on this point. Furthermore her effort to compose herself distinguishes her from her mother and younger sisters, who like to fan the flames of their grief.

Plausibility, “inclusive” verisimilitude, illuminative verisimilitude, and “rightness” are four different types of lifelikeness—four different ways a work of fiction can be remarkably true to life. In Jane Austen’s great skill at all of them, we have found an explanation for the impression of extraordinary “aliveness” her characters continue to give even after two hundred years. For while some of the sources of her novels’ verisimilitude were time-bound, destined to weaken in their effect as novels and the world changed, these were not: Jane Austen excels at these four by the standards of any era.

Of novelists who have created characters that seem extraordinarily alive, Austen is perhaps the one who employs the least amount of sensory description. In *Pride and Prejudice*’s opening scene, for instance—the conversation between Mr. and Mrs. Bennet about Bingley’s arrival in the neighborhood—the reader is perfectly in the dark about whether the couple are sitting or standing or are in or out of doors. Now we move on to Nabokov, who will help us understand how fiction achieves lifelikeness in its depictions of the sensory world.

Chapter Three: Nabokov's Lectures and *Pnin*

In his introduction to *Lectures on Literature*, the posthumous volume of lectures Nabokov delivered to undergraduates when he taught at Wellesley and Cornell, John Updike gives a decidedly bleak account of the author's ideas on the relationship of literature to reality. After opining that the 1950s were more congenial to Nabokov's way of thinking about literature than would have been the following decades, he says, "But in any decade Nabokov's approach would have seemed radical in the degree of severance between reality and art that it supposes" (xxv). He cites in support Nabokov's pronouncement that "great novels are great fairy tales," and opposes to Nabokov's attitude Wallace Stevens's belief that "if we desire to formulate an accurate theory of poetry, we find it necessary to examine the structure of reality, because reality is a central reference for poetry." "In [Nabokov's] aesthetic," says Updike, "small heed is paid to the lowly delight of recognition, and the blunt virtue of verity." I want to show that this image of Nabokov is perfectly opposite to the truth: that far from being unconcerned with verisimilitude, he is one of its great proponents, and that the pleasures of "recognition" and "verity" are central to his conception of art. First I'll lay out the ideas about verisimilitude one finds in his work as a critic (mainly in his lectures¹), and then I'll explore the effects these ideas had on Nabokov's own art, through an analysis of his novel *Pnin*.

Nabokov's pronouncement that all novels are fairy tales appears at the start of his lectures on *Mansfield Park*:

Mansfield Park is a fairy tale, but then all novels are, in a sense, fairy tales. At first sight Jane Austen's manner and matter may seem to be old-fashioned, stilted, unreal. But this is a delusion to which the bad reader succumbs. The good reader is aware that the quest for real life, real people and so forth is a meaningless process when speaking of books. In a book, the reality of a person, or object, or a circumstance depends exclusively on the world of that particular book. An original author always invents an original world, and if a character or an action fits into the pattern of that world, then we experience the pleasurable shock of artistic truth, no matter how unlikely the person or thing may seem if transferred into what book reviewers, poor hacks, call "real life." There is no such thing as real life for an author of genius: he must create it himself and then create the consequences. The charm of *Mansfield Park* can be fully enjoyed only when we adopt its conventions, its rules, its enchanting make-believe. *Mansfield Park* never existed, and its people never lived. (LL 10)

The sense in which all novels are fairy tales is that each presents a world with its own rules. A novel may contain things that are perfectly unreal—things that do not match our ideas of what is possible in real life; but as long as these things fit the pattern of the fiction's world, they are "real" (possible) in that world. In other words, the question of what can happen and exist in the world of a given novel—of what the rules of its world allow—is distinct from the question of what can happen and exist in the *real* world. And so there are things in *Mansfield Park* that a certain type of reader (for Nabokov, a bad one) might reject for being "unreal"—for not being

¹ Nabokov's lectures have been published in two volumes, *Lectures on Literature* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich/Bruccoli Clark, 1980) and *Lectures on Russian Literature* (New York: Harcourt/Bruccoli Clark, 1981).

possible in real life—that are not unreal (impossible) in the world that novel creates. Something Nabokov doesn't say here (but which, as we shall see, he believed) is that it is right to reject as flaws things one finds in a novel that don't fit the pattern of its world. The good reader does this; a bad one rejects things for not fitting the patterns of the *real* world—or at least the real world as he or she imagines it—regardless of whether they fit the pattern of the world of the fiction.

Nabokov puts this theory to work in his discussions of two details in *Bleak House*: Krook's spontaneous combustion and the equally fantastical fate of the Jarndyce and Jarndyce lawsuit, in which the legal fees have absorbed all the money at issue in the suit. "It does not, of course, matter a jot," says Nabokov, "whether or not a man burning down that way from the saturated gin inside him is a scientific possibility" (LL 80). And "just as Krook's end was sound logic in the magic world of Dickens, so the Chancery case also has a logical end within the grotesque logic of that grotesque world" (LL 81). The example of Krook's demise reappears in a lecture on Stevenson, where, while discussing the fantastical metamorphosis of Jekyll into Hyde, Nabokov again suggests that the "reality" of events in a work of fiction depends on the rules of its world:

Stevenson musters all possible devices, images, intonations, word patterns, and also false scents, to build up gradually a world in which the strange transformation to be described in Jekyll's own words will have the impact of satisfactory and artistic reality on the reader—or rather will lead to such a state of mind in which the reader will not ask himself whether this transformation is possible or not. Something of the same sort is managed by Dickens in *Bleak House* when by a miracle of subtle approach and variegated prose he manages to make real and satisfying the case of the gin-loaded old man who literally catches fire inside and is burnt to the ground. (LL 188)

That every work of literature is a world with its own rules is reaffirmed in a lecture on *Madame Bovary*. After listing events in that novel that he thinks could never happen in real life, Nabokov reminds us that "Flaubert's world as all worlds of major writers, is a world of fancy with its own logic, its own conventions, its own coincidences. The curious impossibilities I have listed do not clash with the pattern of the book—and indeed are only discovered by dull college professors or bright students" (LL 146). Here, again, what matters is the "pattern of the book"—the "pattern of that world," as he says in the passage from the lecture on *Mansfield Park*; since they fit this pattern, the impossible details of *Madame Bovary* should not be regarded as flaws.

One might suppose from all this that verisimilitude—or at least the form of verisimilitude I called in my last chapter "plausibility"—is of little importance in Nabokov's conception of literature. That game of constraints so many of us enjoy in Jane Austen, the virtuosity of certain writers at keeping things true to life, might seem to have no place in an aesthetic where impossible details are not to be judged as flaws so long as they fit the world of the story. But Nabokov's criticism is in fact greatly preoccupied with pointing out lapses in plausibility, lapses he considers mistakes. One of my favorite examples occurs in a lecture on Chekhov. In Act III of *The Seagull*, Nina gives the writer Trigorin a medallion inscribed with the title of one of his books and with the numbers of a page and a line. She quickly leaves the room and the house (Arkadina's summer house where Trigorin has been staying), and Trigorin is left to wonder about the reference. He inquires whether his books are in the house, and,

hearing they are in the study, leaves the room and the stage to find them. Nabokov, after describing the ensuing back-and-forth between the characters who remain on the stage, complains,

there is a bad blunder directly afterwards. Trigorin comes in, turning the pages of the book, looking for the line, and then he reads, for the benefit of the audience: "Here it is: ' . . . if any time you need my life, just come and take it.'"

Now it is quite clear that what really would have happened is that Trigorin, hunting for the book in Sorin's study on the lower shelf and finding it, would, normally, crouch there and then read the lines. (*LRL* 290)

Chekhov needed the audience to hear that line, and in order to make this happen he has sacrificed psychological plausibility. For Nabokov, this lapse in truth to life is a flaw.

Nabokov's lectures are replete with similar objections. Later in his treatment of *The Seagull*, he laments the artificial way Chekhov in the third act makes his characters repeat certain mannerisms. In his discussion of the act that follows, he says, "And though here again the characters are shown in their oddities or habits—Sorin again dozes, Trigorin talks of angling, Arkadina recalls her stage successes—this is much more naturally done than in the false dramatic background of the preceding act, because it is quite natural that in the same place, with the same people collected, two years later, the old tricks would be gently and rather pathetically repeated" (*LRL* 293). In Dostoevski, Nabokov finds a slew of characters whose unreality mars the novels they appear in, such as "Nastasya Filipovna, one of those completely unacceptable, unreal, irritating characters with which Dostoevski's novels teem. This abstract woman indulges in the superlative type of feeling: there are no limits either to her kindness or to her wickedness" (*LRL* 127). And he brilliantly exposes a lapse in plausibility in *The Brothers Karamazov's* murder trial:

the following circumstance, which would easily have settled the question and saved Dmitri, is completely disregarded by the author. Smerdyakov has confessed to Ivan, another brother, that he was the real murderer, and that in committing his crime he had used a heavy ashtray. Ivan is going all out to save Dmitri; yet this essential circumstance is never mentioned at the trial. Had Ivan told the court about the ashtray, not much skill would have been needed to establish the truth if the ashtray was examined for blood and its shape was compared with the shape of the mortal wound. This is not done, a bad flaw in a mystery novel. (*LRL* 135)

In the Tolstoy lectures, when he comes to *Anna Karenin's* famous "chalk scene," in which Lyovin writes in chalk on the green cloth of a card table the letters (in Nabokov's translation) "w, y, s, n, d, y, m, n," which Anna correctly decodes as "When you said no, did you mean never?", Nabokov observes, "All this is a little far fetched. Although, no doubt, love may work wonders and bridge the abyss between minds and present cases of tender telepathy—still such detailed thought-reading, even in Russian, is not quite convincing. However, the gestures are charming and the atmosphere of the scene artistically true" (*LRL* 163). And of a scene in that same novel in which a well-known professor of philosophy has come to Moscow from Kharkov to debate with Levin's half-brother Koznischev whether there is a "line to be drawn between the psychological and the physiological phenomena in man," Nabokov complains that "Tolstoy did not bother to go very far for a suitable subject. Problems of mind versus matter are still discussed all over the world; but the actual question as defined by Tolstoy was by 1870 such an

old and obvious one, and is stated here in such general terms, that it hardly seems likely a professor of philosophy would travel all the way (over 300 miles) from Kharkov to Moscow to thrash it out with another scholar” (*LRL* 217).

So here we have two themes of Nabokov’s lectures: first, that every work of literature is a world with its own rules, and that implausible details are acceptable so long as they fit the pattern of the fiction’s world; and second, a rejection of certain details for not being true to life. At first blush, these themes might seem contradictory: if what matters is not lifelikeness but “fitting the pattern of the fiction,” then the details Nabokov rejects should be rejected for clashing with that pattern, not for being implausible. But what if the patterns of life overlap with the pattern of a fiction—what if truth to life, to a certain degree, is part of the texture of a fictional world, even though that world differs in various ways from the real one? Then, to object to implausibility would be, in certain cases, the same as objecting to a violation of the rules of that world. That Nabokov subscribed to this theory is suggested at the start of his lectures on Dostoevski, in a passage that combines our two themes:

When an artist starts out on a work of art, he has set himself some definite artistic problem that he is out to solve. He selects his characters, his time and his place, and then finds the particular and special circumstances which can allow the developments he desires to occur naturally, developing, so to say, without any violence on the artist’s part in order to compel the desired issue, developing logically and naturally from the combination and interaction of the forces the artist has set into play.

The world the artist creates for this purpose may be entirely unreal—as for instance the world of Kafka, or that of Gogol—but there is one absolute demand we are entitled to make: this world in itself and as long as it lasts, must be plausible to the reader or to the spectator. It is quite inessential, for instance, that Shakespeare introduces in *Hamlet* the ghost of Hamlet’s father. Whether we agree with those critics who say that Shakespeare’s contemporaries believed in the reality of phantoms, and therefore Shakespeare was justified to introduce these phantoms into his plays as realities, or whether we assume that these ghosts are something in the nature of stage properties, it does not matter: from the moment the murdered king’s ghost enters the play, we accept him and do not doubt that Shakespeare was within his right in introducing him into his play. In fact, the true measure of genius is in what measure the world he has created is his own, one that has not been here before him (at least, here, in literature) and, even more important, how plausible he has succeeded in making it. I would like you to consider Dostoevski’s world from this point of view. (*LRL* 105-06)

The passage may initially seem opaque because of Nabokov’s unusual way of using the term “plausible.” He is using it to mean “acceptable,” one of the word’s early meanings now obsolete. This is why he says that our “accepting” the ghost in *Hamlet* is an example of *Hamlet*’s world being “plausible to the reader or the spectator,” even as he implies that the ghost may be entirely unreal for us. What matters, he is saying, is not whether for us or for *Hamlet*’s original audience such a thing could exist in real life—but the fact that we “accept” it, that we feel it to be in consonance with “the forces the artist has set into play,” i.e., with the fiction’s world. This is again Nabokov’s idea that unreal things are perfectly acceptable in a work of fiction

unless they clash with the pattern of its world. Now, an important fact should be noted: Nabokov indeed goes on to “consider Dostoevski’s world from this point of view”—to examine how “plausible” it is; but the several examples he gives of implausibility in Dostoevski’s fiction are implausible in the usual sense: like the examples I have given above (the unreal Nastasya Filipovna and Ivan’s incredible failure to mention the ashtray at the trial), they all are rejected by Nabokov for not being true to life. The only way this can be coherent is if the two definitions of plausibility—conformity to the pattern of the fiction and conformity to the patterns of life—overlap. It seems that, for Nabokov, a certain degree of faithfulness to what is possible in real life is part of the pattern of Dostoevski’s worlds. In the world of *The Brothers Karamazov*, people have memories and minds that are similar enough to those of real people to make an omission such as the one Ivan commits at the trial as impossible in that world as it is in the real one. Thus, when we reject that event as a flaw, we do so not simply because it departs from verisimilitude, but because the verisimilitude from which it departs is part of the fabric of *The Brothers Karamazov*’s world.

Nabokov makes a similar assessment of the artificiality he detects at the end of Act II of *The Seagull*: “Nina is slightly false. That last sigh over the footlights dates, and it dates just because it is not on the same level of perfect simplicity and natural reality as the rest of the things in the play. We are aware, certainly, that she is actressy and all that, but still it does not quite click” (LRL 288: my emphasis). The problem, Nabokov says, is not simply that Nina’s speech is implausible, but that it breaks with a pattern of plausibility that is part of the world of the play.

Nabokov’s lectures, then, imply a theory of verisimilitude. It is a theory that explains why, in a single work of fiction, we will accept some unreal things and reject others. In the build-up of scenes in a novel, patterns are formed—patterns of truth to life and patterns of departure therefrom. We extract from these patterns a sense of a coherent world where certain things are possible and other things are not. It is a world that is similar in some ways and different in others from the real one; and when we feel that an event in the fiction clashes with the logic of that world, we reject it.² When we looked at *Pride and Prejudice*, we found that we can imagine plenty of implausible things that, were they to happen in that novel, we would reject. But there are also implausibilities we accept in it, such as the super-human facility of speech in Austen’s characters, and it is not obvious why this should be. Nabokov gives us an answer: the unreal things we accept fit the pattern of the novel’s world, while those we would reject do not. Like every fictional world, the world of *Pride and Prejudice* is both similar to and different from the real one. One of the ways it is different is that people in this world have a much greater facility in speech than people have in real life. This implausible characteristic is part of the fabric of the novel right from its opening pages, and this is why we don’t object to it. If this were not the case—if the speech of the characters were more lifelike—and if, in the middle of the book, Elizabeth started speaking with such facility, then we would likely reject this as a flaw. And here is the fascinating corollary: for all the ways *Pride and Prejudice* is true to

² A slightly different theory is that of Deena Skolnick and Paul Bloom in their article “The Intuitive Cosmology of Fictional Worlds” (in *The Architecture of the Imagination: New Essays on Pretence, Possibility, and Fiction*, edited by Shaun Nichols [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006], 73-86): “Every time we encounter a new fictional story, we create a new world. The default assumption is that this world contains everything that the real world contains. We then modify this representation based on several constraints” (77). The “constraints” are ways the fictional world differs from the real one, as indicated by the narrative itself either explicitly or implicitly, and sometimes by our knowledge of the genre to which it belongs. In this view there is no need for the writer to establish patterns of truth to life—only patterns of departure from it.

life, if all of a sudden, in the middle of the novel, Elizabeth started speaking as real people do, with all the hemming and hawing and false starts of real speech, we would certainly object to this realism for being out of place in the novel's world. Verisimilar things, too, can clash with the pattern of a fiction, as Nabokov makes clear in his discussion of Gogol's *The Greatcoat*:

In this world of utter futility, of futile humility and futile domination, the highest degree that passion, desire, creative urge can attain is a new cloak which both tailors and customers adore on their knees. I am not speaking of the moral point or the moral lesson. There can be no moral lesson in such a world because there are no pupils and no teachers: this world *is* and it excludes everything that might destroy it, so that any improvement, any struggle, any moral purpose or endeavor, are as utterly impossible as changing the course of a star. (LRL 57)

Through patterns created in the build-up of scenes in a fiction, the writer implicitly declares the extent to which the fiction's world is true to life and the extent to which it is not. These are the "rules" of that world, and part of the reader's pleasure is in watching the writer work within these limits—watching him or her attend to all the other exigencies of compelling storytelling while staying within the bounds of what is possible in the story's world; we enjoy the virtuosity this requires. In the last chapter, I compared the writer to a juggler, saying that we enjoy his skill in keeping the orange of plausibility in the air along with the apple of tight storytelling and with all his other aims as a narrator. What we have learned from Nabokov's lectures is that the orange is not exactly plausibility: it is faithfulness to the pattern of the work—to the pattern of the story's world. This faithfulness includes plausibility, but only to the extent to which truth to life is part of the pattern of that world.

Seen in proper context, Nabokov's idea that all novels are fairy tales, that every work of literature is a world with its own rules, hardly suggests the radical "severance between reality and art" Updike says it implies. But there is another theme in Nabokov that in certain of its manifestations might seem to devalue verisimilitude. It is the theme of "subjective life," and it appears in *Pale Fire* in the description of portraits by the Zemblan painter Eystein that achieved an illusionistic verisimilitude in their depiction of various objects surrounding the sitter:

In some of those portraits Eystein had also resorted to a weird form of trickery: among his decorations of wood or wool, gold or velvet, he would insert one which was really made of the material elsewhere imitated by paint. This device which was apparently meant to enhance the effect of his tactile and tonal values had, however, something ignoble about it and disclosed not only an essential flaw in Eystein's talent, but the basic fact that "reality" is neither the subject nor the object of true art which creates its own special reality having nothing to do with the "reality" perceived by the communal eye. (130)

Nabokov's statement that "reality" is not the subject of true art might seem to devalue verisimilitude; he might seem to be saying that real art has nothing to do with the project of faithfully depicting elements of real life. But what Nabokov means by "reality" when he puts the word in quotes is something much more limited; he means reality as it is seen and known by everyone—by the "communal eye," as he says at the end of the passage—as opposed to the way it appears to the artist, who, if he is an artist of any value, will notice a great many things that escape the average eye. Here is what Nabokov said when asked about the passage in an interview for the BBC:

In your new novel, Pale Fire, one of the characters says that reality is neither the subject nor the

object of real art, which creates its own reality. What is that reality? Reality is a very subjective affair. I can only define it as a kind of gradual accumulation of information; and as specialization. If we take a lily, for instance, or any other kind of natural object, a lily is more real to a naturalist than it is to an ordinary person. But it is still more real to a botanist. And yet another stage of reality is reached with that botanist who is a specialist in lilies. You can get nearer and nearer, so to speak, to reality; but you never get near enough because reality is an infinite succession of steps, levels of perception, false bottoms, and hence unquenchable, unattainable. You can know more and more about one thing but you can never know everything about one thing: it's hopeless. So that we live surrounded by more or less ghostly objects—that machine, there, for instance. It's a complete ghost to me—I don't understand a thing about it and, well, it's a mystery to me, as much of a mystery as it would be to Lord Byron. (SO 10-11)

Different people, then, possess different amounts of information about the things around them, and these differences in information or knowledge correspond to different “levels of perception”; if I go on a walk with a friend who is a specialist in lilies, he will notice much more than I in any lily we encounter. In a sense we will see different lilies. The reason this is relevant to the passage from *Pale Fire* is that the true artist is for Nabokov someone who possesses information about the things he depicts that is fuller than that of the average person, and the depiction itself reflects this fullness of information. If he paints a velvet dress, he makes us see it through his eyes—he shows us what he sees, what he notices about velvet and dresses. This is what Nabokov means when he says that true art “creates its own special reality having nothing to do with the ‘reality’ perceived by the communal eye.” It is the special reality of the painter—the world as he sees it in all his fullness of perception—that is rendered by true art. And so the problem with Eystein’s method of inserting real materials into his paintings is that real wood or velvet will be seen by the viewer in whatever way he normally sees them, whereas a *depiction* of these things would show them as they are seen by the painter. In a lecture on Kafka’s *Metamorphosis*, Nabokov says that “From my point of view, any outstanding work of art is a fantasy insofar as it reflects the unique world of a unique individual” (LL 252).

The idea that different people have different realities appears elsewhere in Nabokov’s lectures. “All reality is comparative reality,” he says in one of the lectures on Austen, “since any given reality, the window you see, the smells you perceive, the sounds you hear, are not only dependent on a crude give-and-take of the senses but also depend upon various levels of information” (LL 146). Here, again, there is the idea that the “information” one has accumulated about things determines how much one sees in the specimens one encounters in the world. The most impressive of his expressions of this idea comes in one of the lectures on Kafka. It is here that Nabokov uses the term “subjective life”:

Let us take three types of men walking through the same landscape. Number One is a city man on a well-deserved vacation. Number Two is a professional botanist. Number Three is a local farmer. Number One, the city man, is what is called a realistic, commonsensical, matter-of-fact type: he sees trees as *trees* and knows from his map that the road he is following is a nice new road leading to Newton, where there is a nice eating place recommended to him by a friend in his office. The botanist looks around and sees his environment in the very exact terms of plant life, precise biological and classified units such as specific trees

and grasses, flowers and ferns, and for him *this* is reality; to him the world of the stolid tourist (who cannot distinguish an oak from an elm) seems a fantastic, vague, dreamy, never-never world. Finally, the world of the local farmer differs from the two others in that his world is intensely emotional and personal since he has been born and bred there, and knows every trail and individual tree, and every shadow from every tree across every trail, all in warm connection with his everyday work, and his childhood, and a thousand small things and patterns which the other two—the humdrum tourist and the botanical taxonomist—simply cannot know in the given place at the given time. Our farmer will not know the relation of the surrounding vegetation to a botanical conception of the world, and the botanist will know nothing of any importance to him about that barn or that old field or that old house under its cottonwoods, which are afloat, as it were, in a medium of personal memories for one who was born there.

So here we have three different worlds—three men, ordinary men who have different realities—and, of course, we could bring in a number of other beings: a blind man with a dog, a hunter with a dog, a dog with his man, a painter cruising in quest of a sunset, a girl out of gas— In every case it would be a world completely different from the rest since the most objective words *tree, road, flower, sky, barn, thumb, rain* have, in each, totally different subjective connotations. Indeed, the subjective life is so strong that it makes an empty and broken shell of the so-called objective existence. (*LL* 252-53)

This rural landscape somewhere near Newton, Massachusetts (presumably Nabokov wrote the passage when teaching in adjacent Wellesley) certainly has objective characteristics; Nabokov is not denying the existence of an objective reality. What the passage so effectively points out is that a person's knowledge and memories, and his purposes in the given place and time, affect the way he "sees" the objective reality around him—they make his experience of the things before him differ from that of other people. In the farmer who has spent his life there, the landscape evokes memories and emotions it cannot evoke in others. And the difference between the tourist and the botanist is not simply that the botanist knows the names for things the tourist sees just as well; the latter's "seeing trees as *trees*" is a reference to the fact that when one learns to identify plants one learns to see them better. A person can see the same tree every day without ever noticing most of the characteristics that mark it as a member of its genus or species, such as the special asymmetrical form of the base of an elm leaf, or the distinctive shingle-like sections of the bark of a Callery Pear. And this can be the case even if he stops to look at it. One needs to learn to see things; perception is not automatic. As one learns to see trees, characteristics like the two I have mentioned become vibrantly present to one's awareness, without any effort and even when one is confronted with specimens one has not seen before. And what is true of the botanical world is true of the world in general.

Nabokov clearly believed that it is better to be his botanist than his tourist. When asked in an interview if he thought of himself as an eccentric, he replied, "An eccentric is a person whose mind and senses are excited by things that the average citizen does not even notice. And, per contra, the average eccentric—for there are many of us, of different waters and magnitudes—is utterly baffled and bored by the adjacent tourist who boasts of his business connections" (*SO* 132). The tourist from the lecture on Kafka seems to have reappeared, representing, as he did before, the imperceptive "average citizen." Nabokov subscribed to a

kind of perceptual elitism, and this is what is at bottom of his statement in the passage about Eystein that true art “creates its own special reality having nothing to do with the ‘reality’ perceived by the communal eye.” In another interview, Nabokov says that “To be sure, there is an average reality, perceived by all of us, but that is not true reality: it is only the reality of general ideas, conventional forms of humdrumery, current editorials” (SO 118). And again, on a different occasion, when asked about his “view of the world”: “What world? Whose world? If we mean the average world of the average newspaper reader in Liverpool, Livorno, or Vilno, then we are dealing in trivial generalities” (SO 135-36).

A higher level of perception, an eye that notices things that with other people go unnoticed, are for Nabokov the artist’s calling card. The artist’s powers of perception, his independence from conventional ways of seeing things, make his reality strikingly original, and he expresses this reality in his art. “Time and space, the colors of the seasons, the movements of muscles and minds, all these are for writers of genius (as far as we can guess right) not traditional notions which can be borrowed from the circulating library of public truths but a series of unique surprises which master artists have learned to express in their own unique way. . . . Up a trackless slope climbs the master artist” (LL 2).

Like his statement that all novels are fairy tales, Nabokov’s idea that “‘reality’ is neither the subject nor the object of true art” is not the radical severance of literature from reality it might at first seem. It is instead a valuable corrective to the traditional figuring of literary realism as a “mirror carried along a road.” Nabokov rightly objects that what literature gives us, in its attempts to represent the world, is not a mirror but a prism: not just a reflection of the world, but the world as it appears through the prism of the writer’s consciousness. I suspect that if we were somehow able to inhabit the minds of others, most of us would be quite shocked at how different the world appears to other people. Fiction is the closest thing to this experiment. To read a novel by Jane Austen is, at least to a certain extent, to see the world through her eyes. It is the world as filtered through her preoccupations and sense of humor, her values and habits of thought, the associations she learned to make between one thing and another, her prejudices and powers of perception. In part this vision is filtered through habits of mind shared by many people of her era, and so will also be found in other writers of the time. But much is distinctly her own.

The aspect of individual vision that interests Nabokov the most is that of powers of perception, and this is a major theme in his discussions of individual writers. There are numerous moments in his criticism when he delights in a writer’s ability to see more than the average eye. In *Nikolay Gogol*, he says that

The difference between human vision and the image perceived by the faceted eye of an insect may be compared with the difference between a half-tone block made with the very finest screen and the corresponding picture as represented by the very coarse screening used in common newspaper pictorial reproduction. The same comparison holds good between the way Gogol saw things and the way average readers and average writers see things. (LRL 24)

He gives as an example of Gogol’s exceptional vision his perception of color in nature. Before Gogol and Pushkin, Russian literature

did not see color for itself but merely used the hackneyed combinations of blind noun and dog-like adjective that Europe had inherited from the ancients. The sky was blue, the dawn red, the foliage green, the eyes of beauty black, the

clouds grey, and so on. It was Gogol (and after him Lermontov and Tolstoy) who first saw yellow and violet at all. That the sky could be pale green at sunrise, or the snow a rich blue on a cloudless day, would have sounded like heretical nonsense to your so-called “classical” writer, accustomed as he was to the rigid conventional color-schemes of the Eighteenth Century French school of literature. (*LRL* 24)

Let’s consider for a moment the example of blue snow. It is a fact that snow takes on a blue tint by reflecting the blue sky. It is also a fact that even a person who lives in a snowy place might never notice this. In Nabokov’s terms, the phenomenon of blue snow is not part of average reality—it is not a feature of the average person’s world. If a writer sees it in nature and includes it in a depiction of a winter landscape, what the depiction will give us is not average reality but the special reality of the writer. This is an example of art “creating its own special reality having nothing to do with the ‘reality’ perceived by the communal eye.”

Returning to his comparison of insect and human vision, and using the conventional color schemes disrupted by the great Russian writers as a metaphor for convention in general, Nabokov suggests that the historical development of the art of literary description can be seen as the product of a gradual refining of vision in writers:

The development of the art of description throughout the centuries may be profitably treated in terms of vision, the faceted eye becoming a unified and prodigiously complex organ and the dead dim “accepted colors” (in the sense of “*idées reçues*”) yielding gradually their subtle shades and allowing new wonders of application. I doubt whether any writer, and certainly not in Russia, had ever noticed before [Gogol], to give the most striking instance, the moving pattern of light and shade on the ground under trees or the tricks of color played by sunlight with leaves. (*LRL* 24-25)

Turgenev, he says, was “the first Russian writer to notice the effect of broken sunlight or the special combination of shade and light upon the appearance of people” (*LRL* 69). When he discusses *Fathers and Sons*, Nabokov quotes a beautiful passage that exemplifies Turgenev’s handling of this phenomenon. It is a description of Katya and Arkadi sitting in the shade of an ash tree, accompanied by the greyhound Fifi: “A faint breeze stirring in the leaves of the ash kept pale-gold flecks of light wavering to and fro over the shady path and over Fifi’s tawny back; an even shade fell upon Arkadi and Katya, save that now and then a vivid streak would flare up in her hair” (*LRL* 91). “The light and shade are beautifully rendered,” Nabokov notes. And of the scene where Anna first appears, in which Arkadi watches her move away from him in her black silk dress (“how graceful her waist seemed to him, the grayish luster of black silk apparently poured over it”—another study in the behavior of light and shade upon a person), he says, “This is Turgenev at his best, the delicate and vivid paintbrush (that gray gloss is great), a marvelous sense of color and light, and shade” (*LRL* 83).

Nabokov was intensely interested in literature’s ability to subtly render in words sensory life. Most of his examples of impressive verisimilitude are, like those we have just seen, descriptions of sensory phenomena. In one of his lectures on *Bleak House*, he delights in this vivid depiction of the harbor at Deal:

Then the fog began to rise like a curtain; and numbers of ships, that we had had no idea were near, appeared. I don’t know how many sail the waiter told us were then lying in the Downs. Some of these vessels were of grand size: one was a

large Indiaman just come home: and when the sun shone through the clouds, making silvery pools in the dark sea, the way in which these ships brightened, and shadowed, and changed, amid a bustle of boats pulling off from the shore to them and from them to the shore, and a general life and motion in themselves and everything around them, was most beautiful.

Nabokov's analysis of the passage shows the great importance of verisimilitude—and especially of literature's ability to render the life of the senses—in his conception of literary art:

Some readers may suppose that such things as these evocations are trifles not worth stopping at; but literature consists of such trifles. . . . “when the sun shone through the clouds, making silvery pools in the dark sea. . . .” Let us pause: can we visualize that? Of course we can, and we do so with a greater thrill of recognition because in comparison to the conventional blue sea of literary tradition these silvery pools in the dark sea offer something that Dickens noted for the very first time with the innocent and sensuous eye of the true artist, saw and immediately put into words. Or more exactly, without the words there would have been no vision. . . . And then Dickens goes on to indicate the way ‘these ships brightened, and shadowed, and changed’—and I think it is quite impossible to choose and combine any better words than he did here to render the delicate quality of shadow and silver sheen in that delightful sea view. (*LL* 116)

It is hard to understand how Updike was able to imagine that “In [Nabokov's] aesthetic, small heed is paid to the lowly delight of recognition, and the blunt virtue of verity.”

Before I move on to *Pnin*, I want to give one more example of Nabokov's delight in verisimilitude. In part seven, chapter fifteen of *Anna Karenin*, there is the dazzling description of Kitty giving birth. Tolstoy narrates the event from the perspective of her husband Lyovin, for whom the whole scene is new and strange and frightening. When Nabokov comes to this chapter, he says,

Mark incidentally that the whole history of literary fiction as an evolutionary process may be said to be a gradual probing of deeper and deeper layers of life. It is quite impossible to imagine either Homer in the ninth century B.C. or Cervantes in the seventeenth century of our era—it is quite impossible to imagine them describing in such wonderful detail childbirth. The question is not whether certain events or emotions are or are not suitable ethically or esthetically. The point I want to make is that the artist, like the scientist, in the process of evolution of art and science, is always casting around, understanding a little more than his predecessor, penetrating further with a keener and more brilliant eye—and this is the artistic result. (*LRL* 164-65)

The evolution to which Nabokov refers is precisely the process Auerbach attempts to delineate: literature's gradual taking of more and more phenomena into its fold. For Nabokov, literature is, among other things, a vehicle for understanding the world; far from being detached from reality, it is in fact a method for probing it. Let's now turn our attention to Nabokov's own probings in *Pnin*.

There is much to like about Nabokov's fourth novel in English. Its endearing central character, clever humor, dazzling wordplay, and subtly woven motifs and correspondences have conspired to make *Pnin* one of Nabokov's best loved works. And along with these, there is the novel's remarkable verisimilitude, the vivid life of its fictional people and world. Ellen Pifer has brilliantly examined the lifelikeness of Nabokov's depictions of psychology—the ways his fiction captures subtly perceived elements of psychological life.³ But what has always impressed me most about Nabokovian verisimilitude is the remarkable life of his imagery, and by imagery I mean the verbal recreation not only of visual impressions but of all kinds of sensory phenomena. It is in his depictions of the sensory world that Nabokov's verisimilitude is at its best.

I want to begin with Pnin's walk to the Waindell College library in chapter three.

An elliptic flock of pigeons, in circular volitation, soaring gray, flapping white, and then gray again, wheeled across the limpid, pale sky, above the College Library. A train whistled afar as mournfully as in the steppes. A skimpy squirrel dashed over a patch of sunlit snow, where a tree trunk's shadow, olive-green on the turf, became grayish blue for a stretch, while the tree itself, with a brisk, scrabbly sound, ascended, naked, into the sky, where the pigeons swept by for a third and last time. (73)

The description of the pigeons is a perfect example of what Nabokov admired in Dickens's description of the seaport: like the "silvery pools in the dark sea," the pigeons' "soaring gray, flapping white, and then gray again" is a phenomenon of sensory life belonging not to average reality but to the special reality of an artist who has captured it in his art. As pigeons fly, they alternate between two activities: they flap their wings and they soar, which means keeping the wings spread without flapping them. This in itself is something most people don't notice. But the really brilliant perception is the underside of the wings changing from gray to white and back again as they catch then lose the sunlight. In photo 1 on my next page, the pigeon in the foreground is soaring. Photo 2 shows the same pigeon starting to flap its wings. In 3 and 4, the wing we still see has caught the sunlight, which has turned it white from gray. In 5 and 6 it loses the sun and turns gray again. "Soaring gray, flapping white, and then gray again": the value of the perception lies precisely in the fact that one can see pigeons all one's life without ever noticing this phenomenon.

The shadow of the elm tree's trunk (we know it is an elm because we have been informed in the preceding paragraph that the path on which Pnin is walking "meandered down a turfy slope among the leafless elms") is olive green on the turf because its grey has mixed with the green of the grass; and it is grayish blue on the snow because the snow is reflecting the blue of the sky. This is the blue snow we encountered in *Nikolay Gogol*, only complicated by the fact that now we see it in shadow. Again, it is something the average eye doesn't see. And like the pigeons' wings turning white then grey again, it reflects not only Nabokov's perceptiveness but also his particular interest in color, light, and shadow as well as in the natural world.

Part of his fascination with nature is his interest in the behavior of animals. Note in this passage, in addition to the pigeons, the presence of a "skimpy squirrel." Its skimpiness is in keeping with the season: squirrels put on weight in fall in preparation for winter's scarcity,

³ See Ellen Pifer, *Nabokov and the Novel* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980).



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and by February 15 (the day of Pnin's walk to the library) they will often have used up their winter fat. But note as well the delightfully precise description of the sound made by squirrels when climbing tree trunks: "a brisk, scrabbly sound." Here, unlike in the description of the pigeons, the effect is not so much that of showing us something in the everyday world we may never have noticed (although I think one could persuasively argue that, if we listen to the actual sound with Nabokov's description in mind, we may well hear it more precisely). It is more a vivification: the descriptive precision creates in our imaginations an image that has far more vibrancy and life than verbally created images usually have; both the tree and the squirrel are made to seem vividly real. In one of Nabokov's lectures on *Anna Karenin*, there is a definition of imagery in literature that stresses this kind of vivacity:

Imagery may be defined as the evocation, by means of words, of something that is meant to appeal to the reader's sense of color, or sense of outline, or sense of sound, or sense of movement, or any other sense of perception, in such a way as to impress upon his mind a picture of fictitious life that becomes to him as living as any personal recollection. For producing these vivid images the writer has a wide range of devices from the brief expressive epithet to elaborate word pictures and complex metaphors. (*LRL* 199)

What is special in this definition is the stress it puts on vivacity. The writer aims to produce not simply images but *vivid* images, which make the fiction's world seem to the reader as real, as "living," as his own. An example Nabokov gives of this vivacity is similar to the description in *Pnin* of the sound made by the squirrel: "Among [the epithets in *Anna Karenin*] to be noted and admired are the 'limply plopping' and 'scabrous' as applied so magnificently to the slippery insides and rough outsides of the choice oysters Oblonski enjoys during his restaurant meal with Lyovin." Here as with Nabokov's "brisk, scrabbly sound," it is the precision of the epithets that makes the image so vivid. If Tolstoy had simply said that there were oysters, and if Nabokov had simply told us that a squirrel went up the tree—or if their descriptions were less precise (if Tolstoy had merely used "soft," for example, to describe the insides of the oysters)—there would be nothing of the crisp, vibrant life the images have as they are.

Imagery in Nabokov is clear, specific, and vivid, characteristics brilliantly on display in the description of Pnin's swim in the river at Cook's Castle:

From a smaller boulder than the one upon which Chateau was perched, Pnin gingerly stepped down into the brown and blue water. He noticed he still had his wrist watch—removed it and left it inside one of his rubbers. Slowly swinging his tanned shoulders, Pnin waded forth, the loopy shadows of leaves shivering and slipping down his broad back. He stopped and breaking the glitter and shade around him, moistened his inclined head, rubbed his nape with wet hands, soused in turn each armpit, and then, joining both palms, glided into the water, his dignified breast stroke sending off ripples on either side. (129)

In the first sentence, consider the way the specificity created by "gingerly" sets our imaginations to work. We create a specific image of Pnin, whose physique we know so well, stepping down into the water "gingerly," the specificity giving vibrancy on the image. Some of us will even imagine the moment from Pnin's perspective, feeling in our imaginations the careful movements of the legs, the sensation of our feet stepping carefully on the stone. Take the word away, and our image of Pnin entering the water becomes in comparison flat and vague.

Pnin's discovery that he has forgotten to remove his watch is another ingenious touch. This is not simply something that, like a thousand other things, might happen when a person goes swimming, such as having an itch or remembering a forgotten appointment; it is something that is *typical* of swimming. Nabokov is painting not only his character taking a swim but also swimming itself, just as Tolstoy depicts childbirth itself in his description of Kitty giving birth. Pnin's "slowly swinging" his shoulders is another such typical detail: it beautifully captures the way, when one walks in water, the natural swing of the shoulders becomes slower and more exaggerated as the weight of the upper body is used to counteract the resistance of the water against one's legs. The source of these details' charm—of the charm they possess for certain readers—is not only their typicality; it is also an impression in the reader that the typicality in question is not obvious—in the best of cases, that it is something he or she had never quite fully perceived. Earlier in *Pnin*, there is a brief, passing sketch of a corner of the Waindell campus in winter: "In summer [the gallery's] trellis was alive with quivering flowers; but now through its nakedness an icy wind blew, and someone had placed a found red mitten upon the spout of the dead fountain that stood where one branch of the gallery led to the President's House" (70). I would bet that for many a reader the detail of the mitten has charm. A lost mitten or glove placed in a conspicuous spot so that its owner will more easily find it is typical of life in winter; but this typicality is far less obvious than, say, the typicality to winter of snowmen or of sweaters. It is one thing to see a conspicuously placed lost mitten, or to wade into a river and realize you are still wearing your watch; it is another to have the typicality of these things fully present to your awareness. What does it mean, after all, to *know* swimming or winter? To know either of these fully (and surely to know anything fully is impossible) would be to be able to enumerate all the things that are typical of it. When asked to describe swimming, we would be able to produce such a list, which would include the special swinging of the shoulders and the realization of having forgotten to remove one's watch. At least in the moment when we are reading Nabokov's depiction of Pnin's swim in the river, we possess these things—we know swimming better than we knew it before. Such moments of increased knowledge are an important literary pleasure; they are one of the major reasons the writers in this study survive.

In "tanned shoulders," Nabokov repeats one of Pnin's physical traits: the bronze on his skin from his sunlamp. It is one of Nabokov's techniques to regularly repeat the traits of his characters. This does at least two things: it gives the pleasure of order—of pattern, repetition, motif—and it keeps the characters vivid in our imaginations so that we see the traits in question whenever the character appears, even when they are not mentioned. As the sentence continues, there is also a repetition of the bulk of Pnin's upper body: "the loopy shadows of leaves shivering and slipping down his broad back."

"Shivering and slipping down" expresses with remarkable precision an appearance of shadows of wind-stirred leaves on the back of a person moving forward. As with "brisk, scrabbly" in the description of the sound of the squirrel, the precision gives birth to a live, vivid image. And here, again, we see Nabokov's special attention to phenomena of light and shadow, displayed anew in the next sentence in Pnin's "breaking," as he reaches into the water, "the glitter and shade around him." Finally, there is the precision of "glided," and the specific image of Pnin's breast stroke, which we see all the more vividly thanks to the detail of the ripples it sends off on either side. Nothing is muddled here—the images Nabokov creates are clear and specific. And notice how much movement there is; this, too, contributes to the

images' vivacity, since pictures in the mind that are still tend to instantly fade.

Nabokov's preference for the specific over the general can be seen in the verbs he uses to indicate ways of walking. Only rarely will he use "walk," preferring instead words for specific types of walking appropriate to the character and situation. Lawrence Clements, a heavy man, "trudges" up the stairs of his house (32), while the nimble, rapid steps of his daughter on the same stairs are conveyed by the verb "trip": Pnin hears outside his closed door "a pair of young feet tripping up steps so familiar to them" (83). And Liza's "tramping in" when she comes to Pnin's apartment in Paris expresses the heaviness a seven-months pregnancy has added to her tread (47). At Cook's, while Pnin and Chateau are walking to the river, the painter Gramineev, angered that the sun has come out and he must now go back for his hat, "came striding toward them down the sloping field" (126). "Striding" nicely conveys the long steps people often make when they walk downhill. In all these cases, the use of the specific verb instead of the general "walk" or "run" adds vivacity to our image of the scene.

In one of his lectures on Austen, Nabokov takes up the question of what a young writer can do to improve his skills. He prescribes that he or she "form a habit of searching with unflinching patience for the right word, the only right word which will convey with the utmost precision the exact shade and intensity of thought" (*LL* 60). And when asked in an interview what literary virtues he sought to attain, he merely responded, "Mustering the best words, with every available lexical, associative, and rhythmic assistance, to express as closely as possible what one wants to express" (*SO* 181). This love of verbal precision is something we have seen in his praise of Dickens's description of the ships at Deal as having "brightened, and shadowed, and changed": "I think it is quite impossible to choose and combine any better words than he did here to render the delicate quality of shadow and silver sheen in that delightful sea view." The virtue of precise expression is eminently on display in Nabokov's own work, and in *Pnin*, as we have already begun to see, there are many fine examples of it. When Pnin at the beginning of the novel discovers he is on the wrong train, he grabs his bag and moves into the vestibule of the car, where he sees through the window of the door "the confused greenery skimming by" (17). The phenomenon in question is expressed with remarkable precision. Seen from a speeding train, objects that are adjacent along a parallel with the line of motion not only become blurred, but also seem to meld together, which effect Nabokov deftly captures with the single adjective "confused." And "skimming by" (to skim meaning to glide or pass quickly and lightly over or along a surface) perfectly renders the light, smooth quickness with which the greenery would seem to pass by, the illusion being, of course, that it is the greenery and not the train that is moving.

On his way to Cook's Castle, Pnin stops at a gas station. The attendant, who has been wiping the windshield, "stepped briskly around the hood and lunged with his rag at the windshield from the other side" (114). "Lunge" is a fencing word: it was first used to indicate an attack made by thrusting toward one's opponent one's sword arm and upper body. Nabokov's use of the term nicely registers the close similarity between this movement and a movement people sometimes make when they start to wash a windshield. In other words, this latter movement is the thing Nabokov wanted to express, and having perceived the similarity between it and the "lunge" in fencing, he has employed that resemblance to "express as closely as possible what [he] want[ed] to express." The precision results in a vibrantly specific image.

Another precisely rendered movement is the "lurch" of the man with whom Pnin plays a game of chess on his voyage across the Atlantic: "the patriarch, after much dignified

meditation, lurched forward to make a wild move.” The man is sitting back in his chair until he suddenly swings his upper body forward so as to be able to reach a chessman. As with the word “lunge” in the description we’ve just examined, we need to know the origin of “lurch” in order to appreciate the precision with which Nabokov employs it. “Lurch” is a sailing term, a contraction of “lee-larch,” which meant a boat’s sudden roll to the leeward side, the side away from the wind. If we know this, we see the man’s upper body make a sudden swing forward similar to the roll made by a sailboat hit by a gust of wind, his buttocks at the point of pivot like the boat’s keel. Here, again, Nabokov’s precision of expression creates a crisp, vibrant image.

Later in the same scene, a man invites Pnin for a beer and reveals that he is Liza’s lover Eric Wind. “Pnin, in silence, his face working, one palm still on the wet bar, had started to slither clumsily off his uncomfortable mushroom seat” (49). “Slither” is just the right word; it perfectly renders the self-propelled sliding one might use to get off a high dome-cushioned bar stool.

In the attic of St. Bart’s, where Victor and other students go to smoke cigars, there are “flimsy laths through which the foot collapsed to a crepitation of plaster dislodged from unseen ceilings beneath” (101). What better word here than “crepitation,” whose sound seems to mimic the one to which it refers? And anyone who remembers old radiators will be able to appreciate the precision of Nabokov’s description of sounds made by the one in Pnin’s room at the Clements’s: “The silence in the little room was punctuated rather than broken by the throbbing and tinkling in those whitewashed organ pipes” (57).

In his metaphors, too, Nabokov is impressively precise. Take for example “the ice and wood of the anesthetic” Pnin feels in his mouth after having his teeth pulled out (38). And consider this equally apt description of a movement made by a squirrel as “tendrillike”: “In one sinuous tendrillike movement, the intelligent animal climbed to the brim of a drinking fountain” (58). Memorable as well is Pnin’s recollection of a Russian wildwood where sunlight was “shining and smoking among the ghosts of racemose bird-cherries in scumbled bloom” (82). That the bird-cherries are

“racemose” means their flowers grow on racemes, stalks with staggered side-shoots, similar in structure to the part of a grapevine where the grapes grow (“raceme,” in fact, derives from “racemus,” the Latin word for “cluster of grapes”). The point I want to make is that, as one sees in the photo at right, the racemes of flowers on bird-cherries really do resemble little ghosts of the white-sheet variety, especially if they are blurred, which is what Nabokov means by “scumbled.” The metaphor is doubly elegant since, in addition to being



Bird cherry in bloom

brilliantly apt, it is part of a delicate motif in this chapter of things related to death: along with this example there is the “gauzy wraith of tissue paper” that falls out of Webster’s Dictionary (78), the death of Mrs. Thayer’s mother (64), Pnin’s English being “murder” (66), the demise of Falternfels’s dog (70), a “dead fountain” (70), Komarov’s “death’s-head’s

nostrils” (71), a reference to Ophelia’s suicide (79), the pallbearers in Pnin’s dream (82), Pnin’s pencil sharpener, which, like pencil sharpeners in general, “ends up in a kind of soundlessly spinning ethereal void as we all must” (69), and the Pushkin lines “And where will fate send me death, / in fight, in travel, or in waves?”, which Pnin declaims in class (68) and which later reappear in his thoughts and in his dream (73, 82).

With the bird-cherries and the squirrel, we have come back to Nabokov’s keen interest in depicting the natural world. If fiction shows us the world as it appears to the writer, then to see the world as Nabokov saw it is, among other things, to have a particularly sharp eye and careful attention for nature—and especially the forms and movements of plants and animals. To the examples we have already seen may be added the various specific classes of tree in the novel. Like the botanist from the lecture on Kafka, Nabokov saw nature “in the very exact terms of plant life, precise biological and classified units such as specific trees and grasses,” and the specificity of Nabokov’s world carries over to the worlds of his novels.

At Cook’s Castle there is a “hummingbird in probing flight” (120). “Probing” nicely differentiates the hummingbird’s way of flying—the way it goes from flower to flower searching for nectar with its bill—from that of the “cruising dragonfly” who appears a few pages later (128). And in another rendering of flight, two flies in Dr. Pavel Pnin’s waiting room “kept describing slow quadrangles around the lifeless chandelier” (175). This, too, is delightfully precise; flies fly in lines that are more or less straight until making split-second turns that can be as sharp as ninety degrees.

Another part of sensory life to which Nabokov is particularly attuned is human gesture, broadly defined as the human body in self-propelled motion. Gestures in Nabokov have a way of making his characters seem alive, and one of the keys to this effect is a quality I will refer to as “freshness.” Imagery, like phrases, can be commonplace, unimaginative, or clichéd. The gestures I have in mind in *Pnin* are just the opposite of this: as images encountered in a story, they are novel, inventive, fresh; and this, combined with the fact that they are convincing—that they are believable as gestures people like the characters in question might make in such situations—brings these characters to vivid life. Consider the effect of gestures made by Bolotov with a book (which happens to be *Anna Karenin*) in this description of Pnin’s arrival at Cook’s:

Varvara buoyantly rose from the seat of the pavilion—where she and Roza Shpolyanski had just discovered Bolotov reading a battered book and smoking a forbidden cigarette. She greeted Pnin with a clapping of hands, while her husband showed as much geniality as he was capable of by slowly waving the book he had closed on his thumb to mark the place. Pnin killed the motor and sat beaming at his friends. The collar of his green sports shirt was undone; his partly unzipped windbreaker seemed too tight for his impressive torso; his bronzed bald head, with the puckered brow and conspicuous vermicular vein on the temple, bent low as he wrestled with the door handle and finally dived out of the car.

“*Avtomobil’*, *kostyum—nu pryamo amerikanets* (a veritable American), *pryamo Ayzenhauer!*” said Varvara, and introduced Pnin to Roza Abramovna Shpolyanski.

“We had some mutual friends forty years ago,” remarked that lady, peering at Pnin with curiosity.

“Oh, let us not mention such astronomical figures,” said Bolotov, approaching and replacing with a grass blade the thumb he had been using as a

bookmarker. (121-22)

Bolotov's two gestures with the book—his greeting Pnin, after closing it on his thumb, by waving it (presumably his other hand is occupied with the cigarette), and his replacement of the thumb with a blade of grass—are both perfectly convincing. People do occasionally wave with something in their hand, and since it's uncomfortable as well as impractical to keep a book closed for long on one's thumb, Bolotov's desire to find a different way to keep his place rings true. The blade of grass is a believable choice, and the fact that he does not already have a bookmark makes perfect sense when we learn, as the scene continues, that he was reading the book's very beginning. But what is special about these gestures is their being both convincing and fresh. Replace them with a standard wave of the hand and the use of a conventional bookmark, and the character seems less alive, even though these commonplace gestures would not be less convincing.

Freshness with plausibility, then, can lend vivacity to gestures, making invented people seem real. But to account for the life-giving power of certain gestures in *Pnin*, we need to bring in another category. In my discussion of *Pride and Prejudice*, I argued that one of the things that makes the characters in that novel seem so vividly real is Austen's inclusion in her representation of them of psychological phenomena that are encountered fairly frequently in life but almost never in art. Here, in Nabokov's gestures, we reencounter this “inclusive verisimilitude,” only now the phenomena in question are not psychological but sensory. And depending on the reader's experiences and the extent to which he or she is aware of them, there will be in some of these examples “illuminative verisimilitude” as well, the impression that something has just been revealed to us—that the writer has just focused our attention on something we have surely experienced but which has never before been the object of our full, conscious awareness.

Take for example a gesture made by Victor when Pnin presents him with a copy of Jack London's *Son of the Wolf*, which Victor assumes is a novel translated from Russian: “I think I'm going to like this,” said polite Victor. “Last summer I read *Crime and—*. A young yawn distended his staunchly smiling mouth” (109). I think most readers would agree that Victor seems impressively real here. The effect derives in part from the gesture's freshness: as an image encountered in a story, the staunch maintenance of a smile made from politeness while the smiler is overtaken by a yawn is striking in its novelty, and this, combined with its perfect plausibility as something this character might do in the given situation (it is late at night, and the trip from St. Bart's has been long) is part of what brings him to life. But unlike the blade of grass employed as a bookmark, this gesture is something I recognize from life, and the recognition adds to my impression of Victor's seeming wonderfully alive here.⁴

Among the gestures in *Pnin* likely to have this pleasurable effect of familiarity combined with freshness and plausibility are those made by Pnin and Liza as he helps her put on her coat at the end of her visit to Waindell: “he was helping her into her coat and as usual searching for the fugitive armhole while she pawed and groped” (57). Then there is the gesture made by Joan Clements when she answers the phone in chapter two: “hullo (eyebrows up, eyes roaming)” (31). Later in that scene, Joan is near the bottom of the stairs while Lawrence is trudging up them. She asks him if he has finished writing a certain article, and, as she listens for his answer, he moves out of her sight, turning the corner of the stairs. Here we get a

⁴ Nabokov's having his character yawn while mentioning Dostoevski is of course also a jab at a writer he thought second-rate.

beautiful detail: “she heard his hand squeaking on the banisters, then striking them” (32). The gestures, so finely observed, reflect Lawrence's fatness and the fact that he is “trudging” up those stairs.

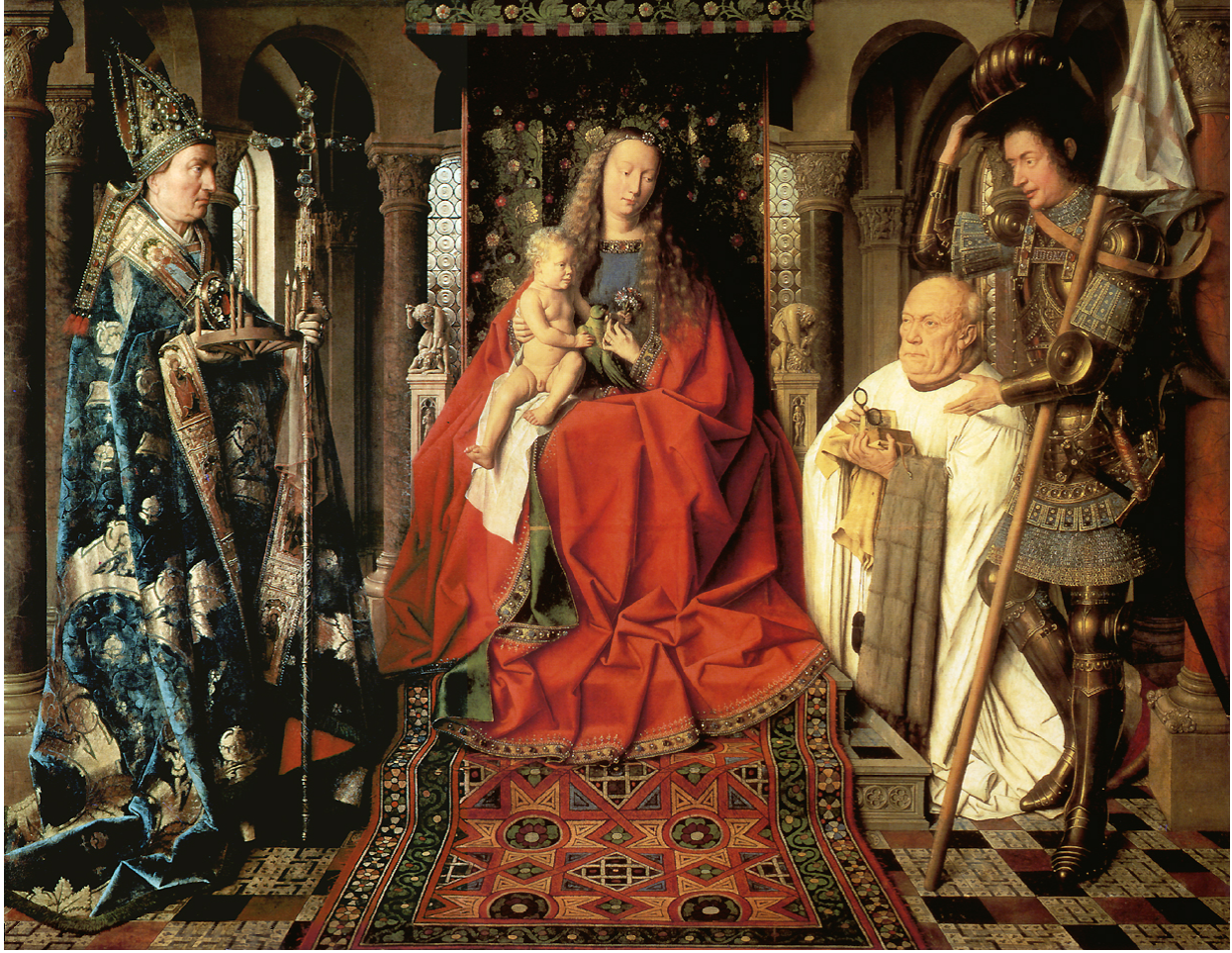
While Pnin takes Liza by taxi to his lodgings at the Clements's, she describes to him St. Bart's. “By the way,’ interrupted Pnin, ducking and pointing, ‘you can just see a corner of the campus from here” (53). This “ducking and pointing,” of course, is a gesture one typically makes when, sitting with someone else in the back seat of a car, one wants to show one's companion some distant object through the window on his side. As an image in a work of literature, it has freshness. It is also familiar to us from life, but here, captured in words, it is made perspicuous: for the second in which the image is in our minds, the gesture is more the object of our full, conscious attention than it has probably ever been.

In another instance of pointing, there is the noteworthy gesture in chapter one made by the worker at the train station when Pnin asks him where is the public telephone. Standing behind a counter in a recess in the large waiting room, “The man pointed with his pencil as far out and sideways as he could without leaving his lair” (25).

At the party Pnin throws in chapter six, there are several memorable gestures; here are two of my favorites. The librarian Mrs. Thayer is with her husband in the hall, and is nudging him toward the living room. As he arrives at the living-room doorway, Pnin and Laurence Clements, who are standing in conversation at either side of it, “drew in their abdomens to let the silent Thayer pass” (163). Earlier, when Mrs. Thayer has just arrived, Pnin hands her a cocktail. “‘Thank you!’ chanted Mrs. Thayer, as she received her glass, raising her linear eyebrows, on that bright note of genteel inquiry which is meant to combine the notions of surprise, unworthiness, and pleasure” (156). I can only say that I have seen this gesture more than once without ever really focussing my attention on it, and that Nabokov expresses it perfectly.

In the midst of all this verisimilitude, there is a way in which the world of *Pnin* differs strikingly for most readers from the real one. I'm thinking of the web of “patterns” in the novel—the echoes, correspondences, and motifs that combine to make its world more ordered than most of us believe the real world to be. Consider for example the several intersecting patterns in the depiction of Pnin's party. Just after his arrival at Pnin's, Lawrence assumes by chance a posture mirroring that of Canon van der Paele in Van Eyck's famous depiction of him (see the photos on my next page).

[He] sank into the easy chair and immediately grabbed the first book at hand, which happened to be a Russian-English pocket dictionary. Holding his glasses in one hand, he looked away, trying to recall something he had always wished to check but now could not remember, and his attitude accentuated his striking resemblance, somewhat *en jeune*, to Jan Van Eyck's ample-jowled, fluff-haloed Canon van der Paele . . . Everything was there—the knotty temple, the sad, musing gaze, the folds and furrows of facial flesh, the thin lips, and even the wart on the left cheek. (154)



Jan van Eyck, *The Madonna with Canon van der Paele*, 1436.



Lawrence's pose—complete with the pocket dictionary amusingly standing in for the Canon's small prayer-book—mirrors that of the figure he already so closely resembles. This in itself is a coincidence, but one we might suppose to be possible in real life. It is generally true of *Pnin's* patterns that, considered in isolation, they do not seem implausible. It is only when considered together that they give the impression that the novel's world is one in which real-life laws of probability don't apply. As Pnin's soirée winds down, Lawrence happens to pick up an album of Flemish paintings Victor has left with Pnin, where he finds the very painting he has unwittingly mimicked. And these are just two strands in a web of intersecting patterns. Lawrence's extraordinary resemblance to Van Eyck's Canon van der Paele echoes another remarkable resemblance in the same chapter: the one, for Pnin, between Tristan W. Thomas, the anthropologist, and Thomas Wynn, the ornithologist; Pnin cannot tell them apart. And both these resemblances echo in turn the resemblance of the gas station attendant to Hagan in chapter five: "It was really striking how the man resembled Pnin's colleague at Waindell College, Dr. Hagan" (114). Moreover, Van Eyck's painting subtly participates in two of the novel's motifs. Standing next to the canon is the armor-clad Saint George, who is there because he is Van der Paele's namesake: the canon's first name was Joris, a Dutch form of George. This pair of Georges extends a motif until now confined to chapter two, where there are as many as six Georges: the Clements's doctor (21), the husband of their charwoman (40), the husband of one of the women in Wind's psychotherapy sessions (51), Liza's latest lover (56), and Zhorzhik Uranski, a critic who wrote a review of Liza's poetry in Paris (45). The name will crop up again in chapter seven in that of one of Liza's old lovers, Georgiy Aramovich Barakan (185).

The Madonna with Canon van der Paele is involved in another motif in addition to this parade of Georges. The parrot held by the infant Jesus is part of the chapter's bird motif, which includes the ornithologist Thomas Wynn, the pheasants in Pnin's backyard (145), the Cardinals pennant hanging in his bedroom (146), the man named Fogelman (in German, "bird man") whom Betty mentions to Wynn (162), a student's having "underlined in violet ink the difficult word *oiseaux* and scrawled above it 'birds'" in an edition of Mallarmé's poems (137), the "owliness" of Wynn and Thomas (149), Lawrence's quip about professors in discussion classes being "cocky" neurotics (161), and Pnin's informing his guests that the name of the flower columbine is "from *columba*, Latin for 'pigeon'" (158).⁵

Along with the painting by Van Eyck, another real-life artwork turns up at Pnin's party. It is the story of Cinderella, brought up by Mrs. Thayer when she says that the

⁵ A distinction should be made between order in the world of a fiction and order that belongs merely to the narrator's rhetoric. In chapter one, we are told that Pnin "never attempted to sleep on his left side, even in those dismal hours when the insomniac longs for a third side after trying the two he has" (21). This idea of a third side beautifully echoes an idea in an earlier passage in which Pnin, on his way to Cremona, tries to decide where to keep his lecture.

If he kept the Cremona manuscript . . . on his person, . . . the chances were, theoretically, that he would forget to transfer it from the coat he was wearing to the one he would wear. On the other hand, if he placed the lecture in the pocket of the suit in the bag *now*, he would, he knew, be tortured by the possibility of his luggage being stolen. On the third hand (these mental states sprout additional forelimbs all the time), he carried in the inside pocket of his present coat a precious wallet . . . and it was physically possible to pull out the wallet, if needed, in such a way as to fatally dislodge the folded lecture. (16)

The idea of a third hand is what is echoed later in the chapter by the insomniac's wished-for third side. But this is a pattern belonging only to the narrator's rhetoric; unlike the patterns above, it falls entirely outside the novel's

aquamarine of the glass bowl Victor has given Pnin is the color she has always imagined Cinderella's glass slippers to have. The Cinderella tale, too, is enmeshed in the novel's web of patterns. In *Pnin* as in that fairy tale, a difference in characters' feet parallels a difference in their souls. Pnin, we are told, has "curiously small" (35, 131), "frail-looking, almost feminine feet" (7). In this trait he is Liza's opposite, as we discover after he brings her to the bus station at the end of her brief visit in chapter two:

He saw her off, and walked back through the park. To hold her, to keep her—just as she was—with her cruelty, with her vulgarity, with her blinding blue eyes, with her miserable poetry, with her fat feet, with her impure, dry, sordid, infantile soul. All of a sudden he thought: If people are reunited in Heaven (I don't believe it, but suppose), then how shall I stop it from creeping upon me, over me, that shriveled, helpless, lame thing, her soul? But this is the earth, and I am, curiously enough, alive, and there is something in me and in life—[Here his thoughts are interrupted by a squirrel that climbs onto a drinking fountain and, Pnin imagines, wants him to press the button.] (57-58)

Notice that the detail of Liza's fat feet comes right before the description of her soul. In the size of their feet, Pnin and Liza are opposites, just as they are opposites in their souls: Pnin is noble and kind, while Liza is coarse, cruel, and vulgar. In this double opposition—this correspondence between delicacy of foot and delicacy of soul—the novel echoes the story of Cinderella, who combines the smallest feet with the noblest, kindest soul, a soul the story contrasts with those of her cruel stepsisters.

This pattern involving Cinderella overlaps with two others—the bird motif and the squirrel motif—when Pnin lays out for Mrs. Thayer and his other guests his theory about Cinderella's shoes, which "were not made of glass but of a Russian squirrel fur—*vair*, in French. It was, he said, an obvious case of the survival of the fittest among words, *verre* being more evocative than *vair* which, he submitted, came not from *varius*, variegated, but from *veveritsa*, Slavic for a certain beautiful, pale, winter-squirrel fur, having a bluish, or better say sizily, columbine, shade—from *columba*, Latin for 'pigeon'" (158). The squirrel motif (there is a squirrel in every chapter) also includes the illustration of a Gray Squirrel on the postcard Pnin sends to Victor (88); the stuffed squirrel Pnin had as a boy and which is glimpsed by the narrator on his visit to Pnin's father (177); the surname "Belochkin" (Russian for "little squirrel"), which belongs to Pnin's first love; the squirrel that escapes a hunter's bullet at the beginning of chapter five (115); the one that climbs an elm passed by Pnin on his way to the library (73); the one Pnin encounters in the park after seeing off Liza at the bus station (and on which he projects, in his desperate mood, Liza's callousness) (58); and the squirrel holding a peach stone in the park in chapter one (24-25), along with the matching image on a screen in Pnin's childhood bedroom of a squirrel holding a "reddish object" (23).

Nabokov is quite fond of motifs, in which, like Dickens, he often involves characters' names (as with Belochkin, Fogelman, and all the novel's Georges). In addition to the motifs

depicted world. I say "entirely" because a pattern can be composed both of things in the fiction's world and things that belong solely to the rhetoric of the narrator. The bird motif in chapter six is one such mixed design—while the elements I have listed belong to the novel's world, there is one other that does not: the narrator's description of the English Department as an "aerie" of hypochondriacs (156). What interests me in this discussion are only those elements of patterns that are part of the world of the novel, since a sense that that world is more elaborately ordered than the real one can be created only by these.

I've mentioned, there is an "elements" motif in chapter two: Liza's "elemental" beauty (44), the surnames Stone (44) and Wind, the wood in the surname "Maywood" (50), Mrs. Fire (Pnin's special name for Mrs. Thayer) (31), Eric's idea that that he is Victor's "land father" while Pnin is the boy's "water father" (55), and Pnin's exchange with Joan about the Turkish word for "water," *su* (33). And in this last example, the "elements" motif intersects a novel-wide motif of things having to do with Turkey. There is Pnin's escape to Istanbul from Crimea and Joan's childhood visit to Istanbul the same year (33), the watercolor of that city hanging in the Clements's hall (54), the stranded Orient Express (one of whose termini was Istanbul) in Victor's nocturnal fantasy (85), Pnin's Turkish rug (69), Entwistle's resembling "a genial Tsarist colonel in mufti" (the *muftie* having been the official head of the state religion in Turkey⁶) (36), a Miss Mopsuestia teaching in the French Department (the ancient city of that name is found in south-eastern Turkey) (142), and Pnin's mistaking a Shriners house for a Turkish Consulate (190).

Miss Mopsuestia is of course another instance of Nabokov's penchant for involving characters' names in his patterns. In *Pnin*, there are numerous jocular names that humorously echo the context in which the character appears. Alpheus Frieze, the first president of Waindell College, has his "firstness" echoed in "Alpheus" (alpha being the first letter of the Greek alphabet), while "Frieze" comically resonates with his being, as a statue in front of the library, forever frozen in place, "holding by its horns the brass bicycle he was forever about to mount" (72-73). Another figure celebrated by the college, the Slavist John Thurston Todd, is depicted in a bust above a drinking fountain, a position that rhymes with the "thirst" one hears in his middle name.⁷ Robert Trebler, member of the Music Department and director of Waindell's bell-ringing, has a name that matches his profession: not only does it contain the musical term "treble," but the consonants in the first name are musically repeated (in reverse order!) in the second, along with the "er" sound. Then there is Judith Clyde, vice-president of the Cremona Women's Club, whose name amusingly evokes two legendary mankillers: the biblical Judith and the Greek Clytemnestra. Dr. Pnin's pince-nez resembles Chekhov's (176), and his name, Pavel Antonovich, is the reverse of that of the writer (Anton Pavlovich), who was, like Pnin's father, a doctor.⁸ Among the advertisements of the Russian-language daily Pnin picks up in the library, a Dr. Popov "promised elderly people new vigor and joy" (75). In his name one hears "pop off," to die. And in that of Mr. Tweed, the pipe-smoking owner of a Waindell bookstore, one senses another joking correspondence, since pipe smoking and the wearing of tweed jackets so often went together in university towns of the 1950s.

Some of Nabokov's patterns are obvious. Take for example his synchronization of two successes at the start of chapter five: Pnin's finding the road to Cook's (his car has been "nosing and poking this way and that in a maze of doubtful roads" [112]), and an ant's finding a way to continue its ascent up a tower on an overlooking hill (the ant "was getting all bothered and baffled much in the same way as that preposterous toy car progressing below" [115]): "everything happened at once: the ant found an upright beam leading to the roof of the tower and started to ascend it with renewed zest; the sun appeared; and Pnin at the height of

⁶ The "sense of 'ordinary clothes (not in uniform)' is from 1816, perhaps from [the] mufti's costume of robes and slippers in stage plays, which was felt to resemble plain clothes" (*Online Etymology Dictionary*).

⁷ See Bodenstein, "Excitement of Verbal Adventure," app. 7.10.

⁸ See Barabtarlo, *Phantom of Fact*, 211-12.

hopelessness, found himself on a paved road with a rusty but still glistening sign directing wayfarers “To The Pines” (115). But most of Nabokov’s patterns are “hidden”—they are there for the reader to discover. Here are a few more examples of subtle, hidden order in *Pnin*.

Enrolled in Pnin’s Elementary Russian course are Josephine Malkin and Charles McBeth (10), an unlikely Shakespearean combination, “Grimalkin” being the name of a familiar of one of the witches in *Macbeth*.

The novel has three short poems: the one Liza recites in Pnin’s bedroom (56), the one Victor writes at St. Bart’s (98), and the sample of Liza’s poetry given by the narrator in chapter seven (181). The second, in the lines “nun-pale now are Mona Lisa’s / lips that you had made so red,” shares nuns with the first (“I have put on a dark dress / And am more modest than a nun”) and lips with the third (“I have a rose which is even softer than my rosy lips”). And while Liza’s use of these elements is stale, Victor’s is fresh and amusing.

When Pnin arrives at Cook’s, Bolotov’s wife Varvara has just discovered her husband “smoking a forbidden cigarette” (121). The event rhymes with one in chapter two: Joan’s catching Lawrence sampling against doctor’s orders bacon she has prepared for herself (31).

The beginning of chapter seven echoes the end of six in a rather ingenious way. In Dr. Pnin’s waiting room, “the blue dab of a window in miniature was reflected in the glass dome of an ormolu clock on the mantelpiece, and two flies kept describing slow quadrangles around the lifeless chandelier” (175). The description delicately rhymes with one at the end of chapter six, in which another insect’s flight describes another closed shape near another reflective dome: “A quiet, lacy-winged little green insect circled in the glare of a strong naked lamp above Pnin’s glossy bald head” (172). Similarly, the end of chapter five and the beginning of six are united by a color: a bright, orangy red. The final image of five is “two dark figures in profile . . . silhouetted against the ember-red sky” (136), while the image that begins the next chapter is “the vermilion imprint, in applied lipstick, of a mimicked kiss” on the neck of a marble Venus (137).

This high degree of order is typical of Nabokov’s fiction, and there is good reason to believe that, in weaving all these patterns into his works, he saw himself as imitating life—or, as he puts it in *Speak, Memory*, “unknown players of games” who plan our lives. Like his character John Shade, he had “A feeling of fantastically planned, / Richly rhymed life” (*Pale Fire*, 68), believing that, if we look carefully at our lives, we will find them rife with the same sort of patterns—the same sort of echoes, correspondences, motifs, etc.—we find in art. This is the premise of *Speak, Memory*, in which the author sets out to uncover the patterns of his life. But I think it safe to say that, to most of us readers, Nabokov’s fictional worlds seem more elaborately ordered than the real one. This departure from truth to life is one we are likely to “accept”—we are unlikely, that is, to feel that it constitutes a flaw. This is precisely because the order in question is a feature of *Pnin*’s world right from the novel’s beginning—it is part, as Nabokov would say, of the “pattern of that world.” So when the several motifs and correspondences involving the painting by Van Eyck show up in chapter six, we do not feel them to be out of place in the novel’s world. If chapter six were the only part of the novel to have this kind of order, I think we would object that the rules of the novel’s world have been broken.

There is, however, at least one pattern in *Pnin* that seems planted by Nabokov to undercut the credibility of his narrator. But it has this effect only when seen in the shadow of Pnin’s objections to the narrator in the novel’s final chapter. At the chapter’s beginning, the

narrator (let's call him N.⁹) describes three encounters he has had with Pnin—the first during a visit to Pnin's father about a speck of coal dust lodged in N.'s left eye, when the doctor presents his son and proudly reports that Timofey has just received the highest grade in an Algebra examination; the second at the country house of N.'s aunt, where Pnin offers N. a part in the play "Liebelei"; and the third at the play's performance, in which N. watches Pnin play the role of a betrayed husband. But later, when the two meet in Paris and N. reminds him of these encounters, Pnin accuses N. of lying:

I tried not only to remind Pnin of former meetings, but also to amuse him and other people around us with the unusual lucidity and strength of my memory. However, he denied everything. He said he vaguely recalled my grand-aunt but had never met me. He said that his marks in algebra had always been poor and that, anyway, his father never displayed him to patients; he said that in *Zabava* (*Liebelei*) he had only acted the part of Christine's father. He repeated that we had never seen each other before. Our little discussion was nothing more than good-natured banter, and everybody laughed; and noticing how reluctant he was to recognize his own past, I switched to another, less personal, topic. (179-80)

Later, on another occasion in Paris, Pnin calls the narrator a "dreadful inventor" who "makes up everything":

One night, as Dr. Barakan, Pnin, and I were sitting at the Bolotovs, I happened to be talking to the neurologist about a cousin of his, Ludmila, now Lady D—, whom I had known in Yalta, Athens, and London, when suddenly Pnin cried to Dr. Barakan across the table: "Now, don't believe a word he says, Georgiy Aramovich. He makes up everything. He once invented that we were schoolmates in Russia and cribbed at examinations. He is a dreadful inventor (*on uzhasniy vidumshchik*)." Barakan and I were so astounded by this outburst that we just sat and looked at each other in silence. (185)

Pnin's accusations undermine the credibility of the narrator, who, for all we know, may be, as Pnin suggests, some sort of pathological liar. They place in doubt the reliability not only of his accounts of encounters with Pnin, but also of all the other stories he's told in the course of the novel. And reinforcing this doubt is his mention, in the description of the performance of "Liebelei," of "the steward of my aunt's estate, Robert Karlovich Horn" (178); this name, transposed into American informality, is that of the man behind the counter at the train station in chapter one: "Just tell them Bob Horn sent you" (25). That these men should have the same name is not, of course, impossible, especially in a world as rife with patterns as *Pnin's*. But in the light of Pnin's accusations, one has to wonder whether "Bob Horn" is simply

⁹ The narrator never tells us his name, but we can glean from certain details that it is probably Vladimir Vladimirovich Nabokov, the name of the author himself. Nabokov has put into the fictional world of *Pnin* a fictional version of himself: like the real Vladimir Nabokov, the narrator was born into a wealthy St. Petersburg family with a "rosy-stone house" on Morskaya Street (175) and a country estate near the city (177); he, too, is a "prominent Anglo-Russian writer" (140) who fled Russia after the revolution and later lived in Paris and Germany; he, too, has moved to the United States and, in 1955, has been teaching literature for some years at colleges; and he, like Nabokov, is a passionate student of butterflies (177), which makes him likely the Vladimir Vladimirovich whose absence Chateau laments when he and Pnin see butterflies at Cook's: "'Pity Vladimir Vladimirovich is not here,' remarked Chateau. 'He would have told us all about these enchanting insects'" (128). Moreover, the narrator has an aunt who is the widow of a General "N—" (177 with 133), which one guesses stands for "Nabokov." But the narrator is not Nabokov, just as Proust's Marcel is not Proust; he is a character in the world of *Pnin*, a fictional version of the author. It is in order to mark this difference that I'll call him merely N.

a name N. has taken from his past to give to a real man whose name he doesn't know or to a person he has invented.

For N.'s being a "dreadful inventor" there is evidence more damning than this. It comes in the novel's final scene, in which the narrator sees Pnin leaving Waindell and unsuccessfully tries to get his attention. Here is the first part of the scene:

I am so constituted that I absolutely must gulp down the juice of three oranges before confronting the rigors of day. So at seven-thirty I took a quick shower, and five minutes later was out of the house in the company of the long-eared and dejected Sobakevich.

The air was keen, the sky clear and burnished. Southward the empty road could be seen ascending a grey-blue hill among patches of snow. A tall leafless poplar, as brown as a broom, rose on my right, and its long morning shadow crossing to the opposite side of the street reached there a crenulated, cream-colored house which, according to Cockerell, had been thought by my predecessor to be the Turkish Consulate on account of crowds of fez wearers he had seen entering. I turned left, northward, and walked a couple of blocks downhill to a restaurant that I had noted on the eve. (190)

N. gives us a compass: the street runs uphill from North to South, and after he steps out of the house, he "turned left, northward." Before he makes this turn, he sees the poplar on his right casting its shadow over the street. When we make a map of the setting (as anyone familiar with the *Lectures* knows Nabokov would want us to do¹⁰) we discover an impossible detail: if that poplar is, along with N., on the west side of the street, and if its shadow crosses over to the east side, then the sun has risen in the West! It is hard for me to imagine that Nabokov did this by mistake; it is an intentional impossibility—an intentional breach of truth to life (and, I should add, of the rules of the novel's world)—that confirms the suspicion, aroused by Pnin's accusations and Bob Horn's name, that N. is a "dreadful inventor." In the novel's final scene, Nabokov unravels everything.¹¹

Why would Nabokov do this? Why make the narrator a liar? First, for the mischievous

¹⁰ *Lectures on Literature* and *Lectures on Russian Literature* include several maps and diagrams (all but one drawn by the lecturer) that Nabokov showed his students to help them accurately visualize settings described in the works under discussion. Eight of these (the diagram of the car of the night train from *Anna Karenin* and of the characters' positions in it [LRL 232]; the map of Southerton Court from its description in *Mansfield Park* [LL 31]; the map of Jekyll's house and the surrounding streets, with the routes traveled by characters in the scene when Hyde tramples the little girl [LL 186]; and the maps of characters' movements through Dublin in *Ulysses* [LL 325, 327, 303, 334-35]) include the points of the compass, either marked in the sketch itself or given in the accompanying description. On this aspect of his pedagogy Nabokov says the following in *Strong Opinions*:

In my academic days I endeavored to provide students of literature with exact information about details, about such combinations of details as yield the sensual spark without which a book is dead. In that respect, general ideas are of no importance. Any ass can assimilate the main points of Tolstoy's attitude toward adultery but in order to enjoy Tolstoy's art the good reader must wish to visualize, for instance, the arrangement of a railway carriage on the Moscow-Petersburg night train as it was a hundred years ago. Here diagrams are most helpful. Instead of perpetuating the pretentious nonsense of Homeric, chromatic, and visceral chapter headings, instructors should prepare maps of Dublin with Bloom's intertwining itineraries clearly traced. Without a visual perception of the larch labyrinth in *Mansfield Park* that novel loses some of its stereographic charm, and unless the façade of Dr. Jekyll's house is distinctly reconstructed in the student's mind, the enjoyment of Stevenson's story cannot be perfect (156-57).

¹¹ If the poplar has been planted by Nabokov to undercut the credibility of his narrator, then perhaps the third chapter's time discrepancy—its day being both a Tuesday and February 15, 1953 (which date did not fall on a

fun of it; to throw into doubt, in the final chapter, the veracity of everything the narrator has related—and to do it in such a clever and amusing way—need have no motivation other than the pleasure of its playfulness. But Nabokov must also have taken pleasure (and foreseen pleasure for his readers) in the way this sinking of N.'s credibility buoys the novel's verisimilitude.

The typical third-person narrator stands, like the author himself, outside the world of the fiction, and thus we do not think to ask how he knows the things he knows about the characters. While reading *Pride and Prejudice*, for example, we never stop to wonder how the narrator knows Elizabeth's most intimate thoughts, or the characters' exact words on this or that occasion. This is because we do not imagine her as a part of the novel's world—as a person living inside it.¹² *Pnin*, by contrast, has a narrator who is very clearly an inhabitant of the novel's world, as we discover in the first chapter when he refers to “a letter [Pnin] had written, with my help, to the New York Times in 1945 anent the Yalta Conference” (16). And this presents an obvious problem: if N. is a person in that world, how can he possibly know all the details of Pnin's life he relates in the first six chapters?¹³ How does he know what socks Pnin was wearing while he traveled to Cremona for his lecture (7), and Pnin's exact words to the

Tuesday)—is meant to do the same. That Nabokov did this by accident seems unlikely, not only because such a slip would be out of character for a writer as meticulous as he, but also because it mirrors the discrepancy in *Anna Karenin* that Bolotov mentions to Pnin: “I notice now that Lyov Nikolaich does not know on what day his novel starts: it seems to be Friday because that is the day the clockman comes to wind up the clocks in the Oblonski house, but it is also Thursday as mentioned in the conversation at the skating rink between Lyovin and Kitty's mother” (122). For a different interpretation of *Pnin*'s calendric discrepancy, see Barabtarlo, 122.

Nabokov ends the novel with a surprise continuation of the story of Pnin's visit to Cremona in chapter one. He returns to the very moment with which that chapter ends, with Pnin alone on the stage and about to give his lecture:

Cockerell, brown-robed and sandaled, let in the cocker and led me kitchenward, to a British breakfast of depressing kidney and fish.

“And now,” he said, “I am going to tell you the story of Pnin rising to address the Cremona Women's Club and discovering he had brought the wrong lecture.”

Both Brian Boyd and Gennadi Barabtarlo assert that this coda is at odds with information we have been given in chapter one. (See Boyd, 280; Barabtarlo, 34, 82-83.) Pnin has with him three papers: the one he has brought for the lecture, Betty's essay, and a lecture he intends to give at a symposium the following week. Boyd and Barabtarlo contend that Pnin cannot arrive at the podium with the wrong lecture if, as the narrator states, he is found just moments before—while Miss Clyde is introducing him—“juggling three papers, all of which he had stuffed into his coat so as to have the one he wanted among the rest (thus thwarting mischance by mathematical necessity).” But this interpretation assumes that the lecture he is supposed to give is among the three he has brought to Cremona. There are two plausible scenarios in which this is not the case. The first is that the paper he has brought for the lecture—a “sheaf of typewriter-size pages, carefully folded down the center” (16)—stays folded (text side in) until Pnin is at the lectern. There he unfolds it and discovers that it is not “Are the Russian People Communist?” (which, as is suggested on page 16, he knows or at least believes to be the lecture he is supposed to give) but some other paper grabbed in Waindell by mistake. The second possibility is that “Are the Russian People Communist?” is the lecture he has brought but not the one he is in fact supposed to give, and that this pops into his head the moment he arrives at the lectern. That Pnin might be confused about which documents are for which events can be gleaned from his intending to give a lecture called “Don Quixote and Faust” in a symposium on “Contemporary Continental Culture” (16 with 15) (for which “Are the Russian People Communist?” would be a plausible fit).

¹² We do imagine the narrator as a woman. I think this is because we automatically project the sex of the author on narrators whose sex isn't specified.

¹³ David Lodge poses the question in his introduction to *Pnin* (Everyman's Library, 2004), but offers only the unsatisfying answer that N. “is obviously Nabokov himself” (xviii). For the reason this is unsatisfying, see my note number 9.

conductor who informs him he is on the wrong train (17), and a thousand similar details Pnin himself would soon have forgotten? The normal way of dealing with this question is simply to ignore it. This is what Melville does when he has his character Ishmael narrate much of *Moby Dick*, including several scenes in which he is not present and whose details he could not have known. As readers, we recognize this as a convention, a common breach in plausibility made because it affords some advantage (here, the advantage of being able to tell the story through a character while escaping the great limitation of sticking only to what he or she would plausibly know and remember), and do not infer that Ishmael must be lying. We put the events he narrates on the same ontological level as those recounted by the “omniscient” narrator Melville has at the helm for the rest of *Moby Dick*; they are, in the terms of the novel, truths. Literature is filled with such narrators, and we readers know that the implausibility of their knowledge does not, in the terms of the work, signal that their stories are lies; we recognize the convention and move on. If Nabokov had not undercut the credibility of its narrator, *Pnin*, too, would automatically invoke this convention. But in his passion for verisimilitude, Nabokov was an enemy of conventions, as is clear in several passages of his lectures. In his lecture on *The Seagull*, for example, after lamenting the artificiality with which, in the third act, the characters are made to repeat certain behaviors (behaviors that, earlier in the play, liberate Chekhov’s drama from the convention of “making the miser always talk of his gold and the doctors of their pills”), he concludes,

This goes to show that Chekhov, though he almost managed to create a new and better kind of drama, was cunningly caught in his own snares. I have the definite impression that he would not have been caught by these conventions—by the very conventions he thought he had broken—if he had known a little more of the numerous forms they take. I have the impression that he had not studied the art of drama completely enough, had not studied a sufficient number of plays, was not critical enough about certain technical aspects of his medium. (*LRL* 291)

And in his discussion of *Bleak House*, we find him objecting to the very convention at issue with his narrator in *Pnin*: “Seven years after the event, as we learn in chapter 64, Esther writes her book, which amounts to thirty-three of the chapters, or a half of the whole novel, composed of sixty-seven chapters. A wonderful memory! I must say that despite the superb planning of the novel, the main mistake was to let Esther tell part of the story. I would not have let the girl near!” (*LL* 102). Nabokov has created in *Pnin* a “new and better kind” of first-person narrative that does away with the convention of the narrator’s impossible knowledge. In making N. a pathological liar, Nabokov makes N.’s narration plausible. It is plausible only as a lie.

Nabokov should be remembered as one of verisimilitude’s great proponents and practitioners. His statement in his lectures that “great novels are great fairy tales,” and his assertion in *Pale Fire* that “‘reality’ is neither the subject nor the object of true art,” are not the radical separation of literature from reality they might at first seem. The first imports that every work of literature creates a world with its own rules, rules that overlap only to a certain extent with those of the real one; in *Pnin* we find a world that departs from the real one in

being more elaborately “patterned.” The second expresses Nabokov’s perceptual elitism—his notion that real art is art that captures reality as it is seen not by everyone, but by the individual eye of the artist, who, if he an artist of any value, will notice a great many things the average eye doesn’t see. In *Pnin*, through our exploration of that novel’s representations of sensory life, we have found many examples of this type of perspicacity, from the pigeons’ wings turning white then gray again as they catch and then lose the sunlight, to the slow swing of Pnin’s shoulders as he wades into the river at Cook’s, to Mrs. Thayer’s coy gesture of “surprise, unworthiness, and pleasure” when Pnin hands her a drink at his party. We have also encountered again the “inclusive” and “illuminative” verisimilitudes we found in *Pride and Prejudice*, and have added to those two a number of other qualities that bring to vibrant life fictional people and worlds: “freshness,” specificity, clarity, and, most of all, precision. Finally, we have seen the ingenious way Nabokov undercuts the credibility of his narrator to make his (N.’s) narration plausible.

Now we move on to Joyce and *Ulysses*. Nabokov’s notion that every work of literature is a world with its own rules will help us understand the dynamics of a work that takes both verisimilitude and pattern to new extremes.

Chapter Four: *Ulysses*

Our exploration of lifelikeness in fiction has covered a good bit of ground. We began, with Proust, by considering its ontological foundation: the bipartite nature of reality in which a world of “general essences” lies “behind the surface” of particulars. We saw, in *À la recherche du temps perdu*, how fiction can illuminate life by capturing subtle general phenomena that have never been the objects of our full, conscious awareness. Then, with *Pride and Prejudice*, we engaged in a typology of lifelikeness—we found again in Jane Austen the “illuminative” verisimilitude we saw in Proust and distinguished from it three other types: plausibility, “inclusive” verisimilitude, and “rightness.” In Austen’s great skill at these four, we found an explanation for the enduring impression among her readers that her characters are extraordinarily “alive.” From Austen we moved to Nabokov, whose lectures gave us two important caveats for thinking about verisimilitude in fiction: first, that plausibility means adherence to the rules of a novel’s world, which may differ in certain respects from those of the real one; and second, that lifelikeness is less a mirror than a prism: not just a reflection of the world, but the world as it appears through the medium of a writer’s consciousness. In *Pnin* we explored the ways a novel can be lifelike in its depictions of sensory life. Now, with *Ulysses*, I want to round out this inquiry by exploring some methods of lifelikeness I haven’t yet discussed: verisimilar obscurity; the interweaving of the fictional with the real; verisimilar cross references; the depiction of “low” realities; and the “stream of consciousness” technique in its ability to bestow on characters a full mental life. Joyce did not invent these techniques, but he carried them much further than any other writer had done; *Ulysses*, the most “patterned” of novels, is also in certain ways the most lifelike, and much of what is distinctive in its style comes from these new extremes.

Verisimilar Obscurity

In the second chapter of *Pnin*, when Joan Clements, having just hung up on Pnin thinking he dialed the wrong number, returns to the kitchen and finds her husband eating some of the bacon she has prepared for herself, we are given the following exchange:

'What was that telephone call?'

'Somebody wanting Mrs Feuer or Fayer. Look here, if you deliberately neglect everything George — ' [Dr O. G. Helm, their family doctor].

'Joan,' said Laurence, who felt much better after that opalescent rasher, 'Joan, my dear, you are aware aren't you, that you told Margaret Thayer yesterday you wanted a roomer?'

Nabokov was a great admirer of *Ulysses*, and this chapter’s extended moment-by-moment depiction of the Clementses’ morning at home may owe a debt to Joyce’s similar depiction in

“Calypso.”¹ But something that separates the two writers is their attitudes toward the reader’s comprehension. Nabokov complains in a lecture that in *Ulysses* “a needless obscurity can be produced by details not brought out with sufficient clarity but only suggested for the knowledgeable” (LL 290), and in the exchange I’ve quoted, he is very un-Joycean in the gloss he gives in brackets to fill us in on the identity of “George.” Compare this to Joyce’s procedure in a conversation between Bloom and Tom Kernan at Dignam’s funeral:

—Was he insured? Mr Bloom asked.

—I believe so, Mr Kernan answered. But the policy was heavily mortgaged. Martin is trying to get the youngster into Artane.

—How many children did he leave?

—Five. Ned Lambert says he’ll try to get one of the girls into Todd’s. (101-02)²

Artane is a village north of Dublin, but its name could apparently be used for the O’Brien Institute for Destitute Children located nearby. And “Todd’s” apparently refers to a Dublin store, “Todd, Burns & Co., Ltd., silk mercers, linen woolen drapers, tailors, and boot and shoe and furnishing merchandisers.”³ But Joyce does not give this information, and so, unless we have lived in Dublin and have heard of these places already, the meaning of Kernan’s words remains to a certain extent obscure to us. There are similar moments of obscurity throughout Joyce’s novel, and this brings about an effect of verisimilitude Richard Ellmann calls the “blurred margin”: “Joyce’s surface naturalism in *Ulysses* has many intricate supports, and one of the most interesting is the blurred margin. He introduces much material which he does not intend to explain so that his book, like life, gives the impression of having many threads that one cannot follow.”⁴ The idea, I think, is this: fiction positions the reader as a sort of ghost—an invisible eavesdropper who accompanies human beings (fictional characters), watching them do and say this and that, and even peering into their minds. If we were ever given the power to do this in real life, we would see and hear plenty of things that we would understand only partially or not at all. And this obscurity would be greatly increased if we were to “eavesdrop” in this way on inhabitants of places or times other than our own. By thinking along these lines, we become aware of a novelistic convention—a truly pervasive difference between novelistic worlds and the real one. In almost every novel, the conversations, thoughts, and actions of the characters are shaped to fit the reader’s comprehension.⁵ Consider for example the dialogue of *Pride and Prejudice*: if somehow we were transported to the Hertfordshire of 1811 and found ourselves listening in on the conversations of a family like the Bennets, those conversations would be riddled with local and personal allusions that even most English readers of Austen’s day would not have been able to understand. Jane Austen, like almost every other novelist, filters all of this out. In *Ulysses* Joyce smashes this convention.

¹ “You will enjoy,” Nabokov told his students in a lecture, “the wonderfully artistic pages, one of the greatest passages in all literature, when Bloom brings Molly her breakfast. How beautifully the man writes!” (LL 306). Even the backstories are similar: in each case the couple is adjusting to their only child having just left home.

² All references to *Ulysses* are to the 1992 Modern Library edition.

³ For both these references see Gifford, “*Ulysses*” *Annotated*, 116.

⁴ Ellmann, *James Joyce*, 366.

⁵ This convention may be compared to the convention in the theater of having the actors continually positioned facing the audience. That convention, too, serves the audience’s comprehension.

The cost of this smashing, of course, is the consternation of a great many readers. We naturally want to understand, and so the obscurity can be annoying or uncomfortable. But the realization that much of this obscurity is a form of verisimilitude should help us be at peace with it. The book's "blurred margins" are part of its design—our not being able to follow those threads is part of the experience Joyce intended for us. And the obscurity rarely prevents us from discerning the important features of any scene.

Ulysses's verisimilar obscurity comes in different degrees of darkness. On the darker end of the spectrum are sentences like these from "Scylla and Charybdis" in which Stephen Dedalus playfully riffs on his own name and initials: "Stephen, Stephen, cut the bread even. S. D: sua donna. Già: di lui. Gelindo risolve di non amar. S. D." (210). Thanks only to Google Books, I've been able ascertain that, after the children's rhyme, Stephen is splicing together different headings from the libretto of a little-known seventeenth-century opera in Italian by Stefano Pesori called "Lo scigno armonico": one of the libretto's headings is "GELINDO RISOLVE DI NON AMARE LA TRADITRICE [GELINDO RESOLVES TO NOT LOVE THE UNFAITHFUL WOMAN]," and another is "FILOMARTE SPIEGA GLI ATTI CRUDELI DELLA S. D. (Sua donna) [FILOMARTE EXPLAINS THE CRUEL ACTIONS OF H. W. (His woman)]." So here we have a misremembered heading from an obscure libretto in a foreign language! Joyce was perfectly aware that his readers had little chance of following this, but that is just part of the verisimilitude—if Stephen were a real person and we were able to eavesdrop on his thoughts, we would encounter this kind of obscurity. And so Joyce is undeterred from including it. There is a moment in "Proteus," a notoriously difficult episode consisting mainly of Stephen's internal monologue, when Stephen seems to break the fourth wall and address the reader: "You find my words dark. Darkness is in our souls, do you not think?" (48). These words seem to capture Joyce's attitude toward the many thoughts of characters in *Ulysses* that he knows will be obscure for its readers.

On the lighter end of the spectrum of the novel's verisimilar obscurity is the simple unexplained reference to a person or a place most readers have no idea of. Among the innumerable examples of this is the reference to Dick Tivy in "Hades"; greeting Ned Lambert, Simon Dedalus asks him,

How are all in Cork's own town?

—I was down there for the Cork park races on Easter Monday, Ned Lambert said. Same old six and eightpence. Stopped with Dick Tivy.

—And how is Dick, the solid man?

—Nothing between himself and heaven, Ned Lambert answered.

—By the holy Paul! Mr Dedalus said in subdued wonder. Dick Tivy bald? (102)

The unfortunate Dick Tivy is never mentioned again; he is as opaque to us as an unfamiliar name overheard in the conversation of strangers. And this is also true of a man named Wetherup who crosses Bloom's mind in "Aeolus" as the latter reflects on Dan Dawson: "Feathered his nest well anyhow. Daughter engaged to that chap in the inland revenue office with the motor. Hooked that nicely. Entertainments. Open house. Big blowout. Wetherup always said that. Get a grip of them by the stomach" (126). In "Lotus Eaters," Bloom remembers "Those two sluts that night in the Coombe, linked together in the rain" (78). As to what exactly the Coombe is (it was a run-down area of south-central Dublin), the reader is left in the dark, and there is a similar level of obscurity when, shortly before, Bloom guesses the destination of a fashionable young woman he sees about to climb into a carriage: "Off to the

country: Broadstone probably” (74); most readers would never guess that Bloom is referring to a railway station. The abundance of references such as these contribute to the novel’s unusually large number of proper names. *Pride and Prejudice* has fifty-four proper names of people, while *Ulysses*’s must number in the thousands. And there is a comparably large number of names of places and businesses. But not only are the proper names extremely numerous; many of them happen to refer to real people and things, which brings us to my next topic.

The Interweaving of the Fictional and the Real

Towns and villages in novels tend to be invented, while cities tend to be real. One of the reasons, of course, is that the particularities of life in great cities such as Paris and Rome are objects of shared experience and fascination. But another reason is that an invented town or village has something of the status in our minds of a town we have never heard of. Since there are plenty of small towns in Normandy of which we have never heard, we can easily suspend our disbelief to imagine Balbec as one of them; we are still within the realm of “realism” when we do so. But this is not true for major cities; to invent a metropolis is to leave the realist mode and enter the realm of fantasy. While Marcel spends different summers in the fictional Combray and Balbec, the metropolis he inhabits is Paris.

When Joyce set to work on *Ulysses*, a longstanding realist technique was to impart an air of reality to fictional people and events by bringing them into contact with real people, events, and places of a city in which one’s narrative was set. In “Swann in Love,” which is entirely set in the Paris of the 1870s and 1880s, Proust gives Swann a lunch date with Jules Grévy (President of the Republic from 1879 to 1887) at the Elysée Palace. Swann promises the Verdurins that, while he is there, he will arrange for them a special theater pass that they will receive in time for the revival of *Les Danicheff*, a real production that took place in 1884.⁶ The real Paris doctor Potain looks after the fictional composer Vinteuil, and in Swann’s frenzied search for Odette the night he finds her gone at the Verdurins’, we briefly enter three real restaurants on the Boulevard des Italiens. In these and similar details, Proust intermingles his characters with particulars of the real city. But the ways in which he does this fall within traditional limits. First, the real particulars are limited in number: most of Proust’s pages are without any, and on the pages where they appear, there is usually only one. Second, the real people are simply mentioned—they never appear in any scene. And almost all the realities in question were well-known in Proust’s time. (An exception to this rule is the streets where certain characters live, such as Odette’s “rue La Pérouse, derrière l’Arc de Triomphe,” whose obscurity necessitates the narrator’s explanation of where it is.) And while he tells us some characters’ streets, he never gives a house number—street names are as far as Proust goes.

Just as we have seen him do with the traditional artificial clarity of dialogue and characters’ thoughts, Joyce takes these limits and smashes them. He floods his novel with real particulars—they appear with far greater frequency than in any other novel I know. In the first six pages of “Calypso,” for example, we get the following Dublin realities: Hanlon’s Dairy, Buckley’s grocery store, Plasto’s hat shop, the house at 75 Eccles Street (the one with the loose cellar flap), St. George’s Church, Boland’s bakery, Arthur Griffith, *The Freeman’s Journal*, the

⁶ See Steel, *Chronology and Time*, 99.

Bank of Ireland building, Larry O'Rourke's grocery store, Larry O'Rourke himself, M'Auley's grocery store, the Dublin cattle market, the North Circular Road, Adam Findlater and Dan Tallon (Dublin grocers), St. Joseph's School, Mr. Woods (who lived at 8 Eccles St., next door to number seven, where Joyce has placed Bloom), Eccles Lane, Andrew's grocery store, a street called St. Kevin's Parade, three former neighbors of Bloom (Citron, Mastianski, and Moisel), Arbutus Place, and Pleasants Street. And this frequency of real people and places is typical of the novel as a whole. Moreover, the great majority of *Ulysses's* real particulars were unknown to any reader of Joyce's time who had not lived for years in Dublin, and many would have been unknown even to a reader of that description. Mr. Woods, for example, was just an obscure man who happened to occupy 8 Eccles St., and one could easily have lived in Dublin without having heard of one of Bloom's local grocers or the tiny Arbutus Place. So why does Joyce bother to include these realities if only a tiny number of readers would be able to recognize them as real? The answer, I think, is that this inclusion is essentially the same as his inclusion in dialogue and characters' thoughts of references that only a tiny fraction of readers will be able to understand: in both cases, he is pushing verisimilitude to an extreme by refusing to let it be limited by the limits of the reader's knowledge. The real world teems with real obscure places and people, so why not the world of a novel? For Joyce, verisimilitude was an artistic value to be pursued for its own sake—even into spaces where the reader is unlikely to see it. That he felt this way is clear from the letters he wrote his aunt asking for details about places in Dublin; for example his famous query (while working on "Ithaca") about the real house where he has Bloom live: "Is it possible for an ordinary person to climb over the area railings of no 7 Eccles street, either from the path or the steps, lower himself from the lowest part of the railings till his feet are within 2 feet or 3 of the ground and drop unhurt. I saw it done myself but by a man of rather athletic build [J. F. Byrne]. I require this information in detail in order to determine the wording of a paragraph."⁷ How many readers would ever notice the implausibility Joyce wants to avoid?

Unlike Swann and Odette, the Blooms have a stated house number—7 Eccles Street—and the house as it appears in the novel is meticulously faithful to the real one. (The real house was also vacant in 1904; Joyce found a way of inserting the Blooms into the city that didn't come into conflict with the residence there of any real person.) This is another way in which the novel's verisimilitude is radical: the unusual specificity and detail with which its main characters are embedded in the real city. And part of this is the way their lives are intertwined with those of real Dubliners. Molly will be singing in concerts with the real Dublin baritone J. C. Doyle, and the Blooms' daughter Milly was delivered by a real midwife named Mrs. Thornton.⁸ The neighbors with whom the Blooms were friendly when they lived on Lombard Street West (60) are all real people, and Bloom has this memory of Molly together with one of them at a picnic: "Funny sight two of them together, their bellies out. Molly and Mrs Moisel" (162). Mrs. Moisel lived on Lombard Street West and really would have been pregnant along with Molly; she gave birth to a daughter thirteen days after Molly had Milly!⁹ The Blooms are connected to real people also through objects in their house. In the prolifically detailed "Ithaca" episode, we learn that the blinds of their bedroom window have been

⁷ Ellmann, 519.

⁸ Gifford, 79.

⁹ Gifford, 166.

supplied by “Frank O’Hara, window blind, curtain pole and revolving shutter manufacturer, 16 Aungier street” (702), and on their mantle is a stuffed owl (fictional?) given them as a wedding present by Alderman John Hooper (real¹⁰) (707).

Perhaps the most radical way *Ulysses* entwines the fictional with the real is its depiction of real people in its scenes. In certain of its episodes, such as “Aeolus,” “Wandering Rocks,” and “Scylla and Charybdis,” the real “characters” outnumber the fictional ones. Throughout the book the two types interact.

Joyce’s Cross References

About halfway through *Pride and Prejudice*, we discover that Mr. Wickham is no longer courting Elizabeth and has turned his attentions toward a certain Miss King, who has just inherited money from her grandfather. Only upon rereading the novel will we notice that this is not the young woman’s first appearance in the story: she gets a passing mention, with no explanation of who she is, in the novel’s third chapter, when Mrs. Bennet begins to list for her husband all of Bingley’s dancing partners: “he enquired who [Jane] was, and got introduced, and asked her for the two next. Then, the two third he danced with Miss King, and the two fourth with Maria Lucas, and the two fifth with Jane again . . .” (8). Now, Austen may have done this simply for artistic economy: instead of introducing two more characters, she uses Miss King and Maria Lucas, who have roles later on in the story. But regardless of her intentions, this early appearance of Miss King also has an effect of verisimilitude—it says that Miss King has not been called into being halfway through the novel to play her role in the novel’s plot but instead has been here all along, just as a real person would if the novel were a true story. In *Ulysses*, Joyce takes this realist device, which normally is used no more than a few times in a novel, and multiplies it; he carries the device to an extreme by packing his novel with hundreds of such cross references. In an example similar to the one in *Pride and Prejudice*, Gerty MacDowell, the heroine of episode thirteen (“Nausicaa”), passes through Stephen’s thoughts in episode two (“Nestor”) as he observes his classroom of students at the boys’ private school where he teaches: “With envy he watched their faces: Edith, Ethel, Gerty, Lily. Their likes: their breaths, too, sweetened with tea and jam” (25) (Here as in “Nausicaa,” Gerty appears with Edith [Edy Boardman]). As in the case of Austen’s Miss King, this early passing appearance gives Gerty an added solidity, an existence independent of her role later on in the novel.

Joyce’s use of cross references bestows this added solidity not only on characters themselves but also on connections between them. In “Lotus Eaters,” for example, Bloom sees an announcement of a sermon by a Father Conmee, and thinks to himself, “Conmee: Martin Cunningham knows him” (80). This is all we hear of the acquaintance between Cunningham and Conmee until much later in the novel, when, at the start of “Wandering Rocks,” Conmee sets off for Artane at the behest of Martin Cunningham to see if he can get Dignam’s son admitted to the Institute for Destitute Children. Part of what is interesting here is that a first-time reader of *Ulysses* (and maybe even a second- or a third-) is very unlikely to remember by the time he gets to “Wandering Rocks” Bloom’s thought about Martin Cunningham’s knowing

¹⁰ Gifford, 123.

Conmee, and is equally unlikely to remember the connection between the two men in “Wandering Rocks” when he rereads “Lotus Eaters.” As with many such cross references in *Ulysses*, it is as if it is there not to be noticed or remembered by the reader but simply because Cunningham knows Conmee and Bloom remembers this. The hiddenness of the cross reference enhances its effect of lifelikeness.

Memories of the distant past are another source of Joyce’s cross references; in “Ithaca,” a man named Philip Gilligan is mentioned twice—first when we are told by the narrator that Bloom was baptized “by James O’Connor, Philip Gilligan and James Fitzpatrick, together, under a pump in the village of Swords” (682), and second when Bloom remembers “companions now in various manners in different places defunct: Percy Apjohn (killed in action, Modder River), Philip Gilligan (phthisis, Jervis Street hospital), Matthew F. Kane (accidental drowning, Dublin Bay) . . .” (704-05). These are the novel’s only references to Philip Gilligan, except for a momentary appearance five hundred fifty pages earlier in “Lestrygonians” when Bloom remembers how the stationer he used to work for used to send him to convents to collect payments: “How long ago is that? Year Phil Gilligan died” (155). Likewise, in episode thirteen (“Nausicaa”) Bloom remembers games of charades played with Molly and their friends in the year before they were married: “Rip van Winkle we played. Rip: tear in Henny Doyle’s overcoat. Van: breadvan delivering. Winkle: cockles and periwinkles” (377). Nearly four hundred pages later, in “Penelope,” the tear in Henny Doyle’s coat is revealed to have been typical of him: Molly, remembering that same year, reflects that Bloom “had a few brains not like that other fool Henny Doyle he was always breaking or tearing something in the charades I hate an unlucky man” (747). Here, too, the inconspicuousness of the cross reference enhances its effect of verisimilitude: it seems to owe its existence solely to the “fact” that Bloom and Molly have both experienced this man and his special brand of ill luck.

Joyce also cross-references certain of Bloom’s possessions, for example certain of his books. In “Ithaca” we find on Bloom’s bookshelf “THE STORY OF THE HEAVENS by Sir Robert Ball” (708). Five hundred fifty pages earlier, in “Lestrygonians,” Bloom briefly thinks of this book: “Fascinating little book that is of sir Robert Ball’s. Parallax. I never exactly understood” (154). Similarly, during one of the hallucinations of the Nighttown episode, Bloom, like Rip Van Winkle, comes back home after years of slumber, and sees, among other things, “our writingtable where we never wrote” (542). The reader has heard of this table once and only once before, in “Calypso,” when Bloom observes his cat stalking around a leg of the kitchen table and thinks, “Just how she stalks over my writingtable” (55). But will the reader remember? Probably not, and so why has Joyce gone to the trouble of creating this and so many other such cross references? Perhaps to give his fictional universe a texture like that of the real one. If we somehow were able to record and then study a day of a person’s life—all a person’s thoughts and experiences on a given day—the more we studied it, the more we would discover such correspondences. This process would be inexhaustible, and so it seems to be in *Ulysses*.

While sitting at the counter at Davy Burne's in "Lestrygonians," Bloom thinks of the statues of Greek goddesses at the National Museum, and of goddesses' food:

Nectar imagine it drinking electricity: gods' food. Lovely forms of women sculpted Junonian. Immortal lovely. And we stuffing food in one hole and out behind: food, chyle, blood, dung, earth, food: have to feed it like stoking an engine. They have no. Never looked. I'll look today. Keeper won't see. Bend down let something drop see if she. (176)

Bloom never gets to see whether the statues have anuses—he tries to but then is addressed by Buck Mulligan (259-60). But we may safely assume he wouldn't have found one, not because the statues are of goddesses, but because they are statues. The anus is a "low" reality that art traditionally leaves out of its depictions of the human form. The equivalent of this in literature is the fact that literary characters seem never to defecate or urinate. When, for example, in a novel by Jane Austen or Henry James, do we get even a hint of a character needing to use the toilet? It is as if this whole area of human experience has been erased. It is significant, then, that in the very next sentence after the passage I've just quoted, Bloom demonstrates that he, though a fictional man, possesses a real man's lower functions: "Dribbling a quiet message from his bladder came to go to do not to do there to do. A man and ready he drained his glass to the lees and walked, to men too they gave themselves, manly conscious, lay with men lovers, a youth enjoyed her, to the yard" (176-77). Stephen, too, while he sits on the rocks of the strand in the novel's second episode, finds that he needs to urinate (the episode ends just as he prepares to do so), and in "Calypso" we are given a detailed depiction of Bloom's experience in his outhouse as he reads and defecates. "Quietly he read, restraining himself, the first column and, yielding but resisting, began the second. Midway, his last resistance yielding, he allowed his bowels to ease themselves quietly as he read, reading still patiently that slight constipation of yesterday quite gone. Hope it's not too big bring on piles again. No, just right" (69). The point of passages like this one was not to shock the reader (readers in Joyce's day were of course far more likely to be shocked by them than we are); it was to advance literary verisimilitude by including in a depiction of human life elements of that life that art has traditionally filtered out. Joyce wanted to render human life as it really is—not some idealized version of it. This desire is reflected in a criticism he made of Ibsen in 1907: "Absolute realism is impossible, of course. That we all know. But it's quite enough that Ibsen has omitted all question of finance from his thirteen dramas."¹¹ And when his cousin informed him that his aunt (the same aunt he wrote to for details of Dublin) had pronounced *Ulysses* unfit to read, he replied, "If *Ulysses* isn't fit to read, life isn't fit to live."¹²

The novel's embrace of "low," bodily realities goes beyond urination and defecation. In "Telemachus" Buck Mulligan hails "the scrotum-tightening sea," his earthy correlate to Homer's "wine-dark sea" (5), and in "Proteus" we see Stephen pick his nose and lay the snot on a rock (51). In "Nausicaa" there is the famous scene in which Bloom masturbates on the strand while watching Gerty MacDowell, his ejaculation aptly synchronized with the explosion of fireworks overhead (366-67), and in "Penelope" Molly gets her period (just before she

¹¹ Ellmann, 266-67.

¹² Ellmann, 537.

urinates into the chamber pot) (769). Molly needs to fart and lets the air out as quietly as she can so as not to wake Bloom (763), who breaks wind much more freely at the very end of “Sirens”: “Ppprrpffrrppfffff” (291). In these moments and many others, Joyce lets into his book elements of human life that have been excluded in the name of decorum from literary depictions of human beings.

Fullness of Inner Life

In bestowing on his principal characters the lower bodily functions, Joyce found a way to make those characters more similar to real human beings than fictional people normally are. He achieves the same goal by bestowing on them something else: a full inner life—a continuous flow of thoughts and perceptions. The way he does this—his so-called “stream of consciousness” technique—has been much discussed but poorly understood. What exactly is the stream of consciousness and how does it achieve its effects?

In *Transparent Minds*, the classic study of techniques for depicting consciousness in fiction, Dorrit Cohn asserts that Joyce presents Bloom’s consciousness “exclusively through the language it produces, without even an elliptic suggestion that his thought stream contains any other ‘mind stuff’ except words.”¹³ She treats Joyce’s technique as a form of quoted interior monologue—the direct quotation of characters’ mental speech. But a close examination of passages of stream of consciousness in *Ulysses* (and even in the chapter from which she draws her examples, “Calypso”) reveals that this technique is more complex, shifting, and ambiguous than Cohn’s description allows.

Categories Cohn herself lays out will help us understand this. She identifies three techniques for depicting a character’s consciousness in third-person fiction. The first is what she calls psycho-narration: a narrator’s description of events in the character’s psyche—of thoughts, emotions, impressions, etc. Psycho-narration refers to the character in the third person and the narrated moment in the past tense, as in “She wondered if he had her letter and whether her plan had intrigued him.” The second technique for rendering consciousness is quoted interior monologue (quoted monologue for short): the direct quotation of the character’s inner speech. Here, the character refers to himself in the first person and to his present moment in the present tense: “Does he have my letter? Has my plan intrigued him?” And the third technique is narrated monologue, a kind of hybrid between the first and the second. This technique presents the character’s thoughts in the form of quoted monologue, but with the first person changed to the third and the present tense changed to the past, as in “Did he have her letter? Had her plan intrigued him?”. This shift in person and tense introduces a peculiar ambiguity: the thoughts belong to the character, but, depending on context and content, it can be unclear whether the language in which they are couched belongs to the character or to the narrator. In the rendering of her thoughts that uses narrated monologue, the woman in my example may or may not have said to herself, “Does he have my letter? Has my plan intrigued him?”. All we know is that she wondered these things, and she may very well have done so without expressing it to herself in words.

¹³ Cohn, *Transparent Minds*, 86.

With these three categories in hand (psycho-narration, quoted monologue, and narrated monologue) we are ready to explore Joyce's "stream of consciousness." The method is properly understood not as a version of quoted monologue but as a clever way of combining all of the three techniques Cohn identifies. It exploits the simple fact that sentences using each can be pared down to sentence fragments and still be understood, and that once this paring has been done the three techniques formally blend together to the point of their being often indistinguishable. Let us see how this works in the opening scene of "Calypso," whose depictions of Bloom's psyche I have italicized:

Kidneys were in his mind as he moved about the kitchen softly, righting her breakfast things on the humpy tray. Gelid light and air were in the kitchen but out of doors gentle summer morning everywhere. *Made him feel a bit peckish.*

The coals were reddening.

Another slice of bread and butter: three, four: right. She didn't like her plate full. Right. He turned from the tray, lifted the kettle off the hob and set it sideways on the fire. It sat there, dull and squat, its spout stuck out. *Cup of tea soon. Good. Mouth dry.* The cat walked stiffly round a leg of the table with tail on high.

—Mkgnao!

—O, there you are, Mr Bloom said, turning from the fire.

The cat mewed in answer and stalked again stiffly round a leg of the table, mewing. *Just how she stalks over my writingtable. Prr. Scratch my head. Prr.*

Mr Bloom watched curiously, kindly the lithe black form. *Clean to see: the gloss of her sleek hide, the white button under the butt of her tail, the green flashing eyes.* He bent down to her, his hands on his knees.

—Milk for the pussens, he said.

—Mrkgnao! the cat cried.

They call them stupid. They understand what we say better than we understand them. She understands all she wants to. Vindictive too. Cruel. Her nature. Curious mice never squeal. Seem to like it. Wonder what I look like to her. Height of a tower? No, she can jump me. (55)

The depictions of Bloom's psyche in this passage alternate with external narration and external description, and with moments of quoted speech (Bloom's and the cat's). The passage begins with a bit of psycho-narration: "Kidneys were in his mind." Notice how psycho-narration places the reader at a certain remove from the character's psyche—it does not give the impression of direct observation of a mind (observation from inside, as it were) that is given by quoted and narrated monologue. "Made him feel a bit peckish," on the other hand (the passage's next depiction of Bloom's consciousness) puts us inside Bloom's mind. This is narrated monologue—a thought of Bloom's expressed by the narrator in the past tense and third person.

The depiction of Bloom's psyche we get next—"Another slice of bread and butter: three, four: right."—is ambiguous: it could just as well be narrated monologue as quoted monologue. It could be, in other words, a reduced version of "I need to add another slice of bread and butter: three, four: right" (quoted monologue) or "He needed to add another slice of bread and butter: three, four: right" (narrated monologue). The ambiguity is created by the absence of subject and verb, which would tell us, by their person and tense, which of the two techniques is being used. But as the stream continues to flow, ambiguity is replaced by unambiguous narrated monologue: "She didn't like her plate full. Right." ("Right" is in itself ambiguous, but since it comes on the heels of a sentence of narrated monologue, we take it to be the same.)

Ambiguity returns in "Cup of tea soon. Good. Mouth dry," in which narrated monologue is again just as possible as quoted monologue. (The sentences could be a shortened version of "I'll have a cup of tea soon. Good. My mouth is dry" or of "He would have a cup of tea soon. Good. His mouth was dry.") But the next bit of depicted consciousness comes as unambiguous quoted monologue: "Just how she stalks over my writingtable. Prr. Scratch my head. Prr."

Then we get "Clean to see: the gloss of her sleek hide, the white button under the butt of her tail, the green flashing eyes." I suppose this could all be quoted monologue, but it seems unlikely to me that Bloom, taking in these details, would verbalize them in his head. So for me the sentence leans more toward narrated monologue, in which the verbalizations in question could be the narrator's and not Bloom's. Finally, in the paragraph that begins "They call them stupid," there is quoted monologue to the end.

In this depiction that weaves in and out of Bloom's consciousness, the parts we would call "stream of consciousness" (all of the parts I've italicized except for the bit of psycho-narration at the start) are composed of three things: unambiguous narrated monologue, unambiguous quoted monologue, and sentences that can be either the one technique or the other. Later in "Calypso," the stream of consciousness incorporates a special kind of psycho-narration we may call "narrated perception." Here is Bloom at the pork butcher's: "He took a page up from the pile of cut sheets: the model farm at Kinnereth on the lakeshore of Tiberias. Can become ideal winter sanatorium. Moses Montefiore. I thought he was. Farmhouse, wall round it, blurred cattle cropping. He held the page from him: interesting: read it nearer, the blurred cropping cattle, the page rustling" (59). After a bit of external narration in "He took a page up from the pile of cut sheets" ("cut sheets," by the way, is a printers' term for paper that has been printed and cut, as opposed to uncut "continuous sheets") we are submerged in Bloom's reading mind: "the model farm at Kinnereth on the lakeshore of Tiberias. Can become ideal winter sanatorium. Moses Montefiore." Bloom is reading to himself parts of the text he has before him, an ad for a Jewish agricultural settlement in Palestine, an endeavor in which Moses Montefiore, a philanthropist and real person, is apparently involved. These sentences are quoted monologue—direct quotations of words in Bloom's head—and so is the sentence that follows: "I thought he was." Bloom had thought Montefiore was dead (this, it seems to me, is the only interpretation that fits). But next we get a series of words that might be something other than quoted or narrated monologue: "Farmhouse, wall round it, blurred cattle cropping" is a transcription of what Bloom sees in a photo that is part of the advertisement he is perusing, but the words don't necessarily mark *thoughts*, which is what they would do if they are quoted or narrated monologue. The words may simply mark *perceptions*, in which case they are psycho-narration, a pared-down version of a sentence such as "Bloom saw

in the photo a farmhouse, a wall round it, and blurred cattle cropping.” This is certainly what is happening in the next sentence, in “the blurred cropping cattle, the page rustling”—these make sense not as thoughts but as perceptions. This method of paring down psycho-narration is used throughout the novel, for example when Bloom exits the church in “Lotus Eaters”: “He stood a moment unseeing by the cold black marble bowl while before him and behind two worshippers dipped furtive hands in the low tide of holy water. Trams: a car of Prescott’s dyeworks: a widow in her weeds. Notice because I’m in mourning myself” (83-84). Here, again, the stand-alone noun phrases make sense only as narrated perception. Part of what is interesting about Joyce’s reduction of psycho-narration to noun phrases is that it brings the reader “closer” to the character’s consciousness: instead of that sense of a remove I mentioned earlier, we seem just as deeply submerged in Bloom’s mind as we are with quoted monologue and narrated monologue. The writer can thus switch rapidly between thoughts and perceptions without the jarring effect of continually changing our distance from the character’s consciousness. This is one of the primary benefits of the stream of consciousness, and so it should come as no surprise that one of the earliest employments of the technique was in a scene that continuously depicts the experience of a person riding through a city in a carriage. Here are two sections of the trip Anna makes to see Dolly toward the end of *Anna Karenin*:

Not answering the question of how she would live without [Vronski], she began reading the signboards. ‘Office and Warehouse. Dentist. Yes, I’ll tell Dolly everything. She doesn’t like Vronski. It will be shameful, painful, but I’ll tell her everything. She loves me, and I’ll follow her advice. I won’t submit to him; I won’t allow him to teach me. Filippov, baker. They say he also sells his dough in Petersburg. Moskow water is so good. The Mytishchi springs and the pancakes.’ And she remembered how, long ago, when she was just seventeen years old, she had gone with her aunt to the Trinity Monastery. ‘One still went by carriage. Was that really me with the red hands? How much of what then seemed so wonderful and unattainable has become insignificant, and what there was then is now forever unattainable. Would I have believed then that I could come to such humiliation? How proud and pleased he’ll be when he gets my note! But I’ll prove to him . . . How bad that paint smells. Why are they always painting and building? Fashions and Attire,’ she read. A man bowed to her. It was Annushka’s husband.

But she at once began thinking what those two young girls could be smiling at. ‘Love, probably? They don’t know how joyless it is, how low . . . A boulevard and children. Three boys running, playing horses. Seryozha! [her little boy] And I’ll lose everything and not get him back.’¹⁴

Perhaps because he is not wholly comfortable with the newness of the device of reducing psycho-narration to noun phrases amid sentences of quoted monologue, Tolstoy tells us that Anna is reading the signs on the shops, thus leaving open the possibility that the words that mark the first of her perceptions (“Office and Warehouse. Dentist” and “Filippov, baker”) are words she pronounces in her head. By the end of the passage, however, this pretext is silently overthrown: the words that mark the last of Anna’s perceptions (“A boulevard and children.

¹⁴ Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina*, 757.

Three boys running, playing horses.”) do not make any sense as inner speech. Like the words conveying Bloom’s perception of the farmhouse in the photo at the pork butcher’s and the rustling of the page, they are psycho-narration reduced to noun phrases. Without this reduction—if Tolstoy had instead used traditional full sentences such as “She saw a boulevard and children” —there would no longer be the effect of a sustained depiction “from inside”; with every bit of psycho-narration, we would have the impression of a sudden removal from the depths of Anna’s mind. In literature and the arts in general, the development of a new technique very often arises from an attempt to solve a representational problem—from an awareness that existing techniques are inadequate for the depiction of a thing one wants to depict. The stream of consciousness developed as a solution to the problem of how to continuously render a character’s consciousness when the character’s thoughts are made continually to switch rails by new perceptions. Part of what I find beautiful in Tolstoy’s use of the technique is the way the content of Anna’s thought, though determined by things outside her—things she sees through the carriage window—is determined also by her state of mind. The sight of the bakeshop, for example, makes her remember her visit when she was seventeen to Mytishchi and the pancakes she had there, and then the pressure of her perturbed state of mind turns the memory of herself as a girl into a meditation on how worse off she is now, making her thoughts circle back to Vronski.

As the passage from *Anna Karenin* demonstrates, the stream of consciousness is the perfect technique for rendering the experience of a person moving through a modern city. As the sociologist Georg Simmel observed in 1903 in a lecture called “The Metropolis and Mental Life,” modern urban life is marked by a superabundance of rapidly shifting, incongruous sensory stimuli. And these stimuli give rise to an equally shifting series of impressions, thoughts, and emotions in the minds of the people who experience them. Here is Simmel’s description of this phenomenon:

The psychological foundation, upon which the metropolitan individuality is erected, is the intensification of emotional life due to the swift and continuous shift of external and internal stimuli. Man is a creature whose existence is dependent on differences, i.e., his mind is stimulated by the difference between present impressions and those which have preceded. Lasting impressions, the slightness in their differences, the habituated regularity of their course and contrasts between them, consume, so to speak, less mental energy than the rapid telescoping of changing images, pronounced differences within what is grasped at a single glance, and the unexpectedness of violent stimuli. To the extent that the metropolis creates these psychological conditions—with every crossing of the street, with the tempo and multiplicity of economic, occupational and social life—it creates in the sensory foundations of mental life, and in the degree of awareness necessitated by our organization as creatures dependent on differences, a deep contrast with the slower, more habitual, more smoothly flowing rhythm of the sensory-mental phase of small town and rural existence.¹⁵

In the light of Simmel’s description, Anna’s carriage ride becomes a kind of encapsulation of the modern metropolis in its effect on mental life. And the description fits equally well the many scenes in *Ulysses* in which Bloom is on the move through the city. It is no coincidence

¹⁵ Simmel, “Metropolis and Mental Life,” 325.

that the first novel to use the stream of consciousness extensively is also the urban novel par excellence. Let us examine a scene in *Ulysses* that shows off the technique's ability to render the interaction of a person's mind with a city's barrage of stimuli: Bloom's own carriage ride in "Hades." When the following passage begins, Bloom has just read in the obituary section of his newspaper an announcement that includes the phrase "since dear Henry fled," and this reminds him of his letter from Martha (the woman with whom he is conducting a flirtation through the mail), since it begins "Dear Henry Flower" (the pseudonym Bloom has used with her).

I tore up the envelope? Yes. Where did I put her letter after I read it in the bath? He patted his waistcoat pocket. There all right. Dear Henry fled. Before my patience are exhausted.

National school. Meade's yard. The hazard. Only two there now. Nodding. Full as a tick. Too much bone in their skulls. The other trotting round with a fare. An hour ago I was passing there. The jarvies raised their hats.

A pointsman's back straightened itself upright suddenly against a tramway standard by Mr Bloom's window. Couldn't they invent something automatic so that the wheel itself much handier? Well but that fellow would lose his job then? Well but then another fellow would get a job making the new invention?

Antient concert rooms. Nothing on there. A man in a buff suit with a crape armlet. Not much grief there. Quarter mourning. People in law perhaps.

They went past the bleak pulpit of saint Mark's, under the railway bridge, past the Queen's theatre: in silence. (91-92)

Like the passage from *Anna Karenin*, this one deftly renders the barrage of sensory stimuli characteristic of city life, and the desultory leaps of thought that result from it. The stream of consciousness, with its reduction of psycho-narration to noun phrases, allows Joyce to leave Bloom's consciousness only when he wants to; even though he switches from thoughts to perceptions five times, he pulls us up from the depths of Bloom's consciousness to render perceptions only twice—when he varies his presentation by switching to external narration (first from "The jarvies" to "Bloom's window," and later from "They went past" to the end). The stream of consciousness thus lets him avoid the jarring continual changes in distance from the character's psyche that any other means would necessitate. And in this passage we also see the fun Joyce has with the technique, in some of the ways he takes it further than Tolstoy. He injects it with verisimilitude by peppering Bloom's thoughts with a variety of mental flaws of the kind a normal mind possesses, especially flaws of memory; here there is the difficulty we often have in remembering something we have done automatically or without giving it much thought—Bloom momentarily doesn't remember that he tore up the envelope of Martha's letter; nor can he remember where he put the letter after he read it. This is similar to the moment in "Calypso" when he can't remember what he did with his hat: "Where is my hat, by the way? Must have put it back on the peg. Or hanging up on the floor. Funny I don't remember that" (68). Joyce also uses the stream of consciousness to bring out Bloom's repeated traits: the pointsman, aptly enough, is one of the sensory stimuli that make Bloom's thoughts change rails, and the thought Bloom has at his appearance brings out Bloom's trait of always looking for ways society could do things better. This is the Bloom-as-social-architect theme, which reaches its culmination in the long hallucination in Nighttown where he becomes the

messiah of Ireland. Finally, Bloom notices the man in the crape armlet because he himself is in mourning—here we see the way a person’s preoccupations of the moment can condition his perception, as Bloom himself realizes when he notices the widow in her weeds while stepping out of the church in “Lotus Eaters”: “Notice because I’m in mourning myself” (84).¹⁶ Joyce uses the stream of consciousness to explore the subtle workings of the psyche.

There is one more feature of the technique that is central to Joyce’s project in *Ulysses*: its unique ability to render ordinary, idle, random thoughts in a way that makes them interesting to read. Consider Bloom’s musings when he is standing behind Tom Kernan in the cemetery: “Nice soft tweed Ned Lambert has in that suit. Tinge of purple. I had one like that when we lived in Lombard street west. Dressy fellow he was once. Used to change three suits in the day. Must get that grey suit of mine turned by Mesias. Hello. It’s dyed. His wife I forgot he’s not married or his landlady ought to have picked out those threads for him” (110). These are free-floating, idle thoughts—unimportant and unconnected to any larger discourse around them. Expressed by any other technique, they become intolerable to read:

Psycho-narration: He admired the soft tweed of Ned Lambert’s suit, and its tinge of purple, remembering that he had had a suit like that himself when he lived in Lombard Street West. Lambert was once a dressy fellow, Bloom remembered—he used to change three suits in the day. And these thoughts reminded Bloom that he needed to get a grey suit of his turned by Mesias. . . .

Narrated monologue: It was a nice soft tweed Ned Lambert had in that suit, with its tinge of purple. He had one like that himself when he lived in Lombard Street West. Lambert was once a dressy fellow; used to change three suits in the day. He must get that gray suit of his turned my Mesias. . . .

Quoted monologue: He reflected, “Nice soft tweed Ned Lambert has in that suit. Tinge of purple. I had one like that when we lived in Lombard street west. Dressy fellow he was once. Used to change three suits in the day. Must get that grey suit of mine turned by Mesias. . . .”

With all of these traditional techniques, there is no longer the illusion of unmediated access to Bloom’s thoughts. Even in traditional quoted monologue, which simply adds an inquit phrase (such as “He reflected”) and quotation marks, we feel the presence of a narrator who is presenting to us the character’s thoughts, and who *selects* what thoughts to present. We feel impatient with the narrator’s selecting such random, unimportant thoughts unconnected to the main threads of his story. But when the very same thoughts are expressed in stream of consciousness, the sense of a selecting narrator disappears, and with it disappears our impatience. The same applies to Bloom’s thoughts about his feet earlier in “Hades”—“Glad I took that bath. Feel my feet quite clean. But I wish Mrs Fleming had darned these socks better” (89)—and to hundreds of similar musings that flutter across Bloom mind in the course of the novel. The stream of consciousness thus allows Joyce to bring into his depiction of human beings a whole department of mental life that fiction almost always leaves out.

¹⁶ Nabokov finds the same phenomenon in Chekhov’s story “In the Gully”: “Lipa sees and hears that little boy because she herself is going to have a baby” (*LRL* 271).

Verisimilitude and Pattern

If *Ulysses* takes verisimilitude to new extremes, it also does this with “pattern,” the weaving of subtle designs I explored in my discussion of *Pnin*. *Ulysses* is at once and in many ways the most verisimilar and the most patterned of artworks. And the allure of Joyce’s patterns very often depends on the truth to life of the elements that compose them.

It has long been understood that many of *Ulysses*’s patterns involve correspondences between the novel and the *Odyssey*. But as far as I know, one of the most impressive instances of this has yet to be expounded in print. In “Hades,” a set of subtle correspondences to classical depictions of the underworld transform Bloom’s carriage into a boat on the river Styx. The pattern begins when Bloom and his companions see through the window of the carriage a turf barge on the Royal Canal.

Crossguns bridge: the royal canal.

Water rushed roaring through the sluices. A man stood on his dropping barge, between clamps of turf. On the towpath by the lock a slacketethered horse. Aboard of the *Bugabu*.

Their eyes watched him. On the slow weedy waterway he had floated on his raft coastward over Ireland drawn by a haulage rope past beds of reeds, over slime, mudchoked bottles, carrion dogs. (99)

Given the context (a journey to a cemetery that echoes in various ways the Greco-Roman underworld) the bargeman on the canal echoes Charon, the ferryman who, in classical mythology, carries the souls of the dead across the river Styx into Hades.¹⁷ And to mark the correspondence, Joyce includes in this passage the English word that is nearest in sound to Charon’s name: “carrion.”

Having noticed the funeral procession, the bargeman lifts his hat in respect for Dignam, and just a few lines later Bloom’s carriage turns onto Finglas Road, the road that runs along the southern edge of the cemetery and from which one reaches the gate.

The carriage steered left for Finglas road.

The stonemason’s yard on the right. Last lap. Crowded on the spit of land silent shapes appeared, white, sorrowful, holding out calm hands, knelt in grief, pointing. Fragments of shapes, hewn. In white silence: appealing. The best obtainable. Thos. H. Dennany, monumental builder and sculptor. (99)

The term “spit of land,” which here must mean a narrow strip of ground the mortuary statues are displayed on, is almost always used to indicate a pointed strip of land projecting onto water from a shore. The statues—the white, silent, sorrowful “shapes”—suggest ghosts, and especially (since they are “crowded on the spit of land”) the ghosts on the bank of the Styx in *The Aeneid*:

A crowd came running and thronging the banks of the river:
men and mothers, the forms of great-hearted heroes,
relieved of life, boys and unmarried daughters,
children placed on pyres before the eyes of their parents:
dense as leaves falling and drifting in forests
in autumn at first frost, or birds flocking to seashore

¹⁷ See Gifford, 114.

from whirlpools at sea when the cold season pursues them
over the waves and sends them to sun-loving country.

They stood there begging to ride first on the water.

Hands reached out, they longed for the opposite shoreline.¹⁸

In Joyce's description as in Virgil's, the spirits are holding out their hands.

This subtle transformation of the statues in the stone carver's lot into ghosts along the shore of the Styx (or along a spit of land jutting out from it) transforms the moving carriage into a boat bringing Bloom to Hades. The transformation takes place for an instant, and then we're back in a carriage driving on Finglas Road. But when we reach the edge of the cemetery, the metamorphosis happens again:

The high railings of Prospect rippled past their gaze. Dark poplars, rare white forms. Forms more frequent, white shapes thronged amid the trees, white forms and fragments streaming by mutely, sustaining vain gestures on the air.

The felly harshed against the curbstone: stopped. (100)

With a single word, "rippled," Joyce transforms the railings' vertical bars (which, from Bloom's perspective in the carriage, are moving sideways) into a series of thin waves on water. This is brilliant for two reasons. First, it is based on a keen perception—the reason the metaphor works is that, from a car or carriage moving past them, the bars of a railing of the kind Joyce has in mind really do resemble ripples moving on water; the two images share a "general essence," to borrow a term from Proust. Second, like the "spit of land" with the statues similar to ghosts, the metaphor delicately transforms the carriage carrying Bloom to the cemetery into a boat on the river Styx. The transformation is again conjoined with a vision of statue-ghosts, this time inside the cemetery-underworld. And in the carriage's coming to a halt while harshing the curbstone, Joyce beautifully suggests a boat scraping the shore as it lands.



A railing of Prospect Cemetery

Much of the beauty of this pattern is in the way its several metamorphoses (the bargeman turned into Charon, the statues turned into ghosts, the cemetery turned into Hades, the carriage turned into a boat on the Styx) take place without breaking the narrative's truth to life. The descriptions of the statues, for example, evocative as they are of ghosts, plausibly render what Bloom sees; the statues are "shapes" and "forms" because he sees them only from a distance.

In the pattern I have just laid out, there are a series of correspondences between events, objects, and characters of *Ulysses* and events, objects, and characters of the *Odyssey* and the *Aeneid*. Correspondences of this kind are found throughout the novel, and they usually serve as links between a single chapter of *Ulysses* and a single episode of the *Odyssey*. In "Aeolus," Bloom's brief journey from the office of the *Freeman's Journal* (the newspaper for which he works) to Dillon's auction house and back again echoes the journey of Odysseus from Aeolia to

¹⁸ Virgil, *Aeneid*, 131. Gifford cites these lines as a source not for the passage I'm discussing but for the next one I will quote.

Ithaca and back when the keeper of the winds sends him off. And the “file of capering newsboys in Mr Bloom’s wake” (129) (they follow him and imitate his walk when he leaves the newspaper’s office) corresponds to Aeolus’s winds, which follow Odysseus’s ship, blowing its sails toward Ithaca. The word “wake” subtly marks the correspondence, since, when used literally, it refers to the trail of waves at the rear of a moving ship. But here, too, the effect relies on plausibility—on the fact that “in Mr. Bloom’s wake” also makes perfect sense as a description of the newsboys’ position.

Correspondences like these are one of Joyce’s tools for linking his novel to Homer’s epic. Another is his motifs. Many of the novel’s chapters have a motif that is taken from the episode of the *Odyssey* to which the chapter corresponds. “Aeolus,” for example, has a wind motif, which includes breezes opening doors and blowing papers off a desk; Simon Dedalus blowing out his mustache; wind-related expressions such as “gale days” and “windfall”; a quotation of the scene in *The Inferno* in which Francesca of Rimini spins in a whirlwind; and much more. Joyce, like Nabokov, was very fond of motifs, but while motifs in a Nabokov novel are easily quantified—the squirrel motif in *Invitation of a Small Animal*, for example, appears eight times—I would not attempt to count the references to food in “Lestrygonians,” to death in “Hades,” or to music in “Sirens.” Now, of course some of these references are merely what one would expect given what the chapter depicts. In a chapter depicting a funeral, there will naturally be plenty of references to things having to do with death: the coffin, the grave, the mourners, and conversations about how the man died are all likely to appear, and the meditations of a friend of the deceased (if the writer lets us in on his thoughts) may very well roam into areas of death beyond those he sees before him. But in “Hades,” the number of references to death goes far beyond the plausible, and this is why one can speak of a “death motif” in the chapter. In “Lestrygonians,” too, there are far more references to food and eating than the fact that it is lunchtime—or that parts of the chapter take place in pubs—would explain. Having just been reminded of Molly’s mispronunciation of “metempsychosis” as “met him pike hoses,” Bloom reflects that she is “not exactly witty.” But then he has second thoughts, remembering the witty name “base barreltone” she had coined for Ben Dollard, a corpulent amateur singer with a deep, resonant voice. And from here Bloom’s mind circles back to the subject of food: “Appetite like an albatross. Get outside of a baron of beef. Powerful man he was at stowing away number one Bass” (154) (Number One Bass was a strong English ale). He then sees a file of advertisers called “sandwichmen,” a name that derives from the way the two large boards covering their fronts and backs resembled pieces of bread in a sandwich (here again, an image having to do with food). One of these men takes out a chunk of bread and crams it into his mouth, prompting Bloom to reflect on bread as the staple food of Ireland and on the skimpy diet such a job provides for: “Our staple food. Three bob a day, walking along the gutters, street after street. Just keep skin and bone together, bread and skilly” (154). This method of advertisement, Bloom reflects, does not bring in much money; much better for the firm they work for (a stationer called Hely’s) would be Bloom’s own idea of a “transparent showcart with two smart girls sitting inside writing letters, copybooks, envelopes, blottingpaper”: “I bet that would have caught on. Smart girls writing something catch the eye at once. Everyone dying to know what she’s writing. Get twenty of them round you if you stare at nothing. Have a finger in the pie. Women too. Curiosity. Pillar of salt” (154). With Bloom’s observation that everyone wants “a finger in the pie”—that when someone shows great interest in something, everyone wants to know what it is—Joyce cleverly reprises the food motif, which comes back once again

with “Pillar of salt,” Bloom’s remembrance of the story of Lot’s wife, who is transformed into a pillar of salt when she looks back (from curiosity, according to Bloom) on burning Sodom. All these alimentary allusions are only a tiny portion of the chapter’s total number.

In his employment of motifs, Joyce plays a familiar double game: in our example from “Lestrygonians,” while the *series* of allusions to food is implausible, imparting to the world of *Ulysses* a higher degree of order than one finds in real life, each appearance of the motif is in itself perfectly natural. Bloom’s use of the expression “to have a finger in the pie,” for example, is perfectly believable given the thought he wants to express. But in filling certain chapters with innumerable instances of a theme, Joyce also does something else.

We found in Nabokov a convergence of the two projects of weaving subtle patterns and of faithfully representing reality: a careful observer of life will, according to Nabokov, find it replete with patterns of the sort we associate with art. In weaving his subtle designs, Nabokov thus saw himself as imitating nature, or, as he says in *Speak, Memory*, the “unknown players of games” who plan our lives. In *Ulysses*, too, the project of representing life and the project of patterning converge, but in a very different way. “Hades,” “Lestrygonians,” and “Sirens” each take for a theme something universal in human experience. Death, food, and music are part of all our lives; they are central to the experience of being human. And in each of these chapters, the instances of the theme are not only extremely numerous but are also encyclopedic: together they aspire to show the topic in all its various aspects and manifestations. In “Lestrygonians,” Joyce’s encyclopedia of food and eating, there is the necessity of food for life, its passage through the body, its conversion to energy, and “its excretion as dung. There is breast feeding, baby food, and tricks for getting babies to eat (“All my babies, she said. The spoon of pap in her mouth before she fed them. O, that’s nyumnyum.” [162]); vegetarianism, health food, and forms of alimentary abstention; the localness of certain foods and the roles they play in remembrance and nostalgia (“What was it she wanted? The Malaga raisins. Thinking of Spain.” [151]); and the way certain foods are markers of social status (“The *élite*. *Crème de la crème*. They want special dishes to pretend they’re.” [175]). A set of imagined newspaper ads brings up the importance of food in employment: “Cook and general, exc. cuisine, housemaid kept. Wanted live man for spirit counter. Resp. girl (R.C.) wishes to hear of post in fruit or pork shop” (160). And we also get a sampling of the myriad English expressions taken from the world of food, such as “the next thing on the menu” and “You can make bacon of that,” and of the various types of meals, including picnics with their potential for messiness and uninvited insect guests; high tea; formal dinners; charity meals for the poor; and, of course, meals at pubs. There are “All the odd things people pick up for food. Out of shells, periwinkles with a pin, off trees, snails out of the ground the French eat, out of the sea with bait on a hook. Silly fish learn nothing in a thousand years” (174). There are cultural culinary curiosities (“Chinese eating eggs fifty years old”) and strange personal likings (Milly’s liking “rock oil and flour,” Bloom raw pastry dough). There is cannibalism, hunting as sport and necessity, the notion that certain foods are aphrodisiacs, the role of food in religion (in fasts, dietary restrictions, and special holiday dishes), the inadequate diets of the poor, farcical ideas about how eating might be changed in the future (such as the notion that we will just be eating pills), and much, much more. Joyce’s treatment of food is not, of course, exhaustive. But like an encyclopedia, it is certainly comprehensive. If one were embarking on a meditation on food in human life, “Lestrygonians” would be a good place to start, since it vividly brings together, in a brief experience of reading, so many aspects of the theme.

I would be remiss to end a study of lifelikeness in *Ulysses* without having mentioned the vivacity of its images. Let us see how Joyce uses gesture and verbal precision to bring his characters to vivid life in the Father Conmee section of “Wandering Rocks.” On his way to Artane, a place on the outskirts of Dublin where he will speak with the director of an institute for destitute children about admitting Dignam’s son, Conmee rides a tram. “Father Conmee sat in a corner of the tramcar, a blue ticket tucked with care in the eye of one plump kid glove, while four shillings, a sixpence and five pennies chuted from his other plump glovepalm into his purse” (222). Notice how perfectly the word “chuted” expresses what Joyce had in mind. Conmee’s palm, which is naturally where the coins would be after the conductor has given them as change, is like a chute the coins slide down. An average writer would have said that the coins “dropped” into the purse, or that Father Conmee “put the coins in his purse,” neither of which comes close to Joyce’s precision (both, in fact, would be false). And as we’ve seen happen in Nabokov, the precision gives rise to a vivid mental image.

The ticket in the eye of Conmee’s other glove is also an image worth noting. It has the quality I’ve called “freshness,” like the blade of grass serving as a bookmark in *Pnin*.

When Father Conmee has put away his purse, we get a careful little sketch of the passengers sitting across from him: “The gentleman with the glasses opposite Father Conmee had finished explaining and looked down. His wife, Father Conmee supposed. A tiny yawn opened the mouth of the wife of the gentleman with the glasses. She raised her small gloved fist, yawned ever so gently, tiptapping her small gloved fist on her opening mouth and smiled tinily, sweetly” (222). First, notice the unusual lack of a referent for “had finished explaining”: this is the first we have heard of this man and his conversation, so the normal way to present it would be to say that he “had finished explaining something.” The sentence creates in the reader something similar to Conmee’s experience of hearing only the very end of the explanation—the reader is denied the referent just as Conmee, who has begun only now to pay attention to his fellow passengers, is denied knowledge of what the man is explaining. Next there is the man’s “looking down,” a detail that beautifully captures something typical of passengers in trams (or subways)—the way they often will look down to avoid seeming to stare at the people across from them. And then there is the woman’s yawn, and the movement she makes with her fist, so finely observed and rendered that any attempt at paraphrase destroys it. This is all we see of the couple—their presence in the novel is entirely contained in four sentences. Yet Joyce’s subtle art endows them with vivid life—they are alive in our imaginations in a way most characters in fiction never are, even across hundreds of pages.

Having alighted from the tram and walked for a while on rural Malahide Road, “Father Conmee drew off his gloves and took his rededged breviary out” (224). Joyce brings back a detail his reader may by now have forgotten—Conmee’s gloves, which have been shown in the scene on the tram two pages earlier. This re-presentation of a prop—of an object a character carries with him—to the reader’s mental eye is one of Joyce’s deliberate techniques. The penultimate section of “Wandering Rocks” begins with Dignam’s son Patrick carrying a package of pork steaks: “Opposite Ruggy O’Donohoe’s Master Patrick Aloysius Dignam, pawing the pound and a half of Mangan’s, late Fehrenbach’s, porksteaks he had been sent for, went along warm Wicklow street dawdling” (250). About a page later, Joyce brings back those steaks:

“Master Dignam walked along Nassau street, shifted the porksteaks to his other hand” (251). This technique bestows on a character a kind of real-life continuity; we see Father Conmee’s gloves again, just as, if we were somehow really there with him, following him and observing him, we would see them more than once. But Father Conmee’s removing his gloves before he takes out his breviary is also another instance of imaginative virtuosity: he *would* take off his gloves to handle the book, since turning pages with gloved fingers is awkward, but this is something most writers would not think of. And notice the way Joyce does not simply say that Conmee “took off” his gloves; “took off” is relatively abstract, whereas Joyce’s “drew off” is much more precise and thus creates a crisper image.

At the end of the Conmee section, when Lynch and his girlfriend appear from behind a hedge, “Father Conmee blessed both gravely and turned a thin page of his breviary” (224). In calling the page “thin,” Joyce is not simply using an adjective to make an image more specific: he is expressing a quality that differentiates the pages of a breviary from the pages of a normal book; he is capturing, in other words, something of the pages’ “essence.” This, too, is one of Joyce’s deliberate techniques. When Bloom enters the church in “Lotus Eaters,” “The cold smell of sacred stone called him. He trod the worn steps, pushed the swingdoor and entered softly by the rere” (80). With “worn,” Joyce captures something that differentiates the steps of old stone churches from normal ones. And we see this same technique again in “Wandering Rocks,” in Corny Kelleher’s “long daybook” (224).

In the 2010 edition of the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory*, here is what one finds in the entry under “Realist Novel,” written by Alan Palmer: “A realist novel is one which appears to provide an accurate, objective, and confident description or authentic impression of reality. This semiotic effect, which rests on the assumption that language is an undistorted mirror of, or transparent window on, the ‘real,’ is based on a set of literary conventions for producing a lifelike illusion.”¹⁹ This definition that oozes contempt for the notion that a work of literature can capture or illuminate reality presents an idea of realism that, while now on the wane, still enjoys a good deal of influence. Some of Palmer’s phrases bring us back to arguments I countered in my introduction; to call realism a “semiotic effect” is to conflate literary images with signs, and the “transparent window on the ‘real’” takes us back to the idea that calling a verbal depiction true to life somehow implicates the speaker in a naive understanding of language that ignores the way different languages partition the world in different ways. But here there is also the notion that the effect of lifelikeness in fiction is brought about by literary conventions. In *Ulysses* we see very clearly how backward this is; Joyce creates his realist effects not by following conventions but by smashing them. In his use of the various techniques I have presented in this chapter—verisimilar obscurity, the interweaving of the fictional with the real, verisimilar cross references, the depiction of “low” realities, and the “stream of consciousness” technique—Joyce achieves lifelikeness by breaking with convention and tradition to push literature’s depiction of human life closer to the life we experience. And if his ways of using these techniques became common—like the accurate foreshortening of feet by early fifteenth-century painters, or the honest portrayal of love by Jane Austen—their effect

¹⁹ Palmer, 491.

of lifelikeness would be lost. This is part of the essence of all the different sources of lifelikeness we have explored in the course of this study; essential to their effect is that they break with common ways of representing things.

What new, ingenious ways will writers find to break with conventions of their art and push fiction closer to life? All we can say for certain is that the discoveries will never have end—that lifelikeness in fiction, like reality itself, is a limitless terrain of exploration.

Appendix: Proust Quotations in French

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“the invisible vocation of which this book is the history”

la vocation invisible dont cet ouvrage est l'histoire (1053).¹

“the most piquant anecdotes . . .”

les plus curieuses anecdotes, qui font la matière inépuisable, divertissement des soirées solitaires pour le lecteur, du *Journal des Goncourt* (2149)

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“something less to be regretted . . .”

“quelque chose de moins regrettable, comme si la littérature ne révélait pas de vérité profonde; et en même temps il me semblait triste que la littérature ne fût pas ce que j'avais cru” (2140).

Certainly, I had never concealed from myself . . .

Certes, je ne m'étais jamais dissimulé que je ne savais pas écouter ni, dès que je n'étais plus seul, regarder. Une vieille femme ne montrait à mes yeux aucune espèce de collier de perles et ce qu'on en disait n'entrait pas dans mes oreilles. Tout de même, ces êtres-là je les avais connus dans la vie quotidienne, j'avais souvent dîné avec eux, c'était les Verdurin, c'était le duc de Guermantes, c'était les Cottard, chacun d'eux m'avait . . . semblé insipide; je me rappelais les vulgarités sans nombre dont chacun était composé (2147).

In so far as my own character was concerned . . .

En ce qui me concernait personnellement, mon incapacité de regarder et d'écouter, que le journal cité avait si péniblement illustrée pour moi, n'était pourtant pas totale. Il y avait en moi un personnage qui savait plus ou moins bien regarder, mais c'était un personnage intermittent, ne reprenant vie que quand se manifestait quelque essence générale, commune à plusieurs choses, qui faisait sa nourriture et sa joie. Alors le personnage regardait et écoutait, mais à une certaine profondeur seulement, de sorte que l'observation n'en profitait pas. Comme un géomètre qui dépouillant les choses de leurs qualités sensibles ne voit que leur substratum linéaire, ce que racontaient les gens m'échappait, car ce qui m'intéressait, c'était non ce qu'ils voulaient dire mais la manière dont ils le disaient, en tant qu'elle était révélatrice de leur caractère ou de leurs ridicules; ou plutôt c'était un objet qui avait toujours été plus particulièrement le but de ma recherche parce qu'il me donnait un plaisir spécifique, le point qui était commun à un être et à un autre. Ce n'était que quand je l'apercevais que mon esprit—jusque-là sommeillant, même derrière l'activité apparente de

¹ Cited page numbers refer to the 1999 single-volume Gallimard edition of *À la recherche du temps perdu*.

ma conversation dont l'animation masquait pour les autres un total engourdissement spirituel—se mettait tout à coup joyeusement en chasse, mais ce qu'il poursuivait alors—par exemple l'identité du salon Verdurin, dans divers lieux et divers temps—était situé à mi-profondeur, au-delà de l'apparence elle-même, dans une zone un peu plus en retrait. Aussi le charme apparent, copiable, des êtres m'échappait parce que je n'avais pas la faculté de m'arrêter à lui, comme un chirurgien qui, sous le poli d'un ventre de femme, verrait le mal interne qui le ronge. J'avais beau dîner en ville, je ne voyais pas les convives, parce que, quand je croyais les regarder, je les radiographiais.

Il en résultait qu'en réunissant toutes les remarques que j'avais pu faire dans un dîner sur les convives, le dessin des lignes tracées par moi figurait un ensemble de lois psychologiques où l'intérêt propre qu'avait eu dans ses discours le convive ne tenait presque aucune place. Mais cela enlevait-il tout mérite à mes portraits puisque je ne les donnais pas pour tels? Si l'un, dans le domaine de la peinture, met en évidence certaines vérités relatives au volume, à la lumière, au mouvement, cela fait-il qu'il soit nécessairement inférieur à tel portrait ne lui ressemblant aucunement de la même personne, dans lequel mille détails qui sont omis dans le premier seront minutieusement relatés, deuxième portrait d'où l'on pourra conclure que le modèle était ravissant tandis qu'on l'eût cru laid dans le premier, ce qui peut avoir une importance documentaire et même historique, mais n'est pas nécessairement une vérité d'art. (2147-48)

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Impelled by the instinct that was in him . . .

Mû par l'instinct qui était en lui, l'écrivain, bien avant qu'il crût le devenir un jour, omettait régulièrement de regarder tant de choses que les autres remarquent, ce qui le faisait accuser par les autres de distraction et par lui-même de ne savoir ni écouter ni voir; pendant ce temps-là il dictait à ses yeux et à ses oreilles de retenir à jamais ce qui semblait aux autres des riens puérils, l'accent avec lequel avait été dite une phrase, et l'air de figure et le mouvement d'épaules qu'avait fait à un certain moment telle personne dont il ne sait peut-être rien d'autre, il y a de cela bien des années, et cela parce que cet accent, il l'avait déjà entendu, ou sentait qu'il pourrait le réentendre, que c'était quelque chose de renouvelable, de durable; c'est le sentiment du général qui dans l'écrivain futur choisit lui-même ce qui est général et pourra entrer dans l'oeuvre d'art. Car il n'a écouté les autres que quand, si bêtes ou si fous qu'ils fussent, répétant comme des perroquets ce que disent les gens de caractère semblable, ils s'étaient faits par là même les oiseaux prophètes, les porte-parole d'une loi psychologique. Il ne se souvient que du général. Par de tels accents, par de tels mouvements de physionomie, eussent-ils été vus dans sa plus lointaine enfance, la vie des autres était représentée en lui et, quand plus tard il écrirait, viendrait composer d'un mouvement d'épaules commun à beaucoup, vrai comme s'il était noté sur le cahier d'un anatomiste, mais ici pour exprimer une vérité psychologique, et emmanchant sur ses épaules un mouvement de cou fait par un autre, chacun ayant donné son instant de pose. (2288-89)

Page 12

“You haven’t thought of giving the Institut an address . . .

“Vous n’avez pas l’intention d’entretenir l’Institut du prix du pain pendant la Fronde? demanda timidement l’historien de la Fronde à M. de Norpois. Vous pourriez trouver là un succès considérable (ce qui voulait dire me faire une réclame monstre)”, ajouta-t-il en souriant à l’Ambassadeur avec une pusillanimité mais aussi une tendresse qui lui fit lever les paupières et découvrir ses yeux, grands comme un ciel. Il me semblait avoir vu ce regard, pourtant je ne connaissais que d’aujourd’hui l’historien. Tout d’un coup je me rappelai: ce même regard, je l’avais vu dans les yeux d’un médecin brésilien qui prétendait guérir les étouffements du genre de ceux que j’avais par d’absurdes inhalations d’essences de plantes. Comme, pour qu’il prît plus soin de moi, je lui avais dit que je connaissais le professeur Cottard, il m’avait répondu, comme dans l’intérêt de Cottard: “Voilà un traitement, si vous lui en parliez, qui lui fournirait la matière d’une retentissante communication à l’Académie de médecine!” Il n’avait osé insister mais m’avait regardé de ce même air d’interrogation timide, intéressée et suppliante que je venais d’admirer chez l’historien de la Fronde. Certes ces deux hommes ne se connaissaient pas et ne se ressemblaient guère, mais les lois psychologiques ont comme les lois physiques une certaine généralité. Et, si les conditions nécessaires sont les mêmes, un même regard éclaire des animaux humains différents, comme un même ciel matinal des lieux de la terre situés bien loin l’un de l’autre et qui ne se sont jamais vus. (919)

Page 13

“the charm of each of them lay . . .”

le charme de chacune consistait en une sorte de métamorphose des chose représentées (656).

Sometimes . . . I had been led by some effect of sunlight . . .

Parfois . . . il m’était arrivé grâce à un effet de soleil, de prendre une partie plus sombre de la mer pour une côte éloignée, ou de regarder avec joie une zone bleue et fluide sans savoir si elle appartenait à la mer ou au ciel. Bien vite mon intelligence rétablissait entre les éléments la séparation que mon impression avait abolie. C’est ainsi qu’il m’arrivait à Paris, dans ma chambre, d’entendre une dispute, presque une émeute, jusqu’à ce que j’eusse rapporté à sa cause, par exemple une voiture dont le roulement approchait, ce bruit dont j’éliminais alors ces vociférations aiguës et discordantes que mon oreille avait réellement entendues, mais que mon intelligence savait que des roues ne produisaient pas. (656-57)

Page 14

“How often, when driving . . .”

Que de fois en voiture, ne découvrons-nous pas une longue rue claire qui commence à quelques mètres de nous, alors que seul devant nous un pan de mur violemment éclairé nous a donné le mirage de la profondeur! (1069)

“prove to us that we should never succeed in identifying objects . . .”

nous prouvent que nous n'identifierions pas les objets si nous ne faisons pas intervenir le raisonnement. . . . Les surfaces et les volumes sont en réalité indépendants des noms d'objets que notre mémoire leur impose quand nous les avons reconnus (1069-70).

On the days, few and far between, of really fine weather . . .

Les jours, assez rares, de vrai beau temps, la chaleur avait tracé sur les eaux, comme à travers champs, une route poussiéreuse et blanche derrière laquelle la fine pointe d'un bateau de pêche dépassait comme un clocher villageois. Un remorqueur dont on ne voyait que la cheminée fumait au loin comme une usine écartée, tandis que seul à l'horizon un carré blanc et bombé, peint sans doute par une voile, mais qui semblait compact et comme calcaire, faisait penser à l'angle ensoleillé de quelque bâtiment isolé, hôpital ou école. Et les nuages et le vent, les jours où il s'en ajoutait au soleil, parachevaient sinon l'erreur du jugement, du moins l'illusion du premier regard, la suggestion qu'il éveille dans l'imagination. Car l'alternance d'espaces de couleurs nettement tranchées, comme celles qui résultent dans la campagne, de la contiguïté de cultures différentes, les inégalités âpres, jaunes, et comme boueuses de la surface marine, les levées, les talus qui dérobaient à la vue une barque où une équipe d'agiles matelots semblait moissonner, tout cela par les jours orageux faisait de l'océan quelque chose d'aussi varié, d'aussi consistant, d'aussi accidenté, d'aussi peuplé, d'aussi civilisé que la terre carrossable sur laquelle j'allais autrefois et ne devais pas tarder à faire des promenades. (1347-48)

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will illustrate a law of perspective . . .

illustrera une loi de la perspective, nous montrera telle cathédrale que nous avons l'habitude de voir au milieu de la ville, prise au contraire d'un point choisi d'où elle aura l'air trente fois plus haute que les maisons et faisant éperon au bord du fleuve d'où elle est en réalité distante. Or, l'effort d'Elstir de ne pas exposer les choses telles qu'il savait qu'elles étaient, mais selon ces illusions optiques dont notre vision première est faite, l'avait précisément amené à mettre en lumière certaines de ces lois de perspective, plus frappantes alors, car l'art était le premier à les dévoiler. Un fleuve, à cause du tournant de son cours, un golfe à cause du rapprochement apparent des falaises, avaient l'air de creuser au milieu de la plaine ou des montagnes un lac absolument fermé de toutes parts. Dans un tableau pris de Balbec par une torride journée d'été, un rentrant de la mer semblait, enfermé dans des murailles de granit rose, n'être pas la mer, laquelle commençait plus loin. La continuité de l'océan n'était suggérée que par des mouettes qui, tournoyant sur ce qui semblait au spectateur de la pierre, humaient au contraire l'humidité du flot. D'autres lois se dégageaient de cette même toile comme, au pied des immenses falaises, la grâce lilliputienne des voiles blanches sur le miroir bleu où elles semblaient des papillons endormis, et certains contrastes entre la profondeur des ombres et la pâleur de la lumière. (659)

“Elstir engaged upon rendering some effect of perspective . . .”

Elstir en train de rendre un effet de perspective sans tenir compte des notions de physique

qu'il pouvait par ailleurs posséder (1181).

"runs close under the spires of the church . . ."

voisine les flèches de l'église, située en réalité à une grande distance, et a l'air de les refléter (1462).

Page 16

"it's an effect that Elstir is very fond of."

c'est un effet qu'Elstir aime beaucoup. J'en ai vu plusieurs esquisses chez lui (1462).

"philosophic theme for some great literary work"

sujet philosophique pour une grande œuvre littéraire (147)

"quite independently of all these literary preoccupations . . ."

bien en dehors de toutes ces préoccupations littéraires et ne s'y rattachant en rien, tout d'un coup un toit, un reflet de soleil sur une pierre, l'odeur d'un chemin me faisaient arrêter par un plaisir particulier qu'ils me donnaient, et aussi parce qu'ils avaient l'air de cacher au-delà de ce que je voyais, quelque chose qu'ils invitaient à venir prendre et que malgré mes efforts je n'arrivais pas à découvrir (147)

"It was certainly not impressions of this kind . . ."

Certes, ce n'était pas des impressions de ce genre qui pouvaient me rendre l'espérance que j'avais perdue de pouvoir être un jour écrivain et poète, car elles étaient toujours liées à un objet particulier dépourvu de valeur intellectuelle et ne se rapportant à aucune vérité abstraite (147)

Page 17

"The ideas formed by the pure intelligence . . ."

Les idées formées par l'intelligence pure n'ont qu'une vérité logique, une vérité possible, leur élection est arbitraire. . . . Seule l'impression, si chétive qu'en semble la matière, si insaisissable la trace, est un critérium de vérité, et à cause de cela mérite seule d'être appréhendée par l'esprit, car elle est seule capable, s'il sait en dégager cette vérité, de l'amener à une plus grande perfection et de lui donner une pure joie (2272-73).

"that unknown thing enveloped in a form or a scent"

cette chose inconnue qui s'enveloppait d'une forme ou d'un parfum (147)

"my mind would become littered . . ."

s'entassaient dans mon esprit (comme dans ma chambre les fleurs que j'avais cueillies dans mes promenades ou les objets qu'on m'avait donnés), une pierre où jouait un reflet, un toit, un son de cloche, une odeur de feuilles, bien des images différentes sous lesquelles il y a longtemps qu'est morte la réalité pressentie que je n'ai pas eu assez de volonté pour arriver à découvrir (148).

“once . . . I received an impression of this sort . . .”

une fois . . . j’eus une impression de ce genre et ne l’abandonnai pas sans un peu l’approfondir (148).

“At a bend in the road . . .”

Au tournant d’un chemin j’éprouvai tout à coup ce plaisir spécial qui ne ressemblait à aucun autre, à apercevoir les deux clochers de Martinville, sur lesquels donnait le soleil couchant et que le mouvement de notre voiture et les lacets du chemin avaient l’air de faire changer de place, puis celui de Vieuxvicq qui, séparé d’eux par une colline et une vallée, et situé sur un plateau plus élevé dans le lointain, semblait pourtant tout voisin d’eux (148).

“In noticing and registering the shape of their spires . . .”

En constatant, en notant la forme de leur flèche, le déplacement de leurs lignes, l’ensoleillement de leur surface, je sentais que je n’allais pas au bout de mon impression, que quelque chose était derrière ce mouvement, derrière cette clarté, quelque chose qu’ils semblaient contenir et dérober à la fois (148).

“presently their outlines and their sunlit surfaces . . .”

Bientôt leurs lignes et leurs surfaces ensoleillées, comme si elles avaient été une sorte d’écorce, se déchirèrent, un peu de ce qui m’était caché en elles m’apparut, j’eus une pensée qui n’existait pas pour moi l’instant avant, qui se formula en mots dans ma tête, et le plaisir que m’avait fait tout à l’heure éprouver leur vue s’en trouva tellement accru que, pris d’une sorte d’ivresse, je ne pus plus penser à autre chose (149).

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in another fashion certain obscure impressions . . .

d’une autre façon, des impressions obscures avaient quelquefois, et déjà à Combray du côté de Guermantes, sollicité ma pensée, à la façon de ces réminiscences, mais qui cachaient non une sensation d’autrefois mais une vérité nouvelle . . . Je me souvins . . . que déjà à Combray je fixais avec attention devant mon esprit quelque image qui m’avait forcé à la regarder, un nuage, un triangle, un clocher, une fleur, un caillou, en sentant qu’il y avait peut-être sous ces signes quelque chose de tout autre que je devais tâcher de découvrir, une pensée qu’ils traduisaient à la façon de ces caractères hiéroglyphiques qu’on croirait représenter seulement des objets matériels. . . . En somme, dans un cas comme dans l’autre, qu’il s’agît d’impressions comme celle que m’avait donnée la vue des clochers de Martinville, ou de réminiscences comme celle de l’inégalité des deux marches ou le goût de la madeleine, il fallait tâcher d’interpréter les sensations comme les signes d’autant de lois et d’idées, en essayant de penser, c’est-à-dire de faire sortir de la pénombre ce que j’avais senti, de le convertir en un équivalent spirituel. Or, ce moyen qui me paraissait le seul, qu’était-ce autre chose que faire une oeuvre d’art? (2271)

Page 19

“The minutes passed . . .”

Les minutes passaient, nous allions vite et pourtant les trois clochers étaient toujours au loin devant nous

“We had been so long in approaching them . . .”

Nous avons été si longs à nous rapprocher d’eux, que je pensais au temps qu’il faudrait encore pour les atteindre quand, tout d’un coup, la voiture ayant tourné, elle nous déposa à leurs pieds.

“painted upon the sky”

peintes sur le ciel

“had so entirely relieved my mind . . .”

m’avais si parfaitement débarrassé de ces clochers et de ce qu’ils cachaient derrière eux, que . . . je me mis à chanter à tue-tête (150).

Page 20

“In reality, every reader is, while he is reading . . .”

En réalité, chaque lecteur est quand il lit le propre lecteur de soi-même. L’ouvrage de l’écrivain n’est qu’une espèce d’instrument optique qu’il offre au lecteur afin de lui permettre de discerner ce que sans ce livre il n’eût peut-être pas vu en soi-même (2296-97).

Page 21

What diminished the pleasure which I was about to feel . . .

Ce qui diminuait le plaisir que j’allais avoir, ce n’était pas seulement l’imminence, mais l’incohérence de sa réalisation. Des lois aussi précises que celles de l’hydrostatique maintiennent la superposition des images que nous formons dans un ordre fixe que la proximité de l’événement bouleverse. Elstir allait m’appeler. Ce n’était pas du tout de cette façon que je m’étais souvent, sur la plage, dans ma chambre, figuré que je connaîtrais ces jeunes filles. Ce qui allait avoir lieu, c’était un autre événement auquel je n’étais pas préparé. Je n’y reconnaissais ni mon désir, ni son objet; je regrettais presque d’être sorti avec Elstir. (672)

Page 22

“They would not be ‘my’ readers . . .”

“Ils ne seraient pas, selon moi, mes lecteurs,” says Marcel, envisioning his future readers, “mais les propres lecteurs d’eux-mêmes, mon livre n’étant qu’une sorte de ces verres grossissants comme ceux que tendait à un acheteur l’opticien de Combray; mon livre, grâce auquel je leur fournirais le moyen de lire en eux-mêmes. De sorte que je ne leur demanderais pas de me louer ou de me dénigrer, mais seulement de me dire si c’est bien

cela, si les mots qu'ils lisent en eux-mêmes sont bien ceux que j'ai écrits" (2390).

"This malady which Swann's love had become . . ."

"Cette maladie qu'était l'amour de Swann," we are told at a certain point, has infiltrated his life so thoroughly that, "comme on dit en chirurgie, son amour n'était plus opérable" (249)

"examining his complaint . . ."

"considérant son mal avec autant de sagacité que s'il se l'était inoculé pour en faire l'étude, . . . se disait que quand il serait guéri ce que pourrait faire Odette lui serait indifférent" (243)

Page 23

"if, thanks to some accidental circumstance . . ."

"si, grâce à une circonstance quelconque . . . l'image d'Odette de Crécy venait à absorber toutes ces rêveries, si celles-ci n'étaient plus séparables de son souvenir, alors l'imperfection de son corps ne garderait plus aucune importance, ni qu'il eût été, plus ou moins qu'un autre corps, selon le goût de Swann, puisque devenu le corps de celle qu'il aimait, il serait désormais le seul qui fût capable de lui causer des joies et des tourments" (165)

"Seeing the room bare of her . . ."

En voyant qu'elle n'était plus dans le salon, Swann ressentit une souffrance au cœur; il tremblait d'être privé d'un plaisir qu'il mesurait pour la première fois, ayant eu jusque-là cette certitude de le trouver quand il le voulait qui pour tous les plaisirs nous diminue ou même nous empêche d'apercevoir aucunement leur grandeur (187).

Among all the methods by which love is brought into being

De tous les modes de production de l'amour, de tous les agents de dissémination du mal sacré, il est bien l'un des plus efficaces, ce grand souffle d'agitation qui parfois passe sur nous. Alors l'être avec qui nous nous plaisons à ce moment-là, le sort en est jeté, c'est lui que nous aimerons. Il n'est même pas besoin qu'il nous plût jusque-là plus ou même autant que d'autres. Ce qu'il fallait, c'est que notre goût pour lui devînt exclusif. Et cette condition-là est réalisée quand—à ce moment où il nous fait défaut—à la recherche des plaisirs que son agrément nous donnait, s'est brusquement substitué en nous un besoin anxieux, qui a pour objet cet être même, un besoin absurde, que les lois de ce monde rendent impossible à satisfaire et difficile à guérir—le besoin insensé et douloureux de le posséder. (190)

"even the tiniest particles of her heart"

les moindres parties de son cœur (221)

"a taste for the sensations which Odette's person gave him . . ."

un goût pour les sensations que lui donnait la personne d'Odette, pour le plaisir qu'il avait à admirer comme un spectacle ou à interroger comme un phénomène, le lever d'un de ses

regards, la formation d'un de ses sourires, l'émission d'une intonation de sa voix. Et ce plaisir différent de tous les autres avait fini par créer en lui un besoin d'elle et qu'elle seule pouvait assouvir par sa présence ou ses lettres (246).

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“At once he could imagine Odette puzzled . . .”

Déjà il se figurait Odette inquiète, affligée de n'avoir reçu ni visite ni lettre et cette image, en calmant sa jalousie, lui rendait facile de se déshabituer de la voir (247).

“suffered above all . . .”

souffrait surtout, et au point que même le son des instruments lui donnait envie de crier, de prolonger son exil dans ce lieu où Odette ne viendrait jamais, où personne, où rien ne la connaissait, d'où elle était entièrement absente (277).

“Yes, I know you have your banquet . . .”

Oui, je sais que vous avez votre banquet, je ne vous verrai donc que chez moi, mais ne venez pas trop tard (221)

“felt an exquisite pleasure . . .”

éprouvait une douceur profonde à l'entendre avouer ainsi devant tous, avec cette tranquille impudeur, leurs rendez-vous quotidiens du soir, la situation privilégiée qu'il avait chez elle et la préférence pour lui qui y était impliquée (221).

Since Madame Verdurin often gave . . .

Comme Mme Verdurin donnait parfois à Swann ce qui seul pouvait constituer pour lui le bonheur; comme, tel soir où il se sentait anxieux parce qu'Odette avait causé avec un invité plus qu'avec un autre, et où, irrité contre elle, il ne voulait pas prendre l'initiative de lui demander si elle reviendrait avec lui, Mme Verdurin lui apportait la paix et la joie en disant spontanément: “Odette, vous allez ramener M. Swann, n'est-ce pas?”—comme, cet été qui venait et où il s'était d'abord demandé avec inquiétude si Odette ne s'absenterait pas sans lui, s'il pourrait continuer à la voir tous les jours, Mme Verdurin allait les inviter à le passer tous deux chez elle à la campagne,—Swann, laissant à son insu la reconnaissance et l'intérêt s'infiltrer dans son intelligence et influencer sur ses idées, allait jusqu'à proclamer que Mme Verdurin était une grande âme. (203)

Page 25

“Whenever she had been away . . .”

Chaque fois qu'elle était partie depuis un peu de temps, Swann sentait qu'il commençait à se détacher d'elle (298-99).

“perfectly at ease and almost happy”

absolument tranquille, presque heureux (299).

In her determination not to take cognizance . . .

Dans sa résolution de ne pas prendre acte, de ne pas avoir été touchée par la nouvelle qui venait de lui être notifiée, de ne pas seulement rester muette, mais d'avoir été sourde, comme nous l'affectons quand un ami fautif essaye de glisser dans la conversation une excuse que ce serait avoir l'air d'admettre que de l'avoir écoutée sans protester, ou quand on prononce devant nous le nom défendu d'un ingrat, Mme Verdurin, pour que son silence n'eût pas l'air d'un consentement, mais du silence ignorant des choses inanimées, avait soudain dépouillé son visage de toute vie, de toute motilité; son front bombé n'était plus qu'une belle étude de ronde bosse où le nom de ces La Trémoille chez qui était toujours fourré Swann, n'avait pu pénétrer. (211)

“Then, looking at his watch . . .”

Puis regardant sa montre, sans doute pour ne pas prolonger les adieux dans l'humidité du soir, il recommanda aux cochers de ne pas traîner, mais d'être prudents à la descente, et assura que nous arriverions avant le train (1490-91).

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In reality there was not one of the “faithful” . . .

En réalité il n'y avait pas un fidèle qui ne fût plus malveillant que Swann; mais tous ils avaient la précaution d'assaisonner leurs médisances de plaisanteries connues, d'une petite pointe d'émotion et de cordialité; tandis que la moindre réserve que se permettait Swann, dépouillée des formules de convention telles que: “Ce n'est pas du mal que nous disons” et auxquelles il dédaignait de s'abaisser, paraissait une perfidie. (217)

“It's the truth.”

C'est ainsi. Je ne veux rien vous dire contre lui, puisque c'était votre ami; du reste il vous aimait beaucoup, il m'a parlé de vous d'une façon délicieuse, mais demandez à ceux-ci s'il a jamais dit quelque chose d'intéressant à nos dîners (1486).

I stopped dead and, leaving my illustrious companion . . .

je m'arrêtai net et laissant mon illustre compagnon poursuivre son chemin, je restai en arrière, penché, comme si j'étais subitement intéressé par elle, vers la vitrine du marchand d'antiquités devant lequel nous passions en ce moment; je n'étais pas fâché d'avoir l'air de pouvoir penser à autre chose qu'à ces jeunes filles, et je savais déjà obscurément que quand Elstir m'appellerait pour me présenter, j'aurais la sorte de regard interrogateur qui décèle non la surprise, mais le désir d'avoir l'air surpris—tant chacun est un mauvais acteur ou le prochain un bon physiognomoniste—, que j'irais même jusqu'à indiquer ma poitrine avec mon doigt pour demander: “C'est bien moi que vous appelez?” et accourir vite, la tête courbée par l'obéissance et la docilité, le visage dissimulant froidement l'ennui d'être arraché à la contemplation de vieilles faïences pour être présenté à des personnes que je ne souhaitais pas de connaître. (671)

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“in all her stories there was constant mention . . .”

dans tous ces récits revenait tout le temps le G.Q.G. (‘j’ai téléphoné au G.Q.G.’), abréviation qu’elle avait à prononcer le même plaisir qu’avaient naguère les femmes qui ne connaissaient pas le prince d’Agrigente, à demander en souriant quand on parlait de lui et pour montrer qu’elles étaient au courant : ‘Grigri?’ (2156).

While we were all talking, Bloch . . .

Comme nous étions tous en train de causer, Bloch ayant raconté qu’il avait entendu dire que Mme Swann m’aimait beaucoup, par une personne avec qui il avait dîné la veille et qui elle-même était très liée avec Mme Swann, j’aurais voulu lui répondre qu’il se trompait certainement, et bien établir . . . que je ne la connaissais pas et ne lui avais jamais parlé. Mais je n’eus pas le courage de rectifier l’erreur de Bloch, parce que je compris bien qu’elle était volontaire, et que s’il inventait quelque chose que Mme Swann n’avait pas pu dire en effet, c’était pour faire savoir, ce qu’il jugeait flatteur, et ce qui n’était pas vrai, qu’il avait dîné à côté d’une des amies de cette dame. (401)

“to show that Cottard’s ‘quip’ . . .”

pour montrer que le ‘mot’ du médecin n’avait pas passé inaperçu pour elle (1546).

“If this is your first appearance at Mme Verdurin’s . . .”

Si ce sont vos débuts chez Mme Verdurin, monsieur, me dit Brichot, qui tenait à montrer ses talents à un “nouveau,” vous verrez qu’il n’y a pas de milieu où l’on sente mieux la ‘douceur de vivre,’ comme disait un des inventeurs du dilettantisme, du je m’enfichisme, de beaucoup de mots en ‘isme’ à la mode chez nos snobinettes, je veux dire M. le prince de Talleyrand (1416).

“to show the men of science . . .”

montrer aux hommes de science qui n’étaient pas du Jockey qu’on pouvait chasser et avoir lu des fables. Le malheur est qu’il n’en connaissait guère que deux. Aussi revenaient-elles souvent (1446).

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Cottard’s hesitating manner . . .

L’air hésitant de Cottard, sa timidité, son amabilité excessives, lui avaient, dans sa jeunesse, valu de perpétuels brocards. Quel ami charitable lui conseilla l’air glacial? L’importance de sa situation lui rendit plus aisé de le prendre. Partout, sinon chez les Verdurin où il redevenait instinctivement lui-même, il se rendit froid, volontiers silencieux, péremptoire quand il fallait parler, n’oubliant pas de dire des choses désagréables. Il put faire l’essai de cette nouvelle attitude devant des clients qui ne l’ayant pas encore vu, n’étaient pas à même de faire des comparaisons et eussent été bien étonnés d’apprendre qu’il n’était pas un homme d’une rudesse naturelle. C’est surtout à l’impassibilité qu’il s’efforçait et même dans son service d’hôpital, quand il débitait quelques-uns de ces calembours qui faisaient

rire tout le monde, du chef de clinique au plus récent externe, il le faisait toujours sans qu'un muscle bougeât dans sa figure. (349)

“where he had, because of the influence . . .”

où il était, par la suggestion que les minutes anciennes exercent sur nous quand nous nous retrouvons dans un milieu accoutumé, resté quelque peu le même (1413).

Page 29

“a man may be illiterate . . .”

on peut être illettré, faire des calembours stupides, et posséder un don particulier, qu'aucune culture générale ne remplace, comme le don du grand stratège ou du grand clinicien (348).

During these brief moments in which he deliberated . . .

Chez cet homme si insignifiant, si commun, il y avait, dans ces courts moments où il délibérait, où les dangers d'un traitement et d'un autre se disputaient en lui jusqu'à ce qu'il s'arrêtât à l'un, la sorte de grandeur d'un général qui, vulgaire dans le reste de la vie, est un grand stratège, et, dans un moment périlleux, après avoir réfléchi un instant, conclut pour ce qui militairement est le plus sage et dit: “Faites face à l'Est.” (996)

the knowledge would have brought me . . .

cela m'eût acheminé plus rapidement à l'idée qu'il ne faut jamais en vouloir aux hommes, jamais les juger d'après tel souvenir d'une méchanceté, car nous ne savons pas tout ce qu'à d'autres moments leur âme a pu vouloir sincèrement et réaliser de bon. Et ainsi, même au simple point de vue de la prévision, on se trompe. Car, sans doute, la forme mauvaise qu'on a constatée une fois pour toutes reviendra. Mais l'âme est plus riche que cela, a bien d'autres formes qui reviendront elles aussi chez cet homme, et dont nous refusons la douceur à cause du mauvais procédé qu'il a eu. . . . et je conclus à la difficulté de présenter une image fixe aussi bien d'un caractère que des sociétés et des passions. Car il ne change pas moins qu'elles. (1849)

“as though this moral distance were proportionate . . .”

comme si cette distance morale était proportionnée à la distance matérielle, dès qu'il savait Odette de retour, il ne pouvait pas rester sans la voir (299).

“Now that the prospect of danger had receded . . .”

Le danger s'éloignant, Cottard fut désappointé. Il voulut même un instant manifester de la colère (1561).

Page 30

“When I bade the Princess good-bye . . .”

Quand je dis au revoir à la princesse, le sourire habituel n'éclaira pas son visage, un salut sec abaissa son menton, elle ne me tendit même pas la main et ne m'a jamais reparlé

depuis (1542).

“a cataclysm frequent among people . . .”

cataclysme fréquent chez les personnes dont la situation est peu solide et qui craignent qu'on n'ait entendu parler d'elles en mal, qu'on les méprise (1542).

I ought not to judge Princess Sherbatoff . . .

je ne dois pas juger sévèrement la princesse Sherbatoff. Son cas est si fréquent! Un jour, à l'enterrement d'un Guermantes, un homme remarquable placé à côté de moi me montra un monsieur élancé et pourvu d'une jolie figure. “De tous les Guermantes, me dit mon voisin, celui-là est le plus inouï, le plus singulier. C'est le frère du duc.” Je lui répondis imprudemment qu'il se trompait, que ce monsieur, sans parenté aucune avec les Guermantes, s'appelait Fournier-Sarlovèze. L'homme remarquable me tourna le dos et ne m'a plus jamais salué depuis. (1542)

Page 31

“She had long ago, from fear of rebuffs . . .”

Elle avait pris depuis de longues années, par peur des rebuffades, l'habitude de se tenir à sa place, de rester dans son coin, dans la vie comme dans le train, et d'attendre pour donner la main qu'on lui eût dit bonjour (1428).

In front of strangers . . .

Vis-à-vis des étrangers—parmi lesquels il faut toujours compter celui à qui nous mentons le plus parce que c'est celui par qui il nous serait le plus pénible d'être méprisé: nous-même—la princesse Sherbatoff avait soin de représenter ses trois seules amitiés—avec la grande-duchesse, avec les Verdurin, avec la baronne Putbus—comme les seules, non que des cataclysmes indépendant de sa volonté eussent laissé émerger au milieu de la destruction de tout le reste, mais qu'un libre choix lui avait fait élire de préférence à tout autre, et auxquelles un certain goût de solitude et de simplicité l'avait fait se borner. (1418)

“intense coldness”

grande froideur (1419)

“the rule among the human race . . .”

dans l'humanité la règle—qui comporte des exceptions naturellement—est que les durs sont des faibles dont on n'a pas voulu, et que les forts, se souciant peu qu'on veuille ou non d'eux, ont seuls cette douceur que le vulgaire prend pour de la faiblesse (1542).

“She professed that she too loved this area . . .”

Elle fit profession d'aimer aussi ce pays [the Norman coast] plus que tout autre. Mais je sentais bien que pour elle comme pour les Verdurin, la grande affaire était non de le contempler en touristes, mais d'y faire de bons repas, d'y recevoir une société qui leur plaisait, d'y écrire des lettres, d'y lire, bref d'y vivre, laissant passivement sa beauté les baigner plutôt qu'ils n'en faisaient l'objet de leur préoccupation (1432).

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