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## Eternity in Art: The Embodiment and Transcendence of Time in Proust and Messiaen

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**Eternity in Art:**  
**The Embodiment and Transcendence of Time**  
**in Proust and Messiaen**

Senior Project submitted to  
The Division of Languages and Literature  
of Bard College

By  
Yichun (Helen) Wu

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“Not a footstep was to be heard on any of the paths. Quartering the topmost branches of one of the tall trees, an invisible bird was striving to make the day seem shorter, exploring with a long-drawn note the solitude that pressed it on every side, but it received at once so unanimous an answer, so powerful a repercussion of silence and of immobility, that one felt it had arrested for all eternity the moment which it had been trying to make pass more quickly.”

——Marcel Proust, *Swann's Way*

*(In Search of Lost Time)*

“The abyss is Time, with its dreariness and gloom. The birds are the opposite of Time, they represent our longing for light, for stars, for rainbows, and for jubilant song!”

——Olivier Messiaen, on “Abyss of the Birds”

*(Quartet for the End of Time)*

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## Introduction

In the winter of 1940-41, in a war camp at Gryazovets in the Soviet Union, a special series of lectures on Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* was given to the captives. When these lectures were translated and published as a book in 2018, the New York Review of Books presented it in this way:

During the Second World War, as a prisoner of war in a Soviet camp, and with nothing but memory to go on, the Polish artist and soldier Józef Czapski brought Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* to life for an audience of prison inmates. ...[I]n reckoning with Proust's great meditation on memory, Czapski helped his fellow officers to remember that there was a world apart from the world of the camp.<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps not coincidentally, thousands of miles away from the Soviet camp, a similar event was taking place in the camp in Görlitz, Silesia. This time, it was not a lecture on Proust's novel but a performance of a quartet titled "For the End of Time" by Olivier Messiaen. On January 15 of the year 1941, along with two other instrumentalists as well as the composer himself on piano, cellist E. T. Pasquier performed in a special concert in Stalag VIII A. It was a special premiere with hundreds of captives as its audience, so special that it could not be found elsewhere in music history. In dedication to the memory of the performance, Pasquier writes:

The camp of Görlitz... Barrack 27B, our theater... Outside, night, snow, misery... Here, a miracle... The quartet "for the end of time" transports us to a wonderful Paradise, lifts us from this abominable earth. Thank you immensely, dear Olivier Messiaen, poet of Eternal Purity.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See the back cover of Józef Czapski's *Lost Time: Lectures on Proust in a Soviet Prison Camp*, trans. Eric Karpeles (New York, NY: New York Review of Books, 2018).

<sup>2</sup> Étienne Pasquier, quoted in Rebecca Rischin, *For the End of Time: The Story of the Messiaen Quartet*, new ed. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006), 70.

A connection is being made when I put these two stories together. In the Soviet camp, Czapski helped his fellow inmates see through Proust's novel that there was another world apart from the world they were living in, and the reality they had seen around them might not be the only true reality. Just like how Proust made his readers see the world beyond the abominable situation, Messiaen helped his audience—the prisoners who shared a similar experience with him in the war camp—to capture spiritual freedom through the *Quartet*, which was described as being “attesting to the eternal freedom of the spirit over the temporal captivity of the body.”<sup>3</sup>

Written for violin, clarinet, cello and piano, Messiaen's *Quartet For the End of Time* has been regarded as one of the most important compositions in the history of Western music, not only for his achievement in producing the heavenly and almost timeless soundscape, but also for the unspeakably difficult circumstance behind the compositional process. The historical background of the *Quartet* had a direct impact on the way in which the composer conceived and accomplished the composition, and the efforts made by Messiaen to realize the conception and prepare for the premiere in the camp granted a legendary halo around this 50-minute long piece consisting of 8 movements. When people praise the impressive beauty of this signature work, how many of them would think of the fact that it was actually written by the composer in captivity?

In May 1940, Messiaen was captured by the Germans and imprisoned in Stalag VIII A. As Messiaen himself described, during the winter it was dreadfully cold; one of the musicians playing in the premiere of the *Quartet* joked bitterly that “the barracks were actually heated by ‘living furnaces’.”<sup>4</sup> Besides the coldness, the shortage of food and water was also a huge

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<sup>3</sup> Rischin, *For the End of Time*, 6.

<sup>4</sup> Étienne Pasquier, quoted in Rischin, *For the End of Time*, 24.

problem, which undoubtedly added insult to injury for the captives. According to Messiaen's second wife Yvonne Loriod, who must have been informed of the story by Messiaen himself, "thousands of soldiers literally fought each other in order to get a drink of water... Messiaen had nothing to eat all day except a bowl of soup with whale fat at noon and that he and his fellow prisoners consoled each other by reciting menus and recipes to each other."<sup>5</sup> In addition, because of the chaotic living condition in Messiaen's barrack which housed roughly 200 prisoners, Messiaen sometimes stayed in the camp latrines in order to have a tranquil environment to compose. As Loriod recalled, a German officer once told Messiaen: "I am going to lock you up in the latrines, so that you can be left to work quietly,"<sup>6</sup> although imaginably, the prisoner's toilets were used by 3,000 people and thus "weren't very clean."<sup>7</sup>

In the actual process of composition and preparation for the performance, the instruments that the ensemble members used had to be shared with many other musicians in captivity. As violinist Le Boulaire said,

there were 40,000 [actually about 30,000] men there and there were four or five violins, one or two cellos, and one piano, .... The only personal instrument was Akoka's clarinet. ...we had to share all this. This resulted in a horrible situation. How could one manage to play something like Messiaen's *Quartet* under these conditions? It was very difficult.<sup>8</sup>

Even the piano Messiaen played on, which was the last instrument available for the entire ensemble, was in a very bad condition. As Messiaen said, "[the] upright piano... was extremely out-of-tune, whose keys intermittently stuck."<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Rischin, *For the End of Time*, 14&23. See also Peter Hill, "Interview with Yvonne Loriod," *Messiaen Companion*, 290-91.

<sup>6</sup> Loriod, quoted in Rischin, 28.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Jean Le Boulaire, interview, 3 March 1995, quoted in Rischin, *For the End of Time*, 33.

<sup>9</sup> Messiaen, quoted in Rischin, 36.



While the *Quartet* was composed and rehearsed under so arduous a circumstance, the music itself was nonetheless aspiring. In his own preface to the *Quartet*, Messiaen described his work as one that could “bring the listener closer to infinity, to eternity in space.”<sup>10</sup> It was partly for the fact that the composition was directly inspired by a passage from the *Book of Revelation* in the *New Testament*, in which Saint John says:

I saw a mighty angel descending from heaven, clad in mist, having around his head a rainbow. His face was like the sun, his feet like pillars of fire. He placed his right foot on the sea, his left on the earth, and standing thus on the sea and the earth he lifted his hand toward heaven and swore by Him who liveth for ever and ever, saying: “There shall be time no longer, but at the day of the trumpet of the seventh angel the mystery of God shall be consummated.”<sup>11</sup>

Messiaen has eloquently expressed his perspective on eternity and suspension of the linear time on a religious sphere. “As I’m a believer, as I’m Catholic,” says Messiaen, “the questions of survival, of the Resurrection, of Eternity, of the suspension of time and space have very much preoccupied me.”<sup>12</sup> Constructing a “music cathedral” on a religious realm, Messiaen eventually succeeded in delivering spiritual consolation to his fellow inmates, setting them free by giving them a light of hope through music.

At Gryazovets in the Soviet Union, the captives also caught a moment of spiritual tranquility through art. Józef Czapski recalls how his fellow inmates, during those lectures and presentations in the camp at night, “packed together underneath portraits of Marx, Engels, and Lenin, listening intently to lectures on themes very far removed from the reality we faced at that time.”<sup>13</sup> In the camp, they were looking for a spiritual nourishment against the abominable

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<sup>10</sup> Messiaen, preface to the score of *Quartet For the End of Time*.

<sup>11</sup> *Revelation*, X.

<sup>12</sup> See *Olivier Messiaen - La Liturgie de Cristal*, directed by Olivier Mille, 2009.

<sup>13</sup> Czapski, *Lost Time*, 7.

surroundings, as Czapski explains: “there [in the tight living quarters at Starobielsk] we tried to take up a kind of intellectual work that would help us overcome our depression and anguish, and to protect our brains from the rust of inactivity.”<sup>14</sup> Then he thought of Proust. What Proust did in his novel is undoubtedly aspiring. He conveys a message through the novel that death, which is the end of time for each individual, is not to be feared. As written on the back cover of *Lost Time*, “Proust had staked the art of the novelist against the losses of a lifetime and the imminence of death. Recalling that triumphant wager, ... Czapski showed to men at the end of their tether that the past remained present and that there was a future in which to hope.”<sup>15</sup>

Proust and Messiaen shared a commonality in the struggle they were undergoing during the process of composition. Although Proust did not write *In Search of Lost Time* during the war, he was almost on his deathbed especially towards the end of his compositional period. From 1908 when Proust first conceived and started to write the prologue to “Contre Sainte-Beuve” to the time of Proust’s death on 18 November 1922 when *ISOLT* was close to its completion, the years of writing extended over a decade<sup>16</sup>. During those years, Proust suffered from irregular sleep patterns and asthma, which got terribly worse after his mother’s death in 1905. In the last few years of his life, Proust was largely confined in his room and entirely devoted himself to the world of literature.

Like Messiaen, Proust’s struggle was not limited to his physical pain. Marcel, the narrator-protagonist in *ISOLT*, is very much like Proust’s reflection in the fictional world. Just as the title of the novel indicates, the narrator recounts the journey of a writer (i.e. the narrator

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<sup>14</sup> Czapski, *Lost Time*, 5.

<sup>15</sup> See the back cover of Józef Czapski’s *Lost Time: Lectures on Proust in a Soviet Prison Camp*.

<sup>16</sup> In some parts of *Contre Sainte-Beuve*, especially the prologue, Proust discusses the role of intellect played in human experience and the discovery of involuntary memory that is able to bring back the past sensations. These ideas were later developed in *ISOLT*.

himself) who has been in search of a long lost past, and it is the past that occupies him, which was once considered unrestorable. In one instance, when Marcel vividly recalls how his grandmother stooped to unfasten his boots and how much he now needs her by his side, the fact that she is no longer there haunts him. “And now that this same need had reawakened,” says the narrator, “I knew that I might wait hour after hour, that she would never again be by my side. I had only just discovered this because I had only just... learned that I had lost her for ever.”<sup>17</sup> As I have mentioned that Marcel is the fictive shadow of Proust, here the pronoun “her” is not exclusively referring to Marcel’s grandmother but Proust’s mother as well, who died two years before Proust started to write the novel. At the same time, knowing in the present that the person is no longer there and recalling the memory of the past in which she is still alive, Marcel says that he “struggled to endure the anguish of this contradiction.”<sup>18</sup>

Contradiction like this is also seen in his remembrance of the places which has changed so much over the years. Méséglise is no longer the same path in his childhood memory but “a part of history” which has survived through bullets and debris in the first world war. In one letter that Marcel receives from Gilberte, she writes:

Probably, like me, you did not imagine that obscure Roussainville and boring Méséglise, where our letters used to be brought from and where the doctor was once fetched when you were ill, would ever be famous places... The French blew up the little bridge over the Vivonne which you said did not remind you of your childhood as much as you would have wished...<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Marcel Proust, *Sodom and Gomorrah*, trans. C. K. Moncrieff and Terence Kilmartin, ed. D. J. Enright (New York: Modern Library, 1993), 213.

<sup>18</sup> Proust, *Sodom and Gomorrah*, 213.

<sup>19</sup> Marcel Proust, *Time Regained: & a Guide to Proust*, trans. Andreas Mayor and Terence Kilmartin, ed. D. J. Enright (New York: Modern Library, 1999), 95-96.

Méséglise is not the same Méséglise, and Vivonne is not the same Vivonne. The places in the past and the ones in the present are indeed different to those who have seen, walked, and lived there. The images of these places that remain in Marcel's memory can never be found again in the present physical world. In other words, he can recall it and think about it, but it cannot be re-lived. Marcel is entangled in these matters that remain forever in the past and in the time passing that can not be captured. The end, meaning the moment of death, is concerned by the protagonist as well as Proust himself, with his deadline approaching, knowing that there might not be enough time left for him to complete the literary project.

Is this not the matter that actually preoccupies us all? In a way, the subject of both the *Quartet* and *ISOLT* reflects a universal and timeless concern about time. Both Messiaen and Proust emphasized the importance of time in their works, embodied their understanding of time in their practices, and suggested the possibility of being “out” of time through art; these works even take one a fairly long period of time to experience. However, the question is: how do they manage to embody such an abstract subject as time in a substantive composition and even go beyond it to help their readers and listeners to catch a sense of spiritual eternity?

In order to further investigate the embodiment and elimination of time in these two works, this project will look closely at the compositional practices in *ISOLT* and the *Quartet*, especially on the structures and techniques that are directly related to time. In the first chapter of the project, I will introduce and further explain Messiaen's and Proust's motivations and the conceptions of their works, including the spiritual and religious consolation Messiaen relied on during his time in the camp and Proust's philosophical ideas about involuntary memory and literature. The main focus in the second chapter will be the one of the several compositional

practices each of them has made to suspend temporality: the suspended chronology in Proust as well as the elimination and manipulation of musical time in Messiaen. In Chapter three, I will examine the “teleological end” of these two compositions, making a statement that both Proust and Messiaen eluded the end by using special techniques, especially the cyclic motion seen in both works that create an infinite loop. In the last chapter, I will look at the experience of reading Proust and listening to Messiaen from a historical and personal perspective, with the idea in mind that the reception of an artwork is the determinative key to the accomplishment of the artist.

Through this project, I want to demonstrate how Messiaen and Proust experimented with the possibilities of embodying and transcending temporality that is usually considered abstract and teleological. Instead of maintaining that time irreversibly moves forward (i.e. from the past, to the present and then towards the future), Proust and Messiaen led their audience to observe, to understand, and to experience how time could be under human control in a specific way, suggesting that spiritual transcendence beyond time is achievable through art. By putting in one single project *ISOLT* and the *Quartet*, Proust and Messiaen, literature and music, I want to investigate the similarities and differences in their approaches to time and duration in art, and obtain a better understanding of one through the analysis of the other.

## Chapter I: Messiaen's Religious Inspiration and Proust's Philosophical Motivation

The notion of time and temporality played an important role in the conception of Messiaen's *Quartet* and Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*. Not every artist gets inspiration directly from "time," and not every artist would make great attempts to embody this intangible substance in the work of art. Before looking closely at the practices that Proust and Messiaen actually did to embody and transcend time, it is worthwhile to explain in further detail what has been introduced before: how their works were conceived in the first place, and how these conceptions are related to time.

As explained in the introduction, Messiaen suffered from the terrible living condition during his captivity in Stalag VIII A. As a composer, he was greatly affected by the deprivation in the camp:

It was an era of dreadful despair...I found myself in Silesia, a prisoner of war...I was persuaded that I had forgotten everything about music, that I would never again be capable of doing another harmonic analysis, that never again in my life would I be able to compose.<sup>20</sup>

His desperation and fear were also observed by those around him. The son of Henri Akoka who was the clarinetist playing in the premiere of the *Quartet* and a great friend of Messiaen, recalled that "Messiaen had lost the will to compose" in captivity.<sup>21</sup> The circumstance behind the *Quartet* was perhaps too striking for Messiaen to recount it faithfully, as he exaggerated in the description of that situation. Describing the entire experience of composing and performing the *Quartet*, Messiaen recalled that Étienne Pasquier had to play on a cello which had only 3 strings,

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<sup>20</sup> Olivier Messiaen, quoted in Rischin, *For the End of Time*, 51. See also Brigitte Massin, *Messiaen*, 154.

<sup>21</sup> Phillipe Akoka, quoted in Rischin, 15.

which was later said to be wrong by the cellist himself. As Pasquier conjectured, Messiaen's exaggeration might have "stemmed from his desire to illustrate the hardships the musicians faced in performing the piece."<sup>22</sup> In other words, only an exaggeration in the description could truthfully convey what he mentally underwent in captivity.

In such a difficult time, Messiaen's religious belief gradually came to dominate the way in which he was looking at the world around him. His Catholic faith not only helped him survive through the deprivation but also inspired him to compose the *Quartet*. In his own preface to the music, Messiaen clearly indicates where his sense of hope came from:

I told them that the quartet was written for the end of time,  
for the end of the past and future,  
for the start of eternity.  
I based it on "Revelation" when Saint John says, . . .  
"I saw a mighty angel descending from heaven, clad in mist, having around his  
head a rainbow. . . ."<sup>23</sup>

Even in the camp, he carried with him a collection of religious texts in his backpack, including "the Gospels, the Epistles, Revelation, and the Imitation<sup>24</sup>," all of which greatly enlightened and inspired him. He says: "I read and reread it constantly, and I paused upon this vision of Saint John, the angel crowned with a rainbow. I found in it a glimmer of hope," which then became a "cornerstone" of the *Quartet*.<sup>25</sup>

Nevertheless, not everyone entangled in that abominable situation would sit down and read those religious texts in a good state of mind; they might not even think of it. What is miraculous about Messiaen's experience is this: what he could not realize nor obtain in the

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<sup>22</sup> Rischin, *For the End of Time*, 66. See also Pasquire, in Hannelore Lauerwald, "Er musizierte mit Olivier Messiaen," 23.

<sup>23</sup> Messiaen, preface to the score of *Quartet For the End of Time*.

<sup>24</sup> Referring to the *Imitation of Christ*.

<sup>25</sup> Messiaen, quoted in Rischin, 51.

external world came to him in his dreams. To put it in Rebecca Rischin's words, "the physical deprivation that he experienced in captivity led him to have colored dreams—quasi-hallucinations..."<sup>26</sup> These colored visions were then projected into the external reality and reminded him of all those colors in the Apocalypse. He says in an interview,

I saw in the Apocalypse that there were a lot of colors, notably two complementary colors, green and red. There was an emerald sea before the celestial throne—this is the color green—and then there was red in several places... Finally, there was an extraordinary being,... an angel crowned with a rainbow—the symbol of all colors—and this tremendous angel,... immense, greater than our planet... lifted his hand toward the heavens and said: 'There will be no more Time!'"<sup>27</sup>

Many tableaux in this recount are familiar to those who have read Messiaen's preface to the *Quartet*, because these images, such as the angel, the rainbow, and the characteristic declaration that "there will be no more time," are exactly the ones he used in his commentary on each movement of the *Quartet*. These colored visions in his dream led him to reread the Apocalypse, which in turn inspired him to compose the music under a religious halo.

Interestingly, these colors didn't come to his dream by accident. For Messiaen, colors functioned almost as a bridge between sound, which he largely played with as a musician, and the divine light, to which he looked up with reverence as a Catholic. Messiaen was not the first composer that established the sound-color relationship, but for him specifically, colors had a direct connection with divinity and religious revelation. He was obsessed with the stained-glass windows of the Catholic churches, which he saw for the first time as a child in the Sainte Chapelle in Paris. "For me, that was a shining revelation, which I've never forgotten," says Messiaen, "and this first impression as a child...became a key experience for my later musical

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<sup>26</sup> Rebecca Rischin, *For the End of Time: The Story of the Messiaen Quartet*, new ed. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006), 50.

<sup>27</sup> Messiaen, quoted in Rischin, 51.



thinking.”<sup>28</sup> Given the gift of synaesthesia, Messiaen was able to see different combinations of colors when he heard different music chords, which eventually led to his creation of a system of modes that have a limited number of transpositions.<sup>29</sup> According to Messiaen, every transposition of each mode is linked to a specific group of color. For instance, the first transposition of Mode 2 represents “blue-violet rocks speckled with little gray cubes, cobalt blue, deep Prussian blue, highlighted by a bit of violet-purple, gold, red, ruby, and stars of mauve, black, and white,” while its second transposition depicts “gold and silver spirals against a background of brown and ruby-red vertical stripes. Gold and brown are dominant.”<sup>30</sup> He used this specific mode in the second movement of the *Quartet* to create a rainbow image and bring out the “gentle cascades of blue-orange chords” in the piano part.<sup>31</sup>

The purpose of introducing the modes of limited transposition is not to get into the details about how specific chords can generate various colors for those who have synesthesia but to demonstrate the fact that colors, specifically the color seen on a stained-glass window in a religious space, play an essential role in Messiaen’s music. If the colored vision that Messiaen saw in his dreams motivated him to reread the religious texts, then his religious faith and his belief that it is possible to somehow capture a sense of spiritual eternity contributed to his conception of the music.

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<sup>28</sup> Messiaen, quoted in Rischin, *For the End of Time*, 56.

<sup>29</sup> The system is called “modes of limited transposition.” According to Messiaen, “these modes are formed of several symmetrical groups, the last note of each group always being common with the first of the following group. At the end of a certain number of chromatic transpositions which varies with each mode, they are no longer transposable...” See Messiaen, *The Technique of My Musical Language*, Vol. 1, Chapter XVI.

<sup>30</sup> Messiaen, quoted in Claude Samuel, E. Thomas Glasow, and Olivier Messiaen, *Olivier Messiaen: Music and Color : Conversations with Claude Samuel* (Portland, OR: Amadeus Press, 1994), 64.

<sup>31</sup> Messiaen, preface to the score of the *Quartet for the End of Time*.

Messiaen's Catholic faith was a great mental support even in the most difficult times. The belief was so strong that he was able to look beyond the surroundings and believe in a greater good even when "the immediate world seemed to be teetering on the edge of an apocalypse."<sup>32</sup> The light he saw through that "stained-glass window" even shed into the life of the others, which created "a 'Messiaenic' effect" as Rebecca Rischin called it.<sup>33</sup> He became a liberator of the soul, as he almost promised his fellow musicians a second coming of Christ. The musicians around Messiaen more or less found hope through him, no matter whether they were religious or not, no matter whether they were optimistic or pessimistic about the situation. The cellist Étienne Pasquier says: "We had faith in Messiaen, and we had faith that the war would come to an end."<sup>34</sup> Importantly, Messiaen did not achieve it through preaching. He once claimed in an interview that the goal of a religious artwork is to prove that even if a person, especially an artist, does not share with you the same religious faith, through different ways you both can reach the same end.<sup>35</sup> Messiaen managed to transfer the hope and light from the religious sphere to the musical world where his spirit reached those who were non-religious. The violinist Le Boulaire, who was non-religious and much more pessimistic about their situation, says: "I admit that... well, I cried certain evenings. But all of a sudden, Messiaen would begin to sing. That's what made me really stumble over the question of the divine"; and sensing Messiaen's spiritual tranquility through music, Le Boulaire even says to himself after hearing Messiaen's music: "God..."<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Rischin, *For the End of Time*, 43.

<sup>33</sup> Rischin, 43.

<sup>34</sup> Pasquier, quoted in Rischin, 43.

<sup>35</sup> Messiaen was talking about his opera *Saint Francis of Assisi*. See Claude Samuel, *Music and Color*, 249.

<sup>36</sup> Rischin, 44.

Just like what Messiaen said, there are many different ways in which people can reach the same end. For those who do not share the Catholic faith with him and thus not able to imagine a spiritual transcendence, Messiaen's music becomes a carrier that brings them to a peaceful and timeless realm<sup>37</sup>. To a certain extent, what Messiaen's music manages to do is similar to what Proust's writing does. Each of these two works is created as an attempt of each artist to capture the ungraspable and make it available to their beholders. Unlike Messiaen who got inspiration from his Catholic faith which he was born with as he claimed, Proust conceived his project from a philosophical idea about regaining time through memory and art. Proust as well as his narrator-protagonist in the novel realize at the end of their life that, when death is approaching and there will soon be no more time for them, literature is a reliable medium to resurrect the past.

The revelation of the imminent end (i.e. death) comes to the protagonist of *ISOLT* for the first time when he goes into a party at the Guermantes after several years of seclusion in a sanatorium. He meets several acquaintances there, but at the same time he notices that everyone he knew has changed and become almost unrecognizable. He describes it as if he has accidentally stepped into a masquerade where everyone is wearing a mask, but the truth is that, as he later realizes, it is an intangible mask called "time" that everyone has to put on. This transformation is the inevitable result of aging. At the moment of revelation, the narrator writes:

...I felt that the success of the disguise was no longer in any way flattering because the transformation was not intentional. And I realised something that I had not suspected when I entered the room a few minutes earlier: the every party, grand or simple, which takes place after a long interval in which one has ceased to go into society, provided that it brings together some of the people whom one knew in the past, gives one the impression of a masquerade, ...at which one is most genuinely "intrigued" by the identity of the other guests, but with the novel

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<sup>37</sup> For the experience of listening to the *Quartet*, see Chapter IV.

feature that the disguises, which were assumed long ago against their wearers' will, cannot, when the party is over, be wiped off with the make-up.<sup>38</sup>

As Marcel alludes to in this passage, the change is unintentional; it is "assumed long ago" and carried out gradually, against people's will. Men are always in a passive position, waiting for the changes to be brought to them by time which, as it passes, transforms everybody into a different person.

Looking at those whom he knew before and now seem to be unrecognizable, Marcel thinks he is looking into "a peepshow of the years,"<sup>39</sup> without realizing at first that he has grown old as well. It is until he sees himself in the eyes of the others and hears the Duchess of Guermantes call him "my oldest friend" that he understands he is not a mere audience of the peepshow but an important part of it. It reveals to him that the end of his life is getting closer and closer, as he claims: "at last I... became aware as I had never been before... of the time which had passed for them, a notion which brought with it the overwhelming revelation that it had passed also for me. And their old age, in itself a matter of indifference to me, froze my blood by announcing to me the approach of my own."<sup>40</sup>

The revelation of aging and time passing immediately reminds Marcel that he might not have enough time to finish his book which he has just decided to embark on, but in the meanwhile, the truth he learns also contributes to the subject of his project. In other words, without the years he has lived and all those memories he has, he might not have known what to write about. From the very beginning of the novel, where this composition initially springs from

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<sup>38</sup> Marcel Proust, *Time Regained: & a Guide to Proust*, trans. Andreas Mayor and Terence Kilmartin, ed. D. J. Enright (New York: Modern Library, 1999), 340.

<sup>39</sup> See Proust, *Time Regained*, 344.

<sup>40</sup> Proust, 345-346.

is already hinted at: memory, one of the keys to the entire project. In his prologue to *Contre Sainte-Beuve*<sup>41</sup>, Proust talks about the effort people tend to make when trying to recall the things past. It is usually done through voluntary memory, the work of our intellect, but what comes through is still the past that has already turned colorless. In other words, the sensations brought back through voluntary memory are not truly revived. Achieving nothing after making efforts through the work of the intellect, Proust claims: “It is not merely that intellect can lend no hand in these resurrections; these past hours will only hide themselves away in objects where intellect has not tried to embody them.”<sup>42</sup>

The true resurrection of the past rarely happens in our life, but it does sometimes occur through our involuntary memory which, however, comes merely by chance. In the novel, right before he steps into the room where the party is taking place, Marcel experiences one of the most important moments in his life, in which the past has been brought back in the present and *as* the present through a series of involuntary memories awakened by accident. The uneven stone he incidentally stepped onto in Venice, the noise of a hammer knocking against the wheel of a train, the touch of the towel he used to dry his face at Balbec, all of these lost sensations are now back to life through the simplest events and subtlest feelings he encounters in the present, which help to build a bridge orienting to the past. It is considered as the biggest revelation in this book because Marcel, after contemplating on the cause of the resurrection, realizes that involuntary memories are able to bring back the past and restore the long-lost time at least for a moment. At that moment, he feels to be an “extra-temporal being...unalarmed by the vicissitudes of the

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<sup>41</sup> *Contre Sainte-Beuve* was written between 1895 and 1900.

<sup>42</sup> Marcel Proust, "Prologue" to *Contre Sainte-Beuve* in *Marcel Proust on Art and Literature 1896-1919*, Sylvia Townsend Warner (trans.), (NY: Carroll & Graf Publishers, 1997), 21.

future.”<sup>43</sup> There is no more temporality, no more partitions distinguishing the past from the present. As an extra-temporal being at that moment, Marcel is beyond time.

But as Marcel acknowledges soon afterwards, being “out” of time is only momentary: “this species of optical illusion... could not last for long.”<sup>44</sup> In other words, restoring the past through involuntary memory is unreliable not only because involuntary memories are awakened totally by chance but also for the fact that the reawakened sensations doom to disappear even if they do occasionally emerge. The sensation resurrected is fugitive, and it slips away quickly. With that in mind, Marcel asks himself by what means he would be able to immobilise the ephemerally revived sensations and keep the past alive as if it were a perpetual present. The answer is: the work of art.

In both the “prologue” to *Contre Sainte-Beuve* and the novel, there are many instances where the narrator “I” makes an attempt to capture the fugitive sensations through writing, even though most of his attempts fail. In the prologue, Proust writes:

I remember how once when I was travelling by train I strove to draw impressions from the passing landscape, I wrote about the little country churchyard while it was still passing before my eyes, I noted down the bright bars of sunlight on the trees, the wayside flowers like those in *Le Lys dans la Vallée*.<sup>45</sup>

However, simply noting down what he sees cannot immobilize that moment. He is still not able to feel what he exactly felt for the first time, and what he recalls in the present is merely a “pallid ghost.”<sup>46</sup> Interestingly, as he mentions later on, when he does involuntarily recall that landscape one day, all the sensations accidentally come back to him lively except for what he has noted

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<sup>43</sup> Proust, *Time Regained*, 262.

<sup>44</sup> Proust, *Time Regained*, 265.

<sup>45</sup> Proust, “Prologue” to *Contre Sainte-Beuve*, 22.

<sup>46</sup> Proust, 22.

down. It proves that what's written is a mere contour without a concrete core that can survive through time.

Marcel's first piece of writing in *ISOLT* is about the steeples of Martinville; the impression that the first sight of it gives him is "so greatly enhanced" that he is "overpowered by a sort of intoxication" to think of anything else<sup>47</sup>. Although this piece of writing has nothing significant, and even the writer himself does not give it a second thought after its completion, writing as a way of capturing and keeping the fugitive things has been partly revealed at the opening stage of the novel. Over the following thousands of pages, Marcel has forgone his ambition to be a writer many times, for he thinks that he lacks the talent and does not really know what to write about. The back and forth between attempting to write and giving up on the project only comes to an end after he experiences a series of involuntary memories in *Time Regained*. The involuntary memory as the key to the resurrection of the past makes him realize that the essence of life is truly everlasting and thus makes him conceive what his prospective project should be about.

"The true paradises are the paradises that we have lost," writes Proust.<sup>48</sup> When the past awakened through memory and the present emerge side by side, it is always the past that seems to be more appealing; as the protagonist says in *Time Regained*:

Always the present scene had come off victorious, and always the vanquished one had appeared to me the more beautiful of the two, so beautiful that I had remained in a state of ecstasy on the uneven paving-stones or before the cup of tea, endeavouring to prolong or to reproduce the momentary appearances of the Combray or the Balbec or the Venice which invaded only to be driven back...<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Proust, *Swann's Way*, 255.

<sup>48</sup> Proust, *Time Regained*, 261.

<sup>49</sup> Proust, 267.

The desire to prolong and reproduce the moment of the past is the motivation for him to embark on his project at last, as he clearly knows by that point: the work of art is the only firm promise of the resurrection. For both Proust and his narrator-protagonist Marcel, being a man close to his death, literature becomes a medium through which he can restore the past: “A minute freed from the order of time has re-created in us... the man freed from the order of time.”<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Proust, *Time Regained*, 264-265.



## Chapter II: Ways to Transcend: Beyond Musical Time and Narrative Time

### I. Messiaen's Elimination of Musical Meter and Manipulation of the Speed of Time

In her analysis of Olivier Messiaen's *Quartet for the End of Time*, Rebecca Rischin makes a statement that time is "the central foundations of the compositional universe."<sup>51</sup> Any creative work of art is composed in time and experienced in time, but time is even more critical an element in music than it is in any other genres. As Messiaen writes in one of his treatises on rhythm and time: "the perception of time is the source of all music and of all rhythm."<sup>52</sup> If we look at a music score, every musical marking is related to time: pitches are defined by their frequencies, rhythms are the durations of notes, tempo markings indicate the speed, time signature regulates the musical meter. Because all of these elements are indispensable in any of the music compositions, there is a statement to be made that music is an art persisting in time.

Among all the markings mentioned above, time signature functions as the bone of the music body: music can be without a melody, but it can't be without rhythm or time. To give a brief explanation on time signature, the upper integral shows the meter of each measure, and the lower integral demonstrates the rhythmic value of one fundamental beat; together they put notes into the meter of time, divided and marked with a bar line. Time signature regulates the musical time and steadies its pacing. It is the framework of musical construction. At the same time, we

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<sup>51</sup> Rebecca Rischin, *For the End of Time: The Story of the Messiaen Quartet*, new ed. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006), 54.

<sup>52</sup> Olivier Messiaen, *Traite de rythme, de couleur, et d'ornithologie (1949-1992): En sept tomes* (Paris: Alphonse Leduc, 1994), Vol.1: 18. (It was completed and published posthumously by Messiaen's wife Yvonne Loriod.)

can derive another statement from it: if the composers ever want to disrupt time in music, meter is the foremost thing they might consider to eliminate.

Messiaen is one of those who tried to eliminate the meter in his composition, as he maintains: "I don't like being binary. I don't like walking on two feet, in steps, in rhythm."<sup>53</sup> In his preface written for the *Quartet*, Messiaen points out the reason for his elimination of time signature in some of the movements and his application of the unsteady rhythms in others: "The special rhythms, independent of the meter, powerfully contribute to the effect of banishing the temporal."<sup>54</sup> In this section, I will divide the movements of the *Quartet* into two main categories: the movements that do not have a marked time signature and the ones that have it but tend to be perceived as metrically free.

Messiaen omitted time signature in four of the eight movements of the *Quartet*, starting from the third movement "Abyss of the Birds" [*Abîme des oiseaux*]. It is a clarinet solo imitating the blackbird's call that Messiaen heard during his military watches near Verdun, long before he got captivated by the Germans. Perhaps not surprisingly, Messiaen's great obsession with birds is attributed, or at least partly attributed, to the sense of freedom observed in bird calls. Messiaen regarded birds as the masters of music because of the various themes and rhythms they are able to make. He once commented on the birdsong after transcribing it onto the music score: "let us go on to say that the bird is the symbol of freedom. We walk, he flies."<sup>55</sup>

During the transcription of the songs that are sung only once, there are immense difficulties that a transcriber has to encounter, especially for Messiaen who were meticulous about it and aimed to be "the first to have made truly scientific and [...] accurate notations of

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<sup>53</sup> Rischin, *For the End of Time*, 39.

<sup>54</sup> Messiaen, Preface to *Quartet for the End of Time*. See Rischin, *For the End of Time*, Appendix A, 129.

<sup>55</sup> Messiaen, quoted in Rischin, *For the End of Time*, 60.

bird songs.”<sup>56</sup> As Messiaen reiterated, the notes and rhythms in birdsongs, which are extremely precise, lead to great challenges for human perception as well as the traditional notation system. When being asked about the arduous process of transcribing the music from nature, Messiaen introduced some possible ways to solve the arising problems,

A bird, being much smaller than we are, with a heart that beats faster and nervous reactions that are much quicker, sings in extremely swift tempos, absolutely impossible for our instruments. I’m therefore obliged to transcribe the song into a slower tempo.<sup>57</sup>

At the same time, birds as the masters of musical composition do not perceive music in meters as human composers do; neither do they draw bar lines between measures to divide time into equal units nor make efforts to count the number of beats in each measure. Therefore, the elimination of time signature would be considered necessary in order to reduce the level of difficulty.

Adopting these methods when writing the “Abyss of the Birds,” Messiaen becomes a personified bird, notating the score without a fixed meter and abandoning the mechanical measurement of time.

From the audience’s perspective, instead of feeling metrical pulses, we hear the musical phrases as if being improvised, just like how those birds do. The reason why the listeners would feel it to be “out” of time attributed to their anticipation of what’s to come. French musicologist and philosopher Gisèle Brelet maintains: “Memory, instead of being incurably fixed, participates in the creative mobility of time... Waiting and remembering are intimately linked to one another: I wait [for] the return of the theme in the measure where I remember it and I can predict the

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<sup>56</sup> Samuel, *Music and Color*, 97.

<sup>57</sup> Samuel, 95.

future of the work according to its past.”<sup>58</sup> As Messiaen concludes from Brelet’s analysis on musical time and memory, composers can “partially deceive the listener's anticipation in choosing the least expected among several possible effects.”<sup>59</sup> In *Traité de rythme*, Messiaen used broken cadence<sup>60</sup> as an example of how the listeners’ perceptual anticipation could be deceived, but he further applied the theory to the rhythm in the actual composition of the *Quartet*. In metrical music, because of the oftentimes unvaried number of beats and the regular placement of upbeats and downbeats, the listeners get used to the metrical pulse and anticipate it in the rest of the work, provided that the time signature does not change.

However, in an open-meter piece like the third movement of the *Quartet*, listeners’ anticipation doesn't work because there is no reliable memory from which the anticipation derives from. To give an example, in the clarinet solo there are several notes that are almost too long for the listeners to feel the beats. As it is shown on the score<sup>61</sup>, the number of beats in each measure varies, and the legato markings usually end in the first note of the following measure instead of the last note of the same measure; it means that the players would need to play the first note of each measure softer in order to “end” the phrase smoothly, and thus downplay what is usually considered as the “downbeat”. In other words, there are no more upbeats or downbeats but only the beginning and the end of a phrase, so the bar lines marked are completely unperceivable.

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<sup>58</sup> Gisèle Brelet, *Le temps musical*, "Les sentiments temporels," 572, vol. 2, quoted in Messiaen, *Traité de rythme*, 35.

<sup>59</sup> Messiaen, *Traité de rythme*, 35.

<sup>60</sup> In classical music, the term “broken cadence” or “interrupted cadence” usually refers to an irregular harmonic resolution; in an interrupted cadence, the penultimate chord would be resolved to some other chord instead of the tonic. See: Rockstro, William S., George Dyson, William Drabkin, Harold S. Powers, and Julian Rushton. "Cadence." Grove Music Online. 2001.

<sup>61</sup> See illustrate 1.

### III. Abîme des oiseaux

Abyss

Clarinettes  
en Si b

Lent, expressif et triste (♩ = 44 env.)

*p* (désolé)

*ppp*

Illustration 1: Olivier Messiaen, *Quartet for The End of Time*, “Abyss of the Birds”, mm. 1-10.

In addition, when the long note (C-sharp in measure 9<sup>62</sup>) with a big crescendo comes out of a short break of silence, time is being perceptually extended because, as Messiaen indicated in *Traité de rythme*, the speed of time passing is perceived relatively,<sup>63</sup> meaning that the speed of time could not be defined definitely but comparatively, not being “slow” or “fast”, but only “slower” or “faster” than another. In the case of the C-sharp, the note sustains much longer than any other note that comes before it, and because the meters are eliminated and the duration of the note cannot be anticipated, the long note almost sounds like it will last forever.

In this way, the mechanical measurement of time can be eliminated in a music written in open meter. It is achieved based on the theory that duration is relative and subject to change for each individual in different circumstances. However, this is far from enough: Messiaen is able to do the same thing even when he does mark a time signature and keep a musical meter. There are two “Louanges” movements in the *Quartet*, both of which are played in a very slow tempo (one

<sup>62</sup> See Illustration 1.

<sup>63</sup> Messiaen writes: “the lengthening or the shortening of time itself is relative... There is no real time. It is the comparison of true time itself with the true time of our terrestrial clocks that leads us to utilize the terms lengthening and shortening: they remain relative to each other.” The main idea partly comes from Bergson’s notion of true time and pure duration. See Messiaen, *Traité de rythme*, 18-26.

marked with the term *infiniment lent*, “infinitely slow,” and another with *extrêmement lent*, “extremely slow”). Although the fifth movement “Louange à l’Éternité de Jésus” is metrically free, and the eighth movement “Louange à l’Immortalité de Jésus” is written in a regular 4/4 time, they nevertheless create the same feeling that the speed of time is so slow that time almost stops. It perfectly corresponds to the religious text behind the composition: “there shall be time no longer.”<sup>64</sup> To approach the way in which Messiaen achieved that, we need to first acknowledge the influence of Henri Bergson upon Messiaen’s understanding of time.

Henri Bergson, one of the leading figures of philosophy in early 20th-century France, maintains that “[p]ure duration is only a succession of qualitative changes that establish... without any relationship with the number: it is pure heterogeneity.”<sup>65</sup> Instead of saying that time always passes at the same speed, Bergson suggests that the time each of us perceives goes sometimes fast and sometimes slowly. Below are the two laws that Messiaen summarized based on Bergson’s idea of true time:

a) *Sense of present duration* Law: in the present, the more time is filled with events, the shorter it seems to us - the more it is void of events, the longer it seems to us.

b) *Retrospective appreciation of the past* Inverse of the preceding law: in the past, the more time was filled with events, the longer it seems to us now - the more it was void of events, the shorter it seems to us now.<sup>66</sup>

In summary, the speed of time is subject to change based on the number and quality of events that happen in a certain period of time, and it also depends on whether we experience it in the present or look back to it as the past.

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<sup>64</sup> Saint John, *Revelation*, X, quoted in Messiaen, preface to *Quartet or the End of Time*.

<sup>65</sup> Bergson, quoted in Messiaen, *Traité de rythme*, 18.

<sup>66</sup> Messiaen, *Traité de rythme*, 19.

How Messiaen managed to make time “stop” in those two *Louange* movements is related to these two laws: he made the musical pulse in the piano part slow enough and the musical events (i.e. ups and downs) few enough that the audience almost feels that time stops proceeding. To take the last movement for example, although there is a 4/4 time signature marked, which means that a quarter note is taken for one beat so the listeners should be able to perceive four beats in each measure, it is impossible for anybody to count it in four unless it is played in a much faster tempo. To count in  $\text{♩}=36$ , which means  $\text{♩}=18$ , is simply against human nature. Oftentimes, the listeners have to wait for the next beat to be played instead of keeping up perfectly with the metrical pulse.

The only possible way to solve this problem is to divide one beat into smaller units (for instance, to divide one quarter note into four sixteenth notes and count a sixteenth note as one pulse), but in the case of the last movement, this solution does not work out for the fact that there are only two attackings within one beat; the first one is a third-second note, and the second one is third-two times longer than the first one. This means that every time the second note is being sustained, the listeners waiting for the next beat won't be able to anticipate the exact time when the following note will be played. In the entire movement, the piano part keeps on the exact same pattern, and the audience keeps waiting as every second note played on the piano seems to be endlessly long. It is also the same in the melody played out by the violinist: the shortest note in the entire movement is an eighth note in a triplet (i.e. one note out of all three in a quarter-note time). If we multiply  $\text{♩}=18$  by three, each eighth note in the triplets equals 54, which is still very slow. In addition, because the first note of a beat is a rest, or very often tied and sustained from

the note before it, the phrases are not at all felt in a regular 4/4 meter. They sound continuous and free, sometimes even improvisational just like the movements written without a musical meter.

## II. Proust's Suspension of Narrative Chronology

Messiaen believes that “anteriority and posteriority are the essential conditions of time,” which is largely inspired by Saint Thomas’s saying in the *New Testament* that “Eternity is an all-encompassing simultaneity” while “time implies a succession of before and after.”<sup>67</sup> This distinction between time and eternity is not exclusively of use to religious musicians. It is rather a universal interest that is appealing to writers as well. In her close analysis of temporal and spatial structure in narrative, Teresa Bridgeman starts with a statement when explaining how time plays an essential role in the theories of narrative: “we tend to think of stories as sequences of events.”<sup>68</sup> This “sequence of events” can be understood as a certain number of incidents happening in time and being orderly arranged based on “the succession of before and after.”

Paul Ricoeur, the French philosopher who dedicated three volumes to the study of time and narrative, maintained that temporality is very closely related to narrativity<sup>69</sup>. In a way, the simplest form of storytelling is to recount the series of events in the same order as they are in real time, namely the chronological sequence that Ricoeur called the “ordinary representation of time”<sup>70</sup>. To a certain extent, chronology is aligned with the logical order of causality we experience in reality: causes lead to effects, and the past leads to the present which in turn leads

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<sup>67</sup> Messiaen, *Traité de rythme*, 15-16.

<sup>68</sup> Teresa Bridgeman, “Time and Space.” *The Cambridge Companion to Narrative* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2007, Cambridge Companions to Literature.), 52.

<sup>69</sup> Paul Ricoeur, “Narrative Time,” *Critical Inquiry* 7, no. 1 (The University of Chicago Press, Fall 1980): 169

<sup>70</sup> Ricoeur, “Narrative Time”, 170.



to the future. It is a linear progression of past, present, and future, the sequence of which people normally consider to be irreversible. This is how our brain is used to processing the information we receive, and the stories told or written in a chronological order are thus much easier for us to follow.

However, chronological storytelling can be much more complicated in literature. French literary scholar Germaine Brée made a seemingly paradoxical comment on Proust's narrative in *In Search of Lost Time*, saying that it has "no real chronological confusion,"<sup>71</sup> but at the same time it is done "without following any special chronological order."<sup>72</sup> Throughout the entire seven volumes, the narrator gives a detailed account of his life from childhood to old age, following the nature of growth faithfully without any "real chronological confusion."

Nonetheless, such a linear progression of time, the "succession of before and after", is very often interrupted by flashbacks when his memories of the past are awakened by accident. Having all those small gestures of looking back while telling the story chronologically on a macroscopic level, it is as if the narrator is looking from both the prospective and the retrospective point of view at the same time<sup>73</sup>. These two paradoxical gestures allow Proust to suspend the sequence of time in narrative while still retaining its narrativity.

To better illustrate the paradoxical gestures, I shall compare Proust's entire novel to a long complicated sentence, in which each part of the novel, however you divide it, can be seen as a single independent clause within that long sentence. Here I will take William Labov and Joshua Waletzky's study on the temporality of verbal clauses and make it reflect on the temporal

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<sup>71</sup> Germaine Brée, *Marcel Proust and Deliverance from Time*. 2nd ed. New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1955, 17.

<sup>72</sup> Brée, *Marcel Proust and Deliverance from Time*, 18.

<sup>73</sup> This will be discussed further in Chapter III.

structure of *ISOLT*. Just like how Teresa Bridgeman described chronology in narrative, the American linguist William Labov defined verbal narrative as "one method of recapitulating past experience by matching a verbal sequence of clauses to the sequence of events which actually occurred."<sup>74</sup> He spent an entire article analyzing a specific unit of narrative—the verbal sequence of clauses that are chronologically ordered but sometimes encounter “intruders” that are out of the temporal sequence. According to Labov, "only independent clauses are relevant to temporal sequence," which leads to another statement that "subordinate clauses...may be placed anywhere in the narrative sequence without disturbing the temporal order of the semantic interpretation."<sup>75</sup> It means: provided that there are two main clauses describing two events placed in a chronological order, if a subordinate clause describing an event out of the order is inserted between these two main clauses, the sentence is still considered chronological even though the temporal sequence has been interrupted.

From a microscopic level, this observation perfectly aligns with Proust’s writing style. Proust’s sentences are extremely long and full of subordinate clauses that inevitably interrupt the flow of the main clause. These sentences all seem to have a reluctance to end, which I will investigate in further detail in the next chapter. For instance, at the very beginning of the novel, there is an extremely long sentence that fills up an entire paragraph:

I would ask myself what time it could be, I could hear the whistling of trains, which, now nearer and now further off, punctuating the distance like the note of a bird in a forest, showed me in perspective the deserted countryside through which a traveller is hurrying towards the nearby station; the path he is taking will be

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<sup>74</sup> William Labov and Joshua Waletzky, "Narrative Analysis: Oral Versions of Personal Experience," in *Essays on the Verbal and Visual Arts: Proceedings of the 1966 Annual Spring Meeting of the American Ethnological Society*, ed. June Helm (Seattle: Distributed by the University of Washington Press, 1967), 20.

<sup>75</sup> Labov and Waletzky, "Narrative Analysis," 21.

engraved in his memory by the excitement..., by unaccustomed activities, by the conversation..., and by the happy prospect of being home again.<sup>76</sup>

This sentence is filled with digressions, starting from the bedroom where the narrator is accommodated, to the whistling of trains, then to the bird in a forest... The subject also changes from “I” to a “traveller” whose identity remains ambiguous. The following sentence, or the following paragraph in this case, immediately goes back to the perspective of the “I” that has been introduced at the beginning of this sentence. All the insertions in between, such as the traveller’s movements and his surroundings, are analogous to the subordinate clauses that Labov explains in his article.

Nonetheless, what I really meant to do by referring to Labov’s study was to look at Proust’s novel on a macroscopic level. On a structural level, the novel is organized in three main parts, which can be generalized in three independent clauses: “I had been longing to be a writer since childhood,” “I have tried for many years to achieve it,” and “eventually in 1920s I achieved my goal.” All of these have been recounted in the same order as the original events, just like how Germaine Brée puts it: “the narrator follows the normal time sequence, he grows older as the tale develops.”<sup>77</sup> And yet, it is an overly simplified generalization of Proust’s novel. The subordinate clauses—the flashbacks here and there—have made these “independent clauses” much more complex. For instance, in M. Swann’s love story in the first volume, there is a flashback that breaks the temporal sequence of events. The flashback comes to Swann when he hears the pianist play the Vinteuil sonata and smells a sense of familiarity in the music. Then he suddenly realizes that he has encountered the same music phrase a year ago: “the year before, at an evening party,

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<sup>76</sup> Proust, *Swann’s Way*, 1-2. (The ellipses are mine, just to reduce the length of the sentence.)

<sup>77</sup> Brée, *Marcel Proust and Deliverance from Time*, 18.

he had heard a piece of music played on the piano and violin.”<sup>78</sup> The sentence was followed by a recount of the previous experience, and his memory of the past interrupts his listening experience in the external world. The music he hears *in the present* suddenly stops, and it is the music in his memory that gets played again.

Nevertheless, the suspension of chronology could also be a result of Proust’s specific writing style. In the first volume *Swann’s Way*, there is a recount of the past in which the narrator, the one who is now telling the story, has not yet been born. The narrator switches from “I” to an invisible figure looking from an omniscient perspective, speaking in an authoritative tone and starting the section “Swann in Love” with: “to admit you to the ‘little nucleus,’ ... you must give tacit adherence to a Creed...”<sup>79</sup> It is neither a “consequence” of the previous passage about his childhood memory, nor a necessary foundation for the later part about his trip to Balbec. It is dated back to a rather remote past, telling the readers how Swann and Odette have made each other’s acquaintance. If we thought that the very beginning of *In Search of Lost Time*, in which Swann is said to have already married Odette and have a baby girl, is the beginning of the story, the narrator suddenly takes a great leap in time and lands in a remote past which surpasses the original “departure point”. When we get to “Swann in Love,” we will then realize that it is the true beginning, before everything else comes into play, even before the narrator of the story, the subject of the memoir, exists.

Just like other flashbacks, “Swann in Love” is a story told in another story, and the narrator breaks the sequence without actually changing the motion of time in the external world. However, the action of “recalling” seems to have taken place also in Proust’s world, meaning the

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<sup>78</sup> Proust, *Swann’s Way*, 294.

<sup>79</sup> Proust, *Swann’s Way*, 265.

external reality outside of the book. It is almost as if an idea suddenly comes to Proust that the part is indispensable for his project, and he thus inserts it between two sections which should have been placed next to each other. Certainly, the actual intention behind it could be questioned, but to look at his disorganized way of writing and rewriting, Proust might have not broken the temporal sequence on a clear purpose.

Investigating the entire process of the composition and publication of *ISOLT*, Nathalie Mauriac Dyer contrasts Proust's working style to Flaubert's, saying that Proust's writing "does not develop in a linear, systematic and predictable fashion from an initial basis of documentary notes and detailed scenarios."<sup>80</sup> She explains that Proust's compositional process contains many drafting and reworking stages, in which the "compact units" in the draft would often "explode" later, being expanded into longer passages. During the reworking stage, Proust would enrich his draft "further in the margins, on facing verso pages and on long, pasted-on papers (*paperolles*)."

<sup>81</sup> However, the revision would not end here; indeed, even in the copy stage he would continue revising his writing, and the expanded passages and notes taken in the margins or on the pasted-on papers would often be "moved around or disappear, in a combination of expansion and condensation."<sup>82</sup> In a similar way, Germaine Brée argues that the modifications made in the text between 1914 and 1922, which is the period of composing and revising *ISOLT*, have introduced "contradictions into the text, variations in chronology, and unconscious repetitions."<sup>83</sup> She attributed the gaps observed between paragraphs and sentences to Proust's disorganized way of

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<sup>80</sup> Nathalie Mauriac Dyer, "Composition and publication of *À la recherche du temps perdu*," in *Marcel Proust in Context*, ed. Adam A. Watt (Cambridge: New York, 2013), 34.

<sup>81</sup> Dyer, "Composition and publication", 34-35.

<sup>82</sup> Dyer, 34-35.

<sup>83</sup> Brée, *Marcel Proust and Deliverance from Time*, 13.

reworking, constantly adding, deleting and moving around sentences and paragraphs over the long period of writing.

These words are confirmed by Proust's *cahiers* and manuscripts documented in Gallica. Various tiny and almost illegible scribbles appear in the narrow margins of the paper, with a considerable amount of cross-outs and added comments here and there<sup>84</sup>. As I have pointed out, the way of writing and editing shown on his manuscripts is not enough to answer the question about Proust's intention of placing "Swann in Love" between two chronological incidents. As Anthony Pugh maintains, the various possibilities of how Proust exactly moved these parts among his *cahiers* remain open<sup>85</sup>. But after all, it at least shows a potential reason why some of the passages or chapters are fragmented and seem to be organized in a non-linear manner and suspending the narrative chronology.

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<sup>84</sup> See Proust, *Fonds Marcel Proust. II — À la recherche du temps perdu. A — Manuscrits autographes. CXIX Reliquat manuscrit de la Recherche*, in Gallica. (<https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b6000682m/f10.image>.)

<sup>85</sup> Anthony Pugh, *The Growth of À la recherche du temps perdu*, (University of Toronto Press, 2004), xxiv.

### Chapter III: Postponing the End: Another Key to the Transcendent World

In the religious sphere, the difference between eternity and time lies in the idea that “eternity has neither a beginning nor an end, whereas time has both a beginning and an end.”<sup>86</sup> Then anything that has neither a beginning nor an end is eternal, and “eternity is God himself.”<sup>87</sup> Anything that has both a beginning and an end is mortal: the birth of a being is the beginning of its time, and the death of it is the end of its time. Even those who do not have a religious background tend to think about time in a similar way: the moment of one’s death is the end of his time. A life without an end is considered immortal. As I have already pointed out in the previous chapter, temporality is teleological: the past leads to the present which is followed by the future. For us mortals, the teleology of time lies in the fact that death is the ultimate destination, so that from the time of our birth, time is going towards an end.

The teleology of time is seen in the world of art as well, the experience of which must have an end as the work itself will end at a certain point. For a literary project, the end is the final period on the last page, and for a music performance, it is the moment when the audience starts to applaud. Artists are well aware of the ephemerality of these experiences. Proust knew that the novel would come to an end as soon as the journey of the protagonist Marcel is completed; he had already alluded to the ephemerality of the experience of theatre in *ISOLT* for the fact that the protagonist could not remain in that moment of Berma’s acting. Olivier Messiaen knew that, as the last note of the *Quartet* disappeared in the air, the transcendence experienced through the music would soon vanish, and he humbly says about his attempt to banish temporalities: “All this

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<sup>86</sup> Saint Thomas, quoted in Olivier Messiaen, *Traité de rythme, de couleur, et d'ornithologie (1949-1992): En sept tomes* (Paris: Alphonse Leduc, 1994, PDF), 15.

<sup>87</sup> Messiaen, *Traité de rythme*, 15.

is mere striving and childish stammering if one compares it to the overwhelming grandeur of the subject!”<sup>88</sup> However, as I have suggested in the introduction and investigated in the previous chapters, both Proust and Messiaen managed to transcend time through some particular techniques in the creation of art. It is done not only through suspending the chronology in *In Search of Lost Time* and eliminating the musical meter in *Quartet for the End of Time*, which I have closely looked at in Chapter II, but also through the compositional techniques that might help elude, or at least postpone, the teleological “end”.

### I. Eluding the End: Proust on Digression, Memory, and Cyclic Motions

In the last volume of *In Search of Lost Time*, the protagonist Marcel eventually makes up his mind to write a book about his life. Although he does not explicitly tell his readers how the book will start and unfold, he hints at the messages he wants to convey through the project and the truth to be embodied in it. Looking at Marcel’s explanation of the inspiration, approach, and goal of his project, we could see many similarities between it and Proust’s *In Search of Lost Time* we now have in our hands. For instance, at one point Marcel says “I should have to execute the successive parts of my work in a succession of different materials” for the reason that the singularity of each experience makes it non-replicable, and what seems suitable to one would not fit another.<sup>89</sup> Therefore, his writing might be very fragmented and filled with different events that might seem unrelated to each other. In addition, as I have mentioned in the second chapter, Marcel has learned that the past moment revived through involuntary memory is ephemeral. It is for this reason that he decides to contemplate on these sensations and immobilize these moments

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<sup>88</sup> Messiaen, Preface to the score of *Quartet for the End of Time*.

<sup>89</sup> Marcel Proust, *Time Regained*, 261.



through writing, since he knows that great works of literature, just like other creative forms of art, partly contain an essence of life. Therefore, the story which he is going to write must come from the life he has lived. The coincidences behind these two features are apparent: Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*, fragmented in its material and composed of the narrator's life events, matches Marcel's project in-mind for both its style and its content.

These similarities might not be accidental, because after all, the truth revealed in the last volume of *ISOLT* comes from the real life journey recalled in the previous volumes, and in the meantime, it directly motivates the protagonist to write. In other words, it is both the inspiration of Marcel's composition and the message conveyed through the composition. Therefore, we could assume that the project Marcel embarks on towards the end of his life, if completed, is indeed the book right in front of us. If this is the case, right after the completion of this journey, the story immediately circles back to the beginning of the same book, in which the protagonist Marcel will then become the narrator who tells the story of his own when he has not yet become a writer. Then the novel ends up being a literary performance, creating an endless loop in which the end, not only going back to the beginning of the same circle, is indeed the beginning itself.

The cyclic motion is made more and more explicit towards the end, especially when Marcel encounters the same sensations that he has experienced in the past. As he once again hears his parents' footsteps as well as the doorbell on the garden gate of Combray, the ringing sound of which was mentioned at the very beginning of *Swann's Way*, a correspondence is made between the beginning and the end of the book, which connects the remote past with the present. "These sounds rang again in my ears," says Marcel,

unmistakably I heard these very sounds, situated though they were in a remote past. And as I cast my mind over all the events which were ranged in an unbroken series between the moment of my childhood when I had first heard its sound and

the Guermantes party, I was terrified to think that it was indeed this same bell which rang within me...<sup>90</sup>

Here the jingle of the bell heard once again immediately brings him back to his childhood, as if time has ceased over these years, and the story circles back to its beginning.

Therefore, if Marcel's project eventually grows and becomes the book we read, then the story never ends because, in a way, the ending is the beginning. However, the premise (that Marcel's project ends up being *ISOLT*) in this hypothesis is questionable. Joshua Landy, from the very beginning of his article *Proust, his Narrator, and the Importance of the Distinction*, challenges the viewpoint that Proust's narrator (on the aspects of his name, experiences and perspectives) is indeed Proust himself.<sup>91</sup> Although it can be argued from either side, there are several points made in Landy's article that are worth discussing and might be able to shed some light on the correspondence between the narrator's and the author's identity, and further on Proust's literary performance.

First of all, in the earlier passages of his article, Landy states that the conclusion made at the end of the first volume *Swann's Way* and the one made at the end of the last volume *Time Regained* contradict each other. At first, the narrator claims that everything is fugitive, while at the end of the entire novel he changes his opinion to say that the things of the past can be revived in a certain way, and for him the bell he heard ringing in his childhood has never stopped. Landy points out that, if the narrator Marcel is indeed Proust who is writing his autobiography in this novel, he could not own these two perspectives at the same time.<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> Proust, *Time Regained*, 529.

<sup>91</sup> See Joshua Landy, "Proust, His Narrator, and the Importance of the Distinction," *Poetics Today*, March 1, 2004, 94-135.

<sup>92</sup> Landy, "Proust, His Narrator," 94.

It is true that Marcel contradicts himself in different stages of the novel. As *Swann's Way* comes to a close, Marcel laments that time slips away: "The reality that I had known no longer existed. ...and houses, roads, avenues are as fugitive, alas, as the years."<sup>93</sup> At the end of the entire novel, however, he claims that "moment from long ago still adhered to me and I could still find it again, could retrace my steps to it."<sup>94</sup> These two opposite answers to the question "whether everything is fugitive and whether time can be regained" seem to support Landy's argument. Nonetheless, Proust's novel is not a literary criticism in which the author must not contradict himself in order to retain the validity of the argument and to avoid a wobbling standpoint. The novel is about a journey. As if a traveller looking from a limited first-person perspective, the protagonist cannot foresee what will happen in the next minute,<sup>95</sup> or at least the narrator must not show his readers that he has an omniscient view over his life at that moment.

In many places of the book, Marcel talks about the "innumerable selves" that are born and then die throughout a person's lifetime. When realizing that he would one day be indifferent to those whom he has loved before, he sees the death of the self and then the birth of a new one. He describes it as a "fragmentary and continuous death that insinuates itself throughout the whole course of our life, detaching from us at each moment a shred of ourself, dead matter on which new cells will multiply and grow."<sup>96</sup> These selves, once dead, are very often forgotten by the selves newly born, which means that the new-born self might have a completely different attitude towards the things that have happened to him and a different impression about the

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<sup>93</sup> Proust, *Swann's Way*, 606.

<sup>94</sup> Proust, *Time Regained*, 530.

<sup>95</sup> Although Proust has very often stepped over this boundary of limited perspective and speaks in an omniscient voice especially in the argumentative passages on art and literature, for most of the time the narrator tells the story in a first-person viewpoint.

<sup>96</sup> Marcel Proust, *Within a Budding Grove*, modern library ed., trans. C. K. Scott Moncrieff and Terence Kilmartin, ed. D. J. Enright (New York: Modern Library, 2003), 340

memories of the past. Therefore, the protagonist's perspective on himself and the world around him must have changed over time, and the narrator is simply telling the story from a specific perspective that is maintained in a specific time.

Moreover, in his letter to the French writer Jacques Rivière, Proust explains: "It is only at the end of the book, ...that my true beliefs will be revealed. The one I express at the end of the first volume, in that parenthesis on the Bois de Boulogne... , is the very opposite of my conclusion. It is [just] a stage ...on the way to the most objective and optimistic [crayonte] of conclusions."<sup>97</sup> Apparently, the end of the first volume is only the first step taken towards the ultimate conclusion. As the author of the book as well as the creator of his universe, Proust has the right to decide what to reveal and what to conceal. We know that, embarking on the task of recounting his life journey, the narrator must have an omniscient view over the journey because he is already at the end of it when he starts writing. He knows about everything before taking up his pen, but this knowledge must be partly concealed from his readers. Before the ultimate revelation delivers the message that time can be regained, Proust says that he is "forced to depict errors,"<sup>98</sup> for the sake of the truth that could only come at the very end. In other words, if Proust gives out the truth by the end of the first volume, then the entire novel would have been finished there as the revelation has already come.

For those who do not know what Proust has experienced in his real life, which more or less shares some commonalities with the protagonist's life, the moment that suggests a connection between Proust the writer and Marcel the protagonist comes when protagonist hears

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<sup>97</sup> Proust, *Correspondence* 13: 98–100 (February 1914). See Landy, "Proust, His Narrator," 94, footnote 6.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*

Albertine call him “‘My—’ or ‘My darling—’ followed by my Christian name” in *The Captive*.<sup>99</sup> Although he does not give out the specific name, presumably the Christian name refers to “Marcel.” Notably, before Proust made edits on his manuscripts, the name Marcel had appeared for a sufficient number of times, which confirmed a correspondence between the protagonist and the author. According to Landy, Proust “routinely eliminated the word ‘Marcel,’ amending the text at *S*: 50, *SG*: 234, and *C*: 145.”<sup>100</sup> So the connection was explicitly there before editing, but for some reason Proust did not intend to make it seem too apparent for his readers. To put it in another way, if Proust was not suggesting the overlaps between himself and his narrator, then why would he choose to call his narrator after his own name instead of using some other names? On the other hand, if the name is an unintentional mistake, then why would he eliminate the word “Marcel” in other passages but not this one?

It is also likely that Proust intends to emphasize the ambiguity and open up the possibilities for interpretation, as he clearly says that the name by which Albertine calls him would be Marcel “*if we give the narrator the same name as the author of this book.*”<sup>101</sup> However, the supposition “if we give the narrator the same name as the author of this book” does not seem right here. Who is speaking now? Who is engaging the readers and addressing them as “we”? Instead of suggesting that the “I” behind the pronoun “we” pertains to Proust as Landy does in his article, I would presume that the voice belongs to neither the narrator nor the author for the reason that the first person “I” behind “we” collides with the third person “the author of this book” that is himself. He must not be addressing himself as both “I” and “he” in the same phrase. The voice rather points to an ambiguous identity.

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<sup>99</sup> Proust, *The Captive*, 91.

<sup>100</sup> Landy, “Proust, His Narrator,” 108.

<sup>101</sup> Proust, *The Captive*, 91. (Italics mine.)

I must say that these questions raised in regard to Joshua Landy's argument do not negate Landy's proposal in its entirety. By challenging his statement and his reasoning behind it, I am rather emphasizing the ambiguity seen in Proust's writing, bringing up various ways of reading *ISOLT*. The hypothesis that Marcel's project is the book in our hands is simply one of them. Although this assumption does not lead to a determinative conclusion that Proust was indeed thinking about making a literary performance when writing the novel, it at least suggests that there is a potential reluctance to end the story, by means of opening up a new world at the end of the current story.

Moreover, there are other aspects in Proust's novel that also shows this reluctance to end. One of the most well-known features of Proust's writing style is the digression found in his sentences which make them extremely long. Digression means to depart from one idea and land onto another, functioning as a bridge that is able to connect two different things without having to formally end the first. As I have briefly mentioned in chapter II, Proust's sentence might begin in one topic, develop into a different one which will in turn lead to another, and eventually end in a place which might not have anything to do with how the sentence begins. It sometimes creates a feeling that everything, no matter if they are interconnected or not, can be squeezed into one single sentence.

Without doubt, the inclination to speak without a stop suggests the reluctance to end the sentence, but the cause of it could be explained in many different ways. In his analysis of the connection between Proust's *ISOLT* and Zeno's paradoxes,<sup>102</sup> Richard E. Goodkin suggests that

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<sup>102</sup> Zeno's four paradoxes: Paradoxes of Plurality, Paradoxes of Motion, Paradox of Place, and the "Grain of Millet" theory. In the article, Richard Goodkin focuses on the "Achilles and the Tortoise" paradox in the Paradoxes of Motion, which demonstrates the impossibility to catch the things moving ahead of you, and the paradox of the arrow, which considers the flying arrow as being motionless because time is composed of moments, and the movement broken into infinite number of moments is always in a now. (See Nick

Proust's digressions are rather unusual: these long sentences are filled with various descriptions made on a single idea which is usually too abstract to be expressed in a few words. Goodkin comments on these Proustian sentences:

...they cannot manage to circumscribe what they are quite literally talking 'about.' The Proustian sentence gives the impression of an infinite narration of a single moment, of an unremitting postponement of the arrival at a goal (the end of the sentence), of a dissatisfaction arising both from the unrepresentability of a single moment and from the unpleasant feeling that no moment ever really 'leads' to another moment except by default, or perhaps exhaustion.<sup>103</sup>

Goodkin means that the narrator (or Proust) is never satisfied with how a specific idea is explained. Because he is never able to go straight to the heart of the matter, what's written seems insufficient to him. He constantly needs extra phrases as supplements to circumscribe the description of a specific idea, and by doing that he is always postponing the arrival of the end.

This perfectionism is partly seen in Proust's unwillingness to give up any details, some of which are not necessarily indispensable to his narrative. At the very beginning of *Swann's Way*, the narrator Marcel provides a detailed account of how he "revisits" the rooms he has been to throughout his life. Lying on the bed, between wakefulness and slumber, Marcel recalls the touch of the beddings, the satisfaction of being wrapped warmly while it's freezing outside, the smell of fresh air bathing in the moonlight in a summer night, the contours in the dark and the ticking of clock in the silence... He says:

...I had seen first one and then another of the rooms in which I had slept during my life, and in the end I would revisit them all in the long course of my waking dream: rooms in winter, where on going to bed I would at once bury my head in a nest woven out of the most diverse material...; rooms where, in freezing

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Huggett, "Zeno's Paradoxes", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2019 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.)

<sup>103</sup> Richard E. Goodkin, "Proust, Bergson, and Zeno, or, How Not to Reach One's End." In *Around Proust*. (Princeton University Press, 1991), 86.

weather, I would enjoy the satisfaction of being shut in from the outer world..., and where, the fire keeping in all night, I would sleep wrapped up, as it were, in a great cloak of snug and smoky air...; —or rooms in summer, where I would delight to feel a part of the warm night, where the moonlight striking upon the half-opened shutters would throw down to the foot of my bed its enchanted ladder...; or sometimes the Louis XVI room, so cheerful that I never felt too miserable in it...; —sometimes, again, the little room with the high ceiling, hollowed in the form of a pyramid out of two separate storeys...; in which my mind... had endured many a painful night as I lay stretched out in bed, my eyes staring upwards, my ears straining, my nostrils flaring, my heart beating;...<sup>104</sup>

Just like Goodkin suggests, the digressions in the sentence are made for one purpose. Proust made a list of the rooms that Marcel recalls at night in order to picture one single moment: what Marcel has experienced in his “waking dream.” In each room presented, Proust includes many subtle details, such as the edge of the bed and the high ceiling, all of which not only help restore the images but also “immerse” the readers into these images of the past. Once the scene of the past is vividly restored, the readers will soon forget the present time in which the narrator is actually lying on his bed in Combray.

In these Proustian sentences such as the one quoted above, the phrases are usually connected by semicolons, which give the entire sentence a sense of endlessness. Presumably, the passage would be much easier to read if the description of each room ends appropriately, meaning to use periods instead of semicolons. But when we read it through and try to feel the flow of the words, it’s not difficult to understand why they all have to be squeezed into one single sentence. It not merely makes the readers feel almost breathless but also says something about memory. In the external reality, these rooms should have been distant in space and distinguished in time; some rooms are remembered in freezing weather while some rooms are

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<sup>104</sup> Marcel Proust, *Swann’s Way*, 7-8. (Ellipses mine.)



smelt in warm air. However, in Marcel's remembrance these rooms are right next to each other as if the partitions of time and space have all been removed. They are no longer separated as they were in the physical world of the past, just as they are no longer separated by period markings that flag the end. It is as if, to put it in a nutshell, a whole lifetime is being squeezed into a single moment.

Remembrance of the things past, such as the rooms he revisited during his bedtime, leads to the key moments in Proust's novel. To a certain extent, memories are the main composites of the novel. In the very beginning of *Swann's Way*, Proust has already touched on this important message, which has been first conveyed in his prologue to *Contre Sainte-Beuve*, on the role of involuntary memory playing in the human experience of time. Similar to the story told in the prologue, the taste of madeleine soaked in the tea revives in Marcel's memory a past that has long gone. Before the involuntary memory is awakened by the familiar taste of madeleine, Marcel ponders on the time past and claims: "to me it was in reality all dead. Permanently dead? Very possibly."<sup>105</sup> Is this not what people usually think about the time past and temporality in general? Temporary and irreversible? If the past is not dead, can we revisit it from time to time and elude the end which is our death?

To this question, what the narrator has experienced during his wakefulness and slumber has already hinted at the answer, but here before the madeleine moment he explains it even further. The past, including the visions, sounds, all the sensations felt in the past, is not dead but hidden somewhere that cannot be found. It is "effectively lost to us until the day (which to many never comes) when we happen to pass by the tree or to obtain possession of the object which

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<sup>105</sup> Proust, *Swann's Way*, 59.

forms their prison.”<sup>106</sup> As he acknowledges, to many of us the moment never comes, because we do not know *when* we will “happen to pass by” the object that contains such a magical intermediary between the present and the past, as we do not know *what* object it might be. All is likely, and all seem impossible to find.

As the taste of the madeleine gradually wipes away the dust on the images of the past, Marcel senses an exquisite pleasure that comes from somewhere not yet known. At that moment, he catches a precious but ineffable essence from the experience and says: “this essence was not in me, it *was* me. I had ceased now to feel mediocre, contingent, mortal.”<sup>107</sup> By saying “it was not in me but *was* me,” he points out that he has found through his involuntary memory a past self that was once considered “dead”. By recalling the images and restoring the scene in his mind, the narrator returns to his former self at that moment. He ceased to feel mortal because, through the rejuvenation, he sees the possibility of going backwards instead of going irreversibly forwards to death, which is the end of his time. Marcel’s statement thus challenges the traditional understanding of temporality and the teleology of time, pointing out the possibility that there is a certain kind of way to avoid, or at least postpone, the end.

After all, how could we not look at the literal end of *ISOLT*? The end of Proust’s novel not only proclaims Marcel’s decision to start his literary project but also reviews the entire journey of his life. With a panoramic view of the time past, Marcel writes: “[a] feeling of vertigo seized me as I looked down beneath me, yet within me, as though from a height, which was my own height, of many leagues, at the long series of the years.”<sup>108</sup> At the end, he is standing in a position high enough to see all the things of the past he has gone through; he is able to look down

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<sup>106</sup> Proust, 59.

<sup>107</sup> Proust, *Swann’s Way*, 60.

<sup>108</sup> Proust, *Time Regained*, 531.

from his own height because he has already reached the top of it. The height is composed of all the moments from the past that have been retained in his memory, which at the end of his life start to form a unity.

As his perspective becomes omniscient, Marcel is able to look at the things past as a whole. All of those people, places and memories, which once seemed to lack a connection, now start to speak to each other. There comes to him a single thread lining up the persons around him, and one end of the thread is Mlle de Saint-Loup. As the daughter of Gilberte and Robert de Saint-Loup, Mlle de Saint-Loup is a descendent of the Swanns and the Guermantes — the two families that are playing the most important roles in Marcel's life, and these two families used to be worlds apart in his understanding. The birth of Mlle de Saint-Loup shows that these two seemingly parallel ways — the Méséglise way [i.e. Swann's way] and the Guermantes way — which could never have overlapped, now lean towards each other. What Marcel used to consider as two completely different universes are indeed not so distant from each other. When Marcel catches sight of Mlle de Saint-Loup, he wonders: "Was she not... like one of those star-shaped crossroads in a forest where roads converge that have come, in the forest as in our lives, from the most diverse quarters? Numerous for me were the roads which led to Mlle de Saint-Loup and which radiated around her."<sup>109</sup> Using the analogy of a forest, Marcel is picturing a dendrogram of the Swanns and the Guermantes, like two of "the most diverse quarters," now being intimately close because of the marriage of Gilberte and Robert giving birth to their child.

In the beginning of *Swann's Way*, Marcel confesses that "if Méséglise was to me something as inaccessible as the horizon, which remained hidden from sight... Guermantes, on

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<sup>109</sup> Proust, *Time Regained*, 502.

the other hand, meant no more than the ultimate goal, ideal rather than real, of the 'Guermantes way,' a sort of abstract geographical term like the North Pole or the Equator or the Orient."<sup>110</sup> It is indeed these two worlds, one inaccessible and another unimaginable, that he eventually gets to know well and see them merging with each other at the end of his life. Once the marriage makes the connection that was considered impossible, the entire relation network in Marcel's world becomes clear. Seeing all the roads leading to each other through Mlle de Saint-Loup, the narrator completes the topography of his social world at the end of his journey.

Nonetheless, even without the thread being created, there are some other interconnections that have been once concealed from him. For instance, Balbec is one of the intersections in the transversal network. Swann is the reason for Marcel's longing to visit Balbec, which then becomes the place where Marcel first met Robert de Saint-Loup; in other words, Swann is the cause of his visit, and because of his visit he meets Saint-Loup. The town Balbec turns out to be the single spot that connects Swann (of Méséglise) and Saint-Loup (of the Guermantes family). The names of these characters and places partly explain why Proust chose "Place-Names · The Names" and "Place-Names · The Place" as the subchapter title of the last section of *Swann's Way* and *Within a Budding Grove*. These are the threads that hold things tightly together in Marcel's life as well as in this book, as he realizes at the end: "life is perpetually weaving fresh threads which link one individual and one event to another, and that these threads are crossed and recrossed, doubled and redoubled to thicken the web."<sup>111</sup> These threads that are once separated eventually unite into one single picture.

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<sup>110</sup> Proust, *Swann's Way*, 188-189.

<sup>111</sup> Proust, *Time Regained*, 504.

Standing in the highest position at the end and having a better sense of how those people around him relate to each other, the narrator changes his way of looking at the end of the story. Noticing a change in tense that switches from the imperfect to the simple past, Germaine Brée claims that it signifies a change "in the narrator's orientation in time."<sup>112</sup> As she points out in her analysis, in the beginning section of the first volume, the narrator who is already old looks back at his childhood spent in Combray. The whole passage is written in the imperfect tense regarded by Brée as "the tense of retrospection." However, starting from the first line of Chapter III in *Time Regained* (close to the very end of the novel) the narrator uses the simple past tense, which is "the characteristic tense for the literary narration of present events."<sup>113</sup> Moving his sight away from the remote past, Marcel returns to his present state. He is no longer oriented in a single backward direction but stands in a present time which sheds light in both directions: the past and the future.

Extracting essence from the past and expecting the future in which the literary project is to be written, the protagonist obtains the same perspective as that of the narrator and even the author Proust. Marcel's voice resembles Proust's more and more as the story moves towards the end. "A feeling of vertigo seized me as I looked down beneath me," says the narrator at last<sup>114</sup>, and this gesture of looking down is analogous to a creator's gaze upon his/her creatures, as well as a novelist's gaze upon the fictional world under his pen. It is not that the things of the past are no longer within him but that, after such a long journey, Marcel is able to look at them from a much farther distance — a distance as far as Proust the author can be from his story, a distance

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<sup>112</sup> Germaine Brée, *Marcel Proust and Deliverance from Time*, 2nd ed. (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1955), 20.

<sup>113</sup> Brée, 20.

<sup>114</sup> Proust, *Time Regained*, 531

so great that he seems to transcend into an extra-temporal space where he is able to revisit the past and look into the future at his will. His capability of looking from an omniscient perspective is not only attributed to the verticality of Time which he is now at the top of but also for the fact that he is already in a position detached from his own life in order to write.

Earlier in the last volume when Marcel realizes that the past can be in some ways awakened in the present, the narrator hints at the extra-temporality of a position “outside time”:

The truth surely was that the being within me which had enjoyed these impressions had enjoyed them because they had in them something that was common to a day long past and to the present, because in some way they were extra-temporal, and this being made its appearance only when, through one of these identifications of the present with the past, it was likely to find itself in the one and only medium in which it could exist and enjoy the essence of things, that is to say: outside time.<sup>115</sup>

The essence of things that extends throughout the past, the present, and the future is extra-temporal, meaning: timeless. Timelessness is embodied in the fact that the essence is not subject to the change brought about by time; it might be hidden, but it never dies, so that it could be regarded as being able to sit in a “perpetual present,” an eternal state. There is no time that we can surely say “it is all over.” Catching such an essence through the experience of a lively past, Marcel is taken to an extra-temporal state as well; it enables him to travel through different temporal periods and thus obtains multiple orientations of time from a god’s viewpoint that looks into infinity. In the end, Marcel the writer becomes a “free spirit” who has gotten out of the labyrinth of time and who becomes the witness narrator of the journey, the creator of the world: the “god” without a beginning nor an end, the “god” that is Eternity itself.

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<sup>115</sup> Proust, *Time Regained*, 262.

## II. Messiaen's Obsession with Numbers, Palindromic Rhythms, and Isorhythmic Cycles

Different from Proust's idea of postponing the arrival of the end, Messiaen was imagining a world without time from the very beginning. The title of the Quartet "For the End of Time" comes directly from the text of Saint John's *Revelation*, in which an angel coming down from heaven raised his right hand and said "there will be no more Time."<sup>116</sup> The announcement "there will be no more Time" is not saying that time will come to an end at a certain point but that the idea of time does not even exist. With this said, we could assume that the word "end" in the title "For the End of Time" is not a teleological end that we can possibly imagine, nor is it an end that we can visualize as the end of a straight line. It rather suggests that there is no more temporality.

In his preface to the *Quartet*, Messiaen explains how the notion of the "end of time" has been embodied in each movement. There are some tableaux brought up over and over again in the commentary on each movement, including the harmonies of heaven, rainbow, birds and stars, all of which hint at the transcendence into something high up and eternal. For example, on the clarinet solo movement "Abyss of the Birds," Messiaen writes: "The abyss is Time, with its dreariness and gloom. The birds are the opposite of Time; they represent our longing for light, for stars, for rainbow, and for jubilant song!"<sup>117</sup> By opposing the birds to the abyss, Messiaen creates a picture in which the birds fly across the temporal abyss towards the sky, symbolizing the desire of liberation not only from the wartime situation but also from time. The tableaux such

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<sup>116</sup> *Revelation*, Chapter X, Quoted from Messiaen's preface to the score of the *Quartet For the End of Time*.

<sup>117</sup> Messiaen, Preface to the *Quartet For the End of Time*. See Rebecca Rischin, *For the End of Time, The Story of the Messiaen Quartet*, Appendix A, 30.

as light, stars and rainbow represent the natural and heavenly beauty that is unreachable for mortal beings.

With a strong Catholic faith, Messiaen deliberately embodied the idea of eternity in the number of movements in the *Quartet*. The total number of eight is not random, as he says “seven is the perfect number, the Creation in six days sanctified by the divine Sabbath; the seventh day of this repose extends into eternity and becomes the eighth day of eternal light, of unalterable peace.”<sup>118</sup> Messiaen’s words lead to my assumption that the eighth movement, which is the last in the *Quartet*, is the one that actually opens the door to eternity. Although seven is the perfect number and the seventh day extends into eternity, the eighth day reveals the eternal light, which is both the final stage of the previous seven days of repose and the new beginning of eternal peace. The eighth movement is titled “Praise to the Immortality of Jesus” (*Louange à l’Immortalité de Jésus*), a second eulogy after the first one titled “Praise to the Eternity of Jesus” (*Louange à l’Éternité de Jésus*). “This movement is pure love,” writes Messiaen in the preface, “The progressive ascent toward the extremely high register represents the ascension of man toward his Lord, of the son of God toward his Father, of deified Man toward Paradise.”<sup>119</sup> Similar to Proust’s approach at the end of *ISOLT*, which becomes the new beginning that starts the same project, the eighth movement that is the end of the 50-min quartet opens up into an infinite new realm.

However, as I have already claimed in Chapter II, practically speaking it is impossible to be completely out of time in any kind of music composition since music is an art persisting in time. Therefore, what Messiaen does in the *Quartet* is in many ways analogous to Proust’s doing

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<sup>118</sup> Messiaen, preface to the score of the *Quartet For the End of Time*. See Rebecca Rischin, *For the End of Time, The Story of the Messiaen Quartet*, Appendix A.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*



in *ISOLT*. Touching upon the techniques applied in this composition and the effects that they might create, Messiaen writes in the preface:

Its musical language is essentially ethereal, spiritual, Catholic. The modes, realizing melodically and harmonically a sort of tonal ubiquity, bring the listener closer to infinity, to eternity in space. The special rhythms, independent of the meter, powerfully contribute to the effect of banishing the temporal.<sup>120</sup>

By looking at the non-retrogradable rhythms, the isorhythmic patterns and Messiaen's special obsession with prime numbers, we will get a better sense of how the temporality is banished, or at least suspended, through Messiaen's postponement of the end.

Composers have always been interested in using different kinds of rhythms in their compositions. What especially appealed to Messiaen were Hindu rhythms and Ancient Greek meters, which not only contributed to Messiaen's idea of "ametrical" music<sup>121</sup> but also explained where the concept of "non-retrogradable rhythm" comes from — a technique frequently mentioned and analyzed in most of the theory books on Messiaen's musical language.

Among all 120 kinds of Hindu rhythms, Messiaen chose a specific kind called *Rāgavardhana* and gave a detailed explanation about it in his first treatise. Presenting rhythm *Rāgavardhana*, its reversion, and the rhythm divided into smaller units<sup>122</sup>, Messiaen writes,

Thus reversed [illustrated in example 3 and 4], it contains three quarter-notes (A) and three eighth-notes (B) [illustrated in example 5], classic diminution of three quarter-notes; further the dot added to the second eighth (at the cross), which renders the diminution inexact, opens to us a new perspective of augmentation or diminution (by addition or withdrawal of the dot) and, above all, constitutes an *added value*; finally, the fragment B is a non-retrogradable rhythm.<sup>123</sup>

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<sup>120</sup> Messiaen, preface to the score of the *Quartet For the End of Time*.

<sup>121</sup> Music without a musical meter. See chapter II.

<sup>122</sup> See illustration 1.

<sup>123</sup> Messiaen, *The Technique of My Musical Language*, trans. John Satterfield (Paris: Leduc, 1966), 1:15.



Illustration 1. Rhythm “Rāgavardhana” and its reversion. (Example 3: the rhythm “Rāgavardhana”; example 4: “Rāgavardhana” reversed; example 5: reversed “Rāgavardhana” being broken into smaller units.)

In illustration 1, we can see all the variations of rhythm that Messiaen has very often used in his *Quartet*: augmentation or diminution of rhythm, added values, and the non-retrogradable rhythm. To further explain Messiaen’s illustration, pattern A (Example 5 in Illustration 1) is the augmented version of pattern B by two (before the dot is added), and B is the diminished version of A by half<sup>124</sup>. The dot added to the second note of pattern B is the “added value”, which then creates a non-retrogradable rhythm: a rhythm created with a palindromic pattern which remains the same no matter whether it’s read forwards or backwards.

What makes a rhythm retrogradable is the asymmetry of the rhythmic pattern, meaning that reading it from left to right is not the same as reading it from right to left. The pattern “ABCD” is the simplest example, which has a different reversed version “DCBA.” In other words, just because the rhythm in example 3 is asymmetrical, we can reverse it to produce its symmetrical image, which becomes the rhythm in example 4. But non-retrogradable rhythm is the opposite: the symmetry of it leads to the fact that reading it forwards or backwards makes no difference. To compare to the retrogradable “ABCD” pattern that I gave before, a non-retrogradable pattern could be “ABCDCBA,” which is in itself symmetrical, just like the pattern B in the example 5. The composer explains his non-retrogradable rhythm in this way:

<sup>124</sup> An eighth note is half the value of a quarter note.

“Outer values identical, middle value free...all rhythms divisible into two groups, one of which is the retrograde of the other, with a *central common value*, are non-retrogradable.”<sup>125</sup>

The sixth movement of the *Quartet for the end of time*, especially the “Au mouvt” section<sup>126</sup> above all, is composed of non-retrogradable rhythms. To give an example, the beginning measure of the first “Au mouvt” section is rhythmically symmetrical: a dotted eighth note, a quarter note tied to an eighth, a half note, a quarter note tied to an eighth, and a dotted eighth note<sup>127</sup>. Like any palindrome, it reads the same, rhythmic-wise, from both directions. To apply Messiaen’s own term, the half note in the center of this rhythmic pattern is the “central common value”: the symmetry axis of the rhythmic palindrome.

The image displays two systems of musical notation for the "Au mouvt" section. The first system consists of three staves, each beginning with the dynamic marking *pp (lointain)*. The second system consists of two staves, with the first staff beginning with a boxed rehearsal mark **F** and the dynamic marking *pp (legato)*. The notation includes various note values, rests, and slurs, illustrating the complex rhythmic patterns discussed in the text.

<sup>125</sup> Messiaen, *The Technique*, 1:20.

<sup>126</sup> See rehearsal letter “F” to “L” in Messiaen, “Danse de la fureur, pour les sept trompettes,” *Quatuor pour la fin du temps* (Paris, France: Durand, 1942)

<sup>127</sup> See illustration 2.

Illustration 2. First two measures of rehearsal letter “F” in Olivier Messiaen, “Danse de la fureur, pour les sept trompettes,” *Quatuor pour la fin du temps*.

The image shows a musical score for three instruments: Violon (V), Clarinet (Cl), and Piano (P). The Clarinet part is marked with the instruction "(bronzé, cuivré)" and "fff". The Piano part is also marked with "(bronzé, cuivré)" and "fff". The music features a complex, non-retrogradable rhythm with accents and slurs.

Illustration 3. Measure 2-5 of rehearsal letter “J” in Olivier Messiaen, “Danse de la fureur, pour les sept trompettes,” *Quatuor pour la fin du temps*.

A simpler example of the variations of rhythm comes from the clarinet-piano duo section in the same movement, where Messiaen not only used the non-retrogradable rhythm but also applied the augmentation and diminution technique. After the first measure of rehearsal letter J<sup>128</sup>, clarinet and piano, with the strings left out, are supposed to mimic the sound of trumpets (as the music term “bronzé, cuivré” written above the staff and the title of the movement indicate), repeating the three notes—F, C-sharp, A. As we can see in Illustration 3, the second measure is the augmented version of the first measure, which is then diminished in the third measure and again augmented in the fourth measure<sup>129</sup>. In addition, in each group of “F, C-sharp, A”, the rhythm of these three notes remains non-retrogradable no matter how much the rhythm has been

<sup>128</sup> See also mm. 4-5 after rehearsal letter “I,” mm.2-5 after “J,” mm.4-9 after K in Messiaen, “Danse de la fureur, pour les sept trompettes,” *Quatuor pour la fin du temps*.

<sup>129</sup> See illustration 3.

augmented or diminished. In other words, the first note F and the third note A always share the same value in the same measure, even though their note values vary from one measure to another, and the note C-sharp between them is always the “central common value” that, in this specific case, is half the value of the previous and the following note.

Augmentation and diminution of rhythms, especially when they take place in turn as shown in Illustration 3, are able to change the audience’s perception of the speed of time. This is backed up by his notion of the “relative time”; to put it in Messiaen’s words, “the lengthening or the shortening of time itself is relative... There is no real time. It is the comparison of true time itself with the true time of our terrestrial clocks that leads us to utilize the terms lengthening and shortening: they remain relative to each other.”<sup>130</sup> It not only points out that the speed of time could be varied, but also alludes to the fact that the speed of time could not be numbered. No matter how quickly or slowly time passes, it is always the true time because, once again as Henri Bergson maintains, the true time is subject to change. Our perception of its speed varies as our internal pulses and the external pulses vary. The speed of time in music is the tempo, and for the specific example illustrated, we could take it as the same group of notes and rhythms being played in many different tempi, the first being slowed down and the second being accelerated, as if time passes at different speeds.

The non-retrogradable rhythm, on the other hand, represents a “regressive” motion, which we have also seen in Proust’s novel, going towards the end which reminds one of its beginning at the same time. A palindromic rhythm is like going towards a summit and then comes back to its starting point. According to our basic understanding of temporality, time is

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<sup>130</sup> Messiaen, *Traité de rythme*, 26.

linear and teleological, in which the beginning and the end are different. However, if we compare its teleology to the movement of climbing a mountain, what we normally take as the destination is the top of the mountain; in this case, we forget the important fact that we have to go down afterwards and go back to the same level that we originally start from. In any non-retrogradable rhythm, the peak of the mountain (i.e. the “central common value” which is also the axis of symmetry) is a halfway point rather than the end. Just like any other palindromes, the beginning and the end are exactly the same, as God conveyed in the Message “I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End.”<sup>131</sup> As Eternity is God itself, in this case not only the sense of teleology disappears, but time no longer exists.

Last but not least, the application of non-retrogradable rhythm also shows his obsession with prime numbers. We know that: in a non-retrogradable rhythm there must be *one* central common value as the axis of the symmetry, so no matter whether the number of values coming before or after it is a prime number or a composite number, the total value of non-retrogradable rhythm must be a prime number. His use of prime numbers is more clearly explained by his application of additional rhythmic values. For example, in illustration 4, we can see that the original 3/4 metrical rhythm can be evenly split into 6 eighth notes (an eighth note being the common factor), and the number 6 is a composite number which is perfectly divisible. However, once a sixteenth note is added, a sixteenth notes instead of an eighth becomes the common factor, and the number thus becomes  $6 \times 2 + 1 = 13$ , an indivisible prime number which turns out to be a very important characteristic in Messiaen’s music composition.

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<sup>131</sup> Revelation 22:13 ASV.



Illustration 4. Added value. A sixteenth note (with a plus sign marked above) is added to a 3/4 meter to make it “ametical.”

Going back to the sixth movement of the *Quartet*, we can see that these short values are added to almost every measure or sometimes even to the quarter notes. To take the first three measures of the movement for instance, A sixteenth note, or two, is added to each of the three measures in 4/4 meter: the “c-natural” in the first bar, the first “b-flat” in the second bar, and the “b-natural” and the “f-sharp” in the third bar. With these notes added, the original 4/4 meter with 16 sixteenth-note now turns into a measure in which the total value is an indivisible prime number. In the first two measures, with a short value added, 16 now becomes 17. Although the third measure does not create a prime number in total, the small group of values (the second and third beat) equals 5 — a prime number as well.<sup>132</sup> Such prime numbers as 5 and 17 very often appear in the sixth movement of the *Quartet*. For the benefit of theoretical analysis, Messiaen clearly indicates in his treatise the places each of these numbers is located.<sup>133</sup> With the values added, we get small groups of 5 sixteenth-notes in B, 7 in C, 11 in D, 13 in E.<sup>134</sup>

 A musical score for the beginning of the sixth movement of Messiaen's *Quartet for the End of Time*. It consists of two staves, treble and bass clef, with a grand staff brace on the left. The tempo is marked 'A Décidé, vigoureux, granitique, un peu vif (♩ = 176 env.)'. The dynamics are 'PIANO' and 'ff (non legato, martelé)'. The music features complex rhythmic patterns with many sixteenth notes and rests.

Illustration 5. Messiaen, *Quartet for the End of time*, mov.6, mm. 1-3.

<sup>132</sup> See illustration 5.

<sup>133</sup> See illustration 6.

<sup>134</sup> Olivier Messiaen, *The Technique of My Musical Language*, 1: 17. See Illustration 6.

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*Danse de la fureur,  
pour les sept trompettes.*

**Déclaté, vigoureux, granitique, un peu vif**

*ff non legato, martelé*

Illustration 6. Messiaen, *The Technique of My Music Language*, 2:2, annotated reduction of the *Quartet*, mov.6.

But why are these prime numbers so critical to him? At the end of his illustration, Messiaen wrote that people tend to have a mysterious predilection towards these numbers, but the mystery remains unexplained.<sup>135</sup> However, in an interview he did explain why the prime numbers matter to him in a religious sense: “not being divisible into equal fractions, represent an occult force (for you know that divinity is indivisible.)”<sup>136</sup> Symbolized as an occult force as well as the unmeasurable divinity, these rhythmic values of the indivisible prime numbers turn out to be “absolutely free” in Messiaen’s own words.<sup>137</sup>

As I have mentioned before, Messiaen has eloquently expressed his perspective on eternity and the elimination of linear time on a religious sphere. “As I’m a believer, as I’m Catholic,” says Messiaen, “the questions of survival, of the Resurrection, of Eternity, of the suspension of time and space have very much preoccupied me. In the camps, I even

<sup>135</sup> Messiaen, *The Technique*, 1:17

<sup>136</sup> Samuel, *Music and Color*, 79.

<sup>137</sup> Messiaen, *The Technique*, 1:17.



wrote...*Quartet for the End of Time*. Not of the times, of time. There is no longer [linear] time nor space, only a perpetual present."<sup>138</sup> The “perpetual present” he mentioned is symbolized by the axis of symmetry found in any palindrome that connects the two extremities. Messiaen introduced an image in one of his interviews to further explain the idea of the “perpetual present”: "It's as if... while traversing a landscape from two opposite points, you encounter the same objects at the same moments, in the same position and numerical order. ...this moment which I live, this thought which crosses my mind, this movement which I accomplish, this time which I beat, before and after lies eternity: it's a non-retrogradable rhythm."<sup>139</sup> The central common value in a non-retrogradable rhythm is the object that must be encountered no matter whether one chooses to traverse the landscape from this spot or that. The axis of symmetry is the perpetual present, and “before and after lies eternity.”

Importantly, such a palindromic and symmetrical sequence is analogous to the structure of Proust's novel. As demonstrated before, the story of *ISOLT* starts from the protagonist's childhood in Combray, in which he mentions the visitor's bell ringing in the evenings.<sup>140</sup> After the story unfolds over the next thousands of pages, it eventually circles back to the place where it first begins, as the protagonist recalls and hears once again at the end of his life the shrill sound of the bell on his garden gate in Combray. The palindromic sequence thus emerges, which starts from and ends in the same spot. But different from Messiaen's idea that the axis of symmetry (i.e. the central point of the palindrome) is the perpetual present, in Proust's writing the perpetual present seems to spread out through the entire story because, as Marcel claims, the bell which

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<sup>138</sup> See *Olivier Messiaen - La Liturgie de Cristal*, directed by Olivier Mille, 2009.

<sup>139</sup> Samuel, *Music and Color*, 76-77.

<sup>140</sup> See Proust, *Swann's Way*, 15-16.

once rang in the remote past has never stopped. When the ringing sound is heard again in the late stage of his life, he says:

as I cast my mind over all the events which were ranged in an unbroken series between the moment of my childhood when I had first heard its sound and the Guermantes party, I was terrified to think that it was indeed this same bell which rang within me and that nothing that I could do would alter its jangling notes.<sup>141</sup>

By describing the past events as being “ranged in an unbroken series,” Proust challenges the belief that life is made of fragmented moments. The perpetual present in Proust’s novel is defined by the fact that the jangling sound of the bell is not momentary. It is not exclusively of the past, but rather stored in one’s memory and extends through one’s lifetime, beyond temporality.

At the same time, there is also a cyclic motion, which we have observed in Proust, on the structural level of Messiaen’s *Quartet*, most notably seen in the first movement “Liturgie de Cristal.” The technique applied in this movement is the “isorhythm” which was frequently used in Medieval music compositions. Isorhythm consists of two critical parts: *talea* and *color*. *Talea* is the repetition of the same rhythms to different pitches, and *color* is the repetition of the same pitches to different rhythms.<sup>142</sup>

Isorhythm is used in both the cello part and the piano part in the first movement of the *Quartet*, in which the cellist has a comparatively more synchronized coordination between the rhythmic repetition and the melodic repetition. The *color* in the cello part consists of 5 pitches (C, E-natural, D, F-sharp, and B-flat), and the *talea* has 15 note values. As we know, 15 is a multiple of 5, which means that the rhythmic pattern and the pitch pattern align perfectly every

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<sup>141</sup> Proust, *Time Regained*, 529.

<sup>142</sup> Margaret Bent, "Isorhythm." Grove Music Online. 2001.

15 note values, or every three melodic patterns. It means that the isorhythm in the cello part circles back every 15 notes. In comparison, the piano part involves a much more complicated isorhythm: the *talea* and the *color* take much longer to complete the circle and reaches the same alignment that has appeared at the very beginning of the piece.

Despite the fact that the cyclic pattern is much easier to be completed in the cello part, both voices do not “end well” in the last measure of the movement because neither the cello nor the piano lands on the ultimate note of the current repetition when the movement ends. In the cello part for example, the pitch ends in F-sharp, the penultimate pitch of its *color*, and the rhythm stops on the 4th note of its entire 15-note sequence; in Anthony Pople’s words, “the close of the movement interrupts the cello about midway through its eighth repetition.”<sup>143</sup> In the piano part, it is *impossible* to reach the ending point, and the reason for that is also related to the prime numbers that I have discussed before. The *talea* in the piano part contains 17 note values, while the *color* repeats itself after every 29 chords. As we know, 17 and 29 are both prime numbers and do not have a common multiple, so the pitch pattern and the rhythmic pattern cannot meet in a long time. By multiplying 17 by 29, we get the number 493, which means that the circle cannot be completed until the pianist plays the 494th chords. This will not happen because, in the piano part, there are only 167 chords in the entire first movement. Therefore, where the piano voice stops is far from the actual end of the isorhythmic cycle.

Messiaen was fascinated with this kind of “impossibility”: being unable to end, which I have also underscored as an important feature of Proust’s novel. The suspension of “the end” which is considered as an inescapable destination for all of us is a bound-breaking technique that

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<sup>143</sup> Anthony Pople, *Messiaen: Quatuor pour la fin du temps*, reprint. ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2003), 20.

transfigures the music into eternity. The image becomes even grander when we look at it from a macroscopic level. If we superimpose the cello on the piano part and put them together, it is not hard to notice that they have never met and will never align with each other in the entire first movement. In the same way as it was explained above, the isorhythm pattern of 15 notes in the cello part cannot align with the isorhythm pattern of 493 note values in the piano part until they have played  $15 \times 493 = 7395$  notes/chords. The first movement only lasts for a limited duration, and the repetitions cannot go on forever, so the isorhythm could never circle back to its starting-point, or never could it end. Therefore, the entire “Cristal de liturgie” is only a fragmentation of what remains unimaginably grand, like a small piece out of an infinite amount of puzzles. Here Messiaen only gives us a glimpse of the infinity and a peek of the eternal, just as Proust sheds light on the extra-temporal essence of life through a transitory taste of the madeleine. As Anthony Pople concluded at the end of his analysis of “Liturgie de Cristal,” the piano and cello are playing “endless music,” so that “for these three minutes or so we are eavesdropping on something everlasting.”<sup>144</sup>

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<sup>144</sup> Pople, *Messiaen*, 18.

## Chapter IV: On the Experience of Reading and Listening

### I. The Writer as a Reader, the Reader as a Writer

While Olivier Messiaen gives us a peek of the eternal by using isorhythm in the *Quartet* and makes us imagine the rest of the picture, the experience of reading *In Search of Lost Time* makes a reader actually feel eternal. French writer Anatole France says: “Life is too short and Proust is too long.”<sup>145</sup> As a reader of Proust’s *In Search of Lost Time*, I believe that most of the readers would agree with France, for the simple fact that over one million words do not go by like a wind; they rather take a great amount of time to read. Even if one does a quick skim or not read a single word, it still takes a fairly long time to turn those 4,000+ pages. For those who do read it in its entirety, there is a possibility to be engrossed in it. Undoubtedly but very often without one’s noticing, the experience of reading is closely related to time: a book must be read in time while it can also make one forget time.

Before everything else, it is important for us to keep in mind that, after all, the protagonist and narrator Marcel in *ISOLT* (as well as Proust himself) is not only a writer but also a reader who knows well the experience of reading. Early in the first volume, Marcel presents a reading scene in an afternoon of Combray, in which he is oblivious to the time passing when he is fully immersed in the fictional world. He writes: “...as each hour struck, it would seem to me that a few moments only had passed since the hour before... Sometimes it would even happen that this precocious hour would sound two strokes more than the last...”<sup>146</sup> When reading the

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<sup>145</sup> Anatole France, quoted in Christine M. Cano, Introduction to *Proust's Deadline*, (Urbana; Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2006.) 1-10.

<sup>146</sup> Proust, *Swann's Way*, 120.

book, his mind is too occupied by what happens in the fiction to notice any change in the external world. Time thus elapses without his notice, and we could even say that time has stopped temporarily for him and only for him, as he claims: “something that had taken place had not taken place for me; the fascination of my book, a magic as potent as the deepest slumber, had deceived my enchanted ears and had obliterated the sound of that golden bell from the azure surface of the enveloping silence.”<sup>147</sup>

It is true that time sometimes flies without our notice, and the experience of reading can lead to an illusion of being “out of time.” An hour can be “compressed” into fifteen minutes when we dive into a fictive world where the mechanical time no longer works. Instead, the subjective time takes charge, the passing speed of which can vary based on the inner activities of each individual and the intensity of the incidents narrated in the story. Proust’s novel is able to create that illusion as well, but at the same time a question comes up: how long will the illusion last? Over those 4,000 pages, there must be at least once when one is distracted by the redundancy of details in the narrative or the limited number of actual incidents taking place in the story. As soon as the attention is no longer drawn entirely towards the fictional world, one will again start to be aware of the time passing. Because of the very nature of his writing style, Proust’s novel sometimes unfolds vertically instead of horizontally: there are tons of details used to expand a single activity while only a few incidents take place in the entire novel. When reading *ISOLT*, I often wait for some incidents to take place in the story, and waiting makes time seem to pass much more slowly. The cause of it is again related to Henri Bergson’s idea of “true duration,” which has been underscored in the previous chapters. Based on Bergson’s theory, the

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<sup>147</sup> Proust, *Swann’s Way*, 120.

duration of the reading experience will seem longer in the present if the reading material contains less concrete content.

In fact, we often forget that the time we have spent reading is the actual time passing both in the external world and within ourselves. It is a part of our lifetime, no matter how small a part it is. Anatole France implies that the experience of reading is defined by "an extra-textual temporality that is quite simply the time a text 'takes' to read—time taken away... from living itself."<sup>148</sup> Time taken away from our life is time "wasted," as Marcel calls it when he looks back upon the time he has spent on frivolous entertainments in society. Since our life is so short, then why do we waste our time in reading such a long work? Just like what France alluded to, *In Search of Lost Time* tells me *through* the story that the time that I have spent reading is deducted from my time of living; in other words, it leads me to see myself through the story instead of making me forget myself or making me feel to be suddenly dragged back into reality as soon as the story ends. When Marcel talks about his prospective project at the end of *Time Regained*, he compares his work to a magnifying glass and clearly expresses the hope that the readers of his book will not be *his* readers but rather "the readers of their own selves."<sup>149</sup>

The journey of the protagonist seems to be personal and irreplicable, taking place in a specific time in a specific space for a specific person. This personal story, however, is an indispensable intermediary through which we can see the universal truths that Proust is guiding us to learn. These are indeed the essences of things that Marcel finds extra-temporal. Recalling in the present the memories of the past, Marcel realizes that there lies "in them something that was common to a day long past and to the present."<sup>150</sup> The extra-temporality is found also in our

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<sup>148</sup> Anatole France, quoted in Christine Cano, Introduction to *Proust's Deadline*, 1.

<sup>149</sup> Proust, *Time Regained*, 508

<sup>150</sup> Proust, 262.

experience of reading: regardless of citizenship, gender, age or other personal background, every reader can learn the truths about life through Proust's writing. Therefore, although the fictional world appears to be very distant from ours and should not have been too much of our concern, it actually is directly reflecting our life, the time we have lived and the time left for us.

For those who have not reached the point of revelation (i.e. the revelation of truth for both the protagonist and us readers in *Time Regained*), the length and redundancy of the entire novel as well as the time it takes to read might have made one want to give up on it from time to time, or simply feel that it could have been much shorter and more condensed. However, I would assert that the unusual length of the book is a strategy rather than a mistake. Proust is a writer who is constantly aware of his readers. Contextually speaking, the novel starts from the protagonist's bedtime reading and ends in a lesson given to his potential readers, which shows that, throughout the entire novel, he values the experience of reading and sometimes even stands in a reader's position. In a nutshell, Proust must have known what he was doing.

Proust explicitly points out in the penultimate volume that "the thought of the author... is fully realized only in the minds of his readers."<sup>151</sup> Claiming that, he acknowledges the importance of the readers and how the value of a literary work is truly realized in the experience of reading or, to put it in his own words, "in the impression made on the readers."<sup>152</sup> In the novel, the protagonist Marcel once encounters his own writing in the newspaper *Le Figaro*. At first he doesn't realize that he is indeed the author of this article, so he reads it simply in the position of a reader. Such an accidental experience of reading himself as a reader is crucial for him to be a writer, as he later realizes that "it was not merely what had been written by me, but what had

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<sup>151</sup> Marcel Proust, *The Captive and The Fugitive*, pbk. ed., trans. C. K. Moncrieff and Terence Kilmartin, ed. D. J. Enright (New York: Modern Library, 2003), 769.

<sup>152</sup> Proust, *The Fugitive*, 769.



been written by me and read by everyone.”<sup>153</sup> After imagining the reader’s gaze cast upon his work, Marcel finds it essential for him to “read this article not as its author but as one of the readers of the paper.”<sup>154</sup> He then pretends to open the newspaper as a person who does not know who writes the article and how he writes it, just to experience what thousands of other people might be doing at that moment and how they might receive this piece of writing. At that moment, the reader Marcel is split from the writer Marcel; he gets out of his self-consciousness and becomes another.

At the same time, however, Marcel hints at the possibility that his readers might not be able to get what he actually means through what he writes. As a writer, he claims: “I could not believe that every other reader on opening his eyes would not see directly the images that I saw, assuming... that the author’s thought is directly perceived by the reader.”<sup>155</sup> Notwithstanding, as a reader he observes quite the opposite: “at the very moment in which I was trying to be an ordinary reader, my mind was rewriting my article while reading it.”<sup>156</sup> Apparently, Proust is well aware of the reader's gaze. According to Marcel, a writer can gain benefit from this kind of role-playing. He used to read his own writing as the author who would compare his writing with the ideal, but now reading himself as a reader and an other self, the painful process of judging at once becomes an activity that does not affect his self-esteem. “I read the article while forcing myself to imagine that it had been written by someone else,” says Marcel, “then all my images,

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<sup>153</sup> Proust, *The Captive*, 767.

<sup>154</sup> Proust, 767.

<sup>155</sup> Proust, 768. This observation has been forecasted much earlier in the novel when Swann reads the letter that Marcel writes to Gilberte; Swann comments on Marcel’s heartfelt writing: “All this means nothing.” See Proust, *Within a Budding Grove*, 87.

<sup>156</sup> Proust, *The Captive*, 768.

all my reflexions, all my epithets taken in themselves, ... charmed me by their brilliance, their unexpectedness, their profundity.”<sup>157</sup>

In the same way, we can almost imagine how Proust himself reads his own novel and pretends to be another. We can also assume that Proust intentionally and almost endlessly expands his writing in order to help his readers actually feel time that is usually unperceivable. This can also be considered as a technique he used in the composition that echoes the main theme as well as the title of *ISOLT*: after we finish reading the book, will we be in search of our lost time (including the time we have spent reading it) as well? After we reach the end of the book and look back upon Marcel’s life journey and, perhaps more importantly, our own journey of reading, what we will be able to see is the time lost not only for Marcel but also for us. After all, I would maintain that Proust knows clearly where the length of his novel might lead his readers, and he explicitly demonstrates to his readers at the end that the length of the work is not simply a writer’s monomania. This is exactly what he wanted his readers to experience through reading: it should feel like a life-long journey.

In her introduction to the book *Proust’s Deadline*, focusing on the publication and reception of Proust’s *ISOLT*, Christine Cano asserts that Proust knew the truth lying in France’s remark that “life is too short and Proust is too long.” Integrating Proust’s physical condition, the publication market in his time, and the very nature of his writing, Cano points out that time is always a concern for Proust:

That life was too short—too short, he feared, to complete his writing project, too short to finish correcting his proofs, too short to see the next volume through the publication process; and that his novel was too long—too long for the current

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<sup>157</sup> Proust, *The Fugitive*, 771.

book market, too long to be held in the reader's mind over several volumes, too long especially to be grasped all at one go.<sup>158</sup>

This passage perfectly explains and also literalizes France's statement; at the same time it summarizes the potential concern during the years in which Proust was working on the novel.

Meanwhile, another interesting but perhaps far-fetched way to interpret France's remark comes to my mind. Life is too short because it lasts for less than 80-100 years; Proust is too long not only because his writing is long but also for the fact that it will survive through time and live from generation to generation. As Proust writes, after the writer finishes the book and strengthens it, "it is the book that grows, that designates its author's tomb and defends it against the world's clamor and for a while against oblivion."<sup>159</sup>

Proust casts the light of such an "immortal life" on the fictive artists created in his novel, such as the writer Bergotte and the composer Vinteuil. Describing Bergotte's death, the narrator addresses the important question: is he dead forever? The question is answered through a passage that seems to depict a scene of transcendence, in which he writes:

They buried him, but all through that night of mourning, in the lighted shop-windows, his books, arranged three by three, kept vigil like angels with outspread wings and seemed, for him who was no more, the symbol of his resurrection.<sup>160</sup>

The words such as "lighted," "angels," and "outspread wings," all help to create a sacred image of eternity, but here the resurrection of the dead body, which is originally a Christian doctrine, is said to be promised by the posterity of art. By comparing Bergotte's books to the angels with outspread wings, Proust suggests that Bergotte's resurrection is promised every time a reader

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<sup>158</sup> Christine M. Cano, Introduction to *Proust's Deadline*, (Urbana; Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2006.) 2.

<sup>159</sup> Proust, *Time Regained*, 508.

<sup>160</sup> Proust, *The Captive*, 246.

opens his book. Therefore, as long as his literary works are still being read, the author will not be permanently dead. Likewise, when listening to Vinteuil's music, the protagonist almost sees the dead composer present at the performance. "It was as though, reincarnate, the composer lived for all time in his music..." describes Marcel, who claims later on that the colors in the music are so lasting and personal that "time has been powerless to spoil their freshness."<sup>161</sup>

In the narrative, we hear more than once an ambiguous and almost timeless voice which, presumably, belongs to the narrator. Earlier in the book, the narrator once refers to himself as someone "who was not yet detached from life."<sup>162</sup> Such a "detachment" comes to him when his grandmother gets really ill and close to death. His grandmother, being almost detached from life, makes him foresee his own deathbed, although at that moment it is still too early to imagine. What the narrator means by claiming "I, who was not yet detached from life" is to say in fact: "I, who is now detached from life." The person who says that he *was not yet* detached from life must know what would happen in the future. In other words, the voice of the first person "I" belongs to the narrator who is already at the end and detached from his life. It is not the protagonist Marcel who was speaking in the past through his writing. It is an artist "out of time" who is able to speak through his works that are being passed on from generation to generation.

Nevertheless, just as Proust points out, the book is able to defend its author "*for a while* against oblivion."<sup>163</sup> There is definitely an end to the posterity, and the end will be the time when there is no more man and thus no more readers. Proust explicitly points that out in *The Captive*, where he imagines an invading and unbearable cold that will eventually kill every man. He says: "however far forwards into future generations the works of men may shine, there must none the

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<sup>161</sup> Proust, *The Captive*, 337-338.

<sup>162</sup> Proust, *The Guermantes Way*, 428.

<sup>163</sup> Proust, *Time Regained*, 508. (Italics mine.)

less be men. ...when there are no longer any men, and if we suppose Bergotte's fame to have lasted until then, suddenly it will be extinguished for all time."<sup>164</sup> By saying that, Proust is foreseeing the real end of time, not only being the death of each individual but also uncovering the limits in the idea of posterity and timelessness of art.

## II. The “Messiaenic Effect” upon the Audience of the *Quartet*

For a composer, the reception of a new piece is also critical. The positive or negative reactions from the audience often determine the initial success of a new composition. Messiaen was liberated from the camp less than one month after the premiere of the *Quartet*, and he was appointed Professor of Harmony at the Paris Conservatory. Although the reason for his liberation that came earlier than many others remains debated and might not be directly or merely related to the composition of the *Quartet*, the possible reasons given by those who were close to him show the success Messiaen had achieved by then, especially after the *Quartet* came out. Some say that Messiaen got repatriated because of his personality and fame which at that time served as a qualification for liberation, among many veterans and others, under a Vichy law.<sup>165</sup> But more evidentially, Étienne Pasquier, a good friend of Messiaen who shared a great amount of time with him rehearsing and performing the *Quartet*, suggests that Messiaen received particular concern and respect from the German camp authorities. Pasquier says:

During our rehearsal for the *Quartet for the End of Time*, we were often visited by some German officers, who would sit in the front of the hall and listen... One day, one of them who spoke a very good French said to Messiaen: “Monsieur

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<sup>164</sup> Proust, *The Captive*, 240.

<sup>165</sup> Rischin, *For the End of Time*, 71-72.

Messiaen, I have something to tell you. In a few weeks, there will be a return of prisoners to Paris. Don't miss the train."<sup>166</sup>

No matter whether these German officers have heard or known about Messiaen's music before, the fact that they would *often* go to their rehearsals speaks the attention Messiaen received as a successful composer, even in such a special situation.

Like the experience of reading Proust, the experience of listening to Messiaen's *Quartet* involves something that cannot be named but is universally felt, even for those who barely listen to or know about classical music. Pasquier gives a recount of the audience's reaction to the *Quartet* at the Stalag premiere:

These people, who had never before heard such music, remained *silent*. These people, who were completely musically ignorant, sensed that this was something exceptional. They sat perfectly still, in awe. Not one person stirred. No doubt, these people reassumed their original personalities afterward, but there they were subject to a miracle: the miracle of the performance of this music.<sup>167</sup>

Although Pasquier's description is all about these listeners' facial expressions and physical gestures, for their attentiveness we can assume that these people were completely attracted by the performance. If we think about Marcel's reading experience in *In Search of Lost Time* that makes him unaware of the time passing in the external reality, the listening experience is very similar. The attention of the audience was thoroughly drawn towards the music, which opened in front of them a door to the spiritually eternal world created by Messiaen who longed to musically express the words "There will be no more time." As Pasquier says, these listener's original personalities came back to them when the performance ended. Presumably, it hints at something unsaid:

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<sup>166</sup> Rischin, *For the End of Time*, 72.

<sup>167</sup> Étienne Pasquier, quoted in Rischin, 69.

during the performance, the distinct personality of each individual was blunted by something revealed through the music that is universal and essential; at that instant, different individuals were connected by a sense of timelessness, just as the German officers in the camp were able to appreciate the ineffable feeling of a French composer through his composition.

If Pasquier's observation was correct, and everyone present at the performance did sense that the music had something exceptional, then how did Messiaen convey the message through music so successfully that every listener was able to understand? Music, as an abstract way of expression after all, usually frees up spaces for various interpretations even more than the written words can do. There are no correct or wrong interpretations but ones that are closer to the composer's initial conception. How did Messiaen prevent different listeners from taking different ideas from the listening experience? The answer is simple: Messiaen attempted to describe his own music in words and literally told his fellow prisoners before the performance what he aimed to depict in each movement.<sup>168</sup> In the speech given before the Stalag premiere, he explicitly pointed out the textual basis of the composition, the images he saw, and the ethereal atmosphere he attempted to create; at the same time he also deliberately guided his audience to listen to the birdcalls, the descending chords imitating the color of rainbow, and the melodic phrase in the cello part (of the fifth movement) that speaks the Word of God. Since Messiaen described his piece in such detail, how could his audience interpret it otherwise?

Perhaps not surprisingly, Messiaen's spoken introduction before the performance of each movement encountered objections at that time. The French musicologist Serge Moreux criticized that Messiaen's commentary on each movement had "disrupted the tonal balance of the work,"

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<sup>168</sup> These remarks later turn into the preface to the score of the *Quartet*, a part of which I have quoted in the passages before.

and the tone of Christian apologetics also displeased many people.<sup>169</sup> Likewise, the Swiss composer Arthur Honegger sensed that “some may find that there is too much literature surrounding this music, and will regret it.”<sup>170</sup> The message that Messiaen reiterated makes the *Quartet* almost a program music, even though the vision he was trying to arouse in his listeners was still very abstract. Besides, the technical explanations given on some of the movements are sometimes received otherwise. For example, how Messiaen’s conception of “Interlude” is different from mine. As described in his commentary on the “Interlude”, “Scherzo is meant as a repose for the listener. Counterpoint play — resolute, alert.”<sup>171</sup> If he doesn’t say so, it is unlikely that I will take it the same as he conceives it, for the reason that this is the first scherzo in this piece. It is a new movement with a new combination of instruments (strings and clarinet without piano) playing a new motif that is encountered for the first time, which will appear again in the sixth movement. If the interlude comes after the sixth movement, and if every motif used in the interlude has been heard before, then Messiaen’s interpretive preference would have made much more sense. But now the audience needs to process a new piece of musical information, how can it be received as a repose?

After all, Messiaen’s literary explanation of his composition might not be necessary, not only because it might be different from what the audience feels instinctively, but also for the fact that he has already expressed it well through his music. The duration of the *Quartet*, just like the length of Proust’s *ISOLT*, partly determines the unusual experience of listening. As I discussed in the previous section on the experience of reading Proust, if the experience is long and does not

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<sup>169</sup> Serge Moreus, quoted in Peter Hill and Nigel Simeone, *Messiaen* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 112-113.

<sup>170</sup> Arthur Honegger, quoted in Hill and Simeone, *Messiaen*, 113.

<sup>171</sup> Messiaen, preface to the score of *Quartet for the End of Time*. See Rischin, *For the end of Time*, Appendix A, pp.129-134.



have a strong directionality, the beholder would be easily distracted especially towards the later stage of the experience. In Messiaen's case, the listeners need to sit there for 50 minutes, holding their breath because many phrases in this piece are so quiet. As the composer says, the musical language of this piece is "essentially ethereal, spiritual, Catholic,"<sup>172</sup> so the atmosphere remains peaceful and tranquil for most of the time. However, the fact that the audience is likely to be "distracted" on the contrary enables them to feel a sense of spiritual transcendence, because one's attention is no longer able to focus on a specific and concrete thing. In the last movement specifically, the music is so simple and the pacing is radically slow that the music almost comes to a standstill. At the same time, the listeners tend to enter an absent-mind state; instead of attentively listening to the music, they are experiencing it more than hearing it, and the experience turns the activity of listening from outward to inward. Like Proust's novel that guides the readers to read themselves, Messiaen's music eventually leads to an introspection and spiritual progress among the audience, as if it is a contemplation on time in which we all live.

There is a similar experience recounted in Proust's *ISOLT*, which can somewhat help us imagine the listening experience of the *Quartet*. Early in the novel, we find the protagonist Marcel reading in a shuttered room which is cool and dark in contrast to the external world full of light and sun in the summer. "I would be lying stretched out on my bed with a book in my hand," writes the narrator, and what he can see while being detached from the external world is merely a gleam of daylight that contrives to slip through the almost closed shutters.<sup>173</sup> Nonetheless, being physically isolated from the real world does not make him "out of the world." He hears the music of the flies which "calls up their image in our memory, but guarantees their

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<sup>172</sup> Messiaen, preface to the score of *Quartet for the End of Time*. See Rischin, *For the end of Time*, Appendix A, pp.129-134.

<sup>173</sup> Proust, *Swann's Way*, 113-114.

return, their actual, circumjacent, immediately accessible presence.”<sup>174</sup> Instead of being isolated, the barrier between Marcel and the outside makes him picture the real world that is always available for imagination and which he is not able to physically see in the present. At that moment reading in his room, he is even more in the world than when he is actually in it, as he claims: “This dim coolness of my room...presented to my imagination the entire panorama of summer, which my senses, if I had been out walking, could have tasted and enjoyed only piecemeal...”<sup>175</sup> The picture of the summer is brought to him in its entirety through imagination when he is completely detached from it.

If we think about the situation that the war camp inmates were living in, there is a connection to be made between Marcel in his room and those captives of war. If Proust suggests that being away from something makes one think even more about it, then we can assume that these captives, meaning the audience at the premiere of the *Quartet*, could more easily obtain a sense of freedom and spiritual transcendence through the *Quartet*. As the *Quartet* is often discussed in its special historical background for the fact that it was in the first instance received and appreciated by those who were physically captivated, there is one question that needs to be asked: would the experience of listening to the *Quartet* be anyhow different when it is performed today? The answer is both yes and no. Yes, it must be more or less different because, without Messiaen’s interpretive preference demonstrated beforehand, the same piece of music can generate different images in different listeners’ minds. For those who do not know Messiaen and have little idea of what this piece is all about, and especially for those who do not share the same

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<sup>174</sup> Proust, *Swann’s Way* 114.

<sup>175</sup> Proust, 114.

religious belief with the composer, the *Quartet* can be heard in various ways that might not be religious at all.

However, I am not saying that Messiaen fails for the fact that this music is evocative only when it is heard by a specific group of people in a specific time. Although the audience today might not be able to hear it in the same way that Messiaen conceives it, they nevertheless are getting a spiritual feeling through the experience. What they feel might have nothing to do with the religious definition of eternity, but there is the same halo around the music in which everything can be forgotten, including time, space, and even music itself. It is deliberately planned by the composer, as “he spoke often of elevation, of ascending” when talking about the end of the last movement.<sup>176</sup> The stillness and silence, which I have also observed in my performance of the *Quartet* as Étienne Pasquier did in his, permeates the air among the audience, elevating us all when the ascending notes eventually disappear after the 50-minute journey which seems as long as a whole lifetime, bringing us to a spiritual transcendence, beyond time.

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<sup>176</sup> Rischin, *For the End of Time*, 42.

## Conclusion

As demonstrated and analyzed through the four chapters, both Olivier Messiaen's *Quartet For the End of Time* and Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* closely engage with time as a motif. They not only establish their compositions based on the topic of time but also deal with time throughout the entire creative process. Time is the inspiration for both of the artists, as Messiaen was held captive in the war, which made him longing for freedom in that special historical time, and as there was not much physical time left for Proust, for whom literature was a way to transcend temporality and regain the past. Although their initial motivations were different, no matter whether the work initially sprang from a religious or philosophical idea, they were aiming at the same goal: to elude temporality. On the journey of escaping time not only did Messiaen quote the text from the *Apocalypse* in which a mighty angel announces that "There will be no more Time," but he also used specific techniques in the composition that are able to perceptually eliminate time, change the speed of time, or elude the end of linear time; likewise, Proust did not merely *talk* about time in his novel but also unfold the entire story through a man's whole lifetime and even reflected the length of a life-long journey in the experience of reading, so much prolonged as if being almost infinite.

The task of conveying a sense of timelessness was undertaken by both artists as an attempt to liberate themselves from time, and free their readers or listeners as well. Although time plays a more or less different role in music and in literature, the audience are able to get a feeling of timelessness, conceptually and perceptually, in the experience of reading and listening. We can get a sense of what the *Quartet* and *ISOLT* are able to bring to people from the story in

the concentration camps, which have been presented in the very beginning of my project: the prisoners in camp compared Messiaen's *Quartet* to "an act of revenge against captivity, against the miserable ambience of the camp,"<sup>177</sup> and the captives in the Soviet camp listening to J. Cszpski's lectures on Proust were able to imagine another world full of light and hope, even though they were physically situated in a purgatory on earth.

However, because Messiaen's *Quartet* and Proust's *ISOLT* are experimental to a certain extent, they were taking tremendous risks at that time. The risk lies in the fact that people might consider these compositions as being "against" the traditional taste, so that these experiments could be easily rejected or even denounced. Those who were looking for something to listen to and read for pastime might find it arduous to consume their works. Around four years after the composition and premiere in the Stalag VIII, there was a debate among the critics on Messiaen's works in general. It is an affair known as "Le Cas Messiaen," in which Messiaen was attacked for his insistence on reading commentary of the music before performance, which was pre-echoed in the criticism made on his *Quartet*. For Proust, the first volume of the novel had been rejected by many publishers at that time. The French publisher Bernard Grasset, after receiving Proust's request of publishing the first volume at Proust's own expense, demanded a "reasonably sized volume," meaning to considerably cut down the length of the volume. The fact that these rejections were regretted by these publishers later on suggests that the work might take a much longer time to digest and might not be able to show its value in the earlier stage of reading.

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<sup>177</sup> Marcel Haedrich, quoted in Rischin, *For the End of Time*, 70.

This said, then is it still worthwhile for us to experience the length of time taken to finish Proust's novel and take time to read the literature around the composition of the *Quartet*, and to focus on these characteristic features more than anything else that is worth discussing about these two works? For me, the answer is both yes and no. Proust suggests in the penultimate volume *The Fugitive* that, like the involuntary memory that shows the past as if the present only temporarily, the effects that a great book (or a great piece of music) can create upon its readers are transient.<sup>178</sup> No matter how successfully Messiaen and Proust managed to elude the end of linear time and guide their audience to catch a sense of eternity, the experience must come to an end at a certain point, and after all, the clock is still ticking. In other words, the discussion and the embodiment of time as well as the experience of a spiritual transcendence do not necessarily define these two works as masterpieces that are able to survive through time. The greatness of these artworks is not determined solely by the fact that they engage with the theme of time. The factors that would eventually lead to the posterity of these artworks are far from being thoroughly covered in my project.

In fact, to put Messiaen's commentary aside and for a moment forget about the embodiment of time and spiritual eternity in his music, the pure soundscape created in the *Quartet* is stupendous, and the diversity in his arrangements of the instruments in each of the movements had been rarely adopted by other composers. The color of sound created in his music is beyond what we think these instruments are able to produce. One wonders what Proust might have been able to say about Messiaen's music had he listened to it, even if he did not read Messiaen's explanation on the theme of time. In the novel, Proust devoted a considerable number

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<sup>178</sup> Proust, *The Fugitive*, 757-758.

of pages discussing the sonata and the septet composed by the fictive composer Vinteuil. In addition, through the voice of his characters, Proust also shared his opinions on the famous composers such as Beethoven and Wagner, and mentioned a few times Claude Debussy's *Pelléas et Mélisande*, which had the most determinative influence upon Messiaen. Thus we can easily imagine that Proust and Messiaen might be able to “meet” each other again, one day, beyond the realm of time, in the world of music.

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