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Spoiled Distinctions: Everyday Aesthetics in French Modernism

by

Hannah Isadora Freed-Thall

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

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in the

Graduate Division

of the

University of California, Berkeley

Committee in charge:

Professor Michael Lucey, Chair

Professor Ann Smock

Professor Barbara Spackman

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by Hannah Isadora Freed-Thall

Abstract

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“Spoiled Distinctions” is a study of experimental aesthetic concepts in Marcel Proust, Nathalie Sarraute, Roland Barthes, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Pierre Bourdieu. Working at the crossroads of aesthetics, phenomenology, and the sociology of culture, I examine instances of “weak” critique—occasions when, instead of assimilating perceptions into a powerful summary, a perceiver is compelled to forge a more proximate, partial, and flexible relation to the objects at hand. My approach to aesthetics is pragmatic: I borrow Bourdieu’s definition of aesthetic taste as an orienting force that produces and maintains social distinctions. I elaborate an alternative use of the theory, however, foregrounding the disorienting potential of inestimable objects and unspecifiable affects. The opening chapter, an exploration of Proust’s involvement in a belle époque diamond-fabrication scam, provides a cultural context for this author’s fascination with the volatility of aesthetic value. Each of the following chapters identifies a modernist aesthetic paradigm that revises Kantian categories: the non-instrumental beautiful becomes the “quelconque,” or “whatever”; the heroic sublime becomes the gentler, intermediary concept of “nuance”; and the extreme dysphoria of disgust is downsized into the troublingly minor “douceâtre,” or too-sweet. I argue that by staging scenes in which the ordinariness of things thwarts critical appraisal, Proust and Sarraute develop alternatives to the high modernist paradigm equating aesthetic pleasure with cultural refinement.

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INTRODUCTION

[L]’art, justement, n’a pas de lieu propre. Il n’est même rien qu’on puisse dire propre ou proprement lui-même. Sans identité stable, présent partout mais toujours ailleurs.

Lacoue-Labarthe, *La poésie comme expérience*

Qu’est-ce qui fait que l’oeuvre d’art est une oeuvre d’art et non une chose du monde?

Bourdieu, *Les Règles de l’art*

This dissertation is a study of critical impasses in French modernism—occasions of thwarted aesthetic judgment, when a perceiver cannot classify or appropriate the object at hand, and masterful appraisal dissolves into expressions of joy or embarrassment, inarticulate babble, or dumbstruck silence. At such moments of suspended categorial thought, new forms of critical attention take shape.

Each of my chapters examines a particular modality of theoretical discomfiture, and in each case, what stumps critical appropriation is not the preciousness of the object, but its ordinariness. The “ordinary” is a crucial concept in modernism, although its meaning is not fixed—in fact, it might be defined precisely as the inestimable, the featureless, or the unqualifiable—as that which always eludes set categories of apprehension.¹ In some of the cases I consider, an object cannot be assimilated because it appears at once singular and banal, eliciting only a gasp of recognition (“ça!”). Alternatively, some inestimable objects appear too close to be classified, their delineated forms blurring into a shifting cloud of attributes. In other cases, a beholder cannot utter the phrases that would demonstrate her critical sophistication, either because she finds herself drawn into the assemblage she seeks to appraise, or because the scene is already buzzing with other people’s judgments.

There is a sociological side to my project. Proust and Sarraute, I argue, teach us to understand “aesthetic experience” pragmatically. They demonstrate that the ability to enjoy objects “without interest” is not a reflection of innate proclivity or talent, but requires initiation, a long investment of time, and a great deal of practice. At the same time, they orient us toward alternative modes of enjoyment, mixed or hybrid aesthetic moods, new ways of angling toward the world that make previously unseen or unknown objects perceptible. They explore the way subjects instrumentalize aesthetic pleasure in order to accumulate social prestige, or “distinction”—but they also play with the very notion of distinction, testing out its grounds and its limits. While Pierre Bourdieu emphasizes the rhetorical mastery of the aesthetic subject, whom he imagines as being extremely adept at manipulating the discourses of refinement, Proust and Sarraute direct our attention to moments of theoretical embarrassment, or critical break-down, when perceptions cannot be assimilated to any appropriate category, and there is no right thing to say. In Proust’s *A la recherche du temps perdu*, for example, a budding aesthetic theorist crows with joy when he encounters

¹ “Le quotidien échappe, c’est sa définition” (Blanchot 355). See Sheringham and Olson for useful perspectives on the elusive concept of the ordinary in the twentieth century. In this dissertation, I narrow this slippery topic by focusing on three particular modalities of ordinariness: the *quelconque* (an overlap of singularity and banality), *nuance* (shimmering, minimal variation), and the *douceâtre* (a minor, quotidian form of disgust).

an assemblage of perfectly forgettable, ephemeral things: a wind-ruffled chicken on a roof and a splotch of light reflected on a pond. In her 1972 novel, *Vous les entendez?*, Sarraute orients our attention toward a grey stone statuette that appears alternately as a precious piece of art or as a worthless piece of junk—a “sale bête” worthy of being tossed in the cellar or used as an ashtray. While Bourdieu contends that the “aesthetic disposition” implies a “break with the ordinary attitude towards the world,” Proust and Sarraute examine the unwieldiness of the ordinary and query what kind of “disposition” its recognition might require. In their fictions, objects that appear inestimable—simultaneously incomparable and worthless, singular and banal—thwart economies of sophistication and obstruct theoretical appropriation. Because these things cannot be assimilated to any a priori category, they inspire a reorganization of the perceptual field, an elaboration of new structures of feeling. This dissertation is an investigation of three such experimental structures of feeling—responses to the irrecuperable ordinariness of aesthetic perception in modernity. I call these experimental moods the “quelconque,” “nuance,” and the “douceâtre.”

Less durable and institutionally fixed than Bourdieu’s “habitus,”² “structure of feeling” is Raymond Williams’s term for the “seething mix of unsettled elements” that comprise our experience of history in the present. Williams invents the term “structure of feeling” to describe an emotional trouble or blockage that cannot be quite articulated—“a certain kind of disturbance or unease, a particular type of tension” that emerges at moments of historical shift between signifier and signified, signaling discord in the relation between a conventional mode of articulation and the experience which it no longer quite fits (*Politics and Letters* 167-8).³ Drawing on Williams’s theory of the affective noise or static that indexes nonadequation between received convention and lived experience, I investigate how particular affective disturbances register a mismatch between the social and historical weight of aesthetic discourse and the seeming triviality of the objects consecrated in modernity as worthy of that special intensity of attention. The *quelconque*, *nuance*, and the *douceâtre*, I argue, are moods or structures of feeling that register the dissonance between residual, reverential habits of aesthetic enjoyment and the non-auratic ordinariness of the modern art work itself.

In focusing on the embarrassing (or ravishing) ordinariness of art in modernity, I am suggesting that experimental writers like Proust and Sarraute, whose perspective on aesthetics is both sociological and phenomenological, cannot be easily cast onto one side of the familiar antinomy between modernist aestheticism and the revolutionary avant-garde. According to Peter Bürger’s classic account, modernism can best be understood as a fundamentally defensive reaction to cultural modernity. In this view, modernist texts like Proust’s *Recherche* are unable to call into question their own alleged autonomy—their institutional status as art—because this is precisely what defends them against consumption by the masses. Not wanting to be legible to just anyone, modernism cultivates difficulty, but it also mystifies this practice, encouraging its devotees to imagine that their enjoyment is a reflection of an innate gift, a superior sensitivity. To borrow Bourdieu’s terminology, we could say that high modernism cultivates an ideology of charisma,

² Bourdieu defines habitus as “systèmes de *dispositions* durables et transposables, structures structurées prédisposées à fonctionner comme structures structurantes, c’est-à-dire comme principes générateurs et organisateurs de pratiques et de représentations” [“durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles which generate and organize practices and representations”] (*Le sens pratique* 88/ *Logic of Practice* 53).

³ For Williams, it would seem that the structure of feeling is always dissonant. As Kevis Goodman points out, in this view, presentness only manifests itself in *disturbances* of mediation—in “the failure of mediation to produce pleasure” (as immediacy, smoothness, purity or homogeneity of sensation) (Goodman 64). The structures of feeling I investigate here are certainly not pure or homogenous, but neither are they entirely unpleasurable. In the chapters on Proust, I am particularly interested in theorizing a happy or pleasurable response to phenomenality—a mode of satisfaction—that could not be simply equated with ideological mystification.

whereby the artwork is imagined to have “a magical power of conversion capable of awakening the potentialities latent in a few of the elect” (“Outline” 174). The avant-garde, on the other hand, works to demystify and denaturalize institutionalized privilege by smashing the divide between art and the everyday, demanding that art “be integrated into the praxis of life” (Bürger 54). While modernism aestheticizes the ordinary and closes itself off from the logic of capitalist consumption, the avant-garde contests the logic of aesthetic autonomy, drawing on the energies of popular culture in order to imagine an artistic practice potentially available to all. By focusing on the dynamics of aesthetic disorientation in Proust and Sarraute, I want to move beyond this opposition between mystification and demystification, between (modernist) sublimation and autonomization and (avant-garde) subversion. Proust and Sarraute develop alternatives to the high modernist paradigm that would equate aesthetic pleasure with cultural refinement. They teach us to attend to the nuances of everyday, seemingly “unrefined” modes of seeing and feeling, and to break from categorical or hierarchical modes of organizing perceptions.

In my chapters on Proust, I identify minor (or “weak”) critical positions that tend to be overshadowed by the more powerful (or “strong”) theoretical stances in the novel (the organizing forces of jealousy and of aesthetic sublimation, for example). I argue that Proust elaborates a non-sublimatory, non-redemptive aesthetic attitude—a way of being attentive to the shimmering nuances of the phenomenal world without doing damage to them. Proust plays out this experimental aesthetic attitude in several ways: through the practice of ventriloquistic imitation (pastiche), by inviting intensified attention to hybrid (singular/everyday) objects, and by cultivating non-categorical styles of description and perception—ways of seeing that make minimal, everyday glimmers visible. Although Proust’s *Recherche* is in many ways the ultimate how-to manual for transforming ephemeral perceptual experience into lasting aesthetic wealth, Proust also highlights occasions of aesthetic embarrassment, when the perceiver cannot profit from perceptual pleasure, but can only gape or point in inarticulate astonishment.

My reading of Proust began as an admiring response to Leo Bersani’s innovative psychoanalytic interpretation of the *Recherche*. But if I have learned from Bersani to be suspicious of the ethos of aesthetic redemption in Proust, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has pointed the way toward less suspicious, more “reparative” attitudes of reading. Proust, after all, is highly attuned to the logic of epistemophilic jealousy (an attitude of sadistic mastery that defends against novelty), but his textual world is also punctuated by occasions of unexpected joy and surprise. While Bersani assumes an anxious struggle between subject and object as a point of departure (even as he works to identify a non-sadistic mode of correspondences in Proust), I try to read Proust from a perspective that does not take this violent antinomy as a given. In this sense, Sedgwick’s notion of “reparative reading,” and her (as yet) unpublished late lecture on reincarnation in Proust has been instructive for me: Sedgwick’s reading of the *Recherche* holds fast to Proust’s childish wonder at existence itself, and to his openness to a wide variety of affective and cognitive systems.⁴

In a pastiche of Edmond de Goncourt, Proust presents himself as a queer aesthetic subject, “un curieux être... un être qui vivrait tout à fait dans l’enthousiasme, dans le *bondieusement* de certains paysages, de certains livres” [“a curious person... a being who lives entirely in the enthusiasm, in the

⁴ See Bersani, *Marcel Proust: Fictions of Life and Art, The Culture of Redemption*, and (co-authored with Ulysse Dutoit) “Beauty’s Light,” *October* 82 (Autumn, 1997): 17-29. On reparative reading, see Sedgwick’s *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*, especially chapter 4, and “This Piercing Bouquet: An Interview with Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick” in *Regarding Sedgwick: Essays on Queer Culture and Critical Theory* (Ed. Stephen M. Barber and David Clark. London: Routledge, 2002. 243-262). I was fortunate to hear Sedgwick present her lecture, “The Weather in Proust,” at Berkeley in 2005.

pious adoration of certain landscapes, certain books”] (CSB 24; *The Lemoine Affair* 38).⁵ This ethos of unsophisticated wonderment is foreclosed in the work of Nathalie Sarraute, who is uniquely attuned to the dysphoric side of aesthetic perception. Yet Sarraute, like Proust, experiments with distinction, inviting us to explore the awkward margins of conventional aesthetic perception and response. Sarraute amplifies the performative infelicity that lurks in speech acts of aesthetic judgment, and she also concocts strange affective potions. Adding “tenderness to rancor, vindictiveness to generosity,” Sarraute’s fictions serve up compositions of pleasure and displeasure that we cannot easily consume (OC 844). I focus on the “douceâtre”—the toned-down, non-sublime mode of disgust that Sarraute allies with art appreciation in an era of ubiquitous cliché, when it is impossible to distinguish between everyday ordinariness and aesthetic ordinariness, between platitude “mastered” in a work of art and “platitude à l’état brut.” Unable to manage the codes of distinction, to judge and classify the objects socially designated as works of art, Sarraute’s characters are perpetually discomfited by their inability to take the right amount of pleasure in appropriate objects in an appropriate way.

Each of my chapters explores a critical quandary, an instance of theoretical embarrassment. “Aesthetic perception” may function to uphold principles of social inequality, but as Proust and Sarraute demonstrate, intensified attention to phenomenality is often incompatible with principles of good taste or decorum: in their novels, those who attempt to flaunt their aesthetic competence find themselves behaving in unsophisticated ways. In Proust, for example, the critic or observer can sometimes only point at some luminous apparition or shadow that moves him. Rei Terada has recently described “phenomenophilia” (attention to “aberrant appearance”—“looking away at the colored shadow on the wall, or keeping the head turned to the angle at which the sunspot stays in view”) as a way of saying “no” to a shared, commonplace world, and hence of escaping from other people (4, 22). I argue that in Proust, occasions of intensified attention to the ephemeral textures of the everyday are not expressions of what Terada calls “dissatisfaction with the given” (8), but rather, instances when the perceiver’s quest to prove himself better than other people is temporarily suspended. Such perceptions do not shore up the perceiver’s solitude or prove his heightened sensitivity. Because they are available to all, the unrefined pleasure they invite unmakes the aesthetic subject’s solipsistic mastery. In gazing at a chicken on a roof, a hedge in bloom, a bouquet of moving steeples, or a patch of light, the astonished perceiver suddenly finds that he has become part of the composition, rather than standing without (or above) to judge. At such moments, perceiver and reader alike enjoy a small break from the teleological drive toward epistemological (aesthetic or erotic) revelation that often dominates the narrative.

Chapter one, “Prestige of a Momentary Diamond,” provides a cultural context for Proust’s fascination with the inestimable. The chapter investigates Proust’s involvement in the “Lemoine Affair,” a scandal that captured the French popular imagination in 1908, just before Proust began drafting the *Recherche*. An engineer claimed to have invented a method of manufacturing diamonds, and upon performing a carefully choreographed trick (he cooked up diamonds, in the nude, for an astonished executive), he managed to defraud the De Beers corporation out of a large sum of money. When the scam was made public in January of 1908, it inspired Proust to publish a series of pastiches in the literary supplement of *Le Figaro*. As if enthralled by the very volatility of the diamond—the preciousness of which had suddenly been revealed as a fiction of controlled scarcity and investor confidence—Proust undertook his own virtuosic exercise in fraud, writing fictional accounts of the *Affaire* in the styles of Balzac, Flaubert, Michelet, Emile Faguet, Sainte-Beuve, Edmond de Goncourt, Henri de Régnier, Renan, Ruskin, Chateaubriand, and Maeterlinck. My

⁵ “Bondieuser” is Goncourt’s neologism, which Proust plays with here. Goncourt uses it to signify the act of taking oneself or someone else for God. “Bondieusement” might be awkwardly translated as “good-god-ing.” Proust’s insistence on the material vocalization of enjoyment is not captured by the phrase “pious adoration.”

argument is that these pastiches are organized around the specter of the mass-produced diamond—the ultimate luxury good suddenly transformed into a commodity like any other. The pastiches reveal Proust’s fascination for the volatility of aesthetic value, and for the thin margin that divides signs of preciousness from signs of ordinariness in modernity.

Chapter two, “‘Zut, zut, zut, zut’: Proust’s *Quelconque* Aesthetics,” investigates an alternative, non-appropriative paradigm for reading in Proust—an aesthetics of the unqualifiable, or “whatever” (“quelconque”). Critics have emphasized a redemptive logic in Proust’s *Recherche*—a tendency on the part of the narrator/perceiver to transform ordinary things into signs of his own totalizing potency. I explore Proust’s representation of occasions that expose the critic’s incapacitation in the face of the incomparably ordinary object. *A la recherche du temps perdu* sometimes calls our attention to objects so unexceptional that they halt and reorient the act of judgment, spoiling the profits of distinction. In *Combray* the narrator utters his first aesthetic judgment—an inarticulate, umbrella-waving “zut, zut, zut, zut”—when he sees an assemblage of objects that appears at once wondrous and banal: a chicken strutting on a roof and a pinkish splotch of light on a pond. Proust returns to the disorienting fantasy of an everyday aesthetics in the penultimate volume of the novel, when idealized Venice transforms into an “espace quelconque”—a space that is entirely “whatever.” Tracing the “quelconque” through Proust reveals a peculiar economy of aesthetic interest—one that is neither redemptive nor subversive. The narrator himself models this aesthetic (in)disposition when he encounters a piece of his own incipient novel in the daily newspaper, and is thrilled to disappear into the ranks of the “lecteur quelconque”—a reader without qualities, any reader at all.

In chapter three (“Weak Reading: Nuage/Nuance/Proust”), I consider how a fascination for the category-weakening concept of nuance can be seen as a particular sort of critical impasse—a theoretical breakdown that occasions new perceptual and cognitive orientations. While an aesthetics of the “quelconque” is organized around unqualifiable objects—too ordinary or commonplace to be critically savored—the minor economy of nuance features hyper-distinguished, excessively qualifiable objects, exemplified by the amorphous figure of the cloud. Presenting a modulation of degree so subtle that it escapes discernment, the extremely “close” attunement such objects require is literally over the top—it tosses the critic out of the navigable universe of taste. The very fabric of form, nuance is accessible only to a theoretical mode “weak” enough to perceive micro-networks of graduated distinctions, glimmers, tints, and textures. At stake here is a new, ecological conception of aesthetic sublimation. I argue that Proust opens up a formalism that is not governed by the profit-oriented thrust of human desire, but rather based in the metempsychosis of natural history (the blossoming of flowers, the drift and transmutation of clouds), which catches the human observer up in its movement.

While Proust orients readers toward the margins of taste, Sarraute orients us toward the multiple textures and orientations inherent in taste’s ugly twin, disgust. In chapter four (“‘C’est beau, tu ne trouves pas?’: Sarraute’s Inestimable Objects”), I demonstrate that, like Proust, Sarraute builds her fictions around occasions of beholding. She revises Proust, however, by focusing on the commodity lifespan of the aesthetic object, and by foregrounding the embarrassing static that cuts through conventions of aesthetic appreciation. Like Bourdieu, Sarraute vulgarizes the “pure” aesthetic gaze by exposing the dis-taste that it conceals: a dysphoric mood of spoiled distinction emerges as the feeling-tone of her aesthetic project. Disgust is more pervasive and ambiguous in Sarraute than in Bourdieu, however: Sarraute explores the affective threshold where interest turns over into disgust, and disgust flickers into interest. This is the zone of the *slightly* revolting, the “un peu écoeurant,” or the “douceâtre.” In Sarraute, the dualisms structuring Bourdieu’s theory of distinction (profitable/unprofitable, formal/material, pure/vulgar) give way to a micro-phenomenology, whereby artworks do not simply compel interest or disinterest, but attune us to

unclassifiable, accretive and amplificatory shifts in attention and value. The heir to Proust's experiments with distinction, Sarraute reveals the pragmatic functioning of taste, and she also shows us how struggles over cultural distinction feel for the subjects involved in them.

I originally set out to write a dissertation on the rhetoric of cliché and platitude in modern literature, and yet found myself writing about aesthetics. This is perhaps not surprising. There is, after all, something small, superfluous, and underwhelming about the very idea of art in modernity. Sianne Ngai suggests that Melville's spectral copy-clerk, Bartleby, who aggravates his employer by gently declining to work, could be read as an emblem for the restricted agency of art in modernity—"a relatively autonomous, more or less cordoned-off domain in an increasingly specialized and differentiated society" (*Ugly Feelings* 2). My admiration for Ngai's study of the "noncathartic" or "ugly" feelings by which art contests its own essentially "tolerated" status is evident throughout the dissertation. Like Ngai, I am intrigued by the complex affective repertoire of alienation and disenchantment that characterizes twentieth-century artwork, and this becomes my explicit focus in the chapter on Sarraute. But overall, my project is happier than Ngai's, a little less oriented toward the ugly, a bit more oriented toward beauty (with all the embarrassing baggage that term implies).⁶ I explore the everyday, corporeal and material dimensions of aesthetic enjoyment—the bodily dimension of such experiences, the social prestige their cultivation promises (but often fails to afford), and the way in which so-called "aesthetic perception" (intensified attention to an object's appearance or aspect) can occur just about anywhere, in response to just about anything. Proust in particular detaches aesthetic pleasure from designated tasteful objects and makes the entire world a space of great perceptual pleasure. And yet both Proust and Sarraute show us that the attitude of dreamy, "disinterested" attentiveness that Kant allies with the sensory perception of beauty is increasingly out of place in modernity.

Aesthetic theory has proven to be a good site for thinking about the sociality of affect, and about the ways in which particular structures of feeling make particular objects perceptible. The structures of feeling I elaborate can be understood as modernist riffs on Kantian categories: the *quelconque* as an inarticulate version of the beautiful; *nuance* as a gentler modality of the ambivalent sublime, and the *douceâtre* as a homey, domestic brand of disgust—not the extreme aversion and non-representability that Kant ascribes to Eckel, but a just-barely tolerable dysphoria, the response to a too-sweet object you cannot quite swallow (but cannot definitively reject, either).

The Kantian beautiful is an essentially empty structure of feeling: "that which pleases universally without a concept," the beautiful names a relation without ground, without content, without anything proper to it (104). I demonstrate that despite his penchant for hidden depths and secret laws, Proust is attuned, precisely, to the featureless, non-cognitive triviality of the beautiful. Because the beautiful for Kant is not bound to any determinate concept or ideal, not much can be said *about* the object of this "disinterested" judgment. The objects that Kant does designate as

⁶ Another way that my project departs from Ngai's is that she engages the particularly weak, powerless, or "tolerated" status of the artwork in the U.S. context. In the French context, as Bourdieu's *Distinction* demonstrates, aesthetic taste remains a potent sociological index even in the era of "highly differentiated and totally commodified society" (*Ugly Feelings* 2). Ngai writes about the dysphoric affects allied with art in an age in which the public sphere and the market "have become virtually co-extensive"; in 20th-century France, this is not exactly the case. The economy of distinction that Bourdieu theorizes is not synonymous with the capitalist market, as there is a chiasmic relation (a tension, a discordance) between cultural capital and economic capital. So one doesn't really expect a French novel to allegorize its own irrelevance or political helplessness—the limited social agency that renders it "not much of a concern" and allows it to be "safely ignored" in the "administered world" of modernity (*UF* 84, 86). Instead, both Proust and Sarraute write novels that catalogue all the ways in which people try (and often fail) to derive cultural capital from the enjoyment of art. While Proust holds out the possibility that art could be "saved" from the clutches of social-climbing distinction-seekers, in Sarraute, the problem seems to be how art can be left alone, and not how it can be made relevant.

particularly appropriate to the purposively purposiveless gaze (things that “please without signifying anything”) can only disappoint our expectations: flowers, certain birds, “a host of marine crustaceans,” and “foliage for borders or on wallpaper” (93, 114). Even in Kant, the aesthetic perceiver is struck with a sort of stutter: he seems to be unable to say anything about the perception of beauty except to declare that it is beautiful.

The Kantian sublime, on the other hand, is a messier response to an inassimilable perception. The sublime is a hybrid sensation, a vibratory ambivalence or wavering between attraction and revulsion, outpouring and inhibition. As an initial feeling of terror and awe in relation to the perception of formlessness gives way to a feeling of triumph, the subject jubilates in his capacity to recast the unmanageable representation of unattainable nature “as a presentation of ideas”—thus proving the superiority of reason over imagination (151). In the judgment of the sublime, Kant claims that we intuit the “superiority of the rational vocation of our cognitive faculty over the greatest faculty of sensibility” (141). I am not particularly interested in the heroic, appropriative energies of sublimity, but I am intrigued by the hybridity of this aesthetic response, its double-take on formlessness, its odd mix of painful pleasure. While the structures of feeling I explore are akin to the Kantian beautiful in their triviality or minoriness, the temporal and spatial hybridity of the sublime remains a guiding thread throughout the dissertation: each of the moods I discuss is an uneven mixture—an amalgamation of enchantment and incredulity, or interest and boredom, or desire and disgust. If Proustian nuance presents the oxymoron of a gentler, smaller sublime (nuance as everyday, minimal variation), Sarraute’s “douceâtre” is nuance’s dysphoric double: the mood of aesthetic perception in an era in which the old distinction markers (coarse/refined, sweet/bitter, facile/difficult, etc.) grate against a new regime of ubiquitous capitalist consumption. Sarraute does not champion one of these regimes against the other, but builds her fiction out of the noise of their encounter.

In my attempt to understand why aesthetic experience is so difficult to manage in modernity, I have spent some time mulling over the difference between Rancière’s and Bourdieu’s perspectives on aesthetic autonomy, or what Rancière calls “littérarité.” These thinkers differ significantly in their view of the political consequences of modern aesthetics: Rancière valorizes the egalitarian ethos of what he terms the regime of the “errant letter,” while Bourdieu demystifies the class-based habits of perception that get passed off as an innate gift, an “aesthetic disposition.” Bourdieu focuses on how incorporated schemes of classification work to divide and exclude, while Rancière is interested in aesthetic acts as “configurations of experience that create new modes of sense perception and induce novel forms of political subjectivity” (*Politics of Aesthetics* 9; *Le partage du sensible* 7). Bourdieu attends to the consolidation and persistence of certain habits of perception; Rancière is more attuned to redistributions of such habitual ways of seeing and feeling. Rancière critiques what he sees as the empiricism of Bourdieu’s method, arguing, for example, that the sociological questionnaire ignores responses that do not fit into its predetermined schema (intellectual versus popular). Hence the sociologist cannot really hear the working class subject who states, *not* “la grande musique, ce n’est pas pour nous,” but instead, “j’aime beaucoup la grande musique, par exemple les valse de Strauss” (*Le philosophe et ses pauvres* 245). As Rancière puts it, the sociologist “jugera des goût musicaux *sans faire entendre de musique*” (268).

Despite their fundamental methodological differences, Bourdieu and Rancière agree on one thing: an essential shift in practices of aesthetic perception and production took place in the mid-nineteenth century. For Rancière, the shift is a movement away from a hierarchical Aristotelian aesthetic regime—a system of norms and rules determining which genre should correspond to which objects, and clearly separating the “poetical” from the “prosaic,” or art from life (“Why Emma Bovary Had to be Killed” 237). This division of “noble” and “ignoble” subjects gives way in modernity to an aesthetic regime marked by a fundamental indifference with regard to subject

matter. In *Madame Bovary*, for example, Flaubert elevates description to the plane of action, and refuses to prefer one character or one type of object over any other. Everything becomes equal for him: the ambitions of a farmer's daughter are no less poetic than the deeds of an aristocrat; a swirling dust cloud is as stylistically interesting as a racing carriage. Rancière notes that while this "equality" of subjects in literature is independent of a political stance in favor of democracy, it is nonetheless historically linked to a general "redistribution of the sensible," whereby the grand actions of noble men are no longer intrinsically superior (or more aesthetically valuable) than the practical lives of working men and women. The problem for Flaubert, Rancière notes, is how "Art" will remain special or distinctive if it no longer has any particular distinguishing features. In fact, Emma Bovary's "practical" sentimentality—her desire to consume art, chairs, and dresses without regard to the distinctions between them—makes her Flaubert's inverted double: both character and writer dissolve the separation between art and life.⁷ Hence Rancière contends that Flaubert "kills" Emma in a gesture of defense against her kitsch aesthetics, an attempt to preserve some margin of distinction for art, to protect it from the everyday appetites of ordinary people.

While Rancière is concerned with the ways in which the rise of "littérarité" relates more broadly to ideals of equality and democracy, Bourdieu analyzes the nineteenth-century rise of a "market for cultural goods," which corresponds to a consolidation of a relatively autonomous literary and artistic field. This new sphere of literature is no longer subservient to the powerful. Because it deals in new forms of credit, it can afford to mock both the bourgeoisie and the *Académie française*—the traditional "central bank" of cultural capital, the institutional "monopoly holder" of cultural prestige which had previously assured the definition of "art" and the "artist" (*Règles de l'art* 320; *Rules of Art* 230). Eschewing traditional modes of consecration, the newly "autonomous" literary field will henceforth be based in "la libre concurrence entre des créateurs-prophètes affirmant librement le *nomos* extra-ordinaire et singulier, sans précédent ni équivalent, qui les définit en propre" ["free competition among creator-prophets freely asserting the extraordinary and singular *nomos*, without precedent or equivalent, which properly defines them"] (*Règles* 96; *RA* 63). In the new logic of the "field," subject matter is not important; art is no longer limited to a particular category of privileged objects. From now on, nothing is too insignificant or too vulgar to appear in a poem or a painting. What counts is the way these things are represented, how they are filtered through the singular vision of a historically unprecedented social personage: the modern artist (*Règles* 115; *RA* 76). Freed from academic rules and expectations, materializing the fantasies of the outcast "prophet" who created it, the artwork itself now attains a status at once sacred and profane. Hence Flaubert proclaims that a work of art is priceless, beyond appraisal, "inappréciable," and Baudelaire denounces the ignorance of critics who try to measure "l'oeuvre singulière" against formal and universal rules (*Règles* 121, 103; *RA* 81, 68). Academic criteria such as the dignity of the work's conception, the superiority of its technique, and the *savoir-faire* inherent in its execution will no longer be the operative standards of judgment. Instead, the critic will simply have to "submit" to the work itself in some undefined way ("en quelque sorte"). In a transformation emblemized by Manet's redistribution of light on the canvas (such that there is no longer any single privileged place for light, which now appears "partout à la surface des choses"), "art" is no longer a "closed world of predetermined possibles," but becomes "an infinite universe of possibles" (*Règles* 191; *RA* 133).⁸

⁷ "What is the wrong done by Emma to literature? The answer is that it consists in fusing literature and life and making any source of excitement equal to any other. But those features that define her temper and the allegedly 'democratic' temper are also the features that define the poetics of her inventor and, more widely, those that define literature as a new regime of the art of writing" (237-238).

⁸ For a Wittgensteinian perspective on this fundamental "openness" of art in modernity, see Morris Weitz's 1956 essay, "The Role of Theory in Aesthetics." Noting that aesthetic theorists remain "deeply wedded to the hope that a correct theory of art is forthcoming," Weitz argues that we should stop trying to determine the "necessary and sufficient

What does this historical shift mean for the aesthetic beholder (or for the literary critic), who is henceforth required to “submit in some way” to a work that obeys no laws except to break with all precedents? Or as Arthur Danto puts it, “what does it mean to live in a world in which anything could be a work of art? A family snapshot, a most-wanted poster, an aluminum kettle, a hawk, a handsaw?” (139). Both Proust and Sarraute explore the consequences of this symbolic revolution, which makes any ordinary thing a potentially aesthetic object, and potentially endows any ordinary person with an aesthetic gaze. From one point of view, these writers struggle (like Flaubert) to maintain the distinction of art—to protect it from the leveling force of the market and prevent it from becoming a consumable commodity like all others. At the same time, Proust and Sarraute show us just how untenable the line is between the institutional realm known as “the aesthetic” and the everyday, phenomenal world. In their novels, objects that generate aesthetic pleasure unsettle the available systems of classification, embarrassing the judgments meant to hold them in place.

Throughout this dissertation, I draw on Bourdieu’s important argument that ways of hearing, seeing, and enjoying objects have sociological stakes: our manner of sorting and classifying the perceptual world in turn sorts and classifies us. But I also want to hold to Rancière’s reminder that aesthetic judgment or experience is not strictly equivalent to name recognition, or to the exercise of worldly erudition. If Bourdieu teaches us to understand “taste” as a social orienting device, rather than simply a gift of nature, Proust and Sarraute teach us to pay attention to the *disorienting* phenomenology of aesthetic perceptions, which do not only solidify social hierarchies, but also unsettle established criteria and habits of classification. The challenge for me is to find a critical language that could remain (at least somewhat) faithful to Bourdieu’s sociological insights *and* to the experimental phenomenology of modernist literature. The result of this compromise is a hybrid critical idiom that borrows freely from a variety of theoretical and critical sources. I hope that it does some justice to the orienting and disorienting, classifying and de-classifying energies of Proust’s and Sarraute’s fictions.

properties of that which has no necessary and sufficient properties” (27, 28). Weitz describes art as an “open concept”: “the very expansive, adventurous character of art, its ever-present changes and novel creations makes it logically impossible to ensure any set of defining properties” (32). Instead of asking what art *is*, we should inquire about its use or employment, what it *does* in the language (30).

CHAPTER ONE

Prestige of a Momentary Diamond

In 1908, a diamond-fabrication scam captured the French popular imagination. According to *Le Figaro*, which covered the affair in great detail, the story goes like this.¹ Several years earlier, an engineer named Henri Lemoine convinced a top De Beers executive (Julius Wernher) that he had invented a method of manufacturing gem-sized diamonds. Lemoine successfully defrauded De Beers out of a large sum of money (66,840 pounds, or 1,671,000 francs) by performing a carefully choreographed trick: he cooked up diamonds, in an electric furnace, in the nude. The condition of the pay-off was that Lemoine would keep the formula secret—and he was also supposed to start a diamond factory. The hoax only became public knowledge when the executive realized he had been had and pressed charges for fraud, effectively calling Lemoine's bluff.

Throughout the highly-publicized trial that ensued, Lemoine continued to play the part of the great inventor, insisting that he really could fabricate diamonds, and begging for the opportunity to perform the experiment just one more time.² Lemoine's act was so convincing that the jewelers' syndicate soon came forward with a civil suit of its own, citing the damages the engineer's claims had done to the diamond business. For several weeks, a public debate raged over whether Lemoine was a clever scam-artist or a great inventor—"un imposteur de génie ou un grand inventeur méconnu" (15 January, 1908). Despite Lemoine's unflinching performance, his trial revealed that the diamonds he claimed to have cooked up actually had jewelers' marks on them. This proved they had been bought in Paris and originated in De Beers' South African mines.³ In other words, Lemoine had passed off "real" diamonds as fake ones: his genuinely fabricated diamond turned out to be just a genuine diamond. Lemoine was eventually sentenced to six years in prison.

If people know about the Lemoine Affair today, it is largely thanks to Proust, who was so intrigued by what he termed "le prestige d'un diamant momentané" that he made the affair the subject and guiding thread of a series of pastiches published in *Le Figaro* in February and March of 1908. In the year before he began drafting *A la recherche du temps perdu*, Proust composed accounts of Lemoine's hoax in the styles of Balzac, Flaubert, Sainte-Beuve, Michelet, Renan, Goncourt, and the theatre critic Emile Faguet. In March of 1909, he published a Lemoine Affair pastiche of the symbolist poet, Henri de Régnier. And in the summer of 1909, Proust attempted to publish

¹ *Le Figaro* began covering the "curieuse affaire" on Jan. 10. The affair is first mentioned on the fourth page of the paper, under the heading, "Nouvelles diverses." Three days later, it hit the front page (under the headline "L'Affaire des diamants"), where it remained for several weeks. For a synopsis of the story as *Le Figaro* presented it, see Jean Milly, *Les pastiches de Proust*, 16-17.

² On Jan. 13, the newspaper cites Lemoine's request to replay the spectacle: "en présence des experts, du juge, de toutes les personnes qu'on voudra, je ferai l'expérience définitive."

³ "Un détail bien curieux, c'est qu'il paraît que les diamants... provenaient des mines de Jagersfontein (Etat d'Orange) et avaient été achetés par M. De Haan à la Société De Beers, dont M. Julius Wernher est, on le sait, le gouverneur. De sorte que Lemoine apportait à M. Wernher, comme le produit de sa fabrication, des diamants achetés chez M. Wernher avec le propre argent de celui-ci" [A very curious detail is that it seems the diamonds... came from the Jagersfontein mines (State of Orange), and had been bought by M. Haan [a Parisian lapidary testifying against Lemoine] from the De Beers Company, which M. Wernher heads, as we know. This means that Lemoine presented to Wernher, as the product of his own workmanship, diamonds bought from Wernher's company with Wernher's own money"] (*Le Figaro*, 26 February).

pastiches of Chateaubriand, Ruskin, and Maeterlinck, but he missed his deadline at the *Figaro*, so these didn't appear in print at the time.

The critical consensus about these pastiches is that the act of strategically ventriloquizing other authors enabled Proust to “purge” external influences and find his “own” voice.⁴ My argument is that the pastiches are experiments in the phenomenology of “convulsive” and “unstable” preciosity (*CSB* 23). They highlight Proust's fascination for the volatility of value and for the peculiar status of the aesthetic object in modernity. They also reveal a Proust whose habits of perception and of composition were fundamentally conditioned by the spatial and temporal rhythms and textures of the daily newspaper.

This chapter is divided into three sections. In the first part, I will consider what the Lemoine Affair pastiches can tell us about Proust's predilection for experimental aesthetic economies. In the second part, I will broaden my examination of the dynamics of Proustian pastiche to investigate the surprising centrality of newspaper-reading and -writing in the *Recherche*. Finally, I will conclude by examining the only explicit, embedded pastiche in the novel—the Goncourt pastiche in *Le temps retrouvé*. Investigating the role this pastiche plays in the narrative, I will explore the centrality of pastiche to Proust's writing practice and to his aesthetic imagination. “Prestidigitateur,” journalist, and literary ventriloquist, the Proust I present here is insistently worldly. I am especially interested in the ways in which Proust reveals the cultivation of distinction and the fabrication of art as a matter of *practice*—at once a banal, non-auratic, everyday exercise, and an experience of enchanted absorption and self-loss.

1. Momentary Diamond

Proust is famous for championing an economy of aesthetic redemption, which we might call, following Bourdieu, an ideology of charisma.⁵ According to this logic, boring everyday objects conceal secret aesthetic riches that can be mined by those endowed with special powers of perception. The Proustian narrator calls this trick “translation,” “deciphering,” or “conversion,” and suggests that by mastering the magic of “involuntary memory,” one can conjure lasting treasures out of the “waste product of experience.” The true meaning of things lies hidden from most people, but the exceptional perceiver can learn to convert visible “hieroglyphics” into their “spiritual equivalent,” distilling “truth” from mere materiality (4: 457; 7: 290).⁶

⁴ This is the position endorsed by Jean Milly, Jean-Yves Tadié, Michael Finn, Annick Bouillaguet, and the editors of the *Pléiade* edition of *Contre Sainte-Beuve*. In her book on Proust, Balzac, and Flaubert, Bouillaguet cites Harold Bloom and claims that Proust's pastiches are symptoms of an “anxiety of influence.” In his biography of Proust, Tadié suggests that in the 1908 pastiches, “Proust se libère des auteurs qui l'osèdent, non sans leur avoir arraché leurs secrets” (604). Tadié does note, however, that pastiche is central in the *Recherche*: “dans cette oeuvre, Proust multipliera les pastiches, comme si le roman était raconté, un moment, par un autre écrivain” (605). See Genette's *Palimpsests* and Milly's *Les pastiches de Proust* for a more serious engagement with Proust's practice of pastiche. No critic has yet written about the Lemoine Affair.

⁵ As Bourdieu puts it, charismatic ideology “concedes to the work of art a magical power of conversion capable of awakening the potentialities latent in a few of the elect, and which contrasts the authentic experience of a work of art as an ‘affection’ of the heart or immediate enlightenment of the intuition with the laborious precedings and cold comments of the intelligence” (“Outline of a Sociological Theory of Art Perception” 174). Charismatic ideology legitimizes social privilege by pretending that it is a gift of nature (175).

⁶ This analogy of involuntary memory as a practice of translating the world's “hieroglyphics” makes the Proustian aesthetic subject an inverted double of the Marxian critic, who recognizes that capital “converts every product into a social hieroglyphic.” Where the Proustian subject converts hieroglyphics into a secret, private message, the Marxian reader deciphers them in order to “get behind the secret of our own social products” (*Capital* 167).

Proustian involuntary memory is a trick that really pays off in the *Recherche*: the narrator manages to pull his entire childhood out of a cup of tea, the beach at Balbec out of a starched napkin, and the city of Venice out of a cobblestone. The Lemoine Affair pastiches operate according to a different logic, however, revealing a Proust who is less interested in the redemptive or sublimatory power of art than in discredited performances of sophistication and spoiled economies of distinction.

In his Lemoine Affair pastiches, Proust is enchanted not so much by alchemy and miraculous transformations, but by the failed bluff—the conjuring trick that falls flat, humiliating the credulous executive even more than the would-be magician. Lemoine’s main line of defense was that his procedure had to be real, because if it were a hoax, it would mean that the world’s great diamond experts were idiots for having believed him. It is “matériellement impossible de croire,” Lemoine declared in a January 31 statement (printed in *Le Figaro*), that “les plus grands experts du monde” could have overlooked the jewelers’ marks on the diamonds that De Beers was now claiming the engineer had tried to pass off as his own. No one could possibly swallow De Beers’s story (“personne ne voudra avaler pareille couleuvre”).

In 1919, when Proust had become famous, he published his Lemoine Affair pastiches as a volume. He contended at this time that the *affaire* had been an insignificant subject chosen at random. The few critics who write about the pastiches have been quick to take him at his word—no one is interested in the Lemoine Affair itself. This is probably because we tend to imagine Proust either as the paragon of cultural sophistication, or as a sickly esthete walled up in a cork-lined room. These fantasies are undercut by the image of Proust as an avid newspaper reader and writer, as a speculator, and a scandal- and gossip-monger who followed every detail of Lemoine’s trial as it played out in the paper—and then brought the *affaire* back to the front page by publishing his own lovingly mocking accounts.

Proust embeds Lemoine’s fantasmatic artificial diamond differently in each pastiche: it appears as one more piece of gossip passed around in a Balzacian salon; as the collective dream of a dusty courtroom crowd in a Flaubertian trial scene; and as a glistening bit of snot hanging from Lemoine’s collar in a pastiche of the symbolist poet Henri de Régnier:

On ne distinguait plus qu’une seule masse juteuse, convulsive, transparente et durcie; et dans l’éphémère éclat dont elle décorait l’habit de Lemoine, elle semblait y avoir immobilisé le prestige d’un diamant momentané, encore chaud, si l’on peut dire, du four dont il était sorti, et dont cette gelée instable, corrosive et vivante qu’elle était pour un instant encore, semblait à la fois, par sa beauté menteuse et fascinatrice, présenter la moquerie et l’emblème. (23)

One could make out just the one single succulent, quivering mass, transparent and hardening, and in the ephemeral brilliance with which it decorated Lemoine’s attire, it seemed to have fixed the prestige of a momentary diamond there, still hot, so to speak, from the oven from which it had emerged, and for which this unstable jelly, corrosive and alive as it was for one more instant, seemed at once, by its deceitful, fascinating beauty, to present both a mockery and a symbol. (35)

Proust said that he composed his pastiches by setting an “internal metronome,” and indeed, we can feel him practicing his act in these pieces.⁷ He tests out the limits of different generic norms,

⁷ In a March, 21, 1908 letter to Robert Dreyfus, Proust writes (in reference to his pastiche of Renan): “J’avais réglé mon métronome intérieur a son rythme et j’aurais [pu] écrire dix volumes comme cela.”

alternating between fiction and criticism, presenting the affair as a vaudevillian tragedy that “abounds with improbabilities” (“fourmille d’in vraisemblances”)—but also as a historical topic that gives Michelet a headache.⁸ The pastiches are joyfully anachronistic: Proust revels in inserting Lemoine’s fabricated diamond into incongruous epochs. In the most outrageously anachronistic of all the pastiches, Proust imagines Ruskin traveling by airplane in order to look at Giotto’s Lemoine Affair frescoes. The pastiches are also insistently metaleptic: Proust blurs the line between the fictional and the real by introducing his own friends and acquaintances into established literary frames, or by confounding novelistic and historical personages.⁹ In the Balzac pastiche, for example, Proust describes Lemoine as “un de ces hommes extraordinaires” who could either be celebrated, like Ivan the Terrible or Peter the Great, or disgraced, like Balthazar Claës or Vautrin (*CSB* 12). Several of the pastiches are constructed as critiques of other pastiches. Proust plays on the fictionality of the entire exercise, for example, when he ventriloquizes Sainte-Beuve in order to critique his own invented Flaubert (Sainte-Beuve quibbles with Flaubert’s lack of verisimilitude), and when he ventriloquizes the critic Emile Faguet in order to “cite” lines from a play of his own invention—a vaudevillian tragedy about Lemoine’s hoax by the playwright Henri Bernstein. Proust even writes himself into the affair as a character: Edmond de Goncourt happily receives the news of Lemoine’s discovery along with news of Marcel Proust’s suicide—he has allegedly killed himself due to the devaluation of his stock portfolio. (Goncourt is disappointed to learn the next day that Lemoine is just a scam-artist and Proust is still alive).¹⁰

In a 1919 review of the pastiches (collected in *Pastiches et mélanges*), Aragon praises Proust’s skill, but notes that “the game ran the risk of being vulgar” (“le jeu risquait d’être vulgaire”). He also admits that he doesn’t really have the stomach for such a medley: “à vrai dire, mon estomac supporte mal les mélanges” (qtd in *CSB* 693). Aragon is playing here on the etymology of “pastiche,” which derives from the Italian “pasticcio,” a pie made of various ingredients. Proust exploits this etymology as well, returning in several of the pastiches to the image of the diamond being cooked in the oven. His Renan dramatically exclaims, for example: “Rallume encore demain le four éteint mille fois déjà d’où sortira peut-être un jour le diamant!” (*CSB* 36). In the unpublished pastiche of Ruskin, the baked diamond as aesthetic object is replaced by a baked potato: Giotto’s

⁸ Proust’s Michelet declares that contemplating the affair disturbed his mind, making him feel as unwell as he had felt while researching the absolutist reign of Henri XIV: “d’étranges maux de tête me faisaient croire chaque jour que j’allais être obligé d’interrompre mon histoire. Je ne retrouvai vraiment mes forces qu’au serment du Jeu de Paume (20 juin 1789). Pareillement me sentais-je troublé devant cet étrange règne de la cristallisation qu’est le monde de la pierre” [“peculiar headaches every day made me think that I was going to be forced to abandon my history. I didn’t really recover my strength until the Tennis Court Oath (20 June 1789). I felt similarly disturbed before this strange realm of crystallization that is the world of the stone”] (28/45).

⁹ See Michael Lucey’s *Never Say I: Sexuality and the First Person in Colette, Gide, and Proust* for a discussion of metalepsis as queer textual practice in Proust. Noting the complex figural detours that occur when Proust has his character, Charlus, cite one of Oscar Wilde’s characters in an expression of grief over the death of Lucien de Rubempré, Lucey suggests that Proustian metalepsis creates a context for queer self-definition and queer sociality (203). In Proust, such blurring of reality and representation can work as a strategy for bringing same-sex sexuality into discourse (210-211).

¹⁰ The Goncourt pastiche is divided into two journal entries. In the first, Goncourt is delighted to hear about Proust’s suicide while dining with Proust’s friend Lucien Daudet: “Comme bouquet, on apporte à Lucien la nouvelle, me donnant le dénouement de la pièce déjà ébauchée, que leur ami Marcel Proust se serait tué, à la suite de la baisse des valeurs diamantifères, baisse anéantissant une partie de sa fortune” [“Like a bouquet, they brought Lucien the news, presenting me with the denouement of the already sketched play, that their friend Marcel Proust had killed himself after the fall in diamond shares, a collapse that annihilated a part of his fortune”] (*CSB* 24/ *Lemoine Affair* 38). In the second journal entry, Goncourt awakens to learn that “Marcel Proust ne s’est pas tué, Lemoine n’a rien inventé du tout, ne serait qu’un escamoteur pas même habile, une espèce de Robert-Houdin manchot” [“Marcel Proust has not killed himself, Lemoine has invented nothing at all, is nothing but a conjurer who isn’t even very clever, a kind of Robert-Houdin with no hands”] (26/40).

painting technique is analogized as a procedure of drawing perspective lines on a potato fresh out of the oven.¹¹ In the Régnier pastiche, as we have seen, the special diamond-cooking oven is actually Lemoine's nose. Anticipating the conjunction of high art and everyday culinary arts so central to his novel, Proust is playing here on Lemoine's unabashedly down-home "scientific" experiment. In response to the prosecutor's query as to why no one else had been able to manufacture diamonds using his method, Lemoine cheekily responded that perhaps they simply failed to cook their diamonds long enough: "La cuisson n'avait pas dû être suffisante" (*Le Figaro*, 25 January, 1908).

My wager is that Proust's Lemoine Affair pastiches reveal something crucial about the precarious distinction between art and the ordinary in modernity. The diamond, after all, suggests the fantasy of aesthetic autonomy. The ultimate luxury item, an object Adam Smith described as "the greatest of all superfluities," the diamond is a gleaming chunk of pure form. Its dazzle obscures its material origins, the labor that drew it from the earth, and the economic networks that maintain the illusion of its rarity.

Like the diamond, the work of art in modernity is a "super-commodity": a commodity *without* planned obsolescence (Boscagli and Duffy 191).¹² Bourdieu describes the work of art as a "fetish": an object that exists only by virtue of the collective belief—or rather, "collective misrecognition"—which knows and acknowledges it as a work of art (*Règles de l'art* 240; *Rules of Art* 169). Metaphorizing the artist as a magician or "legitimate impostor," Bourdieu notes that works of art exist as symbolic objects only if they are received by spectators capable of legitimating them as such. According to Marcel Mauss's 1903 analysis of the social basis of magic, the magician's "legitimate imposture" is dependent on the "magic group." Similarly, the production of the work of art as a "sacred and consecrated object" involves, as Bourdieu puts it, an "immense enterprise of *symbolic alchemy* involving the collaboration. . . of a whole set of agents engaged in the field of production" (*Règles* 241; *RA* 170). Hence the avant-garde artist who offers up a "ready-made" object as his own original artwork is effectively testing the power of the spell.¹³ When Lemoine tries to pass off De Beers' diamonds as his own creation (claiming "je reconstitue le diamant tel que le fait la nature"), he presents himself as a sort of unwitting Duchamp: an artist investigating the limits of modernist magical thinking (in this case, the collective investment of belief that enables the gross overvaluation of certain rocks). If Lemoine's hoax tested the elasticity of the system that produces and maintains faith in the diamond's "true value," Proust's pastiches—which counterfeit the voices of consecrated authors—make the parallel between gem-fetishism and aesthetic fetishism explicit.

When Bourdieu uses the term "fetishism" to describe the "collective misrecognition" that produces the work of art as such, he is drawing on Marx's theory of the commodity. For Marx, commodity fetishism is the misperception that transforms "definite social relation between men" into "the fantastic form of a relation between things" (*Capital* 165). Marx's formula for fetishism, which Žižek describes as "the most elementary definition of ideology," highlights the mystified perception that enables subjects to act as if the worth of commodities were inherent in the objects themselves: "they do not know it, but they are doing it" ("Sie wissen das nicht, aber si tun es") (qtd

¹¹ "[S]i vous prenez une pomme de terre cuite au four [...] et si ayant déshabillé cette pomme de terre vous la marquez d'encre au dos et précisément sur les points de son relief que quelqu'un qui la tient devant lui ne peut apercevoir sans se casser la tête et une bonne semaine de torticolis, vous avez l'histoire de tout le développement de la peinture murale en Italie, notamment des fresques de Giotto" (*CSB* 204).

¹² Boscagli and Duffy describe the jewel as "an object with an aura, with little use value but with vast exchange value" (191).

¹³ De Duve suggests that Duchamp's urinal (or "fountain") "manifests the magic power of the word 'art'" (13). Duchamp is therefore playing a game with the notion of aesthetic autonomy: perceiving the urinal as an autonomous artwork requires "an act of faith" (14).

in Žižek 28). Drawing on this notion of ideological mystification, Bourdieu emphasizes the aesthetic fetishist's necessary blindness to the workings of the game of belief in which she participates—a game producing the sacred prestige of the artist's name and of the artwork itself.¹⁴

I would suggest, however, that if aesthetic appreciation in modernity involves a sort of fetishism, it is not the unconscious acting-out that characterizes Marxian ideological mystification. Rather, when we elevate a poet to the status of a prophet, or when we silently admire a signed bicycle wheel, urinal, or brillo box, we are performing the logic of Freudian fetishism, as this theory has been reformulated by Octave Mannoni: “je sais bien, mais quand même” [“I know very well, but all the same”] (Mannoni 11).¹⁵ In Freud's theory, the fetishist exists in a state of disenchanting enchantment: he continuously acts out the conflict between what he *knows* to be true (that his mother's body is strangely unlike his own) and what he nonetheless goes on *believing* (that her body is like his after all).¹⁶ Unlike the Marxian commodity fetishist, the Freudian sexual fetishist does not act out of a state of ignorance or repression; he happily embraces the contradiction between his knowledge and his apparently incompatible belief. The fetishist is both demystified *and* mystified, disillusioned and enthralled. His perception bundles together the banality of the obvious (“je sais bien. . .”) and the thrill of its suspension (“mais quand même. . .”).¹⁷

Freud's theory of sexual fetishism speaks to the peculiar mode of disenchanting or secular belief that characterizes aesthetic perception in modernity. Without referencing fetishism, James English makes a similar point when he revises Bourdieu's notion of “illusio” (sense of investment in the game) in order to account for the mixture of enchantment and disenchantment that characterizes our attitude toward the enduring prestige of cultural prizes in modernity:

What Bourdieu calls the ‘illusio’ of literature—the fundamental belief in the literary game and in the value of its stakes—has been complicated or compromised by something that is neither a perfect lucidity regarding ‘the object truth of literature as a fiction founded on collective belief’ nor a radical disillusionment from which literary practice can only seem a form of ‘cynical mystification or conscious trickery’ (*Rules of Art* 274). We are, rather, dealing with a kind of suspension between belief and disbelief, between the impulse to see art as a kind of ponzi scheme and the impulse to preserve it as a place for our most trusting investments. (118)

Proust's Lemoine Affair pastiches revel in precisely this attitude of demystified mystification, this “suspension between belief and disbelief” that enables us to go on investing in the seemingly inherent preciousness of certain consecrated objects. Proust simultaneously dismantles the fantasy of aesthetic autonomy and luxuriates in it.

¹⁴ Bourdieu cites a text by Mallarmé as an exception to this rule: an example of literature unusually self-conscious about its own game, and which flaunts its awareness of the “illusio” (the collective belief in the game and the value of its stakes). Bourdieu calls Mallarmé's unusual lucidity “deliberate fetishism” (*RA* 274-275).

¹⁵ In *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Žižek appropriates Mannoni's line as the formula for ideological fantasy in an era when the classic concept of ideology as “false consciousness” no longer holds: “Cynical reason is no longer naïve, but is a paradox of an enlightened false consciousness: one knows the falsehood very well, one is well aware of a particular interest hidden behind an ideological universality, but still one does not renounce it” (29).

¹⁶ In Freud's fantasy scenario, the fetish itself is a “substitute” for the woman's imagined phallus, “which the little boy once believed in and does not wish to forego.” The fetish is therefore a “permanent memorial” to the perception that compelled the child to accept the reality of sexual difference: by investing his libido in this material object, the fetishist is able to maintain a peculiar suspension of disbelief: he retains his belief and also gives it up (205-206).

¹⁷ Mannoni notes that Freud's theory provokes this same sense of boredom and wonder in the reader: “on se trouve partagé entre une impression d'extrême banalité et un sentiment de grande étrangeté” (11).

A January 31, 1908 cartoon in *Le Figaro* shows a wealthy couple luring a lady to their salon by boasting that their guest list includes a countess, a “cinématographe inédit,” “deux fakirs,” and the “prestidigitateur Lemoine.” “We’ll make cash and diamonds!” the couple exclaims (“on fera du blé et des diamants!”). As a number of recent accounts have shown, belle époque illusionists (“prestidigitateurs”) fostered in their audiences a state of “lucid self-delusion” (Landy 125).¹⁸ With his mixture of science, performance skills, and rhetorical dazzle, Lemoine played on the appeal of the modernist prestidigitator. Just as trick cinema and magic-show audiences enjoyed cultivating a special mixture of credulous incredulity, the public both knew Lemoine was a faker, and took great pleasure in believing his act all the same. As a January 13, 1908 editorial in the socialist daily, *L’Humanité*, puts it (speaking of the diamond recipe that Lemoine had placed in a safe-deposit box in a London bank, in order to keep it safe from the prying hands of De Beers executives):

on sait parfaitement que dans le ‘pli’ déposé dans une banque de Londres il n’y a rien, ou que, s’il y a une formule, elle est sans valeur, on le sait. . . et cependant on aime à s’entendre redire que peut-être il se pourrait qu’il y eût quelque chose. . . (original ellipses)

we know perfectly well that the envelope deposited in a London Bank contains nothing, or that if it does contain a formula, it is worth nothing, we know this. . . and nonetheless we love to hear ourselves repeat that perhaps there could be something in it. . .

It was precisely the excitement of investing belief in an obvious fiction that made the Lemoine Affair so compelling: “si ce pli qui ne contient rien contenait quelque chose?” (*L’Humanité* 13 January 1910). Casting himself in the role of the illusionist alternately described in the papers as an “alchimiste,” an “ingénieur mystificateur,” and an “ingénieur escroc,” Proust plays with this modern mixture of enchantment and incredulity.

The Lemoine Affair was an event that both demystified and remystified the diamond. First the diamond’s uniqueness is threatened when it is imagined to be artificially reproducible. Then, it turns out that it is not reproducible (and De Beers stockholders everywhere, including Proust, breathe a sigh of relief).¹⁹ Nonetheless, the diamond emerges from the Lemoine Affair looking like

¹⁸ Landy notes that the famous 19th-century “prestidigitateur,” Robert-Houdin, acted the role of professor, presenting his own tricks as experiments, or miracles of science, and publishing volumes unmasking the tricks of others (*Les Tricheries des Grecs dévoilées* (1861); *Les Secrets de la prestidigitation et de la magie* (1868)). As Landy puts it, “Mid-century prestidigitation was a legerdemain in which what was taken away with one hand was, simultaneously, restored with the other” (108). Houdin’s show called for new kind of spectatorship: someone with “mental dexterity equal to his manual dexterity” (110). Houdin’s performances required the spectator’s simultaneous conviction and distrust, his or her “aptitude for detached credulity.” Hence the ideal spectators would be “ready to don and doff their lucidity repeatedly throughout the show” (110). In this sense, Houdin provided his audiences with “a model for the construction of a belief system that recognizes itself as illusory” (110). For a broader history of secular magic, see Simon During *Modern Enchantments: The Cultural Power of Secular Magic* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2002) and James W. Cook, *The Arts of Deception: Playing With Fraud in the Age of Barnum*. (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2001). Cook notes that in the 19th century, magicians start using exposés and how-to manuals as a promotional tool. “For the first time, explaining the behind-the-scenes workings of one’s magical performance was becoming almost as important and as central to the professional magician’s craft as the more conventional work of designing and performing tricks” (178). For a discussion of the relation between the fad for theatrical conjuring and the flourishing of trick cinema in the early 20th century, see Matthew Solomon, “Up-to-Date Magic: Theatrical Conjuring and the Trick Film” (*Theatre Journal* 58 (2006): 595–615).

¹⁹ In a March 26, 1908 letter to Louis d’Albufera, Proust notes that his Lemoine Affair pastiches address his own economic loss: “Notre pauvre Rio Tinto [a mineral and mining company] n’est guère brillant. J’ai bien envie de la

an unstable apparition: a fiction of investor confidence and controlled scarcity. Proust's pastiches experiment with the wavering prestige of Lemoine's "momentary" synthetic diamond, which appears in the pastiches as miraculous and abject, precious and banal.

Lemoine's trick of cooking up synthetic diamonds, after all, offered the paradoxical lure of a preciousness so easy to reproduce that it wouldn't be worth much at all.²⁰ The Lemoine Affair pastiches explore the fetishistic investments that enable the conception of aesthetic autonomy in modernity. They also play on what Bill Brown has termed the modernist fantasy of "trans-aestheticization": the longing to definitively erode the dividing line between art and non-art. Such an aestheticization of everyday life would dissolve the very distinction of art, making art ordinary.²¹ Proust is famously interested in sublimatory economies that transform unremarkable everyday things into rare treasures. But he is also fascinated by objects that appear simultaneously invaluable and value-less—at once incomparable and perfectly forgettable. He is drawn, for example, to characters that appear to oscillate between the poles of originality and banality, appearing alternately singular and utterly typified. His novel simultaneously celebrates and denigrates Odette (a demi-mondaine with a Botticelli face), Rachel (a "femme quelconque" who is also a "femme d'un grand prix"), Charlus (a prince so distinguished that he prefers to go by the lowly title of "baron"), and Albertine (an incomparably desirable lover who is also just an ordinary-looking middle-class girl). In a draft of *Albertine disparue*, the narrator describes a woman (Madame de Putbus's maid) whom he desperately desires but has never met. He imagines her as singularly ordinary: her smile expresses "les lieux communs les plus communs de la stupidité la plus banale" (4: 725). This paradox of superlative ordinariness, or of uniqueness indistinguishable from utter non-uniqueness, is precisely what interests Proust about the fantasy of mass-produced diamonds.

Modernism loves these strangely ordinary, overdetermined, yet unreadable signs. The momentary snot-diamond that Proust tenderly serves up in his pastiche of Henri de Régnier is something like Woolf's "solid object"—an inestimable "drop of solid matter" that washes up on shore, a mere "large irregular lump" that is "nothing but glass" but appears nonetheless to be "almost a precious stone" ("Solid Objects" 80). Similarly, Woolf's "mark on the wall" resembles a jewel lying about "at the roots of turnips," and sparks innumerable fantasies before it turns out to be a mere snail ("The Mark on the Wall" 38). Proust's conjunction of preciousness and worthlessness is also reminiscent of James's "figure in the carpet," a hyper-meaningful and yet meaningless metatextual index that vaguely signifies "something or other," and is metaphorized, variously, as a "little point," a "foot in a shoe," a "piece of cheese in a mouse-trap," a "little trick" an "exquisite scheme," a "silver lining," a "buried treasure," or simply "that!"

Bourdieu has taught us that aesthetic taste is fundamentally "practical," or sociologically advantageous, and he frequently cites the *Recherche* as a prime illustration of the theory that taste functions as a social orienting device, maintaining subjects' attachments to particular positions in social space. And yet in the pastiches and throughout the *Recherche*, Proust demonstrates that the signs of distinction are difficult to handle. Art is both enchanting and embarrassing in Proust. His

bazarder quand il sera revenu au cours où je l'ai acheté. Qu'en penses-tu, grand financier ? As-tu vu que, dans mes pastiches du *Figaro*, j'ai parlé de ma déconfiture avec la De Beers?" (qtd in Tadié 609).

²⁰ According to the *Figaro*, many people wrote to Lemoine in prison, begging him to send them a few diamonds (since making them was so easy for him, or so they imagined): "Détail amusant: Lemoine reçoit à la prison de la Santé des masses de lettres. Beaucoup sont des demandes d'argent, de gens le suppliant de leur venir en aide. Il y a des commerçants menacés de la faillite, des jeunes filles qui ont besoin d'une petite dot pour se marier... 'Il vous serait si facile de faire cinq ou six pauvres diamants dont le prix nous tirerait de peine', disent-ils" (27 janvier 2008).

²¹ Brown discusses the concept of "trans-aestheticization" in his online essay, "Art, Administration, and the Poetics of Administration." See Rancière's "Why Emma Bovary Had to be Killed" for a larger discussion of the political and aesthetic consequences of the eroded distinction between "art" and "life" in modernity.

characters are constantly making fools of themselves when they try to derive cultural capital from performances of “disinterested” aesthetic pleasure. They froth at the mouth while waxing poetic about Chopin, make absurdly exaggerated claims to musical sensitivity; mispronounce names, knock objects off the table, lose track of time and hold up a fancy dinner party for 45 minutes, and so on. This may be because they lack the training and rhetorical skills necessary to manipulate complex and shifting aesthetic discourses—like Lemoine, their bluff just isn’t quite practiced enough. On the other hand, it may be that there is something inherently discomfiting about art in modernity. It’s the ultimate luxury item, reflecting the good taste of the select few who know how to enjoy it, but it’s also troublingly unremarkable—an object defined by its explicit lack of established criteria, set content, or precise purpose, and which is supposed to incite not intelligence or wittiness, but states of unthinkingness. This dazzling emptiness makes the artwork in modernity a perilous investment—like the diamond, circa 1908.

2. Proust and the Newspaper

The Lemoine Affair pastiches demonstrate Proust’s fascination for the precarious and shifting line between the signs of distinction and the signs of ordinariness in modernity. The pastiches present Proust not as a singular figure whose genius transcends markets and history, but as a modernist whose writing practices and habits of perception and interpretation were bound up in the circuits and rhythms of early twentieth-century material culture. In this section of the chapter, I examine Proust’s attachment to that most commonplace of literary objects: the daily newspaper.

The Lemoine Affair was for Proust entirely mediated by the newspaper: Proust followed the developments of the Affair in early 1908 as it played out in the pages of *Le Figaro*. The pastiches he then published in that paper are performances that not only riff on the styles of a particular set of authors, but also play on the articles that ran throughout the month of January. The *Figaro* articles about what it dramatically calls “L’Affaire des diamants” include a hodge-podge of voices and opinions: the articles *already* read like a set of pastiches. They shift from one point of view to the next, quoting Lemoine’s supporters and detractors at length, citing scientists, jewelers, lawyers, Lemoine’s wife, amateur chemists, gem enthusiasts, and even letters that were sent to Lemoine in prison from enthusiastic fans hopeful that he might be willing to cook them up a diamond or two. Like Proust, the *Figaro* journalists are enchanted by the details of Lemoine’s performance; they want to know everything about the mysterious “substance” he allegedly transformed into diamonds: “Quel était son aspect, quelle était sa grosseur, quelle était sa consistance? Etait-elle dure ou molle, pulvérulente ou cohésive, amorphe ou cristalline, dense ou légère?” [“What did it look like, what was its size, what was its consistency? Was it hard or soft, powdery or sticky, amorphous or crystalline, heavy or light?”] (15 January 1908).

Roland Barthes has suggested that Proust only began serious work on his novel after his critical essay, *Contre Saint-Beuve*, was rejected by *Le Figaro* in 1909. This rejection, according to Barthes, was the force that propelled Proust out of journalistic, episodic writing and into a entirely different rhythm of prose—“une écriture longue” (*La préparation du roman* 154). It is tempting to think of Proust’s monumental novel, launched in response to a journalistic failure, as the ultimate anti-newspaper. The newspaper, after all, deals in daily humdrum; it is composed of disconnected information bound together only by the idea of “today”—information rendered obsolete by the mere act of reading it. *A la recherche du temps perdu*, on the other hand, is famous for celebrating what Deleuze calls “the true signs of art.” Proust’s novel supposedly demonstrates the power of art to overcome the passing of time; it valorizes the cultivation of a perceptual disposition capable of transforming merely ephemeral apparitions into lasting aesthetic riches.

Yet Proust's novel valorizes not only redeemed time—the eternal, the monumental, Art with a capital A—but also the contingent and episodic, the forgettable and forgotten. The Proustian narrator describes the newspaper as precisely the medium in which these temporal modes coexist: as he puts it, the newspaper presents “les proportions inattendues de distraction et de présence d'esprit, de mémoire et d'oubli dont est fait l'esprit humain” [“the incalculable proportions of absence and presence of mind, of recollection and forgetfulness, of which the human mind is composed”] (1: 478; 2: 68). In the pages of the mass daily, the “philosophie du feuilletoniste,” according to which “tout est promis à l'oubli,” is on equal footing with its opposite: “une philosophie contraire qui prédirait la conservation de toutes choses” (1: 477; 2: 67/49). Two opposing temporal orders exist within the newspaper: one privileging continuity, the other obsolescence:

Dans le même journal où le moraliste du “premier Paris” nous dit d'un événement, d'un chef-d'oeuvre, à plus forte raison d'une chanteuse qui eut son heure de Célébrité” : “qui se souviendra de tout cela dans dix ans?,” à la troisième page, le compte rendu de l'académie des inscriptions ne parle-t-il pas souvent d'un fait par lui-même moins important, d'un poème de peu de valeur, qui date de l'époque des Pharaons et qu'on connaît encore intégralement? (1: 477-78)

In the same newspaper in which the moralist of the leader column says to us of an event, of a work of art, *a fortiori* of a singer who has enjoyed her “hour of fame”: “Who will remember this in ten years' time?”, does not the report of the Académie des Inscriptions overleaf speak often of a fact in itself of smaller importance, of a poem of little merit, which dates from the epoch of the Pharaohs and is still known in its entirety? (2: 67)

Bourdieu suggests that the difference between high-culture and mass-culture literary production and consumption is a difference between two different temporal regimes. So-called “pure art” privileges production and slow time, while the literary industry privileges dissemination and temporal immediacy. The distinction between high-brow and industrial literature is largely determined by the presence or absence of a time-lag between the appearance of the work and its “legitimation” by a public. The fantasy of pure art requires a delay in publishing success; the work must be imagined as a priceless “offrande symbolique,” a gift met with the most precious counter-gift: name recognition (*Les Règles de l'art* 211). Essential to this symbolic economy is the “intervalle de temps interposé” between offering and counter-offering. According to Bourdieu, this temporal interval works as a screen, dissimulating the interestedness of the seemingly purely generous gesture. On the other hand, the economic logic of literary and artistic industries privileges immediate and temporary success, measured by sales, and adjusted according to client demand. What I want to show here is that Proust plays with this opposition between the instantaneity of diffusion and the longue durée of production. He explores the interstice between these two economies, and is as intrigued by the possibility of a mass-produced “high” literature as he is by the possibility of a mass-produced precious gem.

A la recherche du temps perdu is a novel about someone who wants to write a novel, but it began as a newspaper article about someone who wants to write a newspaper article. In late 1908, when Proust began working on the project that would become the *Recherche*, he conceived of it as a newspaper piece that would go something like this: a man is tossing and turning in bed, wondering what happened to the article he submitted so long ago; then in the morning, thrilled to find that his article has finally been published on the front page of the *Figaro*, he has a conversation with his

mother about another newspaper article he plans to write.²² This newspaper frame, I would argue, didn't really drop out of Proust's *Recherche* but was absorbed into and scattered through the 3,000-page novel.

Proust had a real penchant for the newspaper. Open the first volume of the *Recherche*, and you get a sense of his affinity for the press right away, since this volume is dedicated to Gaston Calmette, editor in chief of *Le Figaro*. When you turn the page, however, you might be jarred by the apparent contrast between that publication-world dedication, and the elaboration of the time-and-space-expanding, metamorphic force of reading that famously opens Proust's novel. In the celebrated first paragraph, the narrator's literary reflections take a "rather peculiar turn" when he falls asleep perusing an anonymous "volume" and imagines himself absorbed into the text he has been reading. The narrator-reader's personality and will are scattered as he *becomes* the heterogeneous subjects of his book:

Longtemps, je me suis couché de bonne heure. Parfois, à peine ma bougie éteinte, mes yeux se fermaient si vite que je n'avais pas le temps de me dire: 'Je m'endors.' Et, une demi-heure après, la pensée qu'il était temps de chercher le sommeil m'éveillait; je voulais poser le volume que je croyais avoir encore dans les mains et souffler ma lumière; je n'avais pas cessé en dormant de faire des réflexions sur ce que je venais de lire, mais ces réflexions avaient pris un tour un peu particulier; il me semblait que j'étais moi-même ce dont parlait l'ouvrage: une église, un quatuor, la rivalité de François Ier et de Charles-Quint. (1: 3)

For a long time, I would go to bed early. Sometimes, the candle barely out, my eyes closed so quickly that I did not have time to tell myself: 'I'm falling asleep.' And half an hour later the thought that it was time to look for sleep would awaken me; I would make as if to put away the book which I imagined was still in my hands, and to blow out the light; I had gone on thinking, while I was asleep, about what I had just been reading, but these thoughts had taken a rather peculiar turn; it seemed to me that I myself was the immediate subject of my book: a church, a quartet, the rivalry between François I and Charles V. (1: 1)

Strangely enough, in drafts, this potent, liminal state of subjective dispersal is sparked not by a "volume," but by the newspaper that the narrator is reading:

~~je me croyais encore en train de lire le journal et je me disais qu'il était une heure après, et donc la pensée qu'il était temps de m'endormir m'éveillait~~ | Je je m'éveillais ~~sans me rendre compte que je venais de dormir~~ + | voulais jeter le journal que je croyais avoir encore en mains

(N.a.Fr. 16641, f. 71 v-f 65, qtd in Naturel, 30)

²² In a December 1908 letter to Georges de Lauris, Proust writes that he is planning an essay about Sainte-Beuve, which will begin "par le récit d'une matinée: maman viendrait près de mon lit, et je lui raconterais l'article que je veux faire sur Sainte-Beuve, et je le lui développerais" (qtd *CSB* 822-23). Cahier II features a draft in which the narrator "décrit l'émotion que lui a causée la publication d'un article de lui dans *Le Figaro*; après quoi il s'abandonne à des rêves de voyage; enfin, au cours d'une conversation avec sa mère, il lui annonce son intention d'écrire 'un article' contre la méthode de Sainte-Beuve" (*CSB* 830-831, n 217).

I thought that I was still reading the newspaper and I told myself that an hour had passed, and thus the thought that it was time to go to sleep woke me | I I woke without realizing that I had just been asleep + | wanted to toss away the newspaper that I thought I still held in my hands

This newspaper is replaced by a book in the published version of the *Recherche*. Nonetheless, the newspaper, allied with threshold states of consciousness, and with the scattering and dispersal of attention, remains a phantom presence in the overture, and throughout the novel.²³

À la recherche du temps perdu is not only a celebration of the death-defying essence of art. It is also a semiotic laboratory that multiplies and accumulates interpretive and phenomenological possibilities. This patchwork novel orients us toward numerous points of view and modalities of attention; it oscillates between gossip and philosophy, melancholia and euphoria, sleepiness and wakefulness, solipsism and schizophrenic multi-voicedness. From this point of view, the newspaper—and especially *Le Figaro*, circa 1908—is quite possibly the most significant and critically overlooked intertext in the novel. In its very first issue, published in 1826, the *Figaro* calls itself a literary paper with a satirical bent, and declares that it will investigate “théâtre, critique, sciences, arts, mœurs, nouvelles, scandale, économie domestique, biographie, bibliographie, mode, etc., etc.” You couldn’t ask for a more apt description of the subject matter of Proust’s novel.²⁴

Everyone reads the newspaper in Proust—from aristocrats to cooks.²⁵ Newspapers circulate throughout the novel—marking parties, deaths, wars, theatrical performances and art exhibitions, and even allowing the narrator to track his lover’s movements without leaving his bed. Juxtaposing literary compositions and weather reports, jokes, advertisements, pastiches, musical scores, and obituaries, war news and society gossip, the newspaper’s multi-directional reading pathways and incessantly renewed, incessantly annulled present orient us away from the dynamics of temporal redemption for which Proust is so famous.²⁶ In Proustian involuntary memory, the force of analogy

²³ Mireille Naturel notes that in the earliest drafts of the overture of Proust’s novel, publication appears as the narrative’s central concern: in this first version of the novel, “lost time” is in fact time lost while waiting for publication (24). Tadié notes that Proust attached great importance to the equilibrium and “dosage” of his own newspaper publications, spreading out articles over several weeks (603).

²⁴ With a largely upper-class readership, *Le Figaro* was essentially a reputable gossip rag, known for its society news, literary columns, and theatre reviews. But it was also a space for avant-garde manifestos: *Le Figaro* published Baudelaire’s “Painter of Modern Life” in 1863, Jean Moréas’s symbolist manifesto on September 18, 1886, and Marinetti’s futurist manifesto on February 20, 1909.

²⁵ The Baron de Charlus claims to read newspapers the way he washes his hands—habitually and without the slightest care. “Je ne fais aucune attention aux journaux” he declares, “je les lis comme je me lave les mains, sans trouver que cela vaille la peine de m’intéresser” (3: 278). Swann, however, is not only a newspaper enthusiast but a gifted and attentive reader of the newspaper, such that “s’il lisait dans un journal les noms des personnes qui se trouvaient à un dîner pouvait dire immédiatement la nuance du chic de ce dîner, comme un lettré, à la simple lecture d’une phrase, apprécie exactement la qualité littéraire de son auteur” [“if he read in a newspaper the names of the people who had been at a dinner-party, could tell at once its exact degree of smartness, just as a man of letters, simply by reading a sentence, can estimate exactly the literary merit of its author”] (1: 242/1: 344). The cook, Françoise, on the other hand, weeps “torrents” of tears over newspaper calamities that would leave her unmoved if they happened to the people she knew in her everyday life (1: 122/ 1: 171).

²⁶ In *La Prisonnière*, for example, the narrator invites a milkmaid into his bedroom in order to flirt with her, and finding himself flustered, uses the newspaper as a shield: “je tâchai de rebondir; les joues, non aperçues dans la boutique, me parurent si jolies que j’en fus intimidé, et pour me donner une contenance, je dis à la petite crémière: ‘seriez-vous assez bonne pour me passer le *figaro* qui est là, il faut que je regarde le nom de l’endroit où je veux vous envoyer.’ [...] “Ça ne vous gênerait vraiment pas trop, dis-je en faisant semblant de chercher dans le *figaro*, que je vous envoie même un peu loin?” [“I tried to spring back again; her cheeks, which I had not noticed in the shop, appeared to me so pretty that I was abashed, and to recover my composure said to the young dairymaid: ‘Would you be so kind as to hand me the *Figaro*

conquers the passage of time, as lasting aesthetic profit is drawn from spent quotidian experience. Involuntary memory takes place on a vertical axis, and it permits the perceiving subject to cast away the outside world and retreat into the sphere of his imagination. The experience of newspaper reading, on the other hand, is heterogeneous, and involves perpetual reorientation in relation to the outside world and its multiple overlapping circuits. Philip Fisher has described the newspaper as an “open” or “torn space” which provokes readers to “look *around*” rather than “looking directly *at* objects” (667-68). And in a far-reaching and fascinating essay, Kevis Goodman suggests that the rise of “the news” in the eighteenth century ushers in a historically new structure of feeling which precedes and lays the groundwork for Romantic (Kantian) aesthetic “free play.” The news, Goodman argues, generates a “globally telescopic eye” allied with what Goodman terms a “paradoxically full but non-ideational vacuity”—a “permeable, open circuit of awareness” (72, 69).²⁷ The newspaper in Proust is an object capable of provoking incompatible, overlapping, or even unspecifiable modes of feeling and attention. At stake here is not the compensatory, self-aggrandizing aesthetics of involuntary memory, but a distinction-spoiling valorization of the most ordinary of literary objects.²⁸

Walter Benjamin famously disparaged the press for privileging random bits of information over more integrated experiential modes. In essays on Leskov and on Baudelaire, Benjamin associates the press with the “atrophy” of experience, arguing that the newspaper “paralyzes” readers’ imaginations, damaging our capacity to perceive external events as anything other than “issueless” and “private” (“On Some Motifs in Baudelaire” 158). In a lesser-known essay, however, Benjamin presents the newspaper in a different light. He acknowledges the desire that binds the newspaper reader to the newspaper, and suggests here that in the act of newspaper-reading, a flickering “dialectical moment” lies concealed. The newspaper reader, excluded from the sphere of cultural production, smolders with impatience to see his interests represented. Benjamin concludes that “the decline of writing in the press turns out to be the formula for its restoration,” since the reader is “at all times ready to become a writer” (740). In the newspaper, Benjamin contends, experience is not simply privatized; rather, the newspaper makes “public property” of literary competence (741).

which is lying there. I must make sure of the address to which I am going to send you.’ [...] ‘Are you quite sure it won’t be giving you too much trouble,’ I said, while I pretended to be searching the columns of the *Figaro*, ‘if I send you rather a long way?’” (3: 650/ 5: 184-85).

²⁷ In a reading of the poet William Cowper’s engagement with the newspaper, Goodman troubles the assumed divide between poetry and history, the “news” and lyric, private and public, daydream and the political. She is interested in developing a complex understanding of poetic retreat, whereby lyric suspension would not be an escape from history, but rather, “a loophole through which the world’s strangeness enters” (91). In the experience of reading the newspaper, Goodman suggests, the mind’s vacuity is both a defense against strangeness and an aperture, admitting the very threat it parries. This hybrid structure of feeling anticipates lyric subjectivity: “at the position of pivot between the emptiness of *acedia* and the fullness of aesthetic experience, Cowper’s teeming vacuity of thought... is an unlikely, involuntary mode of knowledge that responds to the pressure of an eventful and information-laden present, one shaped by technological and territorial extension” (105).

²⁸ It is worth noting that Picasso was also playing with the textures and temporalities of the daily paper during the same period. Krauss suggests that in his cubist collages of 1912-1913, Picasso was seduced by the newspaper’s “whirl of signifiers” (48). Each newspaper fragment is “in constant semantic play”: one newspaper form “generates the silhouette of a wine glass”; another “conjures up the complicated form of a bottle,” and at the same time, headlines intrude; the canvas is cacophonous, full of voices. Hence Krauss argues that the effect of the collage is “the motion of conversation, never solidified into ‘information,’ ‘argument,’ or ‘idea.’” And none of the voices “can be said to represent the position of the author” (55).

If the newspaper erodes the divide between readers and writers, it also calls into question the opposition between the serious and the trivial. Early in the *Recherche*, Charles Swann advocates a reversal of the “essential” and the “insignificant,” whereby newspapers would publish philosophy, and salon gossip would only appear in a gold-embossed volume published once a decade.²⁹ What Proust ultimately shows us is that the newspaper itself is the object that makes such evaluative leaps and reversals imaginable. Reading the newspaper in Proust brings to light a different side of *A la recherche du temps perdu*: this is not a backward-looking monument to aesthetic distinction, but an experimental text that orients readers toward the unredeemable open-endedness of the ordinary.

3. Proust, pasticheur

I will conclude this chapter by offering another perspective on Proustian enchantment and on the Proustian “practice” of distinction. I have suggested that Proust’s Lemoine Affair pastiches explore the precarious border between the signs of art and the signs of ordinariness in modernity. These pastiches test out the fetishistic logic of enchanted disenchantment that subtends the fantasy of aesthetic autonomy. They also highlight Proust’s fascination for the newspaper, with its heterogeneous assemblage of temporalities, voices, and attitudes. In this final section of the chapter, I explore the narrative and aesthetic importance of the only explicit embedded pastiche in the *Recherche*—the Goncourt pastiche in *Le temps retrouvé*. This pastiche scrambles all the codes of Proust’s novel. It revisits a familiar scene and turns it inside out, reviving the exhausted narrator’s interest in and attachment to the fictional world he inhabits.

Periodically throughout the *Recherche*, Proust shuts down his textual world and then builds it back up again. As if the narrative had momentarily lost interest in itself, the space of the text is sometimes temporarily divested of color and vibrancy, only to appear once again luminous and alive. For example, in the overture of the novel, the narrator describes the experience of being stripped of all memory and identity and then returning to selfhood from the very outer limits of imaginable consciousness.³⁰ Later, at the end of *A l’ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs*, the text concludes its remarkable depiction of the narrator’s vacation at the beach in Balbec by quietly dissolving the fictional world it has made for us. The novel gently ushers us out of the luminous oceanside world, making the departure from Balbec less abrupt by allowing us to linger with the narrator in his shrouded hotel

²⁹ “Du moment que nous déchirons fiévreusement chaque matin la bande du journal, alors on devrait changer les choses et mettre dans le journal, moi je ne sais pas, les... Pensées de Pascal ! (Il détacha ce mot d’un ton d’emphase ironique pour ne pas avoir l’air pédant.) Et c’est dans le volume doré sur tranches que nous n’ouvrons qu’une fois tous les dix ans, ajouta-t-il [...] que nous lirions que la reine de Grèce est allée à Cannes ou que la princesse de Léon a donné un bal costumé.” [“Suppose that, every morning, when we tore the wrapper off our paper with fevered hands, a transmutation were to take place, and we were to find inside it—oh ! I don’t know; shall we say Pascal’s *Pensées* ? He articulated the title with an ironic emphasis so as not to appear pedantic. ‘And then, in the gilt and tooled volumes which we open once in ten years,’ he went on [...] ‘we should read that the Queen of the Hellenes had arrived at Cannes, or that the Princesse de Léon had given a fancy dress ball.’”] (1: 26/ 1: 33-34).

³⁰ “[Q]uand je m’éveillais au milieu de la nuit, comme d’ignorais où je me trouvais, je ne savais même pas au premier instant qui j’étais; j’avais seulement dans sa simplicité première le sentiment de l’existence comme il peut frémir au fond d’un animal; j’étais plus dénué que l’homme des cavernes; mais alors le souvenir—non encore du lieu où j’étais, mais de quelques-un de ceux que j’avais habités et où j’aurais pu être—venait à moi comme un secours d’en haut pour me tirer du néant d’où je n’aurais pu sortir tout seul” [“when I awoke in the middle of the night, not knowing where I was, I could not even be sure at first who I was; I had only the most rudimentary sense of existence, such as may lurk and flicker in the depths of an animal’s consciousness; I was more destitute than the cave-dweller; but then the memory—not yet of the place in which I was, but of various other places where I had lived and might now very possibly be—would come like a rope let down from heaven to draw me up out of the abyss of not-being”] (1: 5/ 1: 4).

room, where there is nothing to see but a small patch of light playing on the floor and walls, and nothing to hear but the faint sound of an oceanside orchestra concert wafting up from below. This diminution of perceptual and affective intensity prepares us to be transported into the unknown spaces and moods of *Le côté de Guermantes*. Involuntary memory is the most famous Proustian method for suspending and renewing excitement about the world, but many other experiences do this as well. A short list would include: drinking champagne; riding in a train, a carriage, or an automobile; looking at paintings; listening to music; smelling flowers; going to sleep; waking up; looking at clouds; eating asparagus; and on and on.

For Proust, writing pastiche is another activity that renews curiosity, awareness, and vitality, rekindling the pasticheur's excitement about the world around him. In *A l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs*, Albertine produces her friend Gisèle's exam pastiche (a letter from Sophocles to Racine) and in nearly the same gesture, passes a note to the narrator, telling him "je vous aime bien" (1: 911/2: 670). The spatial and temporal proximity of the two epistles indicates, on the one hand, that Albertine's amatory declaration is just as practiced and put-on as her *breuvet* essay will be. On the other hand, the crossing of Albertine's and "Sophocles's" compositions suggests that pastiche itself is a sort of love letter, a practice of affection and affinity that pulls the loved one close. Bourdieu has suggested that Proustian pastiche is not caricature or parody—it does not simply reproduce the most salient characteristics of a style. Rather, Proust's pastiches reproduce the *habitus* of other writers—Proust gets inside those writers' tastes, reproducing their dispositions, their habits of perception and interpretation, the quasi-corporeal rhythms they cultivate, their manner of orienting the reader through space (*Distinction* 173).

The term "pastiche" is often used to refer to the characteristic style (or style-lessness) of postmodernity. Jameson famously defined postmodern pastiche as "blank parody"—a depthless, ahistorical, random cannibalization of all the styles of the past (*Postmodernism* 17-18). Modernist pastiche, on the other hand, was a particular practice of writing, popular in France around the turn of the century, which required its practitioners to give themselves up to the rhythm and *feel* of another writer's voice. Anticipating surrealist automatic writing, the belle époque fad for pastiche can also be tied to modernism's broader interest in travesty, masks, animal mimicry, and emotional contagion, from Gabriel Tarde's fin-de-siècle theory of imitation as the foundation of social cohesion, to Marcel Mauss's 1934 theory of "habitus" as "une imitation prestigieuse" whereby the individual "borrows" his corporeal dispositions.³¹ Walter Benjamin, Roger Caillois and Jacques Lacan were all taken by the notion that identity might be fundamentally imitative, based in a sort of mimetic compulsion to "become other" (Tausig xii).³²

³¹ On the acquisition of durable bodily dispositions through education and family inculcation, Mauss writes: "ce qui se passe, c'est une imitation prestigieuse. L'enfant, l'adulte, imite des actes qui ont réussi et qu'il a vu réussir par des personnes en qui il a confiance et qui ont autorité sur lui ... L'individu emprunte la série des mouvements dont [son corps] est composé à l'acte exécuté devant lui ou avec lui par les autres" ["What takes place is a prestigious imitation. The child, the adult, imitates actions which have succeeded and which he has seen successfully performed by people in whom he has confidence and who have authority over him... The individual borrows the series of movements which constitute [his body] from the action executed in front of him or with him by others"] (369/ 101-102).

³² Tausig notes that for these thinkers, "the wonder of mimesis lies in the copy drawing on the character and power of the original, to the point whereby the representation may even assume that character and that power" (*Mimesis and Alterity* xii). Roger Caillois's essay on the compulsion of insects to imitate space itself was key for a number of modernists; Lacan cites it, for example, when he claims that the formation of the ego begins with the infant's jubilation at the sight of its mirror image. See Caillois, "Mimétisme et la psychasthénie légendaire" (1935) and Lacan, "Le stade du miroir" (1936/1949). Benjamin was so fascinated by what he called the "mimetic faculty" that he suggested that the modern subject is driven by "empathy" with the commodity form or with exchange value itself. See *The Arcades Project*, 448-449. On the importance of trance, possession, and passivity in the French avant-garde, see Joyce Cheng's "Mask,

Pastiche was a widely practiced school exercise during the French Third Republic,³³ and by the early twentieth century, there was a market for pastiche compilations, like the multi-volume series, *A la manière de . . .*, edited by Reboux and Muller and published in five installments between 1908 and 1950. Pastiche as practiced by Reboux and Muller is caricatural in tone: it mocks the very concept of stylistic novelty, and denigrates the authors it pastiches, rather than celebrating them.³⁴ But Proustian pastiche is not simply parodic—it is not just about surpassing more powerful authors, or becoming free from literary influence. Rather, Proustian pastiche is a rehearsal of tonal flexibility and plasticity, a practice of intimacy with a variety of styles and generic norms.

Proust injects the Goncourt pastiche into the *Recherche* at the precise moment that the narrative has hit a lull. At the beginning of the final volume,³⁵ the narrator has returned to Combray, where everything seems insignificant, small, flat, and unsurprising. The return to Combray is introduced in a tone of boredom—the narrator informs us that he almost skipped telling us about the visit. The narrative itself is exhausted; the world that has been so lovingly built around us for thousands of pages seems like a shoddy set. The narrator complains that his imagination and sensibility must have “weakened”: “j’étais désolé de voir combien peu je revivais mes années d’autrefois” [“I was distressed to see how little I relived my early years”] (4: 267/ 7: 2). The river Vivonne, once described as “flowing crystal” full of minnows and tadpoles and waterlilies and framed by buttercups, is now “narrow and ugly” (“mince et laide”).

It is into this dead world that Proust inserts the Goncourt pastiche. In an echo of the very first scene of the novel, the narrator reads several pages of the Goncourt *Journal* before falling asleep one night. Instead of simply describing or critiquing the *Journal*, as he does with other referenced works of literature, the narrator uncharacteristically “cites” at length from this work—which is, of course, not really a quotation from Goncourt, but Proust’s own invention. In this pastiche, we’re invited to imagine the nineteenth-century novelist and esthete as a guest in Proust’s own novel: the space that Goncourt details is the Verdurin salon—with which any reader who had read all the way to Proust’s final volume would be quite familiar. In other words, in this pastiche, the novel doubles back on itself, presenting one of its privileged spaces from an entirely new point of view.

Why would Proust have privileged the Goncourt *Journal* in this way, when, as the *Lemoine Affair* pastiches demonstrate, he could have ventriloquized any number of other texts? Perhaps, as Jean Milly suggests, it is a way for Proust to embed one of the publication scandals of the day into his novel: the final volumes of the Goncourt *Journal* were due to appear in 1916, but their

Mimicry, Metamorphosis: Roger Caillois, Walter Benjamin and Surrealism in the 1930s” (*Modernism/modernity* 16.1: 61-86).

³³ See Paul Aron, *Histoire du pastiche: le pastiche littéraire français, de la Renaissance à nos jours* (Paris: PUF, 2008). Françoise Douay-Soublin notes that literary-themed *baccalauréat* exam exercises were unknown before 1859, but became centerpieces of Third Republic pedagogy, as historical exercises and Latin composition went out of vogue. Douay-Soublin notes that four-fifths of *bac* exercises proposed between 1880 and 1903 were literary in theme, rather than historical. She offers as an example *Lettre de Fénelon à La Motte sur la querelle des Anciens et des Modernes* (1143).

³⁴ For example, in the 1910 edition, the pastiche of Tolstoy is full of comically unpronounceable names (“Ivan Labibine Ossouzoff, du Gouvernement de Kartimskrasolvitchegosk, district de Vokovosnesensk-Anskrevsantchoursk,” etc.). The pastiche of Baudelaire is explicitly racist and full of words like “spleen,” “vomit,” “squelette,” “puanteur,” “stérilité,” and so on. (*A La Manière De...* Ed. Charles Muller and Paul Reboux. Paris: Grasset, 1910. 33-43/71-73.)

³⁵ As the publication of the final volumes of the novel were posthumous, there is some debate over where to place the breaks between volumes. In the 1954 Pléaide edition, *Le temps retrouvé* begins with the narrator’s statement that he nearly abstained from recounting the return to Combray. The 1987 Pléaide edition places this statement at the end of the penultimate volume, *Albertine disparue*. The classic Moncrieff/Kilmartin/Enright translation reproduces the original Pléaide volume break.

publication was delayed.³⁶ Or perhaps Proust is both playing with and paying homage to the Goncourts' peculiar mixture of rarified aestheticism and coarseness. Edmond and Jules Goncourt's fanatic devotion to art is a model for the Proustian narrator's nearly magical powers of aesthetic sublimation: the Goncourts boast that they both enjoy and suffer from a superior delicacy and refinement, claiming to be better equipped than others to derive aesthetic pleasure from ordinary objects. Yet, like *Le Figaro*, the Goncourt *Journal* mixes the mundane with the lofty, aestheticizing the mundane details of the quotidian while also exposing the corporeal, material realities of prestigious writers' daily lives—Baudelaire's bad hair cut; Flaubert's financial problems; Maupassant's syphilis, etc.

On the other hand, Proust lets us know that the choice of Edmond de Goncourt is almost arbitrary: he could have given us the same scene in a radically different generic and tonal register, as a pastiche of Balzac's *La fille aux yeux d'or*. What sort of queer, orientalist, sado-masochistic dinner party could Proust have served up, in place of the hyper-refined salon portrait he filters through the perspective of Edmond de Goncourt? We will never know: the narrator claims that Gilberte was engrossed in Balzac's novella that night, and he did not want to take it from her.³⁷

The Goncourt pastiche is organized around images of inversion and reversal. A set of pearls (which once belonged to Mme de Lafayette) miraculously turn black in a fire. The doctor Cottard describes a case of dual personality (“de véritables dédoublements de la personnalité”) whereby a patient can simply be touched and awakened to a second life. Indeed the pastiche itself is an inversion: playfully ventriloquizing Goncourt in order to shuffle and rearrange the elements of Proust's novel. The passage is full of Proustian elements: a reference to *One Thousand and One Nights*, to Venice, to Japanese chrysanthemums. But now we focus on Monsieur Verdurin, rather than Mme Verdurin; and on the material details of the dinner (the plates, the food, the decor) rather than the conversation. And instead of presenting the Verdurins as the novel has up until now—as a couple of wealthy, faux-bohemian social climbers—Goncourt describes them as the epitome of refinement, insisting on the rarity, the remarkable quality, and the “genuine” distinction of their salon. Like the Lemoine Affair pastiches, the Goncourt pastiche highlights the volatility of signs of distinction. Once focalized through Goncourt's point of view, signs of vulgarity flip over into signs of sophistication. It's as if we are suddenly offered a vision of things that has been repressed until now—although this depth metaphor doesn't quite work, since the narrator suggests that Goncourt records the “copiable” surface of things, while he himself has x-ray eyes, and attends, like a surgeon, to all the laws and causes hidden beneath them (4: 297/ 7: 41). A number of critics who write about this pastiche argue that it is included in the volume in order to elevate the narrator's own accomplishment: according to this view, Proust is disparaging Goncourt's vision in order to make his own style and point of view seem smarter.³⁸ Instead, one could say that this occasion of narrative redoubling reveals Proust's interest in the invigorating multiplicity of the perceptual world.

³⁶ The *Académie Goncourt* apparently feared being sued for libel. The complete *Journal* did not appear until 1956. (Milly, *Proust dans le texte et l'avant-texte* 187).

³⁷ “Je ne voulais pas emprunter à Gilberte sa *Fille aux yeux d'or* puisqu'elle la lisait” [“I did not want to borrow Gilberte's copy of *La fille aux Yeux d'Or* as she was reading it herself”] (4: 286/7: 26).

³⁸ Michael Finn writes, for example, that “there is something of the primordial apparition about the Goncourt pastiche, as though it constituted an earlier form bobbing to the narrative's surface from a time in the writer's life when, with characteristic inarticulation, an imitation of a writing stance that is wrong is presented as a substitute for an explanation of what is right. Proust instinctively juxtaposes mimetism and pastiche with the creative act, and his Narrator/writer is made to live out this juxtaposition, presenting us with an unavowed copy of a famous writer of the day as a prelude to the composition of a novel of his own” (141).

The pastiche energizes and revives the tired narrative: the narrator tells us that reading the episode fills him with the desire to see those places and people again: “par une contradiction bizarre, maintenant que ce livre en parlait, j’avais envie de les voir” (4: 287/7 26-27). The placement of the Goncourt pastiche here shows us that the practice of pastiching is not for Proust simply a means of “exorcizing” or “purging” his debt to other writers. Rather, the pastiche has a reparative function; it renews the narrator’s interest in the world around him; it is as if the narrative itself were suddenly given an infusion. When he begins describing his stay at Tansonville, the narrator claims to have become disinterested in the world around him—he says that Combray now leaves him “incurieux”—and yet the words “curious” “curiosity,” and “surprise” recur repeatedly in the pages just before the pastiche is introduced.

Pastiche for Proust is not simply a means of becoming free from literary influence. Rather, pastiche makes hallowed works of literature accessible and inhabitable—it turns them into objects to be played with rather than revered. Pastiche opens sanctified texts to new uses: the pasticheur tries on prestigious names and voices, testing out a variety of consecrated ways of seeing and feeling, speaking and writing. The inclusion of the Goncourt pastiche at the end of the *Recherche* remaps the novel’s synapses, stretching its generic limits and multiplying its points of view. The pastiche rearranges the coordinates of the novelistic universe that has been constructed for us over thousands of pages, revealing how extremely different everything could look.

My aim throughout this chapter has been to demonstrate that Proust is not exclusively interested in the cultivation of aesthetic sophistication. Rather, he is an experimental writer who tests out the grounds and limits of distinction. In the Lemoine Affair pastiches, we see Proust practicing his tonal and generic flexibility as he investigates the mixture of lucidity and magical thinking that shores up the fantasy of aesthetic autonomy in modernity. There was no end to this practice for Proust, just as he never “outgrew” his love of gossip, scandal, newspapers, and ventriloquistic experimentation. As he tries out various points of view on Lemoine’s real/fake diamond, Proust plays at the limit between enchantment and disenchantment, illusion and disillusion, knowledge and belief. This capacity to shuttle back and forth between a position of sociological demystification and an attitude of aesthetic captivation becomes one of the most striking features of *A la recherche du temps perdu*. In 1908, when he wrote his Lemoine Affair pastiches, Proust wasn’t exorcising influences; he was rehearsing the various styles and perceptual modes that he would activate throughout his novel. These pastiches help us to recognize the affective, sensory, and epistemological heterogeneity of the *Recherche* itself, showing us just how elastic, expansive, and variegated Proust’s fictional world can be.

In the next chapters, I develop this view by exploring two experimental aesthetic concepts in Proust: the “quelconque” and “nuance.” While the present chapter examines Proust’s fascination for newspapers, pastiche, and the dramaturgy of the public hoax, chapters two and three are more broadly concerned with the ethics of aesthetic perception in the *Recherche*. Proust’s response to the vanishing divide between art and everyday life is ambivalent. I argue that although Proust famously advocates a strategy of aesthetic sublimation, whereby ordinary things can be “redeemed” into a protected and cordoned-off aesthetic realm, he also teaches us to enjoy the everyday in its everydayness—to be satisfied with the ordinary without laboring to translate, sublimate, purify, or subvert it. Occasionally in Proust, heightened attention to phenomenality is imagined as something other than an index of the perceiver’s superior sensitivity and refinement. In chapter two, I focus on instances in the *Recherche* when the perception of an inestimably ordinary object is accompanied by critical disarticulation. At such moments, the beholder can only emit an ineloquent stammer, an unsophisticated “zut” or “bah.” Chapter three further explores what Sedgwick would call the “reparative” ethos of Proust’s world-view (which is not equivalent to what Bersani terms the “culture of redemption”). In this chapter, I read Proust’s non-dualistic, non-anxious disposition

toward “nuance” as an alternative to his drive toward “le temps retrouvé.” Although Proust sometimes advocates partitioning the world into time wasted and time regained, materiality and spirit, he also teaches us to cultivate “weaker,” more proximate and less appropriative critical positions. Weak theory, which draws on what Barthes calls the “drift” of affect rather than the teleology of drive, permits the theorist to get close to cloudy, everyday glimmers, textures, and tones.

CHAPTER TWO

Zut, zut, zut, zut: Proust's Quelconque Aesthetics

Le nom de stations dans un indicateur de chemin de fer du Nord... un livre insipide pour les gens de goût... peuvent avoir pour lui un tout autre prix que de beaux livres de philosophie, et font dire aux gens de goût que pour un homme de talent il a des goûts très bêtes.
Proust, *Contre Sainte-Beuve*

In a rare moment of garbled speech, the narrator of Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu* issues his first aesthetic judgment as a stutter of “ravisement.” What is most striking about this arrested or “ravished” judgment is the ordinariness of the scene that provokes it. Stopping to gaze at a chicken fluffing its feathers in the wind and a red tool-shed roof reflected in a pond, the nascent aesthetic theorist can only point inarticulately with his umbrella as he exclaims in astonishment, “zut, zut, zut, zut.” This peculiar conjunction of wonder and banality recurs at key moments of the *Recherche*, as Proust directs our attention to objects so remarkably unremarkable that they resist critical hold. At stake here is not the redemptive aesthetics of *mémoire involontaire*, which transforms the most ordinary things (cookies, paving stones, napkins) into art, but a mode of ravished attention to the ordinary that spoils the profits of distinction.

According to Bourdieu, aesthetic taste is fundamentally “practical,” or sociologically advantageous. He frequently cites the *Recherche* as a prime illustration of the theory that taste functions as a social orienting device (“une sorte de sens de l’orientation sociale”), maintaining subjects’ attachments to particular positions in social space.¹ Proust’s engagement with aesthetics is stranger than Bourdieu’s analysis would suggest, however. What Bourdieu terms the “aesthetic disposition”—the capacity to garner cultural profit, or “distinction” from the experience of beauty—is entangled in Proust’s novel with what this disposition allegedly rejects: the facile, the infantile, the ordinary. Defining the aesthetic disposition as “the only socially accepted ‘right’ way of approaching the objects socially designated as works of art,” Bourdieu suggests that a distinguished aesthetic orientation is founded on a denunciation of “naive” reactions (*Distinction* 29). “A generalized capacity to neutralize ordinary urgencies,” the aesthetic disposition implies distance from all that is “common, i.e., easy and immediately accessible, starting with everything that reduces the aesthetic animal to pure and simple animality” (54, 32). In this chapter, I examine scenes in which Proust foregrounds precisely such distinction-shattering, immediate pleasure in his representation of aesthetic experience. The most striking aesthetic experiences in the *Recherche*, I argue, are those that require attention to an object so ordinary—simply *there*—that it defies critical appropriation: a tool-shed roof reflected in a pond, a hedge in bloom, some steeples, a patch of yellow wall. Provoking an impasse for critical judgment, these unqualifiable objects generate a childish or creaturely state of wonder, marked by nonsensical interjections or sing-song babble.

A la recherche du temps perdu might be read as the ultimate celebration of aesthetic distinction—or even as a “monumental expression” of “supersophistication” (Litvak 17).² After all, when

¹ “Le goût, fonctionnant comme une sorte de sens de l’orientation sociale (*sense of one’s place*) oriente les occupants d’une place déterminée dans l’espace social vers les positions sociales ajustées à leur propriétés, vers les pratiques ou les biens qui conviennent aux occupants de cette position, qui leur vont” (*La Distinction* 544).

² Critical readings that highlight the dynamics of indistinction in Proust are rare; a notable exception is Litvak’s brilliant essay on Proust’s queer penchant for bad objects. Litvak concentrates on the narrator’s education in sophistication, a quality that, it turns out, requires a “highly cultivated taste for waste,” and is bound up with an “incorrigible immaturity”

Bourdieu seeks a literary example of the internalized social relationships or “society games” that produce and maintain the fantasy of “pure” aesthetic taste, he turns to Proust. Yet Proust is fascinated by the edges of distinction, the zone where the aesthetic and the ordinary intersect or shade into one another. He writes in *Contre Sainte-Beuve* that he is out to upset the conventional notion of aesthetic disposition: his novel will ruminate on objects and events that break with traditional hierarchies of value, and which “les gens de goût” may consider tasteless. In Proust, the everyday, the overlooked, and the minor become potential sources of aesthetic wealth. A subjectively-oriented aesthetics, Proust readily admits, will seem stupid to intelligent people. Because the worth of things is entirely personal for him (“l’échelle des valeurs ne peut être trouvée qu’en lui-même”), instead of a celebrated opera, an ultra-elegant soirée, or a philosophical oeuvre, the Proustian aesthete prefers ordinary events, finding inestimable value in provincial musical performances, silly balls, the names of northern train stations, and insipid books.³ Deriving aesthetic worth from the apparently worthless is a dangerous game, as people might read your interest in the undistinguished as a sign of your own lack of distinction. As Proust acknowledges, a writer’s taste for the unrefined prompts distinguished people to remark that “pour un homme de talent il a des goûts très bêtes” (CSB 215). Indeed, Proust’s fascination for the unintelligent—ordinary objects, gossip, states of stupor or unthinkingness—has struck some readers as stupid. Rejecting *Du côté de chez Swann* for publication, a reader for the Ollendorf publishing house proclaimed: “Je ne sais si je suis bouché à l’émeri, mais je ne comprends pas l’intérêt qu’il peut y avoir à lire trente pages sur la façon dont un Monsieur se retourne dans son lit avant de s’endormir” [“I might be obtuse, but I don’t see the point of reading thirty pages about the way that some fellow tosses in bed before falling asleep”] (qtd in Barthes, “Longtemps” 462).

The consequences of a taste for indistinction are significant. Proust’s flagrant disregard for the hierarchies of taste opens up radically democratic possibilities. If any ordinary thing is a potential aesthetic object, what is to distinguish art from what it is not, and the aesthetically disposed perceiver from everyone else? As Jacques Rancière queries in his reading of *Madame Bovary*, if *anything* can be made into art, what is to keep *anyone* from becoming an aesthetic subject?⁴

Proust defends against the destabilizing threat of an everyday aesthetics by claiming to value in the ordinary not its ordinariness, but rather, its potential transformation: the secret value it reveals to those endowed with special powers of perception. If the vulgar and mundane (provincial balls, inane books, and so on) interest him, it is because Proustian aesthetics generally works on the

(17). According to Litvak, Proust reduces high society to a “dungheap” as part of an elaborate strategy to avoid the merely mediocre, the mundane. The rapidity with which “high” turns into “low” in the *Recherche* can be read, Litvak suggests, “as an ingenious tactic for short-circuiting the middle” and hence for avoiding boredom at all cost (83). It is precisely the return of that short-circuited middle that interests me here. Like Litvak, my focus is the volatility of taste in Proust, but I am interested less in Proustian intelligence (Litvak’s vulgar Proust is smarter than ever) than in moments when the ordinariness of things stumps the critical project.

³ “Il pourra se faire qu’une détestable représentation musicale dans un théâtre de province, un bal que les gens de goût trouvent ridicule, soit évoquent en lui des souvenirs, soit se rapportent en lui à un ordre de rêveries et de préoccupations, bien plus qu’une admirable exécution à l’Opéra, qu’une soirée ultra-élégante dans le faubourg Saint-Germain... Le nom de stations dans un indicateur de chemin de fer du Nord ... un livre insipide pour les gens de goût ... peuvent avoir pour lui un tout autre prix que de beaux livres de philosophie, et font dire aux gens de goût que pour un homme de talent il a des goûts très bêtes” (CSB 215).

⁴ As I note in the introduction, Rancière argues that Flaubert “kills” Emma Bovary precisely because her kitsch aesthetics are too close to the author’s own doctrine of trans-aestheticization, and hence threaten the precarious distinction of art. Flaubert himself opens the door to kitsch by destroying the border between the poetic and the prosaic—inventing a pure style without limits, without proper or improper subjects. If Flaubert wants to make everything into art by aestheticizing the ordinary, Emma pushes this one step further. She expects to enjoy aesthetic experiences materially, in everyday life; she wants art to adorn her body and decorate her house. By punishing Emma for this transgression, Flaubert writes “le premier manifeste anti-*kitsch*” (69).

principle of sublimation, or “translation.”⁵ According to this logic, the merely phenomenal world (“cet espèce de déchet de l’expérience” [4: 468]) is valuable because it is a source of subjective truth. As the narrator puts it in *Combray*, the task of the writer consists in replacing the “opaque” impenetrability of real things (“un poids mort que notre sensibilité ne peut soulever”) with an assimilable immateriality (“une quantité égale de parties immatérielles, c’est-à-dire que notre âme peut s’assimiler” [1: 85]). As Leo Bersani has shown, in this act of “translation,” the subject quells the world’s strangeness by swallowing it up with metaphor and making it into an extension of his own mind.⁶ When the perceiver finds a “metaphoric equivalent” in the object for himself (Bersani and Dutoit 24), he rescues the thing from the realm of the commonplace, that wasteland in which reality is “à peu près identique pour chacun” (4: 468). The most complete elaboration of this theory occurs in *Le Temps retrouvé*:

[U]n nuage, un triangle, un clocher, une fleur, un caillou . . . 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. Sans doute ce déchiffrement était difficile mais seul il donnait quelque vérité à lire. . . [I]l 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. (4: 457)

[A] cloud, a triangle, a church spire, a flower, a stone . . . 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 must suppose to represent only material objects. No doubt the process of decipherment was difficult, but only by accomplishing it could one arrive at whatever truth there was to read. . . [T]he task was to interpret the given sensations as signs of so many laws and ideas, by trying to think—that is, draw forth from the shadow—what I had merely felt, by trying to convert it into its spiritual equivalent.

(6: 273)

As Bersani puts it in an article co-authored with Ulysse Dutoit, in this process of “déchiffrement,” the self expands in order to possess the secrets of the material world. Ultimately, the subject is “adequately filled” and can “dispense entirely with the external spectacle” (24).⁷ According to this

⁵ “Le devoir et la tâche d’un écrivain sont ceux d’un traducteur” (4: 469) [“The function and the task of a writer are those of a translator” (6: 291)].

⁶ See *Marcel Proust: The Fictions of Life and of Art* (Oxford UP, 1965) and *The Culture of Redemption* (Harvard UP, 1990).

⁷ Bersani and Dutoit identify an exception to this trend in Proust: an occasional, “non-sadistic” aesthetics of plenitude that illuminates “Being” as pure relationality, or correspondance. Examining the scene in *Combray* in which the narrator beholds a daffodil field, Bersani and Dutoit note that these flowers induce aesthetic pleasure not by being (figuratively) devoured, but precisely because they are inedible. They argue that in this scene, rather than assimilating the world, the perceiver projects his own “useless” pleasure out onto it, and the flowers appear to shine as a result of this displaced narcissism (26-27). Although less appropriative than the Proustian aesthetics of translation or decipherment, the non-sadistic aesthetics that Bersani and Dutoit elaborate here leaves little space for the object. A mere screen for the subject’s projections, the daffodils only *appear* to “shine on their own,” elevated (or “promoted”) to the status of aesthetic objects (27). The perceiver abstains from gobbling up the flowers, and his disinterest is rewarded with a golden treasure. The minor, or occasional aesthetic mode I will investigate throughout this article can be distinguished from Bersani and Dutoit’s “non-sadistic” aesthetics of plenitude in that it is not grounded in the logic of psychoanalytic compensation, or sublimation, and hence is not only non-sadistic, but non-subject-centered.

persuasive reading, humble, ordinary things have their place in the *Recherche*—but only if they can be subsumed under theoretical laws, converted into signs of the perceiver’s interpretive power.⁸

Indeed, the *Recherche* presents an assemblage of insignificant, everyday objects—cookies, paving stones, napkins, etc.—which are valuable because they can be assimilated into general laws and made to reflect the perceiver’s totalizing potency. Yet alongside this assemblage of decipherable objects, a secondary, shadow constellation is perceptible. This constellation consists of ordinary things that are moving—even ravishing—not because they are recuperable to theory, but precisely because they are *there*. Because neither special skill nor training is required to appreciate such objects, they erase, rather than maintain distinctions. The writer Bergotte’s stupefied recognition of a yellow patch of wall in a Vermeer painting—a luminous spot that asks nothing and reflects nothing of the perceiver—is one example of this alternative, non-appropriative aesthetics. A pinkish splotch of light that flashes from a roof to a pond—halting the narrator in his tracks and provoking his inarticulate cry of pleasure—is another. Like the ungraspable “reflet neutre” the narrator glimpses while waiting for involuntary memory to divulge its secrets,⁹ these perceptions tend to surprise the perceiver while he is on the path to somewhere else. Unlike the novel’s collection of theoretically profitable, *mémoire-involontaire*-provoking objects, these ordinary things function not as arrival-points, but as minor impasses. At such moments, rather than sublimating or “translating” the ordinary object into a general theory, the perceiver simply points back at it. In fact, in this alternative aesthetic paradigm, the aesthetic subject tends to imitate the object, rather than compelling it to mimic him.¹⁰ Tracing instances of aesthetic disorientation reveals a different side of the *Recherche*. In the margins of its celebration of desirous appropriation (“la conquête de la vérité”), we find a modest affirmation of the world’s inassimilable, everyday appearance. This is not the celebrated paradigm of time regained, but a more humble aesthetics of things glimpsed along the way.

1. “Zut, zut, zut, zut”

La littérature, dans ses moments parfaits... tend à faire dire “C’est ça, c’est tout à fait ça!”
Barthes, *La Préparation du roman*

There has never been anyone else with Proust’s ability to show us things; Proust’s pointing finger is unequalled.
Benjamin, “On the Image of Proust”

The narrator demonstrates a non-appropriative interest in the world early in the novel, when he is thrilled, or “ravished” by the wind in a chicken’s feathers and the reflection of light on a toolshed and a pond. Tired from reading all morning, he is taking a walk (a “promenade”) in order to allow his long-immobile body to discharge its accumulated energies “in all directions” like a spinning

⁸ Deleuze also privileges the decipherment of essences in Proust. He suggests, in *Proust et les signes*, that the novel presents an teleological “apprenticeship in signs,” whereby the narrator ascends from the empty signs of society, to the deceptive signs of love, to the true signs of art. (In the second half of *Proust et les signes*, however, this tripartite division of decipherable signs is jettisoned in favor of a much wilder, non-totalizable play of unfolding and revolving, exploding and criss-crossing signs. Ultimately, the narrator is not a Platonic truth-seeker, but a “schizophrenic spider,” and the novel, a giant web.)

⁹ “[L]e souvenir visuel ... débat trop loin, trop confusément; à peine si je perçois le reflet neutre où se confond l’insaisissable tourbillon des couleurs remuées; mais je ne peux distinguer la forme” (1: 144).

¹⁰ Benjamin seems to invoke precisely this side of the *Recherche* when he writes so enigmatically in “The Image of Proust” that Proust’s most convincing insights “fasten on their objects as insects fasten on leaves” (242).

top. Cheerfully (“avec allégresse”), he spins himself into a scene that is simultaneously stunning and unremarkable. At the edge of a pond, sunlight is shining on a red-tiled gardener’s hut and on the hen that struts along its roof:

Le vent qui soufflait tirait horizontalement les herbes folles qui avaient poussé dans la paroi du mur, et les plumes de duvet de la poule, qui, les unes et les autres se laissaient filer au gré de son souffle jusqu’à l’extrémité de leur longueur, avec l’abandon de choses inertes et légères. Le toit de tuile faisait dans la mare, que le soleil rendait de nouveau réfléchissante, une marbrure rose, à laquelle je n’avais encore jamais fait attention. Et voyant sur l’eau et à la face du mur un pâle sourire répondre au sourire du ciel, je m’écriai dans mon enthousiasme en brandissant mon parapluie refermé: “Zut, zut, zut, zut.” (1: 155)

The wind tugged at the wild grass growing from cracks in the wall and at the hen’s downy feathers, which floated out horizontally to their full extent with the unresisting submissiveness of light and lifeless things. The tiled roof cast upon the pond, translucent again in the sunlight, a dappled pink reflection which I had never observed before. And, seeing upon the water, and on the surface of the wall, a pallid smile responding to the smiling sky, I cried aloud in my enthusiasm, brandishing my furled umbrella: ‘Gosh, gosh, gosh, gosh!’ (1: 218-19)

In this scene, the aesthetic subject is disoriented by an assemblage of ordinary, theoretically profitless objects. Here, the material world does not hide truths that the theorist must penetrate and reveal: the passage foregrounds horizontality, contiguity, immediacy, in-distinction. The perceiver does not stand above the scene (if anyone does, it is the chicken). He does not “translate” or extract essences from things, but simply sees the passing correspondence between them: a “smile” of light binding a wall to a pond. The scene does not privilege any single object, but draws our attention to a zigzagging reflection that tenuously and momentarily joins roof, water, wall, and sky. It is hard to say where this composition begins and ends, whether it extends to include the downy feathers or the wild grass poking up through the wall. The “marbrure” that the shed’s roof makes on the pond’s surface suggests the variegated surface of a book cover or of skin—emphasizing the flatness of the scene and extending its composition to include the reader, whose eyes skim along the surface of the book she is holding.

It is important, too, that this “humble discovery” takes place in the enthusiastic top-spinning mood of post-reading—what occurs here is not a scene of “translation” (like the redemptive translation or abstraction of ordinary things into lasting signs the narrator advocates elsewhere). The narrator is not consuming the world, making it his own. Rather, he’s simply spinning through it—discharging the energies stored up in his body. The chicken is the narrator’s double: just another sentient being out for a walk (note that the narrator’s “promenade” is echoed by the image of the hen which “se promenait” along the tool-shed roof). Not unlike a chicken’s clucks or squawks, the narrator’s *zuts* are word-objects—“mots opaques”—sounds or corporeal gestures that draw the speaker into the scene rather than permitting him to stand without to judge it.¹¹ Just as the narrator’s

¹¹ According to Jakobson, the first linguistic function acquired by humans (the “phatic”) is also the one function shared by birds. Motivated by the simple desire for contact, the phatic is the noisiest—least informative—of all linguistic functions. It refers to messages “serving to establish, to prolong, or to discontinue communication to check whether the channel works (‘Hello, do you hear me?’), to attract the attention of the interlocutor or to confirm his continued

body is not consuming objects but rather, expending its wild, spinning energies in all directions, “zut, zut, zut, zut” is neither descriptive nor analogical, but indexical. This utterance does not duplicate or penetrate its object, but simply binds the speaker to the world. Similarly, instead of insulating the narrator against the elements, the closed umbrella functions as a pointer, extending a line from the narrator’s body to the objects around him, expanding the indexical force of his enthusiastic exclamation. Following Paul Fry, we might call this an “ostensive moment”—an instance of “a-theological astonishment” accompanying the “temporar[y] release of consciousness from its dependence on the signifying process” (7, 4). The narrator’s joyful, “indistinct” vocalization is not a failure, but the model for a non-recuperative encounter between the speaking subject and the world.¹²

The narrator seems to dismiss his own undignified response, indicating that he has failed to see clearly into the source of his “ravisement,” and suggesting that his “unilluminating” cries are merely manifestations of confused, unelucidated ideas—“idées confuses qui m’exaltaient et qui n’ont pas atteint le repos dans la lumière” (155). Yet the scene itself, which culminates in the description of sunlight illuminating and embracing the surface of things, is nothing if not luminescent. This luminous, dehierarchized visual composition will find its reflection later in a painting by Elstir, in which a “hôpital sans style” or a “dame un peu vulgaire,” bound together by a shimmer of light, appear no more or less precious than a traditionally valorized aesthetic object, such as a cathedral. The narrator will take a surprising lesson from this reorganization of the perceptual field. Time passes; it cannot be regained:

on sentait que la dame allait bientôt se retourner, les bateaux disparaître, l’ombre changer de place, la nuit venir, que le plaisir finit, que la vie passe et que les instants, montrés à la fois par tant de lumières qui y voisinent ensemble, ne se retrouvent pas. (2: 421)

One felt that the lady would presently go home, the boats drift away, the shadow change place, night begin to fall; that pleasure comes to an end, that life passes and that instants, illuminated by the convergence at one and the same time of so many lights, cannot be recaptured. (3: 577)

If this recognition is largely engulfed by the redemptive theory that the narrator preaches to us at the end of the novel, it is because perceptions of this sort are not ultimately memorable. Six volumes later, when the narrator recalls the Montjouvain pond scene in the context of disparaging the incompleteness of his response—his failure to translate his feeling into more essential language—he actually misattributes the perception, suggesting that he was provoked to cry out “zut alors!” upon seeing the shadow of a cloud on the river Vivonne (4: 468). This misattribution and slight mis-

attention” (355). Jakobson borrows this term from Malinowski, who argues that this type of utterance in “primitive languages” works to signal friendship.

¹² “Ravishment” in Proust is allied with the desire to make contact with phenomena, to be *proximate* (rather than dominating). The breaking point of critical language—the point at which judgment gives way to the gasp of astonishment—“ravisement” is also the mood associated with the narrator’s very first bit of writing in the novel, the note he sends via Françoise to his mother imploring her to come to him: “mon petit mot allait, la fâchant sans doute ... me faire du moins entrer invisible et ravi dans la même pièce qu’elle” (125). [“my little note, though it would annoy her ... would at least admit me, invisible and enraptured, into the same room as herself” (1: 39).] Here “ravi” carries the strong sense of rapture or ravishment (literally, the state of being carried away); in his “ravishment,” the narrator imagines touching his mother with an outstretched string or line. The note is a “fil délicieux”—“an exquisite thread”—extending the writer’s body into another space (125).

quotation indicate the contingency and forgettability of the scene; ravishing as it is, the novel cannot derive any lasting aesthetic wealth from it.

In a draft version of *Combray*, the string of “zuts” is attached to what is now one of the most well-known and oft-discussed scenes of the novel. This is the famous “drame du coucher,” the scene in which the unhappy narrator is sent to bed without his mother’s kiss. Critics have interpreted this scene as the point of origin for the Proustian “law” that desire is jealous, insatiable and grounded in lack.¹³ Surprisingly, a draft version of the bedtime drama demonstrates a striking resemblance to the chicken/tool-shed/pond scene of the published novel. Here the narrator has just decided to wait up for his mother in order to procure her kiss:

je me levai, je m’assis, j’ouvris les fenêtres, le calme qui résultait de mes angoisses finies, la peur et la soif du danger me mettaient dans une allégresse extraordinaire. J’étais dans une disposition joyeuse, ces paroles insignifiantes que j’entendais [monter] mollement du jardin m’enchantaient. Je me répétais ‘Zut! zut! zut! zut! zut! alors!’ avec le même accent enivré que si ces mots avaient signifié quelque vérité délicieuse, je sautais seul dans ma chambre, je m’adressai un sourire dans ma glace, et ne sachant sur quoi faire tomber ma tendresse et ma joie, je saisis mon propre bras avec transport et j’y déposai un baiser. (*Cahier 8 37*, qtd in Hughes 89)

I rose from bed, I sat down, I opened the windows, the calm succeeding my anguish, fear, and thirst for danger put me in a state of extraordinary exhilaration. I was in a joyful mood, those meaningless words I heard rising lazily from the garden enchanted me. I repeated to myself: ‘Zut! zut! zut! zut! zut! alors!’ with the same intoxicated tone as if these words signified some exquisite truth, I leapt alone in my room, I smiled to myself in my mirror, and not knowing where to place my tenderness and joy, I seized my own arm and, enraptured, planted a kiss on it.

In the published version of this scene, in place of the exclamations, the reflected smile, and the kiss, we find a classic example of the Proustian appropriative relation, whereby the perceiver’s mind envelops and tames the external world. So instead of crying “zut” and kissing his own arm, the narrator silently opens the window and sees a mute, frozen landscape—a tense, circumscribed projection of his own anxiety: “Dehors, les choses semblaient, elles aussi, figées en une muette attention” (1: 32).

In the draft, however, the narrator opens the window and is “enchanted” by the “insignificant” words he hears. The logic of reflection, rather than assimilation, structures the passage. Instead of “translating” the world around him, here the narrator simply calls back to it, his meaningless exclamation doubling the “paroles insignifiantes” that float up from below. And if the exclamation conveys any “truth,” it is not lasting and immaterial but “délicieuse”—sensual and finite. What we find in the draft version of the *drame du coucher* is not the primal scene for all subsequent jealousy, but the blueprint for a non-totalizing, disorienting aesthetics—privileging not the arrival but the intermediary instant, not the mental assimilation of phenomena but the momentary caressing of their surface.

¹³ When Bersani argues that the narrator’s primary relation to the world is one of anxious appropriation, he points to the *drame du coucher* as the basis for the narrator’s permanent sense of privation (*Marcel Proust* 42-43). Roger Shattuck describes this scene as “a play within a play enacting [a] ritual of desire and discontent” (*Proust’s Way* 139).

2. “Petit pan de mur jaune avec un auvent, petit pan de mur jaune”

If the narrator’s response to a zigzag of light on the Montjouvain pond is a senseless exclamation of pleasure, he must henceforth learn to derive theoretical profit from his sensory experiences. He dismisses his enthusiastic “mots opaques” as a childish response to aesthetic pleasure, a failure to translate the world’s thickness into immaterial concepts. Still, traces of this initial stuttered “zut” are scattered through the *Recherche*—instances when the eloquence of aesthetic judgment is replaced by blather or song. The writer Bergotte’s astonished perception of a little patch of yellow wall in a Vermeer painting is such a moment of critical impasse. Bergotte’s stammer of impossible judgment—“petit pan de mur jaune avec un auvent, petit pan de mur jaune”—indicates that aesthetic disorientation is not something one grows out of in the *Recherche*.

In *La Prisonnière*, the narrator reads in the newspaper that a writer he has long admired has died. Bergotte’s death is remarkable in that it occurs precisely in the instant that the writer discovers impersonal beauty—a beauty that does not require the perceiver’s interested gaze in order to exist. In a little patch of yellow wall in Vermeer’s “View of Delft” Bergotte recognizes “une beauté qui se suffisait à elle-même” (3: 692). Inassimilable, self-sufficient, the “petit pan de mur jaune” permits only a deictic gesture of acknowledgment. The yellowness is not recuperable to a subject’s search for personal meaning; it does not mean anything, and can only be pointed at. Suggestive of the “marbrure rose” that flashes from roof to pond at Montjouvain, the “petit pan de mur jaune” also recalls the narrator’s intermediary, unredeemed image of Combray—before he has resurrected it with involuntary memory—as a “pan lumineux” (1: 43). Moreover, the patch of yellow wall seems all the more ungraspable when one seeks its referent in Vermeer’s painting, which assembles—amidst its many pointy spires—a variety of luminous spots, none definitively more “precious” than the others.¹⁴

Presented as the most precious object imaginable, the yellow patch is also disorientingly ordinary. Mieke Bal reads the patch as a “dis-figure”—the “visual equivalent of a Freudian denial”—and argues that it presents not a lack of meaning, but a surplus or overdetermination of form (91). What interests me about the “petit pan de mur jaune,” on the other hand, is the way it appears to hover outside of the dualistic logic of surface and depth, concealment and exposure, overdetermination and insufficiency, failure and success, which governs the teleological plot of aesthetic conversion in Proust. Conjoining the rhetoric of preciousity with the stuff of the everyday, the patch is inestimable in both senses of the word: at once unremarkable and incomparable. In the following passage, the ideal aesthetic object is joined in a chain of associations with the most commonplace things—the undercooked yellow potatoes Bergotte eats before arriving at the museum and the random news item, or “fait divers” he fears becoming as he collapses onto the sofa:

“Je ne voudrais pourtant pas, se dit-il, être pour les journaux du soir le fait divers de cette exposition.” Il se répétait: “petit pan de mur jaune avec un auvent, petit pan de mur jaune.” Cependant il s’abattit sur un canapé circulaire; aussi brusquement il cessa

¹⁴ Mieke Bal writes that although “it is generally agreed that this little patch of yellow wall is nowhere to be seen in the painting at La Haye,” some critics refer to the patch in the painting “as if its presence were without doubt” (260). They identify it in different parts of the painting, however. This ambiguity is heightened by the syntax of Bergotte’s exclamation: as Didi-Huberman points out, in the phrase “petit pan de mur jaune,” it is impossible to determine whether “jaune” qualifies the wall or the “pan.” He argues that in the first case, the emphasis is on the historical referent: the wall as a verifiable detail of seventeenth-century Delft (246-47). In the second case, the perceiver’s gaze is fixed on the blazing materiality of the paint itself: the *pan* as immeasurable, expansive “zone of colored intensity” which “leaps into view” (267-68). Didi-Huberman notes that in colloquial usage, “pan” is an onomatopoeic interjection, translatable as “Bang!” “Thump!” or “Whack!” (248).

de penser que sa vie était en jeu et, revenant à l'optimisme, se dit: "C'est une simple indigestion que m'ont donnée ces pommes de terre pas assez cuites, ce n'est rien."
(3: 692)

'All the same,' he said to himself, 'I shouldn't like to be the headline news of this exhibition for the evening papers.' He repeated to himself: 'Little patch of yellow wall, with a sloping roof, little patch of yellow wall.' Meanwhile he sank down on to a circular settee; whereupon he suddenly ceased to think that his life was in jeopardy and, reverting to his natural optimism, told himself: 'It's nothing, merely a touch of indigestion from those potatoes, which were undercooked.' (5: 245)

Socially incommensurate phenomena (*a fait divers*, a Vermeer masterpiece, potatoes) are bound together in a metonymic chain. The passage blunts the distinction between aesthetic perception and ordinary consumption: Bergotte enters the exhibition and eats the potatoes in adjoining clauses ("Bergotte mangea quelques pommes de terre, sortit et entra à l'exposition").

Stunned by the sight of a painting that is actually less remarkable than he expected (it appears less "éclatant," less "différent de tout ce qu'il connaissait"),¹⁵ the distinguished writer is suddenly a child reaching for an untenable butterfly: "ses étourdissements augmentaient; il attachait son regard, comme un enfant à un papillon jaune qu'il veut saisir, au précieux petit pan de mur" ["his dizziness increased; he fixed his gaze, like a child upon a yellow butterfly that it wants to catch, on the precious little patch of wall"] (5: 244). Like a creature with a will of its own, the "petit pan de mur" resists appropriation and the aesthetic subject can only point in childish "étourdissement." "Étourdissement," a word repeated in the description of Bergotte's crisis, suggests giddiness and euphoria as well as vertigo and disorientation, and also bears connotations of inattention and mindlessness.¹⁶ Rather than confirming his aesthetic disposition, this experience leaves the perceiver disoriented and indisposed.

As he collapses in front of the painting, Bergotte utters a repetitive phrase that points to and doubles the object without appropriating it in any way: "petit pan de mur jaune avec un auvent, petit pan de mur jaune." Similarly, early in the novel, the narrator is overwhelmed by the "inépuisable" but undefinable ("obscur et vague") joy caused by the sight of a hawthorn hedge in bloom: his "pensée ... ne savait ce qu'elle devait en faire" (1: 138). At a loss to "descendre plus avant" into the object's "secret," he can only look again and again, heart pounding "comme au voyageur qui aperçoit sur une terre basse une première barque échouée que répare un calfat, et s'écrie, avant de l'avoir encore vue: 'La Mer!'" ["my heart beat like that of a traveller who glimpses on some low-lying ground a stranded boat which is being caulked and made sea-worthy, and cries out, although he has not yet caught sight of it, 'The Sea!'" (1: 139/1: 195). Like the hawthorn hedge and the scene at the Monjouvain pond, Bergotte's yellow patch is an aesthetic object that thwarts theoretical appropriation. Indeed, this is an experience that the perceiver will not even live to tell about.

Following Barthes, we might describe the exclamations that accompany aesthetic disorientation ("zut, zut, zut, zut," "petit pan de mur jaune," "la mer!") as *punctive*. The photographic

¹⁵ Vermeer's *View of Delft* is like the Montjouvain pond scene in its occlusion of iconography or hidden meaning. Svetlana Alpers foregrounds the importance of empiricity in seventeenth-century Dutch painting, arguing that in works like *View of Delft*, "the perceived world *deposits itself* as such—such as it is perceived—in pigments on a picture." *View of Delft* tells no story; it simply makes manifest "the world staining the surface with color and light, impressing itself upon it... . Delft is hardly grasped, or taken in—it is just there for the looking" (27).

¹⁶ "Étourdi" suggests folly or carelessness, but also a stunning experience that bring the subject close to death: *Littérature* cites La Fontaine's fable of the lion and the mouse, in which the mouse escapes from the lion's paws "assez à l'étourdie" (*Fabl. II*, 11).

“punctum” is a mark of sheer contingency (“ça!”). Not a sign, but an uncodeable detail, the *punctum* does not signify, but rather, “pricks” the beholder. Similarly, the Proustian stutter of rapture (or *étourdissement*) marks the perception of a joltingly uncodable object or assemblage of objects. This form of language is “punctive” because it neither describes nor symbolizes, but simply indexes. Pointing toward an insignificant *thereness*, such utterances indicate what the speaker cannot assimilate into theory or metaphorize into art.¹⁷ These punctive interjections are not simply non-referential—they are hyper-referential, indexing a presence that eludes critical language.¹⁸

The self-sufficient little patch—contiguously linked to the indigestible yellow potatoes—belongs to a constellation of unqualifiable objects in the *Recherche*, objects that are stunning and yet beclouded by ordinariness, and which provoke the most sing-song or commonplace response. If we let Bergotte’s yellow patch guide our reading of Proust, a different textual landscape begins to emerge: not a textual space organized around hidden depths to be penetrated and exposed, but rather, one composed of luminous surfaces and dazzling points. This intermittent aesthetic mode in the *Recherche*—call it *ravissement*, or *étourdissement*—obliterates the distinction between art and non-art, simply affirming (not sublimating or subverting) the ordinariness of things.

3. “Je me mis à chanter à tue-tête”

At the center of this alternative topography we find the Martinville steeples. Reinforcing the narrator’s assimilative or digestive relation to the world, Combray often appears as an edible landscape, full of *brioche*s, *madeines*, and *chaussons*, saturated with imbibable essences and odors. Yet the town and its environs are also speckled with prickly, indigestible steeples and spires. Poking up between the “doigt de Dieu” that opens the second chapter of *Combray*, and the “doigt levé du jour” that closes it, the Martinville steeples are particularly important indexes: they provoke the narrator to begin writing the very text that we are reading. As he speeds past the shimmering, mobile points from his carriage seat above a chicken cage, the narrator is moved to compose a description, and then to punctuate his accomplishment with a joyful squawk.

As it presents the narrator’s only embedded piece of writing in the entire novel, critics have accorded much attention to the Martinville passage. Peter Collier and J. D. Whiteley celebrate the passage as the only instance in the *Recherche* “when the protagonist becomes specifically and

¹⁷ Barthes suggests that if literature tends (in its “perfect moments”) to make us cry out, “that’s it!” (“c’est ça!”), interpretation makes us say, “that’s *not* quite it,” and always finds a “shadow” around which to spin a discourse (*La Préparation du roman* 125). Barthes aligns the deictic moment (or “tilt”) in literature with the Zen notion of *Wu-shi*, or “rien de spécial” (“nothing special”): a practice of translating or designating things in their simplicity without commenting on them, merely giving the sense that things are *such* (“précisément ainsi”) (126).

¹⁸ By highlighting the deictic, or punctive force of aesthetic perception, Proust is playing on Kant’s theory of non-cognitive, non-instrumental, “disinterested” aesthetic pleasure. Kant suggests that there is nothing to say *about* the radical particularity of the aesthetic, defined precisely by its lack of determined content or evaluative criteria. The judge of aesthetic beauty is reduced to pointing, able only to reiterate the declaration of pleasure (“this is beautiful”) without describing or analyzing the experience any further. As Vivasvan Soni puts it, because the Kantian aesthetic judgment engages only the phenomenality or sensuous immediacy of “this” particular object, it “says nothing except ‘Look!’ It only points at the object mutely, without reason or argument.” Therefore “the only form that a judgment of beauty can take is the monotonous repetition of the sentence ‘This object is beautiful’” (5). Yet Kant also claims that the aesthetic judge must be indifferent to the actual existence of the object. Hence Derrida suggests that the Kantian analytic of the beautiful implies the stuttering economy not of “ça!” or “look!” but of negation pushed to the point of incoherence: a babbling “*négativité sans négativité*” or “*sans sans sans*” (147). While Proust’s aesthetic subjects are knocked off guard by the dazzlingly ordinary “thereness” of things, Kantian “disinterested” pleasure (according to Derrida) presupposes the neutralization (or entombment) of all determined existence or phenomenal empiricity (54).

absolutely the artist,” and argue that it presents a *mise-en-abîme* of the general movement in Proust from ignorance toward enlightenment (571). Making a similar argument from a critical point of view, Bersani and Dutoit contend that the passage epitomizes the novel’s assimilative aesthetics: the narrator sees something that moves him and so he metabolizes it in metaphor, incorporating and taming the threatening unfamiliarity of the perception. Indeed, the narrator initially encourages this reading, introducing his composition with a description of the loss he has prevented. He suggests that had he not been compelled to symbolize his perception in writing, the steeples would have sunk into a forgettable constellation of ordinary, unassimilated stimuli: “les deux clochés seraient allés à jamais rejoindre tant d’arbres, de toits, de parfums, de sons, que j’avais distingués des autres à cause de ce plaisir obscur qu’ils m’avaient procuré et que je n’ai jamais approfondi” [“those two steeples would have gone to join the medley of trees and roofs and scents and sounds I had noticed and set apart because of the obscure pleasure they had given me which I had never explored in depth”] (1: 294/1: 254, trans. modified). We therefore expect the description that follows to penetrate the objects and extract their essence, preventing their fall into the limbo of unredeemed sensation.

Yet the passage, which juxtaposes two descriptions of the same phenomenon (one composed by the juvenile narrator, one by the mature narrator), celebrates shifting surfaces and points, not penetrable depths, and foregrounds a logic of mutability, not monumentality. The continuous addition and subtraction of steeples in the young narrator’s composition confounds analogy: the objects will not hold still long enough for a totalizing metaphor to be applied to them. Instead, the steeples are caught and released by one figure after another—likened to birds, then trees, then flowers, then girls. Like the momentarily illuminated assemblage that provokes the narrator’s ravished “zut, zut, zut, zut,” the conjunction of objects that generates aesthetic pleasure here is fleeting. This passage foregrounds above all a complex “fugue” playing out between the pair of Martinville steeples and the third, distant Vieuxvicq steeple. Continuously changing in number and placement, appearing and disappearing, the steeples are two, then three, then separate into two plus one, then oscillate between three and two, then vanish.

In Proust’s 1907 *Figaro* article, “Impressions de route en automobile,” on which this passage is based, the steeples are compared to the central yet marginal titular edifice in a Turner painting. Simultaneously remarkable and entirely forgettable, the steeples are as ephemeral as a rainbow or a glimmer of evening light: their shape “tient aussi peu de place, semble aussi épisodique et momentané, que l’arc-en-ciel, la lumière de cinq heures du soir” (CSB 64). In *mémoire involontaire*, the present assimilates the past by the force of analogy, transforming a useless, forgotten detail into a usable one, drawing aesthetic profit from spent quotidian experience. The description of the *clochers*—oscillating between one, two, and three, appearing and disappearing, shifting in relation to one another—suggests a non-appropriative relation between the artist and the world he makes into art. Comparing the “opacity” and “uselessness” of this instance of writing to the narrator’s earlier “zut,” Michel Butor cites the observer’s failure in both cases to uncover the source of his emotion and forcefully “respond” to phenomena, rather than simply being moved by them: “Nous n’avons devant les yeux qu’une seconde description ... inutilement plus imagée. Il est vain d’essayer de chercher à travers elle le pourquoi de l’émotion du jeune Marcel, et à cet égard, malgré son apparence descriptive, elle reste aussi opaque que le ‘zut’ prononcé du côté de Méséglise” (120).¹⁹ Roger Shattuck reads the scene in a similarly dismissive vein, arguing that the Martinville passage is

¹⁹ “We have before our eyes merely a second description ... to which images have been uselessly added. It is futile to seek in this description the reason for the young Marcel’s emotion, and in this regard, despite its descriptive appearance, it remains as opaque as the ‘zut’ pronounced on the Méséglise Way.” In both episodes, Butor contends, the narrator fails to place himself at the center of the scene; both the description of the steeples and the “zut” cry are derivative, secondary—merely the “result of the question posed by things,” and “not yet a response.”

one of the markers of “horizontal” experience, or “limited vision,” against which the final “vertical” experience of aesthetic transcendence is opposed. According to Shattuck, the vision of interwoven steeples lacks any final form or pattern; the steeples are astonishing and confusing because they can only be “seen at eye level” (91). I would suggest, however, that the juxtaposition of horizontality and sharpness is precisely what makes the perception so interesting. Note that the steeples appear both depthless and pointy—*flèche* also means arrow, pointer, or spear. The passage becomes even pointier when we consider the name of the doctor in whose carriage the narrator is riding: Doctor Percepiéd, or “pierce-foot,” a name that suggests precisely the kind of pedestrian epiphany, or shocking ordinariness that I am investigating here.²⁰

Echoing the joyous “zut, zut, zut, zut” that punctuates his perception of a reflection on the Montjouvain pond, the narrator concludes his first literary composition with an inarticulate cry. As he finishes his description of the steeples, he bursts into a joyful, head-splitting, egg-laying song from his seat next to a cage full of chickens: “comme si j’avais été moi-même une poule et si je venais de pondre un œuf, je me mis à chanter à tue-tête” [“as though I myself were a hen and had just laid an egg, I began to sing my head off”] (1: 296/1: 257, trans. modified). Critics who discuss the Martinville episode rarely address this odd moment. According to Collier and Whiteley, the “deliberate depoeticization” of the scene (crowned by the “grossly inelegant assimilation of the fledgling writer to a clucking hen”) works to contrast the “artistic” piece of writing to its nonpoetic, banal (“deliberately sub-Proustian”) surroundings (578). The last in a series of clichés (“à bride abattue,” “comme le vent,” “pris d’une sorte d’ivresse”), the song sung “à tue-tête” is included, Collier and Whiteley suggest, in order to “downgrade the linguistic climate” of the real and hence foreground the superiority of the narrator’s piece of writing. Against the notion that this passage contrasts a “blank, artless view of reality” to an artistic one, we might say that this scene demonstrates the extent to which aesthetic experience in Proust is bound up in all that it allegedly eschews. In its most moving forms, the aesthetic is nothing special—which is to say, it belongs less to the world of essences and ideas than to a material immediacy that resists appropriation, transforming the writer and would-be theorist into a squawking hen or a stammering child. The original desire to write is shown here to be less about appropriating or incorporating the object’s strangeness than it is about calling back to the world.

In a recent essay on the “impersonal” in Emerson, Sharon Cameron queries Emerson’s peculiar penchant for clichéd figurations. Cliché, that strange modern concept of words devalued through overuse, is often described as exhausted or broken metaphor.²¹ Flaunting its resistance to propriety, cliché seems to speak itself without the speaker’s intention or knowledge, much to the dismay of critics like Eric Partridge, whose *Dictionary of Clichés* qualifies cliché as “pointless,” “nauseating,” “frightening,” “half-baked,” and “uncultured” (2). But we might understand cliché not simply in terms of a degradation of uniqueness, but as a gestural, non-appropriative iteration. Cameron’s essay is useful here because it engages the relation between banal or platitudinous language and an impersonal mood that Emerson, like Proust, calls “ravishment.” Cameron notes that despite his remarkable eloquence, Emerson tends to give voice to “propositional banality” in describing the ecstatic erasure of personal identity (97). In Emerson, Cameron suggests,

²⁰ Offering a different perspective on the defamiliarizing force of everyday perceptions in the *Recherche*, Sara Danius reads this passage as evidence of Proust’s fascination for technologies of velocity, or for what she terms “the aesthetics of the windshield.” While my reading foregrounds the non-monumentality of the steeples, Danius highlights the thrill of novelty, suggesting that the most important element in the episode is the speed at which the narrator is traveling—a speed which “transforms the surrounding landscape into a phantasmagoria” (131).

²¹ In the *Harper Handbook to Literature*, Northrop Frye defines cliché as “overused expressions once clever or metaphorical, but now trite and time-worn.” De Man describes cliché as “a dead or sleeping metaphor which has lost its literal connotations... and has only kept a proper meaning” (*Allegories of Reading* 65).

platitudinous language is not opposed to the “ravishment” of the impersonal. Rather, the voice that is anyone’s and no one’s is in fact the very voice of ravishment (93). Cliché marks the obliteration of personal identity and indicates an experience of self-shattering at the heart of Emerson’s—and, I would argue, Proust’s—conception of the aesthetic. As Cameron puts it, “the platitudes that often seem stunning in an Emerson essay—stunning that a writer who displays so much expertise in crafting powerful sentences could also write so vapidly—well serve this goal of voicing words whose particular source is undiscoverable” (94). Cliché, after all, is “the voice of no private person” (93). What is so interesting about cliché as a mode of aesthetic response in Proust is that it suggests not an experience so private that it cannot be transmitted, but an experience that could be had by anyone.

And what about the chicken? Bersani and Dutoit interpret it as proof that the narrator has indeed incorporated his vision. The metaphor of laying an egg comically illustrates the narrator’s movement from subjective deprivation to plenitude, they argue: the “egg” is the “egg of his own descriptive resources that he has finally expressed, pressed out of himself onto the page” (24). I would suggest, however, that the entire passage, and especially this crowning moment of disarticulation, work to turn the narrator’s writerly authority inside out. The desire to write is not unlike the urge to crow or squawk—not an appropriative act, but a responsive one, generated from the infantile or creaturely margins of speech.

4. “Bah!”

Inspired to write by the sight of objects that appear simultaneously piercing and pedestrian, the narrator completes his first literary text by singing (like a chicken) as if to bust his head (“à tue-tête”). The episode in which the article appears in print (a scene Proust originally planned to place in the *ouverture* of his novel) is also marked by strikingly undistinguished speech.²² Highlighting the volatility of distinction in the *Recherche*, this scene heralds the narrator’s artistic success even as it foregrounds the disorienting ordinariness of the daily newspaper that transmits his work. As he begins to leaf through the *Figaro* one morning, the narrator suddenly recognizes his essay on the Martinville steeples. Responding to this passage from his own incipient novel, the narrator places himself in our position, modeling for us a non-appropriative and unsophisticated attitude of reading that oscillates between indifference and fascination, concentration and distraction. Proust presents the event of becoming an author as a distinction-flattening experience, a fall into the de-individuating space of the “quelconque”—the ordinary, undistinguished, or “whatever.”

The newspaper, the most mundane of literary objects, is neither discarded nor redeemed in this scene. Instead, the passage highlights a vertiginous conjunction of oppositions: the newspaper appears simultaneously interesting and uninteresting, boring and miraculous, elite and common. The narrator first perceives the newspaper as “quelque chose d’intéressant” that his mother brings to him. This initial interest is immediately extinguished and replaced by an empty, unreceptive mood: “ce n’était que des journaux... J’ouvris ‘Le Figaro.’ Quel ennui !” [“it consisted only of newspapers... I opened the *Figaro*. What a bore!”] (4: 147-48/6: 766). Then in an abrupt tonal shift,

²² The scene appears in the earliest notebooks of sketches for the *Recherche* (Cahiers 3 and 2). This 1908–1909 sketch opens with the hero tossing in bed as he wonders what has happened to his article on the Martinville steeples: “Je fermai les yeux en attendant le jour; je pensai à un article que j’avais envoyé il y a longtemps déjà au *Figaro*” (4: 671) [“I closed my eyes while waiting for the day, I was thinking about an article that I had long ago sent to the *Figaro*”]. In the morning his mother brings him a copy of the newspaper with his front page article, and he is thrilled to read it as “un quelconque des dix mille lecteurs” (4: 673) [“any reader at all out of ten thousand”].

mechanical reproduction is described in enchanted terms: the newspaper is a “spiritual bread”—“pain miraculeux, multipliable, qui est à la fois un et dix mille, et reste le même pour chacun tout en pénétrant à la fois, innombrable, dans toutes les maisons” [“a miraculous, self-multiplying bread which is at the same time one and ten thousand, which remains the same for each person while penetrating innumerable into every house at once”] (4: 148/6: 767). Although the *Figaro* is a historically elite newspaper, the narrator relishes its ordinariness, contending that because an article is only completed in the minds of its readers (“ne se réalise complète que dans l’esprit de ses lecteurs”), its “cachet dernier” is “quelque chose d’un peu commun” (150). Expanding this populist tone, the narrator imagines his article being lifted up over the shoulders of an excited crowd (“une foule”). A textual object that is simultaneously singular and multiple (“à la fois un et dix mille”), the newspaper in Proust generates and dissolves distinctions at once.²³

Proust presents newspaper-reading as an experience by turns distracted and concentrated, inviting a glance that is at once diagonal, horizontal, and vertical, and he depicts the daily paper itself as both a shield protecting the individual’s privacy, and a generator of new collective configurations. Most striking in this scene is the positive valence given the word “quelconque”—a gender neutral adjective qualifying something neither specific nor generic, but indeterminate in quality or identity. Cultivating the point of view of an “être impossible,” the narrator strives to read simultaneously as an author and as a “lecteur quelconque”—a reader without qualities, any reader at all (150). “Quelconque” is a strange adjective. The marker of unmarkedness, rather than qualifying its object, it un-qualifies. In the late nineteenth century, “quelconque” acquired a pejorative connotation, and came to qualify something as ordinary, unremarkable, or lacking in distinction. This qualifier tends to indicate an ambiguous overlap of tones: either neutral (*quelconque* as “indefinite”), or dismissive (*quelconque* as “ordinary” or “mediocre”). Yet “quelconque” has also come to suggest the indeterminacy of a singularity held in common, open to all. As Blanchot, Deleuze, Agamben, and Jean-Luc Nancy have argued, the *quelconque* is a paradigm-thwarting concept that blurs the distinction between particular and general, the singular and the common.

For these philosophers, “quelconque” invokes new way of conceiving of community and the commonplace. In *L’Entretien infini*, Blanchot describes the “homme quelconque” (or “homme de la rue”) as a creature of irresolvable contradictions. Neither this nor that—“ni à proprement parler moi ni à proprement parler l’autre”—the *homme quelconque* is, like Proust’s newspaper reader, at once bored and attentive: “indifférent et curieux, affairé et inoccupé, instable, immobile” (364, 363). Deleuze uses the term *espace quelconque* to describe a cinematic space in which singularity is multiplied, made virtual: “C’est un espace parfaitement singulier, qui a seulement perdu son homogénéité, c’est-à-dire le principe de ses rapports métriques ou la connexion de ses propres

²³ The tonal contradictions allied with the newspaper are particularly striking in a set of early drafts. In those versions of the scene, wildly contrasting moods frame the *Figaro*’s arrival. In the first version, the narrator’s mother puts down the newspaper absent-mindedly—“d’un air de distraction complète” (4: 671) In the second version, this “distraction” is complicated—her apparent “indifference” conceals a “violence inaccoutumée.” In this draft, the mother rapidly exits the room “comme un anarchiste qui a posé une bombe” (672). A third draft entirely abandons this radical tone, replacing anarchy with a list of mundane excuses for withdrawing—this is not the time to chat; one ought not stand around gabbing in one’s bathrobe; the cook is waiting for her orders; she must speak with the butcher: “[Elle] se retirait admettant que, malade, je dormisse le jour mais ne voulant pas laisser périmer en moi pour des jours meilleurs l’horaire d’une vie saine et pratique, et me montrer qu’il y a heure pour tout, que ce n’en était pas une pour causer, qu’on ne reste pas à causer en robe de chambre, que la cuisinière l’attendait pour les ordres, et qu’il était grand temps qu’elle aille s’habiller si elle voulait parler au boucher quand il viendrait et lui dire qu’on ne se servirait plus chez lui s’il continuait à ne pas donner des biftecks plus tendres et plus avantageux” (672-73).

Contra Benedict Anderson’s argument (borrowed from Benjamin) that the newspaper homogenizes time, reducing the fullness and heterogeneity of experience to a flattened “meanwhile,” in Proust the newspaper is a volatile text allied with household chores and anarchist bombs, indifference and extreme concentration.

parties, si bien que les raccordements peuvent se faire d'une infinité de façons" ["it's a perfectly particular space which has merely lost its homogeneity, that is to say the principle of its numeric relations or the connection amongst its proper parts, so well that the interrelations amongst them may be made in an infinite number of ways"] (155/109). Agamben also associates the *quelconque*, or "quodlibet" with the potentiality of the singular, or "tel quel." In *The Coming Community*, Agamben turns in circles around the "whatever" as the notion of an unnameable exteriority—a thing without attributes, without archetype—thinkable only as pure limit or threshold. Similarly, in "Le Cœur des choses," Nancy attempts to elaborate a non-privative sense of "quelconque." "Quelconque" for him indicates a singularity held in common, simultaneously determined, singular, and indeterminate, open. It suggests "l'indéterminité d'être de ce qui, chaque fois, est posé et exposé dans la stricte concrétion déterminée d'une chose singulière, et de son existence singulière" (206) ["'Whatever' is the indeterminateness of being in what is posited and exposed within the strict, determined concretion of a singular thing, and the indeterminateness of its singular existence"] (206/174). *Quelconque* is a difficult concept for us to think through, Nancy notes, because it requires that we leave behind what thinking usually means, abandoning "toutes nos pensées déterminantes, identifiantes et destinantes" ["all our determining, identifying, destining thoughts"] in order to see the world as comprised of the permutability of all things (206, 221/174).

In *La Chambre claire* Barthes refers three times to this peculiar adjective, each time placing it in quotation marks (without ever specifying the source of the citation). The vagueness and imprecision of an unattributable citation is precisely what *quelconque* suggests—something is *quelconque* because everyone knows it, it belongs to the doxa ("ce que tout le monde voit et sait" [119]). Yet the *quelconque* is also a space where opposing edges meet: where the indefinite flips into the singular; where "cette difficulté à exister, qu'on appelle la banalité" shades into "contingence, singularité, aventure" (40-41). Qualifying the vacuous mood bordering a sudden flash or "fulguration," the *quelconque* suggests a field that is at once commonplace, unremarkable, and yet from another point of view absolutely particular. Hence the photograph Barthes prizes above all others, the most indescribably beloved (the Winter Garden photograph) is for us "rien d'autre qu'une photo indifférente, l'une des mille manifestations du 'quelconque'" ["For you, it would be nothing but an indifferent picture, one of the thousand manifestations of the 'ordinary'"] (115/73). Elsewhere Barthes uses the term "neutre" to speak of something that is *incomparable* and yet *not unique*,²⁴ and this paradoxical singularity is also at stake in the *quelconque*. "Quelconque" marks an object as unqualifiable or inestimable; or as Ann Smock has put it, as simultaneously "beneath notice and beyond compare."²⁵

In Proust, the *quelconque* is a marker of superlative ordinariness, or remarkable insignificance, and it is particularly bound to scenes of reading or interpretation.²⁶ The *Figaro* scene pivots on the *quelconque*—the adjective is repeated five times. In this passage, the *quelconque* marks the intersection of textual production and reception, authorial distinction and readerly anonymity. Relishing his indistinction, the narrator celebrates a disorienting mode of reading that is contradictory, even

²⁴ "Le Neutre se tiendrait dans cette nuance (cette moire): dénégation de tout unique et cependant reconnaissance de l'incomparable" (*Le Neutre* 118).

²⁵ Correspondance, May 2006.

²⁶ When the narrator first sees Charlus at Balbec, "quelconque" qualifies the Baron's mysterious, open-ended motives and desires (1:71-72) ["whatever reason"; "some reason" (2: 452, 454)]. "Quelconque" is also an adjective attached to Saint-Loup's lover, Rachel. An unqualifiable object in the narrative, Rachel is simultaneously common ("une poule" or "simple petite grue") and exceptional ("une femme d'un grand prix"). A prostitute and a remarkable artist, this "femme quelconque" is described in terms that liken her to the materiality of the novel itself. Newspaper-like, compressed "like a piece of paper" between mediocrity and singularity, the immobility of her face is "comme celle d'une feuille de papier soumise aux colossales pressions de deux atmosphères" [2: 151-54]).

“impossible,” requiring him to position himself at the intersection of “tous les contraires”:

au moment même où j’essaie d’être un lecteur quelconque, je lis en auteur, mais pas en auteur seulement... Et quand je sentais une défaillance trop grande, me réfugiant dans l’âme du lecteur quelconque émerveillé, je me disais, ‘Bah!’ (4: 150-51)

At the very moment in which I was endeavouring to be an ordinary reader, I was reading as author, but not only as author... And when I became aware of too blatant a weakness, taking refuge in the spirit of the ordinary and astonished reader, I said to myself: ‘Bah!’ (6: 770-71)

We rarely hear the narrator’s reported speech in this text—generally, he stands back and reports other peoples’ speech—but in this scene, his voice takes on a surprisingly vernacular tone, his astonished “bah!” echoing his earlier “zuts” and chicken squawks, as well as Bergotte’s stupefied stammer. Moreover, in this rare instance of autocitation, the narrator valorizes his own art not for its power to transcend time and abolish finitude, but simply for being a little prettier than the reader might expect: “Mais sapristi, s’ils ne sont pas contents? Il y a assez de jolies choses comme cela, plus qu’ils n’en ont l’habitude” [“Good heavens, they ought to be pleased! There are plenty of pretty things in it, more than they usually get”] (152/771, trans. modified). Championing aesthetic categories that Kant banished from his theory of the beautiful (the pretty or merely pleasing), the Proustian narrator models a flagrantly un-sophisticated mode of reading. In doing so, he indicates that his own incipient novel opens a space of in-distinction, in which boredom and fascination short-circuit into one another, an elite readership can be imagined as a “foule,” and a narrator who elsewhere carefully withholds his voice suddenly breaks into a triumphant “bah!”

5. “O sole mio”

In each of these episodes, a commonplace object (a spot of light, a patch of wall, three steeples, the daily newspaper) generates a punctive response, rather than a recuperative one. Instead of pulling back in order to instrumentalize the perception—“translate” it into theory—in each case the perceiver finds himself drawn into the scene. Startled by the perception of something at once exceptional and insignificant, he utters an undignified “zut” or “bah.” At such moments, the ordinary or *quelconque* appears as an intensity that dissolves the language of judgment.

Proust’s attention to the vicissitudes of distinction is nowhere more evident than in the Venice chapter of *Albertine disparue*. In an episode that highlights the disorienting force of the ordinary in the *Recherche*, the narrator, hit hard by economic and romantic losses, undertakes a Venetian voyage with his mother in order to re-attune his sense of distinction.²⁷ The episode turns on the paradox of an everyday aesthetics, culminating in a reversal in which all the profits derived from the aesthetic experience are annulled. Although he goes to Venice as an aesthetic critic, following in Ruskin’s illustrious footsteps, the narrator departs in tongue-tied astonishment, witness

²⁷ The narrator explains that his “ruine relative” is the result of failed speculations: “il me fallait payer aux coulissiers des différences si considérables, en même temps que des intérêts et des reports que sur un coup de tête je me décidai à tout vendre et me trouvai tout d’un coup ne plus posséder que le cinquième à peine de ce que j’avais hérité de ma grand-mère et que j’avais encore du vivant d’Albertine” [“I had to pay out such considerable sums in brokers’ commissions, as well as interest and contango fees, that in a rash moment I decided to sell out everything and found that I now possessed barely a fifth of what I had inherited from my grandmother and still possessed when Albertine was alive”] (4: 219/6: 867).

to a radically inassimilable landscape. As Venice dissolves into a nameless “lieu quelconque” (a place without qualities, a mediocre or undistinguished place), the would-be theorist, faced with this singularly ordinary scene, can only sing a popular song.

In Venice, the line between art and everyday life is crucially blurred. A city in which *everything* is a work of art,²⁸ Venice appears in the *Recherche* as both the culmination and the cul-de-sac of a modernist fantasy of trans-aestheticization. This episode demonstrates the distinction-spoiling force of an everyday aesthetics: pushed to its limit, an aesthetics of the everyday implies a collapse of the border between art and non-art. As Bill Brown puts it, “modernism names a longing that modernism sought both to enact and evade: the end of art—its realization—in a trans-aestheticized world.” A trans-aestheticized world would be utterly inestimable: precious to the point of worthlessness; distinctive to the point of indistinction. In the Venice episode, Proust explores the margins of distinction, venturing into the strange zone where the aesthetic meets the ordinary. Object of the narrator’s longing throughout the novel,²⁹ Venice turns out to be unknowable in the most unyielding way—simultaneously foreign and too familiar, strange and yet obvious, “singular” and yet insignificant, improper, “quelconque.” Like Bergotte’s potato-esque yellow patch, *quelconque* Venice presents an impasse to theory.

The association of Venice with decadence is a familiar literary topos: Chateaubriand, Byron, Balzac, and Ruskin (among others) have all written of the city’s ruin.³⁰ In Proust’s account, however, the trope of decay is given a modernist spin. What remains when the narrator loses his theoretical hold on Venice is not horrible, but unremarkable, or “whatever.” In a reversal of the self-expanding dynamics of *mémoire involontaire*, Venice contracts the aesthetic subject upon himself (“me contractait sur moi-même”) when it suddenly shrugs off his projections, appearing alien to all desire, simply *there* (4: 231). This inassimilable space (“je ne pouvais plus rien lui dire de moi, je ne pouvais rien laisser de moi se poser sur lui”³¹) is embarrassingly banal, like Hamlet exposed as a mere actor with black costume and blond wig.³² Abruptly dropped out of “the whole network of criss-crossing references woven around it” (Bourdieu 498), Venice now appears not terrifying but simply undressed, or poorly costumed: “Tels les palais, le Canal, le Rialto, se trouvaient dévêtus de l’idée qui faisait leur individualité et dissous en leurs vulgaires éléments matériels” [“So it was with the palaces, the canal, the Rialto, divested of the idea that constituted their reality and dissolved into their vulgar material elements”] (4: 232/6: 885). And yet, broken into bits that are “pareilles à toutes autres,” Venice nonetheless appears absolutely “singular” (231). As a “lieu quelconque,” Venice becomes the site of a tension between the inassimilable and the over-assimilated: between a particularity so particular that it cannot be named or appropriated (“ça!”) and a nameless, quality-less “médiocrité.” *Quelconque* Venice marks the site where the invaluable and the valueless meet. Throughout this episode Proust explores the paradox of a superlative ordinariness, inviting us to wonder how an object could be more commonplace than any other. The transformation of the city into a “lieu

²⁸ “[A] Venise, ce sont les œuvres d’art, les choses magnifiques, qui sont chargées de nous donner les impressions familières de la vie” [“In Venice, it is works of art, things of priceless beauty, that are entrusted with the task of giving us our impressions of everyday life”] (4: 205/6: 848).

²⁹ Tony Tanner points out that “visiting (the word name) and not-getting to Venice is one of the recurring preoccupations and themes for over five-sixths of the book” (242).

³⁰ Nathalie Mauriac Dyer notes that Ruskin wished to be the “ultimate recorder of [Venice’s] collapse” (73).

³¹ “I could no longer tell it anything about myself, I could leave nothing of myself imprinted on it” (6: 884).

³² “J’avais beau raccrocher désespérément ma pensée à la belle courbe du Rialto, il m’apparaissait avec la médiocrité de l’évidence comme un pont non seulement inférieur, mais aussi étranger à l’idée que j’avais de lui qu’un acteur dont, malgré sa perruque blonde et son vêtement noir, j’aurais su qu’en essence il n’est pas Hamlet” [“In vain might I fix my mind despairingly upon the beautiful and distinctive curve of the Rialto, it seemed to me, with the mediocrity of the obvious, a bridge not merely inferior to but as alien to the notions I had of it as an actor of whom, in spite of his blond wig and black garments, we know quite well that in his essence he is not Hamlet”] (231/884-5).

quelconque” is triggered, after all, by the narrator’s decision to wait in Venice for Madame de Putbus’s maid, a woman described in drafts as exceptionally ordinary. Her smile suggests the most common of all commonplaces (“les lieux communs les plus communs de la stupidité la plus banale”); her expression is paradoxically more banal than any other (“la plus banale et la plus commune du monde” [4: 725]). Like Madame de Putbus’s maid, the city “that had ceased to be Venice” appears ordinary beyond compare.³³

The scene in which Venice becomes a “lieu quelconque” might be read as an inverted, modernist sublime, in which the perceiver is astounded by insignificance, rather than by terror- and awe-generating totality. The sublime is Kant’s name for a judgment-thwarting perception of immeasurable and incomparable enormity, which threatens to toss the theorist out of the navigable universe of taste. Like *A la recherche du temps perdu*, Kant’s *Third Critique* is a text about the conditions of possibility for aesthetic judgment, and it bears witness to critique’s ghost—a mood in which the distance necessary for criticism is abolished, and the critic finds himself gaping at the inassimilable. In Kant’s narrative, however, the sublime can ultimately be contained on the condition that the subject’s abstract, “incoercible” humanity be split from a more commonplace humanity: we realize our abstracting, theoretical potential, Kant suggests, by refuting “trivial” physical insignificance (145). The marker of finitude and of the common business of living, the “trivial” emerges in this Enlightenment discourse as the remainder of an awe-generating aesthetic experience—the trivial is what must be sacrificed for the sake of theory.³⁴ Although Kant imagines the critic victoriously rising above nature by sacrificing all that is finite and commonplace in himself, the work of critique remains haunted by its limit, the point at which the judge, incapable of abstracting and assimilating the object of perception, finds his powers reduced to “an insignificant trifle” (144).

What shocks in the modernist “quelconque” is not the sheer enormity and incalculability of nature (as is the case in Kant) but rather, “cette singularité des choses”—a singularity that appears as an irrecoverable ordinariness.³⁵ Eroding Kant’s tenuous distinction between the “trivial” and the appropriative power of theory, Proust’s Venice chapter dramatizes the disorienting potential of modernist trans-aestheticization.³⁶ Venice is revealed as an object that quivers with the contradictions of an everyday aesthetics—it is simultaneously too familiar and not familiar enough, over-assimilated and inassimilable, “médiocre” and “lointain” (232). Stripped of its proper name,

³³ Proust is generally interested in the paradox of a plural singularity. Chris Eagle has proposed that the *Recherche* stages a tension between a typological and a particularizing style, playing “the state of generality without substance (thoseness) against the state of phenomenal appearance (thisness, haecceitas)” (1002). Suggesting that this text is particularly drawn to the queer zone between particularity and generality, Eagle notes that beyond Proust’s repeated Balzacian typologies (marked by plural deixis: “un de ces”) and his attention to haecceity (“thisness”), he demonstrates a fascination for “exceptional sets,” of which “les hommes-femmes” is a striking example (1008).

³⁴ Kant associates the “trivial” with human mortality and physical vulnerability, but also with the activities of everyday existence: “goods, health, and life” and the “spirit of mere commerce” (145-46). In *Wonder, the Rainbow, and the Aesthetics of Rare Experiences*, Philip Fisher suggests that by privileging the sublime (and its aestheticization of fear), modern thought has neglected more localized (and comparatively small, or trivial) ways of experiencing novelty, such as the feeling of wonder (2).

³⁵ Sianne Ngai has coined the neologism “stuplime” to describe modern and postmodern works of art that induce a feeling of simultaneous boredom and awe. While the Kantian sublime describes a feeling of shock followed by serenity, or *apatheia*, as the aesthetic subject discovers the superiority of reason over imagination, and hence the self’s autonomy from nature, the “stuplime” involves not an uplifting transcendence, but an “immersive, downward pull into ... the ‘common muck’ of language” (268). Proust’s version of aesthetic disorientation, like the “stuplime,” involves a perception of untranscendable, unclassifiable materiality. But while “stuplimity” is an affective response to hyperbolic repetition or citation (such that formal differences cede to modal ones and linear sequence is replaced by simultaneous layering), Proust’s “quelconque” Venice presents the paradox of a mediocrity which is nonetheless *singular*.

³⁶ Jameson also describes the Venice episode as a “negative sublime,” but for him this means that appearances are stripped away to reveal “the Real” itself: a “zero degree of being” or a “dead extension” beneath the surface (203).

Venice is at once close and distant, both/neither subject and object: “ce lieu quelconque était étrange comme un lieu où on vient d’arriver, qui ne vous connaît pas encore, comme un lieu d’où l’on est parti et qui vous a déjà oublié” [“This unremarkable place was as strange as a place at which one has just arrived, which does not yet know one, or a place which one has left and which has forgotten one already”] (232/884).

The recognition of Venice as a “lieu quelconque” destabilizes the entire edifice of aesthetic distinction. At the moment that the city is exposed as both exceptional and mediocre, the grounds for aesthetic judgment dissolve and the narrator finds himself aesthetically indisposed, filled with “dégoût” (4: 232). If Venice first appears as an elevated version of Combray (Combray in a richer key), now the narrator can only compare it to the *bains Deligny*, a prestigious Parisian swimming pool floating in the Seine. An aristocratic space in the middle of a river, surrounded by walls to keep out uninvited swimmers, the *bains Deligny* were simultaneously cordoned-off and yet entirely permeable, suggesting a questionable distinction. In Proust’s lifetime the *bains* were actually full of the unfiltered Seine.

In the *Recherche*, aesthetic judgment is particularly vulnerable to stupid immobilization—the most astute critic always risks being struck dumb by the unwieldiness of the aesthetic object. The Venice chapter dramatizes precisely this intimacy between judgment and stupor, foregrounding the volatility of the object, its tendency to crumble and withdraw from the observer. The narrator does not speak while he is in the grips of the “quelconque.” Once again, the otherwise supremely articulate aesthete can only burst into song. This time he does not sing “à tue-tête,” but “mentalement” along with a musician serenading his hotel from a boat. As the aesthetic object swings between singularity and mediocrity, the narrator is transformed into “une attention suivant anxieusement le développement de *Sole mio*” (232). A song Adorno describes as a “Neopolitan semihit,” already a commodified image of Italian-ness when Proust was writing *Albertine Disparue*, “O sole mio” is a cliché (Adorno 65).³⁷ Noting that a series of prose rhymes play on “sole” in this passage, Malcolm Bowie declares that the “the potency of cheap music [has never] been celebrated with such an expenditure of repeated syllables” (227). This “vulgaire romance” simply fills the time (“me faisait passer l’heure” [232-33]) and yet also immobilizes the narrator in “religious” attention. Recalling the interesting/uninteresting daily newspaper, the “insignificant” piece both fascinates and holds no interest at all: “sans doute ce chant insignifiant entendu cent fois, ne m’intéressait nullement” (233). The narrator silently sings along with the “vulgar” romance in a state of immobility, suspended between numbness and hypersensitivity, “immobile avec une volonté dissoute” (234). If the catchy song does not exactly interest him, the narrator is nonetheless struck, even stunned as he listens: “chaque note que lançait la voix du chanteur avec une force et une ostentation presque musculaires venait me frappait en plein cœur” [“Each note that the singer’s voice uttered with a force and ostentation that were almost muscular stabbed me to the heart”] (234/887). Echoing the egg-laying tune he belts out after completing his first literary composition, the narrator’s mental rendition of “O sole mio” inverts the image of Venice as the elusive object of an arduous quest.

“The city that had ceased to be Venice” is one of a number of inassimilable objects in the *Recherche*, objects at once inestimable and theoretically profitless, from the “marbrure rose” and “petit pan de mur jaune” to the “fugue” of shifting steeples and the singular/multiple *Figaro*. In the

³⁷ Eduardo di Capua composed “O sole mio” in 1898 (the Golden Age of the *canzone napoletana*), and the song won second prize in the annual Piedigrotta festival. The song became known all over the world after Caruso recorded it for the Victor Talking Machine company in 1916. A popular legend surrounding the song is that in 1920, it was played in lieu of the Italian national anthem at the Antwerp Olympics when the conductor failed to locate the appropriate score (*Around Naples Encyclopedia*, 2 June 2008).

description of each of these objects, Proust's usual valorization of depths and essences gives way to an astonishing flatness, suggesting that these perceptual experiences—and the vocalizations they generate—could be anyone's. Instead of standing above phenomena in order to extract timeless truths from them, at such moments the perceiving subject is hardly different from the thing he looks at.

Proust is fascinated by the paradox of an everyday aesthetics. On the one hand, he works to transform the detritus of the ordinary into aesthetic riches: his aesthetics is one of redemption, as Bersani has convincingly demonstrated. But there is also a current in the *Recherche* that pulls us toward objects that the text itself seems unable to appropriate. These objects resist evaluation and unmake the subject's mastery, destabilizing the grounds for aesthetic judgment. In scenes organized around remarkably unremarkable perceptions, Proust challenges us to understand trans-aestheticization as a non-vertical shift—neither simply a redemption or purification of the everyday, nor a vulgarization of art. Yet he also foregrounds the risk inherent in eroding the border between art and non-art: how is the theorist to retain mastery over a trans-aestheticized world? How can critique cope with the return of what it must throw out of itself in order to survive: the mediocre, the ordinary, the *quelconque*? The fantasy of an everyday aesthetics culminates (or hits its point of no return) in the perception of Venice as a space suspended between the familiar and the strange, the obvious and the unknowable. In Venice (or the “lieu quelconque” that was once Venice), the ideal aesthetic object proves to be indistinguishable from its cliché.

My aim in this chapter has been to highlight a minor, experimental side of Proust's aesthetic imagination. A canonical reading of European modernism asserts that modernist texts seek to counter the equivalences imposed by mass culture. According to this interpretation, texts such as *À la recherche du temps perdu* work to redeem commonplace modes of perception and to recuperate the banal by drawing it into a network of associations deemed aesthetically valuable. Proust's novel largely substantiates this view. Yet the *Recherche* also occasionally invites us to imagine a different kind of aesthetics. In moments of inarticulate, affirmation-provoking astonishment, the Proustian beholder enjoys the world in its common, undignified singularity, rather than as a mineable source of secret treasure. Such occasions of wonderment and whatever-ness offer an alternative to the paradigm that defines the ability to appreciate artworks—and to transform everyday things into aesthetic riches—as the ultimate measure of human worth. In Proust, the aesthetic subject is sometimes struck by an incomparable and yet unremarkable object which, indistinguishable from ordinary things, eludes critical judgment and evokes only a punctive stammer or a responsive call. At the margins of the “pure” aesthetic experience, seemingly opposite modes of attention tend to shade into one another: the most rapt attention flips into boredom; the throes of rapture are indistinguishable from indigestion; the most distinguished artist is suddenly a child reaching for a butterfly; and the most distinguished critic a bewildered traveler mouthing the words to a popular song.

CHAPTER THREE

Weak Reading: Nuage/Nuance/Proust

In *Phénoménologie de la perception*, Merleau-Ponty describes a peculiar form of aphasia. Subjects stricken with this disorder are preoccupied with “nuance,” or minor distinctions in tint, and fail to sort colors into general categories:

On constate d’abord qu’ils le font plus lentement et plus minutieusement qu’un sujet normal: ils rapprochent l’un de l’autre les échantillons à comparer et ne voient pas d’un seul coup d’œil ceux qui ‘vont ensemble.’ De plus, après avoir correctement assemblé plusieurs rubans bleus, ils commettent des erreurs incompréhensibles : si par exemple le dernier ruban bleu était d’une nuance pâle, ils poursuivent en joignant au tas de ‘bleus’ un vert pâle ou un rose pâle,—comme s’il leur était impossible de maintenir le principe de classification proposé et de considérer les échantillons sous le point de vue de la couleur d’un bout à l’autre de l’opération. (205)

[T]hey do it more slowly and painstakingly than a normal subject: they slowly place together the samples to be compared and fail to see at a glance which ones ‘go together.’ Moreover, having correctly assembled several blue ribbons, they make unaccountable mistakes: if for example the last blue ribbon was of a pale shade, they carry on by adding to the collection of ‘blues’ a pale green or pale pink—as if it were beyond them to stick to the proposed principle of classification, and to consider the samples from the point of view of basic colour from start to finish of the operation. (204)

Unable to see the particular sensory data as representative of abstract essence or *eidos*, Merleau-Ponty’s aphasics are hyper-aware of color gradations and intermediary shades. Their perception is oriented toward contiguity and contact: instead of reducing the samples to general categories at a glance, they are compelled to examine each one minutely. As if moved by the desire not only to look but to touch the fabric of each ribbon, even when the patients manage to sort the samples “correctly” into color groups, they only do so after carefully comparing them by placing them next to one another.¹ Two objects of the same color do not appear identical to the aphasiac, who perceives a variety of comparative or interpretive possibilities: “il peut arriver que dans l’une le ton fondamental domine, dans l’autre le degré de clarté ou de chaleur” (223). In this chapter, I consider such fascination for “nuance” at the expense of the category as a particular sort of critical impasse—a theoretical breakdown that occasions new perceptual and cognitive orientations.

The unremarkable yet incomparable objects I consider in chapter two spoil expected profits by eliciting non-appropriate, undignified aesthetic responses. That chapter emphasizes the infantile

¹ “Même quand, au début de l’épreuve, ils procèdent correctement, ce n’est pas la participation des échantillons à une idée qui les guide, c’est l’expérience d’une ressemblance immédiate, et de là vient qu’ils ne peuvent classer les échantillons qu’après les avoir rapprochés l’un de l’autre” [“Even when, at the beginning of the test, they proceed correctly, it is not the conformity of the samples to an idea which guides them, but the experience of an immediate resemblance, and hence it comes about that they can classify the samples only when they have placed them side by side”] (205/204).

or animal side of aesthetic reception, examining scenes in which the would-be critic or theorist squawks or stammers in ineloquent stupefaction. An aesthetics of nuance engages an even less graspable object and an even more facile, or effortless response. Nuance annuls the pure-impure polarity subtending an economy of distinction by proliferating differential intensities in place of dualisms and expanding the indiscernible space of the middle. We might qualify this aesthetic mode as tactile, rather than deictic, as it tends to draw the reader in extremely close, collapsing the distance required for pointing. While corporeal or verbal indexing (“ça!”) is the paradigmatic response to objects at once singular and commonplace (“quelconque”), nuance invokes a gentler, less pointed type of contact. As an early reader of the *Recherche* put it, when subjected to unusually intricate textual detail at such close range, the only option is to feel one’s way, “pas à pas, à tâtons” (Normand 14).

Chapter two maps out a constellation of hybrid aesthetic objects in the *Recherche*—things that appear simultaneously remarkable and unworthy of remark, singular and commonplace. If a *zout*-inducing pink reflection next to a strutting chicken, or a yellow patch of painting metonymically linked to some undercooked potatoes are paradigms for this ordinary/stunning distinction-spoiling aesthetics, a cloud (with its infinite gradations of color and shape) exemplifies the disorienting aesthetics of nuance. “Nuance” is the etymological cousin of “nuage”; it derives from the Old French “nue” and the Latin “nubes.” In Proust, cloudiness adheres to objects seen from very far away or from extremely close by: cloudiness suggests a disturbance in the distance required to classify and delineate forms. Drifting outside of the pure/impure, complex/facile dualisms that ground the Kantian hierarchy of taste, clouds are objects with “neither form nor consistency,” in which any kind of figure may appear and vanish (Damisch 31). The vaporous space of the cloud implies neither plenitude nor insufficiency. Blurry-edged, indefinite, incalculable, clouds drift at the periphery of the perceptible world, and at the edges of Proust’s sublimation-centered aesthetic system. Because clouds hover beneath the level of distinct shape, they can spread and share out their properties, but cannot be replaced or redeemed into more essential form. With neither surface nor solidity, there is literally nothing to peel back in a cloud, no secret content to be revealed. Clouds belong to an alternative economy, one in which objects continuously, slowly, gradually metamorphose (vaporize, condense, solidify) without revealing hidden essence.²

The first section of this chapter explores the relation between nuance and what Eve Sedgwick, following Silvan Tomkins, calls “weak theory.” Weak theory privileges proximity and contact over wide-ranging generalization. In the *Recherche*, the narrator’s hyper-sensitivity to nuance occasionally thwarts his attempt at categorical (strong) aesthetic judgment. The second section examines the disorienting effect of Proust’s descriptive practices, which pull the reader up to the cloudy zone where delineated space gives way to what Deleuze and Guattari call haptic space—an

² As Ruskin—Proust’s favorite art critic—puts it in his homage to Turner’s clouds: “It is within the limits of possibility that a cloud may assume any form... It is totally impossible to study the forms of clouds from nature with care and accuracy” (Ruskin, *Modern Painters* I, 216). Indeed, a glance at the “cloud” section of the five-volume work’s index reveals the form-exploding variety of clouds—the motley list of entries includes: “brighter than the sky, or whitest paper,” “unpaintable,” “connected *with* the sky, not separate” (original emphasis), “cirrus: number of, at sunrise, calculated,” “curves in, all curves, rare,” “edges often darker than centres,” “infinity and variety of,” “mistaken for mountains,” and “rain-clouds: form of horseshoe” (VI, 76-78). Although Ruskin “conveniently” divides the atmosphere into three spaces, each characterized by a particular form of cloud, he first warns that “in reality, there is no distinct limit fixed between them by nature, clouds being formed at *every* altitude, and partaking according to their altitude, more or less of the characters of the upper or lower regions. The scenery of the sky is thus formed of an infinitely graduated series of systematic forms of cloud” (216). Clouds are capable, in Ruskin’s account, of generating endless streams of adjectives: his skies are alternately “mottled,” “mackerel,” “fleecy,” “flakey,” “fiery,” “ragged,” “ponderous,” “checkered,” “torn,” “ribbed,” “plummy,” “honeycombed,” “craggy,” “silky,” “opalescent,” “inky,” “sulphureous,” “elastic,” and so on. So mutable as to escape final classification, the cloud is not unqualifiable, but inexhaustibly qualifiable.

amorphous, infinitely variable aggregate of microscales, rather than a formal composition. I argue in the third section of the chapter, finally, that nuance opens up an alternative economy of interest in Proust, organized not around the instrumental logic of drive, but according to the non-subject-centered drift of affect. Objects that appear particularly nuanced—such as the vibrant hawthorn flowers, or the nebulous “petite bande”—are able to spread their diffuse light through the novel, sharing out their qualities with their surroundings, precisely *because* they resist classification. The peculiar economy of Proustian nuance is best understood as an impersonal (meteorological) form of sublimation—an elemental, outward-spreading “dégradation,” rather than a purifying substitution.

1. Weak reading

À la recherche du temps perdu is often read as a teleological narrative of aesthetic conversion. According to this interpretive line, the entire novel builds up to the revelation of *Le temps retrouvé*, when the narrator discovers that art can triumph over finitude (“lost time”) by “translating” ephemeral sensory experience into signs of lasting truth.³ In fact, this conversion-to-art plot is only *one* of various pathways the novel sets out for us—albeit a particularly well-marked and well-traveled one. In the novel’s overture, Proust orients us toward a topography of overlapping semiotic systems. The opening paragraph turns us in two directions at once, figuring the narrator’s reading experience with reference to two irreducibly different conceptions of metamorphosis: (Christian) revelation, and “metempsychosis”—the (cross-species, non-finalized) transmigration of the soul from one body to another.⁴ Having fallen asleep while reading, the narrator has the impression of being absorbed into the objects his volume describes:

Cette croyance survivait pendant quelques secondes à mon réveil; elle ne choquait pas ma raison mais pesait comme des écailles sur mes yeux et les empêchait de se rendre compte que le bougeoir n’était plus allumé. Puis elle commençait à me devenir inintelligible, comme après la métempsycose les pensées d’une existence antérieure (1: 3)

This impression would persist for some moments after I awoke; it did not offend my reason, but lay like scales upon my eyes and prevented them from registering the fact that the candle was no longer burning. Then it would begin to seem unintelligible, as the thoughts of a previous existence must be after metempsychosis (1: 1, trans. modified)

³ Victor Graham argues that the revelation of *Time Regained* “gives meaning to all that has gone before, revealing in a single flash the truth that has been the ultimate goal” (197). René Girard writes that the novel is rooted in a personal transformation “structured exactly like the experience Christians call a conversion” (39). Deleuze also reads the novel teleologically when he argues in *Proust and Signs* that the *Recherche* is the narrative of an “apprenticeship in signs” in which the hero ascends from the empty signs of worldliness, to the deceptive signs of love, to the essential signs of art. Leo Bersani offers a critique of this “redemptive” plot in Proust in *The Culture of Redemption* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1990).

⁴ Plato’s *Republic* ends with an account of metempsychosis, whereby human beings and animals pass into one another: Orpheus chooses the life of a swan, Thamyras, the life of a nightingale, Ajax, the life of a lion, Agamemnon, an eagle, Atlanta, an athlete, Epeus, a “woman cunning in the arts,” Thersites a monkey, and so on. “And not only did men pass into animals, but... there were animals tame and wild who changed into one another and into corresponding human natures—the good into the gentle and the evil into the savage, in all sorts of combinations” (276). In contrast, Girard defines (Christian) conversion as “a change that takes place once and for all, with no conceivable return to the starting point” (36-37).

The conversion/ metempsychosis tropes overlap as alternative descriptions of the same phenomenon: they diverge without conflicting. These figures point us toward different systems that will coexist throughout the novel: one is vertical or transcendent, totalizing, and limited to the human, while the other suggests a non-teleological, horizontal movement—not up into salvation, but across toward other species and modes of perception and embodiment. The reference to Saul/Paul’s conversion on the road to Damascus (and his subsequent blindness, until the “scales” fall from his eyes), implies a view of metamorphosis as a singular redemptive movement, a sudden recognition of the Truth, with its accompanying renunciation of previous experience. In Pythagoreanism, on the other hand, metempsychosis is a biocentric, rather than anthropocentric concept, signifying the transmigration of the soul “of a human being or animal at or after death into a new body of the same or a different species” (OED). “Metempsychosis” therefore implies a different, non-dualistic conception of metamorphosis—not a one-way transformation that divides the fallen from the saved, but a more repetitive, horizontal movement. It suggests a process of graduated differentiation, a slow migration made up of multiple micro trips, a transformation that works itself out bit by bit, in many stages or versions of embodiment, rather than in a single, blinding flash of light.

The point is not that metempsychosis, and its attendant logic of graduated difference and species-skipping transformation, is more important than the logic of conversion in Proust. The universe of the *Recherche* is one in which these systems—which we might call binary or digital (two-valued) versus graduated or analog (many-valued)—are not dialectically related.⁵ One never cancels out the other, nor do they ultimately converge in synthesis.⁶ Instead, they border one another as different climates or pressure systems might, and we have the pleasure of wandering from one to another, sometimes making our way precariously between them. The conversion plot links up to the Proustian topos of art’s redemptive or sublimatory power, instantiated by the narrator’s triumphant and epiphanal turn to literature at the end of the novel. The metempsychosis plot branches out into a general aesthetics of *nuance*—with its imperceptible subtleties, graduated distinctions, and outward-spreading metamorphoses.

Another way to understand the intersection of transcendence and metempsychosis in Proust is as a play between what the psychologist Silvan Tompkins terms “strong” and “weak” affect theories, or modes of organizing perceptual data. A strong theory is a theory of wide generality and temporal extension. Adept at absorbing a range of particulars into a summary, a strong theoretical stance is distinguished “by the size and topology of the domain that it organizes” (Sedgwick 134). A “weak” theoretical strain, on the other hand, attends only to close-by phenomena; it offers “sensitization” to relevant incoming information that might correlate to its interpretation, but its “cognitive antenna” is less anticipatory and far-reaching than that of strong theory (Tompkins 166). Weak theory privileges proximity and contact over wide-ranging generalization. If strong theory reaches far into the future and the past in order to extend a “simplified and powerful summary” over

⁵ I borrow the analog-digital opposition from Sedgwick and Frank, who use it in reference to Silvan Tompkins’s theory of affect. Tompkins represents affect as a layering of machine and biological models, or digital (on/off) and analog systems (graduated and/or multiply differentiated) (*Touching Feeling* 100-101).

⁶ The reading of Proust that I develop in this essay is inspired by Sedgwick’s suggestion, in a 2002 interview, that one might understand the *Recherche* as a text that performs a “systematic choreography” between “strong” and “weak,” or “paranoid” and “reparative” positions (*Piercing Bouquet* 249). Other readings of the *Recherche* that foreground non-dialectical doubleness include Deleuze’s *Proust and Signs* (in which the narrator is alternately a seeker of essences and a schizophrenic spider); Antoine Compagnon’s *Proust Between Two Centuries* (which presents the *Recherche* as the “novel of the in-between”); and Malcolm Bowie’s *Proust Among the Stars* (which argues that the novel tends alternately toward unity and toward non-totalizable multiplicity).

a great variety of experiences, weak theory, as Tomkins puts it, is “little better than a description of the phenomena which it purports to explain” (qtd in Sedgwick 134). The redemption plot in Proust is “strong” in that its dualistic teleology easily takes over the entire textual landscape, casting other forms of experience as failed or incomplete. A reading attentive to non-finalized, metempsychotic exchanges and reversals, on the other hand, does not preclude the coexistence of other patterns of transformation or modes of interpretation.

While strong theory is good at assembling details into totalizing formulations, weak theory is attentive to nuance—subtle or slight variation or difference in meaning, color, shade, or tone. The *Trésor de la langue française* assembles the following definitions of “nuance,” each of which shades subtly into the others:

Intensité, degré plus ou moins fort que peut prendre une même couleur— Teinte qu'on peut distinguer d'autres, à l'intérieur d'une même couleur, par le mélange légèrement différent des composantes qui y entrent ou par la subtile différence d'intensité que présentent ces composantes—Modification de l'intensité d'un son ou des phrases de l'exécution musicale—Variété ou variante fondée sur une différence de détail, souvent subtile et difficilement discernable, entre deux ou plusieurs choses ou états par ailleurs semblables, ou entre les divers états d'une même chose—Quantité très faible et presque indiscernable de quelque chose—Etat intermédiaire par lequel peut passer une chose

Intensity or degree of greater or lesser strength that a single color can take on—Tint distinguishable from others, within a single color, by the slightly different mixture of its components or by the subtle difference in intensity that these components present—Modification in intensity of a sound or of musical phrases—Variety or variant based on a difference of detail, often subtle and difficult to discern, between two or several things or states otherwise the same, or between diverse states of the same thing—Very weak and almost indiscernible quantity of something — Intermediary state through which a thing can pass

Presenting a modulation of degree so subtle that it escapes discernment, nuance (like a cloud) invites attunement to the very edges of form, the threshold of materiality. Nuance suggests a level of distinction so rarified as to be indiscernible: nuances are distinctions pushed to their most extreme limit, which is to say, pushed to the place where they cease to be distinct. An intermediary phenomenon, nuance can be understood as a variation *between* two states of the same thing (like a shade of red between two shades of red). Hence Lyotard defines nuance as an open-ended indeterminacy or “scarcely perceptible” harmonic wavering within determinate identity (140). Lyotard allies nuance with timbre, and I will return to this concept in the last section of this chapter. For now, note that tuning into nuance orients us toward the horizontal (toward the axis of the *beside*) rather than the vertical (toward secret depths or transcendent heights). Lyotard suggests that nuance is perceived in terms of sensory texture, rather than (ocular) detachment: the mind cannot grasp, but can be “touched” by nuance (153).

Leo Spitzer refers frequently to nuance in his 1928 essay on Proustian style. He notes that in his attempt to touch upon the “exact nuance” of a sound, a light, a sensation, Proust often has recourse to a particular turn of phrase—one that brings out an intermediary register indirectly, by

naming what lies closest to it.⁷ Hence Proust often repeats the turn of phrase, “it was not *a* but *b*,” or “if not *a* at least *b*,” whereby *a* and *b* are offered to the reader simultaneously (420). Proust’s sentences tend to slow down, spill out, and multiply possibilities in order to render the nuances of the in-between. As we meander through the *Recherche*, we often find ourselves drifting this way and that through sentences that distend, puff out, engorge into one shape, then another. We float in the interstice of a “soit... soit,” we are suspended in the hiatus of an “unless” or blown along by a succession of “ou... ou... ou.” Spitzer notes that the *Recherche* is full of the prefix “in-”: immatériel, impalpable, inconnu, inaccessible, indéfini, ineffable, illisible, inexistant. . . (448-49). This profusion of the “in-” suggests an escape from precision, a quality of being not-this (but not necessarily “that,” either). “Nuance” is what cannot be directly grasped, but becomes perceptible in proximity. “Nuance” offers itself to view not as an absolute negation of some other quality, but as what lies just *beside* the other.

One might expect nuance to appear in Proust as a rarified or delicate quality perceptible only to a privileged minority. After all, in Bourdieu’s analysis of the system of taste, the uninitiated masses are presumed to perceive only a “chaos of sounds and rhythms, colours and lines” in the very objects which, for the cultural elite, present a subtle web of references and counter-references (2). And in Baudrillard’s study of the bourgeois system of objects, the “dignity” of the bourgeois interior is characterized by its diffusion of discrete “nuances,” such as beige and mauve, rather than bright colors (43-44). Yet there is something peculiar about nuance that is left out of Bourdieu and Baudrillard’s accounts—a quality of minoriness and non-systematicity that makes the hyper-nuanced object inappropriate to the distinction-seeking aesthete. Barthes hints at this quality when he contrasts the opposition of primary colors (red v. blue) to the “light difference”—the “onset” or “effort toward difference”—that one glimpses in monochrome, or unmarked, “colorless” colors. The very shades that Baudrillard interprets as signifiers of bourgeois propriety and good taste appear in Barthes’s reading as ungraspable and unsettling. Orienting us toward a paradigm-thwarting, minute scale of distinction, organized around the shimmer, or “moire,” such colorless or nuanced tonalities subtly shift depending on the angle of one’s gaze: the “moire” is “that whose aspect, perhaps whose meaning, is subtly modified according to the angle of the subject’s gaze” (*Neutral* 51).

During the last decade of his life, Barthes distanced himself from a semiotics grounded in the logic of castration and compensation. Inspired by Proust—whom he considers the central figure of his own “literary cosmogony”—Barthes elaborates “weak” readings, skirting dualistic thinking in favor of nuance (*OC IV*, 140). Attentive to minute gradation, amplification, and tonal distinctions, this minor theoretical mode abstains from classifying phenomena according to the binary pairs part/whole, manifest/latent. Instead, it plays with nuances—which Barthes also terms “intensités différentielles” (*La Préparation* 75). Barthes’s reading plucks nuance out of the bourgeois interior and makes it the organizing figure of a posthumanist ethics. When he states (in the preliminary remarks to *Le Neutre*) that he wants to read each figure so as to bring out its nuances, he adds that what he really wants is to *live* according to nuance. “Make no mistake,” he warns, “this is not about more intellectual sophistication” (“ceci n’est pas la requête d’une sophistication intellectuelle” (11/37)). Barthes associates nuance with minor flaws or particularities, inassimilable details—“ce qui est raté”—as well as with the diffuse, lingering light one might see in a cloud (*Préparation* 82). This meteorological trope suggests that nuance is not the quality of an elite or inaccessible object. Rather, nuance emerges in Barthes’s late work as a field of complexity or “continuous variation” that is also entirely commonplace, available (or equally unavailable) to all. Hence, in *Le Neutre*, Barthes dreams

⁷ “[L]orsque la nuance cherchée se trouve à mi-chemin entre deux nuances plus faciles à rendre, il n’y a d’autre moyen que de nommer les deux en soulignant la plus proche” (420). [“When the sought-after nuance lies halfway between two nuances that are easier to render, the only way is to name both while emphasizing the closer one.”]

of creating “nuance exercises” for children. These exercises would orient children away from dualistic, wide-ranging classifications (strong theory) and toward small differences and graduated distinctions (weak theory). Instead of the traditional focus on definitions, synonyms, and antonyms, students might study an inventory of “micro-networks of words that are very similar but a tiny bit different,” which, without denying difference, would illustrate the “price of the ‘bit’” (“le prix du ‘peu’”) (130/170).⁸ We might understand Proust’s famously complex syntax as pedagogical in precisely this way. Proust invites us to slow down and attune our attention away from hierarchical antinomies and toward nuance, with its microscopic atmospheric shifts, gradations, amplifications, and differential intensities.

In the *Recherche*, the scene in which the narrator meets the ambassador, Norpois, exemplifies the difference between a socially-profitable relation to nuances (as in Baudrillard’s “nuanced” bourgeois interior) and a flagrantly useless, even childish attachment to nuance (such as Barthes imagines teaching with his “nuance exercises”). The novel’s most explicit investor in cultural capital, Norpois is a virtuoso and detached classifier of artworks. Hoping to impress his sophisticated dinner guest and colleague, the narrator’s father presents the diplomat with a piece of his son’s writing—a “prose poem” that could well be an excerpt from the first volume of the *Recherche*, as it details the narrator’s exaltation upon coming home from a walk in Combray. Rather than initiating the boy into the realm of social distinction, however, Norpois dismisses the narrator’s hyper-nuanced, adjective-proliferating style. For Norpois, the ideal writer is a man whose attention to production and compensation leads him directly up the road to social recognition; the successful artist “n’est pas homme à s’arrêter en route” [“not the sort of man to stop along the way”] (1: 453/2: 32, trans. modified).⁹ The narrator’s heightened attention to sonorous detail, on the other hand, is entirely pointless from the diplomat’s point of view: “toutes ces subtilités de mandarin déliquescents me semblent bien vaines” [“all those subtleties of a deliquescent mandarin seem to me to be quite futile”] (1: 474/2: 62).

The distinguished ambassador is also unimpressed with the narrator’s capacity as an aesthetic critic. Thanks to Norpois’s recommendation, the narrator has finally been permitted to attend a performance by the celebrated actress, Berma. To his dismay, he finds himself utterly unable to judge what he sees. If Rachel, the former prostitute-turned-great actress in the *Recherche*, exemplifies an aesthetics of *quelconque* undecidability—she is simultaneously singular and nothing special—Berma exemplifies the marginal, understated, paradigm-thwarting economy of nuance. What Proust shows us in this theatre scene is that extreme attention to nuance brings the perceiver so near to the object—and its multiple textures, tints, dimensions—that the very opposition between close and distant, weak and strong reading dissolves. Nuance orients us toward the cloudy, intermediary spaces at the margins of established critical schemas and hierarchies of taste.

The first time the narrator sees Berma perform, his critical faculties are stumped. Because he has not yet developed the strong theory that would subsume the nuances of the performance into a single formulation, he experiences a crisis of distinction, in both sense of the word. He is literally

⁸ Walter Benjamin also allies nuance with childhood perception. In an early essay titled “A Child’s View of Color,” Benjamin suggests that children, with their flexible, receptive, non-symptomatic perceptual habits are better attuned to nuance than sophisticated, cross-referencing adults are. Where adults are attentive to “things,” “symptoms,” and “intellectual cross-references,” a child’s view of color encompasses “an infinite range of nuances” (50-51). Benjamin muses that this must be because “the range of distinctions within each of the senses... is presumably larger in children.” He associates a childish sensitivity to nuance with a variety of childhood objects and activities, from soap bubbles and “games with painted sticks,” to sewing kits, decals, and “making objects by folding paper” (50).

⁹ For Norpois, aesthetics and war are intimately linked. His example of a successful writer is a man who publishes alternately on “the Sense of the Infinite on the western shore of Lake Victoria Nyanza,” and “the Repeating Rifle in the Bulgarian Army” (2: 32).

unable to “read” the performance in a way that will yield cultural capital. He struggles to distinguish foreground from background, star from secondary actors: “une actrice entra par le fond, qui avait la figure et la voix qu’on m’avait dit être celles de la Berma. On avait dû changer la distribution. . . Mais une autre actrice donna la réplique au première. . . la seconde lui ressemblait davantage encore.” [“An actrice entered from the back who had the face and voice which, I had been told, were those of Berma. The cast must therefore have been changed. . . But a second actress not responded to the first. . . the second resembled her even more closely.”] A minute later, it seems to him that compared to Berma, both of these actresses’ performances are comprehensible, marked by clear distinctions: “toutes deux. . . ajoutaient à leurs rôle de nobles gestes—que je distinguait clairement et dont je comprenais la relation avec le texte” [“Both of them. . . embellished their roles with noble gestures—which I could clearly distinguish and could appreciate in their relation to the text”] (1: 488/2: 25). Berma, on the other hand, speaks her lines in such a way that the narrator is unable to differentiate her from the text. Because Berma, unlike the other actresses, does not structure her monologues according to expected oppositions, her delivery seems flat, without distinction: “elle passa au rabout d’une mélopée uniforme toute la tirade où se trouvèrent confondues ensemble des oppositions pourtant si tranchées qu’une tragédienne à peine intelligente, même des élèves de lycée, n’en eussent pas négligé l’effet” [“she planed down into a uniform chant the whole of a speech in which there were mingled together contrasts so striking that the least intelligent of actresses, even the pupils of an academy, could not have missed their effect”] (1: 450/ 2: 27). This understated, non-dualistic delivery is perceived as an undifferentiated flood of words, and the actress seems to disappear into the language she recites: “je ne pouvais même pas, comme pour ses camarades, distinguer dans sa diction et dans son jeu des intonations intelligentes, de beaux gestes” [“I could not even, as I could with her companions, distinguish in her diction and in her playing intelligent modulations or beautiful gestures”] (1: 449/2: 26). The problem is not simply that the actress’s non-oppositional delivery makes her indistinguishable from her role. Berma’s performance is unjudgeable because the narrator cannot find the distance necessary to judge her. As he magnifies and unmagnifies the spectacle, the narrator is disoriented by alternate, coexisting versions of the actress. These incompatible images overlap, neither more real than the other: “je pensais que ce n’était plus la Berma que je voyais, mais son image dans le verre grossissant. Je reposai la lorgnette; mais peut-être l’image que recevait mon oeil, diminuée par l’éloignement, n’était pas plus exacte; laquelle des deux Berma était la vraie?” [“I thought that it was no longer Berma but her image that I was seeing in the magnifying lenses. I put the glasses down. But perhaps the image that my eye received of her, diminished by distance, was no more exact; which of the two Bermas was the real one?”] (1: 449/2: 27). Berma appears to oscillate between disappearing and proliferating, between vanishing into her role and multiplying on stage.

This disoriented perception—which does not subsume “close” into “distant” vision, detail into generality—exemplifies the mode of critical impasse that I will investigate throughout this chapter. When his father invites him to distinguish himself in front of Norpois later that evening by uttering the expected praise, the narrator misses the opportunity to confirm his (and his parents’) good taste. Unable to derive any cultural capital from his experience at the theatre, he can only stammer, lacking the words to describe the peculiarity of his disappointment: “je ne cherchais pas à remplacer les mots qui me manquaient. . . je balbutiai” [“I made no attempt to substitute ready-made phrases. . . but stood there stammering”] (1: 457/2: 37). The narrator’s embarrassing failure in front of Norpois demonstrates that heightened attention to the formal qualities of the aesthetic object does not necessarily yield cultural distinction. Rather, extreme attention to nuance is literally over the top—it threatens to toss the perceiver out of the navigable universe of taste. Like the color aphasiacs who privilege minor resemblances over generalizing comparisons and accretion over division—adding light pink and green ribbons to a pile of blues—the social player who becomes too

interested in nuance (preferring to gaze at or stroke the cards in his hand rather than play them) may find himself excluded from the game altogether.¹⁰

2. Too Close

Là où la vision est proche, l'espace n'est pas visuel, ou plutôt l'oeil lui-même a une fonction haptique et non optique.
Deleuze et Guattari, *Mille plateaux*

Proust's earliest critics were bewildered by the extreme closeness of attention that the *Recherche* requires of its readers. Bernard Grasset, who published *Swann's Way* in 1913 at Proust's expense, flatly characterized the volume as "unreadable" ("illisible") (qtd in Cano, 58). Jacques Normand, who advised Fasquelle not to publish *Swann's Way* in 1912, found his critical faculties stumped by the novel's "unimaginable disproportion" (20). Normand suggests that the only possible response to the *Recherche* is a weak one—the reader must stick as close as possible to the text, following the author step by step, "feeling one's way along" ("à tâtons") (14).¹¹ Similarly, Henri Ghéon (who reviewed *Swann's Way* in 1914) disparages the peculiar closeness of Proust's vision, complaining that everything in the volume contains an inexhaustible "treasure of nuances" (22). Proust seems to suffer, in Ghéon's account, from a sort of perceptual disorder. Instead of clearing vistas in the forest, he is compelled to detail each individual leaf :

Le temps qu'un autre eût employé à faire du jour dans cette forêt, à y ménager des espaces, à y ouvrir des perspectives, il le donne à compter les arbres, les diverses sortes d'essences. . . Et il décrira chaque feuille, comme différente des autres, nervure par nervure, et l'endroit, et l'envers. (22)

The time that another would have spent clearing the forest, managing its spaces and opening up vistas, he spends counting various species of trees. . . And he will describe each leaf as different from the others, vein by vein, first the front, then the back.

Rather than subordinating particular details to general, wide-ranging structures, Proust luxuriates in the textural minutia of what lies closest at hand. If critics are no longer disoriented by Proust's habit of piling nuance upon nuance in flagrant disregard for conventions of novelistic proportion, it is perhaps because we come to the novel armed with strong theories.

We might conceptualize the theoretical impasse the narrator hits up against at the theatre (and which these early reviewers encounter in their readings of Proust) as the disorienting effect of extremely close reading. Proust's descriptions sometimes pull the reader right up to the edge of the perceptible—the place where patterns become fuzzy and the border between inside and outside,

¹⁰ Indeed, by the end of the evening, the effusive narrator breaks the rules of the social game to such an extent that he is definitely expelled from the diplomat's esteem. Norpois will allude with disdain to the moment when it seemed that the effusive adolescent would kiss his hands: "on me raconta qu'il avait fait allusion à une soirée d'autrefois dans laquelle il avait vu le moment où j'allais lui baiser les mains" ["I was told that he had alluded to an evening long ago when he had seen the moment in which I was about to kiss his hand"] (1: 478/ 2: 68).

¹¹ Describing Proust as a "pathological case," Normand is almost as tongue-tied after seven-hundred and twelve pages of hyper-nuanced description as the narrator is after his first trip to the theatre: "qu'est-ce que tout cela signifie? Où tout cela veut-il mener?—Impossible d'en rien savoir! Impossible d'en pouvoir rien dire!" (20, 13) The critic finds himself reduced to a stammer: "mais pourquoi tout cela? Mais quel rapport? Quoi? Quoi enfin?" (13).

object and interpretation, becomes indistinct. If historically, an intensified attention to detail has a disciplinary function—essential to the individualization and classification of workers, patients, soldiers, students¹²—Proust’s intensification of detail functions to dehierarchize, de-classify, de-individualize. Inviting us to read so “closely” that we lose track of divisions and classifications, Proust diffuses and redirects the potentially paranoid, clue-seeking energies of close reading. An extremely close reading magnifies the textural threshold where structure dissolves into perceptual substance, leading us up to the very limit of meaning, where there are “no further signs to be read” (Elkins 198).¹³ Proust is fascinated by this “point of unsurpassable closeness”—the zone where unaided vision hits its limit, and clear lines dissolve into amorphous ones. As the narrator puts it in *Combray*, the closer one gets to the object of investigation, the more it “volatilizes” and drifts away. If strong theory attempts to burn off the mist in order to get the lay of the land, a weak theoretical approach stays close to the nuances of this cloudy “evaporative zone” (1: 84). Instead of assembling details into overarching laws, the Proustian aesthetics of nuance tempts us into a reading *so* close that the reader, like a color aphasiac amidst myriad multicolored ribbons, loses all sight of predetermined classifications. In two passages in particular—the ekphrastic representations of the Hubert Robert fountain and of a plate of asparagus—we are invited to linger at description’s breaking point.

In eighteenth- and nineteenth-century realist novels, descriptions of bourgeois interiors organize details so as to individuate and refine the characters at their center. The description of things serves as the backdrop to the description of the hero or heroine’s progress through the world (Stewart 28). In Proust, bourgeois description becomes so rarified, so hyper-attuned to nuance, that it swells out of bounds, flooding the line between background and foreground and even occasionally spilling onto the observer. In such hyper-refined description, the subject’s centrality is eclipsed as the stability of metric space (which holds the bourgeois hero at its center) gives way to what Deleuze and Guattari call haptic, or smooth space (“espace lisse”).¹⁴ Suggestive of the strange insubstantiality of the cloud, haptic space is allied with close-range vision, while metric (or “striated”) space relates to a more distant, optical spatial organization—it presumes an “immobile outside observer” (*A Thousand Plateaus* 493; *Mille plateaux* 615). Deleuze and Guattari pile up descriptions of these two kinds of space, offering one analogy after another: the haptic is amorphous, the metric formal; the haptic involves nomadic movement and open spaces, the metric involves the sedentary, the interior

¹² Allying intensified attention to detail with a modern “micro-physics of power,” Foucault argues that this “mystical calculus of the infinitesimal and the infinite” was elaborated during the classical age in order to make legible and productive a variety of emergent spaces: the school, the barracks, the hospital, the workshop (139-140). For a discussion of the relation between the detail and positivistic thought, see the final chapter of Didi-Huberman’s *Confronting Images*. Didi-Huberman suggests that when the detail is made to ground an epistemology of “exhaustive description,” it encompasses three operations: *proximity* (getting closer, “enter[ing] into the details”), *partition* (breaking down, taking apart), and *addition* (“to detail” is to “enumerate all the parts of a whole, as if the ‘cutting up’ had served only to make possible a complete accounting, without remainder—a sum”) (230).

¹³ Elkins suggests that because there is no limit to a close reading except the texture of the object itself, close reading is inevitably “foggy,” drawing the reader into the uncertain sphere where lexeme blurs into morpheme, character into mark, and the semiotic into the non-semiotic (199).

¹⁴ Deleuze and Guattari use the term “haptic” rather than “tactile” because this word “does not establish an opposition between the two sense organs but rather invites the assumption that the eye itself may fulfill this nonoptical function” (*A Thousand Plateaus* 492). For a full-length study of haptic, or smooth space in Proust, see Nathan Guss, *Proust Outdoors*. Guss valorizes in particular the wild, “deterritorialized,” ocean-like indeterminacy of Albertine’s body, and highlights the subversive, ecocritical potential inherent in attending to the smooth, untotizable, rhizomatic spaces in Proust. Guss’s version of non-metric, “outdoor” space is “stronger” and more akin to the Kantian sublime than the more modest and minor intensities of nuance I am investigating here. Guss does not focus particularly on the sense of touch or the phenomenology of closeness.

space; the haptic implies an “aggregate” or “entanglement” (“enchevêtrement”) of intricate microscales, as in the “anti-fabric,” felt, while the metric implies a delimited or closed woven fabric with top and bottom, vertical and horizontal elements; or again, the haptic is like patchwork, with its “infinite, successive additions of fabric,” while the metric is like embroidery, “with its central theme or motif” (476/594). Haptic space is “irregular and undetermined,” oriented toward “continuous variation,” while metric space is “defined by a standard”; it “produces an order and succession of distinct forms” (477-78/596-97). In haptic space, points are subordinated to the intervals between them: lines, or trajectories; in metric space, lines are subordinated to points, or stops (478/597). If the metric belongs to the sphere of “major” science, the haptic involves “minor geometry”: this type of space can be conceptualized geometrically as a line curved in such a way that it is just less than a surface, or a cube hollowed out until it is slightly more than a surface (487). What is really important to note here is that the haptic and the metric, the close and the distant, are not really opposites: each is continuously being transversed by or reversed into the other. In this sense, the play of haptic and metric space suggests the rhythmic overlap of strong and weak theory: the strong theorist grids, systematically encloses and excels at subsuming parts into wholes (or dividing wholes into parts) while disregarding the incomparable or indeterminate; the weak theorist likes changes in direction, connections, accumulations, and is oriented toward the non-totalizable and the indeterminate, the qualitative, the intermediary, the minor deviation, the just-over or just-under, the slightly more or slightly less—the nuance.

We observe Proust’s transition from metric to non-metric space especially in extremely close descriptions. The nearer we get to the object, the more subtly and minutely its coordinates shift, until its properties appear to come unglued, both from one another and from the object itself. Optical classification gives way to a “zone of indiscernibility” that invites touch, rather than delineation (*A Thousand Plateaus* 488; *Mille plateaux* 609). Instead of a whole divisible into equal parts, the object appears as an amorphous, acentered assemblage or accretion of nuances. As we make our way through Proust’s exorbitantly nuanced descriptions, we sometimes become aware of sliding out of bourgeois, ocular space, into a nebulous space so replete with detail, so qualifiable and so variable, that it can no longer be easily seen or measured. The description of the Hubert Robert fountain in *Sodome et Gomorrhe* is precisely such an instance of cloudification, or transfer from the optical to the haptic. The fountain appears classically composed and contained from a distance, but from close-up, its impenetrable density and linearity gives way to an unpredictable proliferation of orientations, speeds, and trajectories:

Dans une clairière réservée entourée de beaux arbres dont plusieurs étaient aussi anciens que lui, planté à l'écart, on le voyait de loin, svelte, immobile, durci, ne laissant agiter par la brise que la retombée plus légère de son panache pâle et frémissant. Le XVIIIe siècle avait épuré l'élégance de ses lignes... Mais de près on se rendait compte que... c'était des eaux toujours nouvelles qui, s'élançant et voulant obéir aux ordres anciens de l'architecte, ne les accomplissaient exactement qu'en paraissant les violer, leurs mille bonds épars pouvant seuls donner à distance l'impression d'un unique élan... De près, des gouttes sans force retombaient de la colonne d'eau en croisant au passage leurs soeurs montantes, et, parfois déchirées, saisies dans un remous de l'air troublé par ce jaillissement sans trêve, flottaient avant d'être chavirées dans le bassin. Elles contrariaient de leurs hésitations, de leur trajet en sens inverse, et estompaient de leur molle vapeur la rectitude et la tension de cette tige, portant au-dessus de soi un nuage oblong fait de mille gouttelettes, mais en

apparence peint en brun doré et immuable, qui montait, infrangible, immobile, élané et rapide, s'ajouter aux nuages du ciel. (3: 56-57)

It could be seen from a distance, slender, motionless, rigid, set apart in a clearing surrounded by fine trees, some of which were as old as itself, only the lighter fall of its pale and quivering plume stirring in the breeze. The eighteenth century had refined the elegance of its lines... But from a closer view one realized that... it was a constantly changing stream of water that, springing upwards and seeking to obey the architect's original orders, performed them to the letter only by seeming to infringe them, its thousand separate bursts succeeding only from afar in giving the impression of a single thrust... From close to, exhausted drops could be seen falling back from the column of water, passing their sisters on the way up, and at times, torn and scattered, caught in an eddy of the night air, disturbed by this unremitting surge, floating awhile before being drowned in the basin. They teased with their hesitations, with their journey in the opposite direction, and blurred with their soft vapour the vertical tension of the shaft that bore aloft an oblong cloud composed of countless tiny drops but seemingly painted in an unchanging golden brown which rose, unbreakable, fixed, slender and swift, to mingle with the clouds in the sky. (4: 75-76)

What this meta-descriptive passage demonstrates is that the closer and more nuanced a reading gets, the more the seemingly refined object blurs and leaks: the fountain's continuity gives way to multiplicity, its immobility to movement, its rectitude and control to hesitation and contingency, and its smooth lines to "exhausted drops" and blurry "soft vapor." The description begins at a distance from its object ("de loin") and then pulls us closer and closer in—first "from a bit closer" ("d'un peu près") then "from close to" ("de près"). Just when it seems as if we could not get any closer, the object splashes out of its frame, saturating the threshold dividing foreground from background and spectacle from spectators. The seemingly disciplined, classical cloud is about to spray out and drench an unlucky passer-by: "un fort coup de chaude brise tordit le jet d'eau et inonda si complètement la belle dame que... elle fut aussi trempée que si on l'avait plongée dans un bain" ["a strong gust of warm air deflected the jet of water and inundated the fair lady so completely that... she was as thoroughly soaked as if she had been plunged into a bath"] (3: 57/4: 77). This odd final detail—described as "one of these little accidents"—indexes the uncontainability of nuance. Proust pushes detail to such extremes that rather than contextualizing the individual, it floods over her.

What is most fascinating about this passage is the way it demonstrates the disorienting effect of closeness. As the initially distant, stable point of observation is drawn closer and closer in, the contoured, centered, systematic object metamorphoses into a non-totalizable assemblage. Similarly, in a famous ekphrastic passage from *Combray*, description becomes so minute and rarified that the object seems to fall apart, unable to contain its own nuances. Here, the narrator has stopped to gaze at some asparagus on the table:

mon ravissement était devant les asperges, trempées d'outremer et de rose et dont l'épi, finement pignoché de mauve et d'azur, se dégrade insensiblement jusqu'au pied,—encore souillé pourtant du sol de leur plant,—par des irisations qui ne sont pas de la terre. Il me semblait que ces nuances célestes trahissaient les délicieuses créatures qui s'étaient amusées à se métamorphoser en légumes et qui, à travers le déguisement de leur chair comestible et ferme, laissaient apercevoir en ces couleurs

naissantes d'aurore, en ces ébauches d'arc-en-ciel, en cette extinction de soirs bleus, cette essence précieuse que je reconnaissais encore quand, toute la nuit qui suivait un dîner où j'en avais mangé, elles jouaient, dans leurs farces poétiques et grossières comme une féerie de Shakespeare, à changer mon pot de chambre en un vase de parfum. (1: 121)

What most enraptured me were the asparagus, tinged with ultramarine and pink which shaded off from their heads, finely stippled in mauve and azure, through a series of imperceptible gradations to their white feet—still stained a little by the soil of their garden-bed—with an iridescence that was not of the earth. I felt that these celestial nuances indicated the presence of exquisite creatures who had been pleased to assume vegetable form and who, through the disguise of their firm, comestible flesh, allowed me to discern in these incipient colors of dawn, these hinted rainbows, these blue evening shades, that precious quality which I should recognize again when, all night long after a dinner at which I had partaken of them, they played (lyrical and coarse in their jesting like one of Shakespeare's fairies) at transforming my chamber pot into a vase of aromatic perfume. (1: 168-9; trans. modified)

Here again, metric space melts or dissolves into an amorphous, haptic assemblage. Like the fountain, which from a distance appears centered and “set apart” in a clearing, the asparagus still-life is at first clearly framed on the table. As we enter into the description, however, this frame falls away and the coordinates of the object shift in relation to one another. Consider what happens to space as our orientation shifts. We begin in front of (“devant”) the object, and as we are pulled in closer and closer in, our gaze is simultaneously redirected outward, as the colors of the vegetable zigzag from ground to sky and back again: out (“ultramarine”), down (“rose,” “mauve”), up (“azure”), down (“foot,” “soil,” “earth”), up (“dawn,” “rainbow,” “blue evening shades”), down (“chamber pot”). The sentence beginning with “these celestial nuances” bulges, piling clause on top of clause, as though no quantity of adjectives could ever complete the portrait or exhaustively qualify the object. The last twist in the description—the “metamorphosis” that transforms solid into liquid, food into waste, visual into olfactory stimulus—pulls us in closer than we had bargained for, as the object of observation disappears from view only to splash out unexpectedly later on. Like the description of the fountain, the asparagus still-life demonstrates that the closer we get to the object, the more distinction flips into indistinction, and the more the object's properties detach, becoming free to merge with any other object. This melting-down of the object such that its qualities loosen and become transferable occurs even on the level of grammar: as Michel Riffaterre points out, this passage implicitly twists the noun “asperges” until it morphs into its verb form, “asperger”—to spray or splash (375). Just as the Hubert Robert fountain finally leaps out of its frame and onto a passer-by, here the asparagus still-life spills off of the table and into the narrator's chamber pot.

The asparagus are described as shading off imperceptibly—“insensiblement”—from top to bottom, suggesting graduated differences in tint so minute that they exceed visual discernment. Echoing the novel's initial turn toward the “weak” axis of metempsychosis, rather than the “strong” axis of redemption, the description of the asparagus foregrounds the liminal qualities of the shimmering, nuanced object by drawing our attention to the nebulous edges of distinct colors, the zone where one tint first becomes perceptible or shades off imperceptibility into another. Hence the vegetable's incipient colors (“couleurs naissantes”) suggest “hints” or “drafts” (“ébauches”) of rainbows—the very first glint of color hovering free of definitive form.

Perceiving such hyper-rarified nuance, Proust suggests, is not the privilege of a trained or sophisticated eye. As if acknowledging its own over-the-top, paradoxically unsophisticated refinement, the passage describes the asparagus tip as “finement pignoché.” In a familiar sense, “pignocher” means to pick at one’s food or nibble without appetite. As a painterly term, “pignocher” suggests an excessive finish or exaggerated workmanship; an attention to detail so extreme that distinctions become indistinguishable: “peindre minutieusement, en revenant souvent à petits coups de brosse ou de pinceau sur des parties déjà faites et en les finissant à l’excès, d’une manière lisse, mesquine et monotone” (Littre).¹⁵ Proust plays on the possibilities inherent in the apparently “monotone,” orienting us toward nuance as Barthes imagines it—not an index of sophisticated taste, but an almost imperceptible initial glimmer: “la notion. . . de début, d’effort de différence” (*Neutre* 83).

3. Dégradation

In the *Recherche*, nuance is allied with heightened attentiveness to detail; nuance is what becomes perceptible at the closest range of a close reading, where metric order begins to dissolve. Closeness is not the only condition for perceiving nuance in Proust, however. Nuance also emerges as a cloudy, “weak” quality that hovers around objects seen from afar. Rather than emerging as the effect of a too-close reading, this second sort of nuance appears as a cloudy patch blurring the contours of objects that have not yet been subjected to epistemological scrutiny. This cloudiness is not strictly visual: it is also represented as a faint, non-cognitive, sensory-affective buzz—an intermittent “murmure” or “bourdonnement” at the threshold of visual, olfactory, and acoustic perceptual pathways.

One of the remarkable features of Proust’s novel is that it occasionally permits us a glimpse of a landscape that has not yet been colonized by desire’s imperious possessiveness. This is not to say that at such moments we see the “thing in itself,” but simply that certain scenes invite us to imagine an inexhaustibly *interested*—but not instrumentalizing—aesthetic engagement with the world. Interest, or in Silvan Tomkins’s terminology, “interest-excitement,” is the “general, impersonal affect” that serves as the basis for both human and animal attachments. In the most basic sense, interest is what commits us to the world, activating and amplifying our capacity to care for things (Tomkins 77-78). As Tomkins points out, interest sustains not only perception but also the state of wakefulness.¹⁶ It is the affect particularly allied with curiosity—with the development of perceptual skills necessary to explore one’s environment, learn, and make memories.¹⁷ Interest enables a

¹⁵ The 1932 edition of the Dictionnaire de l’Académie Française defines “pignocher” similarly as an excessively attentive workmanship, “une facture trop soignée.”

¹⁶ In a formulation highly relevant to the *Recherche*, a text suffused with depictions of sleeplessness, Tomkins notes that insomnia may be produced by extreme interest, or sustained intense excitement (76-77).

¹⁷ Curiosity is an affect often theorized in conjunction with wonder, and with the scientific and geographical explorations and discoveries of the Early Modern period. See, for example, Daston and Park, *Wonders and the Order of Nature, 1150-1750* and *Curiosity and Wonder from the Renaissance to the Enlightenment*. In *Wonder, the Rainbow, and the Aesthetics of Rare Experiences*, Philip Fisher suggests that the importance of wonder and curiosity in modernity has been overshadowed by a preoccupation with (religious or sublime) dynamics of fear. While wonder and curiosity imply a mobile, lingering, exploratory “play of the mind” over the “details of the object,” the fear-relief dialectic implies an “obsessive, fixed focus of attention” that preempts other modalities of interest (39). Ross Posnock’s account of Henry James’s curiosity is particularly relevant for thinking about this affect in Proust. Posnock allies Jamesian curiosity with vulnerability, openness, flexibility, nonidentitarian thinking (or the “entwining of self and other”) and the “overlap” of “psychological, cultural, critical, and sexual modalities” (20-21).

multiplicity of ways of becoming acquainted with an object. It instigates not only the will to possess, but a flexible, non-dualistic engagement with phenomena that Tomkins describes as a “*changing sampling of the object*” (79, original emphasis). This conception of interest is central to the minor aesthetic economy of nuance in the *Recherche*, which privileges the metempsychotic micro-shifts and horizontal spread of affect, rather than the instrumental (teleological or regressive) force of drive.¹⁸ A sophisticated, “strong” aesthetic disposition is dependent upon the capacity to symptomatize sensory experience, and translate it into wide-ranging theories. This strong theoretical current sustains both the teleological rise-to-art plot and the regressive, unsatisfied, jealousy plot for which Proust is so famous. The impersonal, open-ended buzz of interest, on the other hand, enables a more modest theoretical trajectory—a flexible movement between perceptual and conceptual horizons that makes nuance perceptible.

When the narrator of *Combray* comes upon a flowering hawthorn hedge at Tansonville, the entire landscape seems to resonate with the sound (and smell) of awakening curiosity. We might imagine this as the first hum of impersonal interest—a perceptual-affective flutter without definitive origin and which never develops into a central theme. The hawthorns offer the perceiver not an object to penetrate, consume, or expose, but a multi-sensory rhythmic texture. “Buzzing” or “humming” with odor, these flowers engage the senses at the point of their conjunction. The first time the narrator perceives them, their “intermittent odor” strikes him as “the murmuring of an intense organic life” [“le murmure de leur vie intense”] (1: 158/1: 114). This olfactory-auditory hum reemerges in the hawthorn hedge scene at Tansonville:

Je. . . trouvai [le petit chemin] tout bourdonnant de l’odeur des aubépines. . . Mais j’avais beau rester devant les aubépines à respirer, à porter devant ma pensée qui ne savait ce qu’elle devait en faire, à perdre, à retrouver leur invisible et fixe odeur, à m’unir au rythme qui jetait leurs fleurs, ici et là, avec une allégresse juvénile et à des intervalles musicaux, elles m’offraient indéfiniment le même charme avec une profusion inépuisable, mais sans me laisser approfondir davantage, comme ces mélodies qu’on rejoue cent fois sans descendre plus avant dans leur secret. (1: 138)

I found the whole path throbbing with the fragrance of hawthorn-blossoms. . . But it was in vain that I lingered beside the hawthorns—breathing in their invisible and unchanging odour, trying to fix it in my mind (which did not know what to do with it), losing it, recapturing it, absorbing myself in the rhythm which disposed the flowers here and there with a youthful light-heartedness and at intervals as unexpected as certain intervals in music—they went on offering me the same charm in inexhaustible profusion, but without letting me delve any more deeply, like those melodies which one can play a hundred times in succession without coming any nearer to their secret. (1: 194)

¹⁸ “Drive” (*Trieb*, instinct, pulsion) names a state of pressure or tension propelling the subject toward particular ends (food, water, air, sexual release). While Freud understands these needs as hereditary and immutable, and contends that they precede and structure affects, Tomkins reverses this relation, arguing that drives are dependent on the flexible and open-ended affect of interest-excitement: “One’s sexual drive and one’s hunger drive can be no stronger than one’s excitement about sexuality or about eating” (*Shame* 76). This is a significant revision, because affects circulate differently than drives do, opening onto a wide variety of textures, densities, amplificatory patterns, and interpretive possibilities. They are not aimed at particular ends, as drives are, but can attach to any object at all, including not only things and people but, as Sedgwick puts it, “ideas, sensations, relations, activities, ambitions, institutions, and any number of other things, including other affects” (*TF* 23).

Impenetrable and unknowable, the hawthorns offer an inexhaustible “rhythm” incomprehensible to thought, and which one can only join—hence the narrator “mimes” it inside himself, “unites” himself with it. The hawthorn passage repeats the *petite madeleine* scene—but with a crucial difference. In that founding scene of involuntary memory, the entire drama plays out within the closed sphere of the narrator’s consciousness. He repeats the Cartesian gesture of blocking out as much of the world as he can: “j’écarte tout obstacle, toute idée étrangère, j’abrite mes oreilles et mon attention contre les bruits de la chambre voisine” [“I shut out every obstacle, every extraneous idea, I stop my ears and screen my attention from the sounds from the next room”] (1: 46/1: 61). When the narrator does momentarily turn away from the olfactory stimulus, it is only in order to renew his mental powers: “sentant mon esprit qui se fatigue sans réussir, je le force au contraire à prendre cette distraction. . . à se refaire avant une tentative suprême” [“feeling that my mind is tiring itself without succeeding, I compel it for a change to accept the distraction which I have just denied it. . . to rest and refresh itself before making a final effort”] (1: 46/1: 62; trans. modified). Ultimately, his efforts are rewarded, and the memory rises up from “great depths” to be exposed on the “surface” of his consciousness. This experience of translating ungraspable formlessness into appropriable form is described as a “difficult task,” an “important enterprise” (1: 63). The scene in which the narrator is enraptured by the hawthorn hedge does not work in quite the same way. Instead of narrating the forceful interpretation of nebulous sensation, the hawthorn passage lingers on the mysteriously buzzing, humming threshold between the perceiving subject and the inassimilable object. Here, too, the narrator turns away from the object in order to return to it with fresh force: “je me détournais d’elles [les fleurs] un moment pour les aborder ensuite avec des forces plus fraîches” (138). Instead of turning *inward*, however, in this scene, the narrator turns his attention *outward*—up the embankment, where intermittent poppies and cornflowers lead into cloud-patched fields. In the instant of this perception, it is as if intentionality and cognition were suspended, eclipsed by the amplification of the senses. The perception, intense as it is, does not lead to epistemological riches. Even when the narrator returns to the object at hand, the feeling that the hawthorns provoke remains “obscure and vague.” Although he makes a “screen” with his hands so that his gaze will not wander from the flowers, the narrator’s feeling of pleasure never quite adheres to the hawthorns themselves, which do not help him to satisfy his epistemological craving:

[J]’avais beau me faire un écran de mes mains pour n’avoir qu’elles sous les yeux, le sentiment qu’elles éveillent en moi restait obscur et vague, cherchant en vain à se dégager, à venir adhérer à leurs fleurs. Elles ne m’aidaient pas à l’éclaircir. (1: 139)

[I]n vain did I make a screen with my hands, the better to concentrate on the flowers, the feeling they aroused in me remained obscure and vague, struggling and failing to free itself, to float across and become one with them. They themselves offered me no enlightenment. (1: 195)

The hawthorns inspire the repeated expression of failure, “j’avais beau...” (“in vain”). And yet the emphasis is as much on the enigmatic “beau” as on the discouragement implicit in the phrase. “Avoir beau” is to try and not succeed—but here, it suggests a non-success that opens onto other possibilities. Hence the narrator, unable to get to the bottom of the sensation or attach it definitively to the object before him, abandons the logic of depth or verticality in favor of the horizontal, or beside. Precisely because the hawthorns remain ungraspable, impenetrable, the perceiver becomes aware of another, even more festive variant of the flower, which in turn leads him to see Gilberte,

Odette, and Charlus—each of whom will open up multiple variants of desirous possibility—on the other side of the hedge.¹⁹

As paradoxical as it may sound, one reason that the narrator is unable to assimilate this experience into strong theory is that the perception is so effortless. While involuntary memory sparks a laborious translation of matter into form, perceiving the hawthorns involves no work at all. As Elaine Scarry suggests, flowers—like clouds—are unusually easy to imagine. This is because, as she puts it, such objects partake of the imagination’s “special expertise in producing two-dimensional gauzy images,” as opposed to solid or thick phenomena (102). With their diaphanous petals, flowers share with curtains or clouds the filmy quality that makes them easily imitated in the mind. They pass effortlessly into the zone of the imagination, eliciting no special labor of appropriation or translation. Indeed, the first time they appear in the novel, the hawthorns are distinguished by a certain cloudiness: “plus haut s’ouvraient leurs corolles çà et là avec une grâce insouciant, retenant si négligemment, comme un dernier et vaporeux atour, le bouquet d’étamines... qui les embrumait tout entières” [“Higher up their corollas opened here and there with a careless grace, holding so unconcernedly, like a final, vaporous adornment, the bunch of stamens... which entirely beclouded them”] (1: 112/1: 156; trans. modified). The vaporousness of the flowers is inseparable from their negligent or careless “grace”—by which we might understand a quality of given-ness, or even gratuitousness. Although the narrator discovers the hawthorns in church, they point the way out of a redemptive or compensatory economy. He can mime them easily, but he cannot penetrate beneath their odor in order to *make* anything of it: “ma pensée. . . ne savait ce qu’elle devait en faire” [“my thought. . . did not know what to do with it”] (1: 138/1: 194). Instead, the flowers lend their qualities to other beings, spreading their vaporous attributes outward—horizontally, rather than vertically—first to Mademoiselle Vinteuil (with her creamy, freckled cheeks), and later to Gilberte and the “little band” of girls at Balbec.²⁰

It may seem as if I’m taking a Kantian route through the *Recherche* by foregrounding an instance of non-laborious flower-perception. Kant, after all, cites as examples of objects suitable for disinterested judgment “flowers, free designs, lines aimlessly intertwined in each other under the

¹⁹ By contrast, Michel Butor’s reading of the *aubépine* passage as a “failure” implicitly heterosexualizes the familiar teleological conversion-to-art plot: “ce qui lui avait été révélé par ces fleurs, c’était la trace, l’espoir de cette fête qu’il poursuivra en vain parmi les cérémonies du monde, et à laquelle il ne parviendra enfin à participer (avec quelle distance et quelle solitude) qu’à travers son livre entrepris à la suite de bien d’autres démarches du hasard complice... il réussira enfin à tenir, à fixer, à posséder ce qui jusqu’alors lui avait presque toujours été retiré aussitôt que donné” (119, 125). By ultimately producing a book, Butor claims, the narrator figuratively conquers the various women he has vainly pursued: “Ainsi c’est par le livre lui-même que nous lisons qu’il atteindra cette femme vainement poursuivie tout au long de cette vie que racontent les pages, dans les trois grandes incarnations: Gilberte, Albertine, et la Duchesse de Guermentes” (125). According to the logic of this reading, the hawthorn hedge offers a childishly non-productive modality of pleasure—a mere foreshadowing of more productive and viril satisfactions to come. *Contra* Butor, we might read the remarkable description of the ungraspable, buzzing hedge as evidence that the *Recherche* does not exclusively privilege the “strong” (and for Butor, implicitly heterosexual) plot of aesthetic conversion. Rather than dismiss the hawthorn scene as incomplete—a mere anticipation of future fulfillment—we might understand the narrator’s fascination with these ungraspable rhythms and textures as evidence that the novel valorizes various forms of desire and modes of enjoyment.

²⁰ Not that the flowers are exclusively allied with the narrator’s interest in girls. In their association with the peculiar act of hat-stomping, they also point to the narrator’s future ambiguous relation to the Baron de Charlus. The scene in which the narrator, like a “princesse de tragédie,” stomps on his own hat while saying goodbye to the hawthorn hedge prefigures the scene several volumes later in which he stomps *Charlus’s* hat in a passionate fit of rage—a scene which is apparently choreographed by Charlus for his own pleasure (1: 204/3: 766).

name of foliage” (93).²¹ The amorphous hum of interest that hovers around the nebulous, living hawthorns is not equivalent to the disinterested free-play that grounds the Kantian perception of beauty, however, as that mode of calm contemplation is unconcerned with the actual existence of the object, and exclusively attuned to form, not formlessness.²² Nor is this sub-theoretical “bourdonnement” explicable in terms of the slippery circuits of psychoanalytic libido (always on the move to compensate for an original loss, its slipperiness indexing the insufficiency of all objects). Rather, the scene in which the narrator stands rapt in front of the hawthorn hedge suggests a mode of gentle attachment to the object’s unknowable, inappropriable vitality—and to the inexhaustible murmur of a shared “intense life.”

In Proustian involuntary memory, an everyday object seems to call out to the perceiver to be rescued or redeemed. As the narrator puts it, such “inferior” objects are interesting only insofar as their materiality—or the sensation it provokes—conceals the subject’s own forgotten past.²³ The hawthorns do not lend themselves to this redemptive, subject-centered logic. They never shed their materiality and reveal the perceiver’s essence to him. Instead, we might read their recurrent buzz as the pulse of an alternative, non-appropriative mode of aesthetic interest in the novel—one not rooted in the strict opposition between form and materiality, subject and object. A murmur that hovers just beneath definitive shape, belonging neither to the beholding subject nor to the object, this “bourdonnement” suggests the *near*-indifferentiation of nuance, or its sonic version, timbre. In a reading of Dickinson’s “I heard a fly buzz—when I died,” Paul Fry interprets the poem’s “buzz” as the hum of existence, perceptible only after all signs and personal predicates have been willed away: the buzz marks a space in which clear distinctions blur and opposing poles become exchangeable. This slight vibration suggests not a complete collapse of difference, but its near disappearance, such that self and other, sound and silence, life and death, become “*almost* indistinguishable” (61, my emphasis). In Proust, the multi-sensory vibration that the narrator perceives (but cannot understand) is an unplaceable, atmospheric effect: the first hum of impersonal interest, the first reverberation of desire’s engine—if it were possible to imagine a modality of desire that belongs as much to the landscape itself as to the perceiving human subject. Barthes has a word for this vibratory sensation of aliveness: *cénesthésie*, or *coenesthesia*, the “shimmering state of the active and affected body” (*Neutral* 228).²⁴ The “bourdonnement” that the narrator perceives in the hawthorn passage is a sonic-olfactory shimmer, or “*moire*”—an atmospheric effect that encompasses both perceiver and perceived, but cannot be tethered to either.

²¹ Kant’s listing of these objects is a peculiarly vivid moment in the text. It is almost as the flowers and foliage flaunt their own delicate qualities in disregard for the philosopher’s insistence that aesthetic (dis)interest is a subjective phenomenon, indifferent to the object’s properties.

²² “One must not be in the least biased in favor of the existence of the thing, but must be entirely indifferent in this respect in order to play the judge in matters of taste” (*Critique of the Power of Judgement* 91). In a sense, the humming or buzzing hawthorn-perception suggests—oxymoronically—a gentle, miniature version of the sublime. In the sublime, the formlessness of the object provokes a vibratory movement: “a rapidly alternating repulsion from and attraction to one and the same object” (141).

²³ “[Notre passé] est caché hors de son domaine et de sa portée, en quelque objet matériel (en la sensation que nous donnerait cet objet matériel) que nous ne soupçonnons pas” [“Our past is hidden somewhere outside the realm, beyond the reach of intellect, in some material object (in the sensation which that material object would give us) of which we have no inkling”] (1: 44/1: 59-60, trans. modified).

²⁴ The *Trésor de la langue française* defines “*cénesthésie*” as a non-specifiable feeling of vitality: “Sensibilité organique, émanant de l’ensemble des sensations internes, qui suscite chez l’être humain le sentiment général de son existence, indépendamment du rôle spécifique des sens.” [“Organic sensitivity, emanating from the ensemble of internal sensations, which gives rise to the human being’s general feeling of existence, independent of the specific role of the senses.”]

In order to understand the peculiarity of this non-cognitive, synaesthetic event, we might consider more closely the sonic phenomenon of timbre, which Lyotard describes as philosophically synonymous with nuance. Timbre, like nuance, is difficult to define; one way to understand it is as the quality, character, or condition of sound, rather than what sound does—or, in other words, what remains of sound after pitch or loudness have been subtracted (Fales 58). Like affect, timbre is associated with great flexibility of perceptual and cognitive response.²⁵ What is most interesting to note about timbre is that it is often perceived pre-attentively, or pre-reflexively—especially by western listeners, who are biased toward the precisely-arranged units of pitch (Fales 59).²⁶ The most subjective, or “perceptualized” element of sound, timbre is generally imputed to its “source” in order to maintain the illusion of a “seamless perceived world,” but it is not measurably in any external object (Fales 62-3, 77). Because, unlike pitch (measurable in frequencies units, or Hz), the perception of timbre does not correspond to any determinate property of the acoustic signal, it is the most malleable parameter of sound. It is precisely this untethered, open-ended timbral malleability that Proust foregrounds in his description of the hawthorn hedge. What Proust invites us to imagine in this passage is a multi-sensory timbral vibration that is not projected onto a particular source, but rather, emerges at the threshold between perceiver and perceived. Creating new pathways between olfactory, acoustic, and visual perception, this amorphous hum enables numerous attachments, dismantling and diffusing the powerful Proustian sublimation machine in order to let its vibrations spread in other directions.

The hawthorns never spark involuntary memory in the *Recherche*. Instead, they are allied with a buzzing, scent-exuding, tactile or textural proliferation of images—a horizontal spread rather than a vertical or penetrative movement that would transform unknowingness into knowledge. The narrator’s first encounter with the hawthorns in Combray reverberates through the novel: the flowers will reappear here and there through the text, without ever revealing a finalizable essence. When they appear for the last time along the twisting paths by Balbec, the narrator is content to “hear” their call without responding. A manuscript variant develops this moment at length, foregrounding the ungraspable quality of the flowers and the peculiar doubleness of the perceptual experience:

Je m’approchai, mais mes yeux ne savaient à quel cran mettre leur appareil optique pour voir les fleurs à la fois le long de la haie et en moi-même. Appartenant à la fois à beaucoup de printemps passés, les pétales se détachaient sur une sorte de profondeur merveilleuse... Et autour de la fleur ouverte devant moi dans la haie, et que semblait animer le maladroit frémissement de ma vision incertaine et double, la fleur qui s’élevait de ma mémoire tournoyait sans pouvoir s’appliquer exactement, dans la tremblante hésitation de leurs pétales, aux aubépines vivantes et insaisissables. (3: 1445)

I went nearer, but my eyes did not know at what adjustment to set their optical apparatus in order to see the flowers at the same time along the hedge and in myself. Belonging at one and the same time to many springtimes, the petals stood out against a sort of magical deep background... And around the flower which opened up before me in the hedge and which seemed to be

²⁵ The arrangement of contrasting timbres “moves listeners to different perceptual positions relative to the acoustic world” (Fales 74).

²⁶ In *Ecology Without Nature*, Timothy Morton describes the phenomenon of ambiance, including the trope of the timbral, as a “fleeting, dissolving presence that flickers across our perception and cannot be brought front and center” (51).

animated by the clumsy quivering of my blurred and double vision, the flower that rose from my memory revolved without being able to fit itself exactly on to the elusive living blossoms in the trembling hesitancy of their petals.
(4: 739-40; trans. modified)

Here, past and present experiences overlap in a play of sensation irreducible to any definitive interpretation or representation of phenomena: the flowers quiver and tremble simultaneously in the world and in the perceiver's memory. The narrator states that he cannot identify the optical gauge or notch ("cran") that would permit him to assimilate the image before him to the image already inside him. Precisely because the outside image cannot be perfectly matched to the "quivering," and "awkward" interior image—there is no productive epiphany of involuntary memory to be had here—the flowers remain "alive" and "ungraspable." The passage itself, which Proust imagined including in the novel but ultimately left aside, doubles the gratuitous existence of the flowers, whose "call" from the side of the path does not have to be heeded.²⁷

The vaporous hawthorns cast a glow through the novel, but not by being sublimated in the traditional sense (elevated, compensated for, redeemed). With their "negligent grace," the hawthorns suggest an apparition of beauty different from the one Bersani and Dutoit identify in their reading of the buttercup passage in *Combray*. Bersani and Dutoit interpret that episode as a rare instance of disinterested (non-consuming) aesthetic pleasure in Proust: the object (which *looks* like food but cannot be eaten) is permitted to "shine in [its] own being" as a consequence of the subject's pleasure being lent to it ("Beauty's Light" 27). Something slightly different occurs with the description of the hawthorns. If the perceiver instrumentalizes his own restraint in order to transform the yolk buttercups into gold (he "accumulates" his pleasure on their surface until it is "powerful enough" to "produce" useless beauty (1: 168)) the hawthorns never yield such riches. Humming with inassimilable vitality, the formless, cloudy flowers do not owe their appeal to the subject's projections (generous or not). Because their formless profusion inspires a layering of sensory responses, the flowers cannot be simply translated into or replaced by another (more valuable) form. Instead, the hawthorns will appear numerous times in the narrative, at Combray as well as at Balbec, slightly modified each time, without ever revealing the secret of their origination. In this sense, the hawthorns have more in common with the *petite phrase* in Vinteuil's sonata than with the *petite madeleine*: the nebulous flower will reappear throughout the novel, not as a lost or repressed object might reemerge in more acceptable or valuable form, but as a melody might reemerge, slightly altered, in a different key, with new ornamentation or dynamic markings, in a set of musical variations.

In *Fragments d'un discours amoureux*, Barthes describes an impersonal, cloudy form of desire that sounds much like the sub-theoretical modality of aesthetic interest I have been elaborating here. Under a figure titled "nuages" ("clouds") Barthes gathers descriptions of a content-less, non-declarative (and yet not repressed) temper ("humeur"). This nebulous mood or disposition hovers at the edges of jealousy, where jealousy cannot be declared. Neither a sign nor a state, this cloudy humor is an "effet dérivé, tempéré, et comme inachevé" ["derived, tempered, and incomplete effect"] that emerges where the explicit expression of appropriative desire is displaced (202/169, trans. modified). While jealousy symptomatizes its objects, turning the entire world into a

²⁷ In this sense, the hawthorns partake of the ethos of the "open secret," as Anne-Lise François has recently elaborated it. François describes the open secret as an intervention that makes "no difference," simply making available a significance "that one *may* or *may not* take in" (119-120). An "unwarranted and uncompelled act of divulging," a gift that costs nothing and demands no return, the open secret is "futureless" in that it implies "a knowledge that auditors and speaker alike are meant to continue to overlook rather than exploit" (133).

decipherable collection of clues, this non-jealous, almost imperceptible drift of interest is imagined in meteorological terms, as if the subject were a landscape and moods simply passed through her from time to time: “all the tenuous shadows of swift and uncertain source which pass across the relationship change its light and its modeling; suddenly it is another landscape” (170, trans. modified).²⁸

Cloudiness in Proust, as in Barthes, is allied with love—not jealous desire, which reduces the sensory complexity of the object (and denies the loved one his or her own rich perceptual experience)—but a relation that acknowledges the object’s vitality without consuming or destroying it. If asked to identify the most Proustian emotions, most readers would probably put jealousy at the top of the list. Jealousy (along with its sibling, paranoia) functions according to a particularly strong affect theory: jealousy amplifies all stimuli correlating to its dualistic interpretive rubric and ignores alternative interpretive possibilities. It strips the world of its perceptual and interpretive complexity, reducing the beloved to an epistemological object—a set of clues to be deciphered. In jealousy, every detail is interpreted as a sign of the lover’s potential infidelity. Hence in *La Prisonnière* the narrator sustains his jealous attachment to Albertine by working to provoke her confessions (“aveux”). He longs to possess her to her very depths—to uncover the secrets concealed behind her enigmatic silences.²⁹ And yet, the passages in which the narrator first encounters the girl—before she has become “Albertine”—set an entirely different tone. In these scenes of non-cognitive perception, the narrator is attuned to the nuances that hover around the not-yet-appropriated other.

Proust describes the narrator’s first contact with the still-anonymous Albertine in elemental, impersonal terms. This girl appears at first as just one incarnation of a series of cloudy objects in the novel, beginning with the hawthorn flowers. At first indistinguishable from her entourage (*la petite bande*), the not-yet-known Albertine is desirable because she materializes as the luminous reflection of a previously desired creature, Gilberte—who in turn first appears on the other side of the vaporous hawthorn hedge in Combray. When the narrator first hears Gilberte’s name, it passes by him like a cloud (casting a “petite bande” as its reflection):

Ce nom de Gilberte passa près de moi. . . formant, passager céleste au milieu des enfants et des bonnes, un petit nuage d’une couleur précieuse, . . . jetant enfin, sur cette herbe pelée. . . une *petite bande* merveilleuse et couleur d’héliotrope impalpable comme un reflet et superposée comme un tapis sur lequel je ne pus me lasser de promener mes pas attardés, nostalgiques et profanateurs. (1: 535-36, my emphasis)

The name Gilberte passed close by me. . . forming, on its celestial passage through the midst of the children and their nursemaids, a little cloud delicately coloured. . . casting, finally, on that ragged grass. . . a marvellous *little band* of light, the colour of heliotrope, impalpable as a reflection and superimposed like a carpet on which I could not help but drag my lingering, nostalgic and desecrating feet. (1: 561-562).

Here the “little cloud” of Gilberte’s name already radiates its cloudy luminosity onto other, to-be-loved girls: the *petite bande* the narrator will meet in Balbec. When the narrator first witnesses the little

²⁸ In *La Préparation du roman*, Barthes returns to this post-anthropocentric notion of feeling. In a discussion of Japanese aesthetics, he valorizes a “paradoxical,” concentrated, non-psychological, non-romantic concept of affect, in which “le plus humain (l’humanité en ce qu’elle a de plus déchirant) rejoint le moins humain: la plante, l’animal” (101)

²⁹ “Ses silences n’étaient donc que des voiles, ses tendresses de surface ne faisaient que retenir au fond mille souvenirs qui m’eussent déchiré” (3: 621). [“Her silences were merely screens, her surface affection merely kept beneath the surface a thousand memories which would have rent my heart” (5: 144)].

band's promenade at Balbec, before he begins the work of "imbibation" that will transform Albertine into a sign of his own jealous desire, he is similarly struck by a purely phenomenal, insignificant glimmer. The *petite bande* appears vaporous at first, "a singular stain," "a harmonious wavering," "an amorphous mass" (2: 354, 388). As expansive and ungraspable as the hawthorn hedge, perceptible as a "vague, white constellation" or "indistinct and milky nebula," *la petite bande* is pure metamorphicity without fixed form (2: 388/2: 550). Taking on one shape, then another—that of birds, flowers, a luminous comet—the *bande* is as forgettable and indistinct, as depthless and changing as a cloud.

The "reflet" first cast by Gilberte's name vanishes only to reappear, some time later, in the narrator's Balbec hotel room: "l'obscurité n'était pas complète et [les rideaux] laissaient se répandre sur le tapis comme un écarlate effeuillement d'anémones parmi lesquelles je ne pouvais m'empêcher de venir un instant poser mes pieds nus" ["the darkness was not complete, and [the curtains] spilled over the carpet a sort of scarlet shower of anemone-petals, amongst which I could not resist placing my bare feet for a moment"] (2: 513/2: 728; trans. modified). Here, again, rather than seeking to decipher or "translate" the phenomenon, the perceiver simply touches it with his feet. This urge to caress, to make contact (not with a dexterous hand, but with the flat, tender surface of a bare foot) is entirely unlike the laborious, appropriative engagement with phenomena (in fact a self-reflexive labor, a "travail de la pensée sur elle-même" (2: 285)) necessary to "decipher" signs and transform materiality into spirit.

Cloudiness is a quality that hovers around an object that can be easily, effortlessly perceived, but not subjected to epistemological labor. So once, when the narrator is walking on the beach with Elstir, the *petite bande* emerges like a stain, a mirage, a marginal cluster or assemblage. "A few spots" or "a few spores," the *bande* is at once unmistakable and unidentifiable (1: 855/2: 593). The narrator's desire to be introduced shrinks and swells with "an elastic force," and at precisely the instant that the introduction is definitively missed, he imagines that his gaze meets the gaze of one of the unknown girls as two clouds might pass one another in the sky. As the *petite bande* begins walking away, the narrator feels his gaze met by an unknown and unknowing look: "Un instant ses regards croisèrent les miens, comme ces ciels voyageurs des jours d'orage qui approchent d'une nuée moins rapide, la côtoient, la touchent, la dépassent. Mais ils ne se connaissent pas et s'en vont loin l'un de l'autre" ["For a moment her eyes met mine, like those traveling skies on stormy days which approach a slower cloud, touch it, overtake it, pass it. But they do not know each other, and soon drift far apart"] (1: 856/2: 595, trans. modified). In the instant of their reciprocally unknowing, passing glance, the beholder is no different than the beheld. Here looking is made tactile, and rather than remaining untouched by his own metaphor (as he is when he conquers the sleeping Albertine with his metaphorizing gaze in *La Prisonnière*), the narrator is cloudified as well. In the preliminary time of this suspended non-acquaintance, it is as if the nebulous quality of the *bande* had transferred itself onto the narrator.

The notion that the given, phenomenological world is insufficient and must be repaired or redeemed by intellectual or aesthetic labor (assimilation, translation, deciphering) is often presented as a law in the *Recherche*. And yet occasionally in Proust the world appears perfectly sufficient. Consider the following passage from *Albertine disparue*, in which sublimation is imagined neither as a melancholic substitution, nor as a purification, but as an ever-widening composition of nuances, concentric zones, and subtle harmonies:

Andrée, ces autres femmes, tout cela par rapport à Albertine—comme Albertine avait été elle-même par rapport à Balbec—étaient de ces substituts de plaisir se remplaçant l'un l'autre en dégradation successive, qui nous permettent de nous passer de celui que nous ne pouvons plus atteindre, voyage à Balbec ou amour

d'Albertine, de ces plaisirs (comme celui d'aller voir au Louvre un Titien qui y fut jadis, console de ne pouvoir aller a Venise) qui séparés les uns des autres par des nuances indiscernables, font de notre vie comme une suite de zones concentriques, contiguës, harmoniques et dégradées, autour d'un désir premier qui a donné le ton, éliminé ce qui ne se fond pas avec lui, répondu la teinte maîtresse... (4: 133-4)

Andrée, and these other women, all of them in relation to Albertine—like Albertine herself in relation to Balbec—were to be numbered among those substitute pleasures, replacing one another in a gradual declension, which enable us to dispense with the pleasure which we can no longer attain, a trip to Balbec or the love of Albertine, pleasure which (just as going to the Louvre to look at a Titian consoles us for not being able to go to Venice where it originally was) separated from another by indistinguishable nuances, convert one's life into a series of concentric, contiguous, harmonic and graduated zones, encircling an initial desire which has set the tone, eliminated everything that does not combine with it, applied the dominant color... (5: 744-5; trans. modified)

Here, “dégradation” (which Moncrieff renders as “declension”) is not pejorative—it does not imply a debasement or loss of value. Rather, it is a painterly term suggesting the lowering of color or light, the gradation of tint, a “gradual toning down or shading off.” We might also think of “dégradation” in geological terms: the disintegration or wearing down of rocks, strata, etc, by atmosphere or water. In this sense, “dégradation” is an apt term for Proust's easy, meteorological mode of sublimation. Proust is inviting us to imagine a style of letting go/passing on that is neither a fall from some original state of grace, nor a preservation of the object (“which we can no longer attain”) in hope of a later recuperation. Instead, the object is neither quite lost nor precisely retained.

In Proust, formerly loved objects persist in cloudy form, in tints or shades that subtly set the tone for future loves. “Sublimated” in the most elemental sense, the object undergoes a metamorphosis, not unlike the shape-shifting that takes place when a body of water sublimates into a cloud. Just as the inassimilability of the hawthorn hedge's timbral murmur leads the perceiver to look away, up the embankment and across the hedge, Balbec disperses across an imaginary canvas, shading into or shedding its light on Albertine—and Albertine sheds hers on Andrée, and Venice on Titian. This horizontal spread of interest occurs not despite, but precisely *because* the object is unattainable. This is a remarkable description of sublimation because it accepts loss as its central principle, but without the drama of psychoanalytic “lack,” or castration. Sublimation is instead imagined as a “dégradation,” a sharing out or shading off of the loved object that makes the rest of the world loveable as well. The “original” object cannot be grasped, but in wearing away, disintegrating, dissolving (de-grading), it sets the tone for all subsequent desires, spreading not a tone of tragic absence, but a ripple effect of nuances.

Although the *Recherche* is in certain ways a distinction-producing machine, it also orients readers toward the extreme limit on either end of the spectrum of taste. It draws us toward a marginal aesthetics of the unqualifiable, or *quelconque*, organized around objects too ordinary or commonplace to be critically savoured—and alternatively, toward a minor economy of *nuance*, featuring hyper-distinguished, excessively qualifiable objects. Presenting a modulation of degree so subtle that it escapes discernment, extremely nuanced objects invite attunement to the very edges of form, the threshold of materiality. Opening onto the textural and the timbral, the affective and the meteorological, the impersonal perceptual mode allied with an aesthetics of nuance is neither sophisticated nor assimilable, neither “disinterested” (in the Kantian sense), nor “interested” (in the Bourdieusian sense).

Nuance is the very fabric of form. It is form in its least systematic, most close-up or material—and hence formless—manifestation. As such, it dissolves the high-low, pure-impure dualisms subtending a traditional conception of the aesthetic sphere, orienting us instead toward other, “weak” modalities of aesthetic interest. In Proust, nuance emerges at the threshold between extreme attention and its release, between labor and ease, between the closest reading imaginable and a non-appropriative perceptual mode that grants the object its own unknowable vitality. The celebrated *petite madeleine* passage is the primal scene for a dominant theoretical current in the *Recherche*: one that celebrates the perfect correspondence of ephemeral material sensation and lasting truth. The various manifestations of the nebulous hawthorn flowers, on the other hand, are faint signposts marking the path of an alternative aesthetics. This winding pathway never leads to sublime vistas, but it allows us to linger over nuanced objects and moods—haptic assemblages, timbral resonances, and cloudy *dégradations* imperceptible to the end-driven traveler.

CHAPTER FOUR

“C’est beau, tu ne trouves pas?”: Sarraute’s Inestimable Objects

C’est rassurant de se servir de ces cloisonnements pour tout remettre en place, pour séparer et enfermer dans des compartiments, des tiroirs bien étiquetés... Il suffit de les ouvrir, c’est là, connu, classé. On peut s’amuser à prendre ici et là et à faire des mélanges subtils au goût des délicats: assortir la tendresse de rancune, la vindicte de générosité... d’exquises compositions...

Sarraute, *Disent les imbéciles*

It’s comforting to use these partitions in order to put everything back in place, to separate and stow away in compartments, properly-labeled drawers. . . You only have to open them, it’s there, known, classified. One can amuse oneself by taking a bit from here and a bit from there, making subtle mixtures for those with delicate tastes: adding tenderness to rancor, vindictiveness to generosity. . . exquisite compositions. . .

Nathalie Sarraute inherits Proust’s experiment with distinction and pushes it to new extremes. Like Proust, Sarraute calls into question the division between the category of “art” and merely “ordinary” objects. While Proust foregrounds the animal or infantile side of aesthetic experience, Sarraute destabilizes the cultural ideal of aesthetic distinction in a different way: she exposes the institutional norms and practiced habits of speech, perception, and sociability that enable (and are enabled by) the performance of sophistication. Sarraute draws on Proust’s micro-phenomenological style, inviting us to concentrate on minutely graduated sensations and unfamiliar, uncategorizable mixtures of feelings.¹ By foregrounding ambiguous moods rather than oppositional classifications, and by drawing attention to nearly imperceptible distinctions and to happenings too minuscule to be qualified as events, Sarraute, like Proust, undertakes a recalibration of aesthetic interest. But while Proust is attuned to gorgeous ordinary things—stunningly unremarkable patches of light and nebulous, hyper-nuanced assemblages—Sarraute orients us toward the uglier side of taste. Sarraute tests out the shelf-life of distinction, representing aesthetic pleasure as always in the process of “turning,” spoiling, or going bad. The sticky and unsettling tone that Sarraute cultivates with her clichés, her piles of quasi-synonyms, and her minor paradoxes functions as a gauntlet thrown down to the critic, who cannot easily “digest” the text and translate it into her own terms.

In many ways, Sarraute’s fiction exemplifies Bourdieu’s sociological theory of “distinction.” According to Bourdieu, judgments of taste are always judgments of class. Such assessments function pragmatically, marking the social status of the subjects who make them while also reinforcing the legitimacy of the objects socially designated as works of art. Like Bourdieu, Sarraute dismantles mechanisms of power. Exposing the struggle for control over symbolic codes and classifications that subtends the enjoyment of art, she demonstrates that there is nothing unlearned, a-historical, or “disinterested” about aesthetic taste. As Bourdieu puts it, taste not only classifies its object (as

¹ Against those who chide Proust for his “excessive minutie,” Sarraute writes that she wishes Proust had been even *more* extreme in his close-ups, instead of drawing back to analyze and classify observations from a distance (1602). Sarraute wants to remain faithful to Proust’s outrageous minutia, and advocates sticking close to the phenomenological in order to “faire revivre [ces groupes composés de sensations, d’images, de sentiments, de souvenirs] au lecteur dans le présent” (1595). Using a cartographic metaphor, Sarraute suggests that she is still working with Proust’s map, but that rather than directing readers to overarching “grandes lignes immobiles,” her texts plunge us into a disorienting sensorial/perceptual contact [“contact... sensible”] with things (1603-04).

beautiful or ugly, distinguished or vulgar); it also “classifies the classifier.”² In texts such as the 1959 novel *Le Planétarium*, the 1962 novel, *Les fruits d’or*, the 1972 novel, *Vous les entendez*, and the 1972 radio-play, *C’est beau*, Sarraute represents mid-twentieth-century bourgeois society as organized around competition for cultural capital. Characters in Sarraute’s novels strive to maintain or elevate their positions in the hierarchy of social space by proving their capacity to appropriate cultural treasures not only materially, but symbolically as well.

Sarraute’s depiction of the aesthetic sphere is ultimately stranger and less schematized than Bourdieu’s, however. Like Bourdieu, Sarraute demonstrates that art owes its social existence to the perceptual and rhetorical habits of those who are disposed to cultivate a seemingly disinterested relation to it. But while Bourdieu’s *Distinction*, published in 1979, investigates how the cultural fantasy of “pure” aesthetic taste successfully reproduces and naturalizes class distinctions, in Sarraute’s fiction, the social players supposedly best-equipped to manipulate works of art are perpetually *embarrassed* by their attempts to derive cultural capital from acts of aesthetic evaluation. Sarraute’s novels zoom in on instances of spoiled distinction, when art objects cease to function as symbolic assets. Like Bourdieu, Sarraute demonstrates that aesthetic judgments both symptomatize and reinforce principles of class hierarchy and social exclusion. But she also amplifies the static of infelicity that cuts through all aesthetic judgments, and foregrounds the impure, subtle mixtures of feeling that bind us to those objects socially designated as works of art.

Another way to understand the stakes of Sarraute’s project is to say that she is interested in the dysphoric side of nuance—not the Barthesian glimmer or the Proustian cloud, but the *âtre*—a suffix that blurs the precision of qualifiers, drawing them into the orbit of the not-quite, the tending-toward, the quasi, or *presque*. If Proust’s novel presents a constellation of luminous patches and cloudy, multi-sensory apparitions, Sarraute privileges weak figures of a limper variety—from the “molle menotte” to the heap of stuff, like the “mou” and “grisâtre” “something” that spills out of a German sofa after the child narrator lacerates it in *Enfance*. Sarraute’s texts are also suffused with visual/olfactory images of a sweet-acrid gas—suggesting an amorphous tone or ambiance that is not emitted by any identifiable source. In *Portrait d’un inconnu*, the narrator describes a vague, ambiguous, mixed feeling that subjects seem to inhale, rather than express: “on avait, par moments, la sensation d’absorber malgré soi, d’aspirer à pleins poumons quelque chose d’épais, de sucré, qui vous rendait tout gourde et bourdonnant” (89-90) [“one had, at times, the sensation of absorbing involuntarily, of deeply inhaling, something thick and sugary that left you all buzzing and numb”].

The current “affective turn” in literary and cultural criticism enables us to appreciate Sarraute’s fascination with the sociality of emotion—a preoccupation that baffled her contemporaries.³ Sarraute teaches us to understand the conventions of aesthetic enjoyment both sociologically and phenomenologically. She approaches taste from a dual vantage point, representing it both as a force of social classification, and as a historically-contingent mixture of feelings that is never entirely classifiable. Sarraute has a word for the mixed or muddled feelings and sensations that exist at the limits of typology: *tropismes*. “Tropisme” is a term borrowed from biology, where it

² In the Introduction to the English translation of *Distinction*, Bourdieu puts it this way: “Taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier. Social subjects, classified by their classifications, distinguish themselves by the distinctions they make, between the beautiful and the ugly, the distinguished and the vulgar, in which their position in the objective classifications is expressed or betrayed” (6).

³ Among the many recent critical works on affect, I am particularly inspired by Sianne Ngai’s *Ugly Feelings*, an Adorno-inflected study of “minor” or “unprestigious” aesthetic emotions in American literature, and Eve Sedgwick’s *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*, which draws on performance studies, the writings of Henry James, and the work of psychologist Silvan Tomkins to develop a non-moralistic theory of shame. For a useful glossary of terms related to emotion studies, see Jonathan Flatley, *Affective Mapping: Melancholia and the Politics of Modernism* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2008), 11-27.

signifies the turning of an organism as a response to given stimuli, such as light or gravity. Sarraute's theory of the tropisme—which she defines as “fluctuations incessantes et rapides d'états en perpétuelle transformation”—can be read as a theory of publicly-mediated affect: feeling as it is materially registered in, refracted through, and productive of particular social contexts (OC 1705).⁴ In *L'ère du soupçon*, Sarraute describes the tropisme as an intersubjective, shifting assemblage of feelings at the limit of cognition:

Ce sont des mouvements indéfinissables, qui glissent très rapidement aux limites de notre conscience; ils sont à l'origine de nos gestes, de nos paroles, des sentiments que nous manifestons, que nous croyons éprouver et qu'il est possible de définir.
(OC 1153)

They are indefinable movements that slip very rapidly at the limits of our consciousness ; they are at the origin of our gestures, of our words, of the feelings that we manifest, that we believe we feel and that it is possible to define.

Elsewhere, Sarraute qualifies these “sentiments à l'état naissant” as unnamed, incomplete, “dramas minuscules” (OC 1761). Because these “movements” develop and disappear with extreme rapidity, the only way to allow the reader to perceive them is by slowing down and closing in on images that might provoke analogous sensations in her: “il fallait décomposer ces mouvements et les faire se déployer dans la conscience du lecteur à la manière d'un film au ralenti” (1154) [“It was necessary to decompose these movements and make them play out in the consciousness of the reader like a slow-motion film.”] Although Sarraute is often associated with the *Nouveau Roman*, her theory of “tropistic” affect distinguishes her from the anti-phenomenological structuralist ideology of her avant-garde contemporaries.⁵

As a fuzzy concept at the limit of categories, the *tropisme* is similar to Raymond Williams's “structure of feeling”: “a structured formation which, because it is at the very edge of semantic availability, has many of the characteristics of a pre-formation” (134). Williams employs the term “structure of feeling” to denote “practical consciousness” rather than “official consciousness”: a social (never simply “personal”), present-tense, flexible, uncertain, active modality of experience, not yet assimilated or converted into a fixed form or finished product. “Structures of feeling” are social

⁴ Although in critical essays and interviews, Sarraute sometimes presents the tropistic sphere of experience as universal and a-historical, her novels represent affect as culturally mediated and historically contingent. The novels explore corporeally-felt, socially contagious, context-specific experiences of shame and disgust. The text that most explicitly historicizes the tropisme is the 1959 novel, *Le Planétarium*. Here, the tropistic substance that floods and derails social interactions takes the historically-specific form of World War II references (metaphors of battle, occupation, and deportation). *Le Planétarium* problematizes any facile dichotomy between what is said and what is felt, because it figures the allegedly ineffable tropisme as the ambiguously assimilated residue of recent history.

⁵ In *Ce que je cherche à faire*, Sarraute puts it this way: “[L]a linguistique devait servir de modèle aux écrivains. Rien n'existait hors de mots. Rien ne leur préexistait. Ceux qui s'aventuraient, comme je l'ai fait moi-même, à affirmer timidement qu'il y avait dans l'esprit de chacun de nous des représentations, des perceptions immédiates et globales, des sensations... que quelque chose donc existe hors des mots, se faisaient aussitôt rabrouer” [“Linguistics was supposed to serve as a model for writers. Nothing existed outside of words. Nothing preexisted them. Those who ventured to timidly affirm—as I myself did—that in all of our minds there were representations, immediate and global perceptions, sensations [...] were instantly snubbed”](OC 1699). Lucette Finas highlights Sarraute's phenomenological engagement with language: “le mot sourd et suinte; il filtre, s'infiltré, colle, tapisse [...] Le mot... est investi de tous pouvoirs. Il *flaire, aguiche, s'allume, tend le cou, bave, absorbe, farfouille, roule, pétrit*” (71-72). In contrast to Sarraute's valorization of affect and sensation, Jameson suggests that a “neutral and combinational” style is characteristic of the nouveau roman, which radically repudiates phenomenological perception (133, 135).

in an extremely *micro* way: not simply effects of institutional or class relations, but “emergent or pre-emergent” qualitative shifts that “do not have to await definition, classification or rationalization before they exert palpable pressures and set effective limits on experience and on action” (25).⁶ As Jonathan Flatley points out, this term enables us to talk about the sociality of affect, and to investigate how the social is linked to the personal in ways “that are more ephemeral and transitory than set ideologies or institutions” (25). Structures of feeling, like *tropismes*, are nascent and fleeting, and they thwart mind-body, cognition-feeling dichotomies, as well as the facile opposition of ideology versus “lived experience.” Thinking in terms of structures of feeling, or *tropismes*, requires attending to the modes of perception and cognition that are neither unmediated, or “direct,” nor quite ideational. As Williams suggests, this is not about “feeling against thought, but thought as felt and feeling as thought: practical consciousness of a present kind in a living and interrelating continuity” (132).⁷ Like Williams, when Sarraute distinguishes between the present-tense, rapid (emerging and disappearing) temporality of the *tropisme* and the more stagnant temporality of social conventions and institutions, she is not drawing an absolute ontological division between (pre-social) feeling and (social) action or speech. Rather, she is stating her interest in the difficult task of representing how struggles for social distinction *feel* in the uncertainty of the present.⁸

This chapter is divided into three sections. The first part investigates Sarraute’s penchant for infelicitous performative statements. If the performative declaration, “this is beautiful,” works to divide and class, distinguishing both the speaker and the object, aesthetic judgments in Sarraute’s fictions never sound so authoritative. Instead, Sarraute amplifies the static surrounding speech acts of aesthetic judgment, foregrounding not the felicity of the declaration, but the embarrassingly infelicitous (or quasi-felicitous) “periperformative” noise around it. In the second section, I move from examining speech acts of aesthetic judgment to examining Sarraute’s representation of aesthetic objects themselves. In Sarraute, the objects designated as art appear strangely unwieldy, like the potato-esque “petit pan de mur jaune” that so dazzles (and nauseates) Bergotte. The paradigmatic ungraspable art object in Sarraute is the grey stone statuette in *Vous les entendez*, which is out of place everywhere. Slipping from one mode of unqualifiability to the next, the statuette appears alternately precious and unremarkable. In the third section of the chapter, I investigate Sarraute’s cultivation of an aesthetics of bad taste. Focusing on Sarraute’s fondness for overripe, sticky-sweet, or *douceâtre* images, from creepy dolls and sinister babies to mercurious-chloride-laced spoonfuls of strawberry jam, I argue that Sarraute establishes her own minor aesthetic category: a

⁶ Kevis Goodman suggests that by “feeling,” Williams means “the *unpleasurable* sensations of ‘disturbance, blockage, tension’ marking the ‘uncertainty principle of history-on-the-move and the irreducibility of ‘present being’ to recorded articulations and received ideology” (70, my emphasis). Sarraute’s *tropismes* seem to be always negative—nasty, embarrassing, discomfiting—but one could imagine structures of feeling that would be (somewhat) pleasurable. Adorno and Benjamin, for example, both identify affective/aesthetic modes of perceiving finitude and historical discontinuity (the “shudder,” the “shock”) that are neither exactly unpleasurable nor quite pleasurable.

⁷ Although the distinction is tenuous, it is important to note that what Williams has in mind is not temporal immediacy (“the present,” often imaged as directly, experientially accessible) but *presentness*, which, as Kevis Goodman points out, is *not* unmediated, although it may be felt as a cognitive dissonance, an inchoate or unspecifiable feeling (a “seething mix of unsettled elements”) (3).

⁸ The *tropisme* is closer to the structure of feeling than to Bourdieu’s “habitus,” in part because the theory of habitus short-circuits affect to focus on corporeal and cognitive schemes and dispositions. “Habitus” is Bourdieu’s term for the internalized system of acquired dispositions by which subjects *actualize* culture unawares—“ways of moving, gesturing, gazing, and orienting in lived space” (Hanks 69). “Habitus” is related to both the *tropisme* and the structure of feeling, but is ultimately less bound up with the vicissitudes of feeling in the present, and more structured, regulated, predictable, and set in the past tense. Another way to put it is to say that both Williams and Sarraute are interested in how *habitus feels* as it is tearing or being recalibrated at moments of cultural shift or rupture. Sarraute in particular is interested in how what Bourdieu calls “habitus *clivé*” feels not for the outward-positioned theorist, but for the subject activating it.

moody mixture of sweetness and disgust. While Proust works to dissolve the border between natural objects (clouds, chickens, patches of light) and art, Sarraute explores the fragile distinction between the work of art and the mass-produced commodity in the mid twentieth century. The “douceâtre” suggests a non-dramatic, non-cathartic modality of disgust—a disgust so slight (or cute) that, unlike the dysphoric formlessness of the sublime, it cannot be heroically cast off.

1. Performative Static

It is difficult to say where conventions begin and end.
Austin, *How To Do Things With Words*

One way in which Sarraute implicitly revises Bourdieu’s theory of distinction is by foregrounding infelicitous or unsuccessful acts of evaluation. Like Bourdieu, Sarraute demonstrates that the art object has no proper content or inherent value, because it owes its existence to institutional frameworks and to the ingrained habits of perception of the “initiated.” She frequently draws our attention to the performative quality of aesthetic judgments, which is to say that statements of aesthetic worth in her novels are not simply descriptions, but actions—speech acts which classify both the speaker (as distinguished enough to make such distinctions) and the object (as worthy or unworthy of such attention). Aesthetic judgments are performative because they function as demands for social recognition, and as symbolic investments which legitimize the object in question, granting it a certain kind of life.⁹

But while Bourdieu emphasizes the bourgeoisie’s mastery of symbolic forms,¹⁰ Sarraute’s fictions foreground instances of thwarted critical language—moments when an observer, reader, or critic can only point, multiply adjectives, or repeat conventional formulations. If Bourdieu

⁹ J.L. Austin distinguishes between two types of statements (an opposition that ultimately proves to be untenable, since each relies parasitically on the other): the constative (descriptive statements, or statements of fact, which can be either true or false) and the performative (forceful, event-producing, successful or unsuccessful, “happy” or “unhappy”). Taking the marriage vow as paradigmatic of the performative utterance, Austin investigates the force of certain verbs when spoken in the first person, present, indicative, active voice: “I promise,” “I apologize,” “I bet,” and so on. Such statements do what they say; in speaking them, one accomplishes an act. “In these examples it seems clear that to utter the sentence (in, of course, the appropriate circumstances) is not to *describe* my doing of what I should be said in so uttering to be doing or to state that I am doing it: it is to do it... When I say, before the registrar or alter, etc., ‘I do,’ I am not reporting on a marriage: I am indulging in it” (6). The declaration of an object’s aesthetic value—as in the statement, “this is beautiful”—might seem like a constative statement or proposition, judgeable according to a true-false criteria, rather than as felicitous or infelicitous. But because aesthetic objects in modernity are defined, precisely, by their lack of proper subject matter or attributes, a statement of aesthetic worth cannot be determined to be true or false. Instead, as Bourdieu demonstrates, aesthetic judgments (including the act of selecting particular objects for display in a museum or on one’s mantle) legitimate the object as worthy of a certain kind of suspended attention (a gaze attentive to its formal aspect). They also generate and reproduce social hierarchies, reinforcing the dividing line between those with and without the cultural authority to make such judgments. Art does not exist independently of the appreciation practices of museum-goers, collectors, critics. Unlike a judge’s act of calling the court to order, or a priest’s legitimation of marriage vows, however, it is difficult to determine whether an aesthetic judgment is “felicitous” or not, and a judgment felicitous in one context will inevitably fall flat in the next.

¹⁰ In *Distinction*, members of the dominant class master the discourse of aesthetic judgment, controlling even the rhetoric of the sociological interview. Bourdieu notes their capacity to turn lacunas into disdainful refusals and confusion into seeming absent-mindedness; the bourgeois subjects have mastered “un art d’effleurer, de glisser, de masquer, en usant abondamment de toutes les chevilles, tous les termes de remplissage et toutes les prudences syntaxiques repérés par les linguistes comme caractéristiques du langage bourgeois” (194/174). Working-class subjects, on the other hand, utter peripformatives or ambivalent performatives, such as “it’s beautiful but... it’s not my cup of tea” (41). Bourdieu notes that, among working-class interviewees, three-fourths of aesthetic judgments begin with “if” (42).

investigates the conditions and consequences of felicitous or productive judgments (what Austin might call the “total speech act in the total speech situation” (52, 148)), Sarraute is attuned to infelicity, or quasi-felicity, and her novels amplify the semiotic (and affective) static that accompanies evaluative acts. In Kant’s “Analytic of the Beautiful,” the pronouncement “this is beautiful,” is endowed with a special performative force: in speaking of beauty as if it were a property of things, the speaker “judges not merely for himself, but for everyone”: he does not simply count on the agreement of others, he “demands” it from them (98). By contrast, Sarraute’s fictions return repeatedly to scenes in which the declarative, “c’est beau” sticks in the speaker’s throat, or comes out as babble. And instead of confidently speaking for everyone, Sarraute’s aesthetic judges tend to implore others to agree with them.¹¹ This is precisely the subject of her 1972 radio play, *C’est beau*, which opens with a man prompting his wife to state that some unnamed object is beautiful:

LUI: C’est beau, tu ne trouves pas?
 ELLE, *hésitante* : Oui. . .
 LUI : Tu ne trouves pas que c’est beau ?
 ELLE, *comme à contre-cœur* : Si. . . si. . .

 HE : It’s beautiful, don’t you think ?
 SHE, *hesitating*: Yes. . .
 HE: You don’t think it’s beautiful?
 SHE: *as if against her will*: Yes. . . yes. . .

In Sarraute, characters cannot call something beautiful without adding, “don’t you think?” Here, the ellipses that punctuate the woman’s lines, along with the italicized stage directions (“hésitante,” “comme à contre-cœur”), infuse a seemingly simple verbal exchange with ambiguity. What interests Sarraute is not simply conflict or disagreement over aesthetic value, but the affective noisiness that attends all acts of aesthetic judgment. She returns again and again not to outright performative misfires,¹² but to minor or slight infelicities, when a conventional or ritualized utterance just barely fails to “come off,” or when it is impossible to determine whether the speech act has succeeded or not.

Although Sarraute shares Bourdieu’s interest in the relation between habits of perception and structures of privilege, if she had written *Distinction*, it would read more like the work of Erving Goffman. Both Goffman and Sarraute focus on the dramaturgy of face-to-face interactions and foreground “flusterings” and faux pas—instances when situations break down, rather than when they go smoothly. Like Goffman, Sarraute is attuned to minor, barely perceptible (but shared) modalities of experience: she suggests, for example, that certain words *irritate* us, inducing “une sensation de chatouillement désagréable ou de légère brûlure” as if they had lodged just beneath the

¹¹ Tempering his description of the aesthetic judgment’s forceful universality, Kant suggests (in §19) that the judgment of taste does not only “ascribe assent to everyone,” but in fact “solicits assent from everyone” (121, my emphasis). (In Meredith’s translation: “We are suitors for agreement from everyone else.”)

¹² Explicit misfires do occur, however, as in *L’Usage de la parole*, when the carefully placed word “esthétique” goes off between two interlocutors like a bomb. Wrapped up carefully in quotation marks and passed over like a delicate package, spoken in order to extend the complicity between the speakers, the word nevertheless detonates, blowing a hole in the conversation. Sarraute invites us to visualize the wreckage wrought by “esthétique,” which she describes not only as a weapon or foreign object, but as a class-orienting device or marker, a “pustule fatidique,” a “tatouage révélant l’appartenance” (960).

skin (OC 1587).¹³ And like Goffman, Sarraute is attuned to the rhythms and structure of embarrassment, a particularly contagious affect that functions as an index of a broken or threatened social bond.

Goffman is good to read with Sarraute, because both are interested in face-to-face encounters—a level of sociological analysis that demands attention to the interstice between the micro and the macro, between individual psychology and overarching institutional structures. Embarrassment, Goffman argues, might *feel* personal (and individuating), but it pertains to the “encounter as a whole” (99). Embarrassment varies widely in its symptoms and intensity, ranging from “intense” to “barely apparent flutterings” (100).¹⁴ As Goffman puts it, “flustering threatens the encounter itself by disrupting the smooth transmission and reception by which encounters are sustained” (102).¹⁵ Sarraute’s description of the *tropisme* as provoking a ripple effect of feeling likens

¹³ Ngai defines irritation as “a minor, low-intensity negative affect”—a feeling of being rubbed in the wrong way, or “put off.” Irritation conjoins “an image of distance or emotional detachment” (detachment from psychological cause, an “incongruity” or “disproportionality” stemming from the “withholding of psychological explanations”) with “an image of physical contact or friction” (UF 175). A “strangely aggressive kind of weakness,” irritation combines “hyperresponsiveness” to one’s external surroundings with an explicit unresponsiveness, a negation of or disengagement from vehement emotion or expressiveness (182, 190-91). Both *Portrait d’un inconnu* and *Tropismes* feature scenes in which one speaker verbally pokes or chafes another in speaking about aesthetic taste: “Il n’y avait pas moyen de s’échapper. Pas moyen de l’arrêter. [...] Il allait continuer, sans pitié, sans répit: ‘Dover, Dover, Dover ? Hein ? Hein ? Thackeray ? Hein ? Thackeray ? L’Angleterre ? Dickens ? Shakespeare ? Hein ? Hein ? Dover ? Shakespeare ? Dover ?’ tandis qu’elle chercherait à se dégager doucement” (22) “Il est là sûrement depuis quelque temps déjà à essayer de me provoquer, de me narguer doucement, comme il fait toujours, à sa manière insidieuse, de me taquiner, assis là-bas, en train de se prélasser: ‘Alors, les voyages, hein, toujours? Les oeuvres d’art ? Les musées ? Les Offices? Rembrandt, hein?’” (88). In *Portrait*, the narrator also describes the evasive judgments of others as unsatisfying little “flicks”: “des chiquenaudes légères” (42), and notes that a conversation provokes in him a weak stinging or itching feeling: “un malaise vague, comme une démangeaison légère que je gratte ici et là, une brûlure comme celle que laisse le contact de l’ortie” (55). The narrator of this novel also describes his interest in one of the characters as an irritation: “cela me travaillait, ce besoin qui me tourmentait comme une démangeaison, dès que je la vois, de me rapprocher d’elle, ce besoin de l’amadouer, de la séduire” (64).

¹⁴ At its most severe, embarrassment halts the encounter altogether. As Goffman puts it: “A completely flustered individual is one who cannot for the time being mobilize his muscular and intellectual resources for the task at hand, although he would like to; he cannot volunteer a response to those around him that will allow them to sustain the conversation smoothly. He and his flustered actions block the line of activity the others have been pursuing. He is present with them, but he is not ‘in play.’ The others may be forced to stop and turn their attention to the impediment; the topic of conversation is neglected, and energies are directed to the task of re-establishing the flustered individual, of studiously ignoring him, or of withdrawing from his presence” (100-101).

¹⁵ In all cases of embarrassment, Goffman suggests, “the same fundamental thing occurs: the expressive facts at hand threaten or discredit the assumptions a participant finds he has projected about his identity. Thereafter those present find they can neither do without the assumptions nor base their own responses upon them. The inhabitable reality shrinks until everyone feels ‘small’ or out of place” (107-8). Goffman contends that while embarrassment seems destructive, it actually serves to make the encounter and the players or speakers more supple, and hence it salvages the encounter, rather than ruining it. This is not necessarily the case in Sarraute. Goffman argues that embarrassment occurs when an individual makes identity-claims which he cannot fulfill, or when a projection of self (or “face”) is discredited (in which case both the discredited and the discreditor can be embarrassed, and the “interaction must be reconstructed”) (106). Embarrassment has a reparative function for Goffman: “by showing embarrassment when he can be neither of two people, the individual leaves open the possibility that in the future he may effectively be either” (111). In other words, embarrassment is how the individual keeps his social face supple, how he exercises his multiple selves. Moreover, as the individual is ground between opposing assumptions, “social structure gains elasticity” (112). If embarrassment serves the purpose Goffman suggests it does—making a given situation more supple precisely by damaging it—we might say that Sarraute is tinkering with and embarrassing the conventions of the novel in order not to ruin, but to repair it, make it supple enough to survive the waning of the bourgeoisie.

her theory to Goffman's, who writes that "embarrassment seems to be contagious, spreading, once started, in ever widening circles of discomfiture" (106).¹⁶

Sarraute's 1962 novel, *Les fruits d'or*, which dramatizes the reception of a novel titled *Les fruits d'or*, is explicitly about the perils of asserting cultural domination through the appreciation of a work of art. This novel explores the fractures and warpings, woofs and warbles that attend speech acts of aesthetic judgment. It consists entirely of squirmings and fidgetings *around* statements such as "c'est le meilleur livre depuis quinze ans," or "il y a ceux d'avant *Les Fruits d'or* et il y a ceux d'après." In this text, aesthetic judgments are performatives that only partially "come off," because they tend to index the speaker's desire to be recognized rather than her effortless sophistication. For example, the following passage turns up the affective interference around an evaluative speech act, figuring an everyday verbal exchange as a desperate (and only vaguely required) demand for legitimation:

Ecoutez. J'appelle, répondez-moi. Juste pour que je sache que vous êtes toujours là. Je crie vers vous de toutes mes forces. Les Fruits d'Or. . . vous m'entendez ? Qu'en avez-vous pensé ? C'est bien, n'est-ce pas ? Et la voix morne répond. . . 'Les Fruits d'or. . . c'est bien. . .' (OC 529)

Listen. I'm calling out—answer me. Just so that I know that you're still there. I'm calling to you with all of my strength. *The Golden Fruits*. . . do you hear me? What did you think of it? It's good, isn't it? And the gloomy voice responds. . . "*The Golden Fruits*. . . it's good. . ."

If this "call" is answered, however half-heartedly, the elliptical gaps in the passage orient our attention toward the vulnerability of such symbolic exchanges. Later, when admirers of *Les fruits d'or* attempt to prove their good taste by specifying why the book is so extraordinary, Sarraute presents their evaluation without ellipses, but as babble, a heap of contradictory adjectives:

"Macabre. Macabre et candide. Une sorte d'innocence. Clair. Sombre, Percant. Confiant. Souriant. Humain. Impitoyable. Sec. Moite. Glacé. Brûlant" (576).

Macabre. Macabre and candide. A sort of innocence. Bright. Somber. Piercing. Confident. Cheerful. Human. Relentless. Dry. Damp. Chilly. Scorching.

Here, the performative declaration of aesthetic worth gives way to sheer semiotic noise. Sarraute is demonstrating that a work of art can be made to signify anything at all, but this extreme pliability unsettles extant categories of appreciation. Judgments of aesthetic appreciation do not "stick" to the work, which resists definitive classification.¹⁷

¹⁶ Sarraute writes that the minor flutterings or irritations provoked by particular words provoke a play of action and reaction: words enter into a subject, where "elles enflent, elles explosent, elles provoquent autour d'elles des ondes et des remous qui, à leur tour, montent, affleurent et se déploient au-dehors en paroles" (OC 1598).

¹⁷ One reason that statements of aesthetic judgment produce such embarrassed static is that the aesthetic sign itself is inherently ambivalent: it simultaneously indexes an immense and heterogeneous network of references and yet appears by definition autonomous and self-contained, pointing only back toward itself. Within the bourgeois institutional sphere, art is "legitimate" to the extent that it appears both "original" *and* hyper-referential; it must simultaneously cite convention and flaunt its rupture of convention. This ironic relation to originality makes the labor of judging artwork increasingly difficult for the distinction-seeking spectator or critic.

The speech act, “c’est beau,” functions in Kant with a sort of magical efficacy. In Sarraute, however, this statement is often offered up in desperation, when there is nothing else to say, as an anxious attempt to save face when one’s reputation is on the line. In *Les fruits d’or*, a well-respected critic is called upon in public to explain why the novel is as good as he claims (he has failed to cite the book a single time in his laudatory article). Under the suspicious gaze of his peers, the critic becomes increasingly flustered, unable to hold the situation together. “Vous savez que vous m’embarrassez,” he admits, while continuing to claim that “tout est beau dans *Les Fruits d’or*. . . n’importe quoi. . .” (590) [“You know you’re putting me in an awkward position [. . .] everything is beautiful in *The golden fruits*. . . anything at all.”] As he turns the pages, however, the text appears awkward and emaciated: “gauche, mince, gracie, décharné.” He searches in vain for the “splendid” and “admirable” passages, and when he finally begins to read, the words fall flat: “les mots scintillants et légers volettent un instant et retombent autour de lui, s’éparpillent. . .” (592) [“the light, sparkling words flutter for an instant and then collapse all around him, scattering. . .”]. Finally, in a gesture of pity and respect for social etiquette, someone holds out the familiar ready-made phrase:

Des yeux vidés de toute expression tournent légèrement dans leurs orbites: le pauvre bougre attend qu’on lui donne quelque chose. . . chacun hésite, un peu confus, chacun fouille, mais elle. . . voilà, j’ai ce qu’il faut, tenez, mon brave, prenez : ‘C’est très beau’ (592).

Eyes emptied of all expression turn slightly in their sockets : the poor guy is waiting for someone to lend him a hand. . . everyone hesitates, a bit confused, everyone digs around, but she. . . here it is, I have what he needs, here you go, old boy, take it: “It’s very beautiful.”

Spoken with some degree of deference, this proffered statement almost mends the situation. But then a tone-deaf speaker echoes the phrase, amplified with excessive enthusiasm: “C’est trrrès beau” [“it’s verry beautiful”]. These words “explode,” spraying the embarrassed critic with shrapnel (“Il est criblé d’éclats”). The garishly rolled *r*—a noisy index of the speaker’s “outrance,” his misreading of social cues—marks the end of *Les fruits d’or*’s prestige for the critic, who now can only save face by casting off the novel (“peut-être me suis-je trompé. . .”). Aesthetic judgments, Sarraute demonstrates, are not simply effective or ineffective, but fluctuate in intensity and effects. Spoken inappropriately, by the wrong speaker, in the wrong context, and they are not simply “unhappy,” but positively toxic. As *Les fruits d’or*’s cachet expires, and it morphs into a “pauvre chose,” it does not merely lose its capacity to confer investor profit. It becomes a sort of social poison, ruining the distinction of anyone who attempts to lay claim to it. Hence when the novel has hit a point of particular low prestige, an untimely admirer exclaims “Moi, *Les fruits d’or*, j’aime ça,” and it is as if he has touched an electrified object: “Des *Fruits d’or* que ma main crispée ne peut lâcher passe un courant, je suis électrocuté, cloué sur place” (605).

Aesthetic judgments in Sarraute never work with the punctual crispness that Austin attributes to the illocutionary speech act. (Indeed, even in Austin’s own account, performatives rarely fulfill all of the conditions for felicity.¹⁸) Sarraute is especially interested in exploring the conditions

¹⁸ Austin lists six conditions for the “felicity” (the “smooth or ‘happy’ functioning) of a performative: 1) “there must exist an accepted conventional procedure having a certain conventional effect, that procedure to include the uttering of certain words by certain persons in certain circumstances”; 2) “the particular persons and circumstances in a given case must be appropriate for the invocation of the particular procedure invoked”; 3) “the procedure must be executed by all participants correctly”; 4) and “completely”; 5) “where, as often, the procedure is designed for use by persons having

and consequences of dissonance between statement and feeling, such as stating that something is beautiful in a half-hearted or excessively enthusiastic tone. Austin argues that feeling the “appropriate” affect is a condition of any felicitous performative, but he acknowledges that a mismatch between feeling and statement does not necessarily result in explicit misfire. Instead, the “insincere” performative, or “abuse,” does not quite “come off,” but nor is it “void” and “without effect.” As he puts it, “when I say ‘I promise’ and have no intention of keeping it, I have promised but. . . .” (16, Austin’s ellipses). Interestingly, in attempting to qualify the effect of a minor conflict between feeling and convention, Austin has recourse to Sarraute’s favorite punctuation mark, the ellipses, or “points de suspension.” Sarraute’s texts are riddled with ellipses. Trails of little black dots spread through her oeuvre like stains, introducing an ambiguous warble or slight dissonance into all verbal exchanges. Frequent references in Sarraute to involuntary corporeal movement (laughter, nail-biting, scratching) function similarly, indexing the uncontrolled and uncontrollable presence of the body in judgments of taste, and unsettling the smooth transmission of meaning without halting it entirely.

Sarraute’s idiosyncratic syntax adds to this noisy effect. While the performative works by attaching the indexical first person pronoun to certain verbs (in the present, indicative, active), Sarraute dismantles such statements, as if to test out the charge and force of deixis once it is separated from its anchoring pronoun. Sarraute also multiplies indexicals like “here” and “now” within the impersonal space of third-person narration. Such indexical markers seem to float free, not indicating any particular conjunction of space and time. Sarraute likes to squish and twist adjectives, too, allowing their connotations to seep onto neighboring words by piling them in lists of near-synonyms, or by repeating softening suffixes such as the “aud” of “pataud” and “courtaud,” and the “âtre” of “grisâtre” and “douceâtre.” A character in *Les fruits d’or* could be speaking of Sarraute’s writing process when she describes her own attempt to wear down the edges of words, molding them into soft globules: “elle va rogner leurs angles, moucheter leurs pointes, bien les emmailloter: des grosses boules un peu molles” (84). Finally, Sarraute heaps up adjectives so that our attention is drawn to non-oppositional differences—the barely discernible distinctions or gaps between near-synonyms.¹⁹

Although Austin initially establishes strict conditions for the felicity of performative language, he eventually acknowledges that the line between the “explicit performative,” the impure, “quasi-performative” (“half descriptive”), and the descriptive statement is fuzzy and may involve a number of “transitional stages” (81). He therefore invents a term for performatives whose effect does not quite coincide with the instant of their utterance: perlocutionary speech acts. The distinction between the illocutionary performative and the perlocutionary performative inheres in the mere difference of a preposition: “in” versus “by.” While the illocutionary speech act can be defined as the “performance of an act *in* saying something” (it is akin to a linguistic shifter in this

certain thoughts or feelings, or for the inauguration of certain consequential conduct on the part of any participant, then a person participating in and so invoking the procedure must in fact have those thoughts or feelings, and the participants must intend so to conduct themselves”; 6) and “must actually so conduct themselves subsequently” (14-15). Despite the precision of these qualifications, *How to Do Things With Words* is largely a list of all the possible ways a performative can fail, and the dichotomy of performatives and constatives is eventually abandoned “in favour of more general *families* of related and overlapping speech acts” (150).

¹⁹ In foregrounding Sarraute’s interest in performative noise, I am countering Ann Jefferson’s claim that Sarraute’s sentences “all tend toward [a] pattern of repetition—phonetic, semantic and syntactic—which has the effect of drawing the world and all its manifestations of difference into a vortex—or a haven—of equivalences” (34). While Jefferson sees Sarraute’s “clusters” of images as “equivalent,” I suggest that Sarraute is drawing our attention not to an engulfing sameness, but to extremely slight, minor, or unqualifiable distinctions and dissonances. (The difference between “oui” and “si... si...”, for example). Sarraute’s prose, like Stein’s, is agglutinative or “grammatically moody”; it erodes formal differences (differences in kind or quality) and replaces them with differences in intensity or degree (Ngai *UF* 252).

regard), the perlocutionary speech act more ambiguously achieves certain effects “by saying something” (99-100; 121). Hence if a paradigmatic illocutionary act is *to warn*, a perlocutionary act is *to convince*.²⁰ The illocutionary demands; the perlocutionary cajoles. As Austin points out, “‘trying to’ seems always a possible addition with a perlocutionary verb” (126). The perlocutionary speech act is less punctual than the illocutionary performative, more improvisatory and less conventional, more vulnerable to the uncontrollable participation of others. It is therefore more difficult to determine exactly when it has achieved its effects (and what these effects even are).²¹ Sarraute is fascinated by the vague and unpredictable, perlocutionary atmosphere pervading all aesthetic judgments.

Austin’s category of the *quasi*-illocutionary, or “perlocutionary” speech act is intriguing, but one suspects that he introduces this term mainly as a place to stash the impurities that he wants to disassociate from the illocutionary speech act. Eve Sedgwick explicitly valorizes the aesthetic and political potential of the perlocutionary, inventing a general term that encompasses a wide range of quasi- or not-quite performatives: the “periperformative.” Sedgwick suggests that if the statement “we (hereby) consecrate this ground” is an explicit (illocutionary) performative, then statements such as “we cannot consecrate it” or even “we get a kick out of consecrating this ground” or “we wish we had consecrated it” are *peri*-performative. Periperformatives hover between description and performance; they are *about* performatives, they “allude to” or “cluster *around*” performatives (68). The periperformative, Sedgwick suggests, effects a sort of unwinding or loosening or wearing at the compact event of the performative.²² It “has the property of sketching in a differential and multidirectional surround that may change and dramatize [the performative’s] meanings and effects” (79).²³

Sedgwick’s discussion of the periperformative helps us to understand what is at stake in Sarraute’s repetition of noisy, incomplete, or seemingly unsuccessful statements of aesthetic judgment.²⁴ Sarraute, after all, is interested less in explicit occasions of felicity or infelicity, social

²⁰ Other perlocutionary verbs include: to persuade, to deter, to tempt (although Austin suggests that this one can be illocutionary, too), to seduce, to pacify.

²¹ As Cavell puts it, Austin imagines the illocutionary speech act as a temporally precise “offer of participation in the order of law” (185). The “perlocutionary” performative, on the other hand, is not an explicit citation of convention, and hence its successes and failures may be difficult to gauge: “there is no final word, no uptake or downturn, until a line is drawn, a withdrawal is effected, perhaps in order to be revoked” (183). Cavell notes that while illocutionary performatives “must be executed by all participants both correctly and completely,” there is no analogue for perlocutionary acts, “there being no antecedent procedure in effect” (181). I would suggest that in the case of aesthetic judgments, it is not that there is no “antecedent procedure” to be cited. As Bourdieu so convincingly shows, the specific ways we engage artworks are learned, inherited, practiced, and passed on. What makes aesthetic judgments “perlocutionary” (in the sense of being open-ended, “vulnerable to criticism,” never fully conventional) is not that there is *no* antecedent, but that there are so *many* antecedents for possible “appropriate” comportment (standing ovation v. throwing seat cushions, for one), and there are such different temporal and spatial axes, practices and affective regimes appropriate for each genre or medium. The myriad objects culturally marked as “art” invoke a splintered and ever-splintering set of class-based orientations and attitudes.

²² Sedgwick writes that she hopes that no one will ever “agonize” over the question of whether a particular sentence is “periperformative” or not. “If a sentence sounds as though it’s probably periperformative, then it’s probably periperformative—and many, many sentences of all sorts are so” (75).

²³ The periperformative is less punctual than the performative, and understanding its effects requires that we think spatially, and not only temporally. Sedgwick notes, for example, that in many Victorian novels, the sexual plot climaxes not at the moment of adultery, but around “rearrangements of performative vicinity,” such as the “displacement[s] of the marital proscenium” that occur when the fact of unhappiness is disclosed to someone outside the marriage (73).

²⁴ While Derrida and Butler focus on the *temporal* parasitism inherent in the performative, Sedgwick attends to the performative’s *spatial* dimension. See Derrida’s “Signature Evènement Contexte,” and Butler’s *Gender Trouble, Bodies That Matter*, and *Excitable Speech*. If Butler largely discusses the temporal dimension of performative citationality, she also engages the materiality of the performative, focusing on corporeal gesture and describing the performative’s “sedimentation” of historicity.

triumph or humiliation, than in statements that just barely “succeed” (such as “oui c’est beau. . .”) or that ambiguously fail (such as “c’est très beau”). She draws our attention to the minute graduations and fluctuations of low-grade discomfort and irritation that subtend acts of aesthetic judgment. In theorizing the periperformative, Sedgwick is not discussing dramatic, punctual instances of performative misfire, but rather, a generalized atmosphere of subtle and ambiguous infelicity. Hence, she argues that James’s novels constitute “an exploration of the possible grounds and performative potential of periperformative refusals, fractures, warpings of the mobile proscenium of marital witness” (73). Following Sedgwick, we might say that Sarraute’s novels constitute an exploration of the fractures and warpings that attend class-affirming scenes of aesthetic judgment.

Sarraute presents aesthetic experience as irreducibly social—both dependent on and productive of social meanings and classifications. Like Sedgwick, she emphasizes the importance of witness as a condition of performative felicity. The performative, as Sedgwick points out, does its work by relying on “the tacit demarcation of the space of a third-person plural, a ‘they’ of witness—whether or not literally present.” The performative utterance, of, say, a dare, therefore “invokes the presumption, but only the presumption, of a consensus between speaker and witnesses, and to some extent between all of them and the addressee” (69). While Austin argues that a performative’s felicity is dependent on conventional speech being spoken “correctly” and “appropriately” in the correct and appropriate context, Sedgwick is interested in what would happen to the performative scene should consensus break down and the witnesses abstain from complying. She invites us to imagine the scene of a dare, warped by the witnesses’ periperformative chorus: “Don’t accept the dare on our account,” which would alter the “interlocutory (I-you-they) space of our encounter” (70). Such periperformative non-compliance is one way that a person might “disinterpellate from a performative scene” (70). The imagined witnesses’ “count me out” functions similarly to the wife’s half-hearted response, in *C’est beau*, to her husband’s demand for aesthetic agreement (“si. . .si. . .”). Such plays *around* a more binding statement demonstrate, as Sedgwick puts it, that the performative’s rhetorical force “rarifies or concentrates in unpredictable clusters, outcrops, geological amalgams” (75). In other words, the periperformative (“c’est beau, n’est-ce pas?”; “c’est très beau”) foregrounds the fragile and shifting parameters of the convention to which it alludes—the bourgeois tradition of aesthetic appreciation in this case, instantiated by the conventional declaration of beauty. Instead of explicitly disinterpellating from the scene of aesthetic appreciation (as Sedgwick’s hypothetical dare-resisters do with their courageous “count me out”), Sarraute’s characters tend to squirm around the act of legitimation they are obliged to perform. The result is sometimes a statement so ambiguous (“si. . .si. . .”) that it is impossible to determine whether it is “felicitous” or not.

The category of the “periperformative” is useful because it includes not only speech acts, but also broken or suspended speech. Sarraute expands the range of periperformative disturbance to include the atmospheric effects of minor bodily movements and tics. Sarraute’s novels rarely give descriptions of bodies, but habitual, aggravating corporeal movements—such as fidgeting, nail-biting, and sweaty-hand-holding—are frequently invoked. In the 1972 novel, *Vous les entendez*, laughter is presented as a noisy, periperformative dissonance infiltrating and disturbing two men’s appreciation of a little piece of gray stone sculpture. In this highly theatrical novel, a man sits at his coffee table with his neighbor, admiring an inherited pre-Colombian statuette, while his children’s uninterpretable laughter floats down from upstairs, periodically punctuating the men’s conversation. This laughter does not quite function as an explicit “count me out,” but it nonetheless troubles the statuette owner’s attempt to make a clear and definitive value judgment. Contagious (like embarrassment), laughter functions in this text like “points de suspension” between clauses, upsetting—ever so slightly—the order of things. The semiotic vagueness of this laughter—a corporeal/affective agitation that the novel references and describes but cannot cite—unsettles the

bourgeois ritual of aesthetic appreciation taking place between the father and the neighbor. The novel registers the shifting effect of the laughter on the interlocutors, who struggle to codify it as a non-threatening sign of the innocence and freshness of childhood. They find, however, that the laughter does not stay put in this category. Soon it sounds frivolous, slightly malicious, and strangely fake: “Gais. Jeunes. Insouciant. Un rien les fait rire. C’est juste ce petit trémolo. . . il paraît un peu forcé. . . comme fabriqué. . .” (746). The men will never succeed in definitively codifying the noise.

By juxtaposing the juvenile laughter to the men’s assessment of the statue, Sarraute foregrounds the sociological function of both expressions of pleasure—while also suggesting that an element of each mode of exchange escapes cognition. Taking pleasure in gazing at a carved piece of stone, Sarraute suggests, is a sociologically pragmatic act as well as a (partially) opaque corporeal phenomenon.²⁵ In this regard, enjoying a work of art is not unlike “getting” and laughing at a joke. Both (adolescent) laughter and (adult) aesthetic appreciation function to bind members of a particular group while alienating outsiders. Although the men imagine their ritual to be serious and sophisticated, they are incapable of defending it from the noise that floats through the walls: “cela perce à travers la porte enfermée, cela s’insinue. . .” (739).

Vous les entendez, like *C’est beau* and *Les fruits d’or*, is explicitly about the peril of making declarations of aesthetic appreciation. As in *C’est beau*, such declarations do not quite *work* as they should. This is the man’s (implicitly unspoken) response to his neighbor’s statement, “C’est bien beau, ça, vous ne trouvez pas?” :

Ne me poussez pas, c’est de la provocation, je ne le fais, vous le savez, que forcé par vous, contraint, ma voix, vous l’entendez, est atone, toute molle, mes lèvres s’entrouvent avec difficulté pour répéter après vous, puisque vous l’exigez: Oui, c’est beau. . . (OC 756)

Don’t push me, this is a provocation, I’m only doing it, as you know, because I’m forced to, coerced, my voice, you hear it, is flat, feeble, my lips open with difficulty to repeat after you, because you insist: Yes, it’s beautiful. . .

As in the radio play, points of ellipsis, little visual and auditory stains in the text, index the noisiness of the performative, drawing our attention to an embarrassed and embarrassing gap in the verbal exchange. The speech act that should function as a symbolic investment, legitimizing or distinguishing both the statuette and the speaker, comes out atonal, flabby and feeble. The speaker describes himself as an actor who continues acting after all the spectators have left the theatre,²⁶ and we might interpret the awkward infelicity of such acts of aesthetic judgment as moments in which Sarraute is indexing the inappropriateness of residual bourgeois standards of evaluation within the context of the late twentieth century. On the one hand, what’s at stake in this novel is a post-’68 generational conflict, in which the performative power of the evaluative statement is continuously interrupted and undermined by that irrepressible, youthful laughter from upstairs.²⁷ On the other

²⁵ Kevin Newmark foregrounds this side of laughter when he describes it as a trembling, grimacing, bumping, jolting, uncontrollably repeated “blank citation.” As sign, laughter refers to its own “inability to occur as anything other than a compulsively repeated reference that is never allowed to come to rest in the fullness of a final meaning” (251).

²⁶ “Il est pareil à un acteur qui continue à jouer dans une salle d’où les spectateurs se sont retirés, à un conférencier qui s’efforce de parler comme si de rien n’était devant des chaises vides” (756).

²⁷ Bourdieu notes that generational tension is highest in the dominant class, “which can ensure its own perpetuation only if it is capable of overcoming the crises that are liable to arise from the competition between the fractions to impose the dominant principle of domination and from the succession struggles within each fraction. The differences between the

hand, it may be that artwork in modernity—defined against the Aristotelian *Belles Lettres* hierarchy of genre conjoining particular representational techniques and subject matter with a given audience—*always* embarrasses the judgments intended to hold it in place.²⁸

As Kent Puckett demonstrates, social mistakes in the bourgeois novel (slips of the tongue, etiquette faux pas, and so on) function to strengthen, rather than undermine, narrative structure and character-coherence. Puckett shows that in 19th-century novels, the mistake generates narrative and characterological desire by indexing the distance between a character and his or her ideally socialized self. This distance is precisely what suggests depth, interiority, and moral authenticity. Hence embarrassing missteps in fact help to produce the *effect* of social and narrative coherence (22-24). In Sarraute, however, mistakes do not serve this character- and plot-plumping function. Sarraute's fictions are phenomenological explorations—slowed down, close-up—of the feelings of anxiety and disgust that attend breaches of sociality.

If an “enchanted” experience of culture is one that forgets the acquisition of the code, Sarraute withholds the privilege of such forgetfulness from her characters and readers alike. In reading her, we are constantly made aware of the time and affective labor implicit in seemingly effortless acts of aesthetic appreciation. “Distinction,” after all, is essentially a performance of legitimacy that convinces “like a successful bluff”; as in gambling, the more practiced one is at playing the game, the more natural it looks. Profiting maximally from the field of cultural goods requires a “sense of the right moment to invest or disinvest” (*Distinction* 92/100). In Sarraute, characters fumble their hands, bet too soon or too late, and reveal how hard they are trying instead of impressing others with the attitude of indifferent detachment that is the ultimate sign of good taste.

2. Unqualifiable Objects

Sarraute is fascinated by the instability of aesthetic signs: objects designated as distinctive, rare, or original are always vulnerable in her novels to wild highs and lows of estimation. *Le Planéterium* opens with an interior-decorating fantasy turned nightmare: a woman returns home in anticipation of the “harmonie exquise” that awaits her in her newly redecorated kitchen. She expects to find “un ensemble d’un goût parfait, sobre, élégant. . .” (343-44). But instead, she is horrified to discover that the half-finished décor suggests a “harmonie pauvre, facile, déjà vue partout.” The colors are crude, the cathedral-inspired round door looks fake and vulgar—“une vraie porte de lavabos”—and the workmen have tracked dirt onto the floors and left stains on the walls. “[I]ls n’ont pas fini, il y a du désordre partout, de la sciure de bois par terre, la boîte à outils est ouverte, des outils sont épars sur le parquet. . .” [“They haven’t finished, it’s all in disarray, sawdust on the

generations... increase with the magnitude of the changes that have occurred in the definitions of occupational positions or in the institutionalized means of access to them” (295/336). In a footnote, Bourdieu notes that his own graphs inevitably fail to capture this important element of intergenerational struggle.

²⁸ For a discussion of the historical shift from a strict Aristotelian hierarchy of genres to the much wilder regime of modern aesthetics, see Rancière’s *Politique de la littérature* and *Le partage du sensible: esthétique et politique*. Bringing Rancière’s perspective together with Bourdieu’s, we might say that in modernism, when artwork increasingly flaunts its subversion of pre-established criteria, the difficulty of responding “appropriately” becomes increasingly acute. Sarraute takes as her subject matter precisely this mismatch between the reader or spectator’s perceptual and behavioral habits, and the kind of attention that modern artwork demands (an intensified attention to nothing special). Embarrassment in Sarraute’s novels is not so much a punctual event (as it is, for example, in Balzac’s *Les Illusions perdues* when Lucien fails to observe established rules of conduct and wears the wrong outfit to the opera) but a condition—a sort of low-grade, constant buzz or hum of awkwardness that suffuses the entire texture of the novel, fluctuating in intensity.

ground, the toolbox is open, tools scattered across the floor. . .”] (344). Inverting an image of rare, effortless taste into its messy, ordinary negative, Sarraute exposes the affective and material labor required to construct the fantasy of authentic distinction.

This half-finished, work-stained kitchen allegorizes Sarraute’s relation to distinction in general. Like Bourdieu, she relentlessly exposes the scaffolding (or pragmatic foundations) subtending the ideal of impeccable taste. Nonetheless, Sarraute is not primarily concerned with ideological demystification. Her objective is not simply to strip the aura from objects socially designated as art, but to explore the multiple (and often dissonant) tones that surround such objects during moments of cultural crisis, as historically-specific practices of appreciation cease to function as they once did. Works of art in modernity, Sarraute suggests, do not exist outside of these circuits of fascination and degradation, esteem and oblivion. Her novels examine the peculiarly indeterminate status of art at mid-century: they invite us to take stock of what distinction-producing objects look (and feel) like from different angles and over time, as their symbolic value rises, plummets, rebounds, wavers. At the end of *Le Planétarium*, the oval door appears to float in limbo, suspended between opposing categories of taste. Either it is unusual, ancient, and cathedral-esque, or it is tacky and touristic: “la porte ovale flotte, incertaine, suspendue dans les limbes. . . vieille porte massive de couvent ou porte de pavillon tocard?” (516).

In *A la recherche du temps perdu*, Proust also investigates circuits of symbolic value and foregrounds the dissonance between material and symbolic appropriation. Hence the Duc and Duchesse de Guermantes hang Elstir’s paintings in their home, but disparage them as ordinary and unrefined, while the narrator is so awed by the works that he holds up a dinner party for forty-five minutes admiring them. Sarraute explores scenarios of distinction-seeking that are much less clearly demarcated: she cuts out any meta-fictional discourse that would establish the “true value” of the artwork in question, and drops us into a messy echo chamber of talk. The artwork itself alternately shines preciously or looks entirely commonplace, and vacillates between appearing semiotically blank or excessively codified. In Proust, the reader is led to side with the narrator’s appreciation of Elstir’s originality, while dismissing the Duc’s vulgar appraisal.²⁹ In Sarraute, works of art are symbolically inappropriable, impossible to appraise with confidence. They are interesting precisely because they appear strangely untranslatable, only partially capturable within any given institutional frame, and never severed from the world of ordinary appetites and everyday perceptions.

Bourdieu argues that when social agents appropriate symbolic capital through acts of aesthetic evaluation, they are (unconsciously) activating an incorporated “network of oppositions”: coarse v. refined, light v. heavy, spiritual v. material, free v. forced, and so on.³⁰ What’s odd in Sarraute is that art objects don’t stay put in any category of value. Instead, they tend to oscillate from one end of the spectrum to the other, appearing incomparable at one moment and unremarkable in the next. Sarraute exploits the ambivalence inherent to the aesthetic sign. In her novels, art objects are strangely volatile, inappropriate everywhere and always slipping out of the categories that make them culturally legible and profitable.

Vous les entendez offers the most striking example of this volatility. The entire novel is built around an unqualifiable object, an inherited Pre-Columbian statuette of uncertain value. The object’s owner attempts simultaneously to convince himself of his property’s worth, and to ensure its (and hence his own) future legitimacy by shaming his children into adopting the pose of proper respect.

²⁹ The Duc is particularly unmoved by an asparagus still-life which Swann has urged him to purchase: “[M]oi, je me suis refusé à avaler les asperges de M. Elstir. Il en demandait trois cents francs. Trois cents francs, une botte d’asperges! Un louis, voilà ce que ça vaut, même en primeurs! Moi, je les trouvais roide” (2: 791).

³⁰ Which adjective is “high” and which is “low” depends on context, so that sometimes “heavy” is petit-bourgeois, sometimes intellectual, but the dualistic structure coheres (546-7/469-70).

This drama of bourgeois collection allegorizes the vicissitudes of aesthetic distinction more generally. After all, the practice of establishing, maintaining, and passing on a private museum is how the dominant class most effectively achieves mastery of both symbolic and material forms. As Bourdieu puts it:

De toutes les techniques de conversion visant à former et à accumuler du capital symbolique, l'achat d'œuvres d'art, témoignage objectivé du 'goût personnel', est celle qui se rapproche le plus de la forme la plus irréprochable et la plus inimitable de l'accumulation, c'est-à-dire l'*incorporation* des signes distinctifs et des symboles du pouvoir sous la forme de 'distinction' naturelle, d' 'autorité' personnelle ou de 'culture.' (320)

Of all the conversion techniques designed to create and accumulate symbolic capital, the purchase of works of art, objectified evidence of 'personal taste,' is the one which is closest to the most irreproachable and inimitable form of accumulation, that is, the internalization of distinctive signs and symbols of power in the form of natural 'distinction,' personal 'authority' or 'culture.' (282)

In *Vous les entendez*, the statuette has not been purchased, but inherited. Because we are invited to imagine that the owner's father brought it back from a trip,³¹ it suggests the fantasy of a "found" treasure, and as such, potentially signifies an even greater capacity for sublimation on the part of its owner than if it had been plucked from a circuit of pre-approved aesthetic objects (as the Guermantes pick up Elstir's *Botte d'asperges*, following Swann's advice). Yet, looted from a culture about which its owner knows nothing, bearing silently a history of which its French keepers are ignorant, the statuette proves to be unwieldy as a signifier of bourgeois cultural capital.

Moreover, the pre-Columbian artefact is an important object in the history of the French avant-garde: its cachet is indissociable from its prior appropriation by ethnographic surrealism.³² For Bataille, such an object is valuable precisely by virtue of its association with his conception of sacred violence and the "low." In his ethnographic journal, *Documents*, Bataille incorporates images of pre-Columbian artefacts along with images of slaughterhouses and big toes. The appeal of the pre-Columbian artefact circa 1930 was that it appeared so foreign to bourgeois practices of aesthetic appreciation. Hence, the problem that Sarraute's collector faces (circa 1970) is not simply how to derive cultural capital from an object that was not originally made to sit on a coffee table and reflect its proprietor's good taste, but how to turn a symbol of anti-bourgeois contestation into the centerpiece of a private family collection. *Vous les entendez* is not only about the difficulty of aestheticizing a looted sculpture; it is about the perils of bourgeoisifying an object already appropriated by the avant-garde. Throughout the novel, the statuette generates more embarrassment than self-congratulatory pleasure. Suspended between the neighbor's pious esteem ("vraiment, vous

³¹ We do not know for certain how the owner's father acquired the piece, but it reminds the neighbor of his own colonialist "finds" abroad: "Vraiment, vous avez là une pièce superbe... Oui, il y a de ces coups de hasard, de ces coups de chance... Une fois, je me rappelle, j'étais en mission au Cambodge, et chez un petit brocanteur... au premier abord j'ai pensé... et puis, figurez-vous, en y regardant de plus près..." (738-39)

³² In 1928, Georges Rivièrè organized the first exhibition of pre-Columbian art ("Les arts anciens d'Amérique") at the Musée des arts décoratifs in Paris. One of Bataille's first published texts was a piece written for this exhibition—an essay entitled "L'Amérique disparue" celebrating the sacred violence of Aztec civilization. See Bataille, *OC* vol. I, 152-158; Rivièrè, "My Experience at the Musée D'Ethnologie" (Proceedings of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland, No. 1968 (1968), pp. 17-21); and Clifford, "On Ethnographic Surrealism" in *The Predicament of Culture*.

avez là une pièce superbe”) and the children’s mocking laughter, sometimes the statuette appears as a precious object to which words cannot adhere: “elle ne ressemble à rien. . .” (739). At other times, however, the piece looks embarrassingly unsophisticated: a “sale bête” made out of lumpy, dirty-grey stone: “pierre grumeleuse, d’un gris sale, grossièrement taillée” (754).

The statuette hovers between aesthetic economies and semiotic possibilities. It is appropriable materially, and (sometimes) symbolically, but never both at once. This poses a problem for its owner, as the bourgeois cultivation of personal distinction requires not simply possessing objects of “quality,” but fully mastering the discourse surrounding them. As Bourdieu puts it:

Les objets qui sont dotés du plus haut pouvoir distinctif sont ceux qui témoignent le mieux de la *qualité de l’appropriation*, donc de la qualité du propriétaire, parce que leur appropriation exige du temps ou des capacités qui, supposant un long investissement de temps. . . ne peuvent être acquises à la hâte ou par procuration. (320)

The objects endowed with the greatest distinctive power are those which most clearly attest the quality of the appropriation, and therefore the quality of their owner, because their possession requires time and capacities which, requiring a long investment of time. . . cannot be acquired in haste or by proxy. (281)

It is not enough simply to display a rarity in one’s house; the bourgeois collector or connoisseur must be able to demonstrate his symbolic appropriation of the object as well. This means mastering the “technical, archaic and esoteric” discourse that separates “informed” from “mere passive consumption” (318/279).³³ Made for unknown purposes, acquired by someone else, vaguely indexing a history of avant-garde contestation, placed on the table by a neighbor, the statuette is not an object of “quality,” but an unqualifiable object, and a dubious signifier of bourgeois luxury and charisma.

Vous les entendez is a novel that explores the sociology of taste in late modernity. It also dramatizes a crisis in the concept of “culture” in 1960’s-1970’s France. The instability of aesthetic value in *Vous les entendez* is not simply a private problem for the bourgeois collector. Rather, the collector’s anxious attempt to compel his children to share in his aesthetic pleasure can be read as an allegory of the French *Etat culturel*’s promotion of art in the name of the patrimoine. Indeed, the statuette’s owner sometimes imagines official state agents (a school director, a social worker) entering the family home in order to arbitrate the disagreement between him and his children.

Sarraute wrote *Vous les entendez* following a decade of intense state appropriation of culture in France. From 1959-1969, André Malraux presided over the first *Ministère des affaires culturelles*. The Ministry used art as a tool of diplomacy, sending France’s museum treasures out on loan so that the French cultural heritage could be admired by all.³⁴ It also sought to instrumentalize art as a medium of cultural cohesion during an era of unprecedented capitalist modernization, as an antidote to the lure of mass media and entertainment largely imported from the United States. A July, 1959 decree

³³ “Par la maîtrise d’un *langage d’accompagnement*, de préférence technique, archaïque et ésotérique, qui sépare la dégustation savante de la simple consommation désarmée et passive, enfermée dans l’instantanéité du plaisir, le *connoisseur* s’affirme digne de s’approprier symboliquement les biens rares qu’il a les moyens matériels d’acquérir” (*Distinction* 318).

³⁴ Malraux understood his role as that of cultural ambassador; as Lebovics notes, Malraux took on the responsibility of being the “trustee” of a certain Western cultural patrimony (26). In this spirit, he temporarily loaned out two of France’s most precious museum treasures: the *Mona Lisa* was sent to the U.S. in 1963, and the *Venus de Milo* went to Tokyo in 1964. On the cultural politics of these loans, see Lebovics, *Mona Lisa’s Escort: André Malraux and the Reinvention of French Culture*, 9-26.

stated that the Ministry would strive to “rendre accessibles les oeuvres capitales de l’humanité, et d’abord de la France, au plus grand nombre possible de Français, assurer la plus vaste audience à notre patrimoine culturel, et favoriser la création des oeuvres de l’art et de l’esprit qui l’enrichissent” [“render the works of humanity, and especially of France, accessible to the greatest possible number of French citizens, ensure the widest audience for our cultural patrimony, and promote the creation of both the works of art and the spirit that enrich that heritage”] (qtd in Looseley, 37). As Herman Lebovics puts it, Malraux wanted to make art into a “new magical bond”—one that could “replace the lost community and the dissipated aura of religious rites” at a moment when American words and images were rapidly circulating through France (5).³⁵ Saddling “Art” with the sacred task of preserving French national unity and international prestige during a moment of perceived “cultural drift,” the Ministry brought about a “profound transformation of the relationship of the aesthetic sphere to the French state” (Lebovics 3, 132).

Between 1961 and 1968, Malraux oversaw the creation of eight *Maisons de la culture* in major provincial towns. These institutions were imagined as “cathedrals to culture” in which, as Malraux’s directeur de cabinet, Antoine Bernard, put it, the greatest possible number would be able to experience high art in conditions favorable to “communion” with the works [“dans les conditions qui favorisent la communion avec les oeuvres”] (qtd in Looseley 36). The idea was that the uninitiated would be transformed by direct and spontaneous contact with artworks. According to the official dogma, “cultural needs” are universal, and the Ministry could democratize high-level aesthetic experience simply through geographical redistribution of consecrated works (40). As Malraux put it: “il faut que. . . n’importe quel enfant de seize ans, si pauvre soit-il, puisse avoir un véritable contact avec son patrimoine national et avec la gloire de l’esprit de l’humanité” [“any sixteen year-old child, no matter how poor, should be able to have true contact with his national patrimony and with the glory of the spirit of humanity”] (qtd in Looseley, 41). Malraux and his Ministry disseminated the fantasy of Art as ontological essence—as “great super-oeuvre” created “by Man in his very being” (Crimp 59).³⁶

³⁵ Investigating the “legitimation crisis of the culture state” in the 1960’s, Lebovics suggests that the Ministry was invented in order to “prop up the faltering culture” (6). Malraux feared both the American “dream factories” and the spread of science and technology from both the U.S. and the Soviet Union; his cultural project can be understood as a “desperate strategy to stave off the Fall” (5). As Lebovics puts it: “Passing after the war from the status of a weak major power to something rather less, and soon stripped of most of its colonies, France deployed its culture—the arts and especially the language—to give it a comparative advantage in the new international competition” (5).

³⁶ Malraux elaborated his fantasy of a democratized high culture in a series of essays published in 1947, 1951, and 1963, which celebrate a concept he termed *le musée imaginaire* (the “museum without walls”). The *musée imaginaire* is essentially the corpus of consecrated works of art, available across the globe thanks to photographic reproduction. A number of Malraux’s contemporaries took aim at this fantasy. Bourdieu’s early sociological work—from his 1965 study of working-class uses of photography, his 1966 study of museum attendance, and his 1979 demystification of the “aesthetic disposition”—seem to be motivated by annoyance toward Malraux’s ideology of Art as universal essence, the codes of which are allegedly legible without any special training or initiation. Other outspoken critics of the *musée imaginaire* include the art historian Georges Duthuit, who criticized the imperialist logic implicit in Malraux’s project in his 1956 *Le musée inimaginable*. Jean Dubuffet, inventor of the category of “art brut,” also attacks Malraux’s conception of culture in his 1968 book, *La culture asphyxiante*. Dubuffet contends that state (mono-)culture works like an “antibiotic,” flattening all strains of expression except those it officially stamps as legitimate. As Dubuffet puts it: “Le premier ministère de la culture a été institué en France il y a quelques années et il aura et a déjà le même effet, qui est celui qu’on souhaite, de substituer à la libre culture un succédané falsifié, lequel agira à la manière des antibiotiques, occupant la totalité de la place sans en laisser la moindre part où puisse propérer rien d’autre” (8). See Rosalind Krauss, “The Ministry of Fate,” in *A New History of French Literature*, ed. Denis Hollier (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1989), pp. 1000-1006, and “Postmodernism’s Museum without Walls,” in *Thinking about Exhibitions*, ed. Reesa Greenberg, Bruce W. Ferguson, and Sandy Nairne (New York: Routledge, 1996), 341-48.

Art is no laughing matter for Malraux,³⁷ and the father in *Vous les entendez* approaches his collector's piece with a similar attitude of religious gravity. His children, however, dismiss such "moribund" cultural expressions, preferring mass cultural entertainment—juke-boxes, magazine covers, foosball—and they view their father's reverence for the statuette with hilarity. When given the opportunity to engage with the object, they work to squash its status as signifier of aesthetic value. First they try to make it indistinguishable from any other consumable commodity (they decorate it with cookie box paper), and later reduce it to sheer use value (they use it as an ash-tray stand). I will return to both of these examples below.

The father's ambivalent attachment to the object occasionally gives way to unadulterated pleasure, but only when he can envision the statuette framed within the safe, neutral haven of the national museum. In the following passage, he briefly enjoys the statuette as a "pure" aesthetic object:

Libre. . . tout cordon. . . toutes amarres coupées. . . seul. . . pur. . . à travers les grandes salles vides, sur les vieux parquets luisants. . . vers cela, juste cela, dans le coin là-bas, près d'une fenêtre. . . posé là, offert. . . non, pas offert, cela ne s'offre pas, cela ne sollicite rien. C'est là sa force. Rien. De personne. Cela se suffit à soi-même. C'est là. Venu on ne sait d'où. Arraché on ne sait à quoi. Repoussant calmement tout ce qui vient se coller à cela : toutes les images, tous les mots.
(792)

Free. . . all cords. . . all moorings cut. . . alone. . . pure. . . through great empty rooms, over old shining floors. . . toward that, just that, in the corner over there, near the window. . . placed there, offered. . . no, not offered, it doesn't offer itself up, it solicits nothing. That's precisely its force. Nothing. From anyone. It's sufficient in itself. It's there. Having come from who knows where. Torn from who knows what. Calmly declining everything that comes to stick to it: all images, all words.

The perceiver jubilates in the feeling of freedom from circumstance that the experience of pure taste affords. Liberated from all function and seemingly without history or even qualifiable identity, the statuette conforms to Kant's criteria for disinterested aesthetic beauty. It is unqualifiable, without content, beyond compare.

Sarraute makes it clear that this fantasy of disinterested pleasure requires a particular institutional frame in order to work: only when the statuette's owner imagines abdicating his status as personal collector is he able to fully aestheticize his property. The art object can be enjoyed when it is decontextualized (in imagination), severed from the bourgeois home and deposited in the national museum. Only once it is authenticated and bureaucratized in the state-sanctioned space of the Louvre, subjected to the rational classification of experts, does the statuette appear to gleam "freely."

³⁷ As Michel Beaujour puts it, for Malraux, culture "must be approached only by dint of ascetic effort: a person's encounter with the masterpieces of art must be a serious and defining event" (182). Malraux's "transcendent purpose" relied upon "the unmitigated power of great art to bring about the modern and secular analogue of a religious epiphany and to introduce poignancy and transcendence into lives generally deemed to be meaningless, brutish, acquisitive, and unidimensional." The democratization of high-level aesthetic experience via the *Maisons de la culture* was intended to "raise ordinary people above their ordinary consciousness" (184).

In *A la recherche du temps perdu*, Proust disrupts privileged hierarchies of value by presenting Bergotte's museum epiphany as surprisingly ordinary, at once overwhelming and underwhelming, bound up in the everyday exigencies of digestion and consumption. Sarraute takes a step beyond Proust's vulgarization of museum space by presenting her character's "disinterested" aesthetic experience as laboriously constructed. Actively projecting the decontextualizing concept of the museum around the statuette, the father struggles to keep adjectives from sticking to the object :

Là, de la bête de pierre cela se dégage, cela s'épand. . . Un mouvement? Non. Un mouvement ça dérange. Ça fait peur. C'est là. C'était là depuis toujours. Un rayonnement? Un halo? Une aura? Les mots hideux touchent cela un instant et sont rejetés aussitôt. Et lui qui est là. . . non, pas lui, il est cet infini. . . que cela emplit. . . non, pas 'infini', pas 'emplit,' pas 'cela.' Même 'cela,' il ne faut pas. . . c'est déjà trop. Rien. Aucun mot. (793)

There, from out of the stone creature it spills, it spreads. . . a movement? No. A movement disturbs, frightens. It's there. It's always been there. A radiance? A halo? An aura? The hideous words touch it for an instant and are immediately cast off. And he who is there. . . no, not he, he is this infinite. . . which that fills. . . no, not "infinite," not "fills," not "that." Even "that" is wrong. . . it's already too much. Nothing. Not a word.

Enjoying an object "without interest" is hard work for Sarraute's characters.

It is not long before the precious statuette is subject to a market crash in value, and it appears entirely ordinary, unworthy of display, deserving of being thrown in the basement with all the other junk:

Que fait ici cette statuette en pierre rugueuse, d'un gris sale, celle d'une bête pataude, courtaude, au muflé écrasé, aux oreilles pareilles à des roues, à des pneus... elle n'est pas à sa place sur cette table basse... Ni là-bas, sur la cheminée ou elle a remplacé... il fallait bien y mettre quelque chose... la pendule de marbre au balancier cassé... Elle aurait dû rester à la cave parmi les fauteuils crevés, les vieilles malles, les vieux pots, les cuvettes et brocs d'émail ébréché... (802)

What's that statuette in rough stone doing here, it's dirty gray, a squat, clumsy beast, with a crushed muzzle, with ears like wheels, like tires. . . it doesn't belong on this coffee table. . . nor over there, on the chimney where it replaced. . . we had to put something there. . . the marble grandfather clock with its broken pendulum... it should have stayed in the basement among the broken armchairs, the old trunks, the old tubs, the basins and pitchers with chipped enamel. . .

As the precious object shifts from "là-bas" to "ici," it becomes ordinary, its crushed muzzle suggesting all sorts of broken-down, time-worn things: ripped chairs, old trunks, chipped enamel basins. And yet when Sarraute topples the statuette from its sanctified museum corner to the dank junk-filled cellar, she is in fact only reorienting our perspective on the strange volatility of the object culturally designated as "art." If the first passage presents the little statue as timeless, the second description plays with this fantasy, noting that the statue was placed on the mantle in order to replace a broken clock. If the first passage presents the statuette as perfectly, self-sufficiently functionless, the second passage also depicts it as functionless—although in a useless, busted-chair

or broken-container sort of way. And while the first description insists on the object's lack of proper or designatable identity, noting that no adjective could possibly adhere to it, the second description foregrounds a different sort of unqualifiability, describing the object as a conglomeration of borrowed and imprecise attributes, which make it comparable to anything at all.

Later in the novel, the father bequests (or imagines bequeathing) the statuette to his children. When he visits (or imagines visiting) their room, he discovers that they have turned their precious inheritance into an ashtray. Flanked on one side by a pile of letters and postcards, it bears an odd protuberance on its back:

c'est une coquille d'huitre géante. . . pleine probablement jusqu'aux bords de mégots, de cendre, et la bête lui sert maintenant de support. . . ou plus vraisemblablement. . . on aurait tort de leur prêter une intention si délibérée, un projet aussi net. . . ou simplement ils l'ont oubliée après l'avoir posée là dans un moment de distraction, pour faire de la place. (829)

It's a giant oyster shell. . . full probably to the brim with cigarette butts, with ashes, and the creature now serving as its support. . . or more likely. . . it would be wrong to attribute such a deliberate intention to them, such a clear plan. . . they simply forgot it after having set it there in a moment of distraction, in order to make room.

Precisely by forgetting about the statuette and abandoning it to its minor role as the support for a container of worthless residue, the children succeed in liberating it from the obligation of emblemizing its owner's good taste. Strangely, the statue seems most useless—severed from the economy of distinction and the circuits of inheritance—when it is reduced to sheer use value.

This is not the end of the story, though—the statuette will re-enter the circuit of symbolic exchange once again. At the end of the novel, we are once again invited to imagine the statuette wrenched from the sphere of bourgeois propriety and inculcated into an economy of ascetic aristocratism—authenticated and labeled at the Louvre. In the following passage, one of the children, now grown-up, passes by the statuette with out-of-town friends as they head toward the museum exit:

Nous pourrions gagner la sortie par là, c'est aussi court. . . Il doit y avoir par ici, je pense, dans une des petites salles sur la droite. . . une statuette précolombienne. . . elle appartenait à notre famille. . . Mais la voilà, tenez, là-bas, près de cette fenêtre. . . Ils s'approchent et se tiennent devant elle dans un pieux silence. Les amis se penchent et lisent respectueusement l'inscription. . . (834)

We can get out over there, it's just as close. . . Right around there, I think, in one of the little rooms on the right. . . there should be a Pre-Colombian statuette. . . it belonged to our family. . . But there it is, see, over there, next to that window. . . They approach and stand still before it in reverent silence. The friends lean over and respectfully read the inscription. . .

Instead of shining freely in its singularity as it does in the first museum fantasy, now the object is simply another piece in the national collection. The museum is likened to the Panthéon or the Père Lachaise cemetery—a graveyard for art, a neutral resting place for officially-sanctioned emblems of the state.

Yet because all of these displacements are presented as possibly paranoid projections, rather than diegetically “real” events, we are not sure at the end if the statuette has been appropriated definitively into a museum collection, or if the squat little beast has been sitting on the *table basse* all along. Like the round door in *Le Planétarium*, it seems to hover between categories and classifications. Ancient convent door or tacky villa? “Pièce superbe” or decorative ashtray? Like Sarraute’s characters, who struggle to resurrect the constantly eroding border between signs of distinction and signs of kitsch, we will never be able to tell.³⁸ Sarraute’s novels invite us to linger at this interstice between classifiable type, and to explore the messy process by which singular things are typified, assimilated into circuits of exchange.

Thus far, I have discussed ways in which Sarraute *represents* the spoiling of distinction. In the final section of this chapter, I want to consider Sarraute’s own cultivation of an aesthetics of bad taste. My wager is that throughout her oeuvre, Sarraute invites us to pay special attention to a particularly diminutive or docile brand of disgust. This is not the intense abjection found in Sartre or Bataille, but a just-barely tolerable modality of aversion. If Sartre’s *nausée* is a response to the sheer contingency of things, Sarraute’s saccharine tonality is the atmosphere surrounding the semi-commodified, quasi-consumable aesthetic object in late modernity.

3. Bad Taste

En matière de goût, plus que partout, toute détermination est négation; et les goûts sont sans doute avant tout des *dégoûts*, faits d’horreur ou d’intolérance viscérale (‘c’est à vomir’) pour les autres goûts, les goûts des autres.

Bourdieu, *La Distinction*

Douceâtre: “Qui tire sur le doux, qui est d’une douceur fade, insipide”
Trésor de la langue française

Bourdieu suggests that the market in cultural goods can be mapped out schematically, with sugary, easily palatable products on one side and more bitter or refined fare on the other: impressionism versus abstraction; the Blue Danube versus Ravel’s Concerto for Left Hand. While Bourdieu highlights the symbolic mastery of the dominant class, which is adept at manipulating this market, Sarraute foregrounds instances of spoiled distinction, when artworks can’t be appraised, classified and transformed into symbolic assets. Sarraute’s characters approach artworks with words like “original,” “authentic,” and “masterpiece.” But the works themselves, made up of platitudes and used-up forms, cannot sustain this type of attention. In an era in which practically anything is

³⁸ Kitsch, like “cliché” is a derogatory term that defines its object with an attitude of disgust. The O.E.D defines kitsch as “art or *objets d’art* characterized by worthless pretentiousness.” Its etymology is uncertain: some argue that it derives from the English word “sketch,” mispronounced by Germans; or, more improbably, as an inversion of the French word “chic”; others link it to the German “verkitschen” (to make cheap) or “kitschen” (to collect rubbish off the street) (Kulka 18-19). Greenberg dismisses kitsch, or the “rear-garde,” as a “mechanical” aesthetics of “vicarious experience” and “faked sensations”(10). Kitsch engages the wrong feelings in the wrong way, according to its critics: it is “sentimental” (Calinescu 237) and yet “cultivates insensibility” (Greenberg 10). Calinescu defines kitsch as “the style of bad taste” and notes that if the recognizability of “high art” rests on a “constant distinction made between those values only to be found in art and the values which can be found elsewhere,” kitsch “erases this distinction in practice” (253, 13). A “sentimental,” “passive,” popular, domesticated and implicitly feminized aesthetic, kitsch promises a predictable, “easy ‘catharsis’” (Calinescu 256, 228). Describing *Madame Bovary* as the first “anti-kitsch” novel, Jacques Rancière defines kitsch in less pejorative terms, as art that has simply been made available to all—“incorporated into anybody’s life... become part of the scenery and the furnishings of everyday life” (240).

museum-worthy—from a bicycle wheel to a brillo box or a can of (fake) “artist’s shit”—and in which an increasingly sophisticated advertising industry aestheticizes every last household product and device, art objects become blander than ever—both more and less accessible as a durable good or distinctive sign. Sarraute shows us that as art itself veers toward pastiche, becoming more and more ambiguously intimate with ordinary, consumable things, it becomes increasingly unwieldy as a source of sociological profit.

Sarraute’s novels demonstrate that those who seek distinction by flaunting their mastery of symbolic forms are haunted by the commodity-character of the artwork in modernity. The platitudinous quality of the art object in the mid-twentieth century is a problem for her characters: they cannot quite figure out how to handle its ambiguous forms or unravel its dubious ironies. *Les fruits d’or* is instructional in this regard, because it is about the problem of deriving cultural capital from a pastiche. Characters in this novel argue about whether another novel titled *Les fruits d’or* is an intentional or accidental copy: does it offer “du concentré de platitude,” or mere “platitude à l’état naturel” (584)? The novel is at first described as a supreme work of art: “un joyau,” “une petite chose parfaite,” “un pur chef-d’oeuvre” [“a jewel,” a “perfect little thing,” a “pure masterpiece”].³⁹ Later, however, the same text is dismissed as “faible et mou,” like mush for toothless people, and it is disparaged as a bad copy, like a twig or stone masquerading as real food at a child’s tea-party, and which adults, out of pity and embarrassment, must smack their lips around and exclaim “oh que c’est donc bon” [“oh isn’t that good”] (560). As this work of art falls from a position of supreme value to one of valuelessness, it also slips out of a rhetorical register of opticality into a register of orality, suggesting something that you are compelled to put in your mouth (but that you can’t quite swallow). One speaker notes that the novel should have been titled “Pléonasmes,” and states that its author intended to produce an object that would be impossible to consume: “il voulais[t] que le lecteur crève de faim devant ça” (571).

In the postscript to *Distinction*, Bourdieu contends that the entire language of aesthetics is “enfermé dans un refus principal du facile.” “Pure taste” is purely negative in its essence, because it is based on “disgust” for all that seems “vulgar,” “superficial,” “à l’eau de rose,” “tape-à-l’œil,” or “douceâtre.” For Bourdieu, excessive sweetness works as a purely aversive force: it is disgusting, and disgust is constituted, as theorists from Kant to Kristeva have argued, by “the vehement rejection or *exclusion* of its object” (Ngai *UF* 22). Sarraute, on the other hand, insists on the sticky, unclassifiable, *slight* grossness of the *douceâtre*, an adjective she frequently allies with objects or feelings that can neither be incorporated nor rejected, or that are just barely tolerable.⁴⁰ By highlighting the perilous sweetness of art objects—including her own texts—Sarraute works to annul the cultural profits that we might derive from them. Unlike postmodern pastiches, such as Warhol’s soup cans and coke bottles, which, according to Jameson, are offered up for our effortless consumption as depthless, emotionless, and ahistorical commodities, Sarraute’s pastiches present a distinctly unpalatable flavor. Sarraute might not want us to “starve to death” while we read her, but she does want to leave a bad taste in our mouths.

Look up “douceâtre” in the *Trésor de la langue française*, and you find a quotation from Sarraute.⁴¹ “Douceâtre” implies not a strong modality of disgust, but a weak one, and is associated (like cuteness) with the feminine, the diminutive, the infantile. Hence the *Trésor* cites Sainte-Beuve’s

³⁹ The description highlights the shiny self-enclosedness of the object: “cet objet refermé sur lui-même, plein, lisse et rond. Pas une fissure, pas une éraflure par où un corps étranger pût s’infiltrer. Rien ne rompt l’unité des surfaces parfaitement polies dont toutes les parcelles scintillent, éclairées par les faisceaux lumineux de la Beauté” (32).

⁴⁰ The poet André du Bouchet writes in a 1949 letter to Sarraute that he is struck by her “ad nauseum” repetition of this word (*OC* 1759).

⁴¹ The citation is from *L’ère du soupçon* (1956): “Un danger se dissimule dans ces phrases douceâtres, des impulsions meurtrières s’insinuent dans l’inquiétude affectueuse, une expression de tendresse distille tout à coup un subtil venin.”

declaration that after the age of creation and fecund invention, men turn to the “fade” and the “douceâtre,” as well as Barrès’s lament (in his *Cahiers*) that “La France va donc insensiblement vers une civilisation douceâtre, éteinte, féminine, et qui l'éloigne progressivement de la virilité guerrière” [“France is moving imperceptibly toward a *douceâtre*, exhausted, feminine civilization, which is distancing it progressively from warrior virility”]. There is something small, minor, and underwhelming about the *douceâtre*; the Goncourts describe Louis Blanc holding a “parole douceâtre” for a moment in his mouth, as if it were a “délicieux bonbon,” and the *Trésor* also cites a passage from Sartre’s *Nausée*, in which Roquentin experiences “une espèce d'écoeurement douceâtre” [“a sort of *douceâtre* disgust”] upon holding a pebble at the beach.⁴² Finally, “douceâtre” suggests a murky *quasi* quality, a being neither *this* nor *that*, as in the Goncourt description of Louis Blanc’s “parole douceâtre,” spoken in a manner that is “mi-pincée, mi-sucrée” [“half-stiff, half-sugary”]. *Douceâtre* is listed as a synonym of “doucereux” [syrupy, sugary, sweetish] which in turn is listed as a “(quasi-) antonym” of “autoritaire, brutal, caustique.” *Douceâtre* is difficult to define because it signifies a not-quite sweet quality, a quality of touching on or edging toward sweetness (“qui tire sur le doux”). It is closely linked to the concept of “fadeur”—not any particular taste, but a monotonous insipidity; a strangely nauseating *lack* of identifiable taste or character. Indeed, Sarraute links the “douceâtre” to the “fade” throughout her work. In the opening pages of Sarraute’s postwar novel, *Portrait d'un inconnu*, for example, the narrator describes “quelque chose de mou, de gluant, qui adhérait et aspirait sans qu'on sache comment et qu'il fallait soulever et arracher de sa peau comme un compresse humide à l'odeur fade, douceâtre. . .” [“something mushy, gluey, something that clung and sucked, who knows how, and that one had to lift and peel off one’s skin like a warm compress with an insipid, *douceâtre* odor. . .”] (41).

As it explicitly lacks any precise, delineated object, we might understand the *douceâtre* as a feeling-tone or mood, rather than a specifiable feeling. “Mood” is essentially an affect without “explicit occasion or object,” or a feeling which seems to be searching for its appropriate object (Ngai *UF* 179). Annette Baier notes that if emotions generally have an object—they are about *something*—moods, “if they are about anything,” are about “nearly everything” (3). As Jonathan Flatley puts it, “[O]ur mood creates the world in which we exist at any given moment. In this sense it is objectless: we don’t have a mood about any one thing in particular but, rather, about everything in general” (19). Suggesting a minor, non-cathartic form of disgust, allied with the infantile, the feminine, the cutesy, the sticky, the diminutive, and the commercial, the *douceâtre* may be the dominant mood of Sarraute’s fiction, which often has recourse to nursery rhyme rhythms and creepily sweet fairy tale tropes.⁴³

An air of indigestible sweetness leaves its trace throughout Sarraute’s first published text, *Tropismes*, which opens with a scene in which sticky clusters of shoppers stand transfixed in front of a shop-window doll whose eyes and teeth turn on and off and on and off at regular intervals. *Tropismes* is the only one of Sarraute’s texts exclusively devoted to the reproduction of *atmosphere*: the volume presents neither plot nor character. Instead, it is full of images suggesting a “douceur menaçante”: lurching ladies chirp and chitter, bodies squirm and fidget in domestic spaces, sticky little hands are available to be squeezed and adorable little cheeks are offered to be kissed or

⁴² “Il y avait quelque chose que j’ai vu et qui m’a dégoûté, mais je ne sais plus si je regardais la mer ou le galet. Le galet était plat, sec sur tout un côté, humide et boueux sur l’autre. Je le tenais par les bords, avec les doigts très écartés, pour éviter de me salir” (14). In contrast to the intense existential nausea Roquentin will later experience, here there is something minor and diminutive about this *douceâtre* feeling. Indeed, “galet” is a diminutive of the Picard word for stone, “gall.”

⁴³ Sarraute is fascinated by stories that combine childish innocence with the threat of extreme violence (being eaten by an ogre; being gassed in the oven). *Hansel and Gretel* is an intertext in *Le Planétarium*; *Le Petit Poucet* is an intertext in *Portrait d'un inconnu*.

“devoured.” The text returns again and again to images of menacing docility or childishness.⁴⁴ Objects and bodies are eerily docile, excessively obedient, “bien matés, bien dressés” (29). Sarraute returns to images of hands being grabbed, fondled, kneaded; children are held, “absorbed,” or even gobbled up “to the last crumb.”⁴⁵

Indeed, the book presents itself as at once hyper-consumable and unconsumable: it is a slim, diminutive object, just over one hundred pages, comprised of prose fragments, some only a single page long. Each *tropisme* offers a whiff of a particular atmosphere; these texts have the unsettling generic idiosyncrasy of Baudelaire’s prose poems, without Baudelaire’s first-person anchor and his corrosive irony. Sarraute’s tropismes are meditations on triviality. In a letter rejecting *Tropismes* for publication, Jean Paulhan notes the work’s “curieuse subtilité” (OC 1718). Subtlety—suggesting at once tenuity, delicacy, abstruseness, dexterity, and cunning—is an apt descriptor for this peculiar text, comprising 24 pieces that turn around states and spaces of the minute, marginal, and disempowered: childhood, old age, shopping, domesticity, gossip.

Tropismes immediately directs our attention to a scene of inexplicable collective fascination for a seemingly unexceptional display. Sarraute’s opening description of a clump of momentarily-halted passers-by overlays the image of the harmless window shopper with the more threatening image of the street crowd. And while the display mannequin is sometimes represented, in Zola’s *Au bonheur des dames*, for example, as a violently fragmented, reified, even decapitated body, here the store-front mechanical doll is not horrifying but just vaguely disquieting, its semi-animated face anticipating the various fidgeting, squirming bodies that populate *Tropismes*.

In another passage, Sarraute describes a group of women who live “la vie des femmes”: shopping, gossiping about marriages, worrying about whether a certain grey goes with a certain blue. Sarraute depicts the women as at once “voracious” and “delicate,” and cites them repeating: “c’est une femme d’intérieur qu’il lui faut . . . D’intérieur . . . D’intérieur . . .” (16) [“what he needs is a housewife. . . housewife. . . housewife. . .”]. This echoed cliché emblemizes Sarraute’s particularly *domestic* avant-garde poetics. Interested, precisely, in the language of a ladies’ tea, Sarraute stretches, pulls, and twists the platitudes of an everyday scene of shopping. Just as the women themselves “roll” the impoverished matter of their own lives into a pellet (“un petit tas, une petite boulette grise”) Sarraute kneads her material into something less than a recognizable drama. There is no catharsis here, no transgression; only these little bits, “boulettes,” “fèves,” “galets.”

In a tropisme that reflects especially on the project of the volume as a whole, an anonymous “elle” would like to thrust commonplace, personality-less clichés away from her, but they hang around her so calmly, so aimably: “ils se tenaient autour d’elle tranquillement, ils lui souriaient,

⁴⁴ A partial list of references to *douceur* would include the following: “Là, attention, doucement, doucement, cela devient dangereux” (22); “Les autres... répondaient poliment, d’un air tout naturel et doux” (34); “douce sécurité” (41); a “douce contrainte” is issued by “une masse molle et étouffante” (45); “elle était effrayante, douce et plate, toute lisse... toute douce, toute plate, se tortillant” (51-52); “quand ils la voyaient qui se tenait silencieuse sous la lampe, semblable à une fragile et douce plante sous-marine toute tapissée de ventouses mouvantes... elle se repliait doucement... songeait à sa petite chambre, au cher refuge où elle irait bientôt s’agenouiller sur sa descente de lit, dans sa chemise de toile froncée autour du cou, si enfantine, si pure” (78); a too-kissable child tastes the “acid and sugary” scent of the grown-ups who constantly try to gobble him up (25-26); “il pouvait tout doucement... passer la main le long de la colonne du buffet” (113); “ils resserraient le lien un peu plus fort, bien doucement, discrètement” (120).

⁴⁵ There is something sour about childhood in Sarraute. In *Portrait d’un inconnu*, the narrator imagines a scene in which a father (based loosely on Balzac’s *anare*, Grandet) looks in at his tiny, aggressive infant in her cradle: “il a senti, tandis qu’il se penchait sur le berceau pour mieux la voir, pénétrer en lui et lui faire mal, comme pénétre dans la chair insidieusement le rebord soyeux de certaines herbes coupantes, la ligne duvetée, agressive, de sa narine trop découpée qu’elle relevait très haut en criant” (71) [“As he leaned over the cradle to see her better, he felt the downy, aggressive line of her too-defined nostril, which she held aloft as she cried, penetrating and hurting him, like the silky edge of certain sharp herbs penetrate into flesh.”]

aimables, mais dignes, très décents, toute la semaine ils avaient travaillé” [“they hung around her calmly, they smiled at her, pleasant, but dignified, very proper, they had worked all week long”]. These dated repetitions of Balzac and Flaubert are so worn down from use that they have become ungraspable: “ils avaient été tant regardés, dépeints, décrits, tant sucés qu’ils en étaient devenus tout lisses comme des galets, tout polis, sans une entaille, sans une prise” [“they had so often been observed, depicted, described, been so sucked on, that they had become all smooth like pebbles, all polished, without a nick, without a hold”] (31). Sarraute cultivates not a subversive, but a sweet aesthetics—a sort of cookies-and-milk avant-garde, one that presents itself as “bien sage” (31).

A little too well-behaved, perhaps—too diminutive, too affirmative. The very first tropisme that Sarraute wrote (which in the 1957 *Minuit* edition appears as the ninth) presents a portrait of domestic anxiety, of sweetness and docility so excessive that it becomes menacing:

Elle était accroupie sur un coin du fauteuil, se tortillait, le cou tendu, les yeux protubérant: ‘Oui, oui, oui, oui,’ disait-elle, et elle approuvait chaque membre de phrase d’un branlement de la tête. Elle était effrayante, douce et plate, toute lisse, et seuls ses yeux étaient protubérants. Elle avait quelque chose d’angoissant, d’inquiétant et sa douceur était menaçant. (14)

She was crouched on a corner of the armchair, squirming, neck strained, eyes bulging: ‘Yes, yes, yes, yes,’ she was saying, and she approved each part of the phrase with a shake of her head. She was frightening, sweet and flat, all smooth, and only her eyes stuck out. There was something eerie and disquieting about her and her tenderness was menacing.

Throughout *Tropismes* bodies fold, twist, and squirm as if trying to take up less space. The language of *Tropismes* also twists and squirms; the text is largely made of accumulative, anaphoric syntax, “piétinant, piétinant, toujours sur place, tournant en rond, en rond” (4). Sarraute is interested here in creating a literary language that could approximate the restrained force and repetition of nailbiting, skin peeling, scratching, or turning in insomnia (“comme on se ronge les ongles, comme on arrache par morceaux sa peau quand on pèle, comme on se gratte quand on a de l’urticaire, comme on se retourne dans son lit pendant l’insomnie” (4)). Phrases backtrack and repeat, generating a nursery rhyme rhythm for Sarraute’s characteristically sweet brand of anxiety: “Il fallait leur répondre et les encourager avec douceur, et surtout, surtout ne pas leur faire sentir, ne pas leur faire sentir un seul instant qu’on se croyait différent” [“One had to respond and encourage them sweetly, and above all, above all, not let them feel, not let them feel for a single instant that one felt oneself to be different”] (5). *Tropismes* tends to pile up near-synonyms, amassing lists of only slightly differentiated words or phrases: “il manquait quelque chose par leur laisser-aller, leur négligence . . . il n’y avait rien de plus méprisable, de plus bête, de plus haïssable, de plus laid” [“they were missing something with their carelessness, their negligence . . . there was nothing more contemptible, more inane, more detestable, more ugly”] (10). Repetition of muted, gentle oxymorons exposes the pliancy of words: “satisfaction désespérée,” “quiétude étrange” (3); “douceur menaçante” (14); “voraces, pépiantes et délicates”; “une légère inquiétude pleine de joie” (15). Language envelops us as it does the child dragged on a walk by his parents in tropisme 17. Dense, gluey air sticks to the boy, adhering to his skin and eyes; “agglutiné,” he “absorbs” his parents’ words. Feeling moves through space in Sarraute’s textual world: material, viscous; it filters from one room to another, sticking to a person like a “bave poisseuse” (12). Sarraute’s agglutinative repetitions and minor paradoxes produce an effect of slight irritation or aggravation, not the strong response of fatigued astonishment Ngai allies with the

Steinian or Beckettian “stuplime.” Lexical repetition in Sarraute suggests a constrained panic, a particularly homey mode of anxiety.⁴⁶

Like her 1930’s surrealist contemporaries, Sarraute is fascinated by the figure of the doll, and her works are replete with wax statues, blinking store-front mannequins, stiff new gift dolls, and characters who resemble “grosses poupées qu’on vient de remonter” (173). Sarraute’s play with docility suggests an alternative to the surrealist obsession with the figure of the *femme-enfant*, however. Hollier notes that the surrealists idolized “woman,” but especially insofar as they could simultaneously objectify her and imagine her as deadly: “they wanted her to arouse in them a fear and trembling that would amplify and sanctify the emotions of which she was both source and object” (96). If the surrealists were drawn to monstrously violent and violated feminine figures—from Caillois’s praying mantis to Hans Bellmer’s erotic dismembered dolls⁴⁷—Sarraute invites us to explore a more diminutive and subtle modality of sweetness.

In *Portrait d’un inconnu*, a sickly-sweet atmosphere suffuses a scene in which a father and a little girl pass by dolls for sale in the park:

Ils avançaient lentement, comme entravés dans leurs mouvements par l’air tiède et un peu moite. Ils se taisaient. A l’entrée du parc, une femme vendait des jouets, des moulinets en celluloid, des ballons, de petites poupées. [...] [L]es yeux de l’enfant, ces yeux inexpressifs, déjà un peu exorbités comme les yeux d’insecte, se tournaient vers ces jouets. [...] Il lui semblait qu’une petite bête avide et apeurée, tapie en elle, l’observait sournoisement. Il sentait, sortant d’elle, comme de faibles et mous tentacules qui s’accrochaient à lui timidement, le palpaient. [...] Et il sentait, tandis qu’il l’entraînait plus loin, pressant très fort dans ses doigts la petite main [...] une sorte de jouissance douloureuse, une drôle de satisfaction au goût âcre et légèrement écoeurant. (137-8)

They went forward slowly, as if hampered in their movement by the warm and slightly moist air. They did not speak. At the park entrance, a woman was selling toys, celluloid windmills, balloons, little dolls. [...] The child’s eyes, those inexpressive eyes, which already bulged slightly like insect eyes, turned toward those toys. [...] It seemed to him that a greedy and frightened little beast, crouching inside her, was observing him slyly. Coming from it he felt something like soft and limp tentacles which clung to him timidly, palpating him. [...] And he felt, as he lead her further away, pressing the little hand very firmly with his fingers [...] a sort of painful bliss, a strange, acrid, and vaguely sickening satisfaction.

⁴⁶ The “homey” quality of the *douceâtre* likens it to kitsch. As Calinescu points out, “what gives kitsch some kind of stylistic unity in the long run is probably the compatibility of its heterogeneous elements with a certain notion of ‘homininess.’ Kitsch is very often the kind of ‘art’ that the average consumer might desire to own and display in his home. Even when displayed elsewhere, kitsch is meant to suggest some sort of ‘artistic’ intimacy, an atmosphere saturated with ‘beauty,’ that kind of beauty one would wish to see one’s daily life surrounded with” (249-50).

⁴⁷ Bellmer’s violated dolls were enthusiastically received by the French surrealists. In 1936, a French trans of his *Die Puppe/La poupée* was published in Paris. Rosalind Krauss describes Bellmer’s mutilated dolls as phallic. These dolls star in a compulsively repeated medusa scene of fantasmatic castration: “Sometimes, deprived of arms, but endowed with a kind of limitless pneumatic potential to swell and bulge with smaller protuberances, [the doll] seems the very figure of tumescence. At other times, she is composed of fragmented members of the doll’s body, often doubled pairs of legs stuck end-to-end, to produce the image of rigidity: the erectile doll.” (“Corpus Delecti” 62).

The passage is organized around moody distinctions (“un peu”; “légèrement”; “il lui semblait”; “comme de faibles et mous tentacles”; “une sorte de jouissance”; “une drôle de satisfaction”). The “vaguely sickening” atmosphere ambiguously encompasses a variety of objects and co-mingling longings: the warm, sticky air, the toys, the timid girl’s insect-like longing and feeble little “tentacles,” the toy-seller’s “innocent” and “placid” coaxing, and the miser’s “acrid” pleasure in resisting his daughter’s desire.⁴⁸

Sarraute’s fictional autobiography, *Enfance*, cultivates a strikingly douceâtre tone throughout. It does this by mixing sweet or appealing images with repugnant ones, as when the child narrator, Natasha, almost hyperbolically submits to her mother’s order to chew her food until it is “aussi liquide qu’une soupe.” Anticipating a visit from her grandparents, the child narrator is instead forced to inhale nasty gas and has her tonsils removed;⁴⁹ a kindly maid coats her own hair (under which her skull looks “luisante et jaunâtre”) with vinegar, which prevents her own nausea, but provokes it in Natasha (998); little children are violently destructive, ripping apart upholstery and stuffed animals; the gift of an excessively stiff new doll makes the narrator uneasy. In a particularly douceâtre scene, a spoonful of strawberry jam with medicine (calomel) mixed into it (it contains “unsavory whitish streaks”) appears both appealing and revolting. (Calomel, or mercurous chloride, was commonly given to children at the turn of the century to treat constipation and for teething, before the dangerous effects of its toxicity were made known.) Here, the narrator is suspiciously examining the jam, which does not seem quite right:

Un cuiller emplie de confiture de fraises s’approche de mes lèvres. . . je détourne la tête, je n’en veux plus. . . elle a un goût affreux, je ne la reconnais pas. . . que lui est-il arrivé ? dans sa bonne saveur de toujours quelque chose s’est glissé. . . quelque chose de répugnant s’y dissimule. . . elle me fait mal au cœur, Je ne l’aime pas, ce n’est pas de la vraie confiture de fraise.—Mais si, voyons, tu vois bien que c’en est’ . . . J’examine avec beaucoup d’attention la mince couche de confiture étalée sur la soucoupe. . . les fraises sont bien comme celles que je connais, elles sont seulement un peu plus pâles, moins rouges ou rose foncé, mais il y a sur elles, entre elles, comme de louches traînées blanchâtres. . .

A spoon filled with strawberry jam approaches my lips. . . I turn my head, I don’t want any more. . . it has a hideous taste, I don’t recognize it. . . what has happened to it? Something has been slipped into its usual good flavor. . . something repugnant is hiding there. . . it makes me sick, “I don’t like it, it isn’t real strawberry jam”—“Yes it is, look, you see very well that it is.” I examine with interest the thin layer of jam spread in the saucer, the strawberries are like the ones I know, they’re

⁴⁸ In mixing avidity with innocence, meanness with sweetness, and the acrid with the saccharine, Sarraute is playing on a tonal contradiction already at play in *Eugénie Grandet*—a novel about left-over social structures, which engages melancholia as a “historically located habitus” (Lucey, *Misfit of the Family* 38, xvi). If melancholia is the organizing affect of *Eugénie Grandet*, sugar is possibly the text’s most important commodity. The miser, Grandet, prizes sugar above all other commodities: “L’obligation de le ménager, prise sous l’Empire, était devenue la plus indélébile de ses habitudes,” and he enjoys dividing sugar cubes into even smaller bits in his free time (3: 1078-9, 1083). Charles, the young Parisian cousin whom Eugénie loves, on the other hand, allegedly polishes his boots with sugar (1079). In a famous scene, Grandet returns home while Eugénie and her mother are breakfasting with Charles, and the ensuing dispute over the sugar bowl exposes cultural and generic fault lines: between the inheritance plot and the love story, expenditure and hoarding, utility and sentiment, aristocratic and bourgeois means of maintaining and transmitting wealth (3: 1090-1091).

⁴⁹ “[O]n me serre, je me débats, on m’appuie sur la bouche, sur le nez un morceau de ouate, un masque, d’où quelque chose d’atroce, d’asphyxiant se dégage, m’étouffe, m’emplit les poumons, monte dans ma tête, mourir c’est ça, je meurs...” (1000).

only a little paler, less red or dark pink, but on them, or between them, there are unsavory whitish streaks. . .

The narrator will henceforth associate strawberry jam with “quelque chose de répugnant, sournisement introduit, caché sous l'apparence de ce qui est exquis” [“something repugnant, slyly introduced, hidden beneath what appears delicious”] (1013).

Sarraute's *douceâtre* suggests a cloying form of distaste unlike the hero-ifying drama of formlessness that Kant describes in his “Analytic of the Sublime.” Initially overwhelmed by formless enormity, the sublime-stricken subject is able to rise up above his own sense of triviality when he discovers the superiority of reason over imagination. Disgust is an important concept in Kant's *Critique of Judgment* because it is the absolute limit-point of aesthetic creation and critique. Disgust is the only affect that threatens aesthetic representation with collapse:

There is only one kind of ugliness which cannot be represented in accordance with nature without destroying all aesthetical satisfaction, and consequently artificial beauty, viz. that which excites *disgust*. For in this singular sensation, which rests on mere imagination, the object is represented as it were obtruding itself for our enjoyment [gleichsam, als ob er sich zum Genusse aufdränge] while we strive against it with all our might. And the artistic representation of the object is no longer distinguished from the nature of the object itself in our sensation, and thus it is impossible that it can be regarded as beautiful. (155)

Disgust is a feeling perilous to taste; it collapses the distinction between the artificial representation of the object and its nature in our perception. Disgust's forcefulness, for Kant, undermines the necessary distance between object and imagination. Like the Kantian beautiful, the disgusting is singular and non-subsumable. But unlike the beautiful, the disgusting does not stay in place so that the subject can enjoy it disinterestedly. Rather, disgusting (non)objects “insist, obtrude, thrust themselves” upon the subject; by forcing enjoyment, disgust “can be neither beautiful, nor ugly, nor sublime, give rise neither to positive nor negative, neither to interested nor disinterested pleasure” (Chaouli 61; Derrida 22). Sarraute recasts the intensities of Kantian disgust. She is interested in a disconcertingly mild modality of distaste—“un vague malaise, un agacement, comme une très légère répulsion”—which leaves the subject with nothing definitive to turn *from*: “il a envie de se détourner, de s'écarter—c'est ce vieux réflexe de défense qui joue malgré lui, celui qu'il a. . . Mais où se croit-il ? [. . .] Contre quoi veut-il se défendre ici? Contre quelle platitude?” [“he wants to turn away, to distance himself—it's that old defense mechanism that plays out despite him, the one that he has. . . But where does he think he is? [. . .] What does he want to defend against here? Against what platitude?”] (511-12).

While Kant imagines disgust as a overwhelming feeling that thrusts itself forcefully and violently upon the subject, Sarraute tones it down and mixes it up, experimenting with a weaker—just barely tolerable—modality of the affect. We might think of the *douceâtre* as the quality of an object that is indigestible or unconsumable because it has already been chewed on too long.⁵⁰ Sticky, moist, lacking flavor, the *douceâtre* has neither the existentialist pathos of Sartrean “nausea” nor the

⁵⁰ In addition to privileging phenomenological feeling and sensation over neutral systematicity, Sarraute's cultivation of an aesthetics of sinister or vaguely disgusting cuteness sets her apart from other *nouveau roman*-associated writers, like Robbe-Grillet. As Sianne Ngai puts it, if the avant-garde is “conventionally imagined as sharp and pointy, as hard- or cutting-edge, cute objects have no edge to speak of, usually being soft, round, and deeply associated with the infantile and the feminine” (“Cuteness” 814).

transgressive energies of Bataille’s “informe.”⁵¹ It is too weak for that. If, according to Kant, the “disgusting” ruins aesthetic pleasure, collapsing the distance necessary for the circulation of mimesis by “insisting on our enjoyment,” Sarraute’s “douceâtre” does not quite insist, but rather, like Barthes’s “obtuse meaning,” sticks around like a guest you can’t get rid of (or a child whose hand you must keep holding).

If the feeling of sublimity enables the aesthetic subject to rise above the triviality of his own commonplace existence, the *douceâtre* might be described as a feeling of truly untranscendable mundanity. Just as deixis is the category of speech associated with Proustian aesthetic disorientation (“ça!”), and rarified description corresponds to Proustian nuance, *cliché* is the form of language most closely allied with the Sarrautian *douceâtre*. Throughout her oeuvre, Sarraute is fascinated by the phenomenology of cliché. Cliché—originally a type-setter’s term dating to the early 19th-century—suggests the particularly modern notion of words worn down by overuse. Given Sarraute’s interest in extra-linguistic, affective rhythms, it is not surprising that she is also preoccupied by a type of language that halts thought (“invites you not to think”) or “prevents the genesis of an image” but provokes *feeling* (Ricks, 361; Deleuze, *Francis Bacon*, translator’s preface). Cliché has no inherent content; all that separates cliché from idiom is the feeling of annoyance cliché provokes in those who identify it as such. Christopher Ricks suggests that the mood of cliché is best described as “unseeing blandness” (361). Sarraute associates cliché with gentle annoyance; a smile; a weak, moist bond; docile participation in a childish game of *la ronde*; an object held so long in one’s mouth that it becomes “tout lisse.”

In “Le sens obtus,” (1970), Barthes presents a theory of platitudinous language. He focuses on the figure of the blunted deictic, which he metaphorizes in terms of a stubby and stubbable big toe or a badly-glued-on *barbiche*, rather than as a pointer finger.⁵² The “obtuse” is barely a sign—more of a weak feeling or a mood allied with a heterogeneous assemblage of trivial and tacky objects. If the photographic index is allied for Barthes with an ecstatic laceration—the prick of the “c’est ça!”—the “obtuse” index provokes instead a minor, non-climactic disgust. The obtuse is another word for cliché, and is associated with the residual aftertaste of meaning—what is left over after all the other levels of signification have been accounted for. A “depleted sign,” or signifier without signified, the obtuse, like the *douceâtre*, does not obtrude on our enjoyment, but hangs on stubbornly whether we like it or not: “inquiétant comme un invité qui s’obstine à rester sans rien dire là où on n’a pas besoin de lui” (III 492). Barthes imagines the obtuse sign as blunted or rounded in form, “émoussé, de forme arrondie”—an index that doesn’t point at anything in particular. It suggests a level of meaning that always arrives “en trop,” a supplement that the intellect cannot absorb, not because it is too strong, but because it is so weak (488). The obtuse sign indexes its own glued-on quality; examples include a variety of “pitiful disguises,” such as thick makeup, a wig or poorly-attached goatee, thick nails, and a cheap ring.⁵³

⁵¹ Bois and Krauss theorize the Bataillan *informe* as “energies within a force field” with no fixed terms, or as a “purely formal alteration in the syntax of the world” (qtd in Chaouli 57). Bataille’s own association of the “informe” with a “crachat” or a crushed spider is decidedly more sticky and disgusting than this purely formal description would suggest, however. In either case, although the diminutiveness of the spider/spit figures relate them to Sarraute’s *douceâtre* dolls, babies, and spoonfuls of jam, the sticky-sweet *douceâtre* is not as repugnant nor as “strong” as the *informe*, which “resembles nothing” and actively de-classes or debases: “terme servant à déclasser” (217). The *douceâtre* is also more mixed, sweeter and cuter than existentialist *nausée*—“une ecstase horrible” felt in the face of sheer contingency.

⁵² The understated, residual quality of the “obtuse” anticipates Barthes’s later theory of the “neutre” (which includes among its many figures: the “ingrat,” the “fuyant,” the “feutré,” the “flasque,” the “indifférent,” and the “vil”).

⁵³ Barthes implicitly associates the third meaning with fascism; he lists as examples the “mollesse” of hands and mouth he sees in an image of “ordinary fascism,” as well as Goering’s fingernails (“gros ongles”) and “bague de pacotille” (500). Although Sarraute generally allies the “*douceâtre*” with art-as-commodity, it sometimes suggests a historical stain—the odor of war, propaganda, and gas chambers. As Barthes suggests in his introduction to Gérard Miller’s study of Pétain’s

Like the Barthesian “obtuse,” the *douceâtre* is closely allied with the consumerist aesthetics of kitsch. “Douceâtre” suggests the quality of an object that hovers somewhere between the extreme non-objectifiability of disgust and what Sianne Ngai has termed the “exaggerated passivity” or hyperobjectification inherent in cuteness.⁵⁴ The cute, in Sarraute, like the *douceâtre*, is described as something that both belongs and does not belong in your mouth. In Sarraute’s 1976 novel, *Disent les imbéciles*, the word “mignonne” conjures up the idea of delicious candy, but it is in fact indigestible:

“Mignonne”. . . mais qu’est-ce que c’est ? ce n’est pas un bonbon, pas une pâte fruitée, je ne peux pas le mâcher, je le retire de ma bouche tout mouillé et luisant. . . C’est une fève, une minuscule poupée de porcelaine. . . (848)

“Cute”. . . what is it? It’s not a candy, not a fruit pastry, I can’t chew it up, I take it out of my mouth all wet and glistening. . . It’s a lucky charm, a tiny porcelain doll. . .

What sort of avant-garde aesthetics does itself out to the reader like an (indigestible) sweet morsel or a (slightly toxic) bite of jam? Sarraute makes us aware that reading is an act of consumption: in reading her, we find ourselves constantly compelled to accept that luscious and sickening spoonful. If, as the poet André Du Bouchet writes in a 1949 letter, Sarraute’s prose has the effect of making the reader docile, it also makes us hyper-aware of our own submission (*OC* 1759).

Bourdieu shows us that aesthetic taste is inseparable from taste for food or clothes or interior design. Sarraute goes one step further, demonstrating that the cute, doll-like passivity and malleability of the commodity taints the things that are supposed to transcend such ordinary circuits of exchange. In *Enfance*, for example, the narrator’s mother is first described as an ideal aesthetic object. The mother shines as unqualifiable and incomparable—“au-delà—loin de toute comparaison possible.” But when she is brought into proximity with a hairdresser’s store-front mannequin, she ceases to function as a privileged signifier, and becomes a sign circulating among signs. Judged to be less beautiful than the display doll, “maman” becomes “marâtre” (step-mother).⁵⁵ This

rhetoric, there was something sickly-sweet about the extremely *ordinary* figure of the French collaborator-in-chief, the Maréchal Pétain: “Nous étouffions sous la jouissance d’un vieillard” (10). Miller discusses Pétain’s cultivation of a hyper-platitudinous rhetoric: “Pétain s’efforce de comprimer les métonymies, de tuer la métaphore. Il aspire à la platitude” (80). In his many “Appels et messages” radio broadcasts, Pétain spoke in slogans, little sing-song catch-phrases: “Il avoue volontiers qu’il parle le plus souvent pour être appris par coeur, et reconnaît en riant son ‘penchant immodéré pour le slogan.’ Ses discours sont constitués de petites phrases calculées pour s’inscrire dans les mémoires, servir de devise ou d’exergue” (80). For example: “Tous les Français fiers de la France, la France fière de chaque Français”; “Nous y consacrerons nos forces. Consacrez-y les vôtres”; “Essayez, Tenez-moi au courant de vos efforts. A tous je souhaite pour cette année : bon travail, bon courage, bons résultats” (80-82).

⁵⁴ Ngai notes that cuteness suggests exaggerated passivity, heightened reification or thingness, and hence qualifies something as hyper-objectivated, the “object par excellence” (834). The “bloblike,” passive, diminutive, malleable, formally inarticulated cute object invites “fondling”—or even aggressive squeezing, squishing or rough handling, as well as disarticulated cooings or murmurs (815-16, 827). Harris writes that the cute aesthetic involves a fantasy of “tractability, cuddliness, and quiescence” (16). The cute object is “incapable of reciprocating,” and therefore the “cute worldview” suggests a “universe of massive human chauvinism” (12). Cuteness, Harris contends, “is the most scrutable and externalized of aesthetics in that it creates a world of stationary objects and tempting exteriors that deliver themselves up to us, putting themselves at our disposal” (8).

⁵⁵ “[Maman] ne paraissait guère se préoccuper de son aspect. Elle était comme au-dehors. . . Hors de tout cela. [...] [A]u-delà. Loin de toute comparaison possible. Aucune critique, aucune louange ne semblait pouvoir se poser sur elle. C’est ainsi qu’elle m’apparaissait. [...] [J]e ne m’étais jamais demandé si maman était belle. Et je ne sais pas ce qui m’a poussée ce jour-là à m’emparer de ce ‘Elle est belle’ qui adhérerait si parfaitement à cette poupée de coiffeur, qui semblait être fait pour elle, et à le transporter, à essayer de le faire tenir aussi sur la tête de maman” (1041).

transformation of the ideal mother into a not-quite mother echoes the degradation of other ideal objects in Sarraute, such as when the indescribable statuette in *Vous les entendez* becomes a “sale bête,” or the cathedral-inspired door imagined to signify “harmonie exquise” in *Le Planétarium* suddenly resembles “une vraie porte de lavabos.”⁵⁶

Sarraute tropes her own *douceâtre* aesthetics in a passage from *Vous les entendez*, in which the man of the house finds that his children have adorned his statuette with a sweet little ruff, made from the type of embossed paper found in cookie boxes. Here, the statue’s owner is describing his children’s perverse action:

Qu’est-ce qu’ils ont fait? –Ils ont, comme les vauriens qu’ils sont, comme des gamins qui attachent une casserole à la queue d’un chat. . . ils ont fabriqué avec du papier gaufré comme celui qu’on trouve, sauf votre respect, au fond des boîtes de biscuits, de chocolat... un collier, une fraise qu’ils ont passé au cou de cette statue... (811)

What have they done? Like the good-for-nothings that they are, like kids that tie a saucepan to a cat’s tail. . . they have made a necklace, a ruff out of waffle-paper like the kind that you find, with all due respect, at the bottom of a box of cookies, and they have put it around the neck of that statue.

When their father demands an explanation, the children insist that the *fraise* looks perfect on the statue “cette fraise lui va à ravir [. . .] ça lui donnait un je ne sais quoi” [“that ruff suits it perfectly [...] it gives it a *je ne sais quoi*”] (812). Although they are mocking the codes that make artwork symbolically appropriable and profitable for bourgeois collectors like their father, the children are also drawing attention to the precariously thin line between sophistication and vulgarity. In a gesture that mirrors Sarraute’s own cultivation of a *douceâtre* aesthetics, by “sweetening” the statuette, the children make it less consumable within an economy of distinction.

By making the *douceâtre* the feeling-tone of her work, Sarraute renders her texts critically sticky, difficult to swallow. Bourdieu describes “taste” as an “orienting device,” a compass needle that points social players toward the practices and goods that suit their social status. Sarraute, on the other hand, is attuned to the slightly gross connotation of the word “taste” itself, which she describes, in *Vous les entendez*, as a round, slimy object that might have fallen out of someone’s mouth: “la bouche plissée, grotesquement arrondie, il a laissé tomber ça: tout rond, glissant... goût...” (810).

In exploring crises of confidence in the distinction system, Sarraute both illustrates and revises Bourdieu’s sociology of taste. In the universe of Bourdieu’s *Distinction*, objects are essentially legible signs: their legitimacy (or illegitimacy) is recognizable even for those social players ill-disposed to invest in them. In Sarraute, on the other hand, subjects find themselves bound to dubiously legitimate objects, and the texts are organized around the mixed feelings that such questionable investment provokes. Sarraute organizes her fictions around objects impossible

⁵⁶ “[C]ette porte n’avait rien de commun—quelle idée d’y avoir pensé, mais elle s’était mise à découvrir des portes ovales partout, elle n’en avait jamais tant vu, il suffit de penser à quelque chose pour ne plus voir que cela—rien de commun, absolument rien, avec ces portes arrondies qu’elle avait vues dans des pavillons de banlieue, dans des villas, des hôtels, même chez son coiffeur... [...] [C]’est cela, ça crève les yeux: la poignée, l’affreuse poignée en nickel, l’horrible plaque de propreté en métal blanc... c’est de là que tout provient, c’est cela qui démolit tout, qui donne à tout cet air vulgaire—une vraie porte de lavabos...” (343-4).

to evaluate—things that appear alternately distinguished and garish, vulgar and sophisticated, authentic and ordinary. While Bourdieu’s social world is structured by legible (if reversible) antinomies, Sarraute is structured by graduated, constantly shifting, minor distinctions. Like Bourdieu, Sarraute demonstrates that social agents are not just consumers of the social world but its creators (467). In Sarraute, however, cultural investors are never confident in their investments, and therefore the social world they inhabit is fraught with peril—its scaffolding showing through, its very foundation liable to give way at any moment. For Bourdieu, the internalized principles of division which subjects exteriorize by their tastes make possible “la production d’un monde commun et sensé, d’un monde de sens commun” [“the production of a common, meaningful world, a common-sense world”] (546/468). Sarraute’s texts dramatize the perpetual dissolution (and reconstruction) of this common sense world. She highlights the instability of the divisions that constitute it, the fragility of its distinctions and partitions, the anxiety inherent in every single act of evaluation. And her fictional space presents itself as half-built, a messy work station, a space in which no one can fully invest belief.

Bourdieu writes that “the cognitive structures which social agents implement in their practical knowledge of the social world are internalized, ‘embodied’ social structures”—“des structures sociales incorporées” (468/ 545). While “dégout” is a crucial motivator in Bourdieu’s theory of distinction, he generally shortcircuits the question of affect, focusing instead on the dialectic of conscious cognition and unconscious corporeal habits and practices. In Sarraute, a pervasive atmosphere of slight disgust indexes the presence of the body in judgments of taste, while exposing the persistent nonadequation between the cultural appetites of given subjects and the weird aesthetic meal they find themselves unable to consume.

The ruined distinction between art and cliché in late modernity alters the terms of the game of taste. Is *Les fruits d’or* an intentional or an unintentional copy? An example of artful platitude, or mere “platitude à l’état brut”? Is the pre-Columbian statuette a piece of trash that should be stashed in the basement, or is it a precious object worthy of display in the Louvre? As Sarraute demonstrates, social subjects go on trying to stake their worth on aesthetic investments well after any “gold standard” in aesthetic value has vanished. The *douceâtre* is the mood of their uncertain cultural consumption—and ours.

A provincial reader in *Les fruits d’or* claims that cliché “mastered” in a work of art bears absolutely no resemblance to ordinary, unintended platitude—the sort that surrounds and infiltrates you like a nasty smell (“la platitude à l’état brut, impure, nauséuse, sournoise, celle qu’on perçoit vaguement soi-même, autour de soi, qui vous pénètre comme une vague odeur” (584)). Yet every page of the novel—and of Sarraute’s oeuvre—works to spoil this distinction. If, as Bourdieu suggests, (twentieth-century, French) social space can be mapped out in accordance with a set of perceptual schemes (elite/mass, high/low, spiritual/material, light/heavy, free/forced, refined/crude, unique/ common, brilliant/dull, etc.), Sarraute shows us that the work of art appears to exist at the cacophonous meeting point of all oppositions. This fundamental blankness and lack of proper content make the artwork in modernity a dangerous investment and a peculiarly disorienting social orienting device.

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