

I

Perspective (Marcel's Steeples)

It was certainly not impressions of this kind that could restore the hope I had lost of succeeding one day in becoming an author and poet, for each of them was associated with some material object devoid of intellectual value and suggesting no abstract truth.

—*Swann's Way*

It is natural for human beings to consider their epistemological situation cause for despondency. Caught, as Blaise Pascal would say, between the infinitely large and the infinitely small, unable to speak with greater certainty about elementary particles than about the vast reaches of space, we are also condemned, so it seems, to irremediable ignorance concerning the contents of other minds, all the more so as we cannot even fathom the contents of our *own* minds, or indeed the very kind of thing a mind *is* in the first place. Faced with such a predicament, some counsel humility, while others (like Pascal himself) propose religious faith. Rare are those who invite us to celebrate the obstacle, to love the limit, to become a fan of finitude. Yet such is exactly the consolation that Proust has to offer, just as Friedrich Nietzsche, the brother-in-arms Proust never recognized, had offered it some thirty years previously. For if Proust's protagonist is anything to go by, the human adventure is a matter of repeatedly bumping up, in increasing frustration, against the variably colored, translucent "barrier" between mind and world (S 115, TR 420), only to realize that the glass itself—our individual perspective—is far more interesting than any aspect of external reality, however accurately grasped, could hope to be.

This is Proust's "Copernican turn," his revolution in the way we approach cognition. It accounts, as is plain, for the overall structure of *A la recherche du temps perdu*, an immense Bildungsroman in which the protagonist succe-

sively abandons the search for essences in one domain after another (nature, society, friendship, love) and concludes, in each case, that its essence is either nonexistent or unavailable, the only accessible essence—accessible, at least, outside of aesthetic contemplation—being that of his own mind's index of refraction. What is perhaps less evident is that Proust's Copernican turn also accounts for a curious section of *Swann's Way*, a section, in fact, in which the ratio between notoriety and justification reaches its zenith; which is to say, almost all readers of Proust know that they are supposed to take it seriously, yet very few are quite sure why. The passage in question concerns Marcel's very first piece of creative writing, his *petit poème en prose* (I:447/BG 35) dedicated to the steeples at Martinville.

Alone, rising from the level of the plain, and seemingly lost in that expanse of open country, the twin steeples of Martinville rose towards the sky. Presently we saw three: springing into position in front of them with a bold leap, a third, dilatory steeple, that of Vieuxvicq, had come to join them. The minutes passed, we were travelling fast, and yet the three steeples were still a long way ahead of us, like three birds perched upon the plain, motionless and conspicuous in the sunlight. Then the steeple of Vieuxvicq drew aside, took its proper distance, and the steeples of Martinville remained alone, gilded by the light of the setting sun which, even at that distance, I could see playing and smiling upon their sloping sides. We had been so long in approaching them that I was thinking of the time that must still elapse before we could reach them when, of a sudden, the carriage turned a corner and set us down at their feet; and they had flung themselves so abruptly in our path that we had barely time to stop before being dashed against the porch. We resumed our journey. We had left Martinville some little time, and the village, after accompanying us for a few seconds, had already disappeared, when, lingering alone on the horizon to watch our flight, its steeples and that of Vieuxvicq waved once again their sun-bathed pinnacles in token of farewell. Sometimes one would withdraw, so that the other two might watch us for a moment still; then the road changed direction, they veered in the evening light like three golden pivots, and vanished from my sight. But a little later, when we were already close to Combray, the sun having set meanwhile, I caught sight of them for the last time, far away, and seeming no more now than three flowers painted upon the sky above the low line of the fields. They made me think, too, of three maidens in a legend, abandoned in a solitary place over which night had begun to fall; and as we drew away from them at a gallop, I could see them timidly seeking their way, and after some awkward, stumbling movements of their noble silhouettes, drawing close to one another, gliding one behind another, forming now against the still rosy sky no more than a single dusky shape, charming and resigned, and so vanishing in the night. (S 255–56)

Although it might, at first glance, seem an innocuous (if not insipid) piece of juvenilia, and although it flagrantly fails to deliver on the promises made for it by Marcel, the "little prose poem," when considered in context, actually betrays a set of crucial insights into the constraints placed on our acquaintance with external objects, the respective roles played by intuition and intellect in information-gathering, and the primacy of self-knowledge over other types of cognition. In addition, it *fills in* the theory, by revealing, through its imagery—and, at a higher level, through the larger mechanisms that subtend image-production—just what kind of distortion Marcel's individual perspective imposes on the world before his eyes. This meager and apparently blunt shred of metal turns out, on closer inspection, to be the key that unlocks the epistemology (and to some extent also the axiology) of the *Recherche*.

1. The Martinville Enigma

If one thing is clear from the Martinville steeples episode, it is that we are supposed to consider it significant. After all, the *petit poème en prose* is the one and only piece of creative writing by Marcel that we are ever given to read, and indeed, quite conceivably, the one and only such effort that he publishes in his entire life. Of course, he has dashed off some pages of his great masterwork by the time the novel ends, but as yet they count simply as "sketches" that he hands around to his uncomprehending friends (TR 520) and that may, given the delicate state of his health, never amount to a finished project (TR 507–8). As for the youthful manuscript approximating to *Les plaisirs et les jours* (TR 521/IV:618)—which is perhaps the same abandoned novel Marcel mentions at S 132—it remains stashed in a drawer, along presumably with the text we are reading, Marcel's memoir (or "récit"), and with any independent "paperies [*paperoles*]" there may be (TR 319, 609). All that he has in print, other than the Martinville steeples passage, falls under the heading of nonfiction, whether it be the set of "very slight articles" (TR 405) he produces in subsequent years or the translation of Ruskin's *Sesame and Lilies* which he deems a mere "travail" (IV:224/F 874). In between the prose poem and the masterwork, there is—nothing at all.

One might say, then, that the Martinville steeples passage constitutes the sole piece of evidence that Marcel has any talent whatsoever as a creative writer; and one might add, more specifically, that it constitutes the sole indication that he is capable of writing the particular type of book he describes. For if the *oeuvre* is to contain (among other elements, but centrally) a set of sensory impressions "translated" into language (see TR 273 and 290–91), then it would be reasonable to wonder, in light of the ratio of translated to untranslated impressions, as to its overall feasibility. At Montjouvain, the play of light on a pond, appearing to smile just as the light on the steeples

will (S 256), elicits nothing more than a barely articulate expression of enthusiasm—"zut, zut, zut, zut" (I:153/S 219)—which Marcel is too indolent to investigate further. At Hudimesnil (BG 404–8), Marcel does try a little harder to penetrate the secret of the trees before him, using a technique of self-distraction which will work perfectly on the madeleine (S 62), but soon gives up, falling back on human company² and on the suspicion that he may be experiencing a *déjà vu*, or at best an involuntary memory, rather than a sensory impression; failing, that is, to realize that the unknown quantity he seeks is not a memory of a specific previous encounter with similar trees but an essence or "spiritual meaning" pertaining to all such trees in general (TR 273). Even at Tansonville, finally, where Marcel does everything right (self-distraction included), nothing comes of all his effort: "I returned to the hawthorns, and stood before them as one stands before those masterpieces which, one imagines, one will be better able to 'take in' when one has looked away for a moment at something else; but in vain did I make a screen with my hands, the better to concentrate upon the flowers, the feeling they aroused in me remained obscure and vague, struggling and failing to free itself, to float across and become one with them" (S 194).

It is no wonder that Marcel repeatedly refers back to the Martinville steeples, whether to mention the experience itself—set alongside the madeleine episode as one of the most important "foundation-stones for the construction of a true life," one of the crucial steps toward "the invisible vocation of which this book is the history"—or to narrate the progress of the written account: produced in the first volume, shown to the diplomat Norpois in the second, revised and sent to the *Figaro* in the third, anxiously awaited in the fifth, published and circulated in the sixth.³ Not just a privileged moment among others, Martinville is a privileged moment that generates writing, since it is clear that what lies "behind" it (unlike what lies behind the madeleine) is more than a bygone era, and since its mystery (unlike those sensed at Montjouvain, at Hudimesnil, at Tansonville, and on the train) appears to be eventually unlocked, its oracular speech decoded.

Yet here, precisely, is where the problem lies. As readers, we are by no means convinced that we are hearing the voice of an oracle (although some critics are so taken with the beauty of the passage that they do not notice the scandal of its failure to live up to its billing).⁴ What Marcel promises us, in a relentlessly extended metaphor of surface and depth, of core and husk, is an exact transcription of "what lay *behind* [the surface of] the steeples of Martinville" (255), "the mystery which lay *behind* them" (257), the secret lurking "*behind* that mobility, that luminosity" (254) or hidden *within* them ("caché en elles" [S 178]). Having sensed the existence of such a quality on numerous other walks along the Guermantes Way, having intuited "the mystery that lay hidden *in* a shape or a perfume" (253) and sought

"to perceive what lay hidden *beneath* them" (252), here he is finally able, he claims, to lift the "lid" and extract the "treasure" (252). We expect, therefore, something rather dramatic by way of a revelation, something on the order of what Marcel's grandmother might see—what *she* finds "beneath the surface" of half-lit steeples is "grandeur,"⁵ an abstract quality, perhaps even that "tallness" which serves as a prime example of a Platonic Form (see *Parmenides* 131d–32b)—or at least an insight comparable to that delivered by the Guermantes's courtyard, when all of a sudden every last mystery of the Baron de Charlus's behavior finds a perfect explanation in his hitherto concealed homosexuality.⁶

We are, however, in for a disappointment. What "reality" lies hidden "beneath the surface" of the Martinville steeples? What transformative knowledge, what Platonic essence, does Marcel detect in their depths? Nothing in the passage gives the slightest indication of any such discovery. In order to make any headway at all, we are obliged to resort to a type of arithmetical calculation. For we fortunately possess not one but two accounts of the excursion, not just the prose poem itself but also, right before it, the history of its genesis, the very same scene described in a down-to-earth, factual way, more or less as Marcel would doubtless have phrased it had he never had the epiphany.⁷ Now if we start from the prose poem and then subtract the narrative, what we are left with is presumably the epiphanic inspiration, the "thought . . . which had not existed for me a moment earlier" (255). Given prose poem, take away prose, and what remains should, by rights, be equal to poetry. So let us consider the two renditions side by side.

NARRATIVE

Our speeding carriage makes the
Martinville steeples, lit up by the
setting sun, appear to move.
The distant Vieuxvicq steeple seems
right next to them.

The Martinville steeples seem far
away, but all of a sudden we stop
right in front of them.
While waiting for the doctor, I get
down to talk to my parents.

"PROSE POEM"

The Martinville steeples [appear to]
rise from the plain.

The Vieuxvicq steeple [apparently]
moves to join them.
We travel fast, but the three steeples
[appear to] stand still.
The three steeples look like birds on the
plain.
The Vieuxvicq steeple [apparently]
moves away again, leaving the
Martinville steeples alone in the
smiling light of sunset.
The Martinville steeples seem far away,
but all of a sudden they [appear to]
throw themselves in front of us.

We resume our journey, leaving
Martinville.

I turn my head to see the steeples
for the last time.

When the sun has set, they become
visible again.

They fall out of sight, become visible
one last time, then disappear.

We resume our journey, leaving
Martinville.

The village [apparently] accompanies us.
The three steeples, still lit up,
[appear to] wave goodbye.

The road turns, and the three steeples
[appear to] veer out of sight, like
three golden pivots.

When the sun has set, they become
visible again.

They look like three flowers painted on
the sky.

They also evoke three young girls of a
legend.

As we gallop away, I see them
[appear to] huddle together
and eventually disappear.

It may perhaps come as little surprise that the “poetic” rendition diverges from the “prosaic” in having collapsed a two-part experience into a single seamless whole, eliding the narrator’s descent from his elevated post on the front seat and the pause, of indeterminate length, while Dr. Percepiéd makes his house call. And it is only slightly more interesting that the poem plays with the order of events, relegating the steeples’ swerve from the very beginning to a position toward the end (the point at which they are compared to “golden pivots”). By far the most significant change, however, is neither what has been moved nor what has been removed, but instead what has been *appended*. A cursory glance at the above table is sufficient to expose the difference in semantic density, the poem making nearly double the number of statements concerning the steeples. More specifically, the poem brings two fresh features into the description, a series of images and a set of personifications (notice that I have inserted the terms “appear to” or “apparently” no fewer than seven times in my synopsis). The steeples resemble birds, pivots, flowers, and girls; they are capable of autonomous movement (“timidly seeking their way, . . . drawing close to one another”), equipped with distinguishing character traits (Vieuxvicq is “bold” and also disdainful, “taking its proper distance” from the other two) and endowed with agency—to the point, indeed, of bearing responsibility for their “actions” (Vieuxvicq being censured as “dilatatory”). It is these two addenda, I will argue, that constitute the very heart of the insight newly introduced into Marcel’s (dim) awareness.⁸ Together they notify a part of him that there is a distinction between the steeples considered objectively and the steeples as *he* sees them, and that what is left over when the first is subtracted from the second is something he did not know he had—namely, a perspective.

2. Optical Illusions and Pre-Predications

What Marcel learns, in other words, is that “in all perception there exists a barrier as a result of which there is never absolute contact between reality and our intelligence” (TR 420; cf. S 115); separating the world from the conscious mind stands the preconscious perspective of the perceiver. Now this perspective itself breaks down into two aspects, the universal (one shared, or potentially shared, by any member of the human race) and the individual (one that varies from person to person). In the next section, I shall explain how the imagery (of flowers, birds, and girls) proceeds from and testifies to Marcel’s individual perspective, and how this makes the Proustian view a sophisticated (and unwitting) refinement of Nietzschean perspectivism. For now, I shall focus on the personifications, which are largely a product of the mental constitution he holds in common with everyone else: to be sure, the steeples do not really move at all, let alone huddle together and drift apart, but from the point of view of someone—anyone—set in a certain location and traveling at a certain speed, they *appear* to do so, just as the sun “comes up” and “goes down” for all of us (give or take the occasional peculiarly hardened scientist). What I see depends on where I am situated with respect to the relevant object, and is exactly the same as what you would see in my place.

Viewed in this light, the two accounts of the Martinville episode diverge dramatically (cf. Milly 132–34). Whereas the first is careful to present optical illusions as illusions, clearly indicating the mechanism of mystification, the second simply lists them as though they were facts:

Narrative: “At a bend in the road I experienced, suddenly, the special pleasure which was unlike any other, on catching sight of the twin steeples of Martinville, bathed in the setting sun and constantly *appearing to change their position with the movement of the carriage and the windings of the road*. . . .”

Prose poem: “*then the road changed direction, they veered in the evening light like three golden pivots, and vanished from my sight*. . . .”⁹

Even where the prose poem *does* allude to the movement of the carriage, we notice, it merely juxtaposes the allusion with an animistic description of the steeples’ (seeming) displacement, as though the two types of motion simply happened to occur at the same time, rather than one being the cause of the other. The final sentence, similarly, opts to preface the main clause, “I could see them timidly seeking their way,” with the subordinate “as we drew away from them at a gallop” (256), rather than the less misleading “*because we drew away from them at a gallop*.”

We should therefore understand the pair of passages as conveying (1) the event as it is belatedly processed by the faculty of reason, with optical illusions revealed for what they are and assigned clear causes, and (2) the event as it is initially experienced, filtered through a standard human subjectivity at a particular set of spatiotemporal positions. Borrowing Marcel's *moraliste* terminology, we might say that the narrative is composed by *intellect* and the prose poem by *intuition*, the latter being a faculty for immediate insight, placing us directly in touch with objects of cognition. As a result, the prose poem is very close to impressionist paintings produced by the fictional Elstir, whose ambition was "to reproduce things not as he knew them to be but according to the optical illusions of which our first sight of them [*notre vision première*] is composed" (BG 570; cf. GW 574).¹⁰ Whereas the narrative version presents what Marcel *knows* about the carriage ride, what he has worked out post hoc, the impressionist paragraph gives only what he *registered* at the time, the initial optical illusion.

In a related way, Proust's narrator will often begin a sentence with a descriptive phrase or set of phrases, and only proceed at the very end to identify what is being described.¹¹ "A little tap on the windowpane, as though something had struck it, followed by a plentiful light falling sound, as of grains of sand being sprinkled from a window overhead, gradually spreading, intensifying, acquiring a regular rhythm, becoming fluid, sonorous, musical, immeasurable, universal: it was the rain" (S 140–41). Now whereas the optical illusion merely renders an effect on the senses, this technique—call it "pre-predication"—also conveys an effect upon *mood*. From "sonorous" to "musical," and from "immeasurable" to "universal," the nuance is discreet but distinct: Marcel is registering no longer a fact of perception but the way heavy rain makes us *feel*, the subjective (but shared) impression of majesty and harmony it generates about itself. The opening line of the Martinville steeples prose poem is just such a pre-predication. We know right away that *something* is "alone, rising from the level of the plain, and seemingly lost in that expanse of open country" but we do not yet know *what* is alone, rising, and lost; so that what we have, for the time it takes us to reach the noun, is a vague intimation of disorientation, remoteness, and solitude (cf. Spitzer 462).

With its very first two words, then, the composition announces its intent, immediately drawing on both impressionistic devices. "Alone," the pre-predication, registers an effect on the heart before indicating its cause; "rising" registers a trompe l'oeil effect on the senses, hinting (albeit *pianissimo*) at the extended personification that will govern the poem as a whole. We may barely notice, so long has the metaphor been dead, but "s'élevant" (literally "raising itself") implicitly attributes agency to the subject of the elevation, just as "s'abaissa," in a line Proust cites from Flaubert's *Sentimental Education*, attributes agency to the subject of the lowering.¹² Already, Marcel

is indicating his refusal to reproduce the world as it is, which is to say as he consciously *knows* it to be, and his desire instead to reproduce the world as it confusedly appears to our *vision première*; taking a leaf out of Elstir's book, he is endeavoring to "remove what he already knew from what he had just felt" (GW 574).¹³ And in doing so, Marcel is revealing a part of what lies "hidden behind the steeples" (S 255), or at least behind the imprint they have made on his imagination. The new truth is in fact a truth about the human mind, not about the steeples: it is about the primacy of intuition, and the qualitative difference between the pictures it offers (delineated in the prose poem) and the corrected pictures subsequently generated by intellect.

3. "Metaphor" as Indicator of Perspective

So far, I have discussed only one aspect of the "poetry" in Marcel's prose poem, and the more mundane aspect at that. To be sure, the optical illusions and pre-predications do testify to the "barrier . . . between reality and our intelligence," but only insofar as the barrier is held in common by every human being. All of us, that is, would perceive the steeples as moving, and all of us would (it is implied) be struck by their lofty isolation;¹⁴ but not all of us would compare the steeples to birds, pivots, flowers, and girls. These images (which Marcel would loosely term "metaphors") are the character's alone, and they carry the burden of indicating the second, unique aspect of his perspective, the part he shares with nobody else.¹⁵ They are what turn "*the steeples*" (S 254) into "*my steeples*" (S 255; cf. Chabot 33). They speak as eloquently about Marcel as the comparison of a steeple to a nail planted in a bleeding sky informs on the bellicose narrator of Céline's *Voyage au bout de la nuit*.¹⁶ Now, whereas the optical illusion has been a staple of Martinville scholarship since Curtius and Spitzer (see Curtius's chapter "Perspectives," and Spitzer 465), the individual aspect—which is ultimately far more important to Proust's portrait of the mind—has received relatively short shrift.¹⁷ It will be my focus, therefore, in the remainder of this chapter. I will attempt to explain (a) how imagery can serve to disclose a point of view on reality, (b) what Marcel's metaphors specifically say about *his* point of view, and (c) whether we can defend the theory against a number of critical objections.

How, first of all, can imagery convey perspective? The answer is that perspective, just like metaphor, is a matter of combination.¹⁸ What I do when I train my consciousness on the world is to organize the latter's objects into classes, and I do so by isolating key features which certain of them have in common. Thus, for example, I may connect scallops with salmon on the grounds that they are members of the marine kingdom, and cinnamon with cilantro on the basis of their appurtenance to the plant realm. So far, we are dealing with standard taxonomical procedures, and our account is more or

less in accord with Kant's universalizing picture of the way experience takes shape in the human mind.¹⁹ What, however, if I decide that scallops are just as similar to cilantro plants as they are to salmon, because a crucial feature of scallops and cilantro alike is to be utterly revolting when consumed? At this point, although I may have reasons for making the connections I do, and although I may even perhaps be able to make you understand them, I am nonetheless moving away from shared structures and into a more private domain of association. Based on my own idiosyncratic passions and attachments, I focus on a particular feature f (say, unpalatability) of object A (the scallop), which then brings it into conceptual proximity with object B (the cilantro). To take a more Proustian example, if I am fascinated by the way in which people are more attracted to those who flee them than to those who pursue them, I may well end up comparing romantic love to Franco-German relations in the early years of the century, rather than to a red, red rose.²⁰

Here we are departing from Kant and moving closer to Nietzsche, for whom the mind organizes experience not under a uniform set of transcendently necessary "categories" but under a unique perspective dictated by the individual's interests, needs and values.²¹ In Proustian terms, everything is filtered through "that little disk of the eye's pupil, through which we look at the world and on which our desire is engraved" (BSB 161; cf. SG 534). We are still dealing with an overarching system that gives shape to the mass of conceptual material by combining it according to reliable rules, so that each separate association makes an implicit claim upon the entire network, but here the rules are almost certain to vary from one human being to the next.

One corollary is that if we wish to learn something about the inner "world" of another individual—that aspect of her perspective which is not held in common with the rest of humanity—we can do so only by studying the combinations that she typically (and unconsciously) produces among the elements of any given domain.²² Thus, in conversation with Albertine, Marcel senses that her "words themselves did not enlighten me unless they were interpreted," which is to say unless they are understood as "the involuntary, sometimes perilous contact of two ideas which [she had] not expressed" (C 109); thus, too, he and his author immediately sense the originality of a novel by the fact that "the relations between things [a]re so different from those that connected them for me" (GW 444, EA 311); and thus, finally, he intuitively behind the arrangements of musical notes "that essential quality of another person's sensations into which love for another person does not allow us to penetrate" (C 206).²³

We have seen that associations between pairs of ideas, concepts, or even musical notes are, on Marcel's theory, always governed by invariant rules. I would go further and venture that the local rules are also indicative of *higher-order* laws of perspective. If the former determine which concept (e.g., ci-

lantro) will reliably find itself linked to which other concept (e.g., scallop) in my mind, the latter represent the more general principles behind all such connections, which is to say the *types* of category my mind is wont to impose upon experience, the joints at which it tends to carve up the world. It may well be, in fact, that the local rules can periodically be suspended, as when my palate learns to appreciate the delicacy of seafood, with the higher-order laws nonetheless remaining firmly in place. (One imagines the editors of Borges's celebrated "Chinese encyclopedia" continuing to group animals under rubrics like "embalmed," "trained," "chimerical," "trembling as though mad," and "resembling flies when seen from a distance" even when a particular animal turns out not, say, to resemble a fly when seen from a distance, or not to tremble as though mad: the encyclopedia's second edition may well require changes in content, but its overall form will be unaffected.)²⁴ As a result, the higher-order laws—to which I shall return later in this chapter—probably serve as the more accurate guide to the deep structure of my personality.

4. Perspective and Viewpoint

We may dispute some of Marcel's observations on the nature of music, but we have, I think, no reason not to take the idea about "metaphor" seriously—unless, of course, we are hardened Wittgensteinians, too linguistically turned to believe in any preverbal inhabitants of the mind. One such Wittgensteinian is Vincent Descombes, according to whom Marcel's theory "appeals to entities whose status is impossible" (220). There is no such animal, maintains Descombes, as an original and arcane outlook (a "private language"); I do not see things differently from you, but merely from a different *standpoint*. If you were to come to where I am, you would see them exactly the way I do.

Descombes's line of reasoning merits at least a brief examination, because it sets out to demonstrate not only that Marcel is *wrong* to believe what he believes but that he is *obviously* wrong: that the novel, in other words, itself proves exactly the opposite of what Marcel is trying to put forward. And although there is at present little evidence to adjudicate in general between the austere Wittgensteinian view and its more permissive rivals, we can at least show that Descombes is a little hasty in attributing his own skepticism to the text. For one thing, he offers no real substantiation for his overall claim about the "myth of interiority" (203, 220).²⁵ For another, when he seeks to back up the more specific idea about emplacement, his choice of example can at times be somewhat misleading.

Take the scene in which Marcel suddenly becomes aware that Rachel, the actress for whom his friend Robert de Saint-Loup is sacrificing money, worldly reputation, and sleep, is the very same Rachel he himself used to be offered for one *louis* in a brothel (BG 206, GW 211). Since the two-bit prostitute Marcel knows differs radically, as hardly needs stating, from the glam-

orous actress Robert knows, it would be tempting (writes Descombes) to label these as “Rachel seen from two different perspectives.” That, however, would be an error, Descombes continues, for one of the two “perspectives” is *correct* and the other is *incorrect*. To be sure, Proust has Marcel explicitly state that neither opinion should be privileged—“the little tart Rachel, the real Rachel, *if it can be said that Rachel the tart was more real than the other*” (GW 214; my emphasis)—but only, continues Descombes, because he has painted himself into a theoretical corner. “Optical perspectivism obliges Proust²⁶ to take these two descriptions of Rachel—*tart* and *woman of great price*—as equally well founded, when the whole point of this section of the narrative is to expose the illusion a lover lives in” (269).

Marcel’s practice, in other words, belies his theory: in defiance of endless declarations about all perspectives being of uniform validity, the narrative itself presents a stark contrast between perfect accuracy on the one hand and outright (and transparent) delusion on the other. Instead of presenting “Rachel seen from two different perspectives,” the scene shows us merely “the real Rachel” and “the false Rachel.” And in spite of all the assertions about perspectives being inaccessible to others, Marcel is here able to share Robert’s delusion—perhaps precisely because it is a delusion, and nothing more subtle or complicated than that—as he watches Rachel on stage. “Marcel realizes that he now sees her as Robert does, since he occupies the same vantage point,” argues Descombes; “the narrator can actually share Robert’s perspective” (268).²⁷

Are “vantage point” and “perspective” really equivalent, however? The *Rachel poule* episode does not prove that they are, as it really has nothing to say about the latter. Far from being an anecdote designed to convey or confirm theories about individual perspective, it presents itself quite clearly as a case of interchangeable attitude. Rather, that is, than suggesting that Marcel considers Rachel a two-bit prostitute because of the way his mind works, or that Robert worships her because of intrinsic mental properties of his own, it straightforwardly accounts for the divergence in sentiment by noting that one first met her in a brothel and the other in a theater.²⁸ Like an optical illusion, the “amorous chimera” from which Robert suffers (TR 313) is a potentially universal (and therefore universally comprehensible) fallacy: just as anyone can climb onto a carriage and witness steeples appearing to move, so all of us are liable to adopt a different outlook on person X depending on which aspect of X’s character first meets our attention.

For we are dealing here primarily with genuinely existing features of Rachel’s personality, and only secondarily with the subjective contribution of her two observers. Descombes may be justified in pointing out that she is hardly a “woman of great price,” but it is misleading to conclude that Marcel is on the mark and Robert off target:²⁹ to claim that Rachel is “really” a prostitute is, it seems to me, to give in to a certain recent bias according

to which a person's most vicious trait is exclusively allowed to define her identity. Marcel's own view runs counter to such bias. Speaking of the type of girl who begins by showing "the purity of a virgin" and then goes on to show "more boldness," he asks "in herself was she one more than the other? Perhaps not, but capable of yielding to any number of different possibilities in the headlong current of life" (C 78). Just so, Rachel is "in herself" no more a "tart" than a "woman of great price," both being, in a sense, facets or potentialities of her complex being (she has, after all, enough talent as an actress to rise to the top of her profession). All that the episode proves is that people display various sides of themselves at various times and in various situations, and that those who meet them are accordingly susceptible to misjudgments, taking the part for the whole.

Thus the episode is very much about *point de vue*, a term Marcel rarely uses to designate an individual perspective—in the classic statements on the subject, he prefers expressions like "vision," "qualitative essence of sensations," "way of seeing," "temperament," "world," or "universe"—and far more often to designate aspects of experience accessible by all (the *Recherche* is packed with topics considered "from a physical point of view," "from a spiritual point of view," "from a practical point of view," "from an intellectual point of view," "from an aesthetic point of view," "from a moral point of view," "from a social point of view," or "from a historical point of view"). Marcel's comments on Robert leave the issue of individual perspective open.

Descombes is mistaken, therefore, in alleging that the novel's examples undermine its own claims, revealing an (unconscious) awareness on Proust's part that the theory of perspective is false, with the result that Marcel is not just wrong but obviously wrong. If Wittgensteinians wish to dismiss the *Recherche*, they must do so by making the unargued-for claim that the mind is as bare and spare as the house Wittgenstein built himself in Vienna; they can gain no support from the text itself. On the contrary, Proust's novel clearly presents the deepest mental states of an individual not as simple and standard but as sophisticated and obscure. Where we are dealing with genuine instances of individual perspective, there is no easy access, but merely three degrees of minimal acquaintance. We may, in the first case, know nothing at all of another person's perspective; or we may become aware of its existence, usually thanks to the pain caused by her escaping our cognitive appropriation (think of Albertine, the perennial "fugitive" from Marcel's understanding); or, finally, we may gain the odd glimpse at its nature, based on clues (speech patterns, dress styles, etc.) that we have to interpret. What we cannot do is *adopt* it in any meaningful sense. Thus heterosexuals can train themselves, as Marcel does, to detect the more overt signs of homosexuality, but they can never aspire to the uncanny mutual awareness Marcel considers unique to members of the "race" (SG 15).

The only exception to the rule—to return to a point made in the previous section—is art. “All the residuum of reality which we are obliged to keep to ourselves, which cannot be transmitted in talk, even from friend to friend, from master to disciple, from lover to mistress, that ineffable something which differentiates qualitatively what each of us has felt and what he is obliged to leave behind at the threshold of the phrases in which he can communicate with others only by limiting himself to externals, common to all and of no interest—are brought out by art,” Marcel famously states (C 343). And once again, the events of the narrative turn out to be perfectly in harmony with his idea.³⁰ Marcel, who used to shun as unpoetic “that sordid moment when the knives are left littering the tablecloth” (BG 372), now lingers at the table. “Since I had seen such things depicted in water-colours by Elstir, I sought to find again in reality . . . the broken gestures of the knives still lying across one another,” he explains. “I tried to find beauty there where I had never imagined before that it could exist, in the most ordinary things, in the profundities of ‘still life’” (BG 612–13). Similarly, having once seen canvases in which land and sea become interchangeable, he is in a position, on the second Balbec visit, to generate the same spectacle for himself, to witness the mast of a fishing boat becoming (what else?) a steeple:

my eyes, trained by Elstir to retain precisely those elements that once I had deliberately rejected, would now gaze for hours at what in the former year they had been incapable of seeing. . . . there were days now when . . . the sea itself seemed almost rural. On the days, few and far between, of really fine weather, the heat had traced upon the waters, as though across fields, a dusty white track at the end of which the pointed mast of a fishing-boat stood up like a village steeple. A tug, of which only the funnel was visible, smoked in the distance like a factory. (SG 247–48; cf. Descombes 255)³¹

Marcel has clearly internalized a way of looking at the world, expanded his range of conceptual possibilities, added a new device to his cognitive toolbox. He can, when he so chooses, see the world through the eyes of Elstir.

Judging by Proust’s 1895 article on Chardin and Rembrandt, we are dealing here with a case of unanimity between author and character. When you have absorbed a number of still-life paintings by Chardin, Proust writes, “you will be a Chardin” in your own right, “you for whom, as for him, metal and pottery will come to life and fruit will talk” (EA 70). You too, in other words, will start to see apparently dull objects as though they were beings endowed with life, energy, and agency. In Proust’s view as in that of Marcel, art possesses the unique capacity to transmit its creator’s perspective in a way that allows us, to a certain extent, to make it our own. To be sure, we do not simply surrender our own perspective and replace it with another’s, do

not literally "become the man himself."³² Art merely grants us the opportunity to "see the universe through the eyes of another, of a hundred others" (C 343), and not through our own transformed eyes: we will always remain aware of the disjunction between what is innate and what is borrowed vision (as we saw above, Marcel "*sought* to find again . . . the broken gestures of the knives," "*tried* to find beauty there where I had never imagined before that it could exist"; it does not come naturally).³³ But even if an artist's world is only ever on loan, to borrow it is to increase the size of the universe. "Thanks to art, instead of seeing one world only, our own, we see that world multiply itself and we have at our disposal as many worlds as there are original artists, worlds more different one from the other than those which revolve in infinite space" (TR 299).

5. Marcel's Perspective

What, then, about the Martinville steeples passage? If Marcel's own literary output is to live up to his claims for aesthetic production in general, then the *poème en prose* should convey something about his deepest mental states; it should convey not only the objective side of his perspective (via the optical illusions and pre-predications) but also its subjective side, via the series of images. With the spirit of Descombes staring intently over our shoulder, we need now to ascertain whether the images concerned really tell us anything about the mind of their creator, whether they really offer us anything more than the impression of a vivid but ultimately unruly imagination. In a sense, the theory stands or falls on this example, the one clear instance of artistry that we ever witness emerging from the pen of the narrator. It should be possible for us to recast Marcel's metaphors as a set of propositions about his inner world, even though, as the same theory demands, propositions can only go so far in making Marcel's character tangible to us: just as, in life, the fullest description of a stranger will always fall short of the knowledge we derive from acquaintance, so here we should expect to end up with a photo-fit drawing of Marcel that is no substitute for his voice, his style itself.

It can at least be asserted that the terms of comparison Marcel selects for the steeples are far from being arbitrary. If we set aside the rather prosaic pivots, presumably invoked merely on the basis of physical similarity, and temporarily postpone discussion of the birds (to which I shall return in the next section), we are left with flowers and girls, two of the most frequently recurring leitmotifs of the novel as a whole. Indeed, flowers and girls may well be particularly prominent in Marcel's mind at the time of the visit to Martinville, since they have been the object of his attention on almost every afternoon expedition from Combray. When not gazing longingly at "some girl from the fields" around Roussainville (S 213–14), he is intently studying the obscene gesture of Gilberte (S 197–99); when not pressing a bank of

hawthorns to deliver its secret (S 193–95), he is luxuriating in the sight of water lilies which—just like the figurative flowers at Martinville, interestingly enough—seem, when the sun sets above them, to “blossom in the sky” (S 240). What the Martinville prose poem has to teach us, then, is that Marcel subliminally associates steeples with girls and with flowers as possessors of a feature which, within his idiosyncratic conceptual universe, comes to the fore in each, setting it apart from most of the other constituents of the visible world. And that feature, we may speculate, is its ability to call to him in a particular way, to set him dreaming, to invest him with belief, to promise him the object of his deepest desire.

The grail in question is not, as the novel’s somewhat misleading title seems to suggest, “lost time.” For it is not the past that its protagonist is pursuing across three thousand pages of peregrinations, but instead an enrichment of experience, an additional dimension, something more than he can readily perceive (under a limited definition, we might call this a desire for *transcendence*). To be sure, memory (of the involuntary kind) will ultimately prove one means to such enrichment. But it is only very late in the narrative that it does so, and even then Marcel considers it merely an intermediate goal, of strictly instrumental utility, and never an end in itself. Until the *matinée Guermantes*, he continually turns outside himself for inspiration, seeking release from the prison of his own consciousness and entry into a different domain. Everywhere he looks, be it at a geographical location, an interesting individual, or a collection of salon regulars, he thinks he sees *worlds*, which is to say systems that are both homogeneous and heteronomous, alien to everyday experience and at the same time perfectly coherent from within. Any manifestation that strikes him as unusual becomes a *sign*, a secret communication that stands in need of decoding, something that would yield a meaning if only one possessed the interpretive cipher, spoke the local language.³⁴

The entire novel, in fact, presents itself as a relentless sequence of fascinations, one no sooner fading than it is replaced by another. Anything is worth attention that seems to hint at a world beyond Marcel’s ken: magical names, like Brabant, Champi, Agrigente, La Raspelière, Saint-Euverte, and of course Guermantes; high-society salons; actors and actresses including Odette and La Berma; artworks including those of Bergotte, Elstir, and Vinteuil; hawthorns, trees at Hudimesnil, *poiriers* in Paris; places such as Balbec, Venice, and Doncières; milkmaids and other unknown women, like those of the Bois de Boulogne, around Méséglise, at Balbec, and in Rivebelle, or like the Putbus chambermaid and the ostensible Mlle d’Eporcheville; Gilberte and the agate marble she gives him, the Duchesse de Guermantes, Mlle Stermaria, Albertine, Andrée, Gisèle, the *petite bande* in general, and no doubt the thirteen others at Balbec.³⁵ If, therefore, Marcel’s unconscious mind brings the Martinville steeples into connection with water lilies and legendary maidens, it is because all three represent classes of objects typi-

cally invested with what Marcel calls "prestige" or, more commonly, "faith" (*foi, croyance*).³⁶ Artworks, flowers, and young women have alike the power to summon a conviction on his part that they are home to a mystery he can share, residents of unknown worlds to which he may travel.³⁷

Translated into propositional phrases, the steeples' revelation would run more or less as follows: "Your deepest desire, driving your perspective, is for transcendence; you seek that transcendence in natural objects, fellow human beings, and aesthetic artifacts; that is why we are linked, in your mind, to flowers and maidens, even though we might be linked to other things in other minds; what is behind us is this fact, and in general the fact that you have a unique and identifiable perspective." The images do not, in the end, teach us anything about the steeples themselves, but only (here again there is a Kantian flavor) about their place in Marcel's subjective conceptual framework.³⁸ What they bring to light is not so much a hitherto unremarked feature of, say, the color of the masonry as the information that buildings, girls, and flowers can all be invested with *croyance*—or rather, since even this last item is barely news to anyone, that *croyance* sits at the heart of Marcel's desire, ruling his perspective, almost exclusively responsible for the myriad serial infatuations related in the novel. (Just to emphasize the connection, he has the imaginary flowers being "*painted upon the sky*" and the girls emerging from a "legend.")

Were Marcel but listening, in other words, he would hear the images telling him a truth about his nature, one which brushes the surface of his consciousness at regular intervals throughout the novel (BG 194, GW 155, SG 560, C 120): that he perceives an aura around certain women, flowers, names, and locations only because he has projected it onto them in the first place; that when all the various haloes have faded it is the projection that remains, evidence of a unique and consistent point of view on the world. That is to say, "we end by noticing that, after all those vain endeavours which have led to nothing, something solid subsists, [i.e.,] what it is that we love" (GW 529). Or again,

if the object of my headstrong and active desire no longer existed, on the other hand the same tendency to indulge in an obsessional day-dream, which varied from year to year but led me always to sudden impulses, regardless of danger, still persisted. The evening on which I rose from my bed of sickness and set out to see a picture by Elstir or a mediaeval tapestry in some country house or other was . . . like the day on which I ought to have set out for Venice [S 559], or that on which I had gone to see Berma [BG 17–29] or left for Balbec [BG 303–4]. . . . my musings gave a certain glamour [*prestige*] to anything that might be related to them. And even in my most carnal desires, orientated always in a particular direction, concentrated around a single dream, I might

have recognised as their primary motive an idea, an idea for which I would have laid down my life, at the innermost core of which, as in my day-dreams while I sat reading all afternoon in the garden at Combray [S 115–23], lay the notion of perfection.³⁹

6. Two Objections: Image-Chains and Metonymyphors

But can we really agree with Marcel that “something solid subsists,” that there is a single, uniform perspective at work, consistently glamorizing particular aspects of experience? Some critics would dispute the idea. First of all, they would argue, Marcel produces too many metaphors. If, as I have claimed, the image in Proust brings together two disparate objects by means of a subjectively (unconsciously) necessary connection, then a given object A should only ever be linked to a given object B. Yet here in the Martinville passage we find four separate counterparts for the steeples, one indeed from each of the mineral, vegetable, animal, and human realms (pivots, flowers, birds, girls). Elsewhere in the novel we find similar cascades of correspondences, as for example when the narrator likens his future project to a military campaign, a spell of fatigue, a discipline, a cathedral, a diet, an obstacle, a friendship, a child, a new world, and, of all things, a dress (TR 507–9). Are we not simply dealing with an exceptionally fertile imagination, capable of converting anything into anything else? Should we not agree with Gaëtan Picon that in Proust things can be “not only themselves, but all the rest” (159; my translation; cf. Spitzer 457, Tadić 1971: 432)?⁴⁰

If we consider the last-mentioned example closely, we find that the process of metaphorization is not after all as random as it might seem. Whether Marcel envisages the magnum opus as cathedral or dress depends, as it turns out, on which of its aspects is in view at the particular moment. For the fact that artworks appear to have two completely incommensurable sides, the “material” and the “ideal,” has been a source of immense fascination and confusion to Marcel ever since his disappointing encounter with Bergotte: What connection, he wonders, holds between mere literary craft and the magic of personal expression (BG 167; cf. C 209, C 259, C 504–14)? How is it possible that composers can convey their inner world merely by rearranging musical notes that are available to all, notes that “the lay listener . . . may pick out on one finger upon the piano” (C 540)? It is no wonder, then, that he considers his own future production very differently depending on whether he thinks about the painstaking labor that will be involved or about the miracle of communication it will enable. “And—for at every moment the metaphor uppermost in my mind changed as I began to represent to myself more clearly *and in a more material shape* the task upon which I was about to embark—I thought that . . . I should construct my book, I dare not say