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Une Chambre Mentale: Proust's Solitude.

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I reached the fourth door, opened it without knocking, pushed aside the heavy curtain on the other side...and went in. The smoke was so thick you could have cut it with a knife...All I could see of M. Proust was a white shirt under a thick sweater, and the upper part of his body propped against two pillows. His face was hidden in the shadows and the smoke from the fumigation, completely invisible except for the eyes looking at me-and I felt rather than saw them...I bowed toward the invisible face and put the saucer with the croissant down on the tray. He gave a wave of the hand, presumably to thank me, but didn't say a word. Then I left.
Céleste Albaret¹

Few writer's rooms are quite so emblematic as the strange solipsistic environment of Proust's cork-lined bedchamber at his second storey apartment at no. 102 Boulevard Haussmann, and fewer still have acquired such an integral relationship to the understanding of its author. Yet, the relationship of literature to the place in which it is produced has generally been a neglected issue in literary studies. This matter immediately raises a number of questions about how we conceive of such a relationship. What relationship exists between the space that Proust wrote in and the work he created, and did his ideas about literature shape the environment he created to write in? In a period of the ascendance of biographical approaches and the increasing consciousness of authors and artists about their public persona, to what extent does Proust's apartment need to be seen not simply as a private space but as a space of literary self-fashioning? In short are we to see the author's apartment simply as a passive context for writing or as part of the actual conditions of literary production?

Proust moved into the apartment at the boulevard Haussmann, one of the fashionable new Parisian boulevards, in 1906, and it was here he began *A la recherche du temps perdu*. It might be said that it was while he was at this address that he first became a novelist, for despite a prolific output of short stories, literary sketches and criticism for newspapers and symbolist reviews, to date his early aspirations as a novelist had resulted in only the aborted *Jean Santeuil*.² Proust was to stay at the Boulevard Haussmann for the next thirteen years semi-invalided

¹ Céleste Albaret, *Monsieur Proust*, ed. George Belmont, Macgraw Hill: New York, 1973, p.16.

² On Proust's development toward *A la recherche du temps perdu* see the essay by John Sturrock in *Marcel Proust, Against Saint-Beuve and Other Essays*, ed. John Sturrock, Penguin: London, 1988, pp.vii-xi. It should be noted that

for much of the time due to the gradual worsening of severe asthma he had contracted as a child, and it was in the apartment's bedroom that doubled as a studio, he wrote most of the manuscript of his novel.³ The apartment on the Boulevard Haussmann therefore holds a special place in accounts of the writer's life and his quest to become a writer.

The apartment on Boulevard Haussmann no longer exists, Proust's study, is now the boardroom of a commercial bank's headquarters, but, nevertheless, the bedroom has been reconstructed at the *Musée Carnavalet*, albeit in the form it took after Proust had been evicted to a small apartment rue Hamelin, where he spent the last months before his death in 1922. Preserved with its original furniture, this fragment of Proust's room is presented like a pristine time capsule located among a group of other historical reliquaries, that include Marie Antoinette's slipper, Robespierre's shaving bowl, pottery from the revolution, an art nouveau interior by Fouquet, of a jewellery shop built in 1900 and the cork lined bedroom of the poet the Comtesse Anne de Noailles, who like Proust, shared her friend's preference for writing while semi-recumbent in bed.⁴ The Carnavalet décor presents display shows the heavy wooden furnishings offset by delicate of Oriental decoration and fabrics, including a decorative Chinese screen depicting an exterior scene, set against the famous pale blond cork-lined tiled walls, an ensemble whose combination of Occidental and Oriental furnishings is typical of the eclectic rococo revival style of the Second Empire, in which the French style of domestic interior was relieved by the taste for exotic fantasy that alluded to the colonial spaces far beyond the boundaries of Europe.

Few exhibits speak so eloquently of the powers of the museum to transform the objects in its collection. Contemporary visitors to Proust's apartment record a very different impression of his living quarters, portraying them as an altogether more austere and theatricalised space. Though the large second storey apartment contained eleven rooms Proust generally confined his movements to the bedroom, the adjoining rooms of which included the main salon and a private dressing room and bathroom the doorway leading to which was located immediately next

Proust claimed that much of *Du Cote du chez Swann*, the first volume of the series had been written when he was but fourteen. Proust's first collection of stories and literary sketches, *Les Plaisirs et les jours* was published in 1896.

³ Though Proust continually complained about his apartment and the problems the location posed for his health, he appears to have been very attached to it. He remained at the apartment during the German bombing of Paris in the first World War, even when a bomb crashed nearby in the rue d'Athènes, leaving only due to his forced eviction in 1919, after his aunt, the heir to the Weil estate, sold the building to this private bank, an eviction that Céleste Albaret, his housekeeper and sometime confidant, blamed for his premature death at forty. See Ronald Hayman, *Proust: A Biography*, Carroll & Graf: New York, 1992, pp. 439-442.

⁴ On Proust's friendship with de Noailles see William Carter, *Marcel Proust*, Yale University Press: New Haven and London, 2000, pp. 271-74.

to the bed. Unlike in his family home in the rue de Courcelles, Proust excluded all images from the walls of his bedroom at the Boulevard Haussmann, though portraits were hung in other parts of the apartment, notably in the main salon where the portraits of his father and mother were displayed and the small adjacent salon where the famous portrait of Proust as a young man by Jacques Emile Blanche, was placed.⁵ The only concessions to the visual arts in his bedroom were a small white statuette of the infant Jesus, which he placed on the marble top of his mother's rosewood chest where he kept the black leather notebooks of the manuscript of his novel, his rosary and a cache of photographs of relatives, friends and actresses that served as aides memoirs for his novel, and a photograph of himself and his brother Robert as children, which he always kept on view.⁶ In this somewhat sequestered room the sedentary Proust would lie in bed in a regal Japanese housecoat, writing in the multiple black bound notebooks that together contain the unfinished manuscript of *A la recherche du temps perdu*, working generally in the evening and through the night.⁷

The detailed description in the memoirs of his housekeeper and *bonne à tout*, Céleste Albaret, depicts his bedchamber as a dark, cramped room placed at the very end of the apartment.⁸ Proust's bed was placed discreetly at its furthest distance at the furthest remove from the windows. From the vantage point of his bed Proust could survey the three entrances into the room but was himself partially screened from view at the entrance of the main salon doorway by the densely arranged furniture. The predominant colour scheme of the room, consistent with the apartment as a whole, was bronze and black with parquet floors. The reminiscences of Proust's *habitués* mention that the blonde cork-lined tiles, that Proust had installed to reduce the noise from his neighbours and the boulevard, which he never got around to covering with wallpaper, had become discoloured due to the daily fumigations of Legras powder that created an odour so strong neighbours complained about it. And that the dimly lit interior, whose windows were covered by the always drawn shutters and curtains, took on the curious ambience of an austere stage

⁵ Previously at the rue de Courcelles he had at least four pictures on the wall a watercolour by Marie Nordlinger given to him by the artist, photographic reproductions of Whistler's *Portrait of Thomas Carlyle* and da Vinci's *La Gioconda*, and a photograph of Amiens Cathedral. In discussing the question of visibility in the arrangement of Proust's bedroom Fuss also points out that while the room contained two mirrors, which were positioned to be out of view from Proust's vantage point in bed. See Diana Fuss, *The Sense of an Interior: Four Writers and the Rooms that Shaped Them*, Routledge: New York and London, 2004, pp. 82-83.

⁶ *Op. cit.*, pp. 195-202.

⁷ On Proust's work habits see Marcel Proust, *Correspondance de Marcel Proust*, ed. Philip Kolb, 21 vols., Plon: Paris, 1970-93, vol. 5, pp. 427 and Ronald Hayman, *op. cit.*, pp. 294-335.

⁸ Céleste Albaret, *op. cit.*, p. 230.

set, as Cocteau suggested in his account of his visits to Proust.⁹ This impression would have been enhanced by the heavy velvet curtains inside the doorways that gave on to the darkened space, invariably illuminated by only by the small green lamp on the bedside table (despite the presence of a large electric chandelier); the lamplight like a spotlight picked out the author tucked in his bed at the end of the room. Arranged next to the bed were three small tables on which were placed the implements of the writer (Proust's pens, inkwell, notebooks, his watch), an assortment of books, handkerchiefs and hot water bottles, and a copious supply of coffee and Evian water.¹⁰

The memoirs of those close to Proust emphasise the secluded and eccentric existence he led for the last half of his life, an existence that has accordingly acquired its own mythic dimensions.¹¹ While the distance Proust took from society was in part as a result of his declining health, it was also a conscious decision to devote himself henceforth to writing, for, according to Proust, his early literary ambitions had been frustrated and compromised by the busy social life he led in fashionable Parisian society. Whether this was true or not the idea took on great explanatory force for the author and his later more solitary life absorbed by writing became a way of redeeming his own sense of time lost. The organising theme of *A la recherche du temps perdu* of the struggle of the young protagonist, also named Marcel, who having tasted the pleasures of love and society devotes himself to becoming a writer, mirrors the course of Proust's own life, encouraging perhaps too readily a view of the book as a fictionalised memoir. The biographical circumstances that led to Proust's later reclusion present a more complex psychological picture than his own account paints but one that again finds its mirror image in the novel Proust wrote. *A la recherche du temps perdu* begins and ends under the shadow of death, a death that hovers over the narrator; the search for lost time is in essence a search also for the lost objects of the past and the apartment at the boulevard Haussmann was a space over which the spectre of death hung heavily.¹²

Proust moved into the apartment at the boulevard Haussmann following the deaths in short succession of his father and mother.¹³ The death of his mother in 1905, to whom he had remained inordinately devoted to since childhood, greatly distressed Proust and profoundly shaped the course of his future. Proust, who had remained alone in his bedroom rather than face his mother on her deathbed, lay for almost two months in sleepless seclusion in the

⁹ Jean Cocteau. *Opium*, Peter Owen: London, 1990, p. 94-98.

¹⁰ Céleste Albaret, *op. cit.*, pp., 273-75.

¹¹ On this see Ronald Hayman, *op. cit.*, pp. 327-345.

¹² On the theme of death in *A la recherche du temps perdu* see Malcolm Bowie, *Proust Among the Stars*, Harper and Collins: London, 1998, pp. 267-318

¹³ See Ronald Hayman, *op.cit.*, pp. 239-247.

parental apartment obsessively writing letters of condolence to anyone he discovered had experienced bereavement, even perfect strangers. In the aftermath he spent six weeks in a private clinic. During this time his nocturnal and neurotic behaviour, which had long estranged him from his family, became more pronounced than ever. Traumatic as this experience was it also served to make him financially independent for the first time and released him from the burden of a parental expectation that weighed heavily upon him. The mother's death may indeed be said to have released him to become a writer and her death, which finds expression in the novel in the narrator's mourning of his grandmother in *Sodome et Gomorrhe*, clarified for him the great preoccupation with the theme of love and loss that prevails within his work, a theme which he had previously failed to conceptualise in his earlier writing.

Although Proust's decision to leave the family home in the rue de Courcelles suggests an intention to move away from the memories of the past, he quickly set about re-constructing a space where those memories would be embedded. Proust's choice of the second floor apartment Boulevard Haussmann in 1906 was probably motivated by sentimental reasons. The apartment had previously been occupied by his great-uncle Louis Weil, who had died a few years earlier; Proust accompanied by his mother had watched Weil die in the very bedroom he would later occupy. Most of the furniture pieces that adorned Proust's bedchamber were heirlooms most particularly from his deceased mother, these included a Boulle worktable inscribed with her initials and the lacquered black grand piano that was placed at the centre of the room.¹⁴ These inanimate objects, mute witnesses invested with vestigial memories of Proust's childhood and lost relatives thus functioned as memorial icons that bore the presence of time past. The apartment thus in one respect became a space of memory and mourning filled with the signs of the presence of the lost object of the mother. Are we to see Proust's regression into a dependent bedridden state as in some degree a regression to a primary state of narcissistic identification with the lost body of the mother? The dark, womb-like space of the almost hermetically sealed bedroom might suggest so.

In his essay *Mourning and Melancholy* Freud explored the similarity between two states of mind that share in common traits of psychical conflict that may express themselves variously through all consuming forms of exclusion, inhibition, illness, sleeplessness and the cessation of interest in the outside world combined with self-reproach, self-reviling and delusional expectations of punishment, all of which serve to psychically prolong the

¹⁴ The furniture in Proust's bedroom also included pieces originally belonging to his father's library (revolving bookcases, an armchair and his father's writing desk) and to Louis Weil as well (the large writing desk placed by the window which Proust never used, preferring to write in bed instead). Unwilling to submit to his brother's wish to auction family furniture, those pieces Proust could not accommodate in his apartment were placed into storage. See Diana Fuss, *op. cit.*, pp., 165-75 and Ronald Hayman *op. cit.*, pp. 242-47.

existence of the lost object.¹⁵ In both instances Freud describes two kinds of narcissistic identification with the lost object, whether actual in the case of mourning or delusional in the case of melancholia, and suggests that a subject's desire to prolong the act of mourning can lead to forms of regression or forms of anticathexes in which the subject may seek to incorporate or internalise the lost object or in which the lost object is experienced as overwhelming the subject's ego. The notion of a reversion to a primary narcissistic identification with the lost object may perhaps shed some light on the particular form of mourning that Proust underwent and the peculiar living arrangements he created for himself at the apartment at the boulevard Haussmann.

The explanatory force of such biographical observations are important in explaining Proust's secluded existence in the latter part of his short life and the impression it makes upon his writing, but the preoccupation with Proust's life has threatened to overshadow the actual work he produced or at least to reduce it to a literary memoir. Recent interpretation has sought to redress this emphasis and counter some of the legends that have arisen about the author. The portrayal of Proust as literary *isole* has been challenged by recent revisionist accounts of his life, that have both questioned the terms of this characterisation and, given the many parallels between Proust's life and his novel, the tendency to read *A la recherche du temps perdu* simply and straightforwardly as a thinly veiled biography.¹⁶ In his much acclaimed life of Proust, Jean-Yves Tadié has challenged this line of thought putting the author back at the epicentre of his own times.¹⁷ Complicating the portrait of Proust as an artist who cut himself away from society, Tadié emphasises Proust's continuing ties to the Parisian literati, his awareness of the movements within fashionable society, as well as his very evident engagement with the intellectual currents of his time. As Tadié has shown, despite long periods of seclusion Proust received frequent visits from friends, had a regular and engrossing nocturnal life at a local brothel which even contained some of his furniture, and periodically made forays

¹⁵ Sigmund Freud, 'Melancholy and Mourning', in *On Metapsychology: The Theory of Psychoanalysis*, ed. Angela Richards, Pelican Freud Library vol. 11, Pelican Books: London, 1984, pp. 245-268 See also Freud's essay, 'On Narcissism', in Sigmund Freud, *op. cit.*, pp. 59-98.

¹⁶ While early biographies like George Painter's tended to use Proust's fiction as a source for gleaning biographical information, recent interpreters of Proust like Jean-Yves Tadié have heavily criticised this approach. *A la recherche du temps perdu* is no memoir, but the writer in dispersing and fictionalising various aspects of his biography and the haute milieu of Paris, might be said to negotiate a series of imaginary interventions into, identifications with and disavowals of the milieu he writes of. See George Painter *Marcel Proust; A Biography*, Chatto and Windus: London, 1959, 1965 and Jean-Yves Tadié, *Marcel Proust*, Editions Gallimard: Paris, 1996, p. 267.

¹⁷ Jean-Yves Tadié, *op. cit.*.

into the high society he'd left behind, though as Tadié acknowledges these increasingly had the character of reconnaissance missions in which Proust gathered new material for his novel.¹⁸

These lines of critique have usefully served to revise our understanding of the relationship Proust had to the outside world. The relationship of Proust to his society was, as Shattuck has written, a more complex and contradictory one than supposed. Proust might be said to have treated writing a continuation of life by other means. Reversing the stereotypes of Proust the enfeebled agraphobic, Shattuck characterises the author as one of the great megalomaniacs of literature, who was “unwilling (in part because of his semi-invalid condition in later years) to relinquish any small hold he could gain over other people by writing.”¹⁹ At the beginning of *Du Cote de chez Swann* the young Marcel learns how to manipulate his mother from the confines of bedroom. The actual Marcel, like his fictional counterpart also became adept at controlling others from his bedchamber. Sickly from birth, and experiencing the first serious asthma attack at nine years old, Proust, Shattuck argues, later, came to see the asthma that would progressively dominate his health as, paradoxically, a source of strength, came, and to see his own infirmity as a means through which he could receive all the attention he could want. In his adulthood, from the seclusion of his sickbed, Proust dominated first his mother and later his various secretaries and servants with ‘interbedroom memoranda’ and his friends with imploring requests for help. Shattuck’s argument is intentionally polemical but nevertheless suggests something of the contradictions of Proust’s existence and the complex relationship of inner and outer worlds in both his life and his writing. To be living at the heart of the new Paris, his bedroom facing onto one of Paris’s most fashionable boulevards, but to keep the blinds firmly drawn; to be at the centre of Parisian society but simultaneously distanced from it; to belong to all this but only by way of a self-consciously fashioned detachment. This is the relationship that Proust establishes for himself with the life and milieu that he represents in *A la recherche du temps perdu* and this sense of being in and apart from is a feature of his novel’s deeper structure of ambivalence and contradiction.

Ultimately underlying such revisionist accounts has been a concern to move attention from the writer to his work. “Forget the cork-lined room and the dallying aesthete”, Shattuck counsels: “Proust lived in the world and

¹⁸ Jean-Yves Tadié, *op. cit.*, pp. 490-99.

¹⁹ Roger Shattuck, *Proust’s Way: A Field Guide to In Search of Lost Time*, W.W. Norton and Company: New York and London, 2000, pp. i-xx and Proust, Fontana: London, 1974, pp. 9-31. See also William Sansom, *Proust and His World*, Charles Scribners and Son: New York, 1973.

wrote about it with fervour." ²⁰ Yet, such corrective readings, though dispelling some of the myths and clichés that surround the author, risk inverting the stereotypical image of Proust and, in so doing, occluding the genuine strangeness of Proust's circumstances and the odd dynamic of his relationship with the world that he wrote of. In short they risk occluding the important and intricate relationship between the work itself and the conditions under which it was produced. The cork-lined studio is memorable, worth remembering and, one might even say integral to the conditions of literary production for Proust and the self-construction of the myth of the author's persona constructed by the author himself. It equally risks losing sight of what is ultimately most salient in Proust. As Walter Benjamin stated Proust is a writer of interiority in the fullest and most radical sense, a viewpoint echoed by Paul de Man's remark that rarely has interiority been so valorised over the external world. ²¹

To place an emphasis on Proust's self-absorbed preoccupation with interior experience, both in his living arrangements and in his novel, is not to say the author's isolationism marked a simple disengagement with the historical context in which he lived or calls for a mode of interpretation that disentangles the author's relationship to his times. On the contrary Proust's solitary conception of writing belongs to a wider, as yet still largely unwritten history of private life. ²² As historians have recently argued, the preoccupation with interiority in late nineteenth century France, far from simply being a flight from society reflected historical changes in the conception of the urban scene and in particular a new accent on privacy and the private interior that emerged out of the rebuilding of Paris in the period of the Second Empire and early Third Republic. While Jules and Edmond de Goncourt saw the massive transformation of the urban structure of Paris, begun under Baron Haussmann during the period of the Second Empire, as regrettably marking the death of the interior and the birth of a life increasingly lived out in the new public spaces of the refashioned Paris, spaces, they regarded as given over to spectacle, promenading and

²⁰ Roger Shattuck, *op. cit.*, p. x.

²¹ Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn, Schocken Books: 1969, p. 201, 212. Paul de Man, *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke and Proust*, Yale University Press: New Haven and London, 1979, p.59. As Henri Bergson, whose theories of time deeply influenced Proust and to whom Proust was related by marriage, commented "rarely has introspection been taken so far". See Marcel Proust, *op. cit.*, 1970-93, vo. 19, p. 492. As Hannah Arendt put it "Proust transformed all worldly events into inner experience". Hannah Arendt, *Antisemitism: Part 1 of the Origins of Totalitarianism*, Harcourt Brace & Company, New York, 1951, p. 80.

²² An important exception to this is the five volume history of private life edited by Michelle Perrot. See for instance Michelle Perrot ed., *A History of Private Life volume 4: From the Fires of Revolution to the Great War*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer, Belknap Press: Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, 1990.

commodified public leisure, arguably the reverse was actually transpiring.²³ As Sharon Marcus has stated Haussmannisation was as much about private as public arenas, about the creation of new interior spaces and enclosures as it was about a new transparent urban space.²⁴ This 'interiorisation of Paris' grew in momentum towards the end of the century with the collapse of radical republicanism in the 1880s. Deborah Silverman in her book *Art Nouveau in Fin-de-Siecle France*, traces the conversion of *art nouveau* from a new monumental public art aligned to the bold radical liberalism of the Third Republic under Jules Ferry, with its accent on social progress through technological modernity to an art conceived as decoration for the private interior.²⁵ A shift that, she argues, saw the replacement of a rationalist paradigm of modern art focused on the architect engineer's bold futuristic public monuments constructed from modern industrial materials, whose most overt symbols were the steel colossus of the *Eiffel Tower* and functionalist glass and iron ensemble of enormous *Gallerie des machines*, for that of the visionary artistan's miniaturised variants of art nouveau statuary, private ornamentation made for private apartments.

This shift within art nouveau from a bold technological public art to an art of purely subjective experience that Silverman traces, marked a wider morphology that saw the redefinition of modernity as it had been defined in the Second Empire and first two decades of the Third Republic from a culture focused on the public spaces of the new Parisian boulevards to a decorative conception of modern art, aligned to the elegantly adorned private interior, an interior seen as a space that preserved subjectivity from what were seen as the detrimental effects of modern life.

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By the end of the nineteenth century discourses on metropolitan life had become increasingly focused on alarmist fears about the depleting effect of the conditions of modern urban existence, which was widely regarded as producing neurasthenia. Such concerns spurred on new psychiatric research into neurosis and scientific investigations into various forms of perceptual and attention deficit disorders, of which the synaesthesia so often

²³ See Timothy J. Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life in Manet and His Followers*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1984, pp. 69-70.

²⁴ Sharon Marcus, *Apartment Stories: City and Home in Nineteenth Century Paris and London*, University of California Press: Berkeley, Los Angeles and London, 1999, pp.138-40. See also François Loyer, *Paris: Nineteenth Century Architecture and Urbanism*, trans. Charles Lynn Clark, Abbeville Press: New York, pp. 238-252.

²⁵ Deborah Silverman, *Art Nouveau in Fin-de-Siècle France: Politics, Psychology and Style*, University of California Press, Berkeley, Los Angeles and London, 1989, pp. 1-16.

²⁶ As Silverman goes on to discuss this shift paralleled a broader change in the political realm from the *solidarisme* of the radical republic to the idea of a self-sufficient autonomous subject that increasingly imposed itself within Republican thought, a shift that articulated a change of emphasis in the conception of citizenship from the public to the private citizen under the more conservative Republican administrations that emerged by the mid 1890s. Op. cit., pp. 48-50.

cultivated by writers associated with Symbolism, was taken to be one example. Charcot's investigations into the suggestibility of patients under hypnosis seemed to offer evidence of just such influence operating below the threshold of consciousness. His research provided a conception of the subject as neither really defined, permanent or stationary but rather as illusive and floating, multiple and intermittent and as such continually subject to the febrile suggestive power of the external environment.²⁷ Charcot's characterisation of the furtive influence of external factors and unconscious forces on the subject's psyche profoundly compromised the idea of the bourgeois subject as an autonomous individual with a clearly defined personality and the ability to exercise free will.

The new modern interior was thus conceived as a soothing, regenerative and appropriately vitalising *envelopment* to counter the perceived anxieties, exhausting pace, spatially de-natured and the over stimulating sensory barrage of the modern city that passified mental will, eroded nerve fibres and penetrated deep into the subject's psyche. The modern interior thus became seen as an alternative self-sufficient realm, emblematic of self-fashioning, a space at once removed from the contingencies of modernity but whose decor combining evocations of natural imagery, dreams and allusive fantasy constructed an alternative realm of the virtual, that substituted for the frenetic and depleting public realm. In short the modern interior became a place where a form of self-fashioned subjecthood reasserted itself over the divided self that inhabited the public domain.²⁸

Such ideas provide a general context in which to understand Proust's secluded living arrangements. However, in contrast to the new modern interior filled with *objets luxe* designed either for aesthetic contemplation or revitalising visual stimulation, Proust's apartment seems by comparison remarkably spare and minimalist. Visitors frequently remarked on the drabness and dimness of his cell like bedroom, of Proust's apparent indifference to the aesthetics of interior design, exemplified in his exclusion of almost all images from the walls of his bedroom, and the lack of taste of his furnishings, which Proust himself mockingly described as a "triumph of bourgeois bad taste". Unlike the Goncourts whose apartment was constructed as an intimate, nostalgic space of reverie that provided an alternative world to the modernity of Haussmanisation, or the fictional *Des Esseintes'* elaborate and visually palpitating interiors in Huysmans *A rebours* (1883), Proust's apartment was arranged as a space that restricted not only visual and aural stimulus from the outside world but visual, aural and even olfactory distractions from within. As Albaret's memoir details, the hypersensitive Proust went to exceptional lengths to control the sights, smells and

²⁷ Op. cit., p. 89.

²⁸ Op. cit., pp. 75-79.

most particularly the sounds he was subjected to. Of these senses Proust regarded sound as the most aggressive and intrusive of the senses (the ear, as an always open instrument was perpetually vulnerable to external assault. Likewise, acutely sensitive to smell, Proust banned all flowers, perfumes and polishes from the apartment and food was ordered from local restaurants to protect the author's defenceless nose from the unbearable aromas of cooking. This sensory inhibition became more extensive as time wore on. The telephone and *théatrophone*, on which Proust used to listen to music and plays piped directly into his bedroom, were removed toward the end of 1914.²⁹

The radical restriction of visual and aural sensation within the writer's studio stands in direct contrast to the importance of these sensations in the novel itself and the privileged place the senses occupy in provoking the involuntary memories that retrieve the past (most especially taste and touch which Proust described as baring unflinchingly "in the tiny and almost palpable drop of their essence, the vast structure of recollection" (DF 192).³⁰ An extraordinary division exists between the detailed sensory description of *A la recherche du temps perdu* and the withdrawn consciousness that self-reflexively recalls, meticulously analyses and reflects upon its meanings. Despite Proust's professed Cartesian denigration of the senses, particularly sight and sound, as deceptive, few writers have written so unremittingly from the senses. *A la recherche du temps perdu* could be described as an observatory of visual constellations in which the pleasures of a conscientious *curiosité* is ever present and the pleasures of visual description take centre stage.³¹ As Malcolm Bowie has written, the seizing of every opportunity for enlarging, multiplying, clarifying, analysing and deepening perception of the succession of images, sensations and appearances that make up the narrator's field of perception articulates a desiring optics, that imitates scientific scrutiny in its quest for precision.³² The array of optical instruments and contraptions and the various forms of visual representation, transmission and projection, from painting, to photography, to magic lantern shows, constitutes a forceful presence in the novel. A similar point can be made about sound. The inhibition of sound in Proust's studio

²⁹ See Diana Fuss, op. cit., p.197.

³⁰ Marcel Proust, op. cit., 1970-93, vol. 1, p. 50-51.

³¹ On the role of the visual in Proust see Jonathan Murphy, *Sight or Cite? Aspects of the Visual in Proust*, unpublished PhD, University of Cambridge, 1994 and Mieke Bal, *The Mottled Screen: Reading Proust Visually*, translated Anna-Louise Milne, Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1997.

³² A leitmotif of the early critical reception of *A la recherche du temps perdu* was the meticulousness of Proust's visual description though critics could not agree whether this vision was best described as microscopic or telescopic or a combination of both, though neither captures the sense of mobility that characterises the visuality the novel relays or the subjective patterning of experience such acts of perception relays. See Mieke Bal, op. cit., pp. 69-78. Bowie makes the point that while Proust imitates scientific scrutiny of sense impressions the novel does not share the latter's cumulative marshalling of perception into a reductive regime that yields coherence. Malcolm Bowie, op. cit., pp. 14-16.

similarly contrasts with the emphasis on sounds and in particular on music in the novel, as well as the particular savour Proust took in representing the rhythms and intonation of speech.³³

It is as though this restriction of sensory perception had become the precondition of Proust's productivity, that the force of the representation of sensation in *A la recherche du temps perdu* had for Proust become founded on its exclusion from his existence as a writer, as if, Proust was aspiring to a condition of innocence from which sensation could be experienced purely cerebrally and entirely afresh and thus, experienced as such, become the powerful vehicle of involuntary memory. In this regard, as Diana Fuss has remarked it is significant that in *Le Cote de Guermantes* the narrator, in a series of synaesthetic passages, twice invokes the image of deafness as a paradigm of creativity and rebirth: "take away for a moment from the sick man the cotton-wool that has been stopping his ears and in a flash the broad daylight, the dazzling sun of sound dawns afresh, blinding him" and later dreams of "an Eden, in which sound has not yet been created".³⁴ This episode parallels the statement by the painter Monet, who Proust much admired, of wishing to see afresh as though he had been born blind and suddenly regained sight.³⁵

As this suggests Proust's preoccupation with progressively inhibiting particular kinds of sensation associated with the social and environmental distractions of the modern urban milieu in his living arrangements reflects more than a desire to create a secluded space apart in which to write. His attempts to exert greater and greater control over his physical environment and to isolate himself from the social world he depicts was intricately connected to the particular understanding of the conditions of literary production that was emerging in his writing. The conception of the interior as a sanctuary was a disciplinary mechanism of sorts, a place to conserve his fragile energy, protect his nerves in order to focus his attention on the great novel he had as yet failed to realise, certainly, but it also implied a theory of literary production. Indeed, Proust constantly reflected on the conditions, both environmental and psychological, he regarded as necessary for him to write. While these reflections were by no means unprecedented, rather they emerge out of a Symbolist intellectual milieu that, rejecting the empiricism of realism, saw the ostensible disengagement with modern life as a prerequisite of true artistic creation, the importance Proust placed on solitary reflection takes on a deeper and more complex meaning in relation to the distinction he

³³ Proust's delight in imitation of the characteristics and affectations of speech, was a feature of his social life where he regularly entertained friends with his parodies of those in his circle and in the precise satire of social manners present in *A la recherche du temps perdu*. See William Carter, op. cit., p. 144-150.

³⁴ Marcel Proust, *Remembrance of Things Past*, trans. C.K. Moncrieff and Terence Kilmartin, Vintage Books: New York, 3 vols., Vol. 3, pp. 74-75.

³⁵ John House, *Claude Monet: Nature into Art*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, p. 1.

drew between the '*moi sociale*' and the '*moi profound*' he regarded as essential to creative processes of writing and able to be materialized only through and in the act of writing.³⁶

This distinction, is first properly elaborated in his essay *Contre Sainte-Beuve*, one of a series of pieces in which he takes issue with the positivism of France's then leading literary critic, where he writes: "A book is the product of a different self from the one we manifest in our habits, our social life and our vices."³⁷ The act of writing thus conceived becomes a matter of making contact with the "deep self which is rediscovered only by abstracting oneself from other people and the self that knows other people, the self that has been waiting while one was with other people, the self one feels is the only real self; artists end up by living for this alone."³⁸ For Proust the *social self* lacked depth and unity, being comprised of only the momentary expressions of a public persona, a surface or superficial selfhood that is conditioned by the company or circumstances the subject finds itself in. It is only when the self is no longer at the mercy of others, Proust argues, when we are solitary and isolated from the words and voices of others that we find ourselves again. In his essay '*Poetry, or the Mysterious Laws*', Proust again arguing against the biographical fallacy of Sainte-Beuve's belief of the indivisibility of the writer and his/her work, offers an image of the writer as a Jekyll and Hyde figure, who can never be man and poet at one and the same time.³⁹ This distinction is mirrored in *Contre Sainte-Beuve* in Proust's distinction between two distinct kinds of language use, conversation and literature.

Proust's anxiety about the detrimental influence of social life on the consciousness of the writer permeates even Proust's reflections on the nature of reading. In the longer of the two versions of his article *Days of Reading*, Proust takes issue with Ruskin's conception of reading as a conversation with the great minds of civilisation, offering instead a view of reading that emphasises instead the role of the reader, and the subjective nature of reading.⁴⁰ But even reading, essential though it might be for edification, is presented as to some degree a distraction from the communion with this deeper self. Thus unlike Marx who regarded alienation as an obstacle to the constitution of authentic subjecthood, in Proust alienation is regarded as essential to preserving a deeper uncontaminated consciousness divorced from the superficialities, influences and distractions of social intercourse.

³⁶ See Sturrock's discussion of this in John Sturrock ed., op. cit., p. xxiii-xxv.

³⁷ Marcel Proust, *Contre Sainte-Beuve, précédé de Patches et mélanges et suivi de Essais et articles*, Editions Gallimards: Paris, 1971, p. 220.

³⁸ Op. cit., p. 224.

³⁹ John Sturrock ed., op. cit., pp. 147- 149.

⁴⁰ Op. cit., 227-233. Both versions of this article are reproduced in Sturrock's edition of *Against Sainte-Beuve*, op. cit..

Given this emphasis on an essential originary individuality in Proust's reflections on literature, it is no coincidence that *A la recherche du temps perdu* was immediately preceded by a series of literary pieces which served to define and distinguish himself in relationship to leading contemporary writers, enacting a series of little oedipal dramas in which he asserted his identity as a writer; these include the aforementioned *Contre Sainte-Beuve* and a series of extraordinary and a set of highly entertaining pastiches in the style of leading writers including the Goncourts, Zola and Flaubert. It is as though before beginning his novel he had to both analyse and master the style of these writers and cleanse his own prose and his underlying conception of literature of any indebtedness to them.

This preoccupation with this deeper stream of reflective selfhood is omnipresent in *A la recherche du temps perdu*, where it acquires a far more intricate formulation than the opposition of surface and deep self might suggest. The book's most insistent theme might be understood as the intricacies, problematics and vicissitudes of personal identity, of how a self comes to recognise itself as such, to maintain identity in time and in spite of time.⁴¹ Arguably even the themes of memory, death and art that form the leitmotifs of Proust's work might be seen as ultimately aspects of a larger enveloping question of identity for the writer. The narrator obsessively returns to the structure and concreteness of human agency providing philosophical and psychological reflections on the question of how a self is construed; whether it is to be ultimately to be understood as concentrated and indivisible or multiple, nomadic and dispersed, continuous or discontinuous, found or constructed, autonomous or an effect of the play of language, material or an abstraction.⁴² In a much quoted passage at the beginning of *Le Cote de Guermantes*, the narrator questions how having once fallen into a deep sleep and thus made bereft of the consciousness that defines one's thoughts and personhood, one is upon waking able to resume being the individual one once was rather than becoming an other.⁴³

The quest for self-knowledge reaches a moment of revelation in *Le Temps Retrouve*, the final volume and ontological telos of *A la recherche du temps perdu*, in which the narrator's search for the rediscovery of the past is ostensibly fulfilled and the endless series of scattered reflections on self identity that make up the previous volumes is resolved in a sudden epiphanic rediscovery of a past he thought forever lost. In *Le Temps Retrouve* all the varieties and sub-varieties of the passions of the human subject are accommodated and assigned a place in, as

⁴¹ See Bowie's discussion of this in Malcolm Bowie, op. cit., pp. 1-29.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ As Bowie argues, these reflections on personhood permeate the narrator's imagistic evocations of nature and the cosmos, as he "searches in nature for figurative representations of self and others or finds in nebulous constellations powerful evocations of his own memories and desires." Malcolm Bowie, op. cit., pp. 3-5.

Malcolm Bowie has put it, “a temporal architecture of the self”, integrated into an overarching artistic design, that the narrator describes allusively as “like a cathedral,... like a medical regime,... like a new world” and which ultimately gives purpose to the artistic quest the narrator has embarked upon.⁴⁴ Yet the certainty and moral purpose of *Le Temps Retrouvé* does little to offset the accumulation of perplexing impressions, doubts, anxious speculations, misrecognitions, veilings and paradoxes that make up so much of the preceding volumes and which at some level cannot help but cast doubt on the foundations on which the final volume is constructed. Proust’s self is ultimately not the transcendent self represented in *Le Temps Retrouvé* but one only discovered and continually rediscovered in and through language, a textual self that is written and constantly rewritten in the solitary act of writing itself.

As I have already argued to re-emphasise the importance of solitariness for Proust’s conception of literature is not to divorce the author from the social context in which he wrote or to suggest that the exterior world does not leave its imprint on the writer’s consciousness. The relationship of *A la recherche du temps perdu* to the environment in which it was written, is a complex one and it is not out of the question that being at the heart of the new Paris may have exerted a powerful unconsciously role in shaping the author’s preoccupation with recapturing lost time. In taking up residence in the heart of the new Paris, as Benjamin observed, Proust was occupying a space that had undergone violent disruption, a transformation which had in effect eradicated the past, that had entirely effaced the streets of the old Paris, whose passing the Goncourts so lamented, and with the destruction of the *vieux quartier*, a salient part of its history.⁴⁵ Diana Fuss in her very thought provoking discussion of Proust, in her book *The Sense of an Interior*, has characterised Proust’s writing as “a kind of literary Haussmanisation”, comparing its long sentences, expanded chapters and reordering of the novel to the extensive new vistas, monumentality and reorganisation of urban space of Haussmann’s Paris.⁴⁶ However, Proust’s writing far more resembles the structure of the old medieval Paris, with its winding roads and ever burgeoning spaces growing slowly expanding, redefining and spiralling outwards, and the design of his novel seems closer to the grand polyphonic and ornamental architectural style of Gothic cathedral, an analogy Proust himself was fond of making in discussing his work, than the rational uniformity of the new Parisian apartment buildings. The regularity, transparency and uniformity of both the new boulevards and the modern apartment dwellings that occupied its highly rationalised spaces seem far removed from the densely intricate ornamental sentences, intransitivity and labyrinthine structure of Proust’s prose,

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Walter Benjamin, op. cit., p. 215.

⁴⁶ Diana Fuss, op. cit., p. 162.

sentences that Anatole France amusingly described as “interminable enough to make you consumptive.”⁴⁷ Likewise, the dimly lit and curiously labyrinthine arrangement of furnishings in the interior of Proust’s bedroom also seems almost deliberately to contravene the organisational plan of the modern apartment’s interior space with its emphasis on breadth, light, symmetry and functionality. There is much evidence to suggest that Proust consciously fashioned his novel after the example of the Cathedral, reaching back into the medieval as a source for his literary endeavours and thus explicitly away from the ultra modernity of Haussmannisation. It was during the period in which Proust had undertaken his translations of Ruskin that he discovered the structural conception of narrative that ultimately informed his epic novel.⁴⁸ Through Ruskin he had encountered the idea of reading a Cathedral like a book. Reversing the analogy allowed Proust to establish the narrative structure of his great work as a cathedral-novel. Early drafts of *A la recherche du temps perdu* made explicit reference to this, with parts given titles that referred to architectural components, but Proust deleted these titles regarding them as too pretentious and with them also the explicit references to the modes Ruskin had brought to bear on deciphering the intricate structure of the Gothic church.⁴⁹ These ‘veiled’ but nevertheless essential references remain imprinted upon the novel on every page, both formally, in terms of the style of Proust’s writing and semantically, in terms of how Proust intended the work to be read.⁵⁰

Proust’s preoccupation with isolation as the condition of the production of his novel and the creation of a space of all absorbing interiority, may in part be explained by his theories of individual autonomy as the basis of

⁴⁷ Quoted in Edmund White, *Marcel Proust*, Viking: New York, 1999, p. 72. On the ‘open structure’ of the Proustian sentence see Julia Kristeva, *Time and Sense: Proust and the Experience of Literature*, trans. Ross Guberman, Columbia University press: New York, 1996, pp. 279-304.

⁴⁸ See Diane R. Leonard, *Ruskin and the Cathedral of Lost Souls*, in Richard Bales ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Proust*, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2001, pp 42-57.

⁴⁹ In a letter to Jean de Gaigeron written in 1919, Proust writes “you read not only the printed book that I have published, but also the unknown book that I would have wished to write. And when you speak to me of cathedrals, I can’t help but be moved by your intuition that permits you to divine what I have never said to anyone and am writing here for the first time; that I wished to give to each part of my book the title: Porch I, Stained-Glass Windows of the apse, etc...I immediately gave up these architectural titles because I found them too pretentious, but I am touched that you discovered them by a sort of divination of the intellect.” Marcel Proust, *op. cit.*, 1970, vol xviii, p. 359.

⁵⁰ In her excellent analysis of the influence of Ruskin’s thought on Proust’s novel Dianne Leonard discusses the influence of Ruskin’s figural modes of reading inscribed in the architecture of the Cathedral. Leonard points to the figuralism or typology leaves its imprint on the semantics of Proust’s writing as a kind of ‘picture-language’. Leonard goes on to argue persuasively that the veiling of references to Ruskin was precisely an adaptation of Ruskin’s own idea of the veiled reference, or more specifically his idea of the embedded ‘lost’ soul of the medieval architect in the edifice of the Cathedral. A soul able to be ‘resurrected’ or ‘re-incarnated’ by the interpreter’s analogical reading of the original ideas underlying the Cathedral’s conception. See Dianne Leonard, *op. cit.*, pp. 44-46, 52-57.

literary production and an almost utopian ideal of self-sufficiency that informs his construction of a pure space of writing. His desire to sublimate his energies and maintain an undistracted attention toward writing *A la recherche du temps perdu* may have led him, whether consciously or not to construct for himself a chamber of pure interiority in which the inhibition of sensation from the exterior world is conceived as necessary for its forceful representation in the parallel world of the novel; the obliteration of all familiarity, the condition of the essential estrangement integral to the interior recovery of involuntary memory. It is in this respect that the bedroom in which Proust wrote his novel might be understood as a curious Cartesian space of sorts, a space of pure interiority that paradoxically produces a represented world of unfettered sensation.