

This study examines the connections between Proust's *fin-de-siècle* 'nervousness' and his apprehensions regarding literary form. Michael Finn shows that Proust's anxieties both about bodily weakness and about novel-writing were fed by a set of intriguing psychological and medical texts, and were mirrored in the nerve-based afflictions of other writers including Flaubert, Baudelaire, Nerval and the Goncourt brothers. Finn argues that once Proust cast off his nervous concerns he was free to poke fun at the supposed purity of the novel form. Hysteria – as a figure and as a theme – becomes a key to the Proustian narrative, and a certain kind of wordless, bodily copying of gesture and event is revealed to be at the heart of a writing technique replete with pranks undermining many of the conventions of fiction.

Michael Finn is Professor of French at Ryerson Polytechnic University, Toronto. He has published on Proust in a wide variety of journals, has served in Bordeaux and Paris with the Canadian Department of Foreign Affairs, and for some years has written on food for *Toronto Life* magazine.



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PROUST, THE BODY AND  
LITERARY FORM

MICHAEL R. FINN



**CAMBRIDGE**  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE  
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge CB2 1RP, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS  
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, United Kingdom <http://www.cup.cam.ac.uk>  
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA <http://www.cup.org>  
10 Stamford Road, Oakleigh, Melbourne 3166, Australia

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First published 1999

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

Typeset in 11/12.5pt Baskerville [CE]

*A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library*

*Library of Congress cataloguing in publication data*

Finn, Michael R.

Proust, the body, and literary form / Michael R. Finn

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0 521 64189 6

1. Proust, Marcel, 1871-1922 - Criticism and interpretation.

2. Neuroses in literature. 3. Hysteria in literature.

I. Title.

PQ2631.R63Z593 1999

843'.912-dc21 98-35829 CIP

ISBN 0 521 64189 6 hardback

*In memory of my parents,  
enthusiastic students of language both,  
Clara Mary Elizabeth Raeburn  
and Carroll Bernard Finn*





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## *Acknowledgements*

The debts I acknowledge here have been accumulated over many years, and in many different circumstances. The first is both academic and human, and is to W. M. (Brick) Frohock, who tempted me to come to Harvard as a graduate student many years ago, and to his wife Nathalie, who helped to socialize a rag-tag, disparate group of us. My thanks go as well to Susan Read Baker and her sister Cathey for their friendship, advice and intellectual support over a period much longer than that of the writing of this manuscript. I have fond memories too of the encouragement received from my friend Joseph Hoare, scholar and Food Editor at *Toronto Life* magazine until his death in 1997.

Some hard-headed comments from Richard Terdiman regarding an early idea for this book helped to nudge it in a more fruitful direction. Barbara Bucknall made a number of useful observations about the manuscript. But my warmest thanks go to my colleague Kathleen Kellett-Betsos for her thorough inspection of this study, and for her unblinking, sensible advice on many aspects of the text. Ryerson colleagues John Cook, Errol Aspevig, Margaret MacMillan, Ingrid Bryan and Thomas Barcsay encouraged me, at various times and in various ways, to persevere. Maureen MacGrogan and Joseph Duggan helped to orientate me in the world of publishing. I owe a debt of gratitude to the reference librarians at that wonderful facility, the University of Toronto Library; and I thank particularly Perry Hall, who assisted me on a number of occasions. The research for parts of this study would not have been possible without access to the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris and the assistance of its staff. I thank Bernard Brun of the Proust research group (ITEM) at the Ecole Normale Supérieure for putting the resources of his Proust collection at my disposal, and Anne Borrel, Secrétaire générale of the Société des Amis de Marcel Proust, for her help at various times.

Two travel and research grants from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada were an important impetus in getting this study airborne. I would like to thank the editors of *French Studies*, of *Revue d'Histoire Littéraire de la France* and of *French Forum* for permission to draw on articles already published in those journals for my chapter 1 (*FS*, 51, 3, July 1997; *RHL*, 2, March–April 1996) and chapter 3 (*FF*, 10, 2, May 1985). It has been a pleasure to work with my upbeat, straight-shooting editor Linda Bree at Cambridge University Press. I appreciated very much, as well, the opportunity to react to a set of even-handed and perceptive criticisms from the two readers who assessed the manuscript for Cambridge. Through many Canadian winters and a few Parisian summers, I talked out the points in this book with Elizabeth Park. I thank her for those exchanges, for the occasions on which she challenged me, and for her patience in putting up with my work habits.

## Abbreviations

Double page references are provided (parenthetically, with volume and page number) for all quotations from *A la recherche du temps perdu*, except for those taken from Proust's manuscript sketches (esquisses). Here the translations are my own. The first reference is to the translation by C. K. Scott Moncrieff and Terence Kilmartin, revised by D. J. Enright, 6 vols. (London: Chatto and Windus, 1992), and the second to the most recent Pléiade edition, 4 vols. (Paris: Gallimard, 1987–9). I have, on occasion, modified the English translation when it did not illustrate adequately a point I was making in my own text. *Against Saint-Beuve and Other Essays* (below) does not contain all the material that figures in *Contre Sainte-Beuve*. Quite a few of the translations from the latter volume (those without the abbreviation *ASB*) are therefore my own.

- ASB*      *Against Sainte-Beuve and Other Essays*, trans. John Sturrock, Penguin
- BIP*      *Bulletin d'informations proustiennes*
- BMP*      *Bulletin Marcel Proust* (formerly *BSAMP*, *Bulletin de la Société des Amis de Marcel Proust*)
- CSB*      *Contre Sainte-Beuve*, Pléiade
- Corr.*     *Correspondance*, 21 vols., Philip Kolb (ed.), Plon
- Esquisse   One of the sketches published in the appendices of *A la recherche du temps perdu*, Pléiade, 1987–9, 4 vols.
- JS*      *Jean Santeuil*, Pléiade

## CHAPTER I

### *Proust between neurasthenia and hysteria*

Studies of hysteria, as a socio-cultural phenomenon, as medical fact and myth, and as a subject for literature, represent a burgeoning field that is both important and, as Mark Micale has put it in a recent and readable overview, ‘hopelessly fashionable’.<sup>1</sup> The medicalization of human experience – and particularly of female experience – in the literature of the second half of the nineteenth century has attracted a major subset of these new hysteria studies.

As we now know, although French interest in hysteria peaked during Jean-Martin Charcot’s years at La Salpêtrière Hospital, and particularly in the 1880s and 1890s, there was voluminous research and writing on the topic years earlier. Ten to twenty years before Charcot’s 1862 appointment to La Salpêtrière, almost a third of French psychiatric theses were already dealing with hysteria.<sup>2</sup> Literature was showing interest in hysteria in the 1860s even as it was becoming a more widely publicized societal phenomenon. Emily Apter has neatly labelled as ‘pathography’ the mix of biography, fiction and clinical case history we find in Zola’s *Thérèse Raquin* (1867), in the Goncourts’ *Madame Gervaisais* (1868), and in Huysmans’ *Marthe* (1876).<sup>3</sup> The model of the genre was no doubt *Germinie Lacerteux* (1864), and its notoriety was guaranteed because the brothers chose to stress the time-honoured link between hysteria and nymphomania.<sup>4</sup> In fact, the Goncourts’ first novel, *Charles Demailly* (1860), was also a pathography, and its subject is one of the earliest portrayals of a condition that came to be known as neurasthenia, a quasi-clinical state of hypersensitivity coupled with nervous exhaustion.<sup>5</sup>

Not only was the novel taking its documentation from medical cases during this period, it was to some extent occupying a limelight that medico-psychiatric research would have preferred for itself. In 1881 Jules Claretie published a very popular novel, *Les Amours d’un*

*interne*,<sup>6</sup> that made some sensational speculations about contacts between doctors and their female patients at La Salpêtrière. Colleagues of Charcot such as Charles Richet, Alfred Binet and Henri Beaunis all wrote fiction that dramatized various aspects of hysteria.<sup>7</sup> There is evidence that Charcot was jealous of the success of some of the naturalist pathographies. To Edmond de Goncourt's chagrin, Charcot joined the hecklers at the première of the stage version of *Germinie Lacerteux*.<sup>8</sup> The play did not enjoy great success.

In 1857, two years before Briquet published his seminal *Traité clinique et thérapeutique de l'hystérie*, hysteria is sufficiently prominent in the literary reader's mind that Baudelaire uses the term to describe the poetic nature with which Flaubert has imbued Emma Bovary. After making that now famous connection, Baudelaire easily slips into a discussion of actual symptoms:

[hysteria shows up] in women in the sensation of an ascending and asphyxiating ball (I am speaking only of the main symptom), [and] manifests itself in nervous men in every kind of impotence and in the predisposition to every excess.<sup>9</sup>

The Goncourts, among others, championed the Romantic idea that artistic talent was in fact based on hypersensitivity. Some of their statements on the subject from the 1860s foreshadow quite directly the decadent mindset that became prevalent in the 1880s and 1890s: creativity was seen as nerve-based. According to the Goncourts, malady was almost a pre-condition for the novelist: 'Sickness sensitizes one's observational faculties like a photographic plate'.<sup>10</sup> Genius, they asserted, was in the nerves:

Man, by nature, does not love truth; and it is right that he not love it. Lies, myth, these are much more likeable. It will always be more agreeable to imagine genius in the form of a tongue of fire than in the image of a neurosis.<sup>11</sup>

By the mid-1890s, when Proust is writing his first novel, *Jean Santeuil*, the Goncourt view has become a literary stereotype. In Proust's young protagonist, hypochondria, insomnia and asthma are presented as incurable and 'the effect of genius' (*JS*, 732). Some twenty years later, the mature Proustian text is more ambiguous on this subject;<sup>12</sup> one senses that since the major work of the writer's life is at last close to completion, a certain peace has been made with the question of nerves. Still, the nervous defects of Charlus are seen as the probable basis of his artistic disposition, though he never develops his gifts. But it is left to the flashy, superficial Dr Boulbon to

say that without a nervous disorder, there are no great artists or scientists. The ambivalence of this pronouncement is underlined by Boulbon's cavalier diagnosis that the Narrator's grandmother is suffering from nerves and that the albumin in her urine, from which she will shortly die, is therefore 'mental' (III, 347; II, 601).

It is of some importance, I believe, to examine Proust's 'nervousness' – both the biographical phenomenon and the presentation of nervous disorders in his fiction – against the backdrop of certain literary figures who were mentors for him. Some of the writers to whom he felt most closely attuned had suffered from nerve-related ailments just as he did. Proust turned both to their works and their lives, especially in the 1895–1908 period, for some confirmation that they had encountered creative hesitations similar to those that plagued him. For a time at least, Proust seems to have accepted the diagnosis, no doubt in part a self-imposed one, that his own chronic lack of willpower and tenacity was nerve-based, and that it was this nervous deficit that could explain his inability to conceive the form and structure of the great work he wanted to write. The problems with form, and the attitudes *vis-à-vis* form, of Flaubert, Baudelaire and Nerval, therefore came to interest him deeply.

At the same time, Proust had privileged access, through his doctor father Adrien, to the latest expert medical opinion on ailments of the nerves and to physician colleagues who were specialists in the field. It is not my purpose to retell the story of Proust's asthma, of his medical consultations, or of his self-prescribed drug regimen. Much more germane to an understanding of *A la recherche du temps perdu*, it seems to me, are the echoes of some of Proust's psychological and medical readings not only in the story the novel tells, but in the way its artistic message is shaped. For although Proust was diagnosed – and diagnosed by his own father, as we shall see – as a chronic sufferer from nerve-related problems, he was adamant that life problems were not solved by science, but rather by aesthetics.

To say that Proust suffered from anxiety of influence, to use Harold Bloom's phrase,<sup>13</sup> is to say that water is wet. His anxieties about literary inspiration and formal perfection hold a threefold interest. They can help us to define what he appears to have diagnosed in himself as a type of *fin-de-siècle* neurasthenia, a generalized lack of willpower based on weakness of the nerves. They also allow us to follow some of the suggested connections in the Proustian text between neurasthenia, hysteria and the creative process,



especially writing. And third, they open a perspective on the interplay between nervous dysfunction and certain aspects of the novel form as it developed in Proust's hands.

## NERVOUS PRECURSORS

*Flaubert*

Though Proust refers with sympathy to the neurotic natures of Baudelaire and Nerval, his sentiments for Flaubert are never expressed in terms of a kinship with his nervous makeup. Three facets of Flaubert's artistry seem to have impressed Proust: certain hard-won features of his actual writing technique, his striving for a beauty of form, and his literary idealism. In the 1920 article 'A propos du «style» de Flaubert', Proust lays out in some detail how Flaubert's grammatical genius and sense of rhythm marked all of French prose in the second half of the nineteenth century. Proust sees greatness as well in Flaubert's insistence on beauty in structure: 'Where Flaubert links up with Balzac is when he says: «I need a splendid end for Felicity»' (*ASB*, 68) ['Où Flaubert rejoint Balzac, c'est quand il dit «Il me faut une fin splendide pour Félicité»'] (*CSB*, 276).<sup>14</sup> But the Flaubertian idea which Proust seems to cite most approvingly and most often is one that connects to the essential message of idealism that underpins *Le Temps retrouvé*. In his introduction to Louis Bouilhet's *Dernières chansons*, Flaubert wrote, 'life's eventualities ... appear [to the writer] fully transposed as though readied for the description of an illusion' (see *CSB*, 224, n. 1; 264–5). Unlike Balzac but like Marcel Proust, Flaubert understood the value of renunciation, the absurdity of life in society, and the fact that a real-life event functions only as the sign of a deeper reality.

These are the main intellectual links between the two writers, and the influences which Proust acknowledges. But each also suffered from a nervous malady that, it can be argued, conditioned his attitude towards speech, towards written language, and towards the structuring of text into narrative. There is much to enlighten us in a comparison of how the younger Gustave Flaubert and the younger Marcel Proust, each from the starting point of an acknowledged nervous malady, confront the activity of writing.

During his most hectic creative period, 1907–9, when he is at once 'rewriting' other writers (in a series of pastiches published in *Le*

*Figaro*), penning critical essays about them (in the *Cahiers* that will form *Contre Sainte-Beuve*), and seeing fictional threads develop out of the critical exercise, Proust is also consciously sifting through the resemblances between himself and other writers, including Flaubert. The *Carnet de 1908* contains a number of references to Flaubert, including the following passage on his letters to his niece, where we observe Proust's unusual habit of physically projecting himself into another writer's daily life and writing problems. There are passages in Proust's texts on Sainte-Beuve and Baudelaire where a similar transposition occurs:

*Letters to Caroline.* A splendid ending for *Un Cœur simple*. I read the Rouen newspaper, etc. I chat with servants whom I find no more stupid than people of a better class. I'm waiting for the book on the Middle Ages. How I envy you your work plans. I would happily stay in Concarneau for the whole winter.

[*Lettres à Caroline.* Fin splendide pour *Un Cœur simple*. Je lis le journal de Rouen etc. Je cause avec domestiques [que] je ne trouve pas plus bêtes que des gens bien. J'attends le livre sur le moyen âge. Comme je t'envie avec tes plans de travail. Je resterais bien à Concarneau tout l'hiver.] (*Le Carnet de 1908*, 75–6)

Many of these references have a dual resonance: they are Flaubert's comments on his own life, but the same events have happened in Proust's existence as well. Proust had enjoyed two prolific months in Begmeil and Concarneau as he began *Jean Santeuil* and may have been tempted to stay longer; he had awaited his own book on the Middle Ages, *L'Art religieux du XIII<sup>e</sup> siècle en France* by Emile Mâle, loaned to him in 1898 by Robert de Billy as he documented himself for translations of Ruskin; in *A la recherche* the Narrator will repeatedly remark on the interest and usefulness of conversation with servants and working class people as compared to aristocrats; and Proust certainly envied Flaubert his work plans, for he himself never seemed to write from one.<sup>15</sup>

Flaubert's experience has become Proust's. And, if only unconsciously, Proust will also have absorbed other remarks in these same letters that connect anguish about creativity and nervous exhaustion:

I'm making no headway with Julien l'Hospitalier ... I have absolutely no idea what is going on in the world ... In order to write one page, I've crossed out twelve ... I'm so obsessed with work that I'm close to insanity.<sup>16</sup>

There are many externals that might make Flaubert and Proust medical soul-mates. Each was the son of an authoritative and sometimes authoritarian doctor father. Proust was a frail, neurotic and later asthmatic child, while Flaubert had poor word skills that pointed to emotional difficulties and undermined his academic career. The patriarchal figure in both of these households was in a position to diagnose and to judge. It is interesting to reflect that it was Flaubert's father who prescribed treatment after his son's often discussed attack of January 1844. Proust's father, as I will argue later in this chapter, made a discussion of his son's nervous condition the subject of a book, *L'Hygiène du neurasthénique*, published in 1897. Both writers' creative lives are structured around a nervous crisis and the death of a parent, events which act as springboards for a retreat from the world and a sharpened focus on personal creativity.

In a letter of 13 May 1845, Flaubert speaks of his nervous attacks of a year before as the turning point between his early period and a later life fully devoted to art:

I have bid practical life an irrevocable goodbye. My nervous condition was the transition between these two states. All I shall want, for a long time, is six quiet hours in my room, a great fire in winter, and two candles each evening to give me light.<sup>17</sup>

After the death of his mother Jeanne, Proust spent about two months in the clinic of Dr Paul Sollier in Boulogne being treated for nervous exhaustion, leaving in January 1906. Sollier was the author of authoritative works on hysteria, but his clinic was also well known for its successful treatment of neurasthenics. In *Le Temps retrouvé*, a single sentence about the Narrator's unsuccessful sojourn in a clinic serves as a transition to the famous train stop in the countryside, when he appears to despair that he will ever recover his childhood gift for inspiration. Almost immediately, however, he again takes up his quest for a literary vocation. Symbolically, but unmistakably, confrontation and acceptance of malady are thematically paired with artistic development.

Both Flaubert and Proust worked through an 'acceptance' of their nervous disorders and saw that acceptance as a synonym of retreat from the world. In the preface of *Les Plaisirs et les jours*, the writer's malady transforms him into a Noah figure, confined to an ark which is at the same time a sickbed, and from which he has a clearer view of the world than from any point on land. Should the sickness be cured, there is a fall from true grace, the latter pointedly presented

as communion with self: 'He had to begin living again, to turn away from himself. . .' ['Il fallut recommencer à vivre, à se détourner de soi . . .'] (*J&S*, 7).

Flaubert took the same positive view of his 'maladie des nerfs'; accepting, and having others accept, his debility established the perfect conditions for creative self-absorption. In two letters from the year following his collapse in Pont-L'Évêque, he confirms his satisfaction:

My malady has had the advantage of allowing me to occupy myself as I please, which is an important point in life. I see nothing in the world more desirable for me than a nice, well-heated room, with the books I love and all the leisure time I want. As for my health, it is basically improved, but the cure is so long in coming, in these nervous afflictions, that it is almost imperceptible.<sup>18</sup>

As far as I'm concerned, I've been feeling quite well since I accepted that I will always be sick.<sup>19</sup>

Proust attributes his own impressionability to his malady. That he is porous, as it were, to the beauties of nature, is a positive part of his condition, for it represents his openness to inspiration. He sees the same poetic permeability in Senancour, and appears to wonder if the latter suffered from the same condition as himself:<sup>20</sup>

Senancour is myself. Moral reverie inspired by nature. He was sick, I believe. Indeed, one must be weak to be so enraptured with the simple phenomena of nature.

[Senancour c'est moi. Rêverie morale inspirée par la nature. C'était je crois un malade. Il faut être faible en effet pour s'enivrer ainsi avec les choses les plus simples de la nature.] (*CSB*, 568)

The feeling for nature, that is, the physical reaction to natural phenomena, is strikingly similar in Flaubert and Proust. The kind of ecstatic oneness with nature that readers identify as a Proustian privileged moment, whether an impression or a recollection, is based on an animal passivity that is described at some length in *Jean Santeuil*. The writer stipulates that this passivity is only relative, in that it affords the calm and mental space in which the imagination can function freely. But the state of waiting, of expectation that life stimulus will arrive from the outside, will have disadvantages that we will examine later in this chapter:

We envy the boa constrictor for whom digestion occupies a whole week and who can then sleep for several days in a row. We envy the lizard who sits for days on a warm rock soaking up the sunlight. We envy . . . seagulls who play

in the midst of storms and let themselves be borne by the wind [...] we derive enjoyment, at the same time, from our imagination ... It is only for the thinker and the sick person that the life of the instincts has all these exhilarations.

[Nous envions le boa pour qui digérer est l'occupation d'une semaine et qui peut alors dormir plusieurs jours de suite. Nous envions le lézard qui reste des journées sur une pierre chaude à se laisser pénétrer de soleil. Nous envions ... les mouettes qui jouent dans les orages et se laissent porter par le vent [...] mais] nous jouissons en même temps par l'imagination ... Ce n'est que pour le penseur et le malade que la vie animale a tous ces enivremments.] (*JS*, 369)

The kind of passive absorption into objects and natural settings that we see in Proust and Flaubert becomes, in each, a key to their creativity in language. Sartre has argued persuasively that the capacity for animalistic 'stupidity' which Flaubert admires in himself ('What is best in me is ... the animal',<sup>21</sup> he writes to Louise Colet) is interchangeable with his capacity for appreciating sensation and feeling, and is synonymous with his capacity for literary inspiration. In Flaubert, that ability is the opposite of the ability to speak, to manipulate words, because, following Sartre's thesis, as a child Flaubert was ignored in favour of his older brother. The meaning of Flaubert's neurosis is that, in a sense, he was never designated in words. Because no verbal attention was paid to his existence, he began to define his existence as mutism and feelings left inarticulate.<sup>22</sup> A wonderful passage from *Les Mémoires d'un fou* shows how language breaks the cohesion of the self:

Infinity seemed more immense to me, if that is possible, than to God ... and then I had to descend from these sublime regions towards words ... How does one render in words this harmony that arises in the heart of a poet ... by what gradations does poetry lower itself without destroying itself?<sup>23</sup>

Here it is not cliché, Flaubert's lifelong *bête noire*, that the young writer fears in language, it is the fact that words interrupt the inner harmony of the self with the world. This is often the writer's experience, of course: readers of Joyce have spoken of the 'antinomy of impression and expression'<sup>24</sup> in his writings. The former is an intimate experience, the latter an activity of a more external order.

Moments of wordlessness in Flaubert's novels are tied in to his biographical epiphany moments. Emma Bovary's communion with nature recalls Flaubert's own silent 'ecstasies':

Silence was everywhere . . . Then, in the distance, beyond the woods, on the other hills, she heard a vague, prolonged cry, a voice lingered, and she listened to it in silence as it fused like music with the last vibrations of her excited nerves.<sup>25</sup>

Of course, Flaubert and Proust come at their diffidence about language from apparently quite different directions. The younger Proust is someone conscious that there is an inner wellspring of words, an excess that corresponds to an excess of meaning. He cannot say 'enough'. Gently ironic portraits of the young Jean Santeuil speak of his exaggeration, the exaltation of his speech (*JS*, 259). A letter from Proust's seventeenth year provides a concrete picture of the irreversible flow that seems to have been Proust's experience of language:

Excuse my writing, my style, my spelling. I don't dare to re-read what I write! When I write at top speed. I realize that one shouldn't write at top speed. But I have so much to say. It just comes like waves.

[Pardon de mon écriture, de mon style, de mon orthographe. Je n'ose pas me relire! Quand j'écris au galop. Je sais bien qu'il ne faudrait pas écrire au galop. Mais j'ai tant à dire. Ça se presse comme des flots.] (*Corr.*, I, 106)

In contrast, even though he was a prolific writer during his adolescence, Flaubert sees himself as 'speechless'. He writes, 'I am a mute who wants to speak'.<sup>26</sup>

Voluble or silent by nature, these two men arrive at surprisingly similar conclusions about the alienating nature of language. Because I am essentially passive, sickly, the language of others, language from outside, invades me and defines me. I do not speak (for Proust this is especially acutely felt in social situations), I am spoken. The Narrator of *A la recherche* endlessly flags the danger of social dialogue: 'when we chat, it is no longer we who speak . . . we are fashioning ourselves then in the likeness of other people and not a self that differs from them' (II, 563) ['quand nous causons, ce n'est plus nous qui parlons . . . nous nous modelons alors à la ressemblance des étrangers et non d'un moi qui diffère d'eux'] (II, 261). There is a strongly developed physical fear in Proust, which we shall examine in the next chapter, of social language as a conduit through which one's identity flows out and is lost.

The object of social exchange is, in both men's perception, to find common ground. Conversation aims therefore necessarily at finding 'common language'. Because there is agreement and conceptions

are shared, there must be stock phrases, cliché. Sartre articulates Flaubert's position as follows:

[the apparent meaning of language] has no other purpose than to unite people, to reassure them by enabling them to make a *gesture of agreement*, and on what could such impenetrable beings, with such diverse interests, agree, if not on *nothing*?<sup>27</sup>

Proust's diffidence about language focuses on speech, but also, at least in his pre-*Recherche* period, on correspondence. Letters are an extension of consensus-seeking, but in the physical absence of the interlocutor, we exaggerate the search for agreement. The letter is *the* locus of insincerity, and Proust sees a similar exaggeration in Flaubert's letters and his own:

[Flaubert's letters to George Sand or about Renan] are obviously not ... sincere and ... they make us tremble to think how people might judge our own literary ideas if, later, they were to find certain articles, or read certain letters if our correspondence were published.

[des lettres de Flaubert à George Sand ou sur Renan] ne sont évidemment pas ... sincères et ... nous font trembler en pensant à ce que croiront de nos idées littéraires ceux qui plus tard retrouveront certains articles, ou si notre correspondance était publiée, liraient certaines lettres. (*JS*, 488)

Literature, then, will provide the mechanism to express difference. How this will be done is not yet clear, since language will be the means at hand. But for Flaubert, at least, finding the exactly appropriate words to a situation is a dubious solution. Such precision will always remain the sign of 'agreement over nothing'. The individual who seeks an exact equation between expression and outer reality is the individual who has agreed to suppress his own identity. Naomi Schor reminds us that Emma Bovary is the character who cannot find the words, while Homais is always successful: "What a terrible catastrophe!" exclaimed the apothecary, who could always find an expression to fit any situation imaginable'.<sup>28</sup>

It is important to recall that a similar ambivalence is embedded in Proust's aesthetics. He speaks often of the need to find the precise metaphor that will translate an impression; the comparison must appear 'inevitable'. 'Water only boils at 100 degrees', he chides Paul Morand (*ASB*, 284; *CSB*, 616). At the same time, metaphor is only a vehicle of comparison. A metaphor does not state or restate any thing, it simply alludes to it through an imitation. Beside Proust's requirement for precision, we should juxtapose his law regarding the element of mystery that is residual in any attempt to articulate a

deeply rooted impression. A certain opacity of language is a measure and a gauge of the depth covered by the writer's investigative work.

Because of their mistrust of language, and because for both of them language is the sign of their potential for alienation, Proust and Flaubert lodge their ideal of style elsewhere than within language itself. Style has nothing to do with the surface features of text, it is, for Proust, 'a question of vision', as though he had in mind the famous phrase of Flaubert, 'style is, in and by itself, an absolute way of seeing things'.<sup>29</sup> Meditating on Stendhal, Proust sees style as a kind of unconscious, skeletal structure detectable beneath the conscious, intellectual structures of the novels. In Flaubert, says Proust, style is the fusion of the writer's intelligence with the objects he is describing – it is a movement in the prose: 'This rippling is the intellect transformed, which has been incorporated into matter' (*ASB*, 281) ['Cette ondulation-là, c'est de l'intelligence transformée, qui s'est incorporée à la matière'] (*CSB*, 612). Sartre's comment on Flaubertian style is valid for both writers: 'Style is the silence of discourse, the silence in discourse, the imaginary and secret object of the written word'.<sup>30</sup>

What one might add is that the Proustian/Flaubertian adoration of silence, and the movement of the intelligence that superimposes itself on matter and undulates with the oscillation of the molecules, in a wordless gesture of communication, is really the transfer to the level of literary technique of an epileptic/hysterical model of communication, with which both writers feel very much at home. Extending this model of artistic communication to the notion of literary structure seems reasonable for Proust and Flaubert both: their literature speaks not through language but through its internal rhythms and structures. Doris Lessing articulated this ideal of writing when she observed, 'My major aim was to shape a book which would make its own comment, a wordless statement: to talk through the way it was shaped'.<sup>31</sup>

Flaubert's gift for uniting his mind with matter is comparable to the talent for hysterical simulation which Proust points out in other writers, such as Racine:

And no doubt a hysteric of genius was struggling inside Racine, under the control of a superior intellect, and simulated for him in his tragedies . . . the ebb and flow, and the manifold, yet for all that fully grasped lurchings of passion. (*ASB*, 283)



[Et sans doute une hystérique de génie se débattait-elle en Racine, sous le contrôle d'une intelligence supérieure, et simula-t-elle pour lui dans ses tragédies ... les flux et les reflux, le tangage multiple, et malgré cela totalement saisi, de la passion.] (*CSB*, 614)

Baudelaire had identified, in Flaubert, this same ability of the 'poète hystérique' to transform himself into his characters' emotions. No wonder Flaubert appreciated Baudelaire's use of the term hysteric, for during the writing of *Madame Bovary* he had found himself experiencing the same nervous fits he depicted in his heroine:

Earlier, at six o'clock, in the instant that I wrote 'attack of nerves', I was so carried away, I was bellowing so loudly and feeling so deeply what my little lady was feeling, that I was afraid I might have one myself.<sup>32</sup>

Proust's and Flaubert's ability to melt into matter (either could have written the phrase 'As a result, sometimes, of looking at a pebble, an animal, a painting, I have felt myself enter inside it'<sup>33</sup>) becomes their ability to create art. A propos of writing a love scene in *Madame Bovary*, its author admits, 'I was the horses, the leaves, the wind, the words that they were saying to each other and the red sun that caused eyelids drowned in love to close'.<sup>34</sup> In his notes on Senancour's *Rêveries sur la nature primitive de l'homme*, Proust identifies this transfer of animus to the plant and animal realm as what is most Proustian about Senancour. He marks the following passage 'très moi':

Delivered up, according to the natural order – that always mobile order – to what changes around us, we are what calm, shadow, the sound of an insect or the fragrance of a plant make of us: we share in that general life, and we flow along with these instantaneous forms. We find ourselves in what is active, in what grows, in the confident air of a chamois, in the bearing of a cedar, its branches hanging down to stretch themselves more easily, in every aspect of the world, which is full of oppositions because it is dependent on order, which changes constantly only to maintain itself forever.<sup>35</sup>

As *A la recherche* opens, this kind of surreal communion with the external world is presented as a potential narrative mode of the novel to be. A semi-dream state can produce the fusion of self and matter that is art: 'It seemed to me that I myself was the immediate subject of my book: a church, a quartet, the rivalry between François I and Charles V' (I, 1) ['Il me semblait que j'étais moi-même ce dont parlait l'ouvrage: une église, un quatuor, la rivalité de François 1er et de Charles Quint'] (I, 3).

Proust's and Flaubert's very similar attitudes towards language appear solidly anchored in their nervous dispositions. When they actively develop strategies of literary structure and form, their anxieties about language set them on similar artistic paths.

*Baudelaire and Nerval*

Two other writers whom Proust greatly admired were Baudelaire and Nerval. He formally credits both with major contributions to his own aesthetic of time and memory,<sup>36</sup> and, more tentatively, he points to overlaps in his and Baudelaire's experience of cruelty, sadomasochism and homosexuality. Here, however, I wish to focus more narrowly on the 'nervous' association Proust felt with the two earlier writers. In the 1907–9 period, Proust is struggling with the fundamental question of which literary form to work in – philosophical essay, novel, criticism – while he fights a rearguard action with himself over how to sever certain still disturbing moral ties with his deceased parents.

In *Contre Sainte-Beuve*, Jeanne Proust plays the role of silent interlocutor in a dialogue where her son assesses Sainte-Beuve's contribution to nineteenth-century literary criticism. Nowhere is she more present than in the chapter on Sainte-Beuve and Baudelaire, where the text invokes the intimate 'tu' in almost every paragraph. Here, Proust's task is to explain to a maternal interlocutor Baudelaire's attraction to female homosexuality and the apparent cruelty of certain letters and poems. Part of his tactic is to underline that Baudelaire had a nervous nature and experienced acute suffering in his own life. Speaking of Baudelaire's poems on old women, he says 'one senses that he had felt the sufferings he makes sport of and presents so impassively down to his very nerve ends . . . he is inside their bodies, he shudders with their nerves, shivers with their debilities' (*ASB*, 40–1) [*les souffrances qu'il raille, qu'il présente avec cette impassibilité, on sent qu'il les a ressenties jusqu'au fond de ses nerfs . . . il est dans leur corps, il frémit avec leurs nerfs, il frissonne avec leurs faiblesses*] (*CSB*, 250).

The enforced presence of the mother during Proust's justification of cruelty towards the old in the poem 'Les Petites Vieilles' has a certain sadistic resonance. Now dead and unable to resist, she is made an observer of her son's faults and sins. In 1907, Proust had addressed head-on the question of liberation through parental death

in his article on the real-life matricide perpetrated by an acquaintance, Henri van Blarenberghé.<sup>37</sup> This truly strange essay houses the most contradictory elements within itself, including a version of an often to be reused fragment on the morning routine of reading *Le Figaro* newspaper, the tone of which, given the horrific murder that is to be described, is knowingly cruel.

What is the connection between Baudelaire's poem, van Blarenberghé's gesture and Proust's artistic search? All three are products of the nervous sensibility. At one end of the neurotic spectrum is the hypochondriac and, at the other, the madman:

Should a low pressure system be 'approaching the Balearic Islands', as the newspapers say, should earthquakes begin, even in Jamaica, at that very instant, in Paris, migraine sufferers, rheumatism victims, asthmatics, and no doubt the insane as well, experience their attacks. *This is a measure of the links that bind the nervous, from the farthest points of the globe, in a solidarity they often would prefer to be less intimate.* If the influence of the heavenly bodies, at least on some of them, were one day to be recognized (Framery, Pelletan, quoted by M. Brissaud), who better than a nervous person would suit the poet's line: 'And long silken threads link him to the stars.'

[Qu'une dépression 's'avance ver les Baléares', comme disent les journaux, que seulement la Jamaïque commence à trembler, au même instant à Paris les migraineux, les rhumatisants, les asthmatiques, les fous sans doute aussi, prennent leurs crises, *tant les nerveux sont unis aux points les plus éloignés de l'univers par les liens d'une solidarité qu'ils souhaïteraient souvent moins étroite.* Si l'influence des astres, sur certains au moins d'entre eux, doit être un jour reconnue (Framery, Pelletan, cités par M. Brissaud) à qui mieux appliquer qu'à tel nerveux, le vers du poète: 'Et de longs fils soyeux l'unissent aux étoiles'. (CSB, 154; the emphasis is mine.)

Proust appears to connect the matricide he is about to discuss with the exacerbated nervous systems of poetic natures like himself (the reference to Dr Eugène Brissaud is to the expert on asthma Proust himself consulted). The killing of a parent is an ultimate taboo, but it is one act on a continuum of actions caused by the nervous hysteria that can affect certain over-sensitive minds. As we have seen, Proust labelled Racine a hysteric because of his abilities as a simulator and an interpreter of the other gender. He sees in Baudelaire another aspect of the hysterical spectrum, the inability to resist blasphemy. In a letter of early 1905 he writes:

People have said he was a decadent? There is nothing more false. Baudelaire is not even a Romantic. He writes like Racine. In fact, he is a Christian poet and that is why, like Bossuet and Massillon, he speaks

endlessly of sin. Let's say that, like all Christians who are also hysterics (I don't mean that Christians are hysterics, you understand, I mean 'those Christians who by chance are also hysterics'), he experienced the sadism of blasphemy.

[A-t-on dit que c'était un décadent? Rien n'est plus faux. Baudelaire n'est même pas un romantique. Il écrit comme Racine. Du reste c'est un poète chrétien et c'est pour cela que comme Bossuet, comme Massillon il parle sans cesse du péché. Mettons que, comme tous les chrétiens qui sont en même temps hystériques (je ne veux pas dire que les chrétiens sont des hystériques, vous me comprenez bien, je veux dire 'ceux des chrétiens qui par hasard sont aussi hystériques') il a connu le sadisme du blasphème.] (*Corr.*, v, 127)

Proust did not, of course, invent Baudelaire's nervous nature. The image of the decadent poet inwardly consumed by a defective nervous system is one that the author of *Les Fleurs du mal* accepted and cultivated. The caption under an 1852 Félix Nadar caricature of Baudelaire reads, 'young nervous poet, bilious, irritable and irritating'.<sup>38</sup> One of Baudelaire's most famous statements about himself, 'When just a child, I felt two contradictory sentiments in my heart, the horror of life and the ecstasy of life', is completed by the less-quoted line, 'This is certainly the characteristic of a lazy, nervous person'.<sup>39</sup> And in his description of Emma Bovary/Flaubert as a hysteric, Baudelaire appears to be defining himself when he imagines hysteria in men: 'it manifests itself in nervous men in every kind of impotence and in the disposition to every excess'.<sup>40</sup>

Proust is troubled by certain aspects of repetition in Baudelaire's poetry and appears to relate these formal problems to the poet's nerve defects. Juxtaposed to Proust's most celebrated pre-*Recherche* statement of frustration in the search for literary form is a cryptic remark about Gérard de Nerval that will lead us to Baudelaire as well:

Laziness or doubt or helplessness [impotence] taking refuge in uncertainty over artistic form. Should it be a novel, a philosophical study, am I a novelist? (What consoles me is Gérard de Nerval. See page xxx of this notebook.)

[La paresse ou le doute ou l'impuissance se réfugiant dans l'incertitude sur la forme d'art. Faut-il en faire un roman, une étude philosophique, suis-je romancier? (Ce qui me console, Gérard de Nerval. Voir page xxx de ce cahier.) (*Le Carnet de 1908*, 61)

Though Baudelaire and Nerval are probably two of Proust's favourite writers in French, during the years he is casting about for

an artistic form, he identifies what, to his mind, are structural weaknesses in their work, and sees these as a confirmation that even the greatest writers shared his own self-doubts about form. It is the origins and nature of these hesitations over structure, as Proust views them, that are intriguing. In Proust's most negative assessment of Nerval, where he almost goes so far as to say that the author of *Les Filles du feu* was a second-rank writer, he focuses on the fact that neither Nerval nor Baudelaire ever arrived at a definitive idea of form. Their hesitation shows up in repetitions: lines from Nerval's poetry recurring in the short story 'Sylvie', poetry on the same subject and employing similar language in *Les Fleurs du mal* and *Petits poèmes en prose*.<sup>41</sup> For Proust, these are not paltry faults. In a diagnosis of the problem in Nerval, he explicitly relates these formal difficulties to his own and to disease, a medical deficiency in willpower:

In such geniuses the inner vision is very sure, very strong. But, be it a *malady of the will* or the lack of a determinate instinct, or a predominance of intellect indicating different paths rather than going down just one, they try in verse and then, so as not to waste the original idea, in prose, etc. (*ASB*, 26)

[Chez de tels génies la vision intérieure est bien certaine, bien forte. Mais *maladie de la volonté* ou manque d'instinct déterminé, prédominance de l'intelligence qui indique plutôt les voies différentes qu'elle ne passe en une, on essaye en vers, puis pour ne pas perdre la première idée on fait en prose, etc.] (*CSB*, 234–5; the emphasis is mine.)

One senses the judgement of a practising writer in these lines, someone who felt himself on shaky formal ground as he wrote in every imaginable genre: short story, poem, autobiographical novel, essay, social column, etc. Baudelaire is no better than Nerval. He is depicted as lacking the ability to establish an overall plan for his work, which he approaches with 'certainty in the detailed execution, uncertainty in his overall scheme' (*ASB*, 52) ['avec des certitudes d'exécution dans le détail, et de l'incertitude dans le plan'] (*CSB*, 259). These two writers reinforce Proust's pre-*Recherche* view that his own weakness is working in repetitive fragments, and that that weakness cannot simply be overcome with intellectual effort, for it is based in nervous weakness and permanent neuroses.

There is self-reference and a tone of real anguish in the above quotation about Nerval's absent willpower. During the *Contre Sainte-Beuve* period, contradictory observations swirl around the roles of intelligence and intuition/instinct in the creative process. To repeat

oneself is lamentable, but is there an aspect of repetition that is intuitive, and therefore revelatory of genuine individuality? 'It is true', says Proust, 'that certain repetitions in Baudelaire seem to be a taste and can hardly be looked on as filling out the line' (*ASB*, 53) ['Il est vrai que certaines répétitions chez Baudelaire semblent un goût et ne peuvent guère être prises pour une cheville' (*CSB*, 260)]. He praises Nerval for his gift of transforming his personal illusions into reality in 'Sylvie', then criticizes him for being too intellectual about it: 'Perhaps there is still a little too much intellect in his story... ' (*ASB*, 31) ['Peut-être y a-t-il encore un peu trop d'intelligence dans sa nouvelle...'] (*CSB*, 240). At the same time, of course, Proust is prefacing his *Contre Sainte-Beuve* with the remark 'Daily, I attach less value to the intellect'. But in classifying Nerval as potentially a second-class writer, Proust seems to say as well that his weakness is a lack of reasoned reflection on what literary form one's thoughts should take. Nerval is *too* intuitive, he has no really determined genius, because he 'creates the form of his art at the same time as his thought'. Thus, intuitive inspirations cannot function alone; distance and perspective on one's revelations must be a part of the creative process too. And of course, they will be in the final version of *A la recherche*, when the intelligence will be allowed a role in ordering the intuitive material that is provided to it. In this earlier period, as I will argue at length shortly, Proust is still very much under the influence of some early readings in the medical and psychological literature that make him want to strictly limit the role of the intelligence.

#### *The Goncourt brothers*

It is generally accepted that Proust's interest in the Goncourt brothers centred on their *Journal* and its celebrated 'style artiste'. In part, as critics have suggested, the Goncourt pastiche in *Le Temps retrouvé* is an attempt to contest that style and the aesthetic that underlies it. At the same time, the 'style artiste' appears precariously close to Proust's own; within it, consciously or unconsciously, he seems to navigate with ease. Proust's final comment on the brothers' contribution to literature – it appeared in *Le Gaulois* in May 1922 – continues the same schizophrenia. He calls the *Journal* 'a delightful and entertaining book' ['un livre délicieux et divertissant'] (*ASB*, 311; *CSB*, 642), suggests he has an essentially positive view of its style, but

condemns the content as sub-literary, and the brothers' naturalist works as outmoded. This ambivalence recalls the push and pull of his feelings about another journalist-critic, Sainte-Beuve, whose prose he parodied with equal delight. 'Now I more than anyone', said Proust, 'have indulged in veritable orgies with the deliciously bad music that is the spoken, ornate language used by Sainte-Beuve' (*ASB*, 270) ['Je me suis permis plus qu'aucun de véritables débauches avec la délicieuse mauvaise musique qu'est le langage parlé, perlé, de Sainte-Beuve'] (*CSB*, 596).

Certainly, Proust's reading of the Goncourts' *Journal* seems to have been extensive, and research has shown the stylistic and thematic relationships between the various Goncourt pastiches<sup>42</sup> and actual texts from the diary.<sup>43</sup> But the Goncourts defined themselves primarily as the novelists of nervous disorders. Might Proust have been interested in the exploration of neurasthenia, hysteria and degenerate sexuality that dominates certain Goncourt novels? There is in fact some evidence to this effect. Proust had met Edmond de Goncourt socially, and he had a certain familiarity with the brothers' fiction and theatre. Perhaps he had read the famous letter from Edmond de Goncourt to Zola, commenting on the death of Jules. Edmond insisted that the latter's demise was nerve-related, and that his end was a logical one for a frail, delicate personality whose nervous constitution had been strained from the beginning.<sup>44</sup> Edmond wrote,

One should realize that our entire *œuvre*, and there lies, perhaps, its originality, rests on nervous malady, that we drew these images of malady from ourselves, and that by dint of studying ourselves, minutely describing ourselves, dissecting ourselves, we developed a super-acute sensitivity that was wounded by the infinitely small things in life. I say 'we' for, when we wrote *Charles Demailly*, I was sicker than he was.<sup>45</sup>

Paul Bourget, to whom Proust was introduced through Laure Hayman in 1888, may have been one of the conduits leading Proust to this letter and to the novel it describes, *Charles Demailly*. Both letter and novel are mentioned in the chapter devoted to the Goncourt brothers in Bourget's *Nouveaux Essais de psychologie contemporaine*. This text would have made suggestive reading for a young writer concerned by his own weakness of purpose. Bourget asserts that willpower deficit is not only at the heart of the Goncourt brothers' literature, but a central element in the naturalist school's subject matter, in Zola, Daudet, Huysmans and Maupassant:

This weakening of the will, which is the usual subject the Goncourts study, is truly the malady of the century. This was the term used fifty years ago; later it was the great neurosis; today we speak of pessimism and nihilism.<sup>46</sup>

Bourget then reviews the plot of *Charles Demailly*. Originally published in 1860 under the title *Les Hommes de lettres*, *Charles Demailly* reads in a number of episodes like an intertext for *A la recherche*. The protagonist, surrounded by journalists who threaten his autonomy and success, is a case-study in neurasthenia before the name. A doctor diagnoses Demailly as suffering from the ‘maladie du siècle’, and the description he provides could have been lifted from the writings of the official apostle of neurasthenia, the American George Beard, whose first discussions of the condition would appear only ten years later. According to the diagnostician in *Charles Demailly*, the condition is attributable to the innumerable pressures of modern society, unlimited competition, career stress, the multiplication of people’s activities and output, and the insalubrity of modern city life:

I consider it . . . to be an organic disease characteristic of the nineteenth-century race, at least in its generality and excess. I believe it to be the malady of all those who inhabit large cities . . . Modern life is changing from the fresh air of a farming life to concentrated life, to life sitting down, to a life of coal gas, a life of lamp gas, a life nourished by falsified, sophisticated, deceptive food, a life in which all the normal conditions of our physical being are reversed . . .<sup>47</sup>

Fictional threads and psychological patterns seem to overlap between *A la recherche* and the Goncourt novel. Demailly shares his Christian name Charles with Proust’s gifted but unproductive trio Charles Swann, Charlus and Charlie Morel, and although Demailly is a published novelist, the tragedy of his life – not unlike that of Swann’s – is that his artistic development is stifled prematurely after a miscalculated marriage to an attractive but coarse young actress. Demailly’s mixed racial origins and nervous nature also look forward to those of Marcel Proust and Swann: ‘a delicate, sickly nature, from a family where the sickly delicacy of two races had crossed and of which he was the last child and the full expansion’ (*Charles Demailly*, 72). He is both highly impressionable and lacking in energy: ‘even furniture seemed friendly or inimical to him . . . He lacked that kind of active energy, the energy that makes us jump out of bed’ (*ibid.*, 73).

It is interesting that Demailly marries an actress; Odette had been



an actress as well before she married her first husband, M. de Crécy (*Recherche*, II, 985, n. 2). More suggestive is that one of the characters in *Charles Demailly*, an attractive *cocotte* often seen at the theatre who continually flirts with Charles, is named 'la Crécy'. Her first appearance is in glorious, white, English lace, like Odette, the eventual *dame en rose*, who appears in white at Combray. Like Odette as well, she has a highly developed taste for Saxe porcelain: 'Food was served on a white Dresden service, with a barley flower pattern. The Crécy woman had old Spanish tastes in porcelain: white Dresden, white Sèvres, or Chinese white' (*Charles Demailly*, 194).<sup>48</sup>

The deeper connection in the life patterns of Charles Demailly and Charles Swann is the use they make of their intellectual and artistic capacities. Though Demailly has an important manuscript underway (with the evocative, Proustian title, *Souvenirs de ma vie morte*), he abandons the reality of art for the illusion of emotional attachment. The text chastises him in the same way the Narrator will chide Swann and other unproductive 'célibataires de l'art'. Demailly knows better than to take the marital plunge. He reflects: 'Love is basically the poetry of a man who writes no poetry, the idea of a man who has no ideas, and the novel of the man who does not write' (*Charles Demailly*, 198). Demailly has a further trait that is critical to the art-versus-life debate in which Swann and the Narrator are plunged. The attraction of an intellectualized social life is strong for him. He needs the *words* of others, as though artistic inspiration were dependent on social interaction: 'I believe an exciting, irritating regimen is required for one's intellectual hygiene; in a word, a certain intoxication of the mind in good intellectual company ...' (*Charles Demailly*, 160-1).

The placing of all these common threads in the context of a novel structured specifically around the figure of a neurasthenic, a sensitive would-be artist with a pathological lack of willpower, foreshadows the shared vocational dilemma of Charles Swann and the Narrator. We cannot be sure that Proust had read *Charles Demailly*, though the title does surface in one of the drafts for the Goncourt pastiche published in *Pastiches et mélanges*.<sup>49</sup> It is evident, however, that Proust was aware of a stage version of the novel, directed by Koning, that premièred in Paris in December 1892,<sup>50</sup> because a section in the pastiche just mentioned is based directly on the entry in the Goncourt *Journal* of 22 December 1892, which bemoans the play's poor reception. The Goncourt entry reads, in part,

Without a doubt, this is an accumulation of unlucky circumstances: bad press, politics, the jinx of the theatre world, and perhaps a personal jinx where December is concerned, the month in which my brother and I were charged in criminal court, in which *Henriette Maréchal* opened, in which, in recent years, I have had pneumonia that has left me with bronchitis.<sup>51</sup>

In the second section of Proust's pastiche, also dated 22 December, we read,

And for an hour I complain in whispers to Rodenbach about the jinx that has always hung over the heads of my brother and myself . . . Rodenbach immediately confesses his conviction that this month of December has always been unlucky for my brother and me, that it led to our being charged in criminal court, to the failure, instigated by the press, of *Henriette Maréchal*, to the pimple I had on my tongue the day before the only speech I have ever had to deliver, a pimple that led people to say that I had been afraid to speak on the grave of Vallès when it was I who asked to do so.

[Et c'est de ma part toute une révolte chuchotée pendant une heure à Rodenbach sur cette guigne qui nous a toujours poursuivis, mon frère et moi . . . Alors Rodenbach de me confesser le fond de sa pensée, qui serait que ce mois de décembre nous a toujours été malchanceux, à mon frère et à moi, ayant amené nos poursuites en correctionnelle, l'échec voulu par la presse d'*Henriette Maréchal*, le bouton que j'ai eu sur la langue à la veille du seul discours que j'aie jamais eu à prononcer, bouton ayant fait dire que je n'avais pas osé parler sur la tombe de Vallès, quand c'est moi qui avais demandé de le faire.] (*CSB*, 26)

Although Proust's text closely reflects the Goncourt original, the pastiche demonstrates his gift for concentrating the stylistic tics of the *Journal*,<sup>52</sup> a gift which is more completely developed in the Goncourt pastiche placed in *Le Temps retrouvé*. Richard Sayce has argued that the brilliance of Proust's later pastiche is to have taken advantage of a network of stylistic and thematic associations between the Goncourt *Journal* and his own novel, some of these actually resident in the Goncourt diary (for example, visual and tactile impressions of food and drink), many others seeded in the pastiche by Proust himself. The result is an eclipse of the *Journal*, absorbed into a stylistically superior and less naïvely configured vehicle for representing reality, *A la recherche du temps perdu*.<sup>53</sup>

There is further evidence that the Goncourts' preoccupation with nervous ailments left a lasting impression on Proust's own writing. The chief fictional work of the brothers which stood out in his memory was *Germinie Lacerteux*. As a teenager, Marcel went to see the

stage version of *Germinie* at the Odéon theatre with his friends Jacques Bizet and Jacques Baignières, and Mr and Mrs Strauss (*Corr.*, I, 161–2).<sup>54</sup> In the memory of the sensitive and neurotic young Proust, the emotions of that evening remained strong; it was Réjane's performance in the lead role that made a particular impact. In one letter he writes,

The art of Madame Réjane has filled my mental life. The sorrows of Germinie Lacerteux were some of the greatest of my life; I still suffer, thinking of them, and I am moved for hours by the memory of that heartrending voice.

[L'art de Madame Réjane a rempli ma vie intérieure. Les chagrins de Germinie Lacerteux ont été dans les plus grands de ma vie, j'en souffre encore et souvent je suis remué pour des heures par le souvenir de la voix déchirante.]<sup>55</sup>

In his 1922 tribute to the Goncourt brothers, Proust expands somewhat on these lines, recalling that his eyes were so red from sobbing that members of the audience approached him after the performance wondering, as he said, whether he had been beaten (*ASB*, 311; *CSB*, 643).

The sobbing and the 'beating' Marcel took, the 'cruelty' and 'sublimely horrifying' scenes he witnessed (*Corr.*, XIX, 312), if we are to accept his language at face value, suggest that some part of Germinie's suffering must have coincided with Proust's own. Her story, let us remember, centres around the need to keep powerful, 'deviant' sexuality secret. It is also a tale of visceral jealousy and borderline sadism, with hints of male/female gender trading. The heart of the story is the relationship between Germinie and the Jupillon family, formed of a devoted but treacherous mother figure and her malicious son. At the same time, it is the portrait of a hysteric, based of course on the life of the Goncourts' servant Rose Malingre, but also on documentation the brothers assembled from medical studies of the condition. Edmond de Goncourt's preface to the 1886 re-edition of *Germinie* lays much emphasis on the sordidness of Rose's double life, and the brother's amazement at what they see as her hystero-nymphomania.

It was in 1892–3, only a short time after seeing *Germinie* as a play, that Proust wrote four stories which appear to owe much to his exposure to its hysteric protagonist: 'Violante ou la mondanité', 'La Confession d'une jeune fille', 'Avant la nuit' and 'La Fin de la jalousie'. The latter two in particular connect uncontrollable sexual

urges to nervous disorders, just as Germinie's 'uterine furore' is a central fact of her hysteric nature. The young women in Proust's stories suffer from intense guilt that tends to coalesce – with overtones of masochism and sadism – around maternal figures. The guilt Germinie feels *vis-à-vis* her own surrogate mother, Mme de Varandeuil, has a very similar flavour.

The nervous excitement champagne causes in the heterosexual heroine of 'La Confession d'une jeune fille' demands instant sexual release and immediate submission: 'My nerves needed release . . . I simply let it happen to me' ['j'avais . . . besoin . . . de dépenser mes nerfs . . . je ne fis plus que me laisser faire'] (*J&S*, 94–5). Germinie has no willpower where sex is concerned. Her desire is pictured as 'that emotion of one's whole being, that almost animal sensation of the approach of a master'.<sup>56</sup> For her part, the heroine of 'Violante' has an attack of nerves after reluctantly resisting Honoré's advances. In 'Avant la nuit', Françoise attributes her lesbianism to a deterioration of the nervous system (*J&S*, 169). And in 'La Fin de la jalousie', the carnal suspiciousness of Honoré, who has a nervous disposition and suffers from nervous asthma, recalls Germinie's bitter jealousy over the liaisons of her lover Bibi.

It is the maternal figure that truly haunts Proust's protagonists and the Goncourts' heroine in certain key scenes where shame is externalized as an image of guilt reflected in a mirror. Germinie sees Mme de Varandeuil as a mother confessor to whom she cannot confess her secret drinking and hidden pregnancies:

And in the midst of this horrible pretence, a pious, almost religious feeling came over her, like the feeling of a daughter lying openly to her mother so as not to break her heart (*Germinie Lacerteux*, 144).

A few pages later, when Germinie contemplates robbing her mistress, she catches a glimpse of herself in the mirror:

She lifted her eyes: the mirror reflected her face. Before this countenance of hers, she grew afraid; she started backwards in horror and shame at the sight of her crime: it was the head of a thief that she had on her shoulders (*Germinie Lacerteux*, 150).

The integration of these two moments in 'La Confession d'une jeune fille' – a flash of insight followed by a mirrored reflection of sin – creates the primal scene of Proustian guilt. The suffering inflicted on the mother figure lifts her to the level of a religious saint. At the same time, guilt can exacerbate one's enjoyment:

Then, as the feeling of pleasure held me ever more tightly, I felt, in the depths of my heart, the stirrings of an infinite sadness and desolation; it seemed to me that I was making my mother's soul weep, the soul of my guardian angel, the soul of God.

[Alors tandis que le plaisir me tenait de plus en plus, je sentais s'éveiller, au fond de mon cœur, une tristesse et une désolation infinies; il me semblait que je faisais pleurer l'âme de ma mère, l'âme de mon ange gardien, l'âme de Dieu.] (*JS*, 95)

The intense combination of pleasure and shame gives way to an intuition that there is a connection between suffering, causing suffering, and personal pleasure:

I had never been able to read stories of the torture that villains inflict on animals, on their own wife, on their children, without shuddering from horror; it now seemed to me, in a confused way, that in any voluptuous, culpable act, there is just as much ferocity in the body that is enjoying itself and, within ourselves, just as many good intentions and just as many pure angels are martyred and weep.

[Je n'avais jamais pu lire sans des frémissements d'horreur le récit des tortures que des scélérats font subir à des animaux, à leur propre femme, à leurs enfants; il m'apparaissait confusément maintenant que, dans tout acte voluptueux et coupable, il y a autant de férocité de la part du corps qui jouit, et qu'en nous autant de bonnes intentions, autant d'anges purs sont martyrisés et pleurent.] (*JS*, 95)

Immediately following these thoughts the young woman sees her own sensual, guilty reflection in the mirror, along with that of her male friend. At the same instant she glimpses her mother observing the embrace from the balcony, and their eye contact is interrupted by an act in which inflicted pain and remorse meet: the mother falls backwards and catches her head between the balcony rungs.

It appears eminently arguable that *Germinie Lacerteux* serves as an intertext not only for these stories but in *A la recherche* as well, projecting forward into the Narrator's courtyard a drama of shopkeepers, sexuality and hysteric behaviours. First of all, the close homonymy of the names Jupillon/Jupien is striking when one considers the interactions of the triangular groupings *mother Jupillon/son/Germinie*, and *father Jupien/niece-daughter/Morel*. The physical installation of Jupien and his niece in the courtyard of the Narrator's apartment building affords him the same observation post that he would have enjoyed as a reader of *Germinie Lacerteux*. In the Goncourt novel, we look down on a courtyard where mother Jupillon runs a *crémérie* as she brings up her son Bibi. Bibi's professional aspirations

are similar to those of the waistcoat maker Jupien and his dressmaker niece: he is a glove cutter and eventually persuades Germinie to set him up in a glove shop.

Some of Germinie's humiliations appear to move forward into *A la recherche*. The episode in which Morel berates Jupien's niece, calling her a whore, recalls a host of scenes in the Goncourt novel where Germinie is publicly humiliated by the young Jupillon. (In the stage version, the 'scène de l'engueulade' was apparently one of the powerful moments in the drama.<sup>57</sup>) The episode is prepared by a repeated focus on Morel's neurasthenia (V, 179–80; III, 668–9), and the actual exchange with the niece is introduced – and, in part, excused – by the remark that Morel suffers from 'a malicious nervousness' which explains his hurtful outbursts. The Narrator overhears Morel in Jupien's shop with the niece, whom he is shortly expected to marry. The girl stands silent and trembling under a rain of insults: 'Didn't I tell you to get out of here, *grand pied de grue*, *grand pied de grue*. Go and fetch your uncle till I tell him what you are, you whore' (V, 180) ['Je vous ai dit de sortir, *grand-pied-de-grue*, *grand-pied-de-grue*, allez chercher votre oncle pour que je lui dise ce que vous êtes, putain'] (III, 670).

It is noteworthy that the Proustian text internalizes and transposes to the masculine the nerve-based ailment that had explained Germinie's promiscuity. When, later, the Narrator happens upon Morel who is weeping over the cruelty of his behaviour, there are repeated references to the recurrence of his neurasthenia. It is to this condition that the text, always with hesitations and qualifications, attributes the violinist's emotional and moral instability.

There are other narrative threads shared by *A la recherche* and *Germinie*. The story of Germinie's torments as an adolescent, her rape, and especially her brutal treatment at the hands of her own sisters when she becomes pregnant (41–2), may lay the groundwork for some of the sadistic sub-themes of *A la recherche* that relate to pregnancy and the family. One of Proust's texts is enticing here, referring to the fact that Jupien's niece was 'in trouble' when quite young (V, 47; III, 558), as though in her mature years, like Germinie, she might be paying the price of an early pregnancy. Kitchen maids in Proust are treated with great brutality: the cook Ernestine tortures her assistant in *Jean Santeuil*, while in *A la recherche* a pregnant kitchen maid receives brutal treatment from Françoise before her delivery, and is the object of even more cruelty after her post-partem

complications. Of course, Mme de Varandeuil herself is the model for such relationships: Germinie's elderly mistress was treated with squalid brutality by her own father and most of her family, and reduced, like Germinie, to the role of domestic, but in her own house.

Perhaps what is most suggestive of all in the Goncourt novel, for a reader of Proust, is the current of androgyny that winds through the narrative, touching most main characters. Like the 'hommasse' Charity of Giotto, Germinie has crude, mannish features. The intensity of her sexual desire is presented as abnormal for a woman: she sleeps with anyone, seeking 'pain in pleasure' (*Germinie Lacerteux*, 192). The Goncourts describe Rose Malingre's career as 'a secret life of . . . uterine furores which made her lovers say: «One of us, she or I, won't leave this place alive!»' (*ibid.*, 250). But Germinie/Rose is not the only androgyne. Mme de Varandeuil is an image of maternal protectiveness and goodness housed within a mannish exterior. Her willpower is described as male, her stoicism and her features as masculine, even her goodness is 'virile' (*ibid.*, 35, 46). Her counterpart Jupien is womanly in his goodheartedness, while his maternal/paternal instincts are tested in the extreme when he must play both mother and father to his niece/daughter, whom he first places under the protection of and then defends against the bisexual Morel.

Surely, however, the most intriguing possible echo of *Germinie Lacerteux* in *A la recherche* is in a portrait of the young Jupillon, an individual whose malicious behaviour looks forward directly to Morel. Here is how Jupillon, the non-stop seducer of servant girls, is presented in one passage:

his appearance was uncertain, and made more ambiguous by his smooth-cheeked face which was marked only by two little brushes of a moustache, and his sexless features in which passion and anger had injected all the nastiness of a nasty little female face. (*Germinie Lacerteux*, 82)

Sharing all the ignorance and maliciousness of Morel but none of his artistic gifts, this 'voyou' does not appear to practise the double-edged sexuality that stands out in his traits. Proust may well have appropriated the kernel of bisexuality hinted at here to help flesh out the character of Charlie Morel, the androgyne who completes the trio of the heterosexual Charles Swann and the homosexual baron Charlus. Each of these would-be artists shares in one or another of the symptoms that *fin-de-siècle* medicine diagnosed in the hysteroneurasthenic male. Surprisingly, we may owe some of Proust's

fascination with the literary exploration of certain sexual and 'nervous' behaviours to the outmoded fiction of the *frères* Goncourt.

Nerve-based ailments are thus resonant markers in the private lives and literature of a range of writers from whom Proust drew diverse types of inspiration. The question remained, before *A la recherche* was begun: in what way would his own nervous condition inhibit or favour his own writing? Proust's correspondence, especially of the 1895–1905 period, reveals endless references to nerve-based disorders. In addition to the constant allusions to his own problems, the letters ascribe nervous conditions to, among others, Lucien Daudet, Alphonse Daudet and his wife, Antoine Bibesco, Anna de Noailles, princesse Brancovan, Fernand Gregh, and Proust's uncle Georges Weil. Proust's preoccupation with his neurotic lack of focus and drive was not his alone, but a broad feature of the 1890s. Maurice Barrès, his own personal life marked by a malady of the nerves which saw him taking rest cures in Switzerland as early as age ten, wrote a first novel, *Sous l'œil des barbares* (1888), whose protagonist's ideal is life as a kind of self-nurturing convalescence from excessive sensitivity. The neurasthenic overtones of his fiction caught the spirit of the age and were obvious to his contemporaries. Edmond de Goncourt spitefully remarked that Daudet viewed Barrès as an exhausted individual whose fiction reflected that exhaustion.<sup>58</sup> When André Gide's *Cahiers d'André Walter* appeared in 1891, Marcel Schwob interpreted the work as a symbolic representation of the nervous exhaustion that seemed to have affected a whole generation of *fin-de-siècle* youth:

You have captured with great perception that terrible malady of the will faced by young men of the second half of the century – a malady that results from a weak will that is slow to develop, and which is neglected in our education for many reasons . . . Alas, I have seen, and close up, other André Walters. Their sad stories held me in their grip as I read your book.<sup>59</sup>

These fictional willpower deficits are remarkably similar to that identified by Proust both in himself and in his hero, Jean Santeuil.

*A la recherche du temps perdu* contains several texts which discuss the two most popular nerve maladies of Proust's day, neurasthenia and hysteria. Two of these passages can provide an initial illustration of the ways in which the two conditions impinge on character and creativity in the novel. The first is a discussion of the water-lily, the second a portrait of the character Charles Morel.



One of the Narrator's observations is that when the water-lily is caught in a river current, its captive to-and-fro movements mimic the manic behaviour of a human neurotic:

I would still find [the water-lily] there, on one walk after another, always in the same helpless state, suggesting certain victims of neurasthenia, among whom my grandfather would have included my aunt Léonie, who present year after year the unchanging spectacle of their odd and unaccountable habits, which they constantly imagine themselves to be on the point of shaking off but which they always retain to the end; caught in the treadmill of their own maladies and eccentricities, their futile endeavours to escape serve only to actuate its mechanism, to keep in motion the clockwork of their strange, ineluctable and baneful dietetics. (I, 202)

[Je ... retrouvais [le nénuphar] de promenade en promenade, toujours dans la même situation, faisant penser à certains neurasthéniques au nombre desquels mon grand-père comptait ma tante Léonie, qui nous offrent sans changement au cours des années le spectacle des habitudes bizarres qu'ils se croient chaque fois à la veille de secouer et qu'ils gardent toujours; pris dans l'engrenage de leurs malaises et de leurs manies, les efforts dans lesquels ils se débattent inutilement pour en sortir ne font qu'assurer le fonctionnement et faire jouer le dé clic de leur diététique étrange, inéluctable et funeste.] (I, 167)

All the explicit and implicit identifications in the passage are of interest: the coupling of the mechanical flower movements with the manic behaviour of Aunt Léonie just as, later in the story, the behaviour of the Narrator will be paired with that of his aunt. A glance at some of the *Pléiade* sketches for this passage shows, unexpectedly, that there are sexual references suppressed within it. The published version relates both to a sketch on adolescent masturbation and to the odd reproductive life of another waterplant, the *vallisneria*.<sup>60</sup> Are we to see in the Narrator's patterns of entrapment in habit and the nerve-based inertia he shares with his aunt, Morel, Germinie and Charles Demailly, the explanation of his fitful, but unproductive devotion to a literary vocation? Is there also a connection between artistic potential, nervous disorders and degenerate sexuality, or between nervous malady and literary impotence? Without ever answering these questions, the Proustian text, just beneath its surface, constantly alludes to them.

Pushed a step further, neurasthenia can turn to hysteria.<sup>61</sup> In the latter part of *A la recherche*, the violinist Morel undergoes a transformation. He is trying his hand at writing, more particularly journalism and satirical pamphlets with his former lover Charlus as

his target. The would-be man of letters is presented as a human counterpoint to the water-lily, trapped by an uncontrollable urge to copy. In Morel's imitation of the novelist Bergotte, the author sees a hysterical nature at work:

Morel imitated Bergotte marvellously. It was even unnecessary, after a while, to ask him for an impersonation. Like those hysterics whom one doesn't have to hypnotise to make them become such or such a person, he entered spontaneously and immediately into the character. (VI, 12)

[Morel imitait Bergotte à ravir. Il n'y eut même plus besoin au bout de quelque temps de lui demander d'en faire une imitation. Comme ces hystériques qu'on n'est plus obligé d'endormir pour qu'ils deviennent telle ou telle personne, de lui-même il entra dans le personnage.] (IV, 278)

The hysteria of imitation was, as we shall see, a nervous problem which Proust had to overcome in his own life. Here it arrests a would-be writer in his tracks. The ability to imitate is a gift, but when it takes place directly at the nerve ends, as it were, the product is simply a copy without individual personality. The degenerate Morel can perform art (he is a violinist after all), but he cannot, in a sense, get beyond performing the Other.

Did some of Proust's medical readings on conditions such as neurasthenia and hysteria have an effect on the way he developed the story of the search for an artistic vocation that is *A la recherche du temps perdu*? It is time to examine Proust's own diagnosis.

#### THE NOVEL OF THE NEURASTHENIC

It was the American George Beard who, in the early 1880s, first 'discovered' neurasthenia in his study *A Practical Treatise on Nervous Exhaustion (Neurasthenia)*.<sup>62</sup> A year later Beard produced a related volume designed more for the lay person, *American Nervousness, its Causes and Consequences, a Supplement to Nervous Exhaustion (Neurasthenia)*.<sup>63</sup> Beard's more specialized study, *Sexual Neurasthenia (Nervous Exhaustion, its Hygiene, Causes, Symptoms and Treatment)*, was the only one translated into French, and not until 1895,<sup>64</sup> but Charcot had already brought Beard's ideas into the medical mainstream in his lectures of the late 1880s.<sup>65</sup> In 1891 Charcot would write the preface to Fernand Villain's primer *La Neurasthénie*.<sup>66</sup> Treatment for neurasthenia varied little between the 1850s and 1905, when Proust committed himself to Dr Sollier's clinic and received what sounds

very much like the Silas Weir Mitchell rest-cure treatment (minus the electricity) for his nervous exhaustion.<sup>67</sup>

In its day, neurasthenia enjoyed the status of an intellectual epidemic in France. As hysteria became a kind of catch-all diagnosis for various female ailments, so neurasthenia was a condition that appeared to capture the nervous complaints of many men, and particularly of upper-class men with delicate constitutions.<sup>68</sup> In spite of the fact that Briquet's famous 1859 treatise on hysteria opens with a discussion of seven male hysterics, and in spite of the fact that Charcot had published over sixty case histories of male hysteria in the 1880s and 1890s, there was a tendency in the medical community to reserve the diagnosis for adolescent boys and effeminate men.<sup>69</sup> The time was not quite ripe to hystericize the male's emotional makeup or to confront the ambiguous aspects of male sexuality. Neurasthenia as a term and as a distinct condition had a social role to play.

Hysteria and neurasthenia were highly popularized notions. In 1895 Max Nordau published a study of degeneracy which quickly became a national bestseller,<sup>70</sup> and in it he claimed that the French as a nation were predisposed to nerve-weakness and neurasthenia. The problem was especially evident in literature and art:

The physician especially if he has devoted himself to the special study of mental and nervous maladies, recognizes at a glance, in the . . . tendencies of contemporary art and poetry . . . the confluence of two well-known conditions of disease, with which he is quite familiar, viz. degeneration (degeneracy) and hysteria, of which the minor stages are designated as neurasthenia.<sup>71</sup>

In *A la recherche du temps perdu*, as we will see, the distinction between hysteria and neurasthenia is similarly unclear, and their link with degeneracy just as marked. Debate on the national weakness of the nerves spilled over into *La Revue des Deux Mondes* (where Proust's father had written as early as 1893), and Alfred Fouillée proposed for the nation the fresh air and exercise cure that doctors like Adrien Proust would suggest for his son.<sup>72</sup>

Certainly between 1890 and 1905, neurasthenia was widely treated, in Europe and the United States, as a serious medical condition.<sup>73</sup> And along with hysteria, it began to become a subject for literature. In *Les Morticoles*, an 1894 French bestseller, Léon Daudet published an unsubtle send-up of Charcot, in the person of Dr Foutange from the Hôpital Typhus. (The story goes that Daudet

had refused the hand of Charcot's daughter and had, as a result, been failed in his final medical examination.) The novel contains a dramatic scene featuring a group of medical orderlies packing a financially ruined neurasthenic off to an institution. The condition is real enough to be treated, but bothersome to physicians because they cannot cure it.<sup>74</sup> A year earlier, Dr Pierre Janet, a rising star of hysteria studies, had received better treatment than Charcot, portrayed as the sensitive Dr Daumier in Marcel Prévost's novel, *L'Automne d'une femme*.<sup>75</sup>

In 1904 neurasthenia was still being described as France's 'fashionable disease'. The writer was Dr Paul Dubois,<sup>76</sup> one of the most prominent clinicians treating the condition. Proust referred his friend Fernand Gregh to Dubois and intended to seek treatment from him himself (*Corr.*, IV, 279, n. 3). In the same year, Proust mentions reading a front-page article in *Le Figaro* entitled 'Neurasthénie' where the writer Henry Roujon reflects on the moral necessity of suffering from the condition (*Corr.*, IV, 288). Of course, neurasthenia was well known in the artistic community. In the company of Mme Greffuhle, Proust first saw Nijinsky dance in Paris in June 1910 (*Corr.*, X, 113); it was in that year that the great dancer himself was diagnosed as neurasthenic. Years later, Marcel Pagnol (born in 1895) was probably poking fun at some of the societal idiosyncrasies of his youth when he included the following exchange in the opening scene of *Marius* (1929):

CESAR You're pale, you're sad: you're like a teetotaller.

MARIUS Perhaps I'm a neurasthenic.

CESAR You?

MARIUS Why not?

CESAR Where would you have caught it?

MARIUS You just get it.<sup>77</sup>

In the United States, neurasthenia became a less popular diagnosis after 1900, especially after Freud's lectures at Clark University in 1909, in favour of other neuroses for which symptoms could be more precisely identified.<sup>78</sup> In a more general sense, neurasthenia has suffered the same fate as hysteria: it has been 'dismembered' (in the phrase of Joseph Babinski) to permit a reconstruction of new and different clinical categories.<sup>79</sup>

Neurasthenia made a dual impact on the Proust household. In 1897, Dr Adrien Proust published, with his colleague Gilbert Ballet, *L'Hygiène du neurasthénique*,<sup>80</sup> a practical guide to identification and

treatment of the condition. Some ten years later, Marcel Proust began the writing of *A la recherche du temps perdu*, a novel whose neurotic Narrator struggles throughout his life against the characteristic neurasthenic absence of willpower, a deficit which inhibits his writing for many years.

The writings of the Proust family provide fertile ground for the study of the relationships between medicine and literature. The 'style' of malady in Proust, the sleep patterns of the author of *A la recherche*, the ideology of hygiene promoted by Dr Adrien Proust and the reaction of his son Marcel, these are but three of literally scores of medically related questions that continue to be of interest to the Proust research community.<sup>81</sup> Proust was extremely well informed about neurasthenia and other nervous disorders. The vocabulary of nervous ailments is constantly in evidence in his fiction, characterizing men and women from the heroine of 'Violante ou la mondanité' and Jean Santeuil to Swann, Charlus, Madame Verdurin and the Narrator. I wish to re-examine here the notion that, in the early stages of its conception, *A la recherche du temps perdu* may well have been seen, by its author, as the biography of a neurasthenic, the story of an individual who suffers from a disease of the will, but succeeds in understanding his ailment, and overcomes it by discovering special sources of energy.

In *Contre Sainte-Beuve*, Proust appears to be considering the possible interest of making the protagonist of his novel a neurasthenic. Speaking about certain novels of Balzac, he states, 'Whoever writes the life of the family of a neurasthenic may paint a picture of the same kind' (*ASB*, 61, n.) ['Celui qui écrira la vie de la famille d'un neurasthénique pourra faire une peinture du même genre'] (*CSB*, 269, n.). But at this very time Proust is also suffering from chronic doubts about the form his story should take: 'Should it be a novel, a philosophical study, am I a novelist?' he asks in *Le Carnet de 1908*. There is good reason to ask whether the rediscovery of self that dominates *A la recherche*, of a self that is not totally cured but is at least conscious of the mechanisms of its condition, is not presented according to schematics borrowed from the medical diagnoses of diseases of the will and of the nerves of Proust's time. In other words, the question we may now ask is to what extent the aesthetic argument and the construction of Proust's novel integrate various diagnoses of diseases of the will in order to challenge certain medical ideas of his time.

## WRITING AND VOLITION

Proust's very first writings, both critical and creative, reproduce endlessly the image of individuals with artistic gifts who do not have the willpower to execute their projects. An 1892 article on Louis Ganderax begins with the picture of a person 'whose strength is not the equal of the obligations at hand, who says «Tomorrow I will possess, in some magical way, the willpower that I lack»' ['dont les forces n'égalent pas le devoir qu'il faudrait remplir, [qui] se dit: «Demain, j'aurai comme par quelque enchantement cette volonté qui me manque»'] (*CSB*, 343). Proust admires the enormous vitality and self-assurance of comte Armand-Pierre de Cholet (his lieutenant during his military service), who published *Voyage en Turquie d'Asie* in 1892. He lauds the man's tenacity and capacity to complete projects, 'the energetic life of a will that knows no limits and no weaknesses, which pursues the difficult enterprises and carries them off' ['[la] vie énergique d'une volonté sans limites et sans défaillances qui poursuit les entreprises les plus difficiles et les mène à bonne fin'] (*CSB*, 351).

The inertia that affects certain creative individuals has overtones of moral degeneration in Proust's writing, as though he always bore in mind the medical diagnoses of his time which assimilated the literary impotence of the decadent writers to degeneracy and even sexual impotence. One thinks, for example, of the heroine of 'Violante ou la mondanité', who, out of apathy, refuses to cultivate what is best in herself, seeks out the social life instead of a more productive solitude, and by that preference alone plunges into vice. But the young Marcel Proust also reacts to the simplistic aspects of medical diagnoses. In a mocking comment on an article in *L'Echo de Paris* (1892), he attacks the naïve medical recipes of hygienists of the period: 'in spite of its prestigious title, this article is no more than a piece of advice on hygiene and, dare I say, a prescription of cold baths to cure impotence' ['malgré son titre prestigieux, [...cet article] se réduit à un conseil d'hygiène et, si j'ose le dire, à une prescription de bains froids contre l'impuissance'] (*CSB*, 352). We see the same type of juxtaposition in 1893 in a phrase that is already a sketch for the famous opposition between instinct and intellect that will dominate *Contre Sainte-Beuve*: 'Art is an instinct, and reflective individuals suffer, in a sense, from impotence' ['L'art est un instinct, et les réfléchis sont un peu des impuissants'] (*CSB*, 358).

In an early article on Robert de Montesquiou, Proust adopts the

count's mocking tone to castigate a class of nerve-sufferers of whom Proust himself is a member:

If you know one of these young men, you know them all. They're all the same. First, they all suffer from a 'malady of the will'. They are without willpower, and thus they cannot act and don't wish to think. Most of them glory in it, others pretend to regret it, as though it were an infinitely distinguished weakness. Some sense the depth of the problem, the toll it takes on the mind and on our actions, but they can't change, because to do so they would require willpower. If it weren't the most pitiful misfortune, it would be the most disgusting of trivialities.

[Vous les connaissez tous, ces jeunes gens, si vous en connaissez un. Ils sont tous pareils. D'abord ils ont tous une 'maladie de la volonté'.<sup>82</sup> Ils ne peuvent pas vouloir, d'où ils ne savent agir et ne veulent pas penser. La plupart s'en glorifient, d'autres affectent de s'en plaindre, comme d'une faiblesse infiniment distinguée. Quelques-uns sentent la profondeur du mal, ses ravages dans l'esprit et dans l'action, mais ne peuvent changer, justement parce que pour cela il faudrait vouloir. Si ce n'était pas la plus pitoyable des misères, ce serait la plus écœurante des banalités.] (CSB, 407)

What this text seems to confirm is that in 1894 Proust was already familiar with *Les Maladies de la volonté* by Théodule Ribot. Proust will not forget the lessons learned in this work, for he refers to it in two important texts, the introduction to *Sésame et les lys* and *Contre Sainte-Beuve*, in contexts where he is discussing creative beings who suffer from aboulia that prevents them from conceiving their work as a whole.

It is the crucial problem of willpower that haunts the hero of *Jean Santeuil*, Proust's abandoned novel begun in autumn 1895. In the episode of the bedtime kiss that reappears in *A la recherche*, Mme Santeuil and a medical friend, Dr Surlande, are discussing Jean. His mother adopts the peremptory tone of her husband as she indicates the life path the parents have chosen for their son:

He is only seven, Doctor . . . But we have some very firm ideas about his future. Not that we would wish to thwart our son's own wishes in any way, as long as his preferences run to a true career, such as the magistrature, Foreign Affairs or the bar.

[Il n'a que sept ans, docteur . . . Mais nous avons pourtant sur son avenir des idées très arrêtées. Non que nous voulions contrecarrer en rien les désirs de notre fils qui sera toujours libre ici, du moment que ses préférences n'iront qu'à une carrière véritable, comme la magistrature, les Affaires étrangères ou le barreau.] (JS, 202–3)

Dr Surlande immediately identifies and limits Jean's possibilities, while Mme Santeuil appears to raise questions about his sexuality: 'He is what we call a nervous child, said the doctor, smiling as though he had pronounced a witticism. His facies indicates that clearly enough' ['C'est [ce] que nous appelons un nerveux, dit le docteur, en souriant comme après un bon mot. Son faciès l'indique d'ailleurs assez'] (*JS*, 202). 'My husband and I want to bring him up in a manly way' ['Nous voulons, mon mari et moi, l'élever virilement'], continues the mother. It is on this evening, after Jean's nervous tantrum, that his mother frees him forever from his guilt. His reprehensible behaviour is not a product of his 'responsible willpower', she suggests, but of 'an involuntary nervous state' (*JS*, 210).

The initial fever of writing *Jean Santeuil* did not last long. Already in September 1896, compositional problems are apparent: the writer cannot arrive at an overall plan for the novel (*Corr.*, II, 124). The letters of 1896–1900 record Proust's progressive detachment from *Jean Santeuil*. Towards the end of 1899, there is the discovery of Ruskin, which seems literally to supplant the fictional project in his mind.<sup>83</sup> But the success of the articles about and translations of Ruskin was no compensation for a lack of more personal writing, as far as Proust was concerned. Writing about others was a secondary activity, a semi-creativity that he found frustrating. Visiting Léon Yeatman on his birthday in 1901, Proust exclaims, 'I'm thirty years old today, and I've accomplished nothing'.

His correspondence from the 1900–05 period reflects his increasing sense of frustration, an absence of inspiration, and the realization that he lacks the conceptual powers to imagine the structure of the major work he has within him. In 1904, he tells Marie Nordlinger that he will refuse to translate *St Mark's Rest*, and in the same year he writes to Barrès, 'I have two more Ruskins to do and after that I will try to translate my own poor soul, if it hasn't died in the interim' ['J'ai encore deux Ruskin à faire et après j'essaierai de traduire ma pauvre âme à moi, si elle n'est pas morte dans l'intervalle'] (*Corr.*, IV, 93).

Proust's apprehensions about artistic aboulia grew more intense and crystallized around his second Ruskin translation, *Sésame et les lys*. This project is, in fact, almost a physical image of Proust's semi-creativity during the period, with its poetic beginning (a miniature version of the Narrator's childhood in Combray) that rapidly trans-



forms itself into an essay on reading. It is, without doubt, a creative piece, bubbling over with ideas about the difference between various belle-lettrist approaches to writing and true creativity, but it is an essay that poses its own basic contradiction. Reading is at the threshold of spiritual life, it is not in itself a spiritual exercise, Proust tells us. His *Sésame et les lys*, his ‘reading’ of Ruskin, comes up against the same obstacle, for the fine introduction frames a translation, a pure reproduction of the Other’s language.

Within the larger essay on Ruskin there is a smaller one which analyses reading as a means of therapy for those suffering from lack of willpower. The text targets certain almost pathological cases of spiritual depression for which reading provides a curative discipline; books are said to play a role analogous to that of psychotherapists for certain cases of neurasthenia (*ASB*, 211; *CSB*, 178). The real subject of these experimentations with reading is the artist who lacks willpower. In a note in which Proust refers to what he calls Ribot’s ‘fine book’, *Les Maladies de la volonté*, he alludes to the aboulia that struck Fontanes and undermined Coleridge’s career. The long, quasi-clinical introduction to these considerations on willpower and art begins with the portrait of an individual almost paralysed by his neuroses, half-way between Beard’s neurasthenic and Charcot’s hysteric:

We know that in certain affections of the nervous system, without any of the organs themselves being affected, the patient is mired in a sort of impossibility of willing, as if in a deep rut, from which he cannot escape unaided and where ultimately he would waste away, if a strong and helping hand were not held out to him. His brain, his legs, his lungs, his stomach are sound. He is not truly incapacitated from working, from walking, from exposing himself to the cold, from eating. But he is incapable of willing these various actions, which he would be perfectly capable of performing. And an organic degeneration, which would end by becoming the equivalent of the diseases he does not have, would be the irremediable consequence of this inertia of the will, if the impulsion he is unable to find in himself were not to come to him from outside, from a doctor who will will for him, until such time as his various organic wills have been re-educated. Now there exist certain minds that might be compared to patients such as these, who are prevented by a sort of laziness or frivolity from descending spontaneously into the deeper parts of the self where the true life of the spirit begins . . . they live on the surface in a perpetual forgetfulness of themselves, in a sort of passivity which makes them the plaything of every pleasure and reduces them to the stature of those roundabout who excite them. (*ASB*, 212)

[On sait que, dans certaines affections du système nerveux, le malade, sans qu'aucun de ses organes soit lui-même atteint, est enlisé dans une sorte d'impossibilité de vouloir, comme dans une ornière profonde d'où il ne peut pas se tirer seul, et où il finirait par dépérir, si une main puissante et secourable ne lui était pas tendue. Son cerveau, ses jambes, ses poumons, son estomac, sont intacts. Il n'a aucune incapacité réelle de travailler, de marcher, de s'exposer au froid, de manger. Mais ces différents actes, qu'il serait très capable d'accomplir, il est incapable de les vouloir. Et une déchéance organique qui finirait par devenir l'équivalent des maladies qu'il n'a pas serait la conséquence irrémédiable de l'inertie de sa volonté, si l'impulsion qu'il ne peut trouver en lui-même ne lui venait de dehors, d'un médecin qui voudra pour lui, jusqu'au jour où seront peu à peu rééduqués ses divers vouloir organiques. Or, il existe certains esprits qu'on pourrait comparer à ces malades et qu'une sorte de paresse ou de frivolité empêche de descendre spontanément dans les régions profondes de soi-même où commence la véritable vie de l'esprit ... ils vivent à la surface dans un perpétuel oubli d'eux-mêmes,<sup>84</sup> dans une sorte de passivité qui les rend le jouet de tous les plaisirs, les diminue à la taille de ceux qui les entourent et les agitent.] (*CSB*, 178–9)

For these irresolute souls, one of whom seems to be Proust himself at this juncture, reading represents a powerful incitation to personal activity.

#### INVOLUTION'S WAY

As we have seen, the first direct mention of Ribot's work by Proust dates from 1894. The year is an important one for Proust from a number of points of view. In the autumn, he enrolled for the *licence* in philosophy. Anne Henry has argued that the philosophy courses he took that year had a profound influence on his thought. She singles out, in particular, a course in aesthetics taught by Gabriel Séailles<sup>85</sup> that was broadly influenced by Schelling's philosophy of art, and she sees that aesthetic position transposed directly into *Jean Santeuil*, begun in 1895. Schopenhauer probably exercised an even more direct influence on Proust. The French translation of *The World as Will and Idea* appeared in 1888,<sup>86</sup> the year Proust did his *baccalauréat* philosophy year at the Lycée Condorcet. Henry's discussion of the similarity of Schopenhauer's and Proust's ideas on music, and of the probable absorption, by Proust, of the German notion of *Einfühlung*, the state of intuitive fusion with external objects which Schopenhauer advanced as a necessary preliminary for artistic creation, is convincing.<sup>87</sup>

At the same time, it has been pointed out that the raw material for *A la recherche du temps perdu* existed in abundance, in embryonic form, in the last three decades of the nineteenth century.<sup>88</sup> In his book on Schopenhauer, for instance, Théodule Ribot observes that one tendency which characterized nineteenth-century metaphysics as a whole was to explain the world by the notion of will (or intuition), and to downplay the importance of the rational intelligence.<sup>89</sup>

The anxiety about personal willpower deficit evident in all of Proust's writing up until about 1906 – the stories in *Les Plaisirs et les jours*, *Jean Santeuil*, his letters – did not diminish after his encounter with Schopenhauer. On the contrary, in the two years following the death of his father and subsequently, both before and after the death of his mother in September 1905, Proust continued to seek psychological and medical answers to his condition. He speaks, beginning in September 1904, of the possibility of being treated for his neurasthenia by Dr Paul Dubois of Bern, then wonders in December if he should consult Dr Jules-Joseph Déjerine of La Salpêtrière. After his mother's death he seems determined to take treatment, but is undecided between Dubois and Déjerine until he eventually accepts the advice of his asthma specialist, Dr Brissaud, and is admitted to Dr Paul Sollier's sanatorium in Boulogne-sur-Seine in December 1905. Proust's reading related to questions of willpower, neurasthenia and asthma appears to have been considerable in this period. The notes and preface to *Sésame et les lys* and Proust's correspondence suggest familiarity with Dubois' famous lecture of 1901 *De l'influence de l'esprit sur le corps*, and his major work, published in 1904, *Les Psychonévroses et leur traitement moral*. Proust had also consulted works by Dr Wilhelm Brügelmann on asthma as well as Brissaud's *L'Hygiène de l'asthmatique*, and a study by two students of Déjerine, Drs Camus and Pagniez, entitled *Isolement et psychothérapie* (1904), which contains an excellent summary of Déjerine's methods.<sup>90</sup> It seems to me, therefore, that more emphasis needs to be placed on the medico-psychological rather than the philosophical framework surrounding Proust's insecurity about willpower.

The psychological and medical aspects of willpower and memory were of course already receiving close scrutiny in the early 1890s. In an important study which Proust's father quotes in his works, *L'Etat mental des hystériques*, Pierre Janet devotes a chapter to aboulia in hysterics.<sup>91</sup> Janet cites a Freud-Breuer essay approvingly, agreeing that the hysteric suffers above all from reminiscences.<sup>92</sup> But it is not

the conscious memory which functions in the hysteric. Like the Proustian Narrator, Janet's hysteric depends on surges from unconscious states to reconstitute full-fledged memories:

remembrance seems to disappear every time [the hysteric's] personality is concerned, every time [he/she] is compelled to say 'I remember'. The remembrance, on the contrary, seems present in various other circumstances – in dreams, hypnotic sleep, thoughtless acts, writing, and speech obtained while the patient's mind is diverted by another conscious operation.<sup>93</sup>

One of Janet's most discussed patients, from his earlier study *Automatisme psychologique*, has the same first name as tante Léonie from Combray; Léonie also makes her appearance in *The Mental State of Hystericals*, notably in the chapter on 'idées fixes'.

October of 1894 also marked the appearance of Théodule Ribot's first article on involuntary memory – or 'mémoire affective', as he called it – in the *Revue Philosophique* which he had founded in 1876.<sup>94</sup> It would be surprising that Proust, so keen on questions of philosophy since he had been turned on to the subject by his philosophy teacher Darlu, did not know of Ribot by the late 1880s, given the latter's notoriety. At just 180 pages, Ribot's digest of Schopenhauer's philosophy would have been a useful and practical reference text for lycée students, and some of his other publications, *Les Maladies de la mémoire* and *L'Hérédité psychologique*, for example, bore titles that were bound to interest Proust.<sup>95</sup> Like his study of diseases of the will, Ribot's research on involuntary memory promotes the superiority of involuntary processes over intellectual ones. Feeling precedes knowing, and consciousness is, in the first instance, visceral.<sup>96</sup> There is a quasi-militant fervour in Ribot's desire to put the intellect in its place, a sentiment that we find echoed fairly exactly in Proust's writing:

The object is to show the distinctive nature of sensibility, its basis, its matter, its content: to establish that the affective life and the intellectual life are heterogeneous, not reducible one to the other.<sup>97</sup>

In his discussion of involuntary memory, Ribot invokes the experiences of Chateaubriand, Nerval and Sully Prudhomme, and makes reference to memories embedded in childhood, in music, and in the experience of another's death.<sup>98</sup> What strikes a reader of Proust, more than these external parallels with *A la recherche*, is Ribot's frequent assertion that an involuntary memory is far more powerful than the initial impression to which it refers, and that such

memories actually resuscitate previous experience which overlaps and shunts aside our current state of perception:

True or concrete affective memory consists in the reproduction in the present of an earlier affective state with all its characteristics. This is necessary, at least theoretically, so that it can be complete. The closer it approaches totality, the closer it approaches exactness. In this case, memory does not consist solely in the representation of conditions and circumstances, that is, in intellectual states; but in the recollection of the affective state itself, as such, that is, as it was experienced.<sup>99</sup>

But let us return to the one study of Ribot to which Proust makes direct and pointed reference. The title *Les Maladies de la volonté* should not lead us astray. The book is by no means simply a pathology of morbid states of the will. On the contrary, the author examines the notion of the will itself and discovers that there is a type of willpower that one might call 'involuntary'. In parallel to voluntary attention, which demands an effort of concentration, there exist states of spontaneous attention, for example, that of a child absorbed by an object it is gazing at, or that of an animal contemplating its prey. In connecting voluntary attention to an effort of the intellect, Ribot seems to give priority to more spontaneous feelings, and he makes an essential distinction that will form the basis of Proust's argument that intuition must precede intellectual efforts, a distinction which contains the seed of the Proustian cleavage between deep self and social self.

Spontaneous attention may be observed, among others, in the poet possessed by an internal vision. Quoting Ferrier, Ribot evokes certain habits and an attitude that are those of the Proustian Narrator absorbed in a profound impression:

In the most intense attention, any movement that would diminish internal diffusion is also stopped. Thus, when we think deeply, automatic actions are themselves arrested, and one notes that a man who falls into deep meditation while walking stops and remains at rest.<sup>100</sup>

In *Contre Sainte-Beuve* (*ASB*, 6; *CSB*, 214), Proust remarks on the way images absorb him; the Narrator of *A la recherche* is similarly transfixed: 'How many times at Combray . . . I returned with such an image, before which I had come to a stop for a moment and which I felt to be but a lid that covered something else' ['Que de fois à Combray . . . je revins avec une telle image, devant laquelle j'étais tombé en arrêt un instant, que je sentais n'être qu'un couvercle'] (IV,

823). Conscious intellectual efforts are insufficient to bring us to the state of heightened sensitivity described by Ribot:

I would define this state of intense, spontaneous attention, with Sergi, as a difference of perception producing a greater psychic energy in certain nervous centres with a sort of temporary catalepsy of the other centres.<sup>101</sup>

The beauty of Ribot's argument, for a reader like Proust, is the way it reverses a value system that enshrines conscious willpower alongside 'intelligence'. These two operate at a surface level, creating the feelings with which they work instead of allowing attention to focus on the spontaneous ideas that rise from the deeper layers of the mind. Ribot equates conscious willpower and intelligence with artificiality and inauthenticity. Moreover, and this may surprise us when we think of the fragility of the products of involuntary memory in Proust, Ribot depicts voluntary attention as precarious and unstable, precisely because it depends on a sustained effort of intellectual concentration:

voluntary attention is an artificial state in which, with the aid of factitious feelings, we maintain with some difficulty certain conscious states that tend only to vanish (for example, when out of politeness we follow a very boring conversation). In one case [= spontaneous attention] what determines this specialization of the consciousness is our whole individuality; in the second [= voluntary attention], it is an extremely weak and limited portion of our individuality.<sup>102</sup>

Even the small details in this passage strike a reader of Proust. The example of boring conversations listened to in stoic politeness looks directly forward to the Proustian dynamic that opposes social language to interior silence. But in a more general sense these lines seem closely linked to the anti-intellectual arguments in *Contre Sainte-Beuve* and to several passages in *Le Temps retrouvé* that deal with the aesthetics of intuition and chance.

Already in *Jean Santeuil* Proust argues that consciously willed investigations cannot pierce the surface of phenomena or events:

in the instant that I lived these scenes of my life, it was my will that registered them for purposes of pleasure or fear, of vanity or maliciousness. And their intimate essence escaped me. I could have gazed at them with great intensity and they would have escaped me all the same.

[au moment où je . . . vivais [les scènes de ma vie], c'est ma volonté qui les connaissait dans un but de plaisir ou de crainte, de vanité ou de méchanceté. Et leur essence intime m'échappait. J'y eusse fixé les yeux avec force qu'elle m'eût échappé de même.] (*JS*, 490)

In *A la recherche*, in terms borrowed even more closely from Ribot, Proust connects everything that is voluntary to the artificial:

The thought that there is a vast difference between the real impression which we have had of a thing and the *artificial* impression of it which we form for ourselves when we attempt *by an act of will* to imagine it did not long detain me. (VI, 220)

[Sur l'extrême différence qu'il y a entre l'impression vraie que nous avons eue d'une chose et l'impression *factice* que nous nous en donnons quand *volontairement* nous essayons de nous la représenter, je ne m'arrêtais pas.] (IV, 448; the emphasis is mine.)

Because they are both the product of an artificial attitude, Proust assimilates intelligence and willpower. What these two produce is mediocre and superficial. The *avant-textes* of the episode of 'l'esthétique dans le buffet' turn endlessly on this observation, which is provoked by Elstir's compliment: whatever his other problems, the Narrator can always enjoy the pleasures of the intellect and of the spirit. But appreciating an intellectual joy is a command performance: 'Whatever I tried to recall of what I had seen, the image that my will drew from my memory seemed to me as boring as reality itself' ['Quoi que je voulusse évoquer de ce que j'avais vu, l'image que ma volonté tirait de ma mémoire me semblait aussi ennuyeuse que la réalité même'] (IV, 802). The mediocrity of the Narrator's life is not so much related to its substance, but to the images requisitioned by his conscious will, which are like 'facsimiles of the intelligence' (IV, 807). It is the image born of chance, 'without the intervention of our will, or of our reason' (IV, 817), 'before there has been any intervention of our will or our intelligence' (IV, 824), that is the only authentic image. The repeated juxtaposition of the words 'volonté' and 'intelligence' melds them into synonyms:

I understood what an abyss there was between a past regained by chance and the inexact and cold facsimiles which, under the guise of the term 'past', my conscious memory . . . presented to my intelligence at the bidding of my will.

[je compris quel abîme il y avait entre un passé retrouvé par hasard et les inexactes et froids fac-similés que sous ce nom de passé ma mémoire consciente . . . présentait à mon intelligence sur la réquisition de ma volonté.] (IV, 813)

Ribot's dissection of the ailments of the will provides Proust with a major trump card: the real disease is to be too responsive to the conscious willpower of the intelligence, which can only suggest

reasonable acts (following a boring conversation out of politeness, for instance). To be healthy is to heed spontaneous, intense impressions, for in them our whole individuality is engaged, our true deep self.

Like the preface of *Sésame et les lys* in which Proust refers to it, Ribot's study of willpower also deals with reading as a remedy against the absence of willpower. Ribot is preoccupied by the moral inertia of the literate and neurotic, the fine minds that have the potential to be creative. Unlike Proust who, in *Sésame et les lys*, pictures the act of reading as an energizing, therapeutic activity for the undecided creative person (Proust's example focuses on the individual who allows himself to be absorbed by the charm of a text), Ribot describes an individual without willpower whom reading defeats. The effort of intellectual concentration required is too great:

Conscious of this weakening of energy, the patient attempts to gain it back; he takes up a book, resolved not to give in to his feelings of intellectual incapacity, psychic languor, cerebral weakness ... In these attempts to understand the meaning of what is before his eyes, he reads and resolutely rereads certain striking passages, with the apparent energy of victory, but without being able to understand a set of very simple ideas or to pursue successfully an elementary line of reasoning. (*Les Maladies*, 100)

This repeated effort to read certain 'striking passages', the intense intellectual attention of this patient, recall in a powerful way the intellectual contraction of the Narrator struggling with the obscure sensations that the madeleine evokes. Of course, the Narrator succeeds in this early effort of memory and will, but much time will pass before he interiorizes the lessons learned. The metaphor of reading appears to continue its journey from Ribot to *Le Temps retrouvé*, the finale of the novel where the reading of oneself becomes the essential activity of the artist and where, finally, the intellect is assigned the essential but limited role that it has to play in art.

There are more pathological cases, according to Ribot, where one observes the progressive degeneration of the will. The judgement and good sense of individuals in this state are perfectly intact:

The patients can exercise their will internally, mentally, according to the requirements of their reason. They can feel the desire to act; but they are powerless to act appropriately. In the depths of their understanding, there is an impossibility. (*Les Maladies*, 38)

There are parallels between this being – intelligent, quite capable of humour, still receptive to the sensations he feels, but impotent – and



both the Narrator and Charles Swann. The child protagonist of Combray is equipped with a prodigious sensibility and is excited by the idea of writing. He is open to the profound rhythms of nature, the inspirational force of the sun and the wind. His problem (a retrospective one) is to integrate these pulsations into a unified view of the world and, in addition, as the short composition on the Martinville spires demonstrates, to translate his impressions into words. Swann is almost as sensitive as the child in certain moments of deep perception, for example, when he listens to music. But both suffer from a kind of artistic inertia, for too often they abandon their efforts to get to the bottom of their impressions and to build out of them a new construction which would be their creative response.

Certain aspects of Swann's character seem composed from Théodule Ribot's formulae for diseases of the willpower. One is struck, for instance, by the emphasis on Swann's intelligence. Intelligence, Proust says elsewhere, is an organizing force that manipulates data provided to it; it cannot create anything. According to Ribot, 'intelligence is savings and will is expenditure' (*Les Maladies*, 29). Swann makes his savings on two levels, so to speak. He refuses to become involved at an emotional, personal level in exchanges of ideas, nor does he ever offer a deeply felt comment on even the most important questions: 'He appeared unwilling even to risk having an opinion, and to be at his ease only when he could furnish, with meticulous accuracy, some precise detail' (I, 116) ['Il avait l'air de ne pas oser avoir une opinion et de n'être tranquille que quand il pouvait donner méticuleusement des renseignements précis'] (I, 97).

His sensibility, his taste, his talents hold much promise, but he always opts for the facile solution while carefully protecting his reputation as a discriminating person. His predilection for things intellectual hides the fact that he has given up on any determination to explore his own individuality. According to Ribot once again, 'a malady of the will produces, as far as is possible, an individual reduced to pure intelligence' (*Les Maladies*, 50). The statement, in the introduction to *Contre Sainte-Beuve*, that its author attaches less importance to intelligence with each passing day, reads very much like an echo of Ribot from a reader taking comfort in the hope that the only way to overcome a disease of the willpower is to fully assume the disease and to accept that, in everything, the involuntary should have first priority.

The relationship Ribot constructs between intelligence and inac-

tion thus governs Swann, even if the latter retains a certain superiority over other characters in *A la recherche*. But Swann's evolution as a person resembles that of the vast majority of the society who people the novel. Proust will reiterate that these individuals live through imitation, imitation being the way of politeness and common sense which leads us not to upset appercarts, and thus not to be upset ourselves. On this particular point Ribot appears to have provided Proust with rules of conduct for his characters:

If one calculates, in each human life, what is to be attributed to automatism, *habit*, *the passions* and, above all, *imitation*, one sees that the number of purely willed acts, in the strict sense of the word, is quite small. For most men, *imitation* is sufficient; they are satisfied with what *was* the will of others and, since they think using everyone else's ideas, they act according to the will of everyone else. (*Les Maladies*, 173; the emphasis is mine.)

The role Proust assigns to art, in lines that appear to draw on the above passage very closely, is to restart life on a different footing, eliminating from it the unconscious copying of the behaviour and ideas of others: 'Our vanity, *our passions*, *our spirit of imitation*, *our habits* have long been at work, and it is the task of art to undo this work of theirs' (VI, 255) ['Ce travail qu'avaient fait notre amour-propre, *notre passion*, *notre esprit d'imitation*, notre intelligence abstraite, *nos habitudes*, c'est ce travail que l'art défera'] (IV, 475; the emphasis is mine).

Even though the Narrator experiences moments of inspiration and deep insight, his goal of becoming a writer long remains just beyond the horizon. He will experience life as dispersion and disintegration. What it lacks is a centre. The search for a fixed, stable core of personality constitutes, in one sense, the entire drama of *A la recherche*. Ribot had also identified this problem of absence at the nucleus in certain indecisive individuals who experience life only as scatteredness, and who seem to have lost the sensation of living:

My existence is incomplete; I have retained the functions and actions of ordinary life; but in each of these something is missing, that is, *the sensation that characterizes them and the joy that follows them*. . . Each one of my senses, each part of myself is separated from me, so to speak, and can no longer provide me with any sensation. (*Les Maladies*, 50–1; the emphasis is mine.)

This image of a person dispersed into tiny atoms and having lost the key to reintegrating them into a self is not so far from our vision of the Narrator. As a young person he suffers from a similar feeling of being separated from the physical objects of the outside world: he

speaks of the 'thin spiritual border' which prevents any contact. The terms 'sensation' and 'joy' from Ribot's text are weighty ones in our context: these are the two key aspects of the Proustian theory of the re-creation of life by art. It is a kind of joy resembling certainty that becomes the sign of reality emerging from the habitual: 'But it was precisely the fortuitous and inevitable fashion in which this and the other *sensations* had been encountered that proved the trueness of the past which they brought back to life . . . , since we feel, with these sensations, the effort that they make to climb back towards the light, feel in ourselves the *joy* of rediscovering the real' (VI, 233) ['la façon fortuite, inévitable, dont la *sensation* avait été rencontrée, contrôlait la vérité du passé qu'elle ressuscitait . . . puisque nous sentons son effort pour remonter vers la lumière, que nous sentons la *joie* du réel retrouvé'] (IV, 457–8; the emphasis is mine).

The Narrator's only hope resides in certain brief moments packed with vivid sensations and inexplicable joy. How can this momentary happiness be converted into lasting happiness, perpetual bliss? It is here that intellectual willpower, the will of the intellect, has its role to play. The realization that, in most individuals, willpower is a periodical thing, seems to have been confirmed by Ribot, who defined three types of willpower: firm, weak and intermittent. Assessing the incidence of these three forms from the point of view of their effectiveness, Ribot sees a hierarchy at the summit of which resides the genius, the individual whose actions seem to be a direct extension of his will:

The most perfect co-ordination is that of those with the greatest will, the great active ones, whatever their order of activity: Caesar, Michelangelo or Saint Vincent de Paul. That co-ordination may be summarized in a few words: unity, stability, strength. The exterior unity of their life is in the unity of their purpose, always pursued, which creates as circumstances evolve new co-ordinations and adaptations. But this exterior unity is, itself, but the expression of an internal unity, that of their character. It is because they remain the same that their purpose remains the same. In their heart is a powerful, inextinguishable passion that co-opts ideas for its own purposes. That passion is themselves, it is the psychic expression of their constitution as nature made it. (*Les Maladies*, 169–70)

Proust clearly does not consider himself one of the 'co-ordinated' geniuses, but the passage appears to have struck him. In a letter to Reynaldo Hahn where he examines the problem of willpower and productivity, this idea of the coherency of genius surfaces again:

for the elite, for thinkers, saints, etc., it is . . . clear that they believe one can do whatever one wishes, or rather that one is worth what one wishes, or rather what one can do. (That is, our willpower, our power over ourselves gives the measure of our worth.)

[pour les personnes d'élite, les penseurs, les saints, etc., il est . . . clair qu'ils croient qu'on peut ce qu'on veut, ou plutôt qu'on vaut ce qu'on veut, ou plutôt ce qu'on peut. (C'est-à-dire que notre volonté, notre pouvoir sur nous donne la mesure de notre valeur.)] (*Corr.*, II, 112)

Théodule Ribot's 'fine book' presents itself as an unexpected inheritance to Proust. Its argument, studded with the intuitions of a paternal figure, provides the features for a nervous hero, suffering from incapacities of the will, suspicious of intelligence, subject to intermittent poetic visions, who learns to reject pure intelligence and intellectual willpower in favour of the spontaneous, the intuitive and the involuntary. If the intense focus on memory is something particularly Proustian, the insistence that involuntary memory is the more magical genus may be read as directly related to the prominence which Ribot gives to the involuntary in his study. Among all the 'Proustian' ideas in Ribot's text, however, it may be that of intermittence that conditions most profoundly the deep structure of the novel and of life experience in the novel: 'A rung beneath this perfect co-ordination [of the genius], there are *those lives that are traversed by intermittence*, whose centre of gravity, which is ordinarily stable, oscillates from time to time' (*Les Maladies*, 170; the emphasis is mine). It is in that oscillation that all of meaningful life resides for the Proustian hero, and the notion of intermittence is transformed into a positive force, a prefiguration of the artistic meaning of the involuntary memory, itself intermittent. The universality of the aesthetic credo of *A la recherche* turns on the idea that any individual with artistic gifts can employ momentary flashes of insight and inspiration to create a durable work. Intermittence marks the life of every man, but it can be transformed into an artistic mindset that is not unlike the 'perpetual adoration' of the monk.

#### NEURASTHENIA: DIAGNOSIS AND RESPONSE

If Théodule Ribot's ideas appear as a kind of spiritual heritage into which Marcel Proust dipped to complete the psychological traits of his Narrator, it should not be forgotten that Dr Adrien Proust also

wrote a detailed analysis of the state of absent willpower which preoccupies his son in the preface to *Sésame et les lys*.

During the period 1896 to 1903, when Marcel's creative production falters, his father's publication list grows as he returns enthusiastically to his speciality, therapeutic hygiene. Dr Proust becomes general editor, for the publishing house Masson, of a series of treatment manuals for all sorts of common conditions. In 1896 he writes an important preface for the work of a colleague, Dr Eugène Brissaud, *L'Hygiène des asthmatiques*. In 1897, in conjunction with Dr Gilbert Ballet, he produces *L'Hygiène du neurasthénique*. Ballet and Dr Proust had already worked together, attempting to apply certain experimental uses of magnets that Charcot had employed with hysterics to other patients with other complaints. They had presented a paper on the topic – later published by Masson<sup>103</sup> – to a medical conference in Amsterdam. In the second edition of *L'Hygiène du neurasthénique* (1900), the editors mention three titles in the new series, *L'Hygiène du goutteux*, *L'Hygiène de l'obèse* and *L'Hygiène du diabétique*. In 1901, Adrien Proust completes the introduction to the third edition (in 1245 pages) of his very popular *Traité d'hygiène* (*Corr.*, II, 34).

Dr Proust's extremely pessimistic verdict on neurasthenia and asthma is that, once the patient has entered adolescence, he is no longer curable unless he has been taught good principles of hygiene. By their simple juxtaposition in time, *L'Hygiène du neurasthénique* and the preface to the volume on asthma stand as negative diagnoses of Marcel Proust's literary production. In 1896 Marcel had published *Les Plaisirs et les jours*, a non-homogeneous collection of short writing – stories, poems and poems in prose, pastiches – and in 1896–7 he was already in the process of abandoning *Jean Santeuil*. Any neurasthenic artist, according to the analysis of Dr Proust, would have 'production' difficulties, for his problem would by definition be an inability to persist and to follow through:

Neurasthenics try out occupations and subjects of study that seem to them likely to excite their interest and to revive their activity; but the attraction of novelty is ephemeral for them. They tire quickly, become disenchanted with their undertaking and soon abandon it to move on to other subjects (77–8).

*L'Hygiène du neurasthénique* requires careful reading for, while analysing a very modish condition, 'la maladie du siècle' as Dr Proust calls it, he is venturing on to land well tilled by his son, an

area where Marcel is as expert as the physician. The basis of the treatment Dr Proust will propose for neurasthenia – and Marcel saw this as well as anyone – was to be drawn from his recipes for proper physical hygiene.

Eugène Brissaud's 1896 study on asthma, which Marcel Proust read with care, is very much in the mould of Adrien Proust's thought. An asthmatic's treatment must involve fresh air and exercise; a day is not complete without a moment reserved for a shower, work in the gym, cycling or fencing. In his introduction to the volume, Dr Proust goes so far as to assert that sensible hygienic principles should prohibit marriages between those afflicted with nervous disorders. He appears to forget that the neurasthenia from which his son suffered would likely have been inherited from his own side of the family, from his sister Elisabeth Amiot to be precise. Already in Brissaud's study Dr Proust maintains that hygiene is the panacea for many neuroses and psychoses, especially neurasthenia, since the condition is the result of an overworked brain. But Adrien Proust also saw hygiene as a response to the ailments of society as a whole:

hygiene ... includes the study of all those conditions that ensure the prosperity of the individual and the species, which improve them morally and physically, in a word, which favour and drive their development. [The programme of the hygienist] must be at one with the aspirations of humanity and all its tendencies towards continued and indefinite improvement, improvement which may be expressed in a single word: progress.<sup>104</sup>

The style of Dr Proust, with its Homaisian potential, must have rankled Marcel, but there are other reasons for reading *L'Hygiène du neurasthénique*. Not only does this study discuss real problems faced by Marcel Proust, it dips into the same pool of images and family experiences as *A la recherche*. At times, in fact, it takes on the tone of an *avant-texte* of that novel.

Let us imagine that at a relatively early point in its evolution, Proust conceived *A la recherche du temps perdu* as the fictional autobiography of a neurasthenic. Obviously, the nervous protagonist would not end his days in total apathy, never having produced anything or having been able to rise from his moral degeneracy. He would rather suffer from a nostalgia for creative activity until a final moment of epiphany, when all hesitations would disappear. Let us examine the various contributions that Marcel's father might have

made to this composition, basing ourselves on the portrait of the neurasthenic supplied in *L'Hygiène du neurasthénique*.

One Proustian theme that is familiar to us from Proust's early stories onwards (one sees it in 'Violante et la mondanité', for example) is the culpabilization of social life, sometimes to the point where it is indistinguishable from more obviously troubled or degenerate pleasures. Some would ascribe the guilt to a kind of transfer: a young person with creative abilities wastes his genius and energies in the social round. It happens that she or he is also homosexual. The delinquency is dual, and the two-part guilt meshes into a single feeling.

Proust's correspondence shows clearly that Adrien Proust condemned his son's attraction to society life, but it is surprising to witness the degree to which, in *L'Hygiène du neurasthénique*, Dr Proust medicalizes the relationship between the taste for the social round and neuroticism:

If one reflects on the conditions of the social life as it is practised here . . . , on the excitations of every sort that it occasions, on the physical fatigue that it causes, which results almost inevitably from the habit of meals that last too long and are too copious, eaten in rooms that are often overheated, if one thinks of the late nights, the insufficient sleep, at least sleep enjoyed at regular times, it is not surprising that the social life is frequently the cause of the development of nervous asthenia. (31).

It is rare to contemplate works of science where a father appears publicly to dissect the weaknesses of his offspring. Dr Proust follows this passage with another in which he connects directly an excess of socializing and degeneracy:

There is nothing so enervating, nothing that is more likely to unbalance the nervous system and to weaken it than a single-minded preoccupation with the search for pleasure and the satisfaction of the lowest, least noble desires . . . Neurasthenia is often the legitimate though unfortunate price one pays for idleness, laziness and vanity. (32).

Adrien Proust refers to the works of Beard, but cautiously. He makes a distinction between American 'nervous exhaustion' and the continental neurosis that stems from exhaustion. Above all, he joins others in expressing his wariness about the label of neurasthenia, because the term often hides erroneous or incomplete diagnoses. (It must be said that original sin in this area is attributable to Beard himself; he spoke of the increasing popularity [*sic*] of baldness as

one of the minor but very instructive expressions of nervous sensibility.<sup>105</sup>)

In turn-of-the-century medical circles, there was acceptance of the connection between symptoms of sexual weakness (nocturnal emissions, *ejaculatio praecox*, masturbation) and the exhaustion-based neurosis described by Dr Proust.<sup>106</sup> Without perhaps wishing to be too categorical in his wording, Adrien Proust sees neurasthenia as the affliction of the effeminate male: 'These neurasthenics are almost always men: they are the «emaciated type» whose nervous system is excessively fragile and yields to the least shock' (11).

What is the origin of this fragility? For Adrien, heredity is either the main cause, or it creates a predisposition for all nervous ailments, although the condition only very rarely passes from one generation to the next in the same form. Hypochondria, migraines, irritability may affect the grandparent but transform themselves into gout or nervous weakness in the grandchild.<sup>107</sup> In the case of neurasthenia, however, heredity is presented as a factor in only about forty per cent of cases. Dr Proust's analysis seems a bit shaky here. Medically speaking, heredity does exist as a cause for neurasthenia. But he appears to feel that the life of neurotics would be too simple if they were not responsible for their condition, and he thus invokes concomitant causes, an irregular lifestyle, excessive time spent in the social round, capricious parents and even, as 'le père Norpois' will reiterate in *A la recherche*, the disastrous effects of a bad education:

One can easily see that incorrect methods of education which cause or hasten the development, in children, of bad tendencies and character faults can exercise a disastrous influence on their physical and moral energy.<sup>108</sup>

If Adrien Proust's book seems to provide, on several levels and from several points of view, a stock of images and ideas which Marcel Proust will employ to animate his novel, it is because Dr Proust's focus is on an in-house nervousness, a family affair. Speaking of the influence of family members on the behaviour of the neurotic, Adrien Proust appears to transfer into his medical text twenty-five years of disagreement with his wife on the manner in which their son should be raised:

Nothing is more likely to stir up or maintain, in these patients, depression and hypochondriacal preoccupations than the assiduous ministrations, the endless questions about their state of health and the recommendations which people in their family circle rain upon them. (80)



Proust's correspondence demonstrates that when Marcel and his mother were separated (for example, when his parents took their annual cure at Evian or Vichy), their correspondence was rife with questions and answers about his state of health.

It is impossible to judge whether Elisabeth Amiot, the sister of Adrien Proust, was as nervous in life as Aunt Léonie was in fiction, but we do know from his writings that the image of this type of female hypochondriac struck Adrien as it did Marcel:

We have seen that certain female neurasthenics, without being paralysed in any way, felt themselves completely incapable of walking and standing up and ended up confined to their bed, relegated for years at a stretch to an immobility which is deplorable. (*L'Hygiène*, 79)

When he lives with Albertine, the Narrator will understand more clearly in what ways he resembles his whole family, including his father and his aunt. The latter are both interested in the weather, the father in a more scientific and external way (the act of consulting the barometer follows him in *A la recherche* like a leitmotiv), the aunt in a more internalized fashion, for often she 'observes' the weather from her bed. Sufferers from neurasthenia are extremely sensitive to cold, heat and atmospheric change. 'It has been said correctly of some of them', notes Dr Proust in his study, 'that they were genuine living barometers' ['de véritables baromètres vivants'] (56). It is intriguing to see Proust revisiting this comparison to characterize his Narrator in this same context of family resemblances:

And as if it were not enough that I should bear an exaggerated resemblance to my father, to the extent of not being satisfied like him with consulting the barometer, but becoming a living barometer myself, as if it were not enough that I should allow myself to be ordered by my aunt Léonie to stay at home and watch the weather, from my bedroom window or even from my bed (v, 82)

[C'était assez que je ressemblasse avec exagération à mon père jusqu'à ne pas me contenter de consulter comme lui le baromètre, mais à devenir moi-même un baromètre vivant, c'était assez que je me laissasse commander par ma tante Léonie pour rester à observer le temps, mais de ma chambre ou même de mon lit?] (III, 586)

Adrien Proust examines the surface of things and employs the barometric comparison to enliven his medical text with a touch of irony. But the tiny barometric personage that inhabits the Narrator is affiliated, via his pure joy, to the self that recognizes the essence of experiences, the self that is capable, in spite of his nervous ailments,

of reliving important sensations in order to transform them into creative energy.

The process of internalizing paternal ideas has its stages: reading/absorption, a parodic rewriting, repudiation by inverting value systems, and a final assertion that becomes an apotheosis. The older he gets and the more his literary inactivity weighs upon him, the more Marcel Proust retires from society life. It is clear, however, that he is not ready to accept the values that his father would substitute for the social ones. Admonitions like the ones we have seen from Dr Proust reappear in ironic surroundings in *A la recherche*, often in language marked by heavy parody.<sup>109</sup>

Dr Proust's diagnosis of the neurasthenic identifies additional factors that are central to the aesthetic preoccupations of his son Marcel. Some of these dovetail closely with certain ideas of Théodule Ribot. *L'Hygiène du neurasthénique* returns constantly to the feeble determination of neurasthenics, the 'ineffectiveness ['impuissance'] of their intellectual faculties' (48), which they are not prepared to admit. Their inertia makes any complex intellectual task, any serious effort at co-ordination of thought, impossible, and leaves the patient full of hesitation and self-doubt (74–80). One description of the problems that affect the memory of neurasthenics and, as a consequence, the stable core of their personality, recalls Ribot and prefigures the Narrator's inability to recall the real content of his life through his conscious, voluntary memory:

The evoking of memories is defective because [neurasthenics] are incapable of sustaining the effort of attention required by *the search for lost memories* [*la recherche du souvenir perdu*]; because most of the events that took place after the onset of their malady are only weakly perceived by them and are therefore not strongly linked to their conscious personality. (76; the emphasis is mine.)

This impossible search for a lost memory could be seen as a paternal challenge. The young Narrator is at first duped, adopting the reasonable but superficial point of view that our conscious personality is involved in the search. At the same time, this medical text proposes a programme for mnemonic education, the education of the Narrator who has been alerted to the importance of the unconscious and who will, henceforth, direct his efforts towards the conquering of the essence of his experience.

I see anchored here, in this medical text, parts of the foundation for a narrating character who is not only congenitally naïve, but who

suffers from the conscious impression of a lack of cohesion at the centre of his existence, just like certain patients described by Ribot. The inability to sustain intellectual effort, according to Adrien Proust's study, means that the neurasthenic cannot resist the incursion of external ideas and influences:

They are often obsessed by some fixed idea, some hypochondriacal preoccupation and live, so to speak, in a state of perpetual *distraction* . . . This is one cause for their perceiving the events which they witness in a vague and uncertain manner. They are thus incapable of relocating them in their memory even when they are still recent. (76–7)

The result of this weakening of the personality, according to Dr Proust, is a relaxing of the links that ensure the synthesis of the self. What is left is a personality open to surrounding influences, naïve, infinitely suggestible (166), and, as we have seen, living out daily experience with only a tenuous recollection of events.

Suggestibility is one of the Narrator's most basic characteristics. The word strikes us, because it is imposed with great force from the opening page of *Du Côté de chez Swann* where one contemplates the Narrator marvellously at ease in a state of half-sleep in which he cannot distinguish between past and present, between the various rooms in which he has slept, between dream and reality. It is around this episode of the 'dormeur éveillé' that the first line of *A la recherche* crystallized and the work finally took off.

It is absorbing to see Dr Proust employ this same image, in a concrete, medicalized way, when he discusses certain treatments available to neurasthenics – treatments that are in fact drawn from the field of hysteria. But the image of the neurasthenic which Dr Proust presents us is, for once, that of a patient enjoying all aspects of his willpower, who seems to control the direction of his experiences even when apparently hypnotized:

The 'state of sleep' generally imposed on neurasthenics, which corresponds to the first stages of hypnosis according to the classification of M. Bernheim, is quite different from true induced hypnosis. Patients do not lose their self-awareness: they take part in the 'session' in spite of having their eyes closed and feeling happy to be absent and to be sleeping. They are sleepers who are awake ['dormeurs éveillés']. Hence, when they obey the verbal suggestions of their doctor after waking, they do not act by virtue of a real unconscious and involuntary suggestion. The mental phenomenon that takes place has but the appearance of suggestion, and is quite different. The instruction they have received has been received in full consciousness; it has not escaped monitoring by their personality. (192)

Willpower is the one thing which Dr Proust refused to admit his son possessed. It is true that he inculcated in him a desire, almost an obsession for it. *A la recherche* is a kind of epic search for artificial willpower, that is, of the conscious variety. But in the state of hypersuggestibility that is hypnosis, and which Dr Proust calls the state of the ‘dormeur éveillé’, the doctor appears to concede to his patient a special kind of willpower, for the latter is quite conscious of every experience that happens to him. Superimposing two states of consciousness, one present, one remembered or sensorially related, will become the technique for releasing the unchanging essence of the Narrator’s personality.

It is hard to resist the question: How much does the dream-state overture of *A la recherche*, so poorly understood at first, so static, so mysterious and opaque, owe to Dr Proust? How much does the narrative, that long, curvilinear quest for willpower, which ends in an enshrining of the involuntary, owe to the desire of the nerve-wounded son Marcel to play with the figure of the neurasthenic in all the senses proposed by his father’s medical manual in order to make of it a literary creation a hundred times more subtle and many-faceted than the humiliating portrait painted by Dr Adrien Proust?

Marcel’s interest in the potential connections between artistic creativity and ailments like neurasthenia and hysteria was intense. His manipulation of his father’s medical ideology, his recontexting of Ribot’s ideas on spontaneous willpower, his attraction to some of the Goncourts’ attempts to translate nervous conditions into literature, all these show Proust struggling to devise an original, creative alternative to some of the medical diagnoses that provided pat answers to these questions. In a sense, however, this struggle was the easy part of Proust’s task, for irony and laughter were his great strong points. The central problem he had to face was also nerve-related, but much more complex. Like Flaubert, he would have to work painstakingly at the construction of a literary form using as building blocks the object of his most basic anxiety, words. Proust’s concern about the viability of language itself is the subject of our next chapter.