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Title	Proust's 'grands chagrins utiles': beyond contingency?
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Publication date	2011-02-01
Original Citation	O'Donovan, P. (2011) 'Proust's 'grands chagrins utiles': beyond contingency?' in: Harkness, N. & Schmid, M. (eds). Au seuil de la modernité: Proust, literature and the Arts. Essays in memory of Richard Bales, Oxford: Peter Lang, pp. 179-194. isbn: 978-3-03911-891-5
Type of publication	Book chapter
Link to publisher's version	https://www.peterlang.com/view/title/10933 - 10.3726/978-3-0353-0129-8
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Download date	2026-11-07 10:34:17
Item downloaded from	https://hdl.handle.net/10468/1538

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Proust's 'grands chagrins utiles': beyond contingency?

At a certain point in *Le Temps retrouvé*, the Narrator appears to take a clear and insistent line when it comes to the issue of 'le chagrin'. The impact of 'le chagrin', he says, is in the end biological: the pain it causes simply brings us closer to death; before the body comes to be destroyed, all we can do, for the sake of 'la connaissance spirituelle', is to extract whatever parcel of understanding we can from the experience (RTP, IV, 484-85). What seems to prompt the conviction that 'la connaissance spirituelle' is something of value is the new urgency which attaches to the Narrator's projected work, in the light of the discoveries which he has just recorded. As the Narrator begins, then, to envisage his book as a realizable project, it seems possible to impose closure on certain of the threads which constitute the quest that has led him to this point, to aspire to the attainment of wisdom in the face of suffering. This gesture represents one view of what it might be to be beyond contingency.

This intriguing line of thought is eminently Proustian in that it forms part of the novel's ceaseless plotting of the dynamics of loss and recovery. At the same time, it can be connected to a line of writing in fiction and indeed in thought which is centred on feeling that is no less singular, on which Proust himself draws. These two issues — the significance we might assign to the insights which shape the Narrator's resolutions at the end of the novel, on the one hand, and the representation of affect in modern fictional narrative, on the other — are connected in the work of Richard Bales.[1] What I shall comment on here is how, in Proust's work, these two strands, though they appear to diverge, in fact provide a perspective within which we can engage with his representation of subjectivity. To elucidate this claim, I shall combine my discussion of the *Recherche* with some comments on Goethe's *Elective Affinities* and Constant's *Adolphe*, where the issue that dominates each narrative is, by contrast, the apparent futility of certain experiences of passion.

It is indeed the case that Proust's response to the suffering of sorrow can be situated with reference to the emergence within modern European culture of a discourse of affectivity

[1] See in particular *Proust: 'A la recherche du temps perdu'* (London: Grant and Cutler, 1995), ch. 6, and *Persuasion in the French Personal Novel: Studies of Chateaubriand, Constant, Balzac, Nerval, and Fromentin* (Birmingham, AL: Summa, 1997).

centred ultimately on the issue of representation. What is significant about this discourse is that it parallels and indeed could be said to supplant a countervailing ethical theory essentially derived from Stoic and other ancient sources. Adam Smith trenchantly calls into question the Stoic insistence on the need to eliminate the passions and proceeds to present the imagination as a source of moral judgements. He takes a special case: the sometimes acute feelings of concern and care which a parent may feel for a child. However excessive such a feeling may appear, it is difficult to regard it as hateful. It is rather, Smith argues, the Stoic position — that any such feeling should be repressed — which is repellent. Smith generalizes this argument, saying that what is true of parental affection, or more generally of love and friendship, applies in fact also to the entire range of 'private and domestic affections'. He concludes his rebuttal of Stoicism with a provocative appeal to imaginary passions:

> The stoical apathy is, in such cases, never agreeable […] The poets and romance writers, who best paint the refinements and delicacies of love and friendship, and of all other private and domestic affections, Racine and Voltaire; Richardson, Maurivaux, and Riccoboni; are, in such cases, much better instructors than Zeno, Chrysippus, or Epictetus.[2]

For Smith, the choice of modern authors consolidates the break with ancient philosophy. Indeed, there is something of a precautionary move here. Stoic philosophy illustrates what may be a vice of philosophy more generally: in its construction of a theory of human nature and human conduct, it can pre-empt any effort to understand how some feeling — even an extreme feeling — may in fact be reconciled with a sense of virtue and self-approbation, as Smith himself goes on to argue. Thus, sorrow at the misfortune of others or grief for the dead may seem perfectly justified and justifiable feelings. Two points are to be noted: first, drama and fiction are enduring sources of a scepticism towards the claims of philosophical systems which is salutary; and, second, these forms of writing further provide access to an emotionally conditioned perspective on the emotions. By excluding Stoic apathy, Smith seeks to define the proper place and character of feeling — in the very process of how we understand and deal with feeling.[3]

Now, at first glance the Narrator's attempted transmutation of 'le chagrin' into 'la connaissance spirituelle' seems to diverge from such a stance. Behind the question of

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[2] *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, ed. by Knud Haakonssen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 164–65.

[3] For a comparable contemporary intervention, see Richard Wollheim, who argues that when we fall under the sway of philosophy we are 'seduced into abandoning the natural, which is the psychological, understanding of mental dispositions' (*On the Emotions* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), pp. 6, 33, 223).

wisdom, there seems to lurk something of an impasse: the attempt to confront painful feelings appears to be deflected into a project with a different, more cerebral, focus. The question to which I now turn is this: to what extent does extreme feeling equate with a certain exposure to contingency? It is possible that the Narrator's gesture amounts to an attempted displacement, not just of the problem of feeling, but also that of contingency. Viewed in this light, the concern which the Narrator articulates may be a cryptic way of connecting the problem of affectivity with other problems: this is a possibility which I shall explore further. A claim we can derive from Smith is that representation is intimately connected to the resources on which we can draw as we grapple with the problems we experience with affect. The problem of affectivity is indeed that of its unmasterable dynamism and, within this component of mental life, it is the infant's loss of a sense of her own or her parent's omnipotence that signals the advent of contingency. So Adam Phillips argues, drawing on D. W. Winnicott. Painful experiences of emotional states confirm, all too tangibly, the outcome of the attainment of the Depressive Position, namely the loss of this sense of omnipotence and the 'immense shock' (to quote Winnicott) which it causes. In the face of 'le chagrin', then, all we can ever hope for is the most momentary equipoise. Even knowledge of contingency is 'paradoxical'. Each parcel of understanding is precarious, as Phillips concludes, because 'emotional experience is new at every moment'.[4] Every insight, as a result, is contingent, because provisional, because vulnerable to the uncertainties, internal or external, subjective and social alike, which in turn it provokes. Desire, like knowledge, is shadowed by the contingencies that drive it on and in turn impinge on each and every one of its outcomes. The incompleteness of each is radical in that these outcomes re-enact a position where the subject is compelled — often painfully — to adopt an attitude of complete and uncertain openness to new emotional experiences.

We can offer a provisional conclusion by saying that the narrative impact of Proust's novel derives from a contingency that has many outcomes — affective, social, aesthetic — but whose significance could ultimately be said to lie in its perennial unforeseeable potential to precipitate shifts in how we think about the world and our place in it. The Narrator's own position is ambiguous: from the outset, from the moment of the *madeleine* episode, he

[4] 'Contingency for Beginners', in *On Flirtation* (London: Faber, 1994), pp. 3–21 (pp. 19–21). The Depressive Position entails the recognition of the mother as a whole object, triggering anxieties connected with the possibility of loss. On the impact of the loss of the feeling of omnipotence, see D. W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality* (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 71.

acknowledges and seeks to espouse a positive contingency.[5] But this pursuit co-exists with experiences of contingency which are — potentially — more ominous and which call the self and its projects into question. Yet at the end of the novel, the past recurs in a present laden with its own contingencies and it is here that the threat of death, which becomes more acute in the light of the revelations of the *matinée* of the Princesse de Guermantes, reveals the vicissitudes of temporality in a new light, such that one of its outcomes is to generate a whole series of new subjective pressures.[6]

It is perhaps in this light that we should consider the Narrator's attempts at containment when it comes to 'le chagrin'. The Narrator elaborates the view that even pain can be a source of a certain joy, if we find some way of drawing on intelligence as a means of generalizing from our own experience: 'Là où la vie emmure, l'intelligence perce une issue […] on sort de la constatation d'une souffrance, ne fût-ce qu'en tirant les conséquences qu'elle comporte' (*RTP*, IV, 484). On this basis, it is possible to embark on a taxonomy of the stages of suffering: what might have been only the beginnings of a moment of torment comes in fact to be fully actualized by the experience of some new desire and the suffering to which, in turn, it gives rise. And these sorrows then become the focus of an inverted loving gesture, almost a carpe diem:

> Pour ces grands chagrins utiles on ne peut pas trop se plaindre, car ils ne manquent pas, ils ne se font pas attendre bien longtemps. Tout de même il faut se dépêcher de profiter d'eux, car ils ne durent pas très longtemps: c'est qu'on se console, ou bien, quand ils sont trop forts, si le cœur n'est plus très solide, on meurt. (*RTP*, IV, 484)

To avail of the utility of suffering, we must mobilize capacities which are above all intellectual. This attitude of mind finds its confirmation in what the Narrator presents as a negative psychological law: our capacity to benefit from pain (something which we must be prepared to do, because 'c'est le chagrin qui développe les forces de l'esprit') is constantly at risk from subjective factors: thus, 'le chagrin' is indispensable, because it is the means by which we can 'nous remettre chaque fois dans la vérité', and evade lapsing into the bad habits of passivity, of scepticism, of indifference. But this intellectual outcome has a precarious

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[5] The experience of tasting the *madeleine* leads the Narrator to give a special prominence to a contingency which is at least half-benign: Il y a beaucoup de hasard en tout ceci, et un second hasard, celui de notre mort, souvent ne nous permet pas d'attendre longtemps les faveurs du premier' (*RTP*, I, 43).

[6] I explore further Phillips's model of contingency as applied to the *Recherche* and some of the ways in which it could be challenged, in 'A Contradictory Look at the Look: Resisting Le Temps retrouvé', in *'Le Temps retrouvé' Eighty Years After / 80 ans après: Critical Essays / Essais critiques*, ed. by Adam Watt (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2009), pp. 167–80.

yield at best. Fully to embrace the harsh truths which suffering uncovers is fraught with mortal risks: 'Il est vrai que cette vérité, qui n'est pas compatible avec le bonheur, avec la santé, ne l'est pas toujours avec la vie. Le chagrin finit par tuer'. If we must accept 'le chagrin', it is, as we saw at the outset, for the sake of 'la connaissance spirituelle qu'il nous apporte' (*RTP*, IV, 484–85). Because the body is mortal, it is the work that must become the repository of knowledge.

So, in effect, the Narrator harnesses something of the sheer force of the novel's redemptive outcome, itself the result of a series of contingencies with a special productive power, so as to bring some closure to what is a seminal thread in the novel. Perhaps to a greater degree than with any other affective state in the novel, 'le chagrin' is a salient issue from the outset and a slippery one: it is a state of feeling in which we are most powerfully exposed to the future and to all of the uncertainties with which it is freighted. This is the problem to which the Narrator finds he must respond. So he appears to conclude from the 'drame du coucher', in which the affective interactions of child and parent are in fact equally opaque and unpredictable to all. The Narrator's father intervenes unexpectedly to urge his wife to sleep in the same room as her son, he justifies doing so by referring to the pain he sees in the Narrator's face: 'tu vois bien que ce petit a du chagrin, il a l'air désolé, cet enfant' (RTP, I, 36). But this intensely desired but altogether contingent outcome triggers new and unexpected feelings: his relationship with his mother is altered, in ways which themselves have the potential to cause future pain.[7]

Ultimately, then, what emerges from the Narrator's attempts to produce an account of 'le chagrin' which will contain it is its intractability, in that any such effort is liable to be affected, precisely, by all of its own contingent outcomes and those of any number of other facets of mental life. In a sense, the attempt to resolve 'le chagrin' simply perpetuates it. The space and the prominence which the Narrator gives to the issue hints as much. There is an element of pessimism in the treatment of 'le chagrin' which points perhaps to unresolved subjective conflicts, exacerbated at the novel's end by the looming contingencies of the present moment.

The Narrator himself acknowledges explicitly that this is a way of thinking which presents him with some problems. Near the opening of *La Prisonnière*, as he ponders his

[7] The Narrator himself, drawing explicitly on experiences which date back to this period, concludes in an aside that intersubjectivity is inescapably subject to contingencies of this sort: 'il y a entre nous et les êtres un liséré de contingences, comme j'avais compris dans mes lectures de Combray qu'il y en a un de perception et qui empêche la mise en contact absolue de la réalité et de l'esprit' (*RTP*, IV, 553).

reasons to be suspicious of Albertine, he notes half-ironically that the ways of thinking that come naturally to him are ill-adapted to contingency. He claims that how he thinks is a fact of nature: 'le monde des possibles m'a toujours été plus ouvert que celui de la contingence réelle'. This passing acknowledgement of contingency quickly transforms into a statement of its forbidding scope, the catastrophes to which it exposes the subject: 'Cela aide à connaître l'âme, mais on se laisse tromper par les individus' (*RTP*, III, 533–34). So the concession to contingency is in its way decisive: such knowledge as may be derived from a scrutiny of any and all possible worlds remains wholly at risk from contingencies which are all too pressing.

There seems, then, to be no way of minimizing the question of contingency and so of 'le chagrin'. In order to appraise this outcome, we need to return to the discourse of affect to which I referred at the outset. The discourse in question can certainly be said to be a feature of what Richard Bales terms the personal novel. Bales's initial reference-point is the confessional novel of the early nineteenth century, whose essentially persuasive orientation extends, as he shows, into a range of later texts. There would be further scope to link this corpus to other contemporary works, including ones, like *Elective Affinities*, with a different narrative voice, or much later ones, like *Anna Karenina*, where the conflicts of personal life are represented within the vastly expanded framework characteristic of canonical realism. Here again, an adverse contingency is at issue: in the works analysed by Bales, chance, mishap, misadventure and malice all figure prominently and generate their own surplus of pain. Bales's analysis also shows just how problematic the narrative telos can be under these conditions — not only subjectively, but also rhetorically (vis-à-vis the implied or actual addressee), and in turn socially. The representational yield of the personal novel considered generically is both distinctive and problematic: what Bales characterizes as 'subjectivity with a vengeance'.[8] This orientation is directly linked to its persuasive intent: the *raison d'être* of a personal narration directed at an audience at once stated and implicit is self-justification — its primary motivation being psychological, in that the act of telling proceeds on the basis of repeated appeals to human psychology. Built into the typically highly architectonic narrative frameworks which these texts mobilize is, then, the intimation of the wider significance of contingency as an issue which connects subjective crisis to a host of problems through which modernity defines itself: in the case of *Adolphe*, the salient problem is one which is central also to Constant's political theory, namely freedom; in the case of *Elective Affinities*, it is that of social calm. Because in these earlier narratives and in Proust's novel alike its impact

[8] *Persuasion in the French Personal Novel*, p. 4.

derives from the powerful sense it gives that everything is at stake, 'le chagrin', the states it provokes and the actions it prompts, are ways of dealing with contingency, both for the subject and in inter-subjective relations which prove to be pervasively governed by it.

But the paradox of the persuasive intent is that, in narrative terms, it is characteristically rooted in the failure of the protagonists' quests: hence, as Bales shows, the suspicion that attaches to it. The 'chagrins' which these personal narratives purport to document are embedded in a complex set of frameworks where evaluation is implicitly or explicitly at issue. So, the persuasive urge is played out against several distinct horizons: that of subjectivity, of course, in the first instance, in that the logic of persuasion presupposes a psychological and ethical framework just as it seeks to modify it; that of the social regulation of the kinds of action which precipitate or cause 'le chagrin';[9] and symbolic, in that the contingencies of subjectivity come in turn to assume a special prominence within a framework that is essentially realist in orientation.[10]

At the same time, there is, in the personal novel, an important element of virtuality in the representation of the passions as a system of causes and effects, something that surfaces at a pivotal moment in Goethe's *Elective Affinities*:

> So all in their different fashions pursued their daily lives, thoughtfully or not; everything seemed to be following its usual course, as is the way in monstrously strange circumstances when everything is at stake: we go on with our lives as though nothing were the matter.[11]

There is more than a hint here of what is unrepresentable. If we think of Proust's Narrator, and his characterization of the recuperation of 'le chagrin' in 'la connaissance spirituelle', perhaps we might see it as a covert concession of the impenetrability of affectivity. The passions can make the improbable seem probable. They motivate the monstrous: this is in part what the progression of the story, stage by stage, will show. It is as if the workings of the passions operate as a parallel plot through which the monstrous can be apprehended. Daily life appears in the narrator's comment almost as something to be taken for granted, but here too the issue is more complex. During the writing of *Elective Affinities*, Goethe mentions in a

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[9] See Constant's preface to the second edition of *Adolphe*, where he comments that certain choices expose us only to 'le choix des maux' (*Adolphe*, ed. by Daniel Leuwers (Paris: Garnier-Flammarion, 1989), p. 39).

[10] In the case of *Adolphe*, the wholly secular framework of the action can be said to align it with an emergent discourse of realism, by contrast with the belief systems invoked in Chateaubriand's *René*.

[11] *Elective Affinities: A Novel*, trans. by David Constantine (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 89.

letter the sense of satisfaction to be derived from taking refuge from the political and military turbulence of the times in the depths of calm passions.[12] The irony of this claim is very palpable: the calm passions of private life possess a turbulence of their own and Goethe himself acknowledged the 'deep passionate wound' which the fiction enveloped for him.[13] If this is a tale of passion, what is at issue are its baleful effects. But the characters' choices are also somehow implicated in a wider evaluative framework, even if only negatively, in the absence, for instance, of an effective compensatory frame, so that this story of the calmer passions ultimately jeopardizes the idea of social calm.

The contingency of subjectivity and the wider problems of evaluation which in turn it poses are issues of distinct import in Constant's writing. In Constant's politics as in his fiction, there is a relationship between choice and consciousness which is not always a benign one. Our choices about choices are the key to a dynamic process in which affectivity is an essential component.[14]

If Adolphe's feelings, like those of Goethe's protagonists, are unfathomable, it is in part because of an unresolved tension between the demands of the world, in all their variety and their tenacity, and those of Ellénore. The story of the seduction of Ellénore and the affair is framed by his protracted and ultimately unsuccessful attempts to complete his social and his sentimental education and these focus increasingly on the desire for freedom.

The ultimate subjective crisis comes about when Ellénore dies, where a lethal form of contingency is unleashed. Adolphe has resolved to leave her, but has not declared his intention. But it is revealed to her when she is sent Adolphe's letter to another character in which he confirms this decision, at which point she becomes fatally ill. Death is experienced as an absolute separation; what he feels is not regret at lost love, but the shattering pain and horror of an irrevocable farewell, in the face of which the value of freedom is thrown into

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[12] See *'Die Wahlverwandtschaften'. Eine Dokumentation der Wirkung von Goethes Roman: 1808–1832*, ed. by Heinz Härtl (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1983), p. 43.

[13] *Goethes Werke*, X, *Autobiographische Schriften II*, ed. by Erich Trunz (Hamburg: Wegner, 1959), p. 505; see also T. J. Reed, *The Classical Centre: Goethe and Weimar, 1775–1832* (London: Croom Helm, 1980), p. 251, n. 18.

[14] This is the conclusion reached by Albert O. Hirschman in his phenomenological analysis of oscillations between the private and the public today, an analysis that explicitly takes Constant as its starting point; see *Shifting Involvements: Private Interest and Public Action* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), pp. 7–8; 96–99. But experiences like that of 'chagrin' are not purely phenomenological; on this point, see André Green, who connects affect to unconscious process by virtue of its 'produits de transformation' (*La Folie privée: psychanalyse des cas-limites* (Paris: Gallimard, 1990), pp. 220–22).

doubt.[15] What the power of his feelings serves to confirm is the reality of freedom of choice, even though it also shows that this reality has been imperfectly understood. The revaluation of freedom stems from the belatedness of Adolphe's discovery of its reality. The absolute loss of Ellénore confirms the reality of a choice that cannot be recuperated. At the same time, the sense that death represents an absolute horizon confirms the significance of freedom as the source of human meaning. Further, this emergence of an equivocal relation to freedom is at the centre of the text's means of representation, in that the narration of consciousness tends to play on a certain temporal indeterminacy precisely where the conflict between love and freedom is in play. What I have in mind here is that form of free indirect discourse which Sylvia Adamson has linked to the use of the 'was-now' construction, or the use of predicates in the imperfect combined with deictics which normally refer to the moment of speaking:

> Combien elle me pesait, cette liberté que j'avais tant regrettée! […] Naguère toutes mes actions avaient un but […] Personne maintenant ne les observait […] J'étais libre, en effet, je n'étais plus aimé.[16]

Here, the occurrence of *maintenant* relates not, of course, to the moment of narration, which is in any case indeterminate, but to the state of consciousness that prevailed at the time of the events narrated; in other words, a number of distinct states of consciousness are merged.[17] At the beginning of the chapter in question, at the point where Adolphe has resolved to break with Ellénore, love is valued because soon all that will remain is the memory of love. The perspective is reversed at the end of the chapter: the pain of lost love annihilates what was to

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[15] Here I take issue with Tzvetan Todorov, who argues that in *Adolphe* affective independence does not map on to political autonomy (*Benjamin Constant: la passion démocratique* (Paris: Hachette, 1997), pp. 124–25). But given that, for Constant, the freedom of the moderns is freedom of choice, it follows that bad choices, whether privately or publicly directed, can generate a sense of loss that deprives freedom of its meaning. Cf. also Stephen Holmes who argues that the pessimism of Constant's private works, including *Adolphe*, is sublimated in the political writings (*Benjamin Constant and the Making of Modern Liberalism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), pp. 13–14). I query this dissocation of literary and philosophical perspectives on the basis that political dimensions of experience, as they impinge on subjectivity, could be said to amount to a distinctively continental version of modernity, in 'Poetry and the Discourse of Happiness in Nineteenth-Century France: The Case of Vigny', in *Joie de vivre in French Literature and Culture: Essays in Honour of Michael Freeman*, ed. by Susan Harrow and Timothy Unwin (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2009), pp. 193–210.

[16] *Adolphe*, pp. 163–64.

[17] See Sylvia Adamson, who argues that in the Bildungsroman the 'was' form becomes a marker of fictionality and the 'was-now' combination a marker of 'sympathetic imagination' ('The Rise and Fall of Empathetic Narrative: A Historical Perspective on Perspective', in *New Perspectives on Narrative Perspective*, ed. by Willie van Peer and Seymour Chatman (New York: SUNY Press, 2001), pp. 83–99 (p. 95)).

have been the fulfilment of freedom. The full discovery of the significance of freedom, from the agent's point of view, comes at a colossal cost: it is impossible to be free and happy. What the text relates is the suffering caused by the discovery of the co-existence of the desire for freedom with other desires and needs.

The reality of freedom as choice makes for states of consciousness which are deeply equivocal. This problem is cast in a wider, no less troubling, perspective at the end of the text. The two framing letters at the end stage a debate about the moral and social significance of the *anecdote*: the publisher castigates Adolphe for his lack of principles, his correspondent argues from the inescapable force of social values and pressures. It remains altogether unclear whether these letters can be said to be compensatory or ironic. The letters could be taken to be compensatory in the sense that they rectify any residual dependence we may have on Adolphe's telling of the story. But they are ironic — they are many-voiced — in that the first letter pre-empts the second and is in turn pre-empted by Adolphe's own telling of the story. There is no last word. Each judgement projects us back into the story. The conflict of values which the text exposes is inescapable and the reality of freedom, in all its ambivalence, is sustained until the end.

For Bales, there is a sharp division between this mode of writing and that of Proust. The personal novel is, as we have seen, rooted in failures which the process of narration is intended, in some way, to redeem. The characteristic failure of the narrator's quest becomes the condition of a psychologically centred self-exploration in which the reader is implicated, though in conflictual ways. Again, the comparison with Proust is potentially telling, in that one way in which the juxtaposition of 'le chagrin' and 'la connaissance spirituelle' can itself be seen is as a compensatory move, though in the case of the *Recherche* directed at the subject who finds himself freshly confronted with painful contingencies. In the case of Proust, for Bales, the subjective outcome of a vastly extended quest, subject to the most extraordinary vicissitudes, is ultimately determined by a kind of complicity which the text sustains with the reader.[18] The turn which these issues take in the *Recherche* is, if we follow Bales, distinctive. Contingency contributes to defining a dominant element of the book on which the Narrator is, finally, about to embark — the redemptive telos and perhaps also its potential as a source of creativity — but it also carries with it the very high likelihood that this project opens precariously onto a future in which it will come to be reoriented, redefined,

[18] For comments on the sense of complicity which results from the reader's access to the creative act in its full immediacy, see *Proust: 'A la recherche du temps perdu'*, p. 82.

deflected, and further that negative contingencies (paralysis, death) may in the end have the upper hand.

What all of these relationships, discursive and social, as well as textual, reveal is this: contingency is an issue with two notable interpretative dimensions. On the one hand, exposure to contingency confronts us with the sense that meanings which matter lie in the future. On the other hand, the extent to which the evaluation of contingency can be social as well as subjective connects it to the ways in which categories like that of modernity are constituted as explanatory frameworks. To close, I shall argue that central to the treatment of the former, in the *Recherche*, is a model of representation which the Narrator's theorization of 'le chagrin' and its transmutation into 'la connaissance spirituelle' tends to occlude. I shall also argue that a central aspect of Proust's great aesthetic gamble is the means by which he broaches the problems which this latter dimension poses, namely the sense that what we term modernity is a space of interpretations, sometimes enabling, sometimes conflictual, of contingencies whose impact is pervasive.

First, representation. The recovery of the past finally vindicates the Narrator's project, but leaves it exposed to a duality without apparent resolution. What's at issue is the Narrator's relation to the materials of the projected work. On the one hand, it is with 'la vraie vie' that art is equated (RTP, IV, 459). On the other hand, the 'chagrins' of life are something which, for the sake of the art work, we must somehow overcome. 'La connaissance spirituelle', because it imposes the impossible perspective of one who is beyond death, who exists only in his works, discounts loss. In this way, it is a bulwark against contingency. But it is self-impoverishing: if the subjective perspective is disallowed, then any and all contingencies, happy or not, are marginalized. Only death delivers us from contingency and the threat of death exacerbates the anxieties which it occasions. The redemptive outcome amounts to a space of painful contradictions and there is some intimation also that 'la connaissance spirituelle' lies in a future from which the subject is ultimately divorced. What's required to bring these two perspectives, if not into alignment, then at least into contact, is a theory of representation, one in which we can point to how contingency and its affective impacts can in some way be engaged with.

What I referred to at the outset as a discourse of affectivity has its own bearing on these issues, in that it may provide the means by which feeling can be understood in itself and also as the essential medium of the self-world relation. In his essay on *Elective Affinities*, Walter Benjamin brilliantly encapsulates this feature of nineteenth-century fiction: 'The lament full of tears: that is emotion. […] The more deeply emotion understands itself, the

more it is transition; for the true poet, it never signifies an end'.[19] In part, no doubt, what Benjamin refers to can be viewed conventionally as the mutability of feeling; but here he also hints at the problem which is intrinsically that of representation, which is its inaccessibility.[20] For the relationship between affect and representation is not stable, so much so that what we may say about feeling does indeed have almost a fictional component. It is for this reason that Nietzsche characterizes as universal the difference between having an experience, on the one hand, and describing it, on the other:

> *Achilles and Homer*. — It is always as between Achilles and Homer: the one *has* the experience, the sensation, the other *describes* it. A true writer bestows words on the emotions and experiences of others, he is an artist so as to divine much from the little he himself has felt.[21]

In other words, representation is understood with reference to a contingency of bestowing, as Nietzsche puts it, which is nonetheless productive.

It is on the point where representation and contingency converge in Proust that it is possible to draw some conclusions regarding the wider scope of the latter. Roland Barthes, like Bales, highlights the identificatory movement which so marks the *Recherche*, insisting that what matters is not the canonical monumentality of the work and its author, but rather the scope to identify with 'l'ouvrier, tantôt tourmenté, tantôt exalté […] qui a voulu entreprendre une tâche à laquelle […] il a conféré un caractère absolu'.[22] This desire for the absolute is the decisive shift in focus which characterizes the closing part of *Le Temps retrouvé*. Yet at the same time the novel's aesthetic dimension consists in a search along the lines envisaged by Nietzsche; it can be said, not to perpetuate, but rather to elicit, as we have just seen, affect and in turn to reactualize the subjective processes which are its 'contenants', not its 'contenus': the 'contenants' of representation originate in processes of affect which are themselves 'contenants'.[23] Art is a space of *re*discovery, a *re*appropriation of materials from which, because of death, the subject will ultimately be divorced. Contingency is the

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[19] 'Goethe's *Elective Affinities*', in *Selected Writings*, I, 1913–1926, ed. by Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), pp. 297–360 (p. 349).

[20] See Adam Phillips, who comments that, while representation can make instinct 'tolerable', 'there is an intensity of affect which representation cannot bind' (*Promises, Promises: Essays on Literature and Psychoanalysis* (London: Faber, 2000), pp. 305–06).

[21] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human: A Book for Free Spirits*, trans. by R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), p. 97.

[22] '"Longtemps, je me suis couché de bonne heure"', in *Œuvres complètes*, V, *1977–1980*, ed. by Éric Marty (Paris: Seuil, 2002), pp. 459–70 (p. 459).

[23] Green, *La Folie privée*, pp. 68–70.

counterpart of that search which expresses itself as the recovery of lost time: it represents all of its deflections and reversals, and the pleasure and pain they may cause. It signifies that a search can continue beyond the apparent point of resolution, where it transmutes into something altogether limitless. The aesthetic matters because it represents this limitless search, at least as far as it can be connected with affectivity. It can also be seen as a gesture towards as a space of possibilities that remains open, a pure reaffirmation, seemingly unaffected by the madness from which it may stem, of the future as the space of human and aesthetic projects that matter. Its futureness matters more perhaps than anything else. This is the sense of the work's aesthetic gamble: it consists in assuming the contingencies of the redemptive outcome and seeing to what extent and how the artwork can become the bearer of 'a future trajectory'.[24] The novel's extravagant commitment to and realization of the aesthetic is a magnificent façade. It connects with but also conceals all of the novel's inner articulations. It contains, but, of course, is different from, the whole host of problems which beset the narrative, those of representation, affect, madness, loss and more. Because distinct from affect, it allows us somehow to become open to its contingencies; because it is connected to affect, we can engage with our passions, irrespective of phenomenology, independently of social factors which have a bearing on evaluation. The novel's impact, which is aesthetic more than it is spiritual, brings us to a point where it is possible to believe, because in being confronted with it in new and unexpected ways we somehow go beyond it, that we are perhaps not absolutely ruled by contingency.[25]

[24] It is on this basis that Luciano Berio advocates a concern for artistic behaviour that 'revises or suspends our relation with the past' (*Remembering the Future* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), p. 2).

[25] On the recognition of contingency as a way of mastering it, see Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Solidarity, and Irony* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 103.