

A LIQUID AIR OF APOCALYPSE: THE END(S) OF MUSIC IN PROUST AND SARTRE

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Music, another form of speech beloved by the lazy or by deep minds seeking relaxation in a charge of activity, tells you about yourself, recites to you the poem of your life. It enters bodily into you, and you in turn become dissolved in it.¹

In Marcel Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past* and in Jean-Paul Sartre's *Nausea*, music seems almost like an all too familiar object, extensively studied both as an individual motif and as an element of "response," a resonance of Proust in Sartre. Thus, my goal is not as much to "clarify" certain aspects of the correspondence that could have been neglected as it is to emphasize a few particular movements, a few singular notes, play them louder until suggesting, and perhaps only that, the deployment of a larger theme.

The reflection, almost a daydream, that the following pages will attempt to share was inspired by the matter of the music in both works. For if it has been said that both Proustian and Sartrean musics convey a certain transcendence, that it is like an eternal essence, that it displays a certain Platonism, it also has been said (sometimes by the same people) that their music could not be comprehended as a pure abstraction, that it would not let go of its materialistic, all too concrete quality. Concrete: surely; solid: nothing is sure: the notes, the movements, that I will privilege owe less to the vibration of air than to the rippling of water. Music, for Proust and Sartre, has the qualities of a liquid, and perhaps also of a liquidator.

What it brings us is endings. End of a certain life, of a certain order, end of a certain fear, and of a certain ignorance. But also ends in the sense of goals, intentions, of emerging new horizons. In the proper sense, their music is one of an apocalypœ. Here and there, Art, the Salvation, is essentially a matter of a literal vision: the matter (the object) is of little importance, the eyes of the artist (re)discover (apocalypstein, to discover) the most insignificant details of the banal in an unveiling, a generative revelation (apocalypsis, revelation.)

Here and there, the ultimate revelation comes from the direct relationship between the material and the abstract: from the Vinteuil's "splashing waves of sound," prototype of his "mystical rooster's song" to

the "translucent bubble all humming" of *Some of these days*, music reveals another world and another time. Here and there, it stimulates a mystical experience from which emerges a new order, the acceptance of disorder and the opportunity to translate daily life. Finally, it might help us foresee the difference between Proust and Sartre regarding the act of writing. Does it really have to do with reintroducing the sacred within modernity or with redefining the very notion of mysticism?

It is a secret for no one that Sartre's *Nausea* occurs thanks to an ambivalence between solid and liquid, viscosity and dryness. However, the evolution of the dichotomy throughout the book remains astounding. The nausea starts with the event of the encounter of the solid with the liquid when the narrator wants to throw a stone in the sea; the real encounter, though, happens inside when he gets scared by the stone "flat and dry, especially on one side, damp and muddy on the other," (*Nausea* 2) afraid to get his fingers dirty by it, he drops it and leaves. In the fall of a pebble, Antoine Roquentin has become irremediably estranged to things, to the world and to himself. The fascination/revulsion Roquentin displays vis-a-vis the viscous, Rhiannon Goldthorpe reminds us, has to do, in part, with the idea that "the instability of the viscous is also associated with the fear of metamorphosis" (117).

Let us then fast forward to the second encounter of Roquentin with his favorite ragtime tune, *Some of these days*. Stricken by a horrific delirium of existence, Roquentin feels he becomes the very saliva in his mouth, dreads the crab-like aspect of his hands, clumsily tries to stab it to death, then goes out to become the little girl, raped and murdered, he reads about in the newspaper before becoming her aggressor before becoming the victim again. A liquid sign informs the whole passage: the run "to flee to throw himself in the lake," "breathing in light bubbles of existence, he is a bubble of fog and desire" to finish in "the Bar de la Marine" (*Nausea* 102). There, the gramophone plays, exists, all spins, the gramophone exists, the heart beats: spin, spin, liquors of my life, spin, jellies, sweet syrups of my flesh, sweetness, the gramophone:

When that yellow moon begins to beam
Every night I dream my little dream.

The voice, deep and hoarse, suddenly appears and the world vanishes, the world of existence. A woman in flesh had this voice . . . The woman: bah! She existed like me, like Rollebon, I don't want to know her. But there it is. You can't say it exists.

The turning record exists, the air struck by the voice which vibrates, exists, the voice which made an impression on the record existed. I who listens, I exist. All is full, existence everywhere, dense, heavy and sweet. But beyond all this sweetness, inaccessible, near and so far, young, merciless and serene, there is this... this rigour (102-103).

Just like the trumpets of John's Book of Revelations, the voice not only announces but performs the end of a world... which might not be such a bad thing: for Roquentin, the air sung signals the possibility of an ecstasy, of an incommensurable "drunkenness."

Then what about this rigour the revelation promises him? Is Sartrean drunkenness a cure for impotence? In its first occurrence, Some of these days announces the restoration of clean, dry, phallic solidity in a nausean world dominated by feminine humid viscosity: Roquentin likes the chorus part and "the abrupt manner in which it throws itself forward, like a cliff against the sea," he craves for the "sharp blow(s)" the myriad of notes inflict on him, making him "grow warm" and feel a "small happiness of Nausea: it spreads at the bottom of the viscous puddle, at the bottom of our time . . ." But "there is another happiness: outside there is this band of steel, the narrow duration of the music which traverses our time through and through . . . tearing it with its dry little points; there is another time" (*Nausea* 21).

The time is near: Roquentin is both the messenger, the prophet and the recipient of the unheard "message:" he knows (in both didactic and biblical, sexual senses) this air, he knows what is coming; but although he knows it by heart he has not grown accustomed to it: each audition is a rebirth, a resurrection simultaneous with a destruction:

the notes know no rest, an inflexible order gives birth to them and destroys them without giving time to recuperate and exist for themselves . . . No sooner than born, it is already old, it seems as though I have known it for twenty years . . . A few seconds more and the Negress will sing. It seems inevitable, so strong is the necessity of this music: nothing can interrupt it, nothing which comes from this time in which the world has fallen; it will stop of itself, as if by order . . . (21-22).

Although troubled by the moving strangeness of such a fragile hardness, Roquentin reaches his paroxysm right after a Silence.

Some of these daysYou'll miss me honey

... When the voice was heard in the silence, I felt my body harden and the Nausea vanish. Suddenly: it was almost unbearable to become so hard, so brilliant . . .

I am in the music . . . I am happy. (21-22).

During the choral intercourse, Roquentin had us hesitate vis-a-vis the "nature" of the music: a liquid that hardens you, a sharp, metallic, unforgiving humidity that changes your very gestures, to look at even your most familiar enemies, the things? But should he not dread to be absorbed in, absorbed by, the music?

We hear a deafening battle raging between times: "the horror of the viscous, Goldthorpe recalls, is the horrible intuition that the past might become viscous" (117). For Jean-Louis Pautrot, the Sartrean music restores duration to consciousness, escapes materiality, ordainates time: work of time, it is an immobile time, an eternal essence which ruins matter in order to survive (35/55). Although he interpreted it as death, Pautrot heard the rumor: not a destruction but a transformation as music reveals itself as the mythical uterus (67). But, for all that, does it mean a regression? Surely, I would remake it positive: music does not give us back to the womb, but gives the womb back to us: a genuine, unexpected rebirth.

"At the same time the music was drawn out, dilated, swelled like a waterspout. It filled the room with its metallic transparency crushing our miserable little time against the walls" (22). Once in the music, in the solid womb, Roquentin has the ultimate vision: "globes of fire turn in the mirrors; encircled by rings of smoke, veiling and unveiling the hard smile of light" (22). Apocalypse in the oldest sense, music makes you see. It helps Roquentin see the "blinding evidence" of the Nausea, that "objects are not made to be touched", it helps him see that

the true sea is cold and black, full of animals; it crawls under this thin green film made to deceive human beings. The sylphs all round me have let themselves be taken in: they only see the thin film, which proves the existence of God. I see beneath it! The veneer melts . . . the scales of God's catch explode everywhere at my look, they split and gape (122).

A theocidal look which will not make him an artist: a true apocalypse, Roquentin's is a preparatory reading. To be saved, to become an artist, he must, just like Marcel in *Remembrance of Things Past*, make peace with things, go past his belief in an irrevocable "divorce" between matter and Art, ignore the horror of getting his feet wet.³

The anti-Nausea? A good cleansing with "abstracts thoughts, transparent as water" (Nausea 56). Where Marcel discovered that "real life, life at last laid bare and illuminated... is literature" (TR 931), Roquentin writes: "beware of literature. I must follow the pen without looking for words" (56). Blind trust in the hard point of the pen, in the whiteness of the paper, oblivious to the nourishing ink, to the dark humid swelling of the sheet. Truths: "I can't put down my pen", says Roquentin just before hearing his air for the last time, about to leave Bourville (Mudtown), writing whatever comes into his mind delays the Nausea (173). The "last word: [I see clearly in the apparent disorder of my life.]"⁴ Like Marcel at the end of *Remembrance*, Roquentin has a revelation: "the long dry laments of the jazz" open his eyes, show him the "other side of existence, in this other world which you can see in the distance" but cannot approach and from which "a little melody began to sing and dance: 'You must be like me; you must suffer in rhythm'" (175).

Last vision, ultimate mystical experience, in a half sleep, Roquentin sees the Jewish composer writing down this "ghost of a tune" (176). Here is the magic Denis Hollier recalls,⁵ in this alchemical quasi synthesis of the dry and the humid:

The moist hand seizes the pencil on the piano . . . he held the pencil limply, and the drops of sweat fell from his ringed fingers on to the paper. And why not I? Why should it need precisely this fat fool full of stale beer and whisky for the miracle to be accomplished? (176)

A true labor: fertility will be shed not from a tool but from the very flesh of its user. Warning: consumption of alcohol proves vital for the health of the creator. Omnipresent, especially in the revelation moments, the glass of beer remains untouched: it does need to be full of stale beer and whisky to achieve the miracle, it does take the liquors of

one's life to spin in order to be saved. Assimilation keeps the key to the Nausea. When Roquentin regrets he never vomits when he is drunk, that during one of his visions he did not even have "the excuse of drunkenness" (56), he might be mistaken again since the happiness he experienced with the music owes a lot to drunkenness. If its magic resides also, as Hollier puts it, in this "appearance of an unanalyzable synthetic totality" (257/170), it is only to the extent that analysis is rendered impossible by intoxication.

Their readers have insisted enough: for Proust and Sartre music is an unspoken, wordless, direct (brutal) language. But its mode has been occulted. In a letter to the composer Reynaldo Hahn, a dear friend of his, Proust writes:

But even written by you, any commentary being in words, i.e. in general ideas, would miss this intimate, inexpressible particularity thanks to which things are to us what they are for no one else in the world, for example when we are drunk (drunk with wine, or chagrin, or walking, etc.), and that your music fetches in the unfathomable bottom of Reynaldo's being and brings back to us, whereas Reynaldo himself could not give it back in words . . . ⁶

As he will put it in *The Captive*, beyond its "return to the unanalyzed [extraordinarily] intoxicating," music must be the "means of communication between souls" (260). Marcel's audition of the Septet could have been written by a Jewish mystic for whom music generates an automatic ecstasy. As if performed from "the world of the angels," Vinteuil's unique accent, "delirious with joy," seems to question the "secrets of death" but still sends a triumphant call,

an ineffable joy which seemed to come from Paradise . . . I knew that this new tone of joy, this summons to a supra-terrestrial joy was a thing that I would never forget. But would it be ever attainable to me? (258-62)

As if Proust read Sartre – everything was already there.

Does Swann suffer in rhythm? Right before jealousy possesses him, Vinteuil's sonata forces Swann into a "strange frenzy of intoxication" by dismissing his intelligence trying to deconstruct it: "watching Swann's

face while he listened to the phrase, one would have said he was inhaling an anaesthetic which allowed him to breathe more freely" (259). Before he knows it, the violin is a voice, a "deceiving siren's call" or a "devil immersed in a stoup of holy water", or sometimes it even floats "in the air, at large, like a pure and supernatural being that unfolds its invisible message as it goes by" and which "spoke to him of the vanity of his sufferings" (378-79). Airborne Angel or liquid Devil, from air to liquid, music is an element that will get you high... for the sake of your soul⁷.

Odette is long gone when he listens, for the last time, to Vinteuil's piece. Despite his limitations, his failure (even before the call of the little phrase), I still believe Swann hears more than Roquentin (if not Marcel), not because during his literal unveiling he discovers "himself," but because listening to (*à l'écoute de*) the five poor little notes which vivify his past, he lowers his eyes, "filled with tears" (377). Tears, ultimate drunkenness of the soul, the last move of its generosity, the costly gift of its sympathy. Roquentin, too self-absorbed, does not care for the Jewish composer or the Black singer, he does not even care for himself; overdosed, he really has no reserve left in his porosity.

By abjectly rejecting any kind of past, the Sartrean musical eschatology might be but a masquerade: should we believe in Roquentin's salvation by writing when all he hears is shame? Incapable of a smile as well as of tears, the hard-core Sartrean listener remains a stranger who fails the penetration test: he belongs to whom Marcel ends up calling the

Celibates of art . . . [who] fail to assimilate what is truly nourishing in art, [who] need artistic pleasures all the time, [who] are victim of a morbid hunger which is never satisfied. (927-28)

The Proustian listener, however, enjoys the bliss of becoming music's own secreted matter.

In the end, Roquentin remains ashamed, embarrassed by the past whereas Marcel makes it part of his present. If, as Claude Lévi-Strauss suggests, music and mythology are "instruments for the obliteration of time" (16), we must not believe in a communion of Proust and Sartre solely because music, in both, eradicates contingency nor because it remains material in spite of ideal claims. Does Roquentin's never-

ending inebriety⁸ irrevocably forbid the assimilation of the music-ambrosia? Will Marcel's final adoption of literature definitely set aside the elixir of the gods? Music and words, the partition that reads "variations on a theme of revelation" keeps on reaching its coda: literature as a vocation, writing as a vocalization — like a prayer... or a children's counting rhyme. Last rest: the child in Sartre might have grown too fast⁹, taken his chant too seriously. Proust, stubborn, rumbunctious, has never stopped rehearsing...

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NOTES

¹Baudelaire, Charles. *The Poem of the Hashish*. 1860. *My Heart Laid Bare and other prose-writings*. Ed. P. Quennell, transl. N. Cameron. New York: The Vanguard Press, 1951, pp. 110-111.

²Such as the glass of beer, making it look "dense and indispensable," like a promise of never-ending drunkenness.

³"I murmur: "it's a seat," a little like an exorcism... It could just as well be a dead donkey tossed about in the water, floating with the current, belly in the air in a great grey river, a river of floods; and I could be sitting on the donkey's belly, my feet dangling in the clear water. Things are divorced from their names. They are there, grotesque, headstrong, gigantic... I am in the midst of things, nameless things" (N, 125).

⁴"Je vois clair dans le désordre apparent de ma vie." Translation mine, omitted by the translator.

⁵In the "first theme" of the French edition of *Politics of Prose*, he rewrites "une chanson magique" into Sophie Tucker's *Some of These Days* (PP, 12/xxiii).

⁶Letter dated 1915. Translation mine. Proust, Marcel. *Correspondance*. Ed. Ph. Kolb. Paris: Plon, 1986. Vol. 14, p. 290.

⁷At his first encounter with Vinteuil's work, Swann's soul had "opened and expanded" (SW, 227); later on, we are told his soul's proportions "were altered" by the little phrase (SW, 258).

⁸How else can we explain his delirium tremens-like visions of things as insects, of bodies as crab-like creatures?

⁹Roquentin's incapacity to throw his own rock in the sea encourages "the children to laugh behind [his] back" (N, 2). A strange child estranged by his fear to be a child...

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