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Son et lumière in Proust

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ABSTRACT

Marcel Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu* is underpinned by an enduring tension between sight and the other senses. Conventional scholarship on Proust claims that the visual pole of this tension is linked to the intellect, as opposed to the association of the remaining senses with intuition and the unfathomable. This reading, however, presents an oversimplification of the complex economy of the senses explored by Proust insofar as it falls prey to visualism, a theoretical predisposition characterised by a double reduction of the perceptual experience. Challenging this tendency, this article draws on sensorial cross-modality and multisensory processes in order to interrogate the connection between sunlight and song in Proust's novel. In particular, we focus on the 'little barometer man' at the start of *La Prisonnière*, whom the narrator anticipates singing on his death bed 'if there is a blink of sun'. We also consider this Proustian connection between song and sunlight in light of a longer tradition, including St Francis of Assisi's 'Canticle of Brother Sun' and the statue of Memnon's dawn song. Proust's consequent demythologising of light and his materialist approach to song support an attempt to consider light shorn of its usual metaphorical connotations.

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This essay considers the presentation of light within literature as a material phenomenon while arguing for the interconnectedness of the senses, which necessitates an understanding of light as embedded within a multi-sensorial context. Within this context, we wish particularly to highlight a connection between *son et lumière*, that is, between sound and light, and even more specifically between song and sunlight. There is a certain perversity in turning for examples of appreciation of literal light to an author famed for his love of metaphor: Marcel Proust.¹ Yet, for Proust, light is not only

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valued for its traditional metaphorical associations with knowledge and the intellect; it is also prized as a material sensation that elicits powerful responses from his protagonist and invites new metaphorical registers and tropes.

Le Temps retrouvé, the last and most orthodoxically theoretical and philosophical novel of *À la recherche*, abounds with passages where light-imbued vocabulary and visually oriented imagery are mobilised to convey the realm of consciousness and reason. Purportedly superficial and exogenous to the subject, the objective dimension of reality, that which can be understood and explained, is expressed by dint of light-charged turns of phrase: 'I therefore forced myself to try to *see* [...] *clearly* [*voir clair*];'² 'I had to try to interpret the sensations as the signs of so many laws and ideas, at the same time as trying to think, that is *to draw out from the penumbra* [*faire sortir de la pénombre*] what I had felt';³ 'Anything we have not had to decipher, *to bring to light* [*éclaircir*] by our own effort, anything which was already *clearly visible* [*clair*], is not our own. The only things that come from ourselves are those *we draw out of the obscurity* [*nous tirons de l'obscurité*] within us'.⁴

Notwithstanding such examples, in *À la recherche* light plays a crucial role not only as a sign for intelligence and reason but also as a physical sensation, in line with a broader prioritising of sense impressions over intellectual truths:

For the truths that the intellect [*l'intelligence*] grasps directly [*à claire-voie*] as giving access to the world of full enlightenment [*le monde de la pleine lumière*] have something less profound, less necessary about them than those that life has, despite ourselves, communicated in an impression, a material impression because it enters us through our senses, but one from which it is also possible to extract something spiritual.⁵

This quotation suggests 'the double nature of light', prone to being adopted as a metaphor for truth, intelligence, and enlightenment, yet at the same time part of the material world of sense impressions prioritised by Proust.⁶ It also, importantly, indicates that the material and the spiritual are not incompatible in Proust's novel.

Proust's denigration of intelligence or the intellect places him within a much larger tradition in French thought that resists, distrusts, or is suspicious of the primacy of vision and the traditionally unproblematic metaphorical associations of light with enlightenment, as has been comprehensively discussed by Martin Jay in *Downcast Eyes*.⁷ Though, as pointed out above, Proust does mobilise the conventional, metaphorical associations of light with enlightenment, especially in *Le Temps retrouvé*, his novel also undermines any possible hasty conclusion concerning the primacy of such an association as regards his thoughts on light. Throughout *À la recherche*, a richer engagement with light as physical sensation is operative, one that

points towards a different metaphorical configuration, and which is consonant with Proust's avoidance of the traditional metaphorical associations of light.

Proust's distinctive way of approaching light more as sensation than sense is concomitant with his valuing of sense impressions as 'the only material [*matière*] of art'.⁸ Moreover, the appreciation of light for its material quality and for its power over the narrator's health, mood, and dispositions repels a reductive philosophical stance that the philosopher Don Ihde calls *visualism*.⁹ A 'symptomatology of the history of thought', *visualism* is a phenomenological and epistemological attitude that privileges vision over the other senses while dividing the visual experience of the world between sense and significance to favour the latter.¹⁰ The result of adopting such an attitude is a reductive engagement with experience and the world. As Ihde explains:

The latent reduction *to* vision became complicated within the history of thought by a second reduction, a reduction *of* vision. [...] The reduction *of* vision is one which ultimately separates sense from significance, which arises out of doubt over perception itself. Its retrospective result, however, is to diminish the richness of every sense.¹¹

The narrator's anti-visualist attitude must not be mistaken for a rejection of vision however, since one of the facets of such an attitude is precisely his physical photosensitivity, an early and famous example of which is his umbrella-brandishing repeated cry of "Damn [*Zut*]" at the sun and its reflections in a pond and on the roof of a garden shed.¹² Construed by Hannah Freed-Thall as a 'peculiar conjunction of wonder and banality' in the face of which 'Proust directs our attention to objects so remarkably unremarkable that they resist critical hold', the narrator's visually triggered ravishing perplexity rendered him practically speechless.¹³ This sort of baffling or ecstatic encounter with light has, nonetheless, sometimes been conveyed in *À la recherche* not by means of garbled speech but instead by new metaphorical configurations. Thus, the reading of Proust's novel that follows charts not merely a joyous, physical reaction to sunlight (though this aspect will recur), but more particularly an extended association between sunlight and song. Our starting point is the 'étourdissant réveil en musique' or deafening musical awakening described at the very beginning of *La Prisonnière*, the fifth volume of *À la recherche*. As well as an important scene where the outside world is understood through sound instead of sight, this passage also introduces us to one of the multiple selves which make up the self, according to *À la recherche*, and whose characteristic is precisely that of singing in response to sunlight.

The idiosyncratic but fundamental bond between song and light or, more accurately, between singing and sunlight in *À la recherche* reflects Proust's

attention to sensorial imbrication. Rather than genuine instances of literary synaesthesia or sensorial correspondence, as Igor Reyner shows sensorial imbrications in *À la recherche* are primarily related to the entwining of vision and listening, which engenders arresting cross-modal imagery.¹⁴ Though various forms of sensorial imbrications are present throughout Proust's novel, the oscillation between the visual and the auditory fields plays a pivotal role, as attested by the opening of *La Prisonnière*.

'[T]he little barometer man'

Writing about Proust, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick ingeniously suggested that 'It would be more than a pun, though not an equivalent, to translate the title of this novel *In Search of Lost Weather*.'¹⁵ The opening scene of *La Prisonnière* is one such privileged moment of narrative about the weather, here in a description of the narrator's waking experience of the outside world as filtered through sound:

From early morning, with my face still turned to the wall and before I had seen, above the tall window curtains, the colour of the line of morning light, I already knew what kind of day it was [*le temps qu'il faisait*]. I could tell from the first street noises, whether they reached me muffled and distorted by dampness or twanging like arrows in the empty, resonant space of a wide-open morning, icy and pure. The rumbling of the first tram told me whether it was huddled against the rain or forging gaily towards a blue horizon. And maybe even those sounds had been preceded by some swifter, more penetrating emanation which had slid into my sleep and suffused it with a sadness foretelling snow, or had found there a certain little intermittent figure which it set to singing so many rousing hymns in praise of the sun [*y faisait entonner, à certain petit personnage intermittent, de si nombreux cantiques à la gloire du soleil*] that, though, still asleep, I would begin to smile, my closed eyes preparing to be dazzled, until a crash of music [*un étourdissant réveil en musique*] finally brought me awake.¹⁶

'Punctuated [*rythmée*] by its morning scenes',¹⁷ *La Prisonnière* is described by Pierre-Edmond Robert as 'a book of hours', an epithet that underscores the somewhat ceremonious and religious tone set by its 'five main days [*journées principales*]'.¹⁸ Its inaugural scene pertains to a genre of scenes in *À la recherche* that can be called 'musical awakening scenes', since they portray hypnopompic states — the Proustian narrator's waking up — filled with sound while openly or figuratively addressing crucial philosophical questions about knowledge, selfhood, and memory. These cardinal, recurring scenes invariably present a narrator who is hyperattentive to sense impressions, through which he tackles a set of issues regarding subjectivity and subjectification, and challenge categories such as exteriority and interiority, reality and rumour, interweaving curious metaphorical imagery and fraught sensorial descriptions of the morning weather.

Our interest in this passage lies chiefly in its introduction of ‘a certain little intermittent figure [*petit personnage intermittent*],’ who sings in response to sunlight. Thanks to ‘Proust’s “historical ear”’, attentive to ‘the mixture of declamation and song [*chant*] particular to the music of old churches’,¹⁹ the song of this figure is described in religious terms, beginning with the very choice of the verb ‘entonner’, which can have the specific meaning of intoning the start of a liturgical sung text such as the ‘Gloria’.²⁰ And the song is indeed one of gloria, or at least of ‘gloire’: ‘so many rousing hymns in praise of the sun’ [*de si nombreux cantiques à la gloire du soleil*]. Through the specific term ‘cantiques’, combined with the idea of ‘gloire’, there is an intertextual echo here of St Francis of Assisi’s ‘Cantique du soleil’ or ‘Canticle of Brother Sun’, to give the early Italian poem its usual English title.²¹ Here, in English translation, are the poem’s opening lines:

‘The Canticle of Brother Sun’

Most High, all-powerful, good Lord,
Yours are the praises, the glory [*la gloire*], the honour, and all blessing,
To You alone, Most High, do they belong,
and no human is worthy to mention Your name.
Praised be You, my Lord, with all Your creatures,
especially Sir Brother Sun [*spécialement monseigneur frère soleil*],
Who is the day and through whom You give us light.
And he is beautiful and radiant with great splendour;
and bears a likeness of You, Most High One.²²

In these lines we find both the idea of ‘gloire’ and the argument for the sun as a symbol for God. The French translation is especially direct in this regard: ‘de vous, Très-Haut, il est le symbole’, literally, of you, Most High, it (the sun) is the symbol.

Beyond this specific example, Sarah Kay has recently explored a broader connection between song and light within different medieval genres, including the *alba* or dawn song as well as morning hymns.²³ She situates examples of these genres within a similarly symbolic understanding of the sun, viewed variously as responsible for the harmony of the spheres, as the sun god Apollo/Phoebus, and as a *figura Christi*. Apollo is especially useful as an embodiment of the connection between song and sunlight, since, as Kay recalls, he is the ‘god of eloquence, song, and cosmic light’.²⁴ He is, moreover, associated with Dawn (the goddess Aurora).

In her discussion, Kay reminds us of ‘the double nature of light’, that is, the fact that light is both literal and metaphorical.²⁵ Quietly echoing Ihde’s critique of visualism, her project then simultaneously mobilises both aspects of light, defying a visualist reading. Rebalancing the conventional approach to light’s ‘double nature’, this essay displaces (rather than revokes) attention from light’s metaphorical nature to its material substance in order to reassess

its role in literature, especially as regards *À la recherche*. By doing so, it draws on Kay's approach while taking up in relation to the 'reduction of vision' a stance analogous to Ihde's method to counteract visualism:

A turn to the *auditory dimension* is thus potentially more than a simple changing of variables. It begins as a deliberate decentering of a dominant tradition in order to discover what may be missing as a result of the traditional double reduction of vision as the main variable and metaphor.²⁶

While Ihde's focus falls on the reduction of all senses to vision, this essay aims to redress the impoverishing of the experience of perceiving light that is caused by excess of abstraction. In this regard, Kay's book, in its very contrast, helps us to appreciate more fully how Proust's commitment to literal light represents a radical *revision* of the literary trope of (in her words) the 'song that gives voice to light', where light has typically been appropriated for metaphorical ends.²⁷

In a medieval context, as we have seen, the sun is never just the sun, but rather is prone to being invested with different symbolic meanings. Proust's interest in the Middle Ages has been discussed in criticism from Richard Bales's foundational study onwards, and the cyclic structure of *La Prisonnière* as well as the sonic content of the morning scenes such as the opening and the *cris de Paris* scene eloquently echoes this link.²⁸ Returning to the start of *La Prisonnière*, we have taken a detour through medieval poetry not only in order to highlight the Franciscan terminology which frames the song of the 'little intermittent figure' but also in order to appreciate, more generally, the longer history of the connection made in Proust's novel between song and sunlight. Placed within this historical perspective, Proust's treatment of the same trope is even more striking by way of contrast. For while, as Kay has shown, medieval poems play on light's 'double nature', Proust's presentation of literal sunlight shorn of any symbolic associations is ironically highlighted by being couched in traditional, religious language.²⁹ The 'hymns [*cantiques*]' of the 'little intermittent figure' are secular; the sun is celebrated not as a symbol but rather for its material qualities. In this respect, Proust's treatment of the sun is atypical not only in light of the poetic tradition but even within *À la recherche* as a whole, which is otherwise characterised by what Sedgwick describes as a 'divinity-field', that is, by 'a Proustian atmosphere in which every act and landscape brims with a proliferation of genii, demigods, Norns, and other such ontologically exceptional beings: no shadow or spring without its nymph, no phone exchange without its goddesses.'³⁰

A few pages later, Proust's narrator elaborates on the nature of this sunlit song, in confirmation of its non-religious nature:

For a few moments, knowing that his company made me happier than hers [Albertine's], I remained in private colloquy with the little inner figure [*le petit personnage intérieur*], singer of salutations to the sun [*salueur chantant du*

soleil], whom I mentioned a moment ago. Of all the persons who make up our individual selves, the most apparent are not the most essential. When illness has eliminated them one by one, there will survive in me a final two or three, the hardest to kill off, and notably one, a philosopher who is happy only when he has discovered between two works of art or between two sensations, a common factor. But I have sometimes wondered if the last of all will not be the little man [*le petit bonhomme*] very like another little man that the Combray optician kept in his shop window, who took his hood [*capuchon*] off whenever the sun shone and put it back on again if it was going to rain. I know that little man, with all his egoism; I can be suffering an asthma attack which only the coming of rain would relieve, he does not care and, at the first drops that I have been so longing for, he scowls and crossly pulls up his hood. On the other hand, I feel sure that on my deathbed [*à mon agonie*], when all my other 'I's' are already gone, if there is a blink of sun [*s'il vient à briller un rayon de soleil*], while I am drawing my last breaths [*mes derniers soupirs*], the little barometer man [*le petit personnage barométrique*] will be delighted and will take his hood off and sing, 'Ah! The sun at last!' [*Ah! enfin, il fait beau.*]³¹

The previously perceived Franciscan intertext of the 'Canticle of Brother Sun' is supported here by reference to the 'capuchon' of the little figure, which may mean more generally any kind of hood but could also suggest more specifically the attire of a Franciscan friar, modelled on the habit of St Francis (whence also the name of the Order of Friars Minor Capuchin, founded in the sixteenth century as a return to the example of St Francis).³² This connection may be further supported by noting the return here, through the comparison to the literal barometer in the optician's window, of the same 'little hooded monk [*capucin*] in the optician's window' noted in the first volume of *À la recherche*,³³ and which Hiroya Sakamoto has traced to a real barometer in the shape of a Franciscan friar, now in the Musée des Arts et Métiers in Paris.³⁴

Despite the figure's potentially religious attire, there is a striking contrast between the first introduction of the song, with its high-register framing, and the short exclamation which concludes the passage, whose status is uncertain, since it may offer a summary of the song, a taste of its presumed lyrics, or merely a verbalisation of the sensorial response to light as song. Regardless of this textual uncertainty, this colloquial and even banal exclamation unveils a resolutely material and clichéd response to an improvement in the weather, rather than an enlightened or poetically elevated response to it. Unlike the medieval tradition of songs about sunlight, the sun here is fêted by a platitude and is invoked not as a symbol of a higher being, whether Apollo or the Christian God, but rather for its material properties of light and warmth. In particular, this passage both recalls and challenges the Franciscan tradition of celebration of the sun as a symbol of God. The Franciscan friar has become a barometer, responding to literal changes in the weather rather than expressing a metaphysical worldview, and his location is neither in a religious building nor even in nature but rather in an optician's window – a

knowing *clin d'œil* that underscores the interest in literal rather than metaphorical sight here. Together, both barometry and optometry suggest adherence to the physical and to what can be measured.

Concomitantly, the sun itself has become fragmented and reduced in this later description; where previously its whole being was celebrated as glorious, now the singer expresses his appreciation of a mere 'blink [*rayon*] of sun'. In this way, the previously dramatic connection between dawn and sunlight is also attenuated to include any emergence of the sun throughout the day, in a more quotidian and eminently iterable variation on the motif. This shift towards the mundane instead of the grandiloquent is mirrored in the transformation of the singing figure into a human-shaped barometer, where drafts of this passage had instead previously considered a comparison to the statue of Memnon.

The statue of Memnon

As Nathalie Mauriac Dyer in particular has explored, an earlier version of this passage explicitly named the statue of Memnon in a quest for comparable mythological models of singing in response to sunlight.³⁵ Memnon himself is a Greek historical, mythical figure, an Ethiopian king, child of Tithonus and Aurora, who was killed in battle by Achilles. Memnon came to be associated with one of the two colossal, seated figures at the Theban necropolis, the only substantial remnants of the great temple of Amenophis. Though the association of Memnon and a statue commemorating the dead Amenophis has been the subject of much speculation, the most compelling explanation is the fact that the statue was reputed to sing at dawn, after partially being toppled by an earthquake in around 26 BCE. The *Grand Dictionnaire universel du XIXe siècle* reports that 'This strange phenomenon has much occupied scholars [*les savants*]'.³⁶ More recent studies explain the phenomenon as a product of air friction caused by the difference of temperature between the exterior of the monument, which is quickly heated by the warmth brought by the sun at dawn, and the crack inside, which remains cooler.³⁷ The debates reported in the *Grand Dictionnaire*, however, are focused on whether the statue's song has a natural or a supernatural explanation, that is, whether it is attributable to the result of a physical property inherent to the statue or rather is truly the mysterious singing of a king-turned-statue to his mother the Dawn. Dampening the controversy's mythical overtones and anticipating twentieth-century scientific conclusions, nineteenth-century positivistic investigations naturally concluded either that the statue's song was the product of a '*supercherie*' or con trick, such as a keyboard instrument hidden within the statue, or that 'the sounds were only a physical and natural effect, the statue being made of a particular type of stone'.³⁸ In these conclusions, we see how the statue of

Memnon came to be ‘de-supernaturalised’ in a way that resonates with Proust’s attention to light for its natural and physical effects.³⁹

The first reference to Memnon in the drafts of the opening of *La Prisonnière* is more direct and captures the essence of the myth: ‘I sing, for the poet is like the statue of Memnon. A sunbeam [*un rayon de soleil*] suffices to make the poet sing’.⁴⁰ The second reference is more elaborate, maintaining an important distinction between the self and its constituent parts (of which the statue of Memnon is but one example) and anticipating the same idea of a ‘musical awakening [*réveil en musique*],’ which, as we have seen, survives in the final version of this passage:

sometimes I only knew that the weather was nice outside [*qu’il faisait beau temps*] because while I was asleep the beam of sunlight [*le rayon du soleil*] through the closed curtains had < come > to touch deep down inside me [*au fond de moi*] a statue of Memnon which had begun to sing, had wanted to be silent no longer, and had ended up causing me to wake up, in a musical awakening [*un réveil en musique*], as it is called in the military [*au régiment*].⁴¹

Although Mauriac Dyer’s essay on the statue of Memnon revealingly charts the trajectory of this figure in Proust’s manuscripts, she steers clear of tackling Memnon’s polysemy by discussing it above all as ‘a metaphor for the voice of the poet’.⁴² Focusing instead on the cross-modal sensorial fabric of the metaphor, we wish to consider further Proust’s decision to excise Memnon and especially whether the discarded Memnon might nonetheless continue to haunt the published version.

Mauriac Dyer notes that Memnon was excised from the text in 1915, at the same time as Proust introduced the notion of ‘cantiques’ where previously he had considered ‘cris’, ‘mélodies’, and ‘chants’.⁴³ This decision seems to indicate Proust’s desire to favour friarish or Franciscan religious overtones over mythological ones. The choice, however, entails a metaphor that, in some ways, is removed from the physical experience being narrated at the beginning of *La Prisonnière*. First, the barometer in the shape of a Franciscan friar mentioned by Sakamoto, unlike the statue of Memnon, does not sing. By producing a noise at dawn, the statue creates a sensorial experience of light becoming sound, or in Proust’s words, singing. Providing the narrator with a model for his joyous experience of feeling the warm, morning light while implying a continuity between light and singing, the cross-modal sensation produced by the colossus is rather metonymical and, because of that, does not forsake the material aspect of light. Secondly, though a barometer casts its weight on the side of a physical explanation and stresses the idea of a mechanical reaction to the weather, an automatic response to atmospheric pressure, in the quotations from *La Prisonnière* above, it is not so much atmospheric pressure that is in play as the narrator’s physical and emotional response to a sunny day.

Despite any negative implications for his health, one part of his reaction is always positive:

I can be suffering an asthma attack which only the coming of rain would relieve, he does not care [...] I feel sure that on my deathbed, when all my other 'I's' are already gone, if there is a blink of sun, while I am drawing my last breaths, the little barometer man will be delighted and will take his hood off and sing.

The conflicting or contradicting metaphorical layers surrounding the idea of the 'little intermittent figure' suggest, therefore, that even though the statue of Memnon is not named in the published version, it has been elided with the barometric monk into the curious figure of an internalised singing barometer in the shape of a Franciscan friar.⁴⁴

Proust's decision to renounce explicit reference to an Egyptian statue cloaked in mythological mystery for a little mechanical object in the shape of a man performs a shift 'from the colossal to the trivial [*du colossal au trivial*]',⁴⁵ bringing us back to the 'peculiar conjunction of wonder and banality' pointed out by Freed-Thall as a powerful Proustian mode of attention.⁴⁶ Moreover, in turning this object into an internalised contributing part of the narrator's self, Proust extends the personification. Not only is this internal, imagined barometer made in the shape of a man, but this man also feels emotions in response to the weather (cross or delighted), adjusts his clothing accordingly (pulling up and throwing off his hood), and, mainly, sings. It is in this song that Proust departs most strikingly from his presumed model, since he endows the barometer figure not only with movement but also with voice. By means of the voice, Proust seems to confirm the hidden presence of the statue of Memnon, a statue whose song is a blissful aesthetic reaction to light rather than an idealised aesthetic product.

Conclusion

In the opening of *La Prisonnière*, light is celebrated not for its association with the intellect but for the sway it holds over the protagonist's bodily existence, its impact on his humorous as well as his humoral life. By unusually binding light and air, sunlight and singing, Proust ends up undermining idealised visual notions, such as metaphoric light, as well as longstanding idealised auditory forms, such as voice, music, and song. According to this reconfiguration of the senses, singing finds a new meaning in Proust, becoming a joyous instance of aesthesis triggered by the revitalising encounter with light, rather than an aesthetic practice and tradition.⁴⁷ Mobilised in relation to light, singing affords and conveys new ways of materially and bodily engaging with the world, ways that relate to the physical pleasure of feeling the

warmth of sunshine on the skin, or the oblique experience of light, such as in the scene when the narrator is reading in his dark room while enjoying the certainty that it is sunny outside thanks to a beam of light that penetrates the room through the shutters, landing on the floor 'like a poised butterfly'.⁴⁸ In this scene, the sunlight is also felt in tandem with the sounds of the flies playing 'a sort of chamber music of summer'.⁴⁹

In addition to the denaturalisation of metaphoric stances of both sound and light, Proust's association of light with singing shows how he averts the traps set by visualism and mobilises light and sound, abstraction and materiality, in order to conjure unexpected metaphorical and metonymical configurations which he encloses 'within the necessary armature [*anneaux*] of a beautiful style [*beau style*]'.⁵⁰ In so doing, the power of light is revealed in full during an awakening (or resurrecting) that is ever more musical as it is sunnier.

Though the idea of dawn and its nascent light or the power of the sun on a sunny day can always be mobilised metaphorically, in the inaugural scene of *La Prisonnière*, as well as in the remaining scenes of awakening in Proust's *roman-fleuve*, the rapport the narrator establishes with the weather is not only literal but also vital, insofar as it is inherently linked to his survival. This is not to say that well-being trumps the pleasure the narrator finds in feeling the warmth and light experienced at dawn or on a sunny day, since this pleasure is likely to have terrible consequences for his health. All in all, however, the connection between light and vitality (understood in its double sense, as both life and liveliness) helps to unravel the striking and perhaps unexpected development from dawn to death in the two passages which discuss the 'little [...] figure' early in *La Prisonnière*.

As we have seen, the 'little [...] figure' sings first at dawn, then subsequently at any 'blink of sun', the latter even as an accompaniment to the protagonist's anticipated death. In this respect, there would be a certain incongruity and even lack of empathy discernible in the 'little [...] figure', since, as we have seen, it is expected that he will sing happily while the protagonist is dying, providing there is a glimmer of sunlight. The contrast between the two figures is even more marked, since the protagonist's death is imagined as a failure of breath ('last breaths' or more literally sighs [*derniers soupirs*]), preceded by a history of 'asthma attacks [*étouffements*]'. In stark contrast both to the imagined song of his inner barometer and to the posthumous song of the statue of Memnon, literal singing, for the protagonist, has always been difficult and under threat, becoming logically impossible on his deathbed. And yet, in Proust's novel, song, death, and breath are unusually but powerfully intertwined. In this intertwining, counterintuitively, singing is often highlighted by moments where breathing is a physical struggle, such as in the musical account of the grandmother's

death.⁵¹ Somewhat operatic, this intriguing singing while dying seems to point to the way breath is haunted by an anticipation of its inevitable and ultimate failure in death. As Kay notes, 'Song, dependent on the air on which our lives depend, is precariously balanced between life and death'.⁵² She later elaborates: 'As an exaggerated use of the voice that requires more breath, and more aesthetic control of that breath, than ordinary speech, song is an especially intense marker of the precariousness of creaturely life and its constant proximity to death.'⁵³ As Béatrice Athias similarly writes of voice in Proust specifically, 'Voice marks the presence of death within life'.⁵⁴

Breath, singing, and death, or as Ihde presents them, breath, life, soul, sound, and voice are intertwined:

In the ancient mythologies the word for soul was often related to the word for breath. [...] God breathes life into Adam, and that breath is both life and word. [...] But the air that is breathed is not neutral or lifeless, for it has life in *sound* and *voice* [and singing].⁵⁵

But what is light's role in all of this? According to the new metaphorical configuration we have presented in this essay, which pairs sunlight and singing and is removed from the conventional association of light with reason and enlightenment — even contradicting it insofar as it is unreasonable for someone to praise the weather that might kill them —, singing might, at times, come to represent not necessarily any actual singing but simply a memory of singing, or else, a metaphor for the enlivening sensation light might inspire, or have inspired, in more auspicious times. Perhaps, on his deathbed, the sensation of light felt by the protagonist might rekindle the deeply embodied experience of resurrecting (from sleep) in the morning, a sensation thrilling enough to make him sing. More than literally intoning songs, singing becomes, for Proust, an index for light, which, in turn, is perceived as one of the substrates of life, a matter as vital as air, hence a corresponding element.

This is not to fall, however, back onto any metaphorical association between light and life, since what is at play here is a material understanding and literal appreciation of both. Though light is paired with death in this scene, it is not an element or a sign of death but provides an accompaniment to it. This potential companionship between light and death in the form of singing is, finally, both a fantasised death, since its actualisation is unlikely, and undoubtedly hyperbolic. The physical sensation of light is especially pleasing for a narrator whose life is so marked by suffering and health struggles. In this context, this hyperbole conveys that even in the most extreme circumstances, like death, the way for the narrator to regain pleasure, even if fleetingly, is through the sensation of light, not as a metaphor of life as opposed to death but as a quotidian index of good weather. The hyperbole thus indicates that for the narrator this weather is not incidental

but vital, appreciated as both a life-giving biological force and a boundless source of pleasure, even in the face of death. In this circumstance, however, light becomes ambivalent, inasmuch as it simultaneously manifests its power while stressing its transience, much like song and voice.

Notes

1. A comparably perverse approach, reading against the grain, is Malcolm Bowie's investigation of brevity in Proust: see Bowie, 'Postlude: Proust and the Art of Brevity', in Richard Bales (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Proust* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 216–29.
2. Quotations from Proust's novel are taken throughout this essay from *À la recherche du temps perdu*, ed. by Jean-Yves Tadié, 4 vols (Paris: Gallimard, 1987–89), subsequently abbreviated to *ALR* plus volume and page number, with English translation from *In Search of Lost Time*, ed. by Christopher Prendergast, 6 vols (London: Allen Lane, 2002), cited by individual volume title. For this particular quotation, see *ALR* IV, 448; Proust, *Finding Time Again*, p. 177. The emphasis in this and the following quotations in this paragraph is ours.
3. *ALR* IV, 457; Proust, *Finding Time Again*, p. 187.
4. *ALR* IV, 459; Proust, *Finding Time Again*, p. 188.
5. *ALR* IV, 457; Proust, *Finding Time Again*, p. 187.
6. We take this phrase about light's 'double nature' from Sarah Kay, *Medieval Song from Aristotle to Opera* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2022), p. 75, and return to her analysis below. On Proust and sense-impressions, see especially Jean-Pierre Richard, *Proust et le monde sensible* (Paris: Seuil, 1974), and Anne Simon, *Proust, ou, le réel retrouvé: le sensible et son expression dans 'À la recherche du temps perdu'* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 2000).
7. Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).
8. Marcel Proust, *Contre Sainte-Beuve précédé de Pastiches et mélanges et suivi de Essais et articles*, ed. by Pierre Clarac with Yves Sandre (Paris: Gallimard, 1971), p. 211; Marcel Proust, *On Art and Literature: 1896–1919*, trans. by Sylvia Townsend Warner (New York: Carroll & Graf, 1997), p. 19.
9. Don Ihde, *Listening and Voice: Phenomenologies of Sound*, 2nd edn (New York: State University of New York Press, 2007).
10. *Ibid.*, p. 6.
11. *Ibid.*, pp. 8–9.
12. See *ALR* I, 153; Proust, *The Way by Swann's*, p. 156. For an overview of the importance of the sun for Proust, see also Francine Goujon, 'Soleil', in *Dictionnaire Marcel Proust*, ed. by Annick Bouillaguet and Brian G. Rogers, revised edn (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2014), pp. 944–6.
13. Hannah Freed-Thall, 'Zut, zut, zut, zut: Aesthetic Disorientation in Proust', *MLN* 124, no. 4 (September 2009), 868–900 (p. 868). See also Freed-Thall, *Spoiled Distinctions: Aesthetics and the Ordinary in French Modernism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 46.
14. Igor Reyner, 'Listening in Proust' (PhD diss., King's College London, 2017), publication in preparation.

15. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, 'The Weather in Proust', in *The Weather in Proust*, ed. by Jonathan Goldberg (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), pp. 1–41 (p. 8). See also on the same topic more comprehensively G. Béros-Cazes, *Proust et le temps qu'il fait, ou, la météorologie dans 'À la recherche du temps perdu'* (Paris: Éditions Caractères, 1986) and most recently Dora Zhang, 'In Search of Lost Weather', in *Proust's 'In Search of Lost Time': Philosophical Perspectives*, ed. by Katherine Elkins (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), pp. 191–216. For an analysis of the specific connection between weather and sound in Proust's novel devoted especially to the internal violin, another metaphor used by Proust to account for his inner self, see Bryan Counter, "'Pour cet état si particulier': Disinterest and the Impersonal Resonance of Aesthetic Experience", *SubStance*, 49, no. 3 (2020), 19–36.
16. ALR III, 519; Proust, *The Prisoner and The Fugitive*, p. 3.
17. Bernard Brun, 'Réveil', in *Dictionnaire Marcel Proust*, pp. 865–6 (p. 866).
18. Pierre-Edmond Robert, 'La Prisonnière: notice', in ALR III, 1628–93 (p. 1678). By 'book of hours' or *livre d'heures* Robert is alluding to the Christian devotional book of prayers popular in the Middle Ages, thus underscoring the medieval tone that filters through key aurally dominated morning episodes of *La Prisonnière*, such as *les cris de Paris*. See Leo Spitzer, 'L'Étymologie d'un "cri de Paris"', in *Études de style précédé de Leo Spitzer et la lecture stylistique de Jean Starobinski*, trans. by Éliane Kaufholz, Alain Coulon, and Michel Foucault (Paris: Gallimard, 1970), pp. 474–81.
19. Spitzer, 'L'Étymologie d'un "cri de Paris"', p. 474.
20. See the entry on 'entonner', where the liturgical definition is given as 'Chanter seul le commencement d'un morceau religieux : ENTONNER le gloria' [Singing alone the start of a religious piece of music: INTONING the *gloria*], in Pierre Larousse, *Grand Dictionnaire universel du XIX siècle*, 17 vols (Paris: Administration du Grand Dictionnaire universel, 1866–77), VII (1870), p. 643.
21. We use the term 'echo' here with in mind Jonathan Culler's comments on 'echo' in 'Intertextuality and Interpretation: Baudelaire's "Correspondances"', in *Nineteenth-Century French Poetry: Introductions to Close Reading*, ed. by Christopher Prendergast (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 118–37. Culler writes that 'Baudelaire's echo seems to disrupt the one-to-one correspondence between natural sign and spiritual meaning' (p. 121), and the same is true of Proust's echo of St Francis.
22. French translation from Paul Sabatier, *Vie de S. François d'Assise: édition de guerre* (Paris: Librairie Fischbacher, 1918), pp. 370–1. Sabatier's *Vie* was first published in 1894 and is chosen here because of its contemporaneity with Proust. The English translation is taken from *Francis and Clare: The Complete Works*, ed. and trans. by Regis J. Armstrong and Ignatius C. Brady (New York: Paulist Press, 1982), pp. 37–8.
23. Kay, *Medieval Song from Aristotle to Opera*, esp. pp. 52–83 on 'Voice as Light'.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 65.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 75.
26. Ihde, *Listening and Voice*, p. 13.
27. Kay, *Medieval Song from Aristotle to Opera*, p. 61.
28. See Richard Bales, *Proust and the Middle Ages* (Geneva: Droz, 1975), as well as more recently *Proust et les 'Moyen Âge'*, ed. by Sophie Duval and Miren Lacasagne (Paris: Hermann, 2015). On medieval plainsong and the morning sounds in *La Prisonnière* see Spitzer, 'L'Étymologie d'un "cri de Paris"'. On

- the medieval symbolism of the sun as known to Proust via his work on Ruskin and his reading of Émile Mâle, see Edward J. Hughes's keynote lecture on 'Sun, Moon, and Earth in Proust' at the Society for French Studies annual conference, Queen's University Belfast, 28 June 2022.
29. More generally, on the parody of religious language and its deviation towards mundane, earthly matters in *À la recherche*, see Stéphane Chaudier, *Proust et le langage religieux: la cathédrale profane* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2004). In Chaudier's discussion of this same passage, however, the worship of the sun by the 'little [...] figure' is suggested to be pagan rather than Christian (see pp. 151–2). In an essay to which we turn in due course, Nathalie Mauriac Dyer also notes that Proust's 'blasphemous reappropriation [*détournement*] of religious language is placed under the sign of Baudelaire' (Mauriac Dyer, 'Memnon barométrique', p. 190).
 30. Sedgwick, 'The Weather in Proust', pp. 15 and 6. In line with Sedgwick's argument, see Richard, *Proust et le monde sensible*, p. 49, on 'An entire solar mythology [*mythologie solaire*] which governs the *Recherche*', also cited by Hughes, 'Sun, Moon, and Earth in Proust', an observation which further highlights the atypicality of this scene. For broader discussion of Proust's use of Christian and mythological imagery, see Margaret Topping, *Proust's Gods: Christian and Mythological Figures of Speech in the Works of Marcel Proust* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).
 31. ALR III, 522; Proust, *The Prisoner and The Fugitive*, pp. 5–6.
 32. The only explicit mention of St Francis in Proust's novel is, incidentally, at least musical, since "'Saint Francis Preaching to the Birds" by Liszt' is heard by Swann at the soirée de Mme de Saint-Euverte: see ALR I, 322; Proust, *The Way by Swann's*, p. 330.
 33. ALR I, 148; Proust, *The Way by Swann's*, p. 151.
 34. Hiroya Sakamoto, 'À propos du "petit personnage barométrique"', *Bulletin Marcel Proust*, 55 (2005), 21–6. Sakamoto's identification of a Franciscan model usefully supports the connection to St Francis's 'Cantic of Brother Sun' explored above, although we ultimately agree instead with the argument of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, according to whom real-life models are pale shadows of Proust's imagined versions: 'It is said that the monumental novelist is himself "inspired" by the lived, and this is true: M. de Charlus closely resembles Montesquiou, but between Montesquiou and M. Charlus there is ultimately roughly the same relationship as between the barking animal-dog [*le chien-animal aboyant*] and the celestial constellation-Dog [*le Chien constellation céleste*]: Deleuze and Guattari, *Qu'est-ce que la philosophie?* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1991), p. 162; Deleuze and Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, trans. by Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchell (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), p. 172. Cited in Claudio Rozzoni, *Marcel Proust: portrait d'un jeune écrivain en philosophe* (Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2016), p. 149.
 35. Nathalie Mauriac Dyer, 'Memnon barométrique, ou *Spleen* à la manière de Proust', in *Originalités proustiennes*, ed. by Philippe Chardin (Paris: Kimé, 2010), pp. 185–95. See also on the drafts of this passage Bernard Brun, 'Étude génétique de l'"ouverture" de *La Prisonnière*', *Cahiers Marcel Proust*, 14 (1987), 211–87, and Jean Milly, 'L'Ouverture de *La Prisonnière* d'après le manuscrit "définitif" et les dactylographies', *Cahiers Marcel Proust*, 14 (1987), 288–337. The most comprehensive study of Proust's mythological


- references is that of Marie Miguet-Ollagnier, *La Mythologie de Marcel Proust* (Paris: Les Belles-Lettres, 1982), although only passing mention is made of Memnon in that study (see p. 260).
36. 'Memnon', in Larousse, *Grand Dictionnaire universel du XIXe siècle*, X (1873), 1493.
 37. Glen Warren Bowersock, 'The Miracle of Memnon', *The Bulletin of the American Society of Papyrologists*, 21, no. 1 (1984), 21–32 (p. 23).
 38. 'Memnon', in Larousse, *Grand Dictionnaire universel du XIXe siècle*, X (1873), 1493.
 39. We take the verb 'de-supernaturalise' from Sedgwick, *The Weather in Proust*, p. 7.
 40. *ALR* III, 1096.
 41. *ALR* III, 1097.
 42. Mauriac Dyer, 'Memnon barométrique', p. 185.
 43. *Ibid.*, pp. 189–90.
 44. See also Richard, *Proust et le monde sensible*, p. 50, on the 'little [...] figure' as an extension of the statue of Memnon.
 45. This is the critical consensus, as reported in Mauriac Dyer, 'Memnon barométrique', p. 194, n. 22.
 46. Freed-Thall, 'Zut, zut, zut, zut', p. 868; Freed-Thall, *Spoiled Distinctions*, p. 46.
 47. In contrast, on actual songs in Proust's novel see Jennifer Rushworth, *Proust's Songbook* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2024).
 48. *ALR* I, 82; Proust, *The Way by Swann's*, p. 85.
 49. *Ibid.*
 50. *ALR* IV, 468; Proust, *Finding Time Again*, p. 198.
 51. See *ALR* II, 635; Proust, *The Guermantes Way*, p. 338. A draft of this passage explicitly compared the grandmother's song to that of the death of Wagner's Isolde: see *ALR* II, 1708, as highlighted by Richard Goodkin, *Around Proust* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), pp. 103–26, and Anne Herschberg Pierrot, 'Notes sur la mort de la grand-mère', *Bulletin d'informations proustiennes*, 36 (2006), 87–100.
 52. Kay, *Medieval Song from Aristotle to Opera*, p. 10.
 53. *Ibid.*, p. 150.
 54. Béatrice Athias, *La Voix dans 'À la recherche du temps perdu' de Marcel Proust* (Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2021), p. 355.
 55. Ihde, *Listening and Voice*, p. 3.

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