Will and Indolence: Proust, Reader of Baudelaire

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One can forget time only by using it.[1]
Baudelaire

In the last pages of *À la recherche du temps perdu*, the Narrator, as he is going to a *matinée* hosted by the Guermantes Princess, is subject to a series of events "supplied by chance" (Proust 1992c: 283)[2] that suddenly wakens slumbering remembrances. The uneven paving-stones in the Guermantes courtyard, the knock of a spoon against a plate, the starched napkin passed on both sides of the mouth: all of these minute incidents project him into his past, and trigger a succession of revelations, a "point of departure for a new life" (ib.: 283),[3] that opens the path to the ultimate decision that ends the

1 "On ne peut oublier le temps qu'en s'en servant" (Baudelaire 1971: 669).
2 "fournies par le hasard" (Proust 1989: 497).
3 "point de départ vers une vie nouvelle" (ib.: 496).

book: he has to put himself to work and start to write. In spite of the compelling events leading to this decision, he nevertheless chooses to attend the reading he came for in the first place. As he deepens the reflections inspired in him by the succession of "ecstasies" he just experienced, the concert that was keeping him waiting in the antechamber all at once comes to a halt. "Not at all bothered" by this interruption, he calls to mind, as he steps into the living room, a lineage of writers he feels related to, or in whom he observes "analogous traits" in the way of conveying "genuinely aesthetic impressions"[4] through a particular use of memory. Among this "noble line" in which he himself "finds [his] place", the Narrator immediately thinks of Chateaubriand in his *Mémoires d'Outre-tombe* (*Memoirs from Beyond the Grave*) and Gérard de Nerval in *Sylvie*, both surprised by remembrances that they did not expect. He then adds Charles Baudelaire, slightly separated from the other two:

> Above all in Baudelaire, where they are more numerous still, reminiscences of this kind are clearly *less fortuitous* and therefore, to my mind, unmistakable in their significance. Here the poet himself, with something of a *slow and indolent choice*, *deliberately* seeks, in the perfume of a woman, for instance, of her hair and her breast, the analogies which will inspire him and evoke for him "the azure of the sky immense and round" and "a harbour full of masts and pennants". (Proust 1992c: 285, my emphasis)[5]

4 "impressions vraiment esthétiques" (ib.: 497).

5 "Chez Baudelaire enfin, ces réminiscences, plus nombreuses encore, sont évidemment moins fortuites et par conséquent, à mon avis, décisives. C'est le poète lui-même qui, avec plus de choix et de paresse, recherche volontairement, dans l'odeur d'une femme par exemple, de sa chevelure et de son sein, les analogies inspiratrices qui lui évoqueront 'l'azur du ciel immense et rond' et 'un port rempli de flammes et de mâts'" (Proust 1989: 498).

While Nerval and Chateaubriand seem to reassure the Narrator in his belief that one must wait until chance, offering incidentally the appropriate elements, impels you to write, Baudelaire's position stands on its own. Slowness, indolence, choice, deliberation: these are the terms that Proust singles out when he thinks of Baudelaire and the art of remembering. The "lesson" is somewhat odd: what has deliberation or will to do with this, in a passage that is precisely dedicated to the celebration of involuntary memory? What kind of deliberation is Proust talking about, and what part does indolence play in it? And what exactly are these "laws governing recollection" (Proust 2000: 259)[6] that Proust hints at in a letter to André Lang, and that he says he "owes" to Baudelaire? These questions seem, at first, to be addressed to the author of the *Recherche*; I will claim they pertain to Baudelaire more directly and will lead, through Proust's observations, to outline fundamental properties of a poetics of memory – that is a *mode* of memory as it is understood and carried out by the text itself. In order to do so, I will first trace out, following the reading of Proust, the peculiarity of Nerval and Chateaubriand's approaches to remembrance, as it differs from Baudelaire's. This will allow me to focus on the interplay between will and indolence that the poet puts into play in his correspondence, his diaries, and the *Fleurs du Mal*. Far from being a speculative wish, this dialectic finds its most successful balance in a poem much favoured by Proust – "A Head of Hair" – which I shall conclude by analysing so as to demonstrate the necessary concurrence of will and indolence in Baudelaire's art of remembering.

6 "ces lois de la réminiscence" (Proust 1992d: 498).

Involuntary?

What part does Baudelaire play in the trio of writers referred to by the Narrator? Each one of the three summoned authors grants a particular function to remembrance in his oeuvre. What distinguishes Baudelaire consists in the *intentional* character of his use of memory. Chateaubriand, in the example given by the Narrator, did not prepare himself to hear the singing of the thrush in Combourg, bringing him back to his youthful games in the woods, nor did he forecast how the "sweet scent of heliotrope" (Proust 1992c: 284)[7] on his trip to Terre-Neuve would hold sway over his impressions, mentally dragging him back to France. Bearing much resemblance with Proust, the autodiegetic narrator of Nerval's *Sylvie* experiences quite a similar adventure. As he "idly" skims through the newspaper on a dull evening, he is taken aback when he reads that the "*Bouquet Festival*" is about to take place that same night. The reading of the name "stir[s]" in him "memories of provincial days" (Nerval 1896: 8-9):[8] his childhood in the village of Senlis, the revels, the dances, and his youthful love for Sylvie. According to the Narrator, the *récit* in both Chateaubriand and Nerval undergoes a "sudden transition" (Proust 1988: 273):[9] as soon as their protagonists stumble on an unexpected sign, the narrative in the imperfect tense stops and continues in the *passé simple*, i.e. a deeper, long-forgotten past. Then begins the evocation of a dead world that seems to be restored *all at once*. Both examples have to deal with something that has been lost, and for which they have been yearning for, without even being aware that they were.

7 "Une odeur fine et suave d'héliotrope" (Proust 1989: 498).
8 "un souvenir de la province" (Nerval 1993: 540).
9 "une brusque transition" (Proust 1971: 599).

In Chateaubriand and Nerval, the signification of the *involuntary* is dual. On the upstream part of remembrance, the *involuntary* postulates that one does not anticipate the event or the stimulus that will trigger the sequence of remembering: the protagonist of Nerval's *Sylvie* discovers by accident the "very simple words" that will shake his memory; it is fortuitously that Chateaubriand gets a whiff of the "small bed of flowering beans" (Proust 1992c: 284),[10] or listens to the thrush's song. On the downstream part, one does not expect the *effect* of such of an event: neither Chateaubriand nor the protagonist of *Sylvie* anticipate the power of the blow. If they are suddenly astonished as the "restored" past magically unfold under their eyes, it is *beyond their will*. And that is why they stand, to the Narrator's eye, as models to worship: both have been capable of connecting and relating a present sensation to a corresponding past impression. The "involuntary" thus concerns both upstream and downstream: it implies no mastery over the events that elicit remembrance, as well as no control of the resilience and power of these forgotten and suddenly revived impressions. One has also to consider that the surprise and the inquiry that follows subsequently (i.e. elucidating the origins of that event), taking place within the realm of the text; whether it is an autobiographical memoir (Chateaubriand) or a novella (Nerval), the wonder and confusion elicited by the event are organised narratively, and the investigation takes place on a literary ground – it offers us the possibility to read the *experience* of seeking for lost recollection.

In his discussion of these excerpts, the Narrator of the *Recherche du temps perdu* identifies a "sensation common to past and present" (Proust 1992c: 226)[11] proper to the

10 "un petit carré de fèves en fleurs" (Proust 1988: 498).
11 "sensation commune" (Proust 1989: 453).

functioning of remembrance, which establishes a type of integral identity between two temporally distant moments. More than a double or a replica, this sensation comes back identically, completely the *same*, as in a perfect superposition: it is the *same* song of the thrush, the exact *same* perfume, the *same* words describing a similar event which abolish the time elapsed between these moments and also spontaneously makes them contiguous. It belongs to this spontaneity to launch the "immediate, delicious and total deflagration" (ib.: 2)[12] of involuntary memory. The less we are prepared for it, the bigger the repercussion of beauty and truth contained in these moments will be. It then falls to the writer to know how to unfold them and make the most of their richness, by capturing them in "the necessary links of a well-wrought style" (ib.: 246)[13].

These "mysterious laws of thought" (Proust 1988: 30)[14] that Proust wanted to explain in his *Against Sainte-Beuve* essay are revealed to him by involuntary memory – and not, as he often observes, by voluntary memory. Voluntary memory, as Gilles Deleuze remarks, "comes always too late" (Deleuze 1972: 51): it always fails to decipher signs, requires the patient efforts of reasoning and seems often incoherent and full of holes – most of the time it is sterile and disappointing. In the *Recherche*, its deficiencies are unrelentingly deplored; a few lines before the "madeleine" episode, the Narrator, discouraged by his unfruitful attempts to regain fractions of his past, sighs:

> And so it is with our own past. It is a labour in vain to attempt to recapture it: all the efforts of our intellect must prove futile. The past is

12 "immédiate, délicieuse et totale déflagration" (ib.: 2).
13 "les anneaux nécessaires d'un beau style". (ib.: 246).
14 "mystérieuses lois de la pensée" (Proust 1971: 239).

hidden somewhere outside the realm, beyond the reach of intellect, in some material object (in the sensation which that material object will give us) of which we have no inkling. And it depends on chance whether or not we come upon this object before we ourselves must die. (Proust 1992a: 51)[15]

As this quotation indicates, one can only encounter the element that will provoke the anamnesis by chance. Hence, volition shall never amount, in spite of all the exertion to encourage memory, to the same intensity as the rare moments of revelation like those in the Guermantes' courtyard. Apparently, such ideas seem to be absolutely opposed to those of the Narrator on Baudelaire. Yet deliberation remains a prominent feature in his account of the poet. However, it is not certain that the will evoked by the Narrator as it refers to the process of remembering wilfully ("*mémoire volontaire*") can be considered as identical to the will noticed in Baudelaire's poem.

Procrastination

How are we then to understand Proust's account of Baudelaire regarding memory? Should the poet be seen as an example to follow or counterexample to avoid? If we go back to the Narrator's description of Baudelaire in the Guermantes' salon, it is surprising to come across the term "deliberation" in a laudatory context. If the Narrator aligns himself with the authors he admires, we should expect that he would not

15 "Il en est ainsi de notre passé. C'est peine perdue que nous cherchions à l'évoquer, tous les efforts de notre intelligence sont inutiles. Il est caché hors de son domaine et de sa portée, en quelque objet matériel (en la sensation que nous donnerait cet objet matériel), que nous ne soupçonnons pas. Cet objet, il dépend du hasard que nous le rencontrions avant de mourir, ou que nous ne le rencontrions pas" (Proust 1987: 44).

criticise the flaw he already lambasted – especially at the moment when he decided to overcome it. It becomes even more surprising if we recall that Proust's reproach to Baudelaire and Nerval, in *Against Sainte-Beuve*, hinges on the question of will. At the beginning of the article, devoted to the author of *Sylvie*, he declares: "his poetry and his stories are (like Baudelaire's *Petits poèmes en prose* and *Les Fleurs du mal* for example) merely different attempts at expressing the same thing" (Proust 1988: 26).[16] In the opinion of Proust, had their imagination been lavish enough, it would not have repeated itself. Yet Baudelaire and Nerval repeat themselves. According to Proust's diagnostic, the "malady of the will" (ib.)[17] afflicting them stems from their laziness – in other words, their laziness is one of the main components of their incapacity to produce something new without having to repeat themselves. Perhaps Proust has in mind the letter that Baudelaire addressed to his publisher, Auguste Poulet-Malassis, in which he admits his fear of having caught "the kind of illness Gérard [de Nerval] had, that is, the fear of being incapable either of thinking, or of writing, a single line" (Baudelaire 1986: 163).[18] Proust's verdict is adamant: both Nerval and Baudelaire are "lazy, showed certainty in the detailed execution, and uncertainty in the overall scheme" (Proust 1988: 52).[19]

Notwithstanding the fact that this assessment does not consider the painful work of "literalization" (Johnson 1979: 67) from verse to prose that it required, the sentence hits where

16 "ses vers et ses nouvelles ne sont (comme les *Petits poèmes en prose* de Baudelaire et *Les Fleurs du mal*, par exemple) que des tentatives différentes pour exprimer la même chose" (Proust 1971: 234).
17 "maladie de la volonté" (ib.).
18 "attaqué d'une espèce de maladie à la Gérard, à savoir la peur de ne plus pouvoir penser, ni écrire une ligne" (Baudelaire 1973: 135-136).
19 "paresseux, avec des certitudes d'exécution dans le détail, et de l'incertitude dans le plan" (Proust 1971: 259).

it hurts: laziness and will are two key-words of Baudelaire's lexicon of melancholy, appearing repeatedly in his letters or his diaries as soon as inspiration vanishes. Unremittingly, Baudelaire observes and diminishes himself while desperately seeking for causes and remedies. He writes to his mother in a fit of despair:

> Try and imagine this perpetual idleness which is brought about my continual feeling of illness, coupled with a profound hatred for that illness. […] I have such faith in the employment of my time, and the strength of my will, *that I know positively* that if I could contrive to lead a regular life for a fortnight or three weeks, *my intelligence would be saved*. (Baudelaire 1971: 23)[20]

Baudelaire logically relates one term to the other, as in a vicious circle: laziness knocks down the efforts of will, and the absence of will establishes laziness's dominion. However, aware as he is of this spiral, he continues to denigrate his work, dissipating "that fluctuating skill, *will-power*"[21] in spite of himself, while constantly thinking that his concentration is not entirely lost.

Following Proust, many critics insisted on Baudelaire's so-called idleness. The poet has been successively identified as being struck by "creative difficulty" (Pichois 1967: 242), "haunted by infertility" (Labarthe 2000: 37), "bitterly stuck in a pointless idleness" (Bataille 1957: 49), harmed by his incapacity to fulfil "his dream of writing […] a man of letter's

20 "Supposez une oisiveté perpétuelle commandée par un malaise perpétuel, avec une haine profonde de cette oisiveté. […] Je crois si parfaitement à l'emploi du temps et à la puissance de ma volonté, *que je sais positivement* que si je pouvais parvenir à mener quinze ou vingt jours durant, une vie régulière, *mon intelligence serait sauvée*" (Baudelaire 1973a: 142-143).

21 "le trésor variable de la *volonté*" (Baudelaire 1986: 198).

immense oeuvre" (Blanchot 1948: 148), and beholding his own "failure" (Laforgue 1931). Those merciless comments were already formulated, as a matter of fact, by Baudelaire himself. The sore letters to his friends or his mother recurrently manifest his struggle against indolence: "My will is in a piteous state and if I do not delve at once into work, I am lost" (Baudelaire 1971: 43).[22] Baudelaire went as far as to give the title *Hygiene* to a section of his diary: this is where we find developed with great care the exercises he was inflicting upon himself in order to cast out the demon of laziness. He collects in these pages notes on inactivity, painfully extracted from the procrastinator's pen, incessantly recalling what he *should* do. Baudelaire's loitering strategy does not even fool himself. He knows too well that when one writes what one is supposed to do, that does not mean he will do it.

The notes of the *Hygiene* diary are ambiguous: they are implorations for an imminent return of energy, wishful thinking very conscious that there is a substantial difference between a promise and its accomplishment. On the one hand, they are *recollections* – they come from the lived experience of prolific hours in which Baudelaire takes the measure of his own capacities; on the other hand, they are *prescriptions*, oriented towards an imaginary and timeless future where all ambitions are stored. Nevertheless, they are written and read again in the inactive present. Baudelaire cautiously registers these private instructions in a notebook to be consulted as a *memorandum*, in dark days. A memorandum – that is a voice repeating each and every second "Remember!" (as in "The Clock"), or "You will recall" (as in "The Balcony"). Eventually, everything revolves around the obsession of dis-

22 "Ma volonté est dans un état piteux, et si je ne pique pas, *par hygiène, et malgré tout*, une tête dans le travail, je suis perdu" (Baudelaire 1973b: 123).

persion, dissipation, evaporation of the concentration – the first sentence of *My Heart Laid Bare* promises nothing else: "Of the vaporization and centralization of the *Ego*. Everything depends on that" (Baudelaire 1983: 53).[23]

Indolence as a technique

Proust's conviction is identical to the one Baudelaire develops in *Hygiene*: "We are weighed down, every moment, by the conception and the sensation of Time. And there are but two means of escaping and forgetting this nightmare: pleasure and work. Pleasure consumes us. Work strengthens us. Let us choose" (Baudelaire 1986: 100).[24] After having delayed as much as possible, the Narrator of the *Recherche* finally decides: he resolves to abandon "the habit […] of perpetual postponement" (Proust 1992 b: 90),[25] and Baudelaire, as a new Virgil, guides him in these steps. Let us go back to the precise passage where Baudelaire is conjured up alongside Chateaubriand and Nerval. If we remember Proust's distaste for voluntary memory, can we plainly believe that these lines are in fact approbatory? I hold that we ought to: "indolence" and "will" do not necessarily imply a reproach. The laziness and the will that Proust perceives in Baudelaire are, in fact, observations on the *method* of writing as well as on the *theme* of the poems.

According to Proust, laziness first belongs to the world that Baudelaire's poems depict. We can find it in pieces where the

23 "De la vaporisation et de la centralisation du *Moi*. Tout est là" (Baudelaire 1971: 175).

24 "À chaque minute nous sommes écrasés par l'idée et la sensation du temps. Et il n'y a que deux moyens pour échapper à ce cauchemar, – pour l'oublier: le Plaisir et le Travail. Le Plaisir nous use. Le Travail nous fortifie. Choisissons" (ib.: 669).

25 "cette habitude […] de l'ajournement perpétuel" (Proust 1989: 95).

exotic and tropical atmosphere mingles with shiftlessness and indolence. It permeates the air of a foreign country – such as the "lazy island" (Baudelaire 1993: 95)[26] of "Exotic perfume", or the "place where indolence drops on the eyes like rain" (ib: 161)[27] of "For A Creole Lady" – unless, in a metonymical movement, it takes hold of its inhabitants; we then think of the woman of the "Dancing Serpent", that lets "[her] childlike head [loll] with the weight of all [her] idleness" (ib.: 103),[28] or the demeanour of the "soft enchantress" that is compared to "a ship […] that rolls along/ In rhythm with a slow and languid song" (ib.).[29] Undulating gait, the regular rhythm of the sea, generous warmth: all of these elements create an ensemble that lets the reverie sink into a peaceful and serene atmosphere.

One of the most important components of this intense and suggestive pleasure is *visual*. In a personal note in his account of the 1859 painting salon, Baudelaire remarks, in a personal note, how drawn he is towards warm lights:

> It is to be presumed that I myself am suffering to some extent from a nostalgia which drags me towards the sun; for I find an intoxicating mist arising from these luminous canvases, which soon condenses into desires and regrets. I catch myself envying the lot of those men who are lying outstretched amid their azure shades, and whose eyes, neither waking nor sleeping, express, if anything at all, only love of repose and the feeling of a blissful happiness inspired by an immensity of light. (Baudelaire 1955: 264)[30]

26 "l'île paresseuse" (Baudelaire 1971: 25).
27 "d'où pleut sur les yeux la paresse" (ib.).
28 "Sous le fardeau de ta paresse / Ta tête d'enfant / Se balance" (ib.: 36).
29 "un beau vaisseau qui […] va roulant / Suivant un rythme doux, et paresseux, et lent" (ib.).
30 "Il est présumable que je suis moi-même atteint quelque peu d'une nostalgie qui m'entraîne vers le soleil; car de ces toiles lumineuses

The spectator, impressed by the pure radiance of the sun, immerses himself in the heat released by Eugène Fromentin's painting. Lulled by langour – which has nothing in common with the procrastinator's anxious laziness mixed with guilt – Baudelaire shelters in a dream, feeding on remembrances. He might have conjured up his trip to the South Seas and his stop on the Bourbon Island – although it wasn't the best of times and the trip in itself was somewhat distressing, the images it left engraved in the mind seem to account for Baudelaire's "envy" and "nostalgia". On that topic, Proust notes that "Baudelaire had clear memories of this tropical nature" (Proust 1988: 306),[31] but unlike real travellers, the reader retains the impression that the poet "only saw that nature from on board ship" (ib.).[32]

As a matter of fact, the distance that Baudelaire keeps is deliberate: he knows that the shimmers and comforting climate of the tropics dampen the quickness and accuracy of thoughts. According to Baudelaire, if the nervousness of the city kept a stimulating tension for the mind, the absolute opposite, i.e. the calmness of tropical sun, can induce a damaging relaxation. In an article on contemporary French poets, he depicts the milieu where C. M. Leconte de Lisle was raised: "one of those perfumed and volcanic islands where the human soul, gently rocked by all the caresses of the atmosphere, *unlearns* each day the exercise of thought". One relinquishes thought as he chooses a life of pure sensation, a

s'élève pour moi une vapeur enivrante, qui se condense bientôt en désirs et en regrets. Je me surprends à envier le sort de ces hommes étendus sous ces ombres bleues, et dont les yeux, qui ne sont ni éveillés ni endormis, n'expriment, si toutefois ils expriment quelque chose, que l'amour du repos et le sentiment du bonheur qu'inspire une immense lumière" (Baudelaire 1971: 650).

31 "Baudelaire se souvenait bien de cette nature tropicale" (Proust 1971: 637).

32 "cette nature, on dirait qu'il ne l'a vue que du bateau" (ib.).

numbed life where stupefaction allows an infinite contemplation. But this contemplation cannot be lived without fear. As a matter of fact, authorised leisure seemed to be a constant motive of anguish for Baudelaire. Paradoxically, he feared that his judicial council (strictly controlling his financial affairs) would stop – although he never ceased to complain about it, constantly impecunious as he was. He explains his reasoning thus: "my first thought was *that I must defend myself* against that indolence and idleness which always follow a momentary relief; for then the future difficulties are ignored […]. *Beatitude would create idleness*" (ib.: 67).[33] And, as we know, idleness would contravene the hygiene rules that Baudelaire severely recorded. The very Baudelairian conclusion of this reasoning could then be: I am happy to be unlucky and well deserve my evil fate (his "guignon", as he called it), for it generates enough obstacles in my way to resist the too-easy temptations of *otium*.

Still wishing to understand the value implied in the Narrator's comments on Baudelaire, we could read the indolence described in the poem differently: more than a theme, it is a *technique*. It is no longer considered, in the poem itself, as a flaw or a deficiency violating the rules set by Baudelaire's hygiene manual. Well rooted in the warm atmosphere of a tropical island, it seems in its place, represented as though it would condition inspiration. In such poems as "Exotic Perfume" and "Head of Hair", his "active inaction", as the critic Jean-Pierre Richard puts it, stimulates the development of remembrances – nostalgic remembrances of a bygone Eden. Indolence lets memory speak without hurry, without urging it:

33 "ma première pensée a été de *me défendre* contre cette indolence et cette paresse qui suivent toujours un soulagement momentané; car, dans ce cas, on oublie les embarras de l'avenir […]. *La béatitude créerait la paresse*" (Baudelaire 1973b: 159).

in the warm envelope of a universe without delays or pressure, it seizes key traits of remembrances. The fluctuant essence of these distinctive and striking images will then be transformed into a *repeatable* form. In some ways, this method could be similar to the Proustian involuntary memory, inasmuch as remembrance is suddenly brought to light, in a blow, and that lasting power exceeds the control of the subject who remembers.

We must be careful when we speak with Proust's own lexicon. In *Time Regained*, the intervention of involuntary memory that spurs the Narrator's reflections calls for two remarks: first, "involuntary" qualifies both the external circumstances of experience that are not in the reach of our will, and the effect that these circumstances produced on the person who remembers. But if involuntary memory supplies sensation, one needs the support of the will to analyse this sensation and search for elements matching two periods of time far apart. One must then refrain from considering involuntary and non-voluntary as identical. The involuntary is a full withdrawal of the will, a complete absence of grip on a given situation; the non-voluntary states a decision *per se*: a part of will remains in the non-voluntary. In other words, the non-voluntary is the will not to have a will. Hence, when Proust speaks of the "choice" and "indolence" Baudelaire displayed in the evocation of his remembrances, it rather seems to be the result of a non-voluntary laziness – a laziness that would allow the joint effect of the involuntary (in the discovery of the components of remembrance) *and* the voluntary (in the decision of being lazy enough to let the remembrance blossom). That is why Baudelaire qualifies laziness, in "La Chevelure" ("Head of Hair"), as "fruitful", "fertile", or "creative".

According to Proust, the fertility of idleness characterises Baudelaire's greatest originality in the art of writing memory:

the way in which he elaborates an autonomous universe, "Baudelaire's mental world", "a planet where he alone has dwelt and which resembles nothing of what we know" (Proust 1988: 308);[34] Proust also names it "the country of his genius, of which each poem is only a fragment that, the moment one has read it, joins up with the other fragments that we know already" (ib.).[35] But in this imaginary topography revealing the passion of a reader confined to bed,[36] "genius" may be considered as the exact synonym of memory. We can find the confirmation of this hypothesis in the answer that Proust gives to André Lang in October 1921, where he turns to the same "family" of authors as at the end of the *Recherche*, but in a different order. He resorts furthermore to a comparison between Baudelaire and Jean Racine,[37] explaining how they are alike:

> Racine is richer in psychological insights, Baudelaire in the laws governing recollection, which for me are in fact more vividly revealed by Chateaubriand and Nerval. In Baudelaire, the recollection is there, *in a static state*, *already in existence when a poem begins* ('When with both eyes closed' etc., 'O fleece curling' etc.). (Proust 2000: 259, my emphasis)[38]

34 "une planète où lui seul a habité et qui ne ressemble à rien de ce que nous connaissons" (Proust 1971: 253).

35 "le pays de son génie, dont chaque poème n'est qu'un fragment, et qui dès qu'on le lit se rejoint aux autres fragments que nous en connaissons" (ib.).

36 Proust clarifies, in a postscript, the circumstances in which he wrote his article: "When I wrote this letter to Jacques Rivière, I did not have a single book beside my sickbed. May I therefore be forgiven for the possible inaccuracy – easily rectified – of certain quotations. I aspired only to leaf through my memory and to give direction to the taste of my friends" (Proust 1988: 307).

37 Proust had already used such a comparison in his preface to Paul Morand's *Tendres stocks* (1920).

38 "Racine est plus fertile en découvertes psychologiques, Baudelaire est plus instructif en ce qui concerne les lois de la réminiscence, que je trouve exposées du reste d'une façon plus vivante chez Chateaubri-

According to Proust, the world of remembrance as it is brought forth by Baudelaire's poem is "already in existence when the poem begins"; that is, unlike what the Narrator claimed in the passage of the *Recherche*, it is not the object of an investigation that we would witness and follow throughout its development. It is not linked to a strictly subjective temporality in which periods and epochs would interpolate rhapsodically. It seems rather that the poem, in Baudelaire's case, already *represents*, in its material existence, a fragment of memory, in which an organised world follows its pace, detached from the laws of time: it is a noted recollection that can be repeated in the present tense. The poems to which Proust refers ("Head of Hair", "The Balcony", "Exotic Perfume", "The Perfume Flask") are all constructed on the iteration of recollection. They are not the stage of particular events that could induce discontinuity; the remembrance does not spring to mind suddenly, abruptly, such as in Nerval's or Chateaubriand's case. I claim that the reason for this depends on a dramaturgical choice: the way in which Baudelaire's poem pictures memory does not consist in a fiction of remembering or ongoing research that leads to what has been forgotten. It is rather an achieved process that can be performed repeatedly: "*already in existence*", as Proust reads it.

Therefore, if the materials that Baudelaire aims to recollect are already in his possession, they do not have to occur all at once, in the present, *because they are not forgotten* and *then* rediscovered. Or, rather, if they have been forgotten, we do not attend to the instant where past and present collide.

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and ou Nerval. Chez Baudelaire la réminiscence est à l'état statique, elle existe déjà quand la pièce commence (quand les deux yeux fermés, etc. ô toison moutonnant, etc.)" (Proust 1992d: 497-498).

"Head of Hair"

We can now see what struck Proust at first: the world of remembrance in *The Flowers of Evil* does not open consequently to a "sudden transition", a rupture in the order of time when the past would burst into the present, or when entire sequences of the past would be re-lived within a present in which we no longer belong. There is a certain slowness proper to remembrances in the *Flowers of Evil* that is opposed to the "deflagrations" of involuntary memory. As soon as the first words are read, we are *already* bathed in the atmosphere of remembrance. As regards the dialectic between will and indolence, "Head of Hair" ("La Chevelure") is perhaps the most significant poem:

O fleece, billowing even down the neck!
O locks! O perfume charged with nonchalance!
What ecstasy! To people our dark room
With memories that sleep within this mane,
I'll shake it like a kerchief in the air!

Languorous Asia, scorching Africa,
A whole world distant, vacant, nearly dead,
Lives in your depths, o forest of perfume!
While other spirits sail on symphonies
Mine, my beloved, swims along your scent.

I will go down there, where the trees and men,
Both full of sap, swoon in the ardent heat;
Strong swelling tresses, carry me away!
Yours, sea of ebony, a dazzling dream
Of sails, of oarsmen, waving pennants, masts:

A sounding harbour where my soul can drink
From great floods subtle tones, perfumes and hues;
Where vessels gliding in the moire and gold
Open their wide arms to the glorious sky
Where purely trembles the eternal warmth.

I'll plunge my drunken head, dizzy with love
In this black sea where that one is confined;
My subtle soul that rolls in its caress
Will bring you back, o fertile indolence!
Infinite lulling, leisure steeped in balm!

Blue head of hair, tent of spread shadows, you
Give me the azure of the open sky;
In downy wisps along your twisted locks
I'll gladly drug myself on mingled scents,
Essence of cocoa-oil, pitch and musk.

For ages! always! in your heavy mane
My hand will scatter ruby, sapphire, pearl
So you will never chill to my desire!
Are you not the oasis where I dream,
My drinking-gourd for memory's fine wine?

[Ô toison, moutonnant jusque sur l'encolure!
Ô boucles! Ô parfum chargé de nonchaloir!
Extase! Pour peupler ce soir l'alcôve obscure
Des souvenirs dormant dans cette chevelure,
Je la veux agiter dans l'air comme un mouchoir!

La langoureuse Asie et la brûlante Afrique,
Tout un monde lointain, absent, presque défunt,
Vit dans tes profondeurs, forêt aromatique!

Comme d'autres esprits voguent sur la musique,
Le mien, ô mon amour! nage sur ton parfum.

J'irai là-bas où l'arbre et l'homme, pleins de sève,
Se pâment longuement sous l'ardeur des climats;
Fortes tresses, soyez la houle qui m'enlève!
Tu contiens, mer d'ébène, un éblouissant rêve
De voiles, de rameurs, de flammes et de mâts:

Un port retentissant où mon âme peut boire
A grands flots le parfum, le son et la couleur;
Où les vaisseaux, glissant dans l'or et dans la moire,
Ouvrent leurs vastes bras pour embrasser la gloire
D'un ciel pur où frémit l'éternelle chaleur.

Je plongerai ma tête amoureuse d'ivresse
Dans ce noir océan où l'autre est enfermé;
Et mon esprit subtil que le roulis caresse
Saura vous retrouver, ô féconde paresse,
Infinis bercements du loisir embaumé!

Cheveux bleus, pavillon de ténèbres tendues,
Vous me rendez l'azur du ciel immense et rond;
Sur les bords duvetés de vos mèches tordues
Je m'enivre ardemment des senteurs confondues
De l'huile de coco, du musc et du goudron.

Longtemps! toujours! ma main dans ta crinière lourde
Sèmera le rubis, la perle et le saphir,
Afin qu'à mon désir tu ne sois jamais sourde!
N'es-tu pas l'oasis où je rêve, et la gourde
Où je hume à longs traits le vin du souvenir?]

The "plot" of the poem is simple: a lover plunges his head into his mistress' shock of hair, the perfume of which leads him to recall "A whole world distant, vacant, nearly dead".[39] Baudelaire develops the same temporal ambiguity as in the notes of the *Hygiene* diary: an immediate will, stretched between the beautiful image of the past and the future project to join it again – but indolence, this time, is more an ally than an enemy. In this dense poem, attention concentrates exclusively on the lover's hair, which dispenses euphoria and elation, as well as patience and determination to breathe as much as possible of the perfume of the past. As the final exclamations demonstrate ("For ages! always!"), the pleasure seems boundless; together they denote the present sensation lured by an "infinite" joy, the desire to prolong this delight indefinitely, and the corollary fear of seeing it vanish. The olfactory pleasure of the mass of hair stems from the *total* regaining of a world previously consigned to oblivion that is on the verge of disappearing again. The emotion is all the more intense as it is held in abeyance.

We can parallel the description of the sensation captured by Baudelaire's poem with something Walter Benjamin noted in his commentary on Proust's involuntary memory:

> anyone who wishes to surrender knowingly to the innermost overtones in this work must place himself in a special stratum […] of this involuntary memory, one in which the materials of memory no longer appear singly, as images, but tell us about a whole, amorphously and formlessly, indefinitely and weightily, in the same way as the weight of his net tells a fisherman about his catch. (Benjamin 1985: 214)

39 "Tout un monde lointain, absent, presque défunt".

In Benjamin's terms, "Head of hair" is a poem of surrender and awareness, of will and its relinquishment. Uttering no fewer than five times a volitional act in order to better refute it, the lyrical *I* seems to say: I wish not to have will any longer, I want my will to disappear in the serenity of remembered indolence. But the *I* must have been resolute prior to distancing itself from the experience, to fix in verses this paradoxical claim that both affirms and negates itself. The willful statement that structures the poem is parallel to the effort of isolating remembrance as an iterative event, turned into verse. There is not, as in Proust, a possibility that the experience might "fail", that it would remain a mute and dead image, such as the trees in Hudimesnil.[40] Baudelaire conceived, in this poem, a *fictitious* exploration: the lyrical *I*, enraptured by the perfume of the hair, feigns to discover a new world that is revealed to him; but he knows it already – as Proust noticed. He knows the memory path to get there and can find anew what has been given to him once: the poem's dreamy image of the "harbour", a transitory place in between two voyages, offers a refuge where the traveler can rest before leaving again. He has now learned the charms to conjure up his remembrances "at will" without having to pass through the pains of a *recherche*. While Proust's acknowledgment of his surrounding world always

40 The Narrator of the *Recherche* remains dumbstruck in front of the trees of Hudimesnil: "I looked at the three trees; I could see them plainly, but my mind felt that they were concealing something which it could not grasp, as when an object is placed out of reach so that our fingers can only touch for a moment its outer surface, without managing to take hold of anything" (Proust 1992 a: 653); "Je regardais les trois arbres, je les voyais bien, mais mon esprit sentait qu'ils recouvraient quelque chose sur quoi ils n'avaient pas prise, comme sur ces objets placés trop loin dont nos doigts allongés au bout de notre bras tendu effleurent seulement par instant l'enveloppe sans arriver à rien saisir" (Proust 1989: 450).

seems to be – geographically as well as mentally – in the process of discovery, Baudelaire's appears fully armed out of the head of the poet. That is, it does not belong to a logic of reconstitution but of evocation. The world of remembrances may exist without he who remembers them: remembrances are autonomous, they are caught in the hair and dwell there latently, but they still remain accessible through their poetical translation.

Proust was fascinated by this poem; perhaps did he spot some kind of convergence between voluntary and involuntary memory – or even a reciprocal improvement of both. I hold that he finds, in "Head of Hair", the felicity related to the total resurrection of a long lost world, as much as the rehabilitation of voluntary memory that allows a stabilisation of remembrances, without the anxiety linked to their ephemerality. In thi poem Baudelaire demonstrates an inclination to seek remembrances willfully, and surprises himself by his own good disposition, such as in the first lines of the *Artificial Paradises*: "There are days when a man awakens with a young, vigorous genius" (Baudelaire 1996: 31).[41] In these "poetical days", as he calls them, every object becomes *more visible*, "the objects of the outward world are brought into powerful relief, with sharp contours and a wealth of admirable colours" (ib.).[42] On such days, the unpredictable Muse consents to present herself, and offers to the poet the accuracy of a beautiful verse that will blend, as Proust suggests, the fortuitousness of involuntary memory (one does not decide to wake up in such state) and the precision of intention. These days therefore become memorable: days where remembrance

41 "Il est des jours où l'homme s'éveille avec un génie jeune et vigoureux" (Baudelaire 1971: 401).

42 "le monde s'offre à lui avec un relief puissant, une netteté de contour, une richesse de couleurs admirables" (ib.).

is comforting, and where writing consigns a trace of what the yearning procrastinator is capable of achieving.

Idleness and will, as we have seen, are central concepts for understanding both Proust and Baudelaire's relationships to memory. When the first reads the latter, his opinion is curiously twisted: he agrees as he dissents; he is inspired but knows that his work must take another path. According to the Narrator, Baudelaire belongs to an illustrious family of writers that have been able to put to use the impromptu material offered by involuntary memory. Yet, he is characterised by his consideration of will as a fundamental component in his inquiry for remembrances. Unlike Chateaubriand and Nerval, he makes an explicit use of it in order to compose his poems, but they nevertheless remain under the sign of involuntary. Baudelaire, therefore, is the only writer who puts into practice this "*memory of intelligence*" that knows how to muster voluntariness and involuntariness.

Before the Narrator confronts his own finitude and enters the harrowing "*Bal de têtes*" –the last episode of the *Recherche*, in which each and every character appears aged, decayed, and barely recognisable – he quotes Baudelaire, as a token or a talisman. The poet remains, to his eyes, a protective model, the last sign of an ideal conjunction where the remembered verses of experience hold out against the relentless destruction operated by time. This model traces what we have called a poetics of memory: a memory that is caught and developed within the text as a theme, and talked over and expanded from one text to the other as guidelines for a method. Proust knows that the pattern he chooses for his novel is built upon the experience of seeking for recollection, but he knows that this experience can only be tentative, exploratory, and may well fall short. Therefore, he rivets his ambition to Baudelaire's poem, as it is, to his eyes, the only attempt to spell out *with* the text the experience of recollection per se. Baudelaire

appears to have undertaken the task of using the text as a means to capture the non-voluntary decision to grasp the past. Ultimately, Proust finds a keystone to the gigantic cathedral of his oeuvre in a poem, that is, a textual memory that one can utter out loud, and repeat, and repeat again.

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