

Proust and Schopenhauer

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Abstract

This chapter is divided into three sections. In the first, I identify the mentions of Schopenhauer in *À la recherche du temps perdu*. I use an implicit reference to Schopenhauer by Swann to open a discussion of Schopenhauer's theory of music. I attempt to downplay its identification, suggested by some commentators, with both the views about music expressed in the novel and the form of the novel itself. In the second section, I discuss Proust's references to Schopenhauer in his essay on reading. I confirm that Proust had a good understanding of Schopenhauer's own view on erudition and suggest that Schopenhauer's influence on Proust may take the form of an enticement to think for oneself. In the third and final section, I consider several potential points of convergence between Proust and Schopenhauer concerning states of the will. However, in all cases I find, as I do throughout the chapter, that below the surface Proust and Schopenhauer often part ways.

Schopenhauer in Proust's novel

Strong claims have been made about Proust's reception of Schopenhauer. The strongest so far is Anne Henry's (1989) that *À la recherche du temps perdu* is a literary translation of Schopenhauer's *The World as Will and Representation*. If this were true, it might come as a surprise to learn that Schopenhauer is mentioned by name only twice in the novel. Both instances occur in the final volume and in connection, for some reason, with Mme de Cambremer. In the first, the Narrator and Bloch have run into Saint-Loup on his way to an appointment with M. de Cambremer at the Ministry of War. The Narrator offhandedly expresses a low opinion of both the Cambremers, which he proceeds mentally to retract by recalling his eventual discovery that Mme de Cambremer was, in fact, 'a remarkable woman, who knew her Schopenhauer'. He is therefore taken aback by Saint-Loup's next remark: 'His wife is idiotic, I won't try to defend her' (*TR*, 60; *IV* 318). The second instance comes from the mouth of Mme de Cambremer herself at the Princess de Guermantes's party in the finale of the novel. She recommends: 'You must re-read what Schopenhauer says about music', to which the Duchess de Guermantes replies, '*Re-read* is pretty rich, I must say. Who does she think she's fooling?' (*TR*, 378; *IV* 569). In both scenes, Schopenhauer momentarily raises Mme de Cambremer's cultural capital, only for a Guermantes to put her back in her place.

Why Schopenhauer specifically is selected for this purpose is unclear. It is, however, ironic that in the same passage the Duchess is said to believe that ‘to be easily bored was a mark of intellectual superiority’, when she would have learned from reading Schopenhauer herself that proneness to boredom is a sign of mental inactivity and dullness (PP 1: 281).

In any case, two full mentions is not a bad score, comparatively speaking. The philosopher most mentioned in the novel, Plato, appears no more than ten times (according to Large’s [2001] count). Schopenhauer ranks below Nietzsche (six), Kant (five), and a handful of others, but he is at least on a par with Rousseau, and, perhaps most importantly, above his arch-rival Hegel, who gets one solitary mention (the same, surprising to some, as Bergson). To be mentioned at all, that is to say, is a rare distinction.

Plus, there is one more reference to Schopenhauer in the novel. It is implicit but unmistakable and rather important. The occasion is an intimate piano performance of Vinteuil’s sonata at the Swann household by Mme Swann herself, which prompts Swann to verbalise some reflections on the nature of music and conclude with the remark: ‘I’m merely trying to point out to this young fellow here that what music shows, to me at any rate, is nothing like “The Will-in-Itself”’ (*In the Shadow of Young Girls in Flower*, translated by James Grieve, London: Allen Lane, 2002 p. 109–110; I 524). Generations of readers in English might have missed this reference because the popular translation by Moncrieff, Kilmartin, and Enright goes with “the triumph of the Will” (*BG*, 124), giving it a Nietzschean ring. In the Pléiade edition, however, the original phrase, “Volonté en soi”, comes with a note suggesting that it may be a reference to Schopenhauer (citing Henry 1981). It is hard to imagine what else it could be: Swann must be disagreeing with Schopenhauer’s idiosyncratic theory that music is a direct manifestation of the will-to-life.

On Schopenhauer’s view, any analogy we sense between music and the world is not because music is a copy of the world, but because both are copies of the same thing: the will-to-life. Music seems abstractly to go through the same ordeal as a living being: relentlessly moving forward in time, building tensions repeatedly and finding resolution only temporarily, or resolving itself permanently only at the point of its temporal end. The structure of music, moreover, corresponds to the entire natural order; it encompasses all the levels of nature which, according to Schopenhauer, each individually correspond to a different art form. He suggests more than once, for example, that architecture corresponds to inorganic nature because it ‘reveal[s] the Ideas in which the will objectifies itself on the lowest levels, and at the same time contribute the deepest, lingering bass-tones of nature’ (*WWR* 1: 235). When music expresses a feeling, it is not ‘this or that individual and particular joy, this or that

sorrow or pain or horror or exaltation or cheerfulness or peace of mind, but rather joy, sorrow, pain, horror, exaltation, cheerfulness and peace of mind as such *in themselves*, abstractly' (WWR 1: 289).

At first Swann seems to come close to agreeing with Schopenhauer's theory by noting some strong general resemblances between music and nature: 'The moment when night is falling among the trees, when the arpeggios of the violin call down a cooling dew upon the earth' (*BG*, 122; I 523). As he goes on, however, it becomes clear that these are not just any trees but those of the Bois de Boulogne; the apparent mirroring of nature in music turns out to be Swann's own reminiscence on the scenes of his early courtship with Mme Swann, which was set to the tunes of Vinteuil. Rather than an independent copy of fundamental reality, then, music, to Swann, evokes something personal, private, and local. In an odd coincidence (or maybe not), shortly after this barely concealed reference to Schopenhauer, Mme de Cambremer becomes the topic of conversation once again: 'Hundreds of times', Swann says, 'without my leaving this room, the little phrase has carried me off to dine with it at Armenonville. Good God, it's less boring, anyhow, than having to go there with Mme de Cambremer' (*BG*, 124; I 524–25). Why Schopenhauer and Mme de Cambremer always go hand in hand is anyone's guess, but she never comes out of it well.

It is ironic that one of Proust's main characters – the one endowed with the greatest art-critical acumen, albeit for painting – disagrees with Schopenhauer on music, when it is over his theory of music that Proust's commentators have made some of the strongest claims for Schopenhauer's influence. Henry's (1981: 8) claim that Vinteuil's music was 'written by' Schopenhauer is endorsed, and elaborated on, by the musicologist Jean-Jacques Nattiez (1989: 78–87), who traces the thesis further back to Samuel Beckett: 'A book could be written on the significance of music in the work of Proust, in particular the music of Vinteuil ... The influence of Schopenhauer on this aspect of the Proustian demonstration is unquestionable' (Beckett 1931: 70). Beckett expands little on this programme of research.¹ He does, however, identify, as above, the point where Swann and Schopenhauer part ways: Swann personalises the 'little phrase' of Vinteuil's sonata with his own associations, 'spatialises what is extra-spatial, establishes it as the national anthem of his love' (Beckett 1931: 72). Schopenhauer, by contrast, insists that music is tainted when it imitates the image of the world: '*imagistic* music is reprehensible once and for all' (PP 2: 382). Unlike the other arts, music is not mediated by the Platonic Ideas of natural kinds, he thinks, and not apprehended in space but in time alone, that is, as a temporal sequence without a spatial location. Its elevation makes it not just transcendent but almost mystical: 'In every age',

Schopenhauer says, ‘people have played music without being able to give an account of it’. Even his own attempt, he says, ‘cannot do more than to present the explanation that I find personally satisfying of the marvellous musical art’ (WWR 1: 284).

‘Music’, Schopenhauer says, ‘is an unconscious exercise in metaphysics, in which the mind does not know that it is philosophizing’ (WWR 1: 292), parodying Leibniz’s mathematically minded view that it is an unconscious exercise in arithmetic (as again Beckett notes). The truths that music reveals are thus deep and timeless; it is not essentially evocative of specific times and places, as it is for Swann. If it were the fixed role of music in Proust’s novel to express the timeless, metaphysical essence of the world in the form of time alone, then this would make some sense of the Henry-Nattiez thesis that Schopenhauer ‘wrote’ the music of Vinteuil. But the thesis is doubtful because, in Swann’s case, whenever he hears the Vinteuil sonata, it only brings *his* life flooding back to him, rather than life itself. Years later, when Albertine plays Rameau and Borodin as well as Vinteuil to the Narrator, the images that the music summons are at least those of the wider world unseen to him: ‘now an eighteenth-century tapestry sprinkled with cupids and roses, now the Eastern steppe in which sounds are muffled by the boundless distances and the soft carpet of snow’ (C, 436; III 883–84). But even so, when the Narrator lectures Albertine on the significance of Vinteuil – imitating Swann not for the first or last time – he wavers between the hypothesis that music corresponds ‘to some define spiritual reality’ (C, 428; III 876), on the one hand, and the ‘materialist hypothesis’, on the other, that there is nothing especially profound about music at all (C, 435; III 883).

A further assumption would need to be made for the even stronger thesis that the form of Proust’s entire novel takes after Schopenhauer’s theory of music. This would be the assumption that literature, for Proust, aspires to music conceived along Schopenhauerian lines; that literature, too, aims comprehensively to express, in the form of time alone, the timeless truths that appear in the world as representation. Nattiez, for one, endorses this reading of Proust, ‘where music is treated as the ideal and Utopian model for literature’ (1989: 87). Certainly, by the end of the novel, the Narrator has at least ‘conceived the ambition to make visible, to intellectualise in a work of art, realities that were outside Time’ (TR, 298; IV 508–509). But it is hard to see how, for the diehard Schopenhauerian, literature can move any closer to music than this, since literature for Schopenhauer simply lacks the same essential quality of abstractness which is possessed by music. Non-musical art forms (at least those known to Schopenhauer) may express things ‘as such in themselves’ but only ever by representing idealised and extreme instances of this or that thing.

Instead of attempting to generalise Schopenhauer's theory of music as a guiding artistic principle for Proust's approach to literature, it would be better to pick up on Schopenhauer's own general thesis about the role of the arts: 'If the whole world as representation is only the visibility of the will, then art is the clarification of this visibility, the *camera obscura* that shows objects with greater purity and allows them to be surveyed and summarized more readily, the play within a play, *Hamlet's* stage upon the stage' (WWR 1: 295). Here we have not only a purifying clarification of the visible world – a recognisably Proustian aspiration – but also, as an outcome, a world within a world, as the strongly Schopenhauerian interpreters of Proust's novel seem to want it to be.

All this would be only if we accepted in the first place that Proust's novel is the transliteration of a monolithic philosophical principle. Several commentators have lined up to doubt that assumption. '*À la recherche* is a novel. It is not a philosophical treatise', says Thomas Baldwin (2013: 79), who quotes Vincent Descombes: Proust's 'task is not to illustrate philosophical themes, but to compose a narrative' (1992: 35). This has implications for the very notion that it is among Proust's objectives to make manifest a preferred, pre-existing philosophy, whether it be Schopenhauer's or someone else's. Duncan Large, who also follows Descombes, argues that, while Proust's first-hand knowledge of Nietzsche was 'no more than passing, his knowledge of Schopenhauer formed the basis for a response similar to that of Nietzsche himself' (2001: 26). Even if Proust was ultimately some sort of Nietzschean, then, it was largely by coincidence. Joshua Landy agrees, adding that while 'Proust is (without his knowledge) closer to Nietzsche than to any other philosopher ... Proust also goes *beyond* Nietzsche in certain respects' (2004: 6n.). Of course, while the novel is different from a philosophical treatise, this does not preclude it from expressing or entailing philosophical ideas, old and new; but the point is that it does other things besides, many of them not philosophical in their significance, and so we should be cautious about any attempt to use a specially selected philosophical system as the key to Proust's novel, or at least temper our expectations of what this approach is capable of unlocking.

A convincing instance of Proust's 'para-Nietzschean departure' (Landy 2004: 50n.) from Schopenhauer can be found, Large argues, in his presentations of aesthetic experience (Large 2004: 34–36). Building on Julia Kristeva's observation that Kantian disinterestedness is not an essential element of aesthetic experience for Proust – 'Proust combines the sacredness of music with erotic perversion' (Kristeva 1996: 264) – Large notes that this moves Proust fundamentally away from Schopenhauer and towards Nietzsche. As Nietzsche says: 'No less an authority than the divine Plato (– as Schopenhauer himself calls him) asserts

something else: that all beauty is a temptation to procreate, – that this is precisely the *proprium* of its effect, from the most sensual all the way up to the most spiritual’ (2005: 203). For Schopenhauer aesthetic experience is always in some sense ecstatic, but never erotic; for Nietzsche, it seems, it is always erotic, often ecstatic. For Proust, his characters are as capable of displaying the above Nietzschean sensual rapture as they are Kantian-Schopenhauerian disinterested mode of aesthetic perception. As an example of the latter, consider Swann’s detached contemplation of a group of initially ugly male faces:

‘even this ugliness of faces which of course were mostly familiar to him seemed something new now that their features – instead of being to him symbols of practical utility in the identification of this or that person who until then had represented merely so many pleasure to be pursued, boredoms to be avoided, or courtesies to be acknowledged – rested in the autonomy of their lines, measurable by aesthetic co-ordinates alone.’ (SW, 388; I 320–21)

Schopenhauer in Proust’s essays

While it may be doubted that Proust and his novel were, in fact, Schopenhauerian, no one can deny that he knew a good deal about Schopenhauer. He is said to have become familiar with the work of Schopenhauer through attending lectures by the aesthetician Gabriel Séailles between October 1894 and March 1895, during his bachelor’s degree at the Sorbonne, when he was also strongly influenced by the French neo-Kantian idealists Émile Boutroux and Alphonse Darlu. Proust attentively read psychologists Paul Janet and Théodule Ribot, who in turn wrote extensively on Schopenhauer (see Kristeva 1996: 159–69; Tadié 2000: 204; Baldwin 2013: 75; François 2017: 479).

In ‘Days of Reading’ (ASB, 195–233; CSB, 160–194), Proust shows off what must be first-hand acquaintance with Schopenhauer’s works. Proust ‘recalls’ a passage in *The World as Will and Representation* where Schopenhauer reels off a dozen or so quotations from other distinguished writers, all of which point generally to the same pessimistic conclusions as his: that suffering is essential to life, that it would be better never to have been born and for the world not to exist. The list includes Voltaire, Herodotus, Plutarch, Swift, Plato, Heraclitus, Sophocles, Euripides, Homer, Pliny, Shakespeare, Byron, and Gracián. The passage Proust has in mind can only be the final paragraphs of chapter 46 of the second volume of *The World as Will and Representation*, titled ‘On the Nothingness and Suffering in Life’. Judging by his near perfect accuracy – Proust only misses one writer, Giacomo Leopardi, but

correctly paraphrases the rest of them in exactly the same order as Schopenhauer – it seems likely that he had the book open in front of him (although, he was said to be gifted at memorising quotations verbatim; see Fraisse 2014: 61).

In the same essay, Proust refers to ‘Aphorisms on the Wisdom of Life’, a long section of the first volume of Schopenhauer’s late work *Parerga and Paralipomena* which is often published as a standalone book. Again Proust highlights Schopenhauer’s tendency to furnish his claims with a consensus of several quotations, while at the same time – and this is what Proust admires – evidently remaining an original thinker. He is impressed that Schopenhauer, despite how often he quotes others, can say in all seriousness: ‘Compilation is not my forte’. In fact, what Schopenhauer exactly says – ‘Kompilieren nicht meine Sache ist’ (SW 5: 334), ‘compilation is not my business’ – does not suggest a lack of talent for stringing together good quotations, but ultimately a lack of interest. It is not his primary aim to rehearse age old wisdom, even though they would, and do, corroborate his point of view.

Proust takes this as an opportunity to praise Schopenhauer, and here he can be taken at his word, unlike in his novel, because he writes in his own voice: ‘Schopenhauer ... offers us the image of a mind whose vitality wears the most enormous reading lightly, each new item of knowledge being at once reduced to its element of reality, to the portion of life that it contains’ (*ASB*, 217; *CSB*, 185). Schopenhauer has successfully navigated what Proust calls the ‘dangers of erudition’, that is, not by posing as unerudite as some philosophers do – Wittgenstein said of himself that no philosopher had read less philosophy (Britton 1967: 60–61), although he too had avidly read Schopenhauer – but instead by being extremely, openly erudite, and yet at the same time keeping life and the world in mind as his ultimate primary source.

This model of originality-despite-erudition differs, as it happens, from the one proposed by James Acheson (1978) to explain the tension in Beckett’s argument that on the one hand *À la recherche* derives from Schopenhauer and yet on the other Proust is an original thinker. Acheson explains that innovation lies in ‘original use of received materials’ (1978: 168), giving another example suggested by Beckett: that Joyce applied Vico’s theory of history to matters of literary style, that Vico in turn borrowed from Bruno, and Bruno from the philosophy of ancient Greece. A similar model is offered by Maurice E. Chernovitz (1945: 184), who lists Schopenhauer first among the sources that Proust synthesises. Proust’s understanding of how Schopenhauer maintained his originality, however, which could be reapplied to Proust himself, is not merely by fashioning an original synthesis or application of existing ideas, but by placing enough trust in the power of his intellectual faculties to verify

those ideas against his own observations of the world. This makes Schopenhauer himself, not the thinkers he quotes, the ultimate authority.

Proust is, furthermore, correct about Schopenhauer's relationship to his influences. Schopenhauer, too, is wary of erudition: 'Reading', he says, 'is a mere surrogate for one's own thinking', and for this reason, 'erudition makes most people even more stupid and simple than they already are by nature' (PP 2: 442). If one seeks to learn well from reading, one must assimilate, integrate, and organise the materials taken from books into the unity of one's own thoughts, which inevitably requires some amount of thinking for oneself: 'For only through the universal combination of what we know, and comparing every truth with every other, do we completely assimilate our own knowledge and take control of it' (PP 2: 441). And in any case, according to Schopenhauer, 'all who think for themselves are basically in agreement, and their difference arises only as one of standpoint', which explains Schopenhauer's tendency, as Proust notices, to quote liberally. As Schopenhauer explains it: 'Often I was pleasantly surprised afterwards to find formulations in ancient works by great men of propositions that I had hesitated to bring before the public because of their paradoxical nature' (PP 2: 445). They give courage, that is, but not content.

Proust, like Schopenhauer, was an anti-reader: voraciously well read, yet suspicious of reading. There are, moreover, some further details on which they agree about reading. At its best, it is a miraculous meeting of minds. However, despite this 'fertile miracle of a communication effected in solitude' (*ASB*, 208; *CSB*, 174), Proust rejects Ruskin's suggestion that reading should occupy a preponderant role in our intellectual lives for reasons that are, once again, reminiscent of Schopenhauer's own suspicions of reading. On Proust's reckoning, Ruskin recounts 'a sort of beautiful Platonic myth', that the ancients revealed almost all the true ideas and left it to the moderns to unpack them by reading and study. Schopenhauer would say that the convergence of minds between the ancients and the moderns, at least in the case of true authentic thinkers, such as himself, is explained by them drawing upon the same original source – life, the world – rather than one borrowing from the other.

Here, however, Proust and Schopenhauer begin to part ways. Proust never concedes, of course, that we merely borrow content from greater writers of the past, but he does see some virtues in the limitations of reading. Specifically, where Schopenhauer sees reading as a mere substitute for thinking for oneself, Proust sees it as an enticement to do so. A few beautiful and original sentences from a great writer, in Proust's experience, conjure up a hidden world but offer us only a partial glimpse. The reader wants more, longing to see how

the world would look if only the writer had turned their eye to this or that feature. Unless the writer has done so, however, this longing only becomes active by us looking for ourselves: ‘The supreme effort of the writer as of the artist only succeeds in raising partially for us the veil of ugliness and insignificance that leaves us incurious before the universe. Then does he say: “Look, look”’ (*ASB*, 211; *CSB*, 178). For Schopenhauer, perhaps disingenuously, reading is barely a cognitive activity; for Proust, by contrast, it is erotic in the Platonic sense of inspiring a truth-seeking that is guided by the sense of beauty, and pedagogic in the Socratic sense of marking the limits of wisdom while at the same time demonstrating its power. ‘We feel very strongly’, Proust says, combining both, ‘that our own wisdom begins where that of the author leaves off, and we would like him to provide answers when all he is able to do is to provide us with desires’ (*ASB*, 210; *CSB*, 176). If Schopenhauer exerted an influence on Proust, then perhaps it was of this kind.

Willing in Proust and Schopenhauer

Proust and Schopenhauer share, among other things, a preoccupation with states of will. When they speak about the will, however, they often have different issues in mind.

A central concern for Proust, for instance, is weakness of will. At one point the Narrator, having stumbled into Jupien’s sado-masochistic brothel, describes lack of willpower as the ‘greatest of all vices’ (*TR*, 180; *IV* 414) since it enables all the other vices to dominate. The Narrator’s own weakness of will, by comparison, seems far less vicious, even tame: he has neglected his own obvious talent as a writer. He associates his weakness of will with the decline in his health, indicating some sort of physio-pathological basis, and dates them both (twice: *TR*, 243-4; *IV* 465 and *TR* 446-7; *IV* 621) to the moment in his childhood when he first broke from his parents’ authority by demanding, successfully, a goodnight kiss from his mother (*SW*, 14-5, 31–50; *I* 13, 32–41), connecting up the first and final volumes of the novel. It is one irony that this defiantly wilful act precipitates a generalised weakness of will, and it is another that an involuntary event restores the Narrator’s willpower back to him. For it is not until the epiphany brought on by a series of involuntary memories that the Narrator is literally revitalised – ‘now that three times in succession there had been reborn within me a veritable moment of the past, my appetite for life was immense’ (*TR*, 223; *IV* 450) – and that he recommits to his vocation, despite all the will this must require.²

Schopenhauer’s philosophy is in many ways a philosophy of the will *par excellence*. It rests on the insight that we experience ourselves in two aspects: once as a representing

subject, and once as a subject of will. As a subject of will, we are granted access to ourselves as objects in a way that is *sui generis* different from our access to other objects of representation. Were it not for this inner insight, speculative metaphysical inquiry would be neither possible nor necessary, for we would be forced simply to assume that there is nothing to external objects beyond their representations (WWR 1: 123–27). Schopenhauer proceeds to decipher the whole world, from the basic laws of nature to animal behaviour and the wide variety of human endeavours, on the assumption that they are various manifestations of a common essence that he finds within himself, the will-to-life.

But he is, by contrast to Proust, only peripherally concerned with willpower and weakness of will. This is because the will, to Schopenhauer, is not a legislative faculty that constrains, licenses, or moderates our desires and wishes: it *is* our desires and wishes, and our striving to achieve them. Schopenhauer barely even believes in the volitional faculty that is supposed to perform such a function, namely practical reason, and certainly not in the Kantian sense (WWR 2: 157; BM: 122). Reason never determines the ends of our actions – the will as distinct from reason does that – but at best it devises the means for achieving them. At most, maxims of action are relevant to moral life in the ‘struggle against the weakness of the moment, and [in] lending consistency to action’ (WWR 1: 83; see BM: 205–206). ‘Ultimately’, Schopenhauer adds, ‘reason does the same for art, where it has just as little to do with the essential business, but supports its execution, since genius is not at one’s beck and call, and yet the work must still be perfected in all’.

Despite these differences, commentators have drawn comparisons between Schopenhauer and Proust over specific states of the will: for example, sexual desire. As one of Schopenhauer’s commentators, Patrick Gardiner, puts it: Schopenhauer traces ‘the sinuous paths, the subtle guises, taken by sexual feeling with an assiduity comparable to his admirer Proust, while at the same time (again like Proust) manifesting a complete disbelief in its capacity to reach any kind of final contentment or satisfaction’ (1963: 177).³ There are a few different thoughts in this. One is that sexual desire must take on guises at all: on Schopenhauer’s view, in fact, all forms of romantic love are the sex drive in disguise, as detailed in his influential chapter on the metaphysics of sexual love (WWR 2: 547–582). This sounds deflationary, but Schopenhauer prefers to think of it as a form of realism. After all, he does not believe that love is a fiction (as some aphorists suggest: ‘True love is like visitation by ghosts; everyone talks about such things, but few people have seen them’, La Rochefoucauld 2007: 25) but only that its reality is not what we tend to think. The reality of romantic love, according to Schopenhauer, is the species’ interest in making suitable matches

masquerading as the individual's interest in personal happiness. Romantic intensity is explained by the high stakes from the point of view of the species, namely its very survival. High romantic ideals – which, Schopenhauer believes, truly are fictions – help the species to achieve its end, sexual reproduction, after which they are jettisoned. For this reason, sexual desire is essentially connected to disillusionment and disappointment for Schopenhauer. Indeed, this goes for desire in general for Schopenhauer, which always sets out with inflated and vain hopes for an impossibly ultimate form of consummation.

We see the same dynamic between desire, idealisation, and disappointment repeatedly played out in Proust's novel, especially in the early volumes, whose characters, including the Narrator, are beset by ideals of love, ones they have derived from art and literature as well as ones they have modelled on others, or simply invented for themselves. Swann, for example, can only find begin to find Odette physically attractive once he has discovered her likeness in a photograph of Zipporah from Botticelli's Sistine chapel fresco (*SW*, 265–7; I 219–20). A formative disappointment for the young Narrator is the disparity between the image of the Duchess de Guermantes that he had built up in his head, and the one that he spots at the wedding of Doctor Percepied's daughter – the real one, with a red face and a pimple flaring up at the corner of her nose. Like Swann, the Narrator takes a second look through the eyes of a would-be artist, to touch up the image in accordance with his desires and thereby reverse the disappointment: 'my eyes resting upon her fair hair, her blue eyes, the lines of her neck, and overlooking the features which might have reminded me of the faces of other women, I cried out within myself as I admired this deliberately unfinished sketch: "How lovely she is! ..."' (*SW*, 210; I 174). On this occasion the Narrator's initial disappointment does not follow sexual consummation – it is not even on the table – although it will on later occasions. Here it is the failure of an artistic sort of consummation: that is, the ineluctable features of visible reality never quite match up to the ideals of his imagination as shaped by his romantic desires, except by a creative and wilful form of self-deception. Both the Narrator and Swann are compelled by erotic forces that they do not yet consciously understand, while being led by idealised images, crafted by themselves, which for a time allow them to feel that they do.

The Narrator experiences a couple more failures of artistic consummation – a performance by La Berma, a meeting with Bergotte – these ones not just the failure of life in its raw form to present itself artistically but the failure of artists to present themselves as such, at least according to his then image of what an artist is. Around the same time he draws a series of deeply Schopenhauerian conclusions from the pain of his recent sexual awakening, the object of which is about to transfer from Gilberte to Albertine: for example, 'There can be

no peace of mind in love, since what one has obtained is never anything but a new starting-point for further desires' (*BG*, 180; I 571). Once Albertine has later fled his captivity, he realises that even if she were to return to him, it would never make him happy:

'whatever joy I might feel at the moment of her return, I sensed that very soon the same difficulties would recur and that to seek happiness in the satisfaction of a desire of the mind was as naïve as to attempt to reach the horizon by walking straight ahead. The further the desire advances, the further does real possession recede. So that if happiness, or at least the absence of suffering, can be found, it is not the satisfaction, but the gradual reduction and the eventual extinction of desire that one should seek.' (*F*, 514; IV 33–34)

There is barely a word in this passage that Schopenhauer would not agree with. That joy, if possible, is short-lived; that it is quickly replaced with pain; that desiring has no terminus and is certainly no route to happiness; that the closest possible thing to happiness is not some final satisfaction of the will but rather its negation; and that this can only be achieved by the eventual elimination of our desires – all these things, Schopenhauer thought too:

'It is no more possible for some satisfaction to stop the will from willing new things than it is for time to begin or end. The will can have no lasting fulfilment that gives perfect and permanent satisfaction to its strivings ... there is no highest good, no absolute good for the will, but rather only ever a temporary good. But if we would like to retain an old expression out of habit, giving it honorary or emeritus status, as it were, we might figuratively call the complete self-abolition and negation of the will ... the absolute good, the *summum bonum*' (WWR 1: 389).

On another occasion, however, the Narrator portrays an almost polar alternative to Schopenhauer's way of dealing with disappointment by eliminating desire. The Narrator tells us that Bergotte had lived an apparently simple life in the years running up to his death except for his expensive indulgence of countless young women. For Bergotte, remaining erotically active at all costs was a condition of his artistic productivity for several reasons. One: 'pleasure that is at all rooted in the flesh is helpful to literary work because it cancels all others pleasures (*C*, 203; III 688). In particular, it stopped him wanting to go out. Secondly, it seems, maintenance of his libido simply kept him going: 'restoring some degree of movement to a spiritual machine which, after a certain age, tends to come to a standstill'. But, most importantly, Bergotte values his desires not because their satisfaction makes him happy; he is

prone, in fact, ‘to despise a thing ... as soon as he had attained it’. By vainly pursuing his desires he gains, instead of happiness, ‘some insights into the reasons which prevent us from being happy and which would have remained invisible to us but for these sudden revelations of disappointment’. He values them, that is, *for* their disappointments, at least insofar as these disappointments illuminate aspects of life that he can then transform into literature (to transform into money, to transform into women, to transform into further disappointment...). It still not doubted here, however, that desire inevitably does lead to disappointment.

Gardiner (1963: 195) draws a further comparison between Schopenhauer and Proust on the topic of what is perhaps Proust’s best-known motif: involuntary memory. He has the following passage from Schopenhauer in mind:

‘it is ... the blessing of a will-less intuition that, through an act of self-deception, it casts such a wonderful spell over things in the past or far away, presenting them to us in a so much rosier light. This is because when we picture days long past spent in a distant place, our imagination recalls only the objects, not the subject of the will, a subject that carried its incurable sufferings around with it then as well as now: but these have been forgotten because they have since made way for so many others. Now objective intuition operates in memory just as intuition of the present *would* operate if we were able to free ourselves from the will and surrender ourselves to intuition. That is why sudden memories of past and distant scenes fly past us like a lost paradise, especially when some difficulty troubles us more than usual’ (WWR 1: 222).⁴

As Gardiner notes, Schopenhauer’s claim is that memory is often accompanied by the same will-lessness that is, according to him, characteristic of all aesthetic perception. This is because the object of perception is recalled without the will of the subject. Consequently, our memory of things is sunnier than we should expect, at least by comparison to the constant misery of the present – ‘happiness always lies in the future, or in the past, and the present is like a small dark cloud driven by the wind over the sunlit plains’ (WWR 2: 588).

Superficially, there are similarities between Schopenhauer and Proust on this score. For a start, Schopenhauer’s mere mention of the scenes of memory as a ‘lost paradise’ calls to mind Proust’s line which is in many ways programmatic for the entire novel: ‘the true paradises are the paradises that we have lost’ (*TR*, 222; VI 449). The primary way to recover lost paradises, according to the Narrator’s final reflections, is through memory. Furthermore,

memory for Proust as for Schopenhauer is akin to aesthetic experience, at least with respect to the delightful – if, in Schopenhauer’s case, dispassionate – pleasures that they can afford.

As Acheson (1978: 173) correctly notes, however, none of the above similarities show that Schopenhauer foreshadowed Proust’s specific version of involuntary memories. There is a crucial difference between what Schopenhauer means by will-lessness and Proust by involuntariness: namely, Schopenhauer may or may not have in mind memories that are called up at will, for what is important to him is that the object of memory no longer affects the will in the way that it once did, whereas for Proust the only interesting kind of memories, the ones from which the events of his novel flow, are specifically those that cannot be recalled at will. For this reason, as Large argues, ‘Compared to Schopenhauer’s conception of “involuntary” memory, Proust’s is undoubtedly more will-less’ (2001: 189).

In defence of Schopenhauer, these commentators make their remarks in the light of Schopenhauer’s all too brief claims about will-less memory in *The World as Will and Representation*. In the later *Parerga and Paralipomena*, Schopenhauer finesses his views on memory over a series of aphorisms (§§348–354) which bring him at least a little closer to Proust. There are still traces there of Schopenhauer’s original view: for example, in memory the past is presented less sorrowfully – but also, interestingly, and quite consistently, less joyfully – ‘because *joy and sorrow* are not representations but affections of the will’ (PP 2: 542). But among the things that he adds to his view, he includes the thought that memory is a capacity for searching one’s past, rather than simply a repository for storing it, and that this capacity is assisted by condensing memories into intuitive images, whether they be metonyms, similes, or analogies, adding that the imagistic nature of memory explains why we can more easily access experiences rather than abstractions, for example those abstractions taken from reading (PP 2: 543–44). He adds that in life there are moments of heightened receptivity and clarity of perception, which may occur without any special external cause, ‘such that afterwards these moments remain indelibly impressed on our memory and are preserved in their entire individuality without our knowing why, nor why they alone stand out from so many thousands similar to them’; he even suggests that these are ‘the *mosaic tiles* from which the memory portrait of our lives is composed’ (PP 2: 545). Finally, Schopenhauer suggests a kind of involuntariness of memory that is different from his earlier notion of will-less memory. First, he mentions banal forms of it: for example, when we are having trouble consciously recalling a word or name, so we give up, only to find that the name comes to us hours or weeks later, as if it were ‘whispered to me by someone’ (PP 2: 544). Then he gives the following example, which is reminiscent of Proustian involuntary memory if anything is:

‘That occasionally long forgotten scenes will suddenly and vividly enter our memory, apparently without any cause, may happen because we just now sensed the same delicate fragrance from long ago, which has not quite reached our clear consciousness. For it is well known that fragrances awaken memories with particular ease, and everywhere the association of ideas needs only an extremely slight push’ (PP 2: 545)

There is, however, one more apparent point of convergence between Schopenhauer and Proust which sees them, once again, part ways once the details are developed. This is that in both Proustian involuntary memory and Schopenhauerian will-less memory, assuming that the latter is modelled on Schopenhauer’s account of aesthetic experience, there is a mutually corresponding transformation of the subject and the object such that both are in some way de-temporalised. In Schopenhauer’s case, the subject of aesthetic experience is elevated to the ‘*pure, will-less, painless, timeless subject of cognition*’ while the object ‘is no longer the individual thing as such, but rather the *Idea*, the eternal form’ (WWR 1: 201). In Proust’s case, his Narrator can enjoy the impressions of involuntary memory ‘because in some way they were extra-temporal’ and because, correlatively, he discovers within himself a being ‘in the one and only medium which it could enjoy the essence of things, that is to say: outside time’ (TR, 223; IV 450). However, for Proust, it is essential to their correlation that this extra-temporal being is having these extra-temporal impressions seemingly simultaneously in the past and in the present. It is crucial to the special kind of aesthetic experience that involuntary memory is because, insofar as it is past, the impression can be enjoyed as an object of the imagination, but insofar it is present, it is real – whereas, ordinarily, reality is disappointing and only the imaginary pleases and delights (TR, 223-5; IV 450–51). There is nothing quite like this in Schopenhauer; his suggestion, rather, is that memory enables us to apprehend the past just as we would apprehend the present if only we achieved the aesthetic, that is, will-less, mode of perception while it is happening, not that a certain class of memories enables an extraordinary apprehension of the past and the present at once.

In the bigger picture this puts a world of difference between Proust and Schopenhauer. For Schopenhauer, to be a will-less, timeless subject of cognition is to *lose* oneself and one’s cares. By contrast, part of why the Narrator is so triumphantly jubilant at his discovery of involuntary memory is that, through it, he *gains* a more substantial sense of his enduring self; he has become timeless in the sense that he has finally retrieved himself from the flow of time. This jubilation must be understood in the light of the Narrator’s initial

anxieties about the passage of time, which set in early on with his ‘suspicion [...] that I was not situated somewhere outside Time, but was subject to its laws, just like those characters in novels who, for that reason, used to plunge me into such gloom.’ These anxious fears are presented to the reader in conjunction with his mother’s anxious hope that ‘a definite rule of life should discipline the vagaries of [his] nervous system’ (*BG*, 63; I 473). Both of them, that is, are worried that, due to his weakness of will, he would never make something of himself; but himself, he later finds, is precisely what he has been making all along.⁵

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SW *Swann’s Way*

BG *Within a Budding Grove*

G *The Guermantes Way*

SG *Sodom and Gomorrah*

C *The Captive*

F *The Fugitive*

TR *Time Regained*

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¹ See Acheson (1978) and Pothast (2013) for discussions of Beckett, Proust, and Schopenhauer.

² On weakness of will and its pathological basis, see Fraisse (2014); on the various dimensions of the 'contra-voluntary' in Proust, see Moran (2017: 101–120).

³ Gardiner (1963) is one of several Schopenhauer scholars to note the connection to Proust. Most include Proust in long lists of artists and writers known to have been influenced by Schopenhauer, e.g., Diffey (1996), Janaway (2002), Jacquette (2005), Singh (2010), Bishop (2012), Lewis (2012), Vasalou (2013) Shapshay (2017), Howard (2020), Schroeder (2020). Some specify an instance of where they overlap, e.g., Safranski (1991: 216) on engrossing aesthetic experiences; Nussbaum (1999: 353) on the influence of will on perception; and Magee (1997: 406) on suffering and the negativity of happiness.

⁴ For an illuminating and detailed analysis of this passage, see Poellner (forthcoming).

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