



Time As a Constellation

Alena Roreitnerová

University of Pardubice, Faculty of Arts and Philosophy, Department of Philosophy
and Religious Studies
alena.teskova@gmail.com

SYNOPSIS

The paper attempts to take seriously one of the main claims of the final part of Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*, where the hero-narrator announces his intention to give his work a form that usually remains invisible, namely the form of time. Our question will therefore be what structure this form has and how it permeates the whole novel. Starting from the hypothesis that the Proustian conception of time can be metaphorically described as a constellation, I will try to show that this constellation can be understood as a connection of two forms of temporality that are clearly present in the book: (1) the simultaneous qualitative time of 'the hour' on the one hand, and (2) the successive temporality, with its related destructive effects, on the other. If those aspects of time are considered together, the reader is confronted with a more complex idea of time as a changing constellation of relations. In the main part of the paper, I will try to show that this conception admits to thinking of time regained not only as rediscovery of the solipsistic time of the hero-narrator but also as time shared on a deeper level with others. And since the notion of joint attention is, at least I suppose, necessary for the constitution of genuine intersubjective time, I will try to show that at the central place of the novel, namely the Venice episode, Proust is concerned precisely with the question of the emergence of time from a singular moment of shared attention.

KEYWORDS

Marcel Proust; time; shared attention; involuntary memory; constellation; Maurice Merleau-Ponty; qualitative time; intentionality; succession; relational conception of time; Gérard Genette; intersubjectivity.

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Let life be similar to a perfect piece of music or to a poem — in spite of the fact that events are partly brought in from outside, and without rhythm — but how? That is the whole problem. To make time a moving image of eternity, for it is not so naturally (Simone Weil 1956, p. 12).

The artist is a telescope — very marvellous in himself, as an instrument. But I think, on the whole, the stars are the principal part of the affair (John Ruskin, p. 213).



In this paper I would like to try to take seriously one of the main statements of the final part of Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*, where the hero-narrator announces his intention to give his work a form that usually remains invisible, namely the form of Time (IV, p. 622).¹ If I prefer the phenomenological approach to others, it is because it is closest to Proustian impressionist poetics (cf. II, p. 14; III, pp. 880–881), which does not investigate things as causes of our perceptions but focuses on phenomena as such and on their inherent laws. The same poetics applies to the representation of time, because, according to Proust, time is born out of a certain 'relation to things', as Merleau-Ponty (1958, p. 478) puts it, and other beings, especially beings to whom we are not indifferent. As the hero-narrator says in an unusually laconic way: 'Love, what is it but space and time rendered perceptible by the heart' (III, p. 887). And it is not impossible that the special sensitivity to time (and space) induced by this feeling has something to do with that 'special sense' of which Proust speaks in one of his last letters where he briefly explains what he would like people to understand about his book:

the image [...] which seems to give the best idea of this special sense is that of a telescope trained on time, for a telescope brings into focus stars invisible to the naked eye, and I have tried [...] to make visible to the conscious mind those unconscious phenomena which, completely forgotten, are sometimes located in the distant past (SL 1983, IV, n. 162).

Therefore, in the poetics of *The Search*, things, and especially beings to which we have the most differentiated attitude, are portrayed in various transformations of perspective and in the greatest possible spatio-temporal extension. As the Proustian narrator famously puts it at the end of the novel:

And [...] if I had not the leisure to prepare the hundred masks suitable to a single face, were it only as the eyes see it and in the sense in which they read its features [...], if I could not introduce these changes and many others (the need for which, if one means to portray the truth has constantly been shown in the course of this narrative) into the transcription of a universe which had to be completely redesigned, at all events I should not fail to depict therein man, as having the extension, not of his body but of his years [...] (IV, pp. 622–623).

But why is the task of depicting time so important for Proust? The first immediate answer — contained, after all, in the passage quoted above — is that this poetic instrument is the only way in which reality can be truthfully represented. However, beyond that, it seems to me that the novel keeps asking the same question over and over again: whether that to which we attach the greatest importance in life, namely our love for an individual human being, can in any sense persist — even after that being, and seemingly also our feeling, has disappeared. I think that for Proust the 'solution' to this ques-

1 I quote Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* from the English translation by C. K. Scott Moncrieff. I refer, however, to the original: *À la recherche du temps perdu*, vol. I–IV, Pléiade, Paris 1987–1989. I continue to quote only the Roman numeral of the volume and the page of this edition.



tion is the realisation of the work itself, precisely as an image of time. Why as an image of time? Because in his reflections on love, he concludes that what really matters to us may not be the other being 'in itself' but the time we have shared. In this sense, the hero-narrator says of himself that what he had unconsciously sought — after he had somewhat forgotten his girlfriend — in other beings, he could not find in them, for what he sought in this way was only 'Albertine herself, the time during which we had lived together, the past in quest of which I had unconsciously gone' (IV, p. 135).

It is obvious to any reader that the *matinée* in the final part of *The Search* is meant to show that lost time is — against our expectations — somehow regained. But in order to say that also the love for the other (or even mutual love — if such a thing exists in the Proustian world)² is preserved, it remains to be decided whether what is thus regained is only the solipsistic time of the hero-narrator or time that is also in a significant way formed by others. For such a thing to be possible, two things are required. First, time cannot be represented only on the hero-narrator's story but must be essentially relational³ — and since it can never remain just an isolated relation between self and other (since we are always part of a 'vaster system', IV, p. 137), *The Search* will be a representation of time as a changing constellation of relations. As Proust wrote already in 1914 (to Ghéon), his novel 'has for object to show the various positions that a number of people take in relation to one another in the course of their lives, to do for psychology what a geometer would do by going from plane geometry to geometry in space, to do, I mean, psychology in Time' (C, XIII 3, p. 371).⁴ Second, in order to think of time regained also as time shared with others, we must first see whether the idea of shared time is even conceivable in the Proustian universe. And since the notion of shared attention is, at least I suppose, necessary for the constitution of genuine intersubjective time, we need to focus on whether Proust is interested in the phenomenon of shared attention in the first place. After all, who else among the novelists emphasises so much that the worlds of the others — especially if we love them — are unknowable and inaccessible; that they are 'planetary' different worlds and that art offers the only way out of this loneliness?⁵

I believe that despite this general emphasis on the 'monadological' nature of the Proustian world, there are places in *The Search* where the hero-narrator reflects on the possibilities of a shared attention that is not limited to the dialogue between art-

2 The question of the reality of love in *The Search* was addressed by Merleau-Ponty in his lectures on Institution and Passivity (1954–1955); specifically in his lectures entitled *The Institution of Feeling*, where he confronts Sartre's reading of Proust. See also Annabelle Dufourcq (2005) on this topic.

3 I deliberately do not use the term 'relative' time (referring to Leibniz and, in Proust's time, also to Einstein) as the opposite of 'absolute' time (referring to Newton), but I use the term 'relational' time as time based on a relationship (this concept can also be attributed to Leibniz, but it certainly has older predecessors).

4 The English translation I am working with here is from Pascal Ilfri (2012, s. 44).

5 In this context, Georges Poulet (1982, pp. 52–74) draws a precise parallel between the separateness of islands of spatiality and the separateness of different times and beings. It would be appropriate to interpret the concept of time as a changing constellation of relations also in its spatial dimension, but such an interpretation would be too extensive. I will therefore limit myself to a reference to Poulet's illuminating book.



ists mediated by a work of art. The experience of art is certainly paradigmatic because there we can really share ‘vision’, or the focus of the artist’s attention on new relations between things.⁶ But such attention is always sedimented in the medium of expression or in the ‘style’ of the work.⁷ However, I will try to show that at the central place of the novel, namely the scene in the Baptistry of St Mark in Venice — to which the famous series of unconscious recollections from the final *matinée* refer — Proust is concerned precisely with the question of the possibility of shared attention.⁸ In other words, the motif of time regained — through reference to the object of the involuntary recollection — indirectly evokes the question of time that is, in a deeper sense, shared. Moreover, this emergence of intersubjective time from a singular moment of shared attention can be understood as the original foundation (*Urstiftung*) of the specific temporality of an artwork, which is able to arouse the attention of others (readers) and is itself animated by it.

It is clear that these motives can only be followed rather briefly within the limited space of this paper. I will therefore proceed from the hypothesis that the Proustian conception of time can be metaphorically described as a constellation. I will try to show that this constellation can be understood as a connection of two forms of temporality that are clearly present in the book: (1) the simultaneous qualitative temporality on the one hand; and (2) successive temporality (with its related destructive effects) on the other. A third motif of time, that of a changing constellation, establishes an adequate relationship between the two sides of temporality by showing how even seemingly untouchable (as if solipsistic) qualitative time is shaped by the presence (albeit negative) of others.

THE QUALITATIVE DIMENSION OF TIME

Proust’s notion of qualitative time has been extensively explored, so I will present it here only in brief. This idea of time appears at first glance to be a particular qualitative dimension of experience that arises in contemplation, usually focused on natural or artistic beauty (such as a certain mood evoked by reading in the Combray garden, a walk in the Bois de Boulogne, etc.). The narrator tells us about this form of time: ‘An

6 Cf. ‘[...] the world around us (which was not created once and for all, but is created afresh as often as an original artist is born) appears to us entirely different from the old world, but perfectly clear’ (III, pp. 622–623).

7 For the wider context of shared attention, which is embodied in a work of art in such a way that it can transform our vision of the world, cf. Antony Fredriksson (2022, pp. 131–163).

8 I note in passing that shared attention is one of the topics that contemporary phenomenology is intensely concerned with, in dialogue with the cognitive sciences. Interesting in this context is the article by Étienne Bimbenet, who argues, somewhat paradoxically, that the experience of shared attention is not a conjunction but a disjunction, since it shows my view of the world as one of the possible ‘views’ among others. As a result, the other emerges before me *in its otherness*, and at the same time the world is multiplied as the object of a plurality of perspectives (Bimbenet 2010, pp. 93–110). Regarding the constitution of intermonadic temporality, see Ichiro Yamaguchi (2018).



hour is not merely an hour, it is a vase filled with perfumes, with sounds, with projects, with climates' (IV, pp. 467–468). And elsewhere he further develops this observation: 'the most simple act or gesture remains enclosed as though in a thousand jars of which each would be filled with things of different colours, odours and temperature [...]' (IV, p. 448). According to Proust, the emergence of this type of simultaneous qualitative time has some presuppositions, which he explains in detail in his work. As for these presumptions, it seems to me that a close reading of *The Search* makes it possible to take Proust at his word when he says that there is an elaborate theory behind his poetics, as he mentions in a 1913 letter to Louis de Robert: 'Something you could call imperceptible is for instance that taste of tea which I don't recognise at first and in which I rediscover the gardens of Combray. But it's in no sense a minutely observed detail, it's a whole theory of memory and knowledge [...] not formulated directly in logical terms' (SL, 1983, III, n. 115).⁹

In his descriptions, Proust consistently follows the conviction that 'all impression is two-fold, half-sheathed in the object, prolonged in ourselves by another half which we alone can know' (IV, p. 470). If this is so, then every hour is a certain encounter between us and things or others. But in order for such an encounter to occur, perceptions must be dematerialised. In *Time Regained* it is said literally: '[...] objects — a book bound like others in its red cover — as soon as they have been perceived by us become something immaterial within us, partake of the same nature as our preoccupations or our feelings at that time and combine, indissolubly with them.' According to this logic, even a name read in a book 'contains within its syllables the swift wind and the brilliant sun of the moment when we read it' (IV, p. 463). Under these circumstances, thoughts, feelings and perceptions necessarily form a kind of mixture that comes together according to certain laws, which Proust's narrator sometimes describes as 'associations of ideas' (I, p. 193, etc.) or 'associations of memories' (I, p. 184). It should be immediately qualified, however, that this conception will be very specific (since it differs significantly from classical empiricism). I suggest — as a hypothesis — that specific Proustian associations or *assemblages* presuppose a certain differentiation of time (and space) that is performed precisely by the activity of attention.

I will try to explain this hypothesis further. Proust's hero-narrator believes that the primary source of knowledge (as well as artistic inspiration) is sensation — at first very vague and almost indiscernible:¹⁰ 'our knowledge is not of the external objects which we try to observe, but of involuntary sensations' (III, p. 672). The fact that these sensations or impressions are involuntary is decisive not only for perception or cognition in a broader sense but also for memory, since the defining feature of the impressions that are also at the origin of Proustian reminiscences is precisely that the hero-narrator 'was not free to choose them, that they had been given to [him] as they were' (IV, p. 457). It is therefore characteristic of these impressions that they come from a certain encounter with reality. And as such they form, in their totality, a 'book' that has been 'printed within us by reality itself' (IV, p. 458). However, if Proust at the same time claims that this book printed by reality is an 'inner book', the reason

⁹ Translation slightly modified.

¹⁰ Cf. for example the iconic observation of Hawthorns: 'the sentiment which they aroused in me remained obscure and vague [...]' (I, p. 137).



for this apparent contradiction is that the random impressions then demand a particular attention that only makes it possible to read them, that is, to perform a certain creative act that brings them to expression (VI, p. 461), while the result of such an effort always remains uncertain. Here I recall only the emblematic passage where the hero-narrator suddenly notices the pink marble reflection of a tiled roof upon the pond, a reflection he had never paid attention to before, and cries aloud ‘damn, damn, damn, damn!’, at the same time feeling that he should not content himself ‘with these unilluminating words, but to endeavour to see more clearly into the sources of my enjoyment’ (I, p. 153). The narrator then echoes these moments in *Time Regained* when he realises, that ‘as far back as at Combray, I was attempting to concentrate my mind on a compelling image (*je fixais avec attention devant mon esprit quelque image*), a cloud, a triangle, a belfry, a flower, a pebble, believing that there was perhaps something else under those symbols I ought to try to discover [...]’ (IV, p. 457). It is precisely these moments of solitary contemplation, in which things emerge in their full reality, at the same time becoming signs or symbols that refer to something else, since they require further searching, which can only be achieved ‘in ourselves’ (according to the logic of the duality of impressions already mentioned).

It seems to me that this whole conception corresponds to the double aspect of attention, which is both passive and active: attention here initially means a certain openness to external impressions (for example, to the correspondence between the light on the roof and in the pond), but then it becomes a creative faculty that dematerialises these impressions and makes them transparent.¹¹ Only in this way can things, beings and even the variability of the weather become part of that mixture which fills the vessels of time, and only in this form can individual impressions contain whole landscapes:

And if [...] they were for me, in their capacity as a duke and a duchess, real people, though of an unfamiliar kind, this ducal personality was in its turn enormously distended, immaterialised, so as to encircle and contain that Guermantes of which they were duke and duchess, all that sunlit ‘Guermantes way’ of our walks, the course of the Vivonne, its water-lilies and its overshadowing trees, and an endless series of hot summer afternoons (I, pp. 169–170).

However, what is including and what is included are not entirely indifferent. For it seems that what encompasses everything else is usually what receives the most intense attention: in the first place, works of art, then beloved beings, aristocratic ladies, various environments and, last but not least, natural beauties. Moreover, everything suggests that these ‘gravitational centres’ of qualitative time carry more weight in Proust’s world than the diachronic identity of the characters: ‘All the memories

11 Similarly, Merleau-Ponty, in *Phenomenology of Perception*, speaks about two sides of the same operative intentionality: ‘We found beneath the intentionality of acts, orthetic intentionality, another kind which is the condition of the former’s possibility: namely an operative intentionality already at work before any positing or any judgement, a “Logos of the aesthetic world”, an “art hidden in the depths of the human soul”, one which, like any art, is known only in its results’ (Merleau-Ponty 1958, p. 498).



which composed the original Mlle Swann were, in fact, foreshortened by the Gilberte of now, held back by the magnetic attraction of another universe (*par les forces d'attraction d'un autre univers*), united to a sentence of Bergotte and bathed in the perfume of hawthorn' (VI, p. 568). At the same time, however, the experience of involuntary memories shows that even the infinitesimal periphery of such a universe has the ability to indicate a centre from which everything else can subsequently unfold. Proust's qualitative time is thus arranged around certain foci of attention, to which other perceptions are associated in a kind of 'gravitation'. For this reason, associations are not mere representations of things as if passively imprinted in memory, which are only arbitrarily attached to a particular time and space. Rather, they remain hidden clues to the deeper state of mind that caused them.

When it comes to these deeper states, Proust knows different degrees of attention; one of the highest is undoubtedly the ability to contemplate a work of art (such as a sonata): 'Composers were warned not to strain the attention of their audience, as though we had not at our disposal different degrees of attention, among which it rests precisely with the artist himself to arouse the highest' (III, p. 210). And it hardly needs to be said that an even deeper state of mind than that which works of art evoke is, according to Proust, that which is capable of producing them. As he puts it: 'in the state of mind in which we "observe" we are a long way below the level to which we rise when we create' (II, p. 127). Yet the very ability to create presupposes the capacity to focus not just on external things but on that 'inner book of signs', as we have seen above; in other words, creation implies the 'contemplation of the essence of things' (IV, p. 454), of 'our true life' (IV, p. 459).

TIME AS SUCCESSION

This is what qualitative time looks like, structured more or less by the creative attention of someone who contemplates nature or a work of art, or who even creates it himself. But every reader of Proust knows that, in addition to this lyrical time, the narrator also portrays in every detail the destructive 'effect of Time' (VI, p. 553), which, in accordance with the old mythological visions, is devouring what it itself has produced. One of the exemplary passages describing the horror of temporality as such is found quite early in *The Search* in connection with the hero's anxious arrival in Balbec:

And our dread of a future in which we must forego the sight of faces, the sound of voices that we love, friends from whom we derive to-day our keenest joys, this dread, far from being dissipated, is intensified, if to the grief of such a privation we reflect that there will be added what seems to us now in anticipation an even more cruel grief; not to feel it as a grief at all — to remain indifferent (y rester indifférent); for if that should occur, our ego would have changed [...]; so that it would be in a real sense the death of ourselves, a death followed, it is true, by resurrection but in a different ego, the life, the love of which are beyond the reach of those elements of the existing ego that are doomed to die (II, pp. 31-32).



The narrator sometimes connects this conflict between our self, which adheres to past or present beings and experiences, and an imagined future self, which will be indifferent to them, with the temporal process of the blind organic life of nature, in which old cells are constantly replaced by new ones that feed and multiply from their dead matter (II, p. 32). However, the passage quoted above is exemplary for several reasons: first, we know that long passages of *The Fugitive* will be devoted to recounting the hero's long struggle with forgetting Albertine (we will return to this losing battle later). Second, it shows well the implications of Proust's impressionistic description of things in terms of their effects. As we shall see, Proust depicts time at crucial points in his novel in terms of a 'double intentionality' (if we may borrow this Husserlian distinction; see Husserl 1990, § 39, pp. 84–88, and also Merleau-Ponty 1958, p. 486): on the one hand, he shows our relation to objects, that is, to things and beings that perish or disappear, but immediately afterwards he shows what this means for the self. In other words, he shows that, along with things and beings, the aspect of our own self that is most determinative of who we are at a given interval disappears as well. And what is essential is that we are usually not aware of these changes because they are too slow to be noticed.

As I will try to show, this concern with double intentionality (one directed towards the object and the other towards the subjective structure of retentions and protentions) is also characteristic of descriptions of the concrete articulation of temporality. We find it, for example, in the reflection on listening to a musical composition, in which it is clearly stated that the elusiveness of a certain temporal object is ultimately determined by the subject's elusiveness to himself. Hence the particular melancholy associated with the temporal sequence as such:

When the least obvious beauties of Vinteuil's sonata were revealed to me, already, borne by the force of habit beyond the reach of my sensibility, those that I had from the first distinguished and preferred in it were beginning to escape, to avoid me. Since I was able only in successive moments to enjoy all the pleasures that this sonata gave me, I never possessed it in its entirety: it was like life itself (I, p. 521).

The hero-narrator observes that it is impossible to grasp the complex composition as a whole, namely, a whole in the sense of what it has meant to us over time. The problem, then, is ultimately not so much the impossibility of grasping the duration of the object as the impossibility of grasping the duration of the hero-narrator for himself.

However, it is peculiar to Proustian depictions of temporal succession that they are very often modelled on the hero's relationship to his loved ones, and therefore they also show this dimension of time as a sphere of genuine openness to the other as opposed to solitary contemplation. More precisely, it is not just an openness (as it belongs to the passive aspect of attention in general) but an affective involvement that has a profound impact on the hero-narrator's perception of time. In one passage, the narrator points out that this interest in the very otherness of the other, which he then seeks in his loves (only to suffer for it), was founded in his childhood: 'I had in me a store of old dream-memories which dated from my childhood, and in which all the tenderness (tenderness that existed in my heart, but, when my heart felt it, was not distinguishable from anything else) was wafted to me by a person as different as possible from myself' (II, p. 164). The feeling of love has its origin (its *Urstiftung*; see



Merleau-Ponty 2010, p. 25) in another being as profoundly different, while this need for difference is itself unconsciously repeated in other loves. More relevant to our question of the representation of time, however, is that affective involvement brings about a significant multiplication of the hero, also described as a fragmentation in time. This is how the hero-narrator describes his relationship with Albertine:

[...] each of these Albertines was different [...]. It was perhaps because they were so different, the persons whom I used to contemplate in her at this period, that later on I became myself a different person, corresponding to the particular Albertine to whom my thoughts had turned; a jealous, an indifferent, a voluptuous, a melancholy, a frenzied person [...]. To be quite accurate I ought to give a different name to each of the 'me's' who were to think about Albertine in time to come (je devrais donner un nom différent à chacun des moi qui dans la suite pensa à Albertine) [...] (II, p. 299).

At this point we can clearly see what it means to put a 'hundred masks' on the same face, depending on which eyes are seeing it. Here, too, time appears as a dimension experienced together, for the hero does not contemplate Albertine as a spectacle but is himself transformed by his relation to her. The multiplication of the facets of Albertine is here the correlate of the multiplication of the hero. Elsewhere, Proust goes so far in this hyperbole of fragmentation or 'refraction' of the self in time that he allows his hero-narrator to declare of himself that he was not 'one man only, but the steady advance hour after hour of an army in close formation'; he even says that 'it was not Albertine alone that was simply a series of moments, it was also myself' (IV, p. 71). In this context it is even possible to think — in terms of Merleau-Ponty's late working notes — of 'the influence of the "contents" on time which passes "more quickly" or "less quickly", of *Zeitmaterie* on *Zeitform*' (see Merleau-Ponty 1968, p. 184).

However, this image of interconnected fragments of two temporalities is not sufficient to understand succession, since Proust works with a multiplicity of timelines: 'as though there were in time different and parallel series' (III, p. 154). When, after Albertine's death, the hero-narrator asks himself how it is possible that, despite his stubborn resistance, he has mentally separated himself from Albertine, he considers the following: 'And so my love for Albertine [...] would never have altered appreciably [...] had it not been drawn into a vaster system in which souls move in time as bodies move in space.' What primarily characterises this 'vaster system' of Time, then, is forgetting: 'oblivion, the force of which I was beginning to feel and which is so powerful an instrument of adaptation to reality because it gradually destroys in us the surviving past which is a perpetual contradiction of it' (IV, p. 137).¹²

Here as well, the problem of the multiplicity of the other and the correlative multiplicity of the self returns: the narrator again formulates it in such a way that forgetting the other is at the same time forgetting the self (the former self). At a certain point, however, the overall situation changes in a remarkably sudden way: 'I felt myself still reliving a past which was no longer anything more than the history of another person' (IV, p. 114). The ability to adapt to a time in which some things, beings and events are irrevocably past thus entails the need to constantly reassess who the

¹² See the above letter to Ghéon (1914).

hero-narrator is to himself. However, when the hero-narrator truly comes to terms with his new self and stops resuscitating the past, he not only finds that he does not recognise himself but also that he loses his orientation in time:

[...] if the fact remains that it is time that gradually brings oblivion, oblivion does not fail to alter profoundly our notion of time. [...] now this oblivion of so many things, separating me by gulfs of empty space from quite recent events which they made me think remote [...] confused, destroyed my sense of distances in time [...]. And as in the fresh spaces, as yet unexplored, which extended before me, there would be no more trace of my love for Albertine than there had been, in the time past which I had just traversed, of my love for my grandmother, my life appeared to me [...] as something so devoid of the support of an individual, identical and permanent self [...], that death might just as well put an end to its course here or there, without in the least concluding it, as with those courses of French history which, in the Rhetoric class, stop short indifferently, according to the whim of the curriculum or the professor, at the Revolution of 1830, or at that of 1848, or at the end of the Second Empire (IV, pp. 173–174).

In this longer passage, more than in any other, we can see in what sense the temporal object that is the other or, more precisely, a certain continuity of love for the other (similar to a musical composition), and especially the forgetting that follows, destroys the very idea of the self as the sovereign subject of temporal constitution. Moreover, this passage represents Proust's (rather pessimistic) interim conclusion to his exploration of temporal succession. It represents what is elsewhere in the novel called 'the materialist hypothesis, that of there being nothing' (III, p. 883), according to which time, differentiated by the soul, is ultimately subject to the relentless laws of succession (and all the indistinct impressions that are of such interest to the hero-narrator do not give the appearance of a hidden depth due to an immaterial essence but only as a result of the indeterminacy of sensory perception). On the one hand we had the mutual differentiation of lovers, on the other the forgetting of Albertine as de-differentiation (of both object and subject); for if perception based on attention is a certain differentiation, then forgetting is, again in Merleau-Ponty's words, an 'undifferentiation' or rather disappearing by disarticulation (Merleau-Ponty 1968, p. 197).¹³ Forgetting thus leads to a final indifference (in fact anticipated in the course of the narrative, II, p. 611; IV, p. 44), which again has two sides: indifference both to Albertine and to the hero himself as a past self with whom nothing connects him any more. It reveals 'a fragmentary and gradual death (*la mort fragmentaire et successive*) such as interpolates itself throughout the whole course of our life' (II, p. 32). Temporal continuity thus seems to disintegrate, evoking a terror of contingency — the contingency of death and of the missing narrative 'emplotment' (as Ricoeur puts it), in short, terror of the fact that time does not allow to be animated and represented.

13 The notion of undifferentiation to which Merleau-Ponty refers in his notes on *The Visible and the Invisible* appears in a similar sense already in Husserl's C-Manuscripts on time (cf. Husserl 2006, p. 87), which Merleau-Ponty had opportunity to study during the war (cf. Zahavi 2002, p. 6).



At the same time, however, if the analysis of succession leads Proust to such gloomy conclusions, it begins to become clearer why the author insists to such an extent on a certain simultaneity and the 'other memory' brought about by involuntary recollections. The involuntary memories themselves are only the most striking manifestation of an entirely different conception of the continuity of the self, namely continuity, which persists despite 'heart's intermissions' (*les intermittences du coeur*, III, p. 153).

In spite of all that is said in *The Search* about a shared past time that is irrevocably lost and the gradual forgetting of the beings we cared about most, there are also passages that seem to contradict these conclusions. In the end, the reason why forgetting seems complete is primarily due to the lack of motivation to remember something that has become (seemingly) indifferent.¹⁴ This is why involuntary memories, listening to a particular musical piece, etc., are so important in the novel. For Charles Swann, the Vinteuil sonata embodies a special inner richness.¹⁵ It is also a cryptogram of his love, and listening to it has an effect on him analogous to that of an involuntary memory on the hero:

I remembered with what relative indifference Swann had been able to speak formerly of the days when he was loved, because beneath the words, he felt something else than them, and the immediate pain Vinteuil's little phrase had caused him by giving him back those very days themselves as he had formerly felt them [...] (IV, p. 448).

Thus, although it is true that the individual entity remains forgotten, what will retain its validity — albeit latent — will be the quality of the once differentiated time. Here again, what we have described as 'double intentionality' returns in a different form: the objects of attention may be lost, but the deepest modification of our own flow of consciousness somehow remains, although it is not accessible through ordinary secondary memory.¹⁶

Once again, then, the ultimate meaning of others for us — and, finally, of the hero-narrator for himself — seems to depend entirely on the maintenance or loss of his own continuity (hence the importance of the phenomenon of intermittences).¹⁷

¹⁴ See Rudolf Bernet (1994, p. 264): '[...] knowing a past that "tells us nothing" is of no interest'.

¹⁵ See also: 'Even when one is no longer interested in things, it is still something to have been interested in them; because it was always for reasons which other people did not grasp. The memory of those sentiments is, we feel, to be found only in ourselves; we must go back into ourselves to study it' (III, p. 101).

¹⁶ Strictly speaking 'time regained' is indeed an 'extra-temporal' experience (IV, p. 450), since it is quasi-temporal in the same sense as Husserl's longitudinal intentionality. What the hero finds, then, is not time in the proper sense but something that makes time as our relation to objects (things, others) possible.

¹⁷ 'For I felt quite sure that if I could place some interval between my thoughts of Albertine, or if, on the other hand, I had allowed too long an interval to elapse, I should cease to love her; a clean cut would have made me unconcerned about her, as I was now about my grandmother. A period of any length spent without thinking of her would have broken in my memory the continuity which is the very principle of life, which however may be resumed after a certain interval of time' (IV, p. 412).



However, involuntary memories suggest yet another paradigm of continuity, other than the organic replacement of cells discussed in the context of time as succession, namely the latent continuity of the contents of the soul. I suggest that it is the experience of this other kind of continuity that leads the hero-narrator at the final *matinée*, without finding any decisive argument (IV, p. 445), to the point where previously unresolvable difficulties lose their significance for him and death becomes — in his words (IV, p. 446) — indifferent (at least for the moment, IV, p. 452).

However, the consideration of a shared time that takes the form of a succession poses yet another question: What about the continuity of the other (for us)? I believe that *Time Regained* provides a certain ‘solution’ to the problem of the identity of the self, but it does not provide a sufficiently clear answer to this question, which is also one of the main questions of the whole novel. To answer it, it is necessary to see time in a different way than as a quality or succession, namely as a certain constellation.

TIME AS A CHANGING CONSTELLATION

As we already know, one of Proust’s main aims in his novel was to show the extension of beings in time. If we were to illustrate this extension briefly with the character of Albertine, it would be possible to observe it in at least three ways (in addition to those already mentioned); firstly, as an extension that she has for her lover in the present moment: ‘I might, if I chose, take Albertine upon my knee [...], but, just as if I had been handling a stone which encloses the salt of immemorial oceans or the light of a star, I felt that I was touching no more than the sealed envelope of a person who inwardly reached to infinity’ (III, p. 888).

Secondly, if we were to follow the entire story of the hero’s love for Albertine, it would appear how she becomes — in accordance with his astronomical metaphor — a kind of distant star for him, into which the original nebula (*la nébuleuse indistincte et lactée*) or ‘vague constellation’ (II, p. 180) of the Balbec girls condenses, only to dissolve again into an indefinite multiplicity: ‘And was it not natural that now the cooling star of my love (*l’étoile finissante de mon amour*) in which they were condensed should explode afresh in this scattered dust of nebulae?’ (VI, p. 142). In the context of the story of gradual forgetting in *La Fugitive*, it would then become apparent that this whole movement of condensation and dispersion (cf. IV, p. 138) consists of a certain ‘development (*devenir*)’ that the hero-narrator tries to grasp by means of a comparison to a musical composition (sonata or septet, IV, pp. 139–140).

However, if we look at the extension of Albertine not only from the point of view of the hero-narrator but from the perspective of multiple characters, the idea of a certain constellation of relationships becomes more apparent. This constellation illustrates the difference in distance between objects as seen by the lover, compared to the gaze of the indifferent onlooker (in this case Robert de Saint-Loup):

[...] *the structure composed of the sensations interposed between the face of the woman and the eyes of her lover [...] is already raised so high that the point at which the lover’s gaze comes to rest [...] is as far from the point which other people see as is the real sun from the place in which its condensed light enables us to see it in the sky* (IV, p. 22).



Thus, differentiation seems to illuminate for each character a part of the universe, that vaster system in which their souls move, while the other elements of the constellation remain in the shadows, but this does not mean that the same objects cannot be stars for other observers of the same constellation: 'And I had realised all this the more because I had stretched to its extreme limits the distance between objective reality and love; (Rachel from Saint-Loup's point of view and from mine, Albertine from mine and from Saint-Loup's [...])' (IV, p. 491). In this way, Proust's narrator confronts in several places two views of the same 'star', which for one of the characters shines while for the other hardly takes a definite shape. If we had more space, it would have been necessary to portray more plastically how Proust imagines time as a changing constellation. This idea, as we have seen, needs to be invoked especially when two or more views of the same 'star' are confronted together. But, in accordance with Proustian poetics, it does not matter so much whether the multiplicity of characters or many 'versions' of the same character show a different perspective on the same being:

[...] *that which concerned the Duchesse de Guermantes of my childhood was concentrated by magnetic energy (par une force attractive) round Combray and that which concerned the Duchesse de Guermantes who invited me to luncheon about a sensitive being of a different kind; there were several Duchesses de Guermantes [...] separated from each other by the colourless ether of years and I could no more jump from one to the other than I could fly from here to another planet* (IV, p. 568).

It is clear from this passage that the individual characters are in the end associated with a particular time, although they themselves formed a major element of its quality. In this sense, their multiplicity corresponds to the multiplicity of the vessels of qualitative time. But the fact that they are separated from each other is only possible because of the 'ether of years' involving necessary forgetting, that is, because of time as succession. Thus, Proust's narrator expresses in the conclusion of *The Search* the same idea that appeared already in the letter (from 1914) quoted above:

We should not be able to tell the story of our relations with another, however little we knew him, without registering successive movements in our own life. Thus, every individual — and I myself am one of those individuals — measured duration by the revolution he had accomplished not only round himself but round others and notably by the positions he had successively occupied with relation to myself (IV, p. 608).

But how to understand more precisely this 'measure of the passage of time', which, like the stars, is determined by the circular motion of each individual being around its own centre and around others? Qualitative time always carries with it a certain intrinsic tempo, which is determined by the relation to the real objects of the individual's attention. It remains to be shown to what extent this apparently quite intimate quality of time is itself part of a certain constellation of relations (also of a temporal nature) with other beings. Therefore, it could be appropriate to ask again why we should understand the above-described interrelationships between individual beings as *temporal* relationships. It seems to me that the relation of differentiation

(attention, passion, love) of a certain being is very often described in *The Search* as a bond that has a temporal nature. This is shown, for example, in one of the passages in which the narrator reflects on why he is unable to detach himself from Albertine (who seems at that moment to be primarily a source of his torment):

What attaches us to people are those thousand roots, those innumerable threads which are our memories of last night, our hopes for tomorrow morning [...] and it is not so much to a person that we sacrifice our life as to all that the person has been able to attach to herself of our hours, our days, of the things compared with which the life not yet lived, the relatively future life, seems to us more remote, more detached, less practical, less our own (une vie plus lointaine, plus détachée, moins intime, moins nôtre) (III, p. 605).

It is in this sense that Proustian differentiating attention (either passive or active) should be understood as temporal or, more precisely, temporalising. Whether in relation to the other it is recollection ('retention') or anticipated indifference ('protection'), it is again shown that intentional orientation towards the other is in fact inseparable from a modification of the temporal flow of the self. If, then, we are willing to understand the relationships between the characters in their temporal sense, where time seems to have even more weight than these beings themselves, then the question that remains to be answered is one that I think is of ultimate importance for Proust, namely whether this temporality can be shared on a deeper level.

SHARED TIME

As has already been suggested, I believe — by way of hypothesis — that the prerequisite for the presence of the other at the very heart of temporality is the possibility of sharing attention. I am convinced that Proust is eminently interested in this question, although the hero-narrator's famous statement that true communication is only possible through art overshadows all other places which suggest different solutions. Therefore, I will now try to briefly outline how the modalities of the presence of the other in *The Search* can be understood.

It seems to me that the destructive effect of forgetting the other, described above in connection with time as a succession, can also be read as an indication — albeit negative — of the intense presence of the other at the very heart of our own temporality. As Lévinas puts it precisely: 'But Proust's most profound teaching — if poetry has any teaching at all — consists in situating the real in a relationship with what has always remained other, with the other as absence and mystery, in finding it in the very intimacy of the 'Self' [...]' (Lévinas 1947, pp. 122–123; my translation).¹⁸ Lévinas, however, neither explains nor demonstrates his observation. Merleau-Ponty, who in his lectures on the *Institution of Feeling* dealt extensively with the question

18 Along with Joseph Czapski, Lévinas is one of the important authors who intensively studied Proust while in captivity during the Second World War. Lévinas noted his intention to publish a critical study on Proust, as we know from his *Carnets de captivité* (2009, p. 74).



of the reality of love in the Proustian universe, tries to understand this presence of the other through the concept of horizon: ‘there is another relation with the other person: the other person as occupying the entire horizon of my life and not as a positive being’ (Merleau-Ponty 2010, p. 34). As the reader well knows, the hero-narrator constantly doubts his love, mainly because he cannot recognise it when he is happy (for love is often identical to anxiety for him, IV, p. 454). However, the application of the notion of horizon (and institution, *Stiftung*) allows Merleau-Ponty to claim that love is, despite all doubts, *real* in *The Search*: ‘There is therefore something besides “monologue”, there is fullness when we think there is emptiness, the reality of what is not immediately sensed’ (ibid., p. 38). The significance of the other’s presence can therefore often only be realised after the fact, as it is not always felt. For example, the hero is convinced that he no longer loves Albertine, but as soon as she leaves, a sudden realisation dawns on him: ‘But this knowledge which had not been given me by the finest mental perceptions had now been brought to me, hard, glittering, strange, like a crystallised salt, by the abrupt reaction of grief’ (IV, p. 4). And it is only in retrospect that the hero is aware of the fullness of their time spent together: ‘I had never known any pleasure at Balbec any more than I had in living with Albertine except what was perceptible afterwards’ (IV, p. 456).

Actually, isn’t there a certain failure of attention (regardless of any ethical issues)?¹⁹ And what role does attention play in these modalities of the presence of the other? At least, we know that the hero-narrator, at many points in the novel, craves the other’s attention; let us mention the first encounter with Gilberte, when, after the girl looks at the hero, his first glance, by which he would like to touch her, is followed by a second ‘an unconsciously appealing look, whose object was to force her to pay attention to me, to see, to know me (*à faire attention à moi, à me connaître!*)’ (I, p. 139). We could find many similar places, as the same Baudelairean motif recurs in several encounters with unknown passers-by.²⁰ The hero-narrator also repeats many times that what the lover seeks in love is, in the end, the attention of the beloved being: ‘Love is born; one would like to remain, for her whom one loves, the unknown whom she may love in turn, but one has need of her, one requires contact not so much with her body as with her attention, her heart’ (II, p. 279). The importance of attention is due to the fact that the extension of being in the Proustian world goes far beyond the limits of tangible bodily presence (as we have seen above). In any case, the question of the possible *sharing* of attention, just like love itself, is always subject to doubt in *The Search*. But still, we can find various places in the novel where the hero-narrator recounts how Albertine’s gaze joined *in absentia* his gaze at a passer-by, so that his perspective was enriched by a glimpse of the unknown world of another being:

¹⁹ In the context of present analysis of Proust’s work, I intentionally avoid any ethical questions, although I believe that the ethics of attention represents one of the most interesting approaches to ethics in general. Cf. the motif of attention as a link between art and ethics, as discussed by Silvia Caprioglio Panizza (2022), following Iris Murdoch and Simone Weil (herself a very attentive reader of Proust).

²⁰ Cf. ‘But it was not only to her body that I should have liked to attain, there was also her person, which abode within her, and with which there is but one form of contact, namely to attract its attention, but one sort of penetration, to awaken an idea in it’ (II, pp. 75–76).

At once, the glance which I had just cast at one or other of them was matched immediately by the curious, stealthy, enterprising glance, reflecting unimaginable thoughts, which Albertine had furtively cast at them and which [...] wafted along these paths [...] the tremor of an unknown element [...] (IV, p. 141).



A similar change of vision is usually produced by works of art in *The Search*, but it seems that at least sometimes it can also be the effect of the mutual union of two beings. Thus, although the paradigm of metamorphosis of vision is represented by artists who express their own distinctive vision through their works, beloved beings sometimes achieve the same effect through their ability to incite and sustain the discerning attention of the lover. In addition to this figure of retrospective joint attention, Proust even considers the other, who, instead of shattering our own presence by his absence, rescues us — by his loving presence — from our own absence for ourselves. Thus, the hero-narrator was saved by the presence of his grandmother at a moment when there was nothing left of his self: '[...] in a moment when I was no longer in any way myself, [grandmother] had come in, and had restored me to myself, for that person was myself and more than myself (the container that is greater than the contents, which it was bringing to me)' (III, p. 153). The narrator does not hesitate to speak of this coming of the other — despite its factual absence — as an initially unknown 'divine presence' (*présence inconnue, divine*) that preserves us to ourselves. This reminiscence has the structure of involuntary memory as we already know it (perhaps with the difference that 'the agonising synthesis of survival and annihilation' is far from being a purely joyful *anamnesis*). But in this case the time is qualitatively different from any other time, not only because of the hero-narrator's activity — since there was 'nothing left of his self' at that very moment — but, above all, because of the present attention of the other, here Marcel's grandmother.²¹ Therefore, even from this passage, which is a kind of parallel to the joyful reminiscences, it is evident that Proust is eminently interested in shared time and attention.

However, we have seen that all cases of shared attention here are retrospective. Presumably this is because the hero-narrator believes that higher levels of attention are only possible in solitude (III, p. 909).²² Yet there is at least one place where he hesitates and considers whether there is — in contrast to the social diversion that is omnipresent in *The Search* — a deeper shared attention in the present as well. This remarkable place is the depiction of the hero's stay in Venice together with his mother.

As is well known, the Venice episode has a special significance in *The Search*, for it is precisely the sensation 'once felt on two uneven slabs in the Baptistery of St. Mark' (IV, p. 446) that the hero recalls when he steps out of the carriage into the courtyard of the Guermantes house and stumbles over the pavement, triggering a whole series of involuntary memories. Moreover, if we look at the context of the novel as a whole, Venice represents a desired city,²³ a city that since childhood continually animated the hero's imagination (inspired by Titian's engravings and photographs of Giotto's

21 Cf. 'My grandmother's attacks passed, often enough-unnoticed by the attention which she kept always diverted to ourselves' (II, p. 594).

22 See below, citation IV, p. 225.

23 See especially I, pp. 382–386; III, p. 913.



paintings).²⁴ It is also the city about which the protagonist repeatedly dreams (II, pp. 443–444). And it would not be Proustian Venice if something did not constantly prevent him from visiting it (illness,²⁵ Albertine's presence²⁶), so it is also the place of a desired future (as such, it is reminiscent of the hero's desire to begin writing his masterpiece).

In a sense, the Venetian episode forms the turning point of the narrative, also because it belongs to the earliest material of the novel, since Proust have been thinking about it from 1908 at the latest.²⁷ It would be very interesting to trace the genesis of the Venice episode in more detail, which is not possible here. What is important for us is that it marks a transition between the original division into *Time Lost* and *Time Regained*.²⁸ We also find an *avant-texte* called 'Venice' in his *Seventy-five Folios* (from October or November 1908); already here are anticipated: 'the moments of our life that sensory perception, the tyranny of the present, the intervention of intelligence, the network of activity, the succession of selfish desires, prevents us from living but that become glorious again on the day, come at last, of the resurrection.'²⁹ A much more explicit and detailed *Urtext* for this episode is then found in *Against Sainte-Beuve* in a text titled *Conversation avec Maman*.³⁰

As is well known, the voyage to Venice is the final stage of the hero's forgetting of Albertine and thus forms a kind of gloomy framework from which intense impressions of the sunlit water town seem to emanate. This allegorical motif is embodied in the angel on the Campanile of St Mark's, which brings a promise of joy in the middle of a sunny morning: '[...] a joy more certain than any that it could ever in the past have been bidden to announce to men of good will' (IV, p. 202).³¹ The angel is also an indicator of time, because it is the only thing the hero can see from his bed: '[...] as the whole world is merely a vast sun-dial, a single lighted segment of which enables us to tell what o'clock it is.'³² As we will see in more detail, the Venetian episode concludes with an evening split between the hero and his mother, which finally leads to a fragmentation of the hero's experience of the city and of himself. According to the experts, Proust extensively reworked this passage, while 'the emotional tone of the episode, between sunrise and sunset, between joy and anxiety, has retained its original character'.³³

Regarding time shared together, there are apparently in the Venice episode two attempts (one earlier and one later) to describe an analogous phenomenon: an in-

24 Cf. I, p. 40; III, pp. 895–896.

25 Cf. I, p. 386.

26 Cf. III, p. 915; IV, p. 6.

27 A certain understanding of the origins of the Venice episode, based on a summary of Bernard Brun's research, is provided, among others, by David R. Ellison (1988).

28 See *Notice* written by Anne Chevalier in edition *Pléiade*, vol. IV (1989), p. 999.

29 Proust 2021, p. 106 (transl. Sam Taylor, 2023).

30 In the *Pléiade* edition (1989) we find four variants of the central Venetian passage along with three variants of the departure from Venice, dating from the layers of 1908–1909 (in *Cahier 3*) to the 1914–1916 version (*Cahier 48, 50*), with the earliest strata of the departure motif referring to the novel *Jean Santeuil* (1895–1899).

31 As already mentioned, we would find a very similar description in *Contre Sainte-Beuve*.

32 *Ibid.*

33 Cf. *Notice* by A. Chevalier, *Pléiade* (1989), vol. IV, p. 1001.



tense loving encounter with the mother in the presence of a ‘stone witness’, which in the first case is an arched Gothic window and in the second case the mosaic in the Baptistery of St Mark. Already in the first case, the motif of shared time is explicit: ‘[...] for these reasons, that window has assumed in my memory the precious quality of things that have had, simultaneously, side by side with ourselves, their part in a certain hour that struck, the same for us and for them’ (IV, p. 204). It would be valuable to look at this first version more closely from the perspective of shared time and later recollection, as this passage ends with the stone witness saying: ‘I remember your mother so well’ (IV, p. 205). For the sake of brevity, however, we will focus only on the second version.

The passage that interests us most here is in the middle of the early afternoon, ‘[...] at that hour when at Combray it was so pleasant to feel the sun close at hand in the darkness preserved by the closed shutters [...]’ (IV, p. 224). We know already that the hero-narrator has always considered attentive solitude to be a condition for true contemplation (this is related to his belief that a deeper appreciation of artistic beauty is difficult, if not impossible, to share). His visit to the Baptistery of St Mark in Venice, accompanied by his mother, represents one of the few places, where the possibility of joyfully shared contemplation of the same object in the presence of another is — despite all reservations — admitted. The narrator immediately adds, however, that even this presence delights him, especially in retrospect (but there is at least some hesitation). Let me provide a longer quotation here:

My mother and I would enter the baptistery, treading underfoot the marble and glass mosaics of the paving [...]. Seeing that I needed to spend some time in front of the mosaics representing the Baptism of Christ, and feeling the icy coolness that pervaded the baptistery, my mother threw a shawl over my shoulders. [...] Today I am sure that the pleasure does exist, if not of seeing, at least of having seen, a beautiful thing with a particular person. A time has now come when [...], remembering the baptistery of St Mark’s — contemplating the waters of the Jordan in which St John immerses Christ, while the gondola awaited us at the landing-stage of the Piazzetta — it is no longer a matter of indifference to me that, beside me in that cool penumbra, there should have been a woman draped in her mourning [...] and that that woman [...], whom nothing can ever remove from that softly lit sanctuary of St Mark’s where I am always sure to find her because she has her place reserved there as immutably as a mosaic, should be my mother.³⁴

This passage is not only rich in symbolic meaning but also stylistically follows a principle which Gérard Genette calls ‘diegetic metaphor’: in a single image, it encompasses the vast space-time of the narrative, creating a sort of story within a story centred in the baptistery with its ‘mosaic of the baptism, “in relation to the site”, where the Jordan is like a second baptistery *en abyme* inside the first; replica of the Jordan’s waves by those of the lagoon in front of the Piazzetta, icy freshness falling on visitors

34 Cf. IV, p. 225. In this case, the translation (by C. K. Scott Moncrieff and Terence Kilmartin) is taken from The Modern Library edition, since this passage does not appear in the edition in use.



like baptismal water, a woman in mourning similar to that, nearby, in Carpaccio's painting, itself an image *en abyme* of Venice within Venice [...] (Genette 1972, p. 49; my translation). This passage is a privileged example of this type of metonymically emanating metaphor, which, according to Genette, is analogous in construction to Proustian reminiscence,³⁵ where a single 'almost impalpable drop (*gouttelette*)' of tea carries the 'vast structure' of recollection (I, p. 46).

By linking this passage with the final reminiscences in *Time Regained*, Proust seems at least to suggest the importance of the presence of others in the involuntary memories. Even though these memories appear at first glance as merely joyful atmospheric impressions, in fact they involve time differentiated with others. (Similar correspondences between involuntary memories and loving beings could be found in the case of other reminiscences, e.g. the presence of Tante Leonie in a memory triggered by a cup of lime-flower tea, and so on.) This motif of the constitutive presence of the other is reinforced by the elaborated contrast with the situation when the hero's mother leaves Venice after a disagreement and he is left alone. Then their entire watery architecture turns into mere matter ('I saw the palaces reduced to their basic elements, lifeless heaps of marble with nothing to choose between them, and the water as a combination of hydrogen and oxygen, eternal, blind [...]'), so that the hero-narrator eventually feels himself dispossessed from his dream city (IV, p. 231).

The Venetian episode as a whole makes clear — through the striking contrast between the morning and evening time — that it is precisely the presence of certain beings-planets which (at least sometimes and often without the consciousness of the hero-narrator) animates his creative attention, that is, the very ability to differentiate impressions: 'For I felt myself to be alone; things had become alien to me; I no longer had calm enough to break out of my throbbing heart and introduce into them a measure of stability. The town that I saw before me had ceased to be Venice' (*ibid.*). So, the disintegration, which is depicted in greater extension (chronologically later) in connection with the forgetting of Albertine, is captured in miniature in the (chronologically earlier) scene of the mother leaving Venice. Thus, if the departure of Albertine brought a feeling of nothingness induced by the dissolution of temporal continuity, so too does the abandonment in Venice evoke successive time in its sinister form: 'I was nothing more than a heart that throbbed, and an attention strained to follow the development of "sole mio"' (*ibid.*). And a little bit further, just before the hero decides at the last moment to go to his mother: 'My mind, doubtless in order not to have to consider the question of making a resolution, was entirely occupied in following the course of the successive lines of "sole mio"' (IV, p. 232).

The main scene from the baptistery is thus framed by a double depiction of successive time, namely the forgetting of Albertine and the anxiety of the mother's departure (with its symbolic meaning of the inevitability of death). Thus, in the Venetian episode, in the space of some thirty pages, both qualitative time and successive time

35 Cf. [...] at the moment when the unevenness of the two pavements had prolonged in all directions and dimensions my arid and crude visions of Venice and St. Mark's, and all the emotions I had then experienced, relating the square to the church, the landing-stage to the square, the canal to the landing-stage, to everything the eye saw, to that whole world of longings which is in reality only perceived by the spirit [...] (IV, p. 455).



are concentrated in their most dense form. It is no coincidence, moreover, that related to the passage on ‘resurrection’ Proust, according to the available marginal notes to his *Carnets*, hesitated whether to associate the motifs of mourning with Albertine or with the grandmother (as the novel’s transposition of the mother).³⁶ The episode thus includes both the painful and the joyful dimension of involuntary memory. We know, however, that *Time Regained* retains only the sunlit side of reminiscences (IV, p. 453), since the recalled impressions are ‘disincarnated’ and ‘freed from the imperfections of exterior perceptions’ (IV, p. 447). Moreover, this disincarnation is in line with the additional correction that refuses to leave the mother (as an archetypal other) in the sight of the stone witness and moves her into the hero’s inner self: ‘I had too clearly proved the impossibility of expecting from reality that which was within myself. It was not in the Square of St. Mark [...] that I should find Lost Time [...]’ (IV, p. 455).³⁷ This displacement finally leads to the necessity of realising a work of art (in which the joy and burden of animating time is in the end passed on to the reader).

Regarding the motive of shared time, when the hero-narrator says that, after his mother’s departure, Venice ceased to be Venice for him, he implies that the other, in a sense, gives a shape to the objects themselves, insofar as they have some value for him. We see, then, that in contrast to the considerations we followed initially in connection with qualitative time, according to which all the colour of time depends on the attention of the time-differentiating soul, the point of view now seems to be reversed. It turns out that this very activity of the individual soul is to be understood in relation to the presence of the other with whom it remains in connection or even in a kind of harmony. This harmony, however, is mostly revealed when it is disturbed, when it only begins to be perceptible, otherwise it is — in accordance with ancient ideas — inaudible, since the sound is present straight from our birth, so that it is not distinguishable from its contrary silence, since sound and silence are distinguished in relation to each other:³⁸ ‘As though our loveliest ideas were like musical airs which might come to us without our having ever heard them and which we force ourselves to listen to and write down’ (IV, pp. 456–457).

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36 Cf. *Notice* by A. Chevalier, *Pléiade* (1989), vol. IV, p. 1011.

37 See also *Esquisse XXIV*; IV, p. 816.

38 See Aristotle’s report in *De caelo* II, 9, 290b11–30.



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