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**Configuring Poetic Time:
Figures of Movement and Perception in Marcel Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu***

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There is a rich reservoir of examples in Marcel Proust's novel, *À la recherche du temps perdu* (1913-1924), for how speech is used not simply to recount perception but to mold an equivalent of it by appealing to the reader's power of imagination. This equivalent can act back on the empirical perception through the precision of literary observation. Accordingly, speech is not conceived as a mere logical instrument by means of which external signs are deciphered. It is a perceptual organ *sui generis* that, although carrying its own imponderables and blind spots, so to speak, also produces its own memory and its own order.

As if wanting to disenchant Bergson's synchronous concept of "duration" (*durée*) in *Matière et mémoire* (1896), in which the continuum of perceptual images is retained as long as they are of utility to motive action, Proust questions any vitalistic perception respecting existence secured by experience, at least outside of his own poetics of *mémoire involontaire*. He counters against the continuity of impressions their interminability and alterability.¹ For instance, when the novel's protagonist tries to perceive the elusive object of his passion, Albertine, as an interconnected whole at least while asleep:

[...] Albertine m'avait souvent paru différente, maintenant, comme si, en accélérant prodigieusement la rapidité des changements de perspective et des changements de coloration que nous offre une personne dans nos diverses rencontres avec elle, j'avais voulu les faire tenir toutes en quelques secondes pour recréer expérimentalement le phénomène qui diversifie l'individualité d'un être et tirer les unes des autres, comme d'un étui, toutes les possibilités qu'il enferme, dans ce court trajet de mes lèvres vers sa joue, c'est dix Albertine que je vis; cette seule jeune fille étant comme une déesse à plusieurs têtes, celle que j'avais vue en dernier, si je tentais de m'approcher d'elle, faisait place à une autre. (II, 660)²

¹ Rainer Warning, ed., *Marcel Proust. Schreiben ohne Ende. Prousts Recherche im Spiegel ihrer textkritischen Aufarbeitung* (Frankfurt 1994); Boris Roman Gibhardt, *Das Auge der Sprache. Ornament und Lineatur bei Marcel Proust* (Berlin-Munich-Paris 2011); Uta Felten and Volker Roloff, ed., *Die Korrespondenz der Sinne. Wahrnehmungsästhetische und intermediale Aspekte im Werk von Proust* (Munich 2008).

² Marcel Proust, *A la recherche du temps perdu*, ed. Jean-Yves Tadié (Paris 1987-1989, Gallimard, Edition de la Pléiade).

Perception is nothing but the reflection of one's own fancy cast back upon the coveter and decomposes any recollection. Imagination and perception cannot be sundered. They rather mutually stimulate each other:

Cette fugacité des êtres [...] nous met dans cet état de poursuite où rien n'arrête plus l'imagination. (II, 154)

Out of this impossibility of representation follows a denial of the boundedness of the images of perception, their *aspect défini*, in favor of their succession, as *images successives*, also as regards the aim of depiction, which reads there:

[...] faire surgir de ce que nous croyions une chose à aspect défini, les cent autres choses qu'elle est tout aussi bien, puisque chacune est relative à une perspective non moins légitime. (II, 660)

As will be demonstrated in the following, Proust's point of departure in procuring a creative equivalent in the literary art is the figurativeness of the line. This metaphor returns in innumerable variations of the description of Albertine. One example:

[...] l'exact point de départ, l'amorce inévitable de lignes invisibles en lesquelles l'œil ne pouvait s'empêcher de les prolonger, merveilleuses, engendrées autour de la femme comme le spectre d'une figure idéale projetée sur les ténèbres. (II, 341)

Proust juxtaposes duration with succession, which never threatens to become identical. The uniqueness and unmistakableness of the individual is eroded; what comes back transformed is rather one's own projection. The stationary object has already been established as hardly denotable; if at all, a saturated recollection of it enters the awareness as disruptions and deformations. The perception of motion poses a still greater challenge, such as, in Cubistic atomization of the perceptual data of a form in the act of motion:

Quelque chose pourtant me frappa qui n'était pas sa figure que je ne voyais pas, [...] mais la disproportion extraordinaire entre le nombre de points différents par où passa son corps et le petit nombre de secondes pendant lesquelles cette sortie qui avait l'air de la sortie tentée par un assiégé, s'exécuta. (IV, 389)

The vaguer the perceptual impression, the more the writing in the description itself becomes motion: incapable of hitting the core, incapable of letting go of the shell. When the narrator writes about nearing Albertine's face—» l'approche de mes lèvres ne différait que par une déviation de lignes infinitésimales «—Proust's interest in linguistically evoking the line in metaphor is striking. The »différentes superpositions de lignes« characterize, on one hand, the fragmentation of the viewed, on the other hand, the ever recommenced circling around this viewed absence. For, the "infinitely small differences of the lines" only yield "mobile faces" (*visages mobiles*) rather than identifiable physiognomies.

The same applies to the shifts in perspective in a landscape. The moving image generated by driving toward the church steeples of Martinville, whose equivalent here is an anthropomorphic dance of silhouettes, is fixed by the youthful narrator and seems to him to be a sign of his literary talent:

Ils [the steeples, B.G.] me faisaient penser aussi aux trois jeunes filles d'une légende, abandonnées dans une solitude où tombait **déjà** l'obscurité; et **tandis que** nous nous *éloignons au galop*, je les vis timidement *chercher leur chemin* et *après* quelques gauches trébuchements de leurs nobles silhouettes, *se serrer* les uns contre les autres, *glisser* l'un derrière l'autre, **ne plus** faire **sur le ciel encore** rose qu'une seule forme noire, charmante et résignée, et **s'effacer dans la nuit.** (I, 180) [*italic* marks space; **black** marks time, underline marks time *and* space]

Leo Spitzer spoke of self-intertwined “drawing” (*dessin*) and “meandering patterns” to describe Proust’s sentences.³ The last quotation does, in fact, follow the content by its form. Its clauses directly imitate the simultaneous and double advancement with distance between observer and object and with time in the growing dusk.⁴ This meandering of the line of sight—» mais la route changea de direction «—engenders the image sequence of three “clumsily stumbling” young girls for the church towers, until at “fading into the night,” image and phrase, substance and form, time and space simultaneously expire. Instead of being mere metaphor, this unity of *signifiant* and *signifié* imitates modal perception and makes use of its fancy, those “images it triggered,” at the same time, here in the form of anthropomorphic projection.

One scene that the novel’s hero observes years later from a traveling train runs counter to the success of this motive image. A horizontal line cuts a group of trees at sunset into two domains, one still brightly lit, and one already obscured in the shadows. This moving “light-dark” in two dimensions is one of those “in betweens” (*entre deux*) typical of Proust: glimpses of the intermediate. Here the image of motion is experienced as a reminiscence of a recollection whose key would be the line, yet its account remains unfathomable and, consequently, the “duration” remains unfulfilled (the “line imagery” is emphasized below):

Le soleil éclairait jusqu'à la moitié de leur tronc une ligne d'arbres qui suivait la voie du chemin de fer. « Arbres », pensai-je, « vous n'avez plus rien à me dire, mon cœur refroidi ne vous entend plus. Je suis pourtant ici en pleine nature, eh bien, c'est avec froideur, avec ennui que mes yeux constatent la ligne qui sépare votre front lumineux de votre tronc d'ombre. Si j'ai jamais pu me croire poète, je sais maintenant que je ne le suis pas ». (IV, 433)

The attempt to apprehend the “gilt band of light on the trunks” and the “the tree’s oblique line” fails. To him it is not a matter of fragmenting the impression of motion:

Hélas rien que ce mot d'instantané faisait de ma mémoire comme une de ces expositions de photographies suffisant à m'indiquer que ce n'était pas plus dans elle que dans l'observation directe. (IV, 802)

As long as the analogy in time does not set in and rise to the consciousness, beauty remains merely photographic. Proust is not concerned here with an impressionistic distortion of the distinction of things, by means of color, for example, which was the basis of Rainer Warning’s famous interpretation.⁵ On the contrary, this “light-dark” line, although it is a negative experience because it is as yet uncreative, does not question which visual suggestion Proust should employ to cipher the experience of place and time, whether lines or patches of color. In this instance the “beauty line” remains puzzling. Elsewhere, however, the linear notion proves to be a source of new phenomenal forms that are potentially informative, as an infinitesimal segment of the continuum of perception. Proust casts the line as the intermediate between the perception and the imagination. For example, he projects onto the contour line of a Venetian arched window the anthropomorphic form of a smile of a real human figure, his mother, encased within this framing image, until the frame and the internal image reappear one-to-one in the lines of sentences, and *signifiant* and *signifié* become unity, like in this description of a Venetian arched window (*ogive*):

[...] quand j'avais à peine dépassé Saint-Georges-le-Majeur, j'apercevais cette ogive qui m'avait vu, et l'élan de ses arcs brisés ajoutait à son sourire de bienvenue la distinction d'un regard plus élevé et presque incompris. Et parce que derrière ses balustres de marbre de diverses couleurs, maman lisait en

³ Leo Spitzer, *Stilstudien* (Munich 1961), p. 369; compare Jean Milly, *La Phrase de Proust* (Paris 1974).

⁴ Compare the readings with different findings Gérard Genette, “Métonymie chez Proust”, *Poétique*, 2 (1970), pp. 156-173; Wolfgang Kemp, „Die Annäherung, Motiv und Verfahren bei Ruskin und Proust“, *Marcel Proust. Motiv und Verfahren*, ed. Edgar Mass (Frankfurt 1986), pp. 54-78.

⁵ Warning, *Schreiben ohne Ende*, p. 23; Rainer Warning, „Vergessen, Verdrängen, Erinnern in Prousts A la recherche du temps perdu“, *Memoria, Vergessen und Erinnern*, ed. Anselm Haverkamp and Renate Lachmann (Munich 1993), pp. 160-184, pp. 161ff.

m’attendant, le visage **contenu** dans une voilette en tulle d’un blanc aussi déchirant que celui de ses cheveux pour moi qui sentais que ma mère l’avait, **en cachant** ses **larmes**, **ajoutée** à son chapeau de paille **moins pour avoir l’air >habillé** devant les gens de l’hôtel **que pour me paraître moins** en deuil, **moins** triste, **presque** consolée de la *mort* de ma grand-mère; parce que **ne m’ayant pas reconnu** tout de suite, dès que de la gondole je l’appelais elle envoyait vers moi, du fond de son cœur, son amour qui ne s’arrêta que là où il n’y avait plus de matière pour la soutenir, **à la surface de son regard** passionné qu’elle faisait **aussi proche de moi que possible**, qu’elle cherchait à **exhausser**, à **l’avancée** de ses lèvres, en un sourire que **semblait** m’embrasser, **dans le cadre et sous le dais du sourire plus discret** de l’ogive illuminée par le soleil de midi : à cause de cela, cette **fenêtre** a pris dans ma *mémoire* **la douceur des choses** qui eurent *en même temps que nous*, **à côté de nous**, leur part dans une certaine *heure qui sonnait*, la même pour nous et pour elles ; et, si pleins de **formes admirables** que soient ses **meneaux**, cette **fenêtre** illustre *garde* pour moi **l’aspect intime d’un homme de génie** avec qui *nous aurions passé* un mois dans une même villégiature, qui y aurait contracté pour nous quelque amitié, et si depuis, chaque fois que je vois le **moulage de cette fenêtre** dans un **musée**, je suis obligé de retenir mes **larmes**, c’est tout simplement parce qu’elle me dit la chose qui peut le plus me toucher : « Je me rappelle très bien votre mère ». (IV, 204)

[*italic* indicates time; **black** indicates space (ornamentation);
underlining: anthropomorphisms and vague perceptions
 black and underlined motive: “smile” (and counter-motive “tears”)]

Proust borrowed this window image from a drawing by John Ruskin (pic. II),⁶ yet sabotages it, so to speak, by building perceptual disturbances into it—an alibi for this: The hero takes in this “superpositioning” of the lines of motion, out of a gondola—and with a reference to Ruskin’s “innocence of the eye” gathers out of the ambiguity of perception the equivocality of linear speech.

Proust’s descriptive images can be read on the basis of their abstraction and their resulting indicative character as figures or “configurations”⁷ of perception in time. Whereas in the descriptions of Albertine imagination appeared as a necessary disturbance and deformation, in this concept of a figure it is understood at the same time as craft, as »la marque de la transformation que la pensée fait subir à la réalité«,⁸ in order to intervene in and alter empirical perception to manifest something else in its image. The question that criticism must decide each time, though, is: How close to or remote from the visual perception is Proust’s figurativeness? The figure means an absence, in Genette’s and Auerbach’s meaning, also in Proust’s poetics, a mere substitute for the ultimate, notwithstanding a wholly conceived plasticity,⁹ a constellation of archetype, copy and illusion (*Urbild, Abbild, Trugbild*). The figure does not leave the bounds of visual evidence here, however. It is to the figure that Proust’s perspectivism of *rapprochement*, *contagion* and *ressemblance* raises claim, which culminates in the visual structural appeal of the line.

In contrast to Rilke’s and also Mallarmé’s absolute mimetic concept of the figure, aimed at calculatedly making a visual action invisible—be it with Rilke the toss of a ball or with Mallarmé the wave of a fan—Proust hence insists on the abstraction of a motion, whose presence just

⁶ John Ruskin, *Works*, ed. E.T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn (London-New York 1903), vol. 9, p. 288f (Palazzo dei Badoari Partecipazzi); compare Boris Roman Gibhardt, “Le sourire de la ligne. Ornement arabesque et perception littéraire chez Marcel Proust“, *Bulletin d’Informations Proustiennes*, 43 (2013), pp. 85-94, Gibhardt, *Das Auge der Sprache*, S. 51-58.

⁷ „La configuration d’une chose, n’est pas seulement l’image de sa nature, c’est le mot de sa destinée et le tracé de son histoire“, Marcel Proust, *Contre Sainte-Beuve. Pastiches et Mélanges. Essais et articles*, ed. Pierre Clarac and Ives Sandre (Paris 1971), p. 112.

⁸ Marcel Proust, *Contre Sainte-Beuve*, p. 269.

⁹ Gérard Genette, *Figures II* (Paris 1969), p. 210; Compare on this history of figura, Erich Auerbach, *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur romanischen Philologie* (Munich-Bern 1967), pp. 55–92, esp. pp. 61, 63, 89.

escapes the linguistic figure, as a *notion pure*.¹⁰ Proust elevated his rhetoric of motion, as it were, to allegory with his description of a spectacular waterwork, more precisely, a fountain, by first introducing the object to be described, in this case, the “jet d’eau de Saint-Cloud,” as a rigid representation, namely, by reference to a real painting by Hubert Robert (pic. I),¹¹ as the image, until the hero sees the fountain with his own eyes and criticizes Robert’s style of petrifying it. Proust launches here a little paragon between pictorial and verbal artifice:

Celui-ci [un unique élan] était en réalité aussi souvent **interrompu** que l’**éparpillement** de la chute, alors que, de loin, il m’avait paru infléchissable, dense, d’une continuité sans lacune. D’un peu près, on voyait que cette **continuité**, en apparence toute linéaire, était assurée à tous les points de l’**ascension** du jet, partout où il aurait dû **se briser, par l’entrée en ligne, par la reprise latérale** d’un jet **parallèle** qui **montait** plus haut que le premier et était lui-même, à une plus grande hauteur, mais déjà fatigante pour lui, **relevé** par une troisième « [...] » De près, des gouttes sans force **retombaient** de la colonne d’eau **en croisant** au passage leurs sœurs **montantes** et, parfois, **déchirées, saisies** dans un remous de l’air troublé par ce **jailissement** sans trêve, **flottaient** avant d’être **chavirées** dans le bassin. (III, 56)

Proust decomposes every form of static pictoriality for the motive image. The literary expression utilizes elements of draftsmanship, but instead of fixing contours simulates this motion. The description of the flowlines and their multifarious processual detailed motions (marked in black) represent the *jet d’eau* as a living piece in the art of waterworks, as opposed to Robert’s almost frozen view from afar. But when Proust asserts elsewhere:

[...] des moments – que je sépare artificiellement aujourd’hui comme si je pratiquais des sections à des hauteurs différents d’un jet d’eau irisé et en apparence immobile. (I, 86)¹²

then Robert’s painting appears in another light; namely, as an *art mnémonique*, an arabesque figure. Although it does not correspond to modal seeing, it contains all possible motions, such as its synthesis in time, and in this way surpasses the empirical perception by the craft of art. The paragon is left undecided because the true ideal of perception, as a sum of all perceptions, purportedly lies only in the simultaneity of perspectives—perhaps an impossible but genuinely poetic enterprise of a persisting “intermediate,” a permutation of the visual angle; so the fountain, whether Proust’s or Robert’s, serves throughout the whole novel as an allegory of that other motion, the stream of words, the rising up of poetic inspiration.

In the novel’s own art history, it is reserved to the artwork of the fictitious painter called Elstir to rehabilitate the modal processuality of perception and at the same time to explore literary figurativeness within it. Circumscriptions of Elstir’s painting intimate this as *métaphores*,

¹⁰ Stéphane Mallarmé, *Œuvres complètes*, ed. Bertrand Marchal (Paris 1998); Rainer Maria Rilke, *Werke in drei Bänden* (Frankfurt 1991); Gibhardt, *Das Auge der Sprache*, op. cit., pp. 73ff.; Anita Kay, “A la recherche de ce qui est caché dans le pli. Une étude d’Autre Eventail de Mallarmé,” *Chimères*, 11 (1977), pp. 44-55 ; Beda Allemann, „Rilke und Mallarmé. Entwicklung einer Grundfrage der symbolistischen Poetik“, *Rilke in neuer Sicht*, ed. Käte Hamburger (Berlin-Köln 1971), pp. 63-82.

¹¹ Hubert Robert, *Park view with fountain*, 1783, Musée du Louvre.

¹² Compare Gibhardt, *Das Auge der Sprache*, pp. 80-87; Compare the readings with different findings by Paul de Man, *Allegories of Reading. Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke and Proust* (New Haven 1979); quotation in de Man, *Allegorien des Lesens*, translated by Werner Hamacher and Peter Krumme (Frankfurt 1988), pp. 105 and 112, and by Marie-Madeleine Chiro, “Sodome et Gomorrhe II. Le jet d’eau d’Hubert Robert,” *Bulletin d’informations proustiennes*, 24 (1993), pp. 119–126. On the “fountain of the I-discourse” (“Fontäne des Ich-Diskurses”) and his “Spektralanalyse,” comp. Manfred Schneider, *Die erkaltete Herzesschrift. Der autobiographische Text im 20. Jahrhundert* (Munich-Vienna 1986), p. 56; furthermore, Philippe Lejeune, „Ecriture et sexualité“, *Europe*, 49 (1971), pp. 113-143, p. 141; Ulrike Sprenger: “Un acte exceptionnel d’autofécondation. Schreiben und Befruchten bei Proust“, *Erotische Recherchen. Zur Decodierung von Intimität bei Marcel Proust*, ed. Friedrich Balke and Volker Roloff (Munich 2003), pp. 80-98. See also the representation of the jet of water frozen solid and its thus newly acquired significance in I, 390.

superpositions and *inversions*.¹³ The narrator depicts these landscape paintings and portraits exactly the way he sees them before him, yet the described scenes could not possibly have taken place at the same time or within the same space. All habitual and intellectual associations are eroded in this multifaceted and equivocal metaphorical imagery, those of matter, gender and time. Hence, Elstir's dialectical reversible images do not outline *disegno*. They rather constellate empirical spaces into a *bel équilibre*, into a balance that reveals the similarity of the seemingly distinct. The sketched pictorial strategies of *superposition*, *inversion* and *comparaison* are all at the service of this new *authenticité*. It carries through what the hero poet had failed at in the sunset example in attempting to describe the *correspondance* between space and time; Proust does, in a way, do justice to it in the Venetian *ogive* quote, the arabesque potentiation of frame and interior image. Elstir also drafted such a nonfixing line language, a kind of osmotic contour. Its reference in art history, insofar as there is one, would rather be toward Cubism or Surrealism via Proust's model cases Monet, Whistler and Vuillard.¹⁴

Proust's ideal writer would accordingly be—here is where the switch from the painterly line of flow into the *ductus litterarum* happens—

[...] un littérateur à qui l'idée serait venue de traiter vingt fois, avec des lumières diverses, le même thème.¹⁵

Paralleling the pictorial arts, Proust also tests multifaceted aspects by disjointing the surfaces individually in order to be able to play through decoratively, so to speak, the indeterminacies inherent in every aesthetic perception. The text, far removed from a mere narrational disposition to represent elapsed events, thereby arrives at the reservoir of—to use Proust's terms—*exemples* or *échantillons de production*, in short, figurations of *possible* actions of the perception, which in unity comprehend their seemingly opposites.

There is no line in this often graphic or decorative *figuram mutare* in which there would not also be a transversal of the ornamental whole. Therefore, it itself would establish a similarity to other linear figures and constantly refer back to the sentential line. The rhetorical license *Ornatus* takes in deviating from *Perspicuitas*,¹⁶ has absolutized itself so far in this ornamental overall structure that plot and narration begin to dissolve, to yield to a rotating form of unity, the *unité qui s'ignore*. It is just that the fine order becomes precarious in the process. In the novel's closing sentence, Proust calls the vigorously ranking images in the vortex of the text—(these 'synapses' of time and space are again highlighted):

[...] des êtres monstrueux, comme occupant une place si considérable, à côté de celle si restreinte qui leur est réservée dans l'espace, une place au contraire prolongée sans mesure puisqu'ils touchent simultanément, comme des géants plongés dans les années à des époques, vécues par eux si distantes, entre lesquelles tant de jours sont venus se placer — dans le **Temps**. (IV, 625)

The ordering of time for Proust crystallizes into an alternation between formation and dissolution; in the line metaphor, it is equivalent to interminable perception in a language that doubts everything that habitual sight presents as secure. Proust thus cancels literature's classical illustrative relationship and declares the medium of representation a medium of perception, even

¹³ Genette, "Métonymie chez Proust"; Roland Barthes, "Une idée de recherche", *Recherches de Proust*, ed. Roland Barthes, Gérard Genette et. al. (Paris 1980), pp. 34-39.

¹⁴ Boris Roman Gibhardt and Julie Ramos, „Langages du décoratif autour de 1900. De l'unité des arts à l'unicité romanesque“, *Marcel Proust et les arts décoratifs. Poétique, matérialité, histoire*, ed. Boris Roman Gibhardt and Julie Ramos (Paris 2013), pp. 233-258 ; Martin Sundberg, „La surface saturée. Edouard Vuillard, Marcel Proust, et le flottement ornemental“, Gibhardt/Ramos, *Marcel Proust et les arts décoratifs*, pp. 151-170 ; Gottfried Boehm, "Ungesicherte Äquivalente. Formen der Modernität am Jahrhundertende“, *Fin de siècle*, ed. Rainer Warning and Winfried Wehle (München 2002), pp. 9-26.

¹⁵ Proust, *Contre Sainte-Beuve*, p. 276 ;

¹⁶ Compare Heinrich Lausberg, *Elemente der literarischen Rhetorik* (Munich 1963), p. 59.

though the immoderacy of these relations—these *rappports*, *superpositions* and *variations*—causes writing in descriptive imagery only to end, in order to start anew, as it were, in an endless melody or “perpetuated approximation” that leads only by chance to a convergence of times.

This stream of consciousness leads not only from perception to speech; the imaginary figures of speech themselves participate in each new perception of the world as well. Figures of the memory define our sensory impressions, in the sense of a “superpositioning.” Indeed, figures of the memory can originate from verbal perception and recur in concrete seeing: For, images once found by speech exert an influence in their own right on a later empirical perception, the same way that the latter acts on the conception of the verbal perception. This is certainly the case for the poet but also for the reader in the process of learning how to see, which would be the act of reading, and beyond that, in the *impressions* of the sensorial world—entirely like one forerunner of Proust’s language of written perception, Baudelaire, with an eye so very directed toward reality who recalls words and verses from earlier readings that the perception practically stumbles upon:

Je vais m’exercer seul à ma fantasque escrime,
Flairant dans tous les coins les hasards de la rime,
Trébuchant sur les mots comme sur les pavés,
Heurtant parfois des vers depuis longtemps rêvés.¹⁷

¹⁷ Charles Baudelaire, *Les Fleurs du mal. Die Blumen des Bösen*, ed. Friedhelm Kemp (Munich 1998), p. 176 (*Tableaux Parisiens, Le soleil*).