"Proust's Intermittent Seriality, or What is a Literary Event?"

In many ways, Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* is the antithesis of a serialized novel. Proust only published one conventional novel over seven book-length volumes, and this work's thousands of pages and endless sentences have made many less dedicated readers wonder when it will stop, let alone start up again. And yet, seriality is absolutely central to the workings of the novel. The question of what repeats, and what does not, ties together the multiple disparate strands of Proust's thought. Being attentive to this novel's seriality in the broadest sense can help us understand how it makes the case for the singularity of aesthetic works, not simply as mimetic representations, but as unique objects, as events as I will argue in the conclusion, that call to the reader to return continually to its complex sentences and haunting images. Indeed, the serial drive of *In Search of Lost Time* is to be found just as much on the side of the reader as that of the novel's diegesis.

In Search of Lost Time, as a monumental novel, has often been described as the last great French work of the nineteenth century, the heir to Honoré de Balzac's *Comédie humaine* and Émile Zola's *Rougon-Macquart* massive novel series. The fact that Proust's novel inherits many technical aspects from these writers, but marks a departure from them has been interpreted as the shift to French modernism or as the turning point between the novel of the nineteenth to that of the twentieth century.[1] However, I would argue that Proust's novel rethinks seriality, both as an

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[1] See Antoine Compagnon's *Proust entre deux siècles*. Paris: Seuil, 2013, in particular the debate between the organicist or the fragmentary nature of the work of art which Proust inherited from the nineteenth century.

organizing principle of narrative over time and, more crucially, as it relates to questions of identity, desire, and aesthetics in ways that borrow from Balzac's and Zola's recurring characters, all the while giving to seriality in its broadest sense a conceptually coherent framework. Balzac's characters, for instance, reappear haphazardly throughout the *Comédie humaine*, and create a tension between representing a type (say, Bianchon as Balzac's go-to Parisian doctor) and representing a mysterious universe beyond that of the narrative (Vautrin, the criminal who rebels against any fixed category). Seriality allows Balzac to project the illusion of a world outside his fictional creation. By contrast, Zola's vision of the Rougon-Macquart, the family that dominates his eponymous twenty-novel series, relies on the emerging science of genetics to rationalize the behaviors of family members and structure their narratives. Literature and (a certain understanding of nineteenth-century) science provide a coherent explanation in Zola's novels for how traits repeat across social types and within a family. Proust's characters, however, recur within the same novel across several volumes, but they borrow their characteristics and actions from other characters and even from other novels, seemingly without reason. They obey different logics from the capitalist/realist logics of Balzac or the genetic/naturalist logics of Zola, in the end showing more affinity with the works of Gustave Flaubert in that narrative is subsumed to the aesthetics of failure and incompletion.[2]

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[2] See Proust's critical assessment of Flaubert, which highlights his predecessor's mastery of style in the service of creating a time of reading and the tension of the blank. Marcel Proust, "À Propos du 'style' de Flaubert," in *Contre Sainte-Beuve*, *Pastiches et mélanges*, *Essais et articles*. Pierre Clarac (ed). Paris, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, Gallimard, 594.

Given the different cultural valences and publishing practices of serial novels in France and the United Kingdom, much recent scholarship on serialization (by scholars such as Peter Garrett, Lauren Goodlad, Sean O'Sullivan and others) has focused on Victorian literature and also on English language television and media studies to the exclusion of other forms of serialization and other regions and languages.[3] Yet, as Bettina Lerner reminds us, the French serialized novel (*roman feuilleton*) began in 1836, almost simultaneously with a translation of a Spanish novel *Lazarillo de Tormes* and Balzac's novel *La Vieille Fille*, which is to say Balzac conceived and published several volumes of the *Comédie humaine* as a series before he started publishing some of the novels in periodicals.[4] Soon, other authors like Alexandre Dumas and Eugène Sue would take up the serial novel to expand the reading public and make fortunes selling popular novels. While the rise of a national consciousness across classes in the nineteenth century was facilitated by this new mass serial-book reading audience, it is difficult to imagine anything further from Proust's difficult sentences and rarefied subject-matter. This isn't to say that Proust envisioned an elitist readership (on the contrary, he claimed that popular literature

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[3] See Peter Garrett, *The Victorian Multiplot Novel: Studies in Dialogical Form*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980; Lauren Goodlad, *The Victorian Geopolitical Aesthetic*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015; and Sean O'Sullivan, "Old, New, Borrowed, Blue: *Deadwood* and Serial fiction," in *Reading 'Deadwood.'* ed. David Lavery, London: Tauris, 2006, pp. 115-29.

[4] Bettina Lerner. "A French 'Lazarillo': Translation and Popular Literature in Nineteenth-Century France". in *Nineteenth-Century French Studies*. Vol 38. No ½ (Fall-Winter 2009-2010), pp. 9-23.

was destined more for the members of the Jockey Club than the working classes),[5] but he wasn't

likely to find a periodical willing to publish *In Search of Lost Time* in installments for the mass

market, though he did attempt to convince the editors of the *Mercure de France* and *Le Figaro* to

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[5] "L'idée d'un art populaire comme d'un art patriotique si même elle n'avait pas été dangereuse,

me semblait ridicule. S'il s'agissait de le rendre accessible au peuple, en sacrifiant les

raffinements de la forme, 'bons pour des oisifs,' j'avais assez fréquenté de gens du monde pour

savoir que ce sont eux les véritables illettrés, et non les ouvriers électriciens. A cet égard, un art

populaire par la forme eût été destiné plutôt aux membres du Jockey qu'à ceux de la

Confédération générale du travail ; quant aux sujets, les romans populaires ennuient autant les

gens du peuple que les enfants ces livres qui sont écrits pour eux." (The idea of a popular art like

that of patriotic art, even if it weren't dangerous, seems to me ridiculous. If it were about

rendering art accessible to the people, by sacrificing the refinements of form, 'good only for the

idle classes,' I have spent enough time around the upper class to know that they are the truly

illiterate people, and not, say, electricians. In this regard, an art that is popular in its form would

be meant more for the members of the Jockey Club rather than for those of the CGT labor union;

as for the subject matter, popular novels bore the common people as much as children are bored

by books written for them.) (all translation my own). Marcel Proust, *A la recherche du temps*

perdu. IV, Bibliothèque de la pléiade, Paris: Gallimard, 1989. pp. 466-7.

publish the "novel" portion of his *Contre Sainte-Beuve*, which they of course refused to consider.[6]

Proust's single novel, across its seven volumes and several thousand pages, does in fact incorporate elements of the serialized, even popular, novel. The many sections and subsections afford internal series or serializations, complete with dramatic plot reversals, cliffhangers, and of course recurring characters and family groups. To take only the most famous example, "Un Amour de Swann," the second section of the first volume can be read as a stand-alone third person novel that also creates a motif of jealous love that is repeated several times in the rest of the novel by characters who do not know Swann's story. Moreover, the end of Swann's "novel" finds him cured of his love for Odette, and yet, like in a soap opera, we next find him years later married to this woman who was not "his type." The unexplained temporal and logical gap resembles the same one Proust had noticed in Flaubert's *L'éducation sentimentale* after Frédéric witnesses Napoléon III's coup-d'état. Just as in Flaubert, political and emotional upheaval are intertwined, and ultimately escape narrative description.

The most "Proustian" feature of serial novels, however, is their relationship to the passing of time. Usually written progressively as they are published, serial novels adapt to changing political and social climates, often responding to readers' evolving tastes or the author's own personal development. Balzac changed political allegiances from the left to the right over the long course of his *Comédie humaine.* Zola began writing the *Rougon-Macquart* before the end of

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[6] Christine Cano describes Proust's evolving strategies and compromises to publish his novel, including in the early stages as a serial, in *Proust's Deadline*, Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2006, pp. 26-7.

the Second Empire, only to subsequently claim that as an artist he "needed" the fall of Napoléon III as an inevitability and then expanded his series from ten to twenty novels.[7] The serial novel participates in public debate and in turn this "actualité" (or current affairs) becomes reintegrated into the fictional world of the novel. The serial novel doesn't appear all at once fully formed, but rather its publication is imbued with a presentness, an era, an extended timeframe. Proust's novel, of course, makes time its central organizing principle, but the length of time it took to publish such an ambitious work ended up transforming the shape, size, and even conception of the whole. When the first volume was published in 1913, Proust was a relatively obscure writer who paid the editor Grasset for the publication of his own book. The beginning of World War I interrupted the publication of the second volume of the novel, and Proust managed to double the size of the middle section, while retaining the final volume mostly intact.[8] The second volume, *A l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleur*, now with the more prestigious publishing house Gallimard, won the Prix Goncourt in 1919 and made Proust and his novel famous. He continued writing and expanding the novel, as a sort of internal serialization or accordion where new volumes could expand infinitely from existing patterns within the "frame" of the first and last volumes and also

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[7] Émile Zola, Preface to *La Fortune des Rougon*, in *Les Rougon-Macquart*, Ed. Henri Mitterand, Vol 1. Paris: Gallimard, 1960, p. 4.

[8] See Christine Cano's *Proust's Deadline* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006) for a detailed account of the novel's publication, especially in regards to Proust's own sense of mortality, but also how Proust originally pushed for publication of the novel as a single volume before embracing the multi-volume format.

create new patterns, until he died in 1922 with the unpublished volumes appearing over several years.

What we might call the novel's "covert seriality" as one very long novel not only reveals how longer narratives are all, in some sense, serial in how they repeat stylistically and thematically, but also how this covert seriality in turn demands serial consumption patterns of the reader. Readers of the first volume in 1913 had no idea of the novel's trajectory, and of course encountered a novelist without the aura Proust would take on in later years. The greatness of the work became evident slowly, with each new volume and with the perspective of time. The "lost time" of the Belle Époque that was searched for in 1913 was indeed definitively lost after World War I. Like a popular serialized novel, Proust's work framed an era and made the passing of time perceptible for its contemporary readers. Subsequent readers, however, more often than not read selectively, rereading earlier volumes and sometimes skipping sections, the way Netflix viewers might watch an episode of *Seinfeld* or *Friends* without feeling compelled to watch every season in succession. In the end, the serial elements of the novel allow for a personalized reading approach that is very much aligned with the novel's own representation of the time of reading, which explicitly asks the reader to look to the "inner book" within themselves, thereby connecting the act of reading and re-reading this book with our own lived experiences.[9]

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[9] "Quant au livre de signes inconnus (de signes en relief, semblait-il, que mon attention explorant mon inconscient, allait chercher, heurtait, contournait, comme un plongeur qui sonde), pour la lecture desquels personne ne pouvait m'aider d'aucune règle, cette lecture consistant en un acte de création où nul ne peut nous suppléer, ni même collaborer avec nous. Aussi combien se détournent de l'écrire!" (As for the inner book of unknown signs (of heightened signs, it would

We can say, then, that more than a plot device designed to pique the reader's interest, seriality is fundamental to the novel's structure and composition. In fact, the unique form Proust's novel takes, of a fictionalized autobiography of a man who narrates his coming to writing, means that the patterns of the narrator's thoughts are reflected in the novel's stylistic choices and even the way the reader approaches the novel's series of characters, and "theories" (the famous "lois générales" continuously put forth and then abandoned by the narrator).[10] The novel's form, whether a unified whole or one in a series, mirrors the narrator's subjectivity as he struggles to understand himself as an individual within a family and a society, before realizing

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seem, that my attention, exploring my unconscious, went searching for, hitting up against, traced the contours of, like a diver who probed the depths), for the reading of which no one could help me with any rule, this reading would consist of an act of creation which nothing could substitute for us or even collaborate with us. And so how many have turned away from writing it!) (*Le Temps retrouvé*, in *A La Recherche du temps perdu*, vol. IV, Paris : Gallimard, 1989, 458).

[10] As Christie McDonald writes, "Proust develops a principle of individuation as the basis of memory and art, as that which both demands and resists generalization. Truth resides in the reconstruction of events without precedent, where nothing ever repeats itself exactly. By probing the way in which associations seem to guide thought, by translating the simultaneity of associations into the necessarily successive, temporal sequences of writing, Proust attempts to generalize the ungeneralizable. Out of individual experience, he wishes to tease some general quality resembling a scientific law and still retain what is unique." *The Proustian Fabric: Associations of Memory*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1991, pp. 1-2.

his vocation as a writer. His life passes before him in a seemingly endless succession of unrelated incidents, only bearing meaning retrospectively.

Even a non-serial novel is made of breaks within narrative where descriptive and theoretical passages alternate with passages full of dialogue and plot. Proust's first attempt at his novel, the drafts of which were published after his death as *Jean Santeuil*, was in part a failure because it devoted too much attention to involuntary memory, resembling something like a jumble of very long "madeleine" scenes. Maurice Blanchot has argued that Proust discovered the need for breaking up the intensity of involuntary memory with long passages of emptiness, of the everyday, in order to capture the intermittent nature of memory, of time, of subjectivity; for Blanchot, emptiness, conveyed by "the densest continuity" of less pure everyday material and which composes the bulk of the novel, is itself in continual development and movement, turning around itself like a sphere and reflecting the more profound movement of memory.[11] The "pure time" of involuntary memory requires, on a stylistic level, the emptiness of continuity created by diegetic breaks and serial returns (Blanchot's "sphere"), while on a conceptual level, involuntary memories themselves are drawn from unexceptional moments in the past that take on meaning only because of their return and their illumination of the nature of time.

To help explain the complex interplay of the passing of chronological time or the diegetical time of fictional narrative and the punctual epiphanies of involuntary memory, we can turn to one of the titles Proust considered for the novel, "The Intermittences of the Heart," which

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[11] Maurice Blanchot. "L'expérience de Proust," in *Le livre à venir*. Paris: Gallimard, 1959, pp. 33-4.

reveals another aspect of Proust's thinking about time that departs from the definitive title *In Search of Lost Time*. The alternate title shows how emotions relate to time, how our relationships with other people do not progress linearly, but come and go seemingly at random intervals, as Marcel calls it, "cet anachronisme qui empêche si souvent le calendrier des faits de coïncider avec celui des sentiments" (this anachronism which so often prevents the factual calendar from coinciding with the sentimental calendar) (III, 153). Proust introduces his doctrine on the intermittences of the heart to explain Marcel's poignantly delayed mourning of his grandmother, occurring years after her death (and in turn resonating with Gérard de Nerval's poem "La Grand-mère"). One volume and four hundred pages after the scene of her prolonged illness and death, the narrator unexpectedly feels the pain for the loss of his grandmother while untying his shoes, as he unconsciously repeats the gesture she had done helping him undress at the same hotel in Balbec the first summer the narrator spent on the coast. Her illness and death, along with his frivolous lifestyle and the passing of time, had led him to forget his grandmother, and just as importantly, his younger self that she had brought out in him:

> Car aux troubles de mémoires sont liées les intermittences du cœur. [...] Mais si le cadre de sensations où elles [nos douleurs] sont conservées est ressaisi, elles ont à leur tour ce même pouvoir d'expulser tout ce qui leur est incompatible, d'installer seul en nous, le moi qui les vécut. Or comme celui que je venais subitement de redevenir n'avait pas existé depuis ce soir lointain où ma grand-mère m'avait déshabillé à mon arrivée à Balbec, ce fut tout naturellement, non pas après la journée actuelle que ce moi ignorait, mais – comme s'il y avait dans le temps des séries différentes et parallèles – sans solution de continuité, tout de suite après le premier soir d'autrefois, que j'adhérai à la minute où ma grand-mère s'était penchée vers moi.[12] (III, 153-4)

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[12] "For memory troubles/disorders are linked to the intermittences of the heart. [...] But if the perceptual environment where [our sorrows] were preserved is recovered, they [the sorrows] have in turn this same power to purge anything that is incompatible with them, to install alone within us the self who lived them. Now since the self that I had just suddenly become once more

Marcel explains that this "bouleversement de toute ma personne" (the upheaval of my whole being) (152) caused by the sudden presence of his grandmother shocked him because he encountered one of his former selves, a self who knew nothing about all that had happened to him since, as if time were made up of "different and parallel series." In order to remember, one has to forget; in order to rediscover a lost self, a lost emotion, one has to have lived multiple, even parallel, lives. If in exceptional circumstances a past situation is repeated ("le cadre de sensations [...] est ressaisi"), then the past self who had lived that experience is brought back with all its singular desires and perceptions. The passing of time, conceived of as forming parallel series of selves, preserves the past even as it protects the present from the overwhelming work of mourning.

In Search of Lost Time reproduces the effect of Marcel's "doctrine" of the intermittences of the heart through the use of structures borrowed from serial novels. Scenes from the beginning of the novel are remembered hundreds, even thousands of pages later, for example when the narrator encounters a copy of George Sand's *François le champi* in the final volume and recalls when his mother had read it to him in the first volume. Often there are transitions lacking between volumes (for instance between *Albertine disparue* and *Le Temps retrouvé*) and even between sections within volumes ("Un Amour de Swann" standing apart from the rest). The slow

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had not existed since that long ago evening when my grandmother had undressed me upon my arrival at Balbec, it was completely natural, not after the present day about which this self was unaware, but – as if there were in time different and parallel series – without loss of continuity, immediately after that first evening in the past, that I attached myself to the minute where my grandmother had leaned towards me."

publication rate meant that readers waited years for the next volume to appear, adding more time for the reader to forget the details of the early sections. Proust's serial parataxis abruptly severs ties between sections just as Marcel's different and parallel selves coexist separately.

The intermittences of Proust's seriality dissolve any overarching narrative thread. By the final volume, the narrator himself has lost his way and discloses that he has spent years in a "maison de santé" (clinic or sanatorium) recovering from some unnamed chagrin. The impossibility of continuity in a series (whether series as publication or as the series of individuals that make up the Proustian self) undoes the causality inherent to classical narrative fiction. As Jacques Rancière has argued, fiction since Aristotle has put forth a coherent notion of causality that starts with a beginning, leading to a middle, and concluding with an end.[13] History, on the other hand, relied on a chronological perspective, where one event succeeded the other, indefinitely. With the rise of new scientific and social scientific discourses in the nineteenth century, fictional models of narration and causality became dominate as historians and scientists studied the evolution of species, events, and concepts. According to Rancière, literature, subsequently, sought micro-narratives that put into question the link between an individual (the hero) and his or her actions. Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* (the novel about "nothing") or Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* (in which Marcel for the most part only observes the world) privilege minute detail and stylistic precision over grand narratives and action. Seriality allows Proust to avoid accumulation in narrative, in favor of a fragmented narrative with fragmented, partial characters.

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[13] Jacques Rancière. *Les Bords de la fiction*. Paris: Seuil, 2017.

The most emblematic of Proust's characters, Albertine, disrupts the flow of the narrative and the structure of the whole novel. As one of the "band" of young girls Marcel encounters on the beach in Balbec, Albertine enters the novel indistinguishable from the other girls. She belongs neither to the Guermantes Way nor to Swann's Way, in a sort of zone all to herself within the novel's geography. Much of the expansion of the novel during and after the war was dedicated to Albertine's story, with two volumes revolving largely around her. She thus inspires a large portion of the internal serialization of the novel, all the while escaping any narrative thread. Marcel's obsession with Albertine, the "être de fuite" (being of flight/fugitive being) leads him to learn as much about her as possible in order to tell more and more stories that rationalize her behavior and contain his fears that she secretly prefers women. The complexity of her personality, her fleeting desires, and constant movement, can only be captured by a series of still images, reminiscent of a nineteenth-century chronophotograph. Indeed, Marcel makes the connection to photography and Albertine at the moment when he first kisses her – as he approaches her cheek, he sees multiple Albertine's appear:

> Les dernières applications de la photographie [...] je ne vois que cela qui puisse, autant que le baiser, 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. Bref, de même qu'à Balbec, 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 Albertines 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.[14] II, 660.

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[14] "The latest developments of photography [...] are the only thing that I see that can, as much as a kiss, bring forth from what we believed to be something with one definite aspect, a hundred

Unlike his past self, brought back or "reborn" in isolation from the other selves in a series of

Marcels, the narrator attempts to collapse all of the "ten Albertines" into one with a kiss. As

opposed to the slow realization of his mourning for his grandmother, requiring hundreds of pages

and a minute analysis of one feeling, the kiss, "accelerating prodigiously the speed" with which

we engage with another person's different aspects, only manages to project a monstrous image of

a multiple-headed goddess. The optical illusion, the multiple perspectives on Albertine, lets the

real Albertine escape his embrace. The totality, or accumulation, of selves or images of the other

doesn't correspond to a stable being that can be comprehended.

     Albertine plays a crucial role near the end of the novel, in volume five, *La Prisonnière*,

when Marcel attempts to define the uniqueness of works of art within a series. She serves as

counterpoint or counterexample and yet also what motivates Marcel in his ramblings. What is

fascinating in this rather long passage, is that the tension between Marcel's theories of

singularity in a work of art and Albertine's serial questions reflects the central tension of the

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other things that it may equally well be, since each is related to a no less legitimate perspective.

In short, just as in Balbec, Albertine had often appeared to me different, now as if, by

prodigiously accelerating the speed of changes of perspective and coloring that a person shows

us over the course of different encounters, I had wanted to make them all hold together in a few

seconds in order to recreate experimentally the phenomenon which diversifies the individuality

of a being and to pull out, one after another, as if out of a box, all the possibilities that it

encloses, in the short journey of my lips to her cheek, it is ten Albertines that I saw; this single

young girl being like a goddess with ten heads, the head that I had seen last, if I tried to approach

it, would give way to another."

structure of *In Search of Lost Time*, only resolved, if it is ever resolved, in the final volume. In this section of the novel, Marcel has invited Albertine to live in his Parisian apartment, rather scandalously since they are not married and she is of a different social sphere. Constantly jealous of her, he keeps close watch of her activities, in effect imprisoning her in a gilded cage. Within the passage that interests us, she plays the pianola, a type of player piano where one can modulate the sounds for emphasis. While she plays, as it were, on the instrument, Marcel reflects upon the nature of music and art, seemingly to the reader, but as it turns out, he is speaking out loud to Albertine. The beauty of the passage comes from a sort of free indirect discourse where the reader can hardly distinguish between the narrator of the novel and the Marcel of the narration, which is to say between a detached and seemingly objective philosopher-novelist and a crazed jealous lover.

As she plays, he muses about the "modeling" necessary to make sense out of the "nebulous" sounds (P III, 874). It takes multiple times listening to the same music to create a structure or model that would create meaning out of seemingly random noises. Yet, the narrator acknowledges that his intellect ("intelligence") inherently transforms these sound sensations into something alien from the music: "[j'aimais] pouvoir, au cours de ces exécutions succéssives, rejoindre les unes aux autres, grâce à la lumière croissante, hélas! dénaturante et étrangère de mon intelligence, les lignes fragmentaires et interrompues de la construction, d'abord presque ensevelie de la brume." (I liked to be able, during these successive sessions, to join together, thanks to the increasing light, alas! denaturing and strange of my intellect, the fragmentary and interrupted lines of the [musical] construction, which at first were almost shrouded in haze) (874). The clarity that comes from understanding a piece of music after multiple listenings may only be illusory, as the construction of "interrupted" (intermittent) sections of music phrasing

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depends on the whims of our intellect, which for Proust is always partial and prone to error.

The rest of the passage illustrates the dangers of putting words to and constructing meaning around the event of a work of art or literature, as the narrator's mad jealousy regarding Albertine leads him to make more and more outlandish associations between works of literature and Albertine's supposed Romantic trysts. Interrupting his monologue about music, Albertine asks him if his theories of repetition and singularity apply to literature as well. Given how Marcel has only talked about musical and sculptural forms that escape linguistic description and intellectual understanding, her question would seem to reveal a logical inconsistency with his idea of the unique world of art (and herself as the bearer of a unique truth). Albertine's question to Marcel points to the essential difference of literature from the other arts as one based on the repetition of language. For Marcel, great authors only have one idea, which is repeated throughout their works: "j'expliquais à Albertine que les grands littérateurs n'ont jamais fait qu'une seule œuvre, ou plutôt réfracté à travers des milieux divers une même beauté qu'ils apportent au monde." (I explained to Albertine that the great writers only ever made a single work, or rather refracted through different mediums a selfsame beauty that they bring into the world) (877). Albertine interrupts Marcel again to quote back to him his assertion that Mme de Sévigné has a "Dostoyevsky side" to her writing, and so she questions whether there can be anything singular or unique to an author's work – Marcel finally admits the foolishness of his idea (880-1). The end of the passage finds Marcel horrified that he might be repeating Swann's superficial aestheticizing of women, yet the reader might remember a passage two thousand pages earlier, when Swann forced Odette to play Vinteuil's "petite phrase" on the piano while kissing him, in a scene that anticipates Albertine's pianola playing even as Marcel himself seems to have forgotten (I, 230). The organic unity of a work of art, or a body of work, which Proust

asserted before he began writing *In Search of Lost Time*, is here put into question as seriality itself, either within a work or the serial repetition of tropes across authors, reveals new and incompatible aspects of the literary text.

The final volume, *Le Temps retrouvé,* written at the same time as the first volume, conceptualizes the intuitions about involuntary memory Marcel had with the madeleine scene, the mourning scene with his grandmother, and other scenes in order to understand how different iterations of our past selves are brought back to the present to reveal essences or "un peu de temps à l'état pur" (a little bit of time in its pure state). As opposed to the obsessive intellectual pursuit of repeatedly constraining Albertine's selves into some imaginary Albertine, involuntary memory is triggered by a sudden jolt, an event, that forces a past sensation to return to the present *as* present. In other words, involuntary memory consists of a sensation from two different times experienced simultaneously. It requires an initial series of successive sensations that are not perceived consciously, but when superimposed, invite the intellect (or conscious) to create a link and conceive of an essence. Marcel then realizes that this creative act is analogous to a work of art, specifically a metaphor which brings two separate objects together and poses a link between them. Cinema, for Proust, is not an art (and of course, in this he is comically wrong), because it only shows a series of images without folding them back and creating metaphors the way literature does, which is to say superimpose sensations.

To conclude, this is where I think theories of the event can be useful for understanding Proust's work as being about both seriality and the search for a singularity outside of the chronological passing of time. Events are inherently paradoxical, and what I am calling a literary event is almost an oxymoron. In its simplest definition, an event is a certain

configuration in a defined place and a defined time. Paris-Mai '68. New York-9/11. Events then

have to be recognized as such. Recognizing an event means naming it and identifying its

singularity, the fact that it is unlike what preceded it and was not predicted in the past. As

Derrida writes,

> Quand arrive un événement, il est illisible. Sa singularité est irréductible. *Ça arrive*,
> mais ça n'arrive qu'à son bord, car pour que l'événement soit lu, il faut qu'il s'efface.
> APORIE: Un événement est unique, mais nous ne pouvons dire qu'*il y a de
> l'événement* que s'il est cité, répété, et alors il a perdu ce qui fait sa singularité, son
> idiome, son unicité. L'événement se perd lui-même, il s'*ex-approprie*.[15]

When an event happens, we necessarily lack words to describe it, because of its very uniqueness,

yet to name the event *as* event, we borrow from already existing words and necessarily erase its

singularity. Events, once described, become part of a series, a pattern, a repetition. We lend to

them causes and effects that tame the uniqueness of the event for our own purposes and desires,

like Marcel explaining Albertine's behavior. Literature as the art of language betrays events by

inscribing them into the iterations of recognized words, and yet also makes this betrayal visible

by showing the art, the artificiality, of literary language and the gap between the event and its

representation. Alain Badiou's work on events, similarly, proposes that an event as singularity

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[15] "When an event happens, it is illegible. Its singularity is irreducible. *It happens*, but it only

occurs at its border/the edge, since for the event to be read, it must efface itself. APORIA: An

event is unique, but we can only say that *there is an event* if it is cited, repeated, and then it has

lost what makes its singularity, its idiom, its unity. The event loses itself, it *ex-appropriates*

itself." Jacques Derrida, *Déplier Ponge: entretien avec Gérard Farasse*. Lille: Presses

universitaires du Septentrion, 2005, 34-5.

violates the laws of set theory, being a set of one.[16] Therefore an intervention must happen to redefine a situation for the one to be part of a multiple. We reinscribe the singular into a series – Marx for example showing in his *18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* how 1848 borrowed from 1789, which borrowed from Roman antiquity, but that this borrowing of costumes and characters masks the uniqueness of the event.[17]

To return briefly to Proust's serial novelistic inspirations, Balzac and Zola, from the beginning of this essay, their works sought to describe the range of responses to political and social upheaval in the 1820s-40s and in the 1850s-1870s, respectively. Seriality allowed for a nearly limitless expansion of characters and plotlines, but literary events – the simultaneous naming of an event and the revelation of literature's betrayal of an event's uniqueness – are rare in their works, which are circumscribed by the narration of historical forces.

Proust's novel complicates the literary event further, in ways that resonate with Derrida and Badiou, but depart from Balzac and Zola. An involuntary memory, whether the madeleine or the paving stones of Venice, brings back a specific sensation of a past place and time, but leaves the narrator speechless, unable to say what the sensation is or why he feels such joy in the experience. Only after the fact can his intellect search his memory and connect the sensation felt in the present to a past place and time, which is to say to name and locate the event. As he says several times, being involuntary, the memory escapes the traps his intellect falls into like the ones we saw with Marcel's jealousy. And yet the experience of the event is a trompe-l'oeil as he

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[16] Alain Badiou, *Being and Event*. Trans. Oliver Feltham. London and New York: Continuum, 2006, 176.

[17] Karl Marx, *The 18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*. New York: International Publishers, 1963.

says, because the past place and time coexist with the present, disrupting the unity of the event even as it reveals that each moment was separate and distinct in time. Involuntary memory reveals the sensation, or the essence, as singular and outside of time. To paraphrase Derrida's paraphrase of Shakespeare via Marx in *Spectres de Marx*, time is out of joint, where the question of every event is a question of how the phantoms of the past erupt into the present, as a revolution.[18]

In Search of Lost Time presents us with a series of apparently unrelated and disconnected passages following a loose chronology, where causality seems absent. However, like Merlin, the narrator begins the novel already at the end of his life, with his observations and his metaphorical writing-style infused in the descriptions of his youth. Just as an event crystallizes past iterations that before the event seemed unremarkable, Marcel's story is a long series of unfortunate events without much meaning until the retrospective end and the discovery of his vocation as writer. We thus have a structure that allows for nearly infinite events to emerge, not necessarily just within the novel, but for the reader in his or her "interior book of signs."[19] The sheer mass of the novel,

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[18] Jacques Derrida, *Spectres de Marx*. Paris: Galilée, 1993, p. 31.

[19] Proust's structured novel, in its relationship to events and to readership, echoes Terry Eagleton's idea of the event of literature: "One of the paradoxes of the literary work is that it is 'structure' in the sense of being unalterable and self-complete, yet 'event' in the sense that this self-completion is perpetually in motion, realised as it is only in the act of reading. Not a word of the work can be changed, yet in the vicissitudes of its reception not a word stays dutifully in place." Terry Eagleton. *The Event of Literature*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2012, p. 20.

with its million words and endless series carry us along, metonymically attaching us to the places described and the places where we read each passage over the years it takes to finish the novel. The question of the event in *In Search of Lost Time* may, in the end, come down to how its seriality, its internal ruptures and repetitions require us to read it again and again – this book that is never the same, lacking in internal coherence, this book that reflects time passing with each successive reading.

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