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A contradictory look at the look: resisting *Le Temps retrouvé*

Patrick O'Donovan

In the course of his discussion of the conditions under which any one of us might achieve individuation, Jonathan Lear makes the joke that the efforts of Adam in this direction did not proceed very far, because, 'after all, he got his knowledge *from an apple*'.[1] His remark, uncharitable though it is, might prompt the question: how much trust should we place in someone whose knowledge of himself comes from a spoonful of tea containing a few crumbs of glutinous cake; or the sound of a spoon against china; or the unsettling sensation of uneven paving stones? The issue is what value we might give to contingency. If we think that 'les vrais paradis sont les paradis qu'on a perdus' (*RTP*, IV, p.449), those things, in other words, which, having lost them, we somehow regain, then contingency is all. But so accidental a discovery brings its own hazards — chiefly that of never acquiring this knowledge at all. As well as outcomes which reaffirm its productive impact, chance can also bring discoveries that prove more difficult to assimilate. Perhaps, then, the question of knowledge is more resistant than some of the notorious moments where time is regained may lead us at first to think.

This problem is an explicit concern of the Narrator, who observes that the narrative of time regained is in any case exposed to, not one, but two contingencies. To quote a famous sentence from *Du côté de chez Swann*: '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, p.43). But a knowledge of contingency doesn't necessarily equip the Narrator to deal with its implicit consequences, the suffering or unhappiness to which one may be exposed in the event that it just doesn't work out. In the face of death, then, the recovery of the past reveals a redemptive contingency; but, because of death, we are compelled to acknowledge also a connection between contingency and loss. From this point on, the novel is haunted by the possibility of an adverse outcome to the redemptive *telos*.

Yet, on one reading, even this hazard need not be regarded as a cause for alarm. In fact, a distinctive new understanding of contingency could be said to emerge from the Narrator's epigrammatic characterization of it. The reading in question is that of Adam Phillips, who, in quoting precisely this sentence from *Du côté de chez Swann*, extrapolates from Proust what he terms a theory of contingency for beginners. Following Winnicott, Phillips argues that the achievement of the Depressive Position brings with it the acknowledgement that 'there is no such thing as omnipotence' – in other words, a salutary process of disillusionment through which it is established that neither child nor parent is omnipotent. Phillips then gestures towards a more general perspective on this state of things, which lies 'somewhere between belief in omnipotence and the abrogation of that belief'. Or so at first it might appear, though, in fact, Phillips's thinking immediately moves in the direction of a claim that seems much more significant in scope, namely the 'acknowledgement of contingency', by virtue of which we learn to accept to the full the decisive role of chance in how are to live. At that point, we are 'beginners at contingency'. What we come to realize is that no prior knowledge can prepare us for what chance has in store for us.[2] Here we

[1] *Love and its Place in Nature: A Philosophical Interpretation of Freudian Psychoanalysis* (New Haven — London: Yale University Press, 1990), p.204.

[2] See the essay entitled 'Contingency for beginners', in *On Flirtation* (London: Faber, 1994), pp.3–21 (pp.19–21). Phillips makes the important point that his reading of Proust (as of Freud) is purposefully schematic, in that he is primarily concerned to develop a perspective on contingency as an issue for the self. Cf. Lear, for whom, following Freud, the development of an individual is 'a *contingency*', but 'not *arbitrary*', in *Love and*

encounter a theoretical stance that is productively attuned to the Narrator's desire for time regained. But there are also contingencies which will seem supremely discordant – or which we cannot reconcile with the account the Narrator himself gives of 'le hasard', so that, in the end, it's not altogether clear that the acknowledgement of chance is sufficient. In engaging in particular with an aspect of the treatment of the look, the issue I wish to explore is the ways in which the narrative acknowledges the unreliability of contingency and knowledge alike.

A sense that contingency can be not only exhilarating but troubling emerges from its association with the look. At the point where he makes to transcribe a passage from the pseudo-*Journal* of the Goncourts, the Narrator notes a 'contradiction bizarre' in which seeing is implicated. What books have to tell us is no more beautiful – indeed, may be much less so – than what we may have seen for ourselves. But what we read does make us want to see what books talk about (*RTP*, IV, p.287). Seeing, then, is connected with the materials of life, but also with the desire for what is as yet unseen. At this pivotal moment, what we witness is an anxiety-permeated evocation of contingency centred on seeing. For the Narrator, the anxiety he feels relates to his project, which, in the light of the passage from the pseudo-*Journal*, suddenly seems to lose its value. This outcome seems to him to represent a reversal of an earlier stance; so, there is a decisive element of loss. But this amounts also to a new piece of knowledge. To the extent that such knowledge remains obscured by the assumption which we have seen the Narrator voice at the outset, namely, that chance can be redemptive, it calls for a contrarian reading.

The episodes I wish to consider are all centred on looking and seeing.[3] The unreliability not only of acts of looking but of seeing more generally is a recurrent conundrum in the novel as a whole. Seeing connects with contingency, as we have already observed. How seeing can be shaped by the act of looking repeatedly brings the Narrator's subjectivity into play: the look shapes the relation between self and other (repeatedly so, in relations both with Gilberte and with Albertine); the existential significance of contingency is something which is often centred on the look (implicitly but pervasively when the Narrator experiences exaltation in his walks around Montjouvain (*RTP*, I, pp.152–153). At the same time, the act of looking can be subject to a baleful contingency of its own, in that it has the scope to bring about a sudden upheaval in self–world relations, resulting in error, misrecognition, miscommunication, a sense of disconnection (to take some notorious moments, in the Narrator's misinterpretation of Gilberte's gesture; in his unease concerning the sense of Charlus's look; in the game of the *furet*). A sequence of late scenes of very fleeting episodes of animal magnetism, to which I shall now turn, offer one particular perspective on the unreliability of seeing and, in turn, on the kind of reading which an undependable contingency might elicit.

Though these are quite singular moments in Proust's novel, the impact of mesmerism, or animal magnetism, is both pervasive and unexpected in a number of cultural and intellectual spheres in post-Revolutionary France. In 1773, Franz Anton Mesmer began to perform the therapeutic application of magnets to patients, before going on to develop a 'bacquet', or circular bath containing metal rods, through which patients could experience what he termed magnetic influence, using their arms as conductors. Mesmer himself posited the existence of a physical force, a kind of invisible

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its Place in Nature, p.27. On the 'immense shock' that results from the loss of omnipotence, see D. W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality* (London: Routledge, 1991), p.71.

[3] Though by no means incidental in the novel, looking and seeing have been relatively little analysed. See, however, Malcolm Bowie on the essentially desiring, as distinct from cognitive, impetus that mobilizes and shapes the Narrator's momentary and discontinuous acts of looking, in *Proust Among the Stars* (London: HarperCollins, 1998), pp.13–15.

gravitational fluid available for manipulation by magnetic means. This force possessed in his view immense therapeutic potential, because it constituted ultimately the vital force of matter and spirit alike. Its therapeutic impact, however, could only be realized, according to Mesmer, where the physician, typically by staring into the patient's eyes, could remove any obstacles which prevented the proper circulation of the magnetic fluid.[4] Today, we understand Mesmer's practice as proto-hypnotism; the psychologists Alfred Binet and Charles Féré, writing a century later, ascribed the crises provoked by him purely and simply to the effects of suggestion on susceptible subjects. They attribute the invention of what they term 'magnétisme' as such to one of Mesmer's followers, the Marquis Chastenet de Puységur, who began to practice what was a distinctively hypnotic form of therapy, in which he interrogated the patient whom he had placed in a state of 'somnambulisme […] magnétique'.[5] The paradox is that Mesmer's original term endures even as its meaning comes to be wholly transformed, an outcome that contributes decisively to the range of shifting senses which it came to encompass. The discourse of mesmerism was widely used as a framework for the discussion both of spiritism and of psychological phenomena in the second half of the nineteenth century; at the end of the century, a psychologically centred engagement with conscious and subconscious phenomena emerged which was to play its part in the development of psychoanalysis.[6] Binet and Féré's treatise testifies to the psychological dynamism of the magnetic phenomenon (so-called) when, in accounting for its therapeutic potential, they argue that both the cause and the cure of a 'trouble fonctionnel' can be ascribed to an 'idée' which is, crucially, amenable to a cure by means of hypnotic suggestion.[7] There is scope to see the knowledge which the Proustian Narrator obtains from those privileged moments which I mentioned at the outset as being connected to just such a dynamic account of mental functioning.[8] But the mesmeric scenes show that the issue of loss is no less full of import and that it has a bearing on the contingencies of the Narrator's own internal perspective.

The mesmeric thread that spans the end of *Albertine disparue* and that of the novel as a whole, though clearly connected with a more sustained narrative focus on looking and seeing, is at the same time distinct for a number of reasons. One central feature of these scenes is, precisely, the interaction of looking (here represented by the mesmeric act) and seeing: the Narrator is the witness to the first two of the four episodes on which I shall comment, is a participant in the third and is himself, he thinks, mesmerised in the final one. The first scene occurs in the middle of a span of ten or so pages which narrate a fortuitous encounter in Venice, in which the Narrator glimpses, first Mme de Villeparisis and then Norpois, as they make their way to their table in the dining room of a converted palace which he had paused (by chance) to inspect. Following a couple of pages of largely one-sided dialogue between Norpois and Mme de Villeparisis, the Prince Foggi appears. The Narrator is wholly external to the story

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[4] For a convenient résumé of Mesmer's doctrine, see Maria M. Tatar, *Spellbound: Studies on Mesmerism and Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), ch. 1; she reproduces in an appendix Mesmer's twenty-seven propositions on animal magnetism from his *Mémoire sur la découverte du magnétisme animal* of 1779. On the ways in which mesmerism was to sustain political radicalism by grounding it in a 'scientific' political theory, see Robert Darnton, *Mesmerism and the End of Enlightenment in France* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1968), in particular chs 3–4.

[5] *Le Magnétisme animal*, third edition (Paris: Alcan, 1890), pp.7–8; 18–21.

[6] John Warne Monroe, *Laboratories of Faith: Mesmerism, Spiritism and Occultism in Modern France* (Ithaca – London: Cornell University Press, 2008), pp.18–19, 42–43; 199–219.

[7] See *Le Magnétisme animal*, ch. 13.

[8] An argument along these lines has recently been developed in some detail by Edward Bizub, *Proust et le moi divisé – La'Recherche': creuset de la psychologie expérimentale (1874–1914)* (Geneva: Droz, 2006). See also Robin Waterfield, who likens the Narrator's revelation on tasting the 'madeleine' to the hypnotic effect of spontaneous age-regression, in *Hidden Depths: The Story of Hypnosis* (London: Routledge, 2003), p.34.

he relays at this point, in that it is Norpois who spots the Prince and announces his presence to his companion. She, in turn, has some difficulty working out who he is. Here is what follows:

> M. de Norpois disait tout cela sur le ton assez désagréable d'un professeur mécontent de son élève et, de ses yeux blancs, regardait fixement Mme de Villeparisis.
> Quant le prince eut fini son café et quitta sa table, M. de Norpois se leva, marcha avec empressement vers lui et, d'un geste majestueux, il s'écarta, et, s'effaçant lui-même, le présenta à Mme de Villeparisis. Et pendant les quelques minutes que le prince demeura assis avec eux, M. de Norpois ne cessa un instant de surveiller Mme de Villeparisis de sa pupille bleue, par complaisance ou sévérité de vieil amant, plutôt dans la crainte qu'elle ne se livrât à un des écarts de langage qu'il avait goûtés, mais qu'il redoutait. Dès qu'elle disait au prince quelque chose d'inexact, il rectifiait le propos et fixait des yeux la marquise accablée et docile, avec l'intensité continue d'un magnétiseur. (*RTP*, IV, p.212)

This first mesmeric scene two specific narrative values: it anticipates something of the shock which the 'Bal de têtes' will unleash on the Narrator, in advance of the happy recovery of the past in the library of the Princesse de Guermantes; and, because it comes at a point where the Narrator claims to have forgotten Albertine, it is a covert means by which her continuing role in the story can be absorbed into other narrative elements. It also shares some salient features with the three comparable scenes that are to follow: all are uniformly brief, almost incidental elements of longer sequences, but share with moments of regained time a sudden collapse in distinct temporal zones. The Narrator's own role is equivocal, in that he presents himself as an observer, though he is implicated in unspoken ways. From the reader's point of view, these come across as strangely oneiric scenes – though dialogue is mentioned, none is reported. Here the outcome is quasi-hypnotic, but the explicit mention of animal magnetism, and of the kind of look associated with it, imparts something of a comic emphasis to the end of this, the most overt of the mesmeric scenes.

And, while the focus is clearly on the mesmerizer, what is at issue is a moment in reciprocal relations between two people, in other words, a moment that encapsulates something of the affective basis of their entire shared biographies (the Narrator sees in their exchanges the 'prolongement d'un long amour' (*RTP*, IV, p.210)). In this way, these two characters, whom we are seeing for the last time, represent a bizarre version of the interaction of past and present. It is as if the present comes to be a botched continuation of the past. It is this element that covertly links this scene to the dominant axis of the expanded novel, the Albertine plot: this exchange is anticipated by many comparable earlier moments centred on looking and specifically by a scene in *La Prisonnière* between Saint-Loup and the Narrator in the presence of Albertine. Like Norpois, the Narrator had fixed his uneasy gaze on Albertine: 'sans qu'on pût s'en apercevoir je tenais Albertine prisonnière sous mon regard'. Unlike that of Norpois, his gesture goes unobserved. But he concedes at the same time that this covert look is 'inutilement vigilant' (*RTP*, III, p.486), casting anticipated doubt on Norpois's efforts. This brief narratorial statement establishes in advance a connection between mesmerism and the entire network of concerns that emerge progressively from the Albertine narrative. So, the treatment of the controlling look goes beyond hypnotism. But, whatever utility hypnotism may be said to possess, the mesmeric gesture of control

proves to have none – it is simply exposed to too many contingencies in an impossibly complicated world. The Narrator does implicate himself in this judgement. But, as if anticipating the later scenes, he also claims in effect to be cured of the mesmeric urge at least. The transfer of this urge to Norpois (among others) allows the Narrator to bypass the loss of Albertine and to disavow the internal perspective.

Le Temps retrouvé as a complete narrative is framed by this first mesmeric scene at the end of *Albertine disparue*, which prefigures the Bal de têtes, and by a matching one – involving Odette and the Duc de Guermantes – near the very end of the novel. Here again the Narrator is the privileged witness; others observe this very public exchange, but only he is fully equipped to interpret it, or so he claims. The Duc appears ungovernably prey to the urge to resist even the most trivial contingencies in his relations with his (changing) objects, a susceptibility that imprisons him in a kind of eternal angry recurrence:

> Par moments, sous le regard des tableaux anciens réunis par Swann dans un arrangement de 'collectionneur' qui achevait le caractère démodé, ancien, de cette scène, avec ce duc si 'Restauration' et cette cocotte tellement 'second Empire', dans un de ses peignoirs qu'il aimait, la dame en rose l'interrompait d'une jacasserie; il s'arrêtait net et plantait sur elle un regard féroce. […] peut-être, dans une hallucination de vieillard, croyait-il que c'était un trait d'esprit intempestif de Mme de Guermantes qui lui coupait la parole, et se croyait-il à l'hôtel de Guermantes, comme ces fauves enchaînés qui se figurent un instant être encore libres dans les déserts de l'Afrique. Et levant brusquement la tête, de ses petits yeux ronds et jaunes qui avaient l'éclat d'yeux de fauves, il fixait sur elle un de ses regards qui quelquefois chez Mme de Guermantes, quand celle-ci parlait trop, m'avaient fait trembler. Ainsi le duc regardait-il un instant l'audacieuse dame en rose. Mais celle-ci, lui tenant tête, ne le quittait pas des yeux, et au bout de quelques instants qui semblaient longs aux spectateurs, le vieux fauve dompté […] reprenait son récit. (*RTP*, IV, pp.596–597)

Here, it is as if the full potential of the earlier troubling scene is unleashed. The connections between them, mediated by means of discreet lexical echoes ('regardait fixement', 'fixait sur elle un de ses regards'), are fairly overt: something of the impact of this one derives, then, from the just tangible sense that it forms part of a sequence which is largely negative. In this scene, the past that recurs is caricatural: we are presented with a concatenation of discordant contingencies bordering on an entropic vacuity. Odette's identity hovers between several of her successive incarnations while, in the mind of the Duc, she merges for a moment with one of his past objects, namely the Duchesse. When he is abruptly interrupted by Odette's 'jacasserie', the Duc succumbs to a hallucinatory 'temps retrouvé' and fixes Odette with a 'regard féroce', a look of the kind previously directed at the Duchesse at which the Narrator himself would vicariously tremble, or so he tells us. This is, in a sense, a failed mesmeric effort, for she, in turn, stares back at him and forces him to submit in what appears as a contest in which each struggles to compel the other to submit.[9] In sum, the scene, together with the first scene, constitutes a moment of counter-synthesis, in which the Duc's conduct recalls that of the Narrator, though he is, once more, implicitly represented as a figure exempt from such urges – and who now, by contrast, gives voice

[9] On the problematic associations of mesmerism with demonic power, see Tatar, *Spellbound*, p.270.

to law-like judgements on the actions of others, as when he says of Odette's attempts to interest him, as a writer, in her past affairs: 'Elle se trompait, non qu'elle n'eût de tout temps abondamment fourni les réserves de mon imagination, mais d'une façon bien plus involontaire et par un acte émané de moi-même qui dégageais d'elle à son insu les lois de sa vie' (*RTP*, IV, p.600). But the Narrator half claims to have obtained this insight mesmerically. We seem to witness the emergence of a counter-trend: the Narrator figures as a kind of compensatory magnetizer, a stance that confirms the attempted elimination of Albertine in favour of law-like generalizations which are opaque as to the object relations which inform them. The way in which this knowledge is apparently obtained means that its very uncertainty is what comes to the fore: the mesmeric gesture by which the Narrator seeks to detach himself from the story draws him back into it.[10]

In brief, the Narrator's reflection on Odette's affairs appear to consolidate the master narrative of *Le Temps retrouvé*, in which the claim is made at suspiciously regular intervals that he has forgotten Albertine. I come finally to two even more compressed segments where the Narrator himself is more directly implicated in encounters which he presents as mesmeric. The first of these is his passing encounter with the Princesse de Nassau in which he is the one to be mesmerized, albeit fleetingly. Again, time is for all practical purposes regained, not that this outcome gives rise to any euphoria. So, this 'grande cocotte du monde' is all at once moribund and somehow time-defiant: 'Elle restait une Marie-Antoinette au nez autrichien, au regard délicieux, conservée, embaumée grâce à mille fard adorablement unis qui lui faisaient une figure lilas. […] Elle me reconnut, elle me serra la main et fixa sur moi les rondes prunelles mauves de l'air qui voulait dire: "Comme il y a longtemps que nous ne nous sommes pas vus ! Nous parlerons de cela une autre fois."' (*RTP*, IV, p.557). Her look – the Narrator refers to her 'yeux stellaires' – encapsulates an unquantifiable past ('Elle me regarda seulement comme j'ai dit, d'une façon qui signifiait "Qu'il y a longtemps!" et où repassaient ses maris, les hommes qui l'avaient entretenue, deux guerres'), but one which is now on the point of annihilation as she trots to the door to leave the Princesse de Guermantes's reception. What is troubling here is the blank automatism of the recovery of the past 'en bloc', an outcome that devalues a redemptive contingency as *telos*.

And then a similar scene is played out between Rachel and the Narrator, who takes himself to be the object of the actress's gaze, in the course of an exchange which is a negative recapitulation of a series of earlier moments where he is captivated or confused by the look he catches in the eyes of others and which, on the whole, he can be relied upon to misread: 'Cependant je remarquai, sans aucune satisfaction d'amour-propre car elle était vieille et laide, que l'actrice me faisait de l'œil, avec une certaine réserve d'ailleurs'.[11] Here it is the Narrator's resistance that is aroused: 'Pendant toute la récitation elle laissa palpiter dans ses yeux un sourire réprimé et pénétrant qui semblait l'amorce d'un acquiescement qu'elle eût souhaité venir de moi' (*RTP*, IV, p.578). The trick to which Rachel resorts – or so the Narrator thinks – is suggestion, though the magnetic aspect remains implicit.[12] This brief moment offers a further bleak portrayal of love relations, in that what emerges clearly from the Narrator's response on this occasion is the primacy of subjective factors over the capacity to respond to contingency as a potentially benign force: he does not recognize Rachel and in the end

[10] The Narrator himself compares the Duc's conduct with his own vis-à-vis Albertine (*RTP*, IV, p.597).
[11] On several occasions in the novel's closing volumes, the Narrator is more or less captivated by looks he receives from Gilberte, whom he misrecognizes (confusing her with Mlle d'Éporcheville, *RTP*, IV, pp.142–143, or with Odette, *RTP*, IV, p.558).
[12] See Binet and Féré, who define suggestion as '*une opération qui produit un effet quelconque sur un sujet en passant par son intelligence*', in *Le Magnétisme animal*, p.128.

has to be rescued by Bloch, who usurps the Narrator in that he assumes what had been the latter's role in the scene between Norpois and Mme de Villeparisis. This, then, is a scene which is in several senses negative: the Narrator's error seems to place beneficient contingency in doubt; it inverts earlier moments centred on the rapture of the look; and, because Rachel is here performing, it seems to equate with the unspoken loss of the other kind of rapture which the Narrator associates with the voice and which seems to hold the promise of some special knowledge in the earlier parts of the novel.[13]

The magnetic scenes seem to intimate that the redemption of lost time, however exhilarating an affirmation of the Narrator's vocation, gives rise to problems which are formidable. The mesmeric figures, all moribund and though now all much older than her, emerge progressively as ghostly avatars of Albertine. The figures whom we witness in them are engaged in some kind of struggle, or struggle fully to grasp the significance of the circumstances in which they find themselves; in either case, the ways in which they are represented, as well as showing that the recovery of the past can generate anxiety, hint at the problematic impact of purely subjective pressures. And yet, following the scene in the library of the Princesse de Guermantes, only one outcome comes to be envisaged, that of the writing of the book, or the fulfilment of the Narrator's vocation; and only one contingency is acknowledged, that of death. In other words, we seem to return to something which does indeed resemble Phillips's apparent espousal of a potentially benign contingency. Of course, when the past is miraculously restored, the threat of death becomes an acute concern for a different reason: the Narrator is confronted with the realization that he may struggle to complete the book which the redemptive *telos* finally elicits.

But a different perception, at once elliptical and anxious, is voiced at the moment of the novel's conception. Here, the existence of what could be termed the subjective or internal perspective is more tangibly avowed. Thus Proust writes in 1908: 'Les avertissements de mort. Bientôt tu ne pourras plus dire tout cela. La paresse ou le doute ou l'impuissance se réfugiant dans l'incertitude sur la forme d'art'.[14] There seem, in fact, to be two distinct contingencies, one biological, and the other affective. In *Le Temps retrouvé*, there is a largely covert conflict: between the rhetoric of self-scrutiny and the various ways in which the acknowledgement of the internal perspective proves in fact to be difficult. That such a difficulty can arise is acknowledged on occasion – but typically when it comes to others.[15] The mesmeric scenes reveal a further tension, between the recovery of the past and the extreme fragility of the present as revealed by the moribundity of others, and so also hint at the subjective pressures that result from the pain of loss at the point where the past does return. Contingency is valorized in *Du côté de chez Swann* and in *Le Temps retrouvé* because of the possibility it offers of recovery. But, in the end, recovery is problematic because the unresolved issue of loss brings internal contingencies to the fore – something that the mesmeric scenes seem in their different ways to connote.[16]

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[13] The impact of the voice is different from that of the look in that can have an overtly defamiliarizing impact, notably so when the Narrator first goes to hear la Berma perform (*RTP*, I, pp.430–443). On the possibility of recognition as an effect of the desire which a look can provoke, see André Benhaïm, *Panim: visages de Proust* (Villeneuve d'Ascq: Presses universitaires du Septentrion, 2006), p.95.

[14] *Carnets*, ed. by Florence Callu and Antoine Compagnon (Paris: Gallimard, 2002), pp.49–50.

[15] For instance, Charlus, following the episode in Jupien's *hôtel* (*RTP*, IV, pp.415–417).

[16] On the persistence of suffering in the wake of Albertine's death, see Nicola Luckhurst, *Science and Structure in Proust's 'A la recherche du temps perdu'* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), ch. 7, in particular pp.222–224. See also Ingrid Wassenaar, *Proustian Passions: The Uses of Self-Justification for 'A la recherche du temps perdu'* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), ch. 5.

The mesmeric scenes precipitate a contrarian reading in that they hint at a knowledge of subjectivity that goes against the claim that the recovery of past experiences amounts to a kind of discovery. That we would have recourse to such a reading strategy so as to bring out otherwise less accessible – I think – elements of the novel arises for specific reasons in *Le Temps retrouvé* (the exuberance of the claims to have recovered time, in other words, to have fulfilled the redemptive *telos*; the fact that the narrative itself seems to be governed by a dialectic that generates 'happy' outcomes in a spectacular way (following the disappointment generated by the reading of Goncourt, the revelations which await the Narrator in the library); the salience of theory might otherwise pre-empt our own reflections on the narrative). And, conversely, the Bal de têtes presents formidable obstacles to assimilation. The mesmeric scenes, because they are connected with Albertine, ultimately allow us to apprehend something of the enduring significance of loss, as distinct from redemption.

A stance that claims to look beyond death or loss, then, is open to a little doubt – even if it is motivated by the Narrator's project as it finally emerges in all its fragility and its magnificence. I asked the question at the outset: how reliable is the knowledge which the Narrator claims to have captured? But the ground has shifted. Now we must ask the question: knowledge of what? The narrative has expanded the scope of the original issue of the reliability of knowledge, so that the problem becomes in part that of assimilation. The past recurs in a present laden with its own contingency, with the result that the question of knowledge remains open. The question that arises with regard to Phillips's model is whether it minimizes the subjective impact of contingencies which are for whatever reason problematic.

Any knowledge implicated in a self–world relation – of which the mesmeric scenes offer a somewhat perverted version – is itself a crucial aspect of mental life. If we can suspend for a moment the euphoria of time regained, then the mesmeric scenes could be said to pinpoint the threshold of a crucial epistemological shift for the Narrator. This seemingly dated thread is a concession to the dynamism of knowledge – because it effectively anticipates knowledge of a very different sort that is yet to come, that can as of now hardly be formulated.[17] The scenes of animal magnetism help to uncover a problem which the discourse of mesmerism cannot elucidate, from which a salutary conclusion must be drawn: knowledge has its limits, so much so that another focus must be found.[18]

And contingency? Contingency – both of the recovery of the past and of mental life – can submerge us. So, as far as knowledge is concerned, we may not be much better off (the mesmeric scenes suggest as much). Contingency is indeed central, in that it retains a margin of the unpredictable that remains something decisive. At the same time, loss unleashes new and unsuspected forms of contingency. It is absurd to seek to encapsulate contingency, of all things. The ultimate form of acknowledgement – and perhaps the most productive, if the most painful – is to concede that it is ultimately unknowable and to seek to elaborate an account of the world in which this is truly so. Phillips shows how, for the purposes of attaining 'a paradoxical kind of knowledge', there is merit in identifying with the Narrator's quest as it comes to be reaffirmed.[19]

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[17] On the affinity between Proust's representation of an unconscious subject to repression and Freud's models of mental process, see Jack Jordan, 'The unconscious', in *The Cambridge Companion to Proust*, ed. by Richard Bales (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp.100–116 (pp.103–105). On the emergence of psychoanalysis as a science of human life that crucially includes subjectivity within its scope, see Lear, *Love and its Place in Nature*, pp.3–6.

[18] See again Lear on the distinction between the hypnotic relation and the gesture of control it represents, on the one hand, and the enquiring compositions and decompositions of the I in love, on the other, in *Love and its Place in Nature*, pp.198–199.

[19] Paradoxical because 'it knows that emotional experience is new at every moment'; see 'Contingency for beginners', p.21.

But, as the vast novel reaches its end, a covert margin of resistance to the redemptive *telos* is uncovered. In the name of an intellectual and affective openness to contingency, not as redemption, but as loss, a largely cryptic, discontinuous and fragmentary narrative sequence almost mesmerically urges a contrarian stance – perhaps ultimately an outcome no less telling than that which leads to the recovery of 'les vrais paradis'.