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Wagner and Proust

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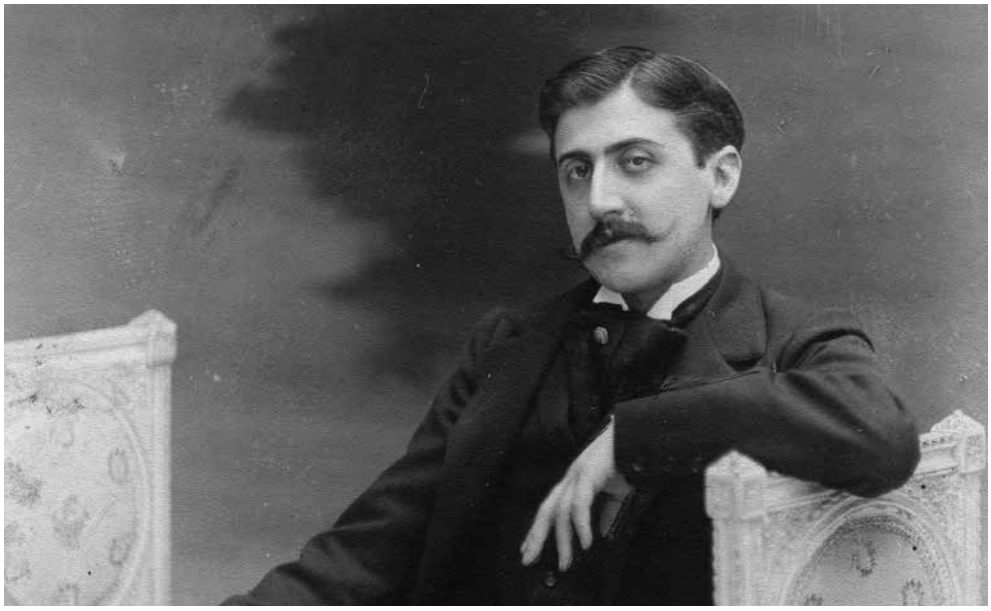
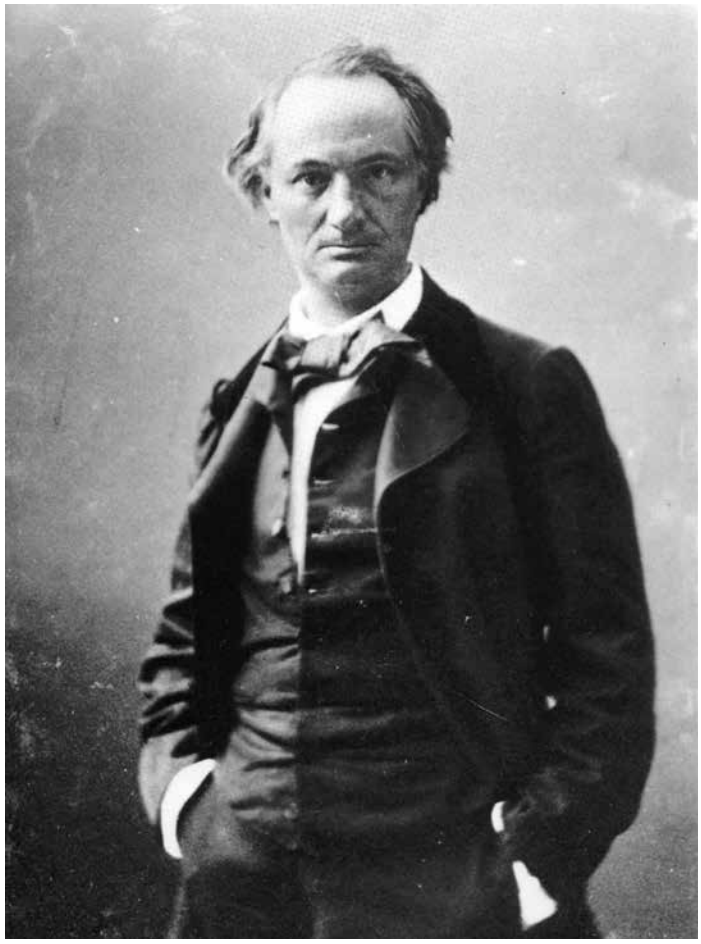


Marcel Proust (1871–1922)

One of Wagner's outstanding features is his deep and remarkably varied impact on the world around him. His influence on other composers, while extraordinary, is not unique: composers such as Josquin, Monteverdi, and Beethoven before, and Debussy after him, had a similarly strong and pervasive effect. But his impact on the works of artists and thinkers from the entire gamut of culture and society – poets, novelists, painters, philosophers and social historians – is probably unique in the history of Western art. One such artist on whom Wagner had a major impact is the great French novelist Marcel Proust (1871–1922). This essay will be an examination of the various manifestations of Wagner that play a significant role in Proust's masterpiece, *À la recherche du temps perdu*.[1] It is not my intent to examine in any detail Proust's personal in-

[1] In this paper I will refer to the work as *La Recherche*: for many decades the work was known to the English-speaking world by C.K. Scott Moncrieff's version of the title, *Remembrance of Things Past*. In spite of the lovely Shakespearean ring of this title, it is not only a very inexact translation of the original, but as Proust himself remarked in a letter to Moncrieff on 10 Oct.



Charles Baudelaire (1821–1867); photo by Félix Nadar

volvement with Wagner's works, but rather to study how and where Wagner's impact appears in his great novel cycle. It is not, however, possible to do this without at least a quick look at Wagner's place in French art and society in the late 19th century.

One of the most famous and significant episodes in Wagner's life was his visit to Paris between late 1859 and March 1861, shortly after the completion of *Tristan*, culminating with the performances of a new, French-language version of *Tannhäuser* at the Paris Opéra. These three performances, although considered to have been a resounding

1922, it falsifies one of the primary themes of the book – that memory alone is largely incapable of capturing Lost Time. In recent decades, newer translations have corrected Moncrieff and called the work – much more accurately – *In Search of Lost Time*. All too many readers in English, nevertheless, still think of the work by its first title, and it seems to me more natural simply to refer to it by a short form of the original French. I have used throughout the Terence Kilmartin reworking of the Moncrieff translation: the newest translation suffers from what to me seems the fatal flaw of having a different translator for each of the seven volumes.

fiasco, were, together with the three orchestral concerts Wagner conducted at the Théâtre des Italiens in the preceding months, nevertheless extraordinary events in both his career and in the history of French culture; and to a great extent put Wagner's name, his ideas, and some of his important works on the international map. Along with *Tannhäuser*, the concerts featured excerpts from *Der fliegende Holländer, Lohengrin* and *Tristan und Isolde.* Wagner's friend and champion, Liszt, as well as other famous composers such as Rossini, Berlioz, Meyerbeer and Gounod, attended these events. The most significant attendee in terms of Wagner's future impact on French culture was, however, the poet Charles Baudelaire (1821–67), who rapturously expressed his enthusiasm and passionate response to Wagner's music in a long fan letter and a very famous essay, 'Richard Wagner et Tannhäuser à Paris'.

Two salient points emerge from these writings, which helped to define Wagner's impact on French artists for the next fifty years. One is the sheer overwhelming power that Baudelaire feels in Wagner's music:

> The thing that struck me the most was the character of grandeur. It depicts what is grand and incites to grandeur. Throughout your works I found again the solemnity of the grand sounds of Nature in her grandest aspects, as well as the solemnity of the grand passions of man. One feels immediately carried away and dominated […] quite often I experienced a sensation of a rather bizarre nature […] of letting myself be penetrated and invaded – a really sensual delight that resembles that of rising in the air or tossing upon the sea.[2]

In short, Baudelaire, entirely untrained in music, expresses what Grout defines as Wagner's greatest attraction for his immediate followers: 'Above all, his music impressed itself on the late nineteenth century because it was able, by its sheer overwhelming power, to suggest or arouse or create in its hearers that all-embracing state of ecstasy, at once sensuous and mystical, toward which all Romantic art had been striving.'[3]

The other aspect that Baudelaire emphasises is less rapturous, yet probably more specific to Wagner's peculiar impact on France and on French artists. This is his interpretation of Wagner's concept of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, first formulated in essays in the late 1840s and initially brought to France in highly condensed and somewhat personalised form by Liszt. Wagner intended by this term to define a new kind of work that would unite all the major disciplines – music, poetry, theatre, design, painting, architecture, dance and even religious ritual – in a single all-embracing work of art. Baudelaire's interpretation is, however, entirely different: to him, it is Wagner's music that gains its extraordinary power and enchantment by its ability to evoke all other disciplines. The music itself is somehow saturated with the spirit of poetry, painting and the other arts. And he seeks to follow what he sees as Wagner's example in his own art, to make his poetry evoke music, painting, drama, philosophy and religious ritual. An excellent example of this is the poem 'Harmonies du soir'.

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[2] Letter from Baudelaire to Wagner, 17 Feb. 1860, in *The Conquest of Solitude*, tr. and ed. Rosemary Lloyd (Chicago, 1986), 145–6.

[3] Donald J. Grout, *A History of Western Music* (New York, 1960), 567.

Baudelaire's interpretation of Wagner's *Gesamtkunstwerk* became the rallying cry for a large number of French artists in the late 19th century. Under the banner of 'L'Union des Arts', the Symbolist poets under Mallarmé, novelists such as Edouard Dujardin, and many of the Impressionist painters such as Monet and Renoir all adopted what they fervently considered to be a Wagnerian creed, that of finding ways to create a new kind of art in which each discipline evoked and utilised features of the others. It is by no means insignificant that virtually none of the earliest exponents of Wagner in France were musicians, and indeed in many cases, were not even especially musical. Inspired by Baudelaire's example – although in many cases, without Baudelaire's instinctive musical perspicacity – they embraced an image of Wagner, more than the works themselves. In many cases – Mallarmé is perhaps the most famous – great French Wagnerians had a rather vague idea of what the music actually sounded like, and for the most part had certainly never seen a staged performance of a Wagnerian opera. At the same time, French music, at least until the late 1870s, showed relatively little Wagnerian influence, even though both Bizet and Gounod were accused of Wagnerian-inspired betrayal of French operatic tradition. While one could certainly argue that both *Carmen* and Gounod's later operas contain elements that would have not been possible without at least a casual knowledge of Wagner, the influence is not of primary importance, and certainly far less than what one finds in French poetry, novels and even paintings of the same period.

This curious situation is reflected in the paradox that, whereas France was the country where Wagnerism as a creed was most rampant, Paris was the very last major city in Europe to produce Wagner's operas. After the *Tannhäuser* fiasco in 1861, no opera of Wagner's was produced in Paris until 1891, when *Lohengrin* was finally presented at the Opéra. The other major works gradually followed, culminating in the first complete *Ring* in 1911 and *Parsifal* in 1914. The reason why Wagner arrived so late in Paris (and in France) is largely political and underlines an extremely important aspect of

Henri Fantin-Latour, *Tannhäuser at the Venusberg* (1864)

César Franck (1822–1890)

Camille Saint-Saëns (1835–1921)

French Wagnerism in the late 19th century, one that Proust would utilise extensively. Nationalistic fervour was stirred up in France throughout the 1860s, and after the humiliating defeat by the Germans in 1871, anti-German sentiment was rife. Wagner's gloating ridicule of France's defeat in his essay *Eine Kapitulation* – a venomous expression of revenge for his own humiliation in Paris ten years earlier – understandably stoked the flames of hatred of all things German, especially Wagner. French Wagnerism after 1871, therefore, took on an anti-nationalistic character and was identified with liberal, 'free-thinking' circles. Wagner became a hero of the counter-culture and with 'radical' cliques in high society. This certainly didn't keep French enthusiasts away from Bayreuth. Albert Lavignac in his books on Wagner and Bayreuth names a long list of French luminaries who flocked to Bayreuth as passionate pilgrims.[4] Some of them went under false names so as not to provoke negative consequences in nationalistic circles back in France.

One incident which clearly illustrates the pro- and contra-Wagner cultural division in France in the 1870s and 80s is the 'conversion' of César Franck and his subsequent break with Camille Saint-Saëns. As a young man and in spite of his own neo-Classical tastes, Saint-Saëns had embraced Wagner, whose music he knew through his friendship with and admiration for Liszt. But he became increasingly alarmed by the domination of what he considered to be German influences on music in France; this sentiment naturally was only strengthened by the experiences of the 1870–71 war and the excesses of the Commune that followed, during which Saint-Saëns had to flee to England. He subsequently became the driving force behind the *Société Nationale de Musique* whose motto was 'Ars Gallica' and which declared a burning hatred for Wagner and everything Wagnerian. Franck, an older and very conservative colleague of Saint-Saëns, was among the founding members of this group. It is highly likely that Franck was pretty much ignorant of Wagner's music until he heard a concert in 1877, probably conducted by Edouard Colonne, in which excerpts from Wagner were performed.

[4] Albert Lavignac, *Le Voyage artistique à Bayreuth* (Paris, 1897).

Franck, already 55 years old and well established as a composer of conservative, diatonic Church music, was thunderstruck. The result was the first of his masterpieces, the Piano Quintet in F minor, in which he introduces many 'Wagnerian' elements, especially in the highly chromatic harmony. Saint-Saëns was aghast and furious and considered Franck to be a 'traitor'. Franck, nevertheless, remained a passionate Wagnerian for the rest of his life (he died in 1890) and a number of his students, including D'Indy, Chausson, and Lekeu, followed him down the Wagnerian path. Indeed, it is in Franck and his followers, and especially in their chamber music, that one finds the first unmistakably Wagnerian music in France. French opera followed soon after, with works such as Chabrier's *Gwendoline* (1886) and D'Indy's *Fervaal* (1895).

If Wagner was absent from the opera house in Paris, his music was ubiquitous in the concert hall after 1881, especially in the highly popular and influential *Concerts Lamoureux*, where scarcely a single programme was without one or more of the famous orchestral excerpts, and where complete acts were frequently performed in concert form. Romain Rolland, among others, describes these concerts[5] and gives a sense of the magic and mystery they evoked to an entire generation of Parisians, including the young Proust. The great majority of Proust's Wagnerian experiences were at these and other similar concerts; he probably saw no more than one or two staged performances. He did, nevertheless, continue to follow both performances at the Opéra and symphonic concerts over the telephone (!) during the last decade of his life, when he was essentially bedridden. And, as is well documented, he had musicians, most notably a string quartet, come to his apartment in the dead of night to perform works for him that he wanted to use for references in *La Recherche*. The most notable of these is the Beethoven C sharp minor Quartet, op. 131, a work of extraordinary difficulty and density, which had scarcely even entered the standard repertoire at that period: it shows a great deal about the high level of Proust's musical understanding that he asked for repeated performances of such a work!

Proust shows a remarkably intimate knowledge of almost all of Wagner's works. Some of his knowledge of Wagner and of music in general arose through his intimate friendship with Reynaldo Hahn (1874–1947). Hahn was a Venezuelan–Jewish émigré, a brilliant composer and pianist, who was chiefly responsible for introducing the young Marcel to the fashionable *haute-bourgeoisie* and aristocracy, social sets that play such a major role in *La Recherche.* Hahn also served as Proust's musical 'guide', and it is certain that some of the technical knowledge of music that he displays in *La Recherche* is thanks to Hahn, though Proust's extraordinarily profound and perceptive understanding must have come from his own innate sensitivity.

A Wagnerian impact is present in four distinct aspects of *La Recherche*: as a general transformation of the idea of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*; as an element of Parisian society; in many descriptions of music, some explicitly by Wagner, others of music by the fictitious composer, Vinteuil, upon whom Proust confers many implicitly Wagnerian characteristics; and finally, and most significantly, on the organic structure and nature of the work itself.

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[5] Romain Rolland, 'A Note on *Siegfried* and *Tristan*', in *Essays on Music* (New York, 1948).

La Recherche as *Gesamtkunstwerk*

La Recherche as a literary manifestation of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* – that is, as a work where literature and life itself take on the character and actively evoke a mixture of many artistic disciplines – is apparent from almost the first page. The narrator's grandmother says of the beloved cathedral of Combray, the village where he spends his childhood holidays, that 'if it could play the piano, it wouldn't sound tinny'.[6] Swann is constantly comparing people to figures in paintings: the narrator's friend Bloch reminds him of Bellini's *The Sultan Mahomet II*, and a serving girl and male servant at a *soirée* at the home of the Marquise de Saint-Euverte remind him of the Giotto frescos in Padova. He at least partly falls in love with Odette because she reminds him of Jethro's daughter in a painting by Botticelli. Scenes in everyday life are compared to plays by Racine and Molière, and indeed, to operas by Wagner – for example, the arrival of the guests at the Princesse de Guermantes' is compared to the arrival of the guests at the Wartburg in *Tannhäuser*. Works of philosophy, classical literature, myth, famous poetry, are all regularly evoked in describing very ordinary scenes. It is not an exaggeration to state that no novel so continuously alludes to other works of art of every genre and era, from the most sacred to the most vulgar, as does *La Recherche*.

One of the results of the omnipresence of the world of art in everyday life is a rather curious reversal of a very Wagnerian principle. To Wagner, myth is the ideal medium for the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, because it is always relevant and speaks to every age and every culture in the present tense. Proust – but also Joyce and other novelists of this period – reverses the relationship. Here life and everyday occurrences take on mythical significance by constantly – if often covertly – making parallels between the simple 'plot' of the novel and its ordinary characters, and the world of myth and legendary tales, or in any event with works of art from every age. This, of course, also reflects, or at least resembles, Freud's interpretation of myth, in which all myths, legends, and indeed all great works of art express eternal truths about each individual human being. In Wagner, the universal becomes personal: in Proust (and Joyce, Mann, and many others) the personal becomes universal.

Another very important aspect of the 'Union des Arts' in *La Recherche* is seen in the story itself: at heart, a *Bildungsroman* that depicts the growth and maturation of an artist. In the course of the narrator's childhood and adolescence, he comes into close relationship with three (fictitious) artists: the writer, Bergotte; the painter, Elstir; and the composer, Vinteuil. Each has an extraordinary influence on the young man, each has different, essential things to teach him, and each evokes radically different emotional responses in him throughout his life. Bergotte is closely associated with the narrator's ambition, and Elstir with the first summer in Balbec and all that represents; whereas Vinteuil evokes both the emotional, irrational response to art, its secret and mysterious ability to reveal meaning in our lives, as well as the narrator's (and Swann's) struggle with sexual jealousy. Each of these three is inspired by artists in the 'real' world,

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[6] Marcel Proust, *Remembrance of Things Past*, tr. C.K. Scott Moncrieff and Terence Kilmartin, 3 vols. (New York, 1981) i.69. The translation here is infelicitous: in French the narrator's grandmother says 's'il jouait du piano, il ne jouerait pas *sec*' ('sec' in italics by the author) – one would normally translate this as 'it wouldn't play dry'.

invariably a composite of physical, aesthetic and even moral characteristics taken from a variety of artists such as Anatole France, Ruskin, Monet, Renoir, Franck, and Fauré. It is not at all an accident that although the writer, Bergotte, incorporates strongly autobiographical elements (especially in the events leading up to his death), Vinteuil, the composer, has of the three by far the most important role in *La Recherche*. Many of the Symbolist poets and indeed the novelist Thomas Mann stated that they wrote poetry or novels instead of music, only because they lacked the talent to compose! In many respects, the same can be said of Proust; at the very least, one can safely say that no novel more compellingly evokes and emulates music.

Wagner's Impact on French Society

Wagner's role in French society is of lesser importance as a theme in *La Recherche*, but it serves as an important predecessor to Proust's analysis of other fads and violent divisions in society – for example, the Dreyfus case, or politics during World War I. This, as we shall see, is one of the principal structural elements in the work as a whole and one which has strong parallels to Wagner, especially to the *Ring*. Wagner and Wagnerism are first presented as key defining elements of the 'little clan' of the Verdurins. This episode, which occurs in the long chapter 'Swann in Love', takes place in a period shortly before the birth of the narrator. In the very first sentence of this chapter, we are told that 'one condition sufficed, but that one was indispensable: you must give tacit adherence to a Creed, one of whose articles was that the young pianist whom Madame Verdurin had taken under her patronage that year and of whom she said "Really, it oughtn't be allowed to play Wagner as well as that!", licked both Planté and Rubinstein hollow.'[7] A page later we are told that 'if the pianist suggested playing the Ride of the Valkyries or the Prelude to *Tristan*, Mme. Verdurin would protest, not because the music was displeasing to her, but on the contrary, because it made too violent an impression on her.'[8] The Verdurins plan an excursion to Bayreuth for the festival, and this becomes the subject of tension, jealousy and resentment. This trip to Bayreuth, by the way, is a very rare example of an anachronism in Proust, who is usually painstakingly careful about dates: this episode takes place just before the narrator's birth, presumably, like Proust's, in 1871. There was no Bayreuth Festival until 1876, and the French began flooding to it in a combination of pilgrimage fervour and social status only after 1882.[9] Proust is actually describing a condition – that of Wagnerism in a social circle as an expression of its identity – which became prevalent only in the 1880s and 90s. Proust contrasts the Verdurins' 'radical' Wagnerism (Proust calls Mme. Verdurin 'the Goddess of Wagnerism and sick-headaches'[10]) with the genteel and traditional, enormously more aristocratic circle of the Marquise de Saint-Euverte, where in this period, a performance of Wagner would be inconceivable.

On the other hand, in the last volume of *La Recherche,* in the chapter about Paris during World War I, Wagner is forbidden and ferociously attacked by exactly the same

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7 Ibid., i.205.

8 Ibid., i.206.

9 See Lavignac, *Le Voyage artistique* (note 4).

10 Proust, *Remembrance* (note 6), iii.250.

people who embraced him as a cause (the Verdurins); whereas Robert de Saint Loup, from the highest levels of the old aristocracy, frequently refers to Wagner with love and admiration, speaking of that 'sublime *Siegfried* which he so looked forward to hearing after the war'[11] or ironically and bitterly comparing the sirens of the air raids on Paris with the Ride of the Valkyries. 'He seemed to be delighted with this comparison of the pilots to Valkyries and went on to explain it on purely musical grounds: "That's it, the music of the sirens was a 'Ride of the Valkyries'! There's no doubt about it, the Germans have to arrive before you can hear Wagner in Paris."'[12] Such reversals in society are one of the primary themes in *La Recherche*.

Allusions to Wagner in *La Recherche*

It is nearly always interesting to read what one great artist writes about another, whether it be Goethe's descriptions of the Italian Renaissance, Tolstoy's diatribes against Wagner and much other Western European music, or Mann's highly poetic and lengthy descriptions of Wagner and Beethoven: one gains valuable insights, not only into the works being discussed, but also into the creative imagination of the artist who is discussing them. This is entirely the case for Proust, who, as a part of his vision of the novel as *Gesamtkunstwerk*, discusses works of art of every discipline imaginable on hundreds of pages of *La Recherche*. Most of the direct allusions to Wagnerian works come as descriptive metaphors, such as the one referred to above, describing the guests' arrival to the elegant *soirée* of the Princesse de Guermantes:

> It is even more probable that the German prince M. de Charlus was […] picturing to himself the reception that occurs in *Tannhäuser,* and himself as the margrave, standing at the entrance to the Wartburg with a kind word of condescension for each of the guests, while their procession into the castle or the park is greeted by the long phrase, a hundred times repeated, of the famous March.[13]

The following passage, from the early chapter in Combray, reveals as well that Proust knew Baudelaire's writings on Wagner:

> that sort of tenderness, of solemn sweetness in the pomp of joyful celebration, which characterise certain pages of *Lohengrin*, certain paintings of Carpaccio, and make us understand how Baudelaire was able to apply to the sound of the trumpet the epithet 'delicious'.[14]

Another similar Wagnerian image evokes *Parsifal*:

> I perceived that, having until this evening […] been accustomed in my mother's drawing-room, in Combray, and in Paris, to the patronising or defensive attitudes of prim bourgeois ladies who treated me as a child, I was now witnessing a change of surroundings comparable to that which introduces Parsifal suddenly into the midst of the flower-maidens. Those who surrounded me now, their necks and shoulders entirely bare, the naked flesh appearing on either side of a sinuous spray of mimosa

[11] Ibid., iii.777.
[12] Ibid., iii.781.
[13] Ibid., ii. 439.
[14] Ibid., i.194.

> or the petals of a full-blown rose, accompanied their salutations with long, caressing glances, as though shyness alone restrained them from kissing me.[15]

Each of these examples manifests a very imaginative, not to say idiosyncratic, vision, yet also reveals real insights. A further example is even more telling and, as we will see later, reintroduces an important motif in an entirely new light:

> I was tortured by the incessant recurrence of my longing [… when] from the depths of a populous, nocturnal Paris brought miraculously close to me, there beside my bookcase, I suddenly heard, mechanical and sublime, like the fluttering scarf or the shepherd's pipe in *Tristan*, the top-like whirr of the telephone.[16]

It is noteworthy in this passage how Proust not only uses Wagnerian images, but serves as an interpreter: not everyone would make the connection between Isolde's scarf in Act II and the shepherd's pipe in Act III or think to link the state of unquenchable longing that both evoke.

The most important discussions of Wagner's music, however, come in passages that describe and discuss the music – notably the Violin Sonata and the Septet – of the fictional composer, Vinteuil. The descriptions of the Sonata, and especially of the famous 'petite phrase' which becomes the 'National Anthem of Swann's love for Odette' are too long to quote here. But I cannot resist quoting the following passage, in which Proust shows how deeply musical motifs can enter into the psyche of the listener:

> In that way, Vinteuil's phrase, like some theme, say, in *Tristan*, which represents to us also a certain emotional accretion, had espoused our moral state, had endued a vesture of humanity that was peculiarly affecting. Its destiny was linked to the future, to the reality of the human soul, of which it was one of the most special and distinctive ornaments. Perhaps it is non-being that is the true state, and all our dream of life is inexistent; but so, we feel that these phrases of music, these conceptions which exist in relation to our dream, must be nothing either. We shall perish, but we have as hostages these divine captives who will follow and share our fate. And death in their company is somehow less bitter, less inglorious, perhaps even less probable.[17]

The longest and most complex musical description in *La Recherche* is of Vinteuil's Septet, a posthumously published work which the narrator hears in its world premiere. According to many sources, most notably Jean-Jacques Nattiez in his book, *Proust as Musician*, much of this description – as well as others in the work – was originally conceived by Proust as a series of epiphanies that the narrator undergoes while listening to Wagner. For structural reasons, and also as a way to liberate completely his poetic imagination, Proust subsequently decided to transfer these descriptions to his imaginary composer, Vinteuil. In many passages, nevertheless, a strongly 'Wagnerian' aroma remains, especially where Proust speaks of Vinteuil's use of motifs. A typical passage describing the end of the work is especially striking:

> Presently these two motifs were wrestling together in a close embrace in which at times one of them would disappear entirely, and then only a fragment of the other could be glimpsed. A wrestling match of disembodied energies only, to tell the truth;

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[15] Ibid., ii.439.
[16] Ibid., ii.757.
[17] Ibid., i.381.

> for if these creatures confronted one another, they did so stripped of their physical bodies, of their appearance, of their names […]. In the end, the joyous motif was left triumphant […] it was an ineffable joy which seemed to descend from paradise, a joy as different from that of the sonata as some scarlet-clad Mantegna archangel sounding a trumpet from a grave and gentle Bellini seraph strumming a theorbo.[18]

This comparison of the Septet with Vinteuil's earlier Sonata is reflected in a Wagnerian parallel three pages later:

> Compared with this septet, certain phrases from the sonata, which were all that the public knew, appeared so commonplace that it was difficult to understand how they could have aroused so much admiration. Similarly we are surprised that, for years past, pieces as trivial as 'The Song to the Evening Star' or 'Elisabeth's Prayer' can have aroused fanatical worshippers […] who wore themselves out applauding and shouting *encore* at the end of what after all seems poor and trite to us who know *Tristan*, the *Rhinegold*, and the *Mastersingers*.[19]

The most interesting of all of Proust's direct citations of Wagner is perhaps in the following passage, because it speaks also of the nature of Wagnerian influence. In this case, anecdotal evidence suggests that Proust's inspiration was from the Fauré Prelude, op. 103 no. 7 – but hundreds of such passages exist.

> It was a passage with which I was quite familiar, but sometimes our attention throws a different light upon things which we have known for a long time […]. As I played the passage, and although Vinteuil had been trying to express in it a fancy which would have been wholly foreign to Wagner, I could not help murmuring *Tristan*, with the smile of an old family friend discovering a trace of the grandfather in an intonation, a gesture of the grandson.[20]

He goes on discussing *Tristan* in the same passage:

> Before the great orchestral movement that precedes the return of Isolde, it is the work itself that has attracted toward itself the half-forgotten air of the shepherd's pipe. And, no doubt, just as the orchestra swells and surges at the approach of the ship, when it takes hold of these notes of the pipe, transforms them, imbues them with its own intoxication […] so no doubt Wagner himself was filled with joy when he discovered in his memory the shepherd's tune, incorporated it in his work, gave it its full meaning. This joy moreover never forsakes him. In him, however great the melancholy of the poet, it is consoled, transcended […] by the exhilaration of the fabricator.[21]

The gist of these passages is a statement of Proust's conviction that the true power and beauty of art derive not so much from the intrinsic quality of the material, but from the creator's ability to shape it, redefine it, indeed rediscover it. This goes back to one of the key passages in *La Recherche*, an incident in the narrator's childhood where he is riding in a coach and views the steeples of the church in Martinville from a variety of perspectives and with changing degrees of sunlight. This incident awakens for the first time the narrator's desire to be an artist and provokes him to write his first prose sketch. This fills him

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[18] Ibid., iii.262.
[19] Ibid., iii.265.
[20] Ibid., iii.157.
[21] Ibid., iii.158.

with such joy and such a sense of self-realisation that when 'I had finished writing it, I was so filled with happiness […] that I began to sing at the top of my voice.'[22] The epiphany of the steeples of Martinville resounds throughout the entire work, and its essential message leads us directly to the most pervasive and most profound impact of Wagner on *La Recherche*: its essential structure. And this structure is in many ways an interpretation or a transmutation of Wagner's leitmotif techniques, especially as used in the *Ring*.

Wagner's Music and the Structure of *La Recherche*

It is always rather tricky to compare different artistic disciplines, to use the language of one to discuss and understand the other. Mallarmé and the 'Union des Arts' notwithstanding, music and literature are very different in their essential nature. Music on its own means nothing that can be defined in empirical or defined rational terms; its expressivity and power lie precisely in this lack of definable meaning, in its Protean ability to change, combine, develop, and re-emerge in total metamorphosis. Words, on the other hand, even when treated as freely and symbolically as Mallarmé does in his most radical poems, retain some degree of concrete meaning. Perhaps only Joyce in *Finnegans Wake* succeeds in entirely liberating words from literal meaning: but he paid a heavy price (in comprehensibility if nothing else) for this liberation, a price that few, if any, other authors have chosen to pay in the nearly eighty years since its publication in 1939. The problem of borrowing between literary and musical methodology is, by the way, very much a two-way street: one of the greatest problems of almost all exegetical works on Wagner, especially on the *Ring*, is precisely that too much of the basically musical experience is defined in literary and dramatic terms. As early a commentator as Ernest Newman points out 'the absurdity of trying to fasten a Wagnerian motive to a fixed verbal formula. The phrase is psychologically complex in a way that only music can be.'[23] Another comment, this time from Curt von Westernhagen, more specifically addresses the problem of the literary–musical relationship of the study of leitmotifs:

> In spite of these literary parallels, it is mistaken to imagine a universally literary origin to Wagner's leitmotif technique. Writers have learned the technique from Wagner, but the 'magic' of which they speak with a certain envy – this magic rests in the material, the music. Far from being foreign to music is the capability of leitmotifs to create relationships, to express relationships that are born out of the spirit of music.[24]

What both these quotes underscore is that many of the techniques that give so much emotional power and complexity, organic vitality, and, ultimately, beauty to the *Ring* and other Wagnerian works are not entirely applicable to literature. But a crucial aspect of the leitmotif, especially in the *Ring* – one almost invariably overlooked or at least underestimated in musical exegesis – is its function as an instrument, not so much of content, but rather of time, more specifically of the creation of a density in the experience of time for the listener. The leitmotif in this respect is perhaps best and most succinctly defined, not by a musician or musicologist, but by Thomas Mann, in comments he wrote on his work, *The Magic Mountain* (written at exactly the same time as *La Recherche*):

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[22] Ibid., i.198–9.
[23] Ernest Newman, *The Wagner Operas* (New York, 1949), 536.
[24] Curt von Westernhagen, *Von Holländer zum Parsifal* (Freiburg, 1962), 55–6.

> I mean by the use of the leitmotiv, the magic formula that works both ways, and links the past with the future, the future with the past. The leitmotiv is the technique employed to preserve the inward unity and abiding presentness of the whole at each moment.

Mann goes on to clarify the specifically 'musical' use of the technique:

> People have pointed out the influence of Wagner's music on my work. Certainly I do not disclaim this influence. In particular, I followed Wagner in the use of the leitmotiv, which I carried over into the work of language. Not as Tolstoy and Zola use it, or as I used it myself in *Buddenbrooks*, naturalistically and as a means of characterization – so to speak, mechanically. I sought to employ it in its musical sense.[25]

Since the fundamental subject of Proust's masterpiece is a quest for the significance and beauty of life as it exists in 'Time' that is otherwise lost to us, it is obvious that such an understanding of the leitmotif – as a 'magic formula' that allows the listener or reader to live each moment with a constantly shifting and redefining sense of a nearly endless series of pasts and imagined futures – is even more suitable to Proust than it is to Mann. We will follow some of Proust's uses of this technique and examine how they not only give structure, but also meaning, to the novel.

The most immediately noticeable use of an important Wagnerian technique in *La Recherche* is not strictly speaking a use of leitmotif, but it entails a fundamental characteristic of Wagner's structural concept, especially in the *Ring*, one which is inextricably linked with leitmotifs. This is the use of passages that anticipate later events, sometimes at a time when they can have no possible meaning to the reader (or listener). This anticipation – a poor translation for Wagner's term *Ahnung* – is as fundamental, yet also at times as mysterious in Wagner as in Proust. Proust features this technique on a wide gamut of scales, from entire chapters to single sentences.

The first volume of *La Recherche*, 'Swann's Way', contains two long chapters whose very *raison d'être* is entirely 'musical' and Wagnerian, in that they serve to anticipate later events in the work. The opening of the book – called by the explicitly musical term 'Overture' – serves to introduce certain of the most important motifs of *La Recherche*, especially sleep and awakening and the state of confusion in time and space that they create; and the narrator's obsessive relationship with his mother, centred on his desperate need for her good-night kiss. At the same time, dozens of names and places, often referred to very obscurely, float about as in a sea of undifferentiated memory: names and places that can mean nothing at all to the reader at this point. Then, after the long chapter that recounts the narrator's childhood visits to Combray, there follows a 215-page interlude that completely stands apart from the rest of *La Recherche*: unlike the rest of the work, it is told in the third person. Without any kind of explanatory segue, the reader is plunged into the tale of 'Swann in Love', an episode that takes place – as the reader can only calculate from evidence given in later parts of the book – about fifteen to twenty years before the birth of the narrator. The last section of 'Swann's Way', with the strange title 'Place-Names: the Name', also falls into this same anticipatory pattern, in that it is centred on the narrator's fascination

[25] Thomas Mann, 'The Making of *The Magic Mountain*' from the English translation of *The Magic Mountain* by H.T. Lowe-Porter (New York, 1967), 720, 725.

with names of places that he will only later – sometimes much later – actually visit. Some of these places will be visited in the flesh in a later section, appropriately titled 'Place-Names: the Place'.

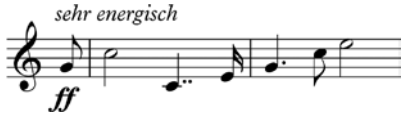
What all these passages have in common is that they give the reader a reservoir of previous experience, which – even if unintelligible at the time – gives density and meaning to future experiences: they have a 'past'. Proust writes about how important this is for the experience of art in a passage where the narrator describes his becoming aware of the Vinteuil Sonata, the work that for Swann, twenty years previously, had meant so very much:

> It was on one of those days that she happened to play for me the passage in Vinteuil's sonata that contained the little phrase of which Swann had been so fond. But one often hears nothing when one listens for the first time to a piece of music that is at all complicated. And yet when, later on, this sonata had been played to me two or three times I found that I knew it perfectly well. And so it is not wrong to speak of hearing a thing for the first time. If one had indeed, as one supposes, received no impression from the first hearing, the second, the third would be equally 'first hearings', and there would be no reason why one should understand it any better after the tenth. Probably what is wanting, the first time, is not comprehension but memory.[26]

This passage goes on to describe the nature of aesthetic and emotional appreciation of art in terms of memory and expectation – exactly as Wagner does (much less coherently) in *Opera and Drama*. What is also remarkable about the passage is that it presents a perfect example of what it describes: the Vinteuil Sonata and its myriad of associations may be new to the narrator, but not to the reader, who already knows the story of 'Swann in Love'.

The real parallel in Wagner to the creation of a reservoir of memory on such an enormous scale is in the very composition of the *Ring*: Wagner's famous need to continue to go deeper and deeper into the past to create a background for the action of *Siegfrieds Tod* – later *Götterdämmerung*. But we also see it in one of the most quintessential if also criticised aspects of the *Ring*, and to a lesser extent of his other mature dramas: the use of narrative scenes in which characters tell parts of the story that have occurred in some past time – sometimes, as in the Norns' Scene, in the deepest past, sometimes of events that we have witnessed ourselves in the theatre. There are many reasons why such scenes are essential to Wagner, but in this context it is important to recognise how they give roots in the past, both to future events, and also in many cases, to the narrators themselves.

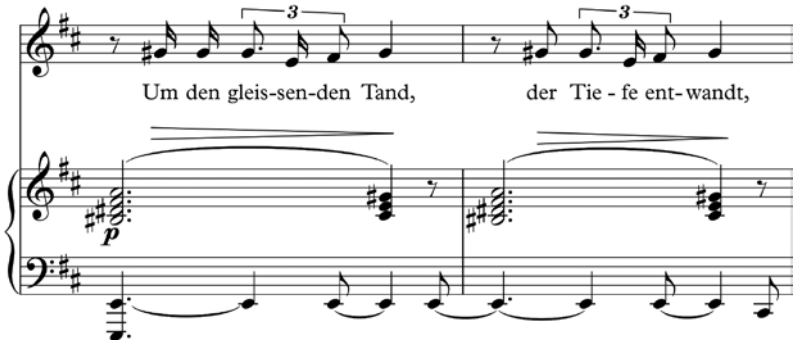
On the other hand, the *Ring* has dozens of examples of leitmotifs that appear – sometimes in covert form – before they can be the bearer of any dramatic association. The most famous example of this comes near the end of *Das Rheingold*:



Ex. 1 Premonition of the Sword motif, *Das Rheingold*, Scene 4

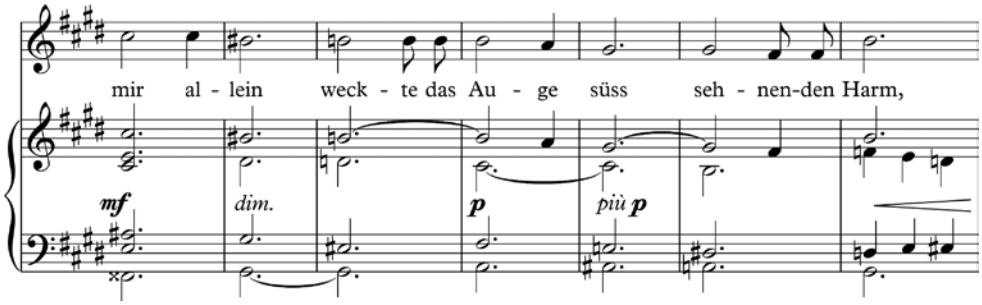
[26] Proust, *Remembrance* (note 6), i.570.

The score says that 'Wotan is seized by a great thought', but of course no one seeing the *Ring* for the first time can have the slightest specific dramatic association with this powerful new theme: its association with the Sword only becomes apparent in Act I of *Die Walküre*. This is a very obvious example of anticipation or *Ahnung*, but many others are far more subtle. For instance:



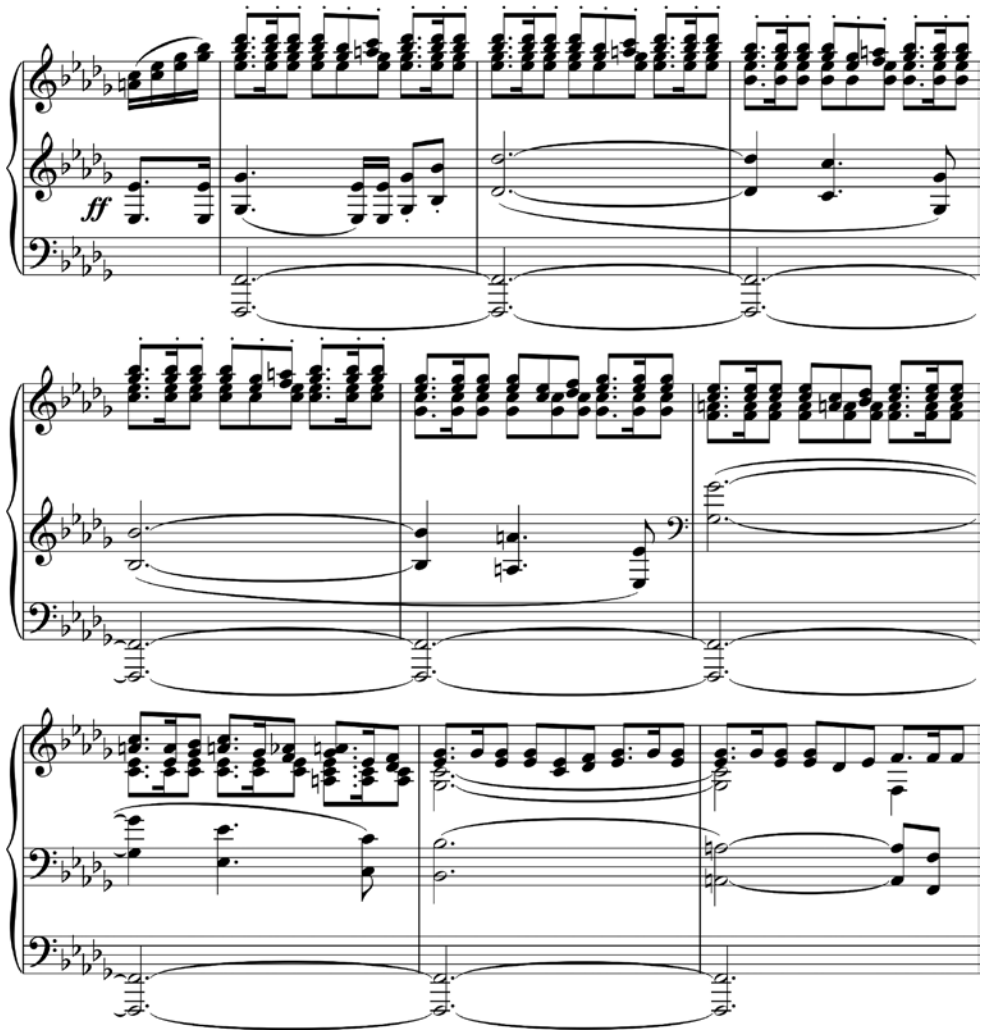
Ex. 2 Loge's Narration in Scene 2 of *Das Rheingold*

which anticipates the characteristic Forging rhythm associated with the Nibelungen; or



Ex. 3 Sieglinde's Narration in *Die Walküre*, Act I, Scene 3

which anticipates the leitmotif to which Wotan will much later put Brünnhilde into a magic sleep. Or another, more complex example, from the orchestral interlude depicting the descent into Nibelheim:



Ex. 4 Descent into Nibelheim, *Das Rheingold*, transition to Scene 3

which is echoed in the orchestral interlude as Wotan and Loge, now with the captive Alberich, re-ascend from Nibelheim: this anticipates not only two almost identical places at the beginning and near the end of Wotan's great monologue in Act II, Scene 2 of *Die Walküre*, but also, although here in a baleful minor-key version, of what will become the primary leitmotif associated with Siegmund and Sieglinde's love (and to some extent, love as a force in the *Ring*).

It is not within the scope of this essay to go into the specifics of Wagner's use of anticipatory moments in the *Ring*: there are hundreds of them, and they function on a variety of levels and with different effects. But they all have a striking parallel with Proust's use

of this same technique throughout *La Recherche*. When in the very opening pages of the work, the narrator speaks of his walks at Tansonville with Mme. de Saint-Loup, not only can we have no possible idea who she may be, but he has purposely confused the reader by naming Gilberte Swann in one of the least recognisable ways. The same is true with 'the lady in pink', who only much later will be known to us as Odette, Swann's great love and future wife. In other cases, the effect is less one of intentional confusion, than of creating surprise: Biche, the rather flippant and undistinguished painter in the Verdurins' 'little clan', will turn out to be the great master, Elstir, many years later in Balbec.

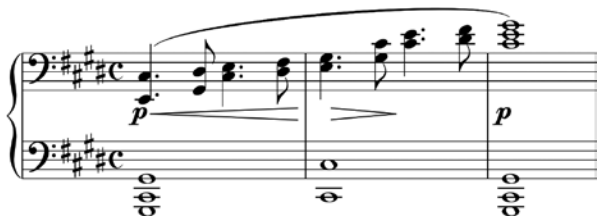
What these examples all have in common is that they create a past, sometimes a very deep and complex one, for these characters and themes: on some level, the reader, and even more so the listener – since listening to music utilises a far less rational part of one's being than does reading a book – remembers and recognises this past even if only unconsciously. And this recognition, this memory, indistinct as it may be, gives depth and vividness to the character in a book or the musical theme, to the experienced moment in time. Aside from any purely structural considerations, this ability to create a sense of recognition – even if unconscious – is the true power of this thematic anticipation, Wagner's *Ahnung*.

In the *Ring*, one can say that there is a core of crucial *Urmotiven* (Wagner's own term) that embody the most fundamental musical aspects of the score and are very generally associated with the most important themes of the drama: nature, the spear (the rule of law), the ring, love, heroism, magic and transformation. Alongside these *Urmotiven*, there are a myriad of lesser leitmotifs, a few associated with very precise objects, characters or events in the work, many more with much more flexible, not entirely definable, dramatic associations. How many of these there are depends entirely on how one wishes to count them: this finding and listing of leitmotifs became an endless game among early writers on the *Ring*. It would have only been silly and futile, had it not also got in the way of more serious studies of the leitmotif and its function in the *Ring*. Nevertheless there are hundreds of distinct leitmotifs, although the vast majority are more usefully – and more accurately – thought of as developments and derivations of more fundamental motivic material and the basic *Urmotiven*. The situation in *La Recherche* is remarkably analogous to that of the *Ring* – with the crucial proviso that literary motifs simply cannot be treated with the type of free transformation and development that musical ones quite normally undergo. And that because of the nature of words, the associative 'meaning' of Proustian leitmotifs is usually – but by no means always – much clearer and more objectively formulated than Wagnerian ones.

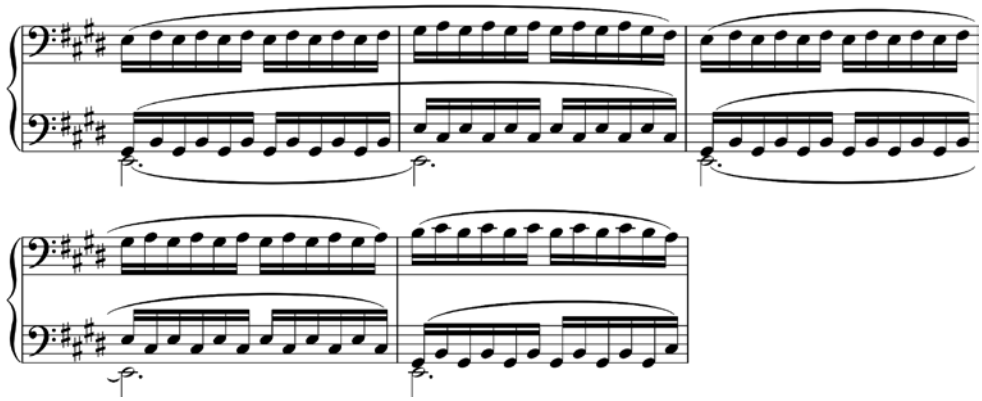
La Recherche contains a small number of basic leitmotifs – we could even call them *Urmotiven* – that pretty much define the basic themes of the work: sleep, possessive jealousy, love and sexuality, the desire to be an artist, social ambition, the power of involuntary memory, the inability of the conscious mind either to invoke the true nature of the past or to imagine the future, and, to paraphrase Joyce's famous phrase in *Ulysses*, 'the ineluctable modality' of existence – that everything, including our own perceptions, changes constantly in time. Alongside these basic themes, each carried throughout the entire work by a basic leitmotif or series of leitmotifs, there are countless smaller leitmotifs, often with quite precise associations.

It is striking to compare Wagner's use of *Urmotiven* with Proust's use of his basic themes in *La Recherche*. The very first scene of the *Ring* in *Das Rheingold* is dominated

by the Nature motif, initially as a description, both metaphysical and concrete, of the Rhine. Much new material is derived from this one *Urmotiv*, but some other material is also introduced, perceived very much as a 'foreign' element: music first heard upon the arrival of Alberich, the first mention of the Ring, the Curse and Renunciation of Love motifs. The first scene of *La Recherche* is similarly dominated by the Sleep leitmotif; but within the twists and turns of the dreamy narrative, new, foreign themes are introduced, if only fleetingly and only partially comprehensible at this time, among them sexuality, social ambition, and (of course) jealousy. In the *Ring*, material from the Nature *Urmotiv* is occasionally present everywhere, but it returns to predominance in the Erda scene later in *Das Rheingold*, and then again in Act II of *Siegfried* with the scene of the Forest Murmurs. In both of these, the original *Urmotiv* is primarily represented, not by the original Rhine manifestation, but rather by derivatives.



Ex. 5 Erda Scene, *Das Rheingold*, Scene 4

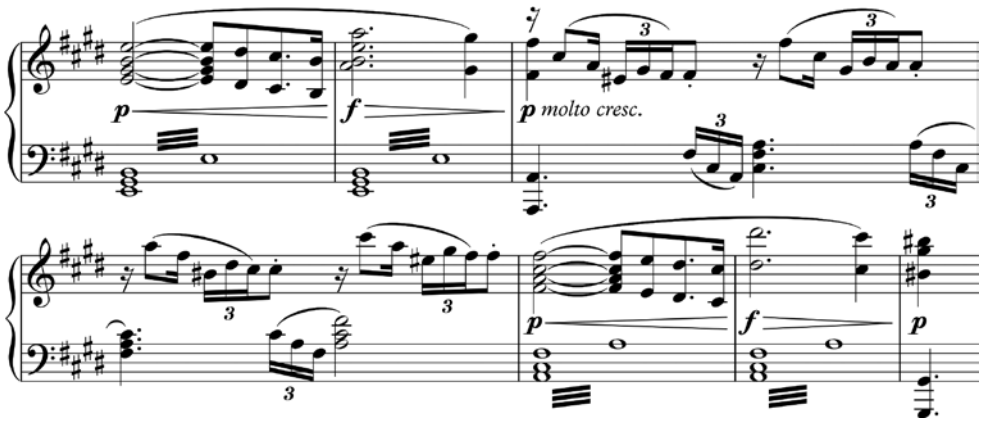


Ex. 6 Forest Murmurs, *Siegfried*, Act II, Scene 2

In both cases, similar, or at least analogous 'foreign' elements are also woven into the musical fabric – from the world of the Ring motif in the former case, from music associated with love in the latter. The Forest Murmurs scene goes even further with these parallels. The intervals of the song of the Rhinemaidens are identical to those in the song of the Forest Bird, and the accompaniment to the first vision of the Rhinegold is basically identical to the 'background' descriptive music of the Forest Murmurs.

We can see remarkable parallels to this situation in *La Recherche*: sleep as a leitmotif is frequently woven into the text, but after the first scene of the work, it takes on primary importance only in the narrator's arrival for the first visit to Balbec (in the second part of *Within a Budding Grove* – Moncrieff's weak translation of *À l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleur*) and then in some of the scenes of life with Albertine in 'The Captive'. In both of these, 'foreign' themes are constantly interwoven. In the opening scene of the work, for example, the element of sexuality is introduced by the image of the narrator's arousal which grows out of his dreams or simply out of the position of his thigh and leg in the bed; this is mirrored later in his scene of life with Albertine, when the narrator allows himself to become sexually aroused by attaching himself, as it were, to Albertine in her sleep.

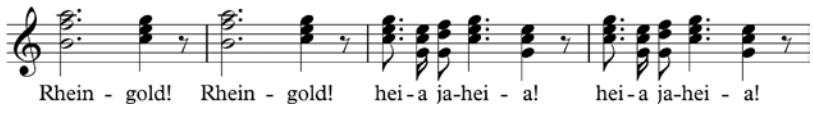
Other similar parallels can be easily found. *Die Walküre* is fundamentally a theatre of the conflict arising out of Wotan's desire for order and the rule of law against the claims of love, first that of Siegmund and Sieglinde, subsequently that of Brünnhilde for the Volsungs, and finally that of Wotan for Brünnhilde. This is musically manifest in a long and extraordinarily complex series of musical conflicts between two *Urmotiven*, the Spear and Love, and the countless forms that they take on during the drama. 'The Guermantes Way' is similarly an account of the narrator's social aspirations, not so much in conflict as in contrast with his desire for love and its ever-changing objects, and his evolving understanding of the nature of friendship and loyalty. This is mirrored in the development of the theme of the Guermantes – the embodiment of unapproachable aristocratic society, itself in constant redefinition in the mind of the narrator – and his desire for friendship and love, with Robert de Saint-Loup, with Albertine, with a whole series of 'dream' women, and even with the still mysterious Baron de Charlus. This is capped off in the final scene of the volume with the famous episode of the 'Red Shoes of the Duchess', where the narrator is faced with the harshest realisation of the superficiality of friendship and loyalty in the face of social priorities; this is expressed clearly as a conflict between two of the basic *Urmotiven* of *La Recherche* – the Guermantes and Swann. This moment serves as a dark and rather bitter counterpart to the glorious conclusion of *Die Walküre* when Wotan's Spear motif becomes an instrument of his love for his daughter, Brünnhilde.



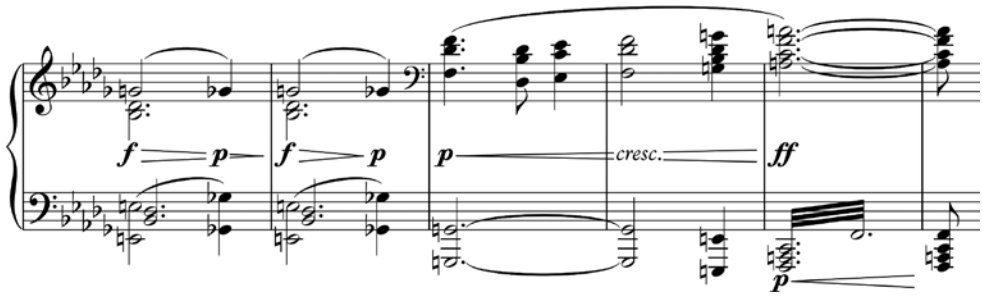
Ex. 7 *Die Walküre*, Act III, Scene 3

It is of course impossible for Proust, even with all his poetic imagination and very free-wheeling imagery, to incorporate elements of the basic themes in constant development and combination in the same way, or at least to the same extent, as Wagner does with his musical *Urmotiven*. It is in fact easier to find more concrete parallels to Proust's leitmotif technique with Wagner's in the use of smaller, more precisely defined motifs.

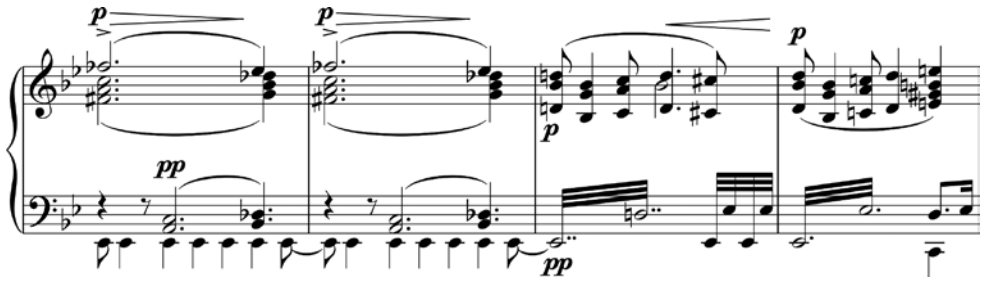
There are many examples of such parallels, but a very illustrative one is Wagner's use of the cry of the *Rheintöchter* at various points in the *Ring*, where the same music takes on very different associations. This example is especially important, because it is the one passage that Wagner – who otherwise avoided completely any kind of analytic writing about his own finished work – cites in a letter to Hans von Wolzogen in the *Bayreuther Blätter*, in which he complains about excessive obsession with identifying and naming leitmotifs at the expense of developments like the following:



Ex. 8 *Das Rheingold*, Scene 1

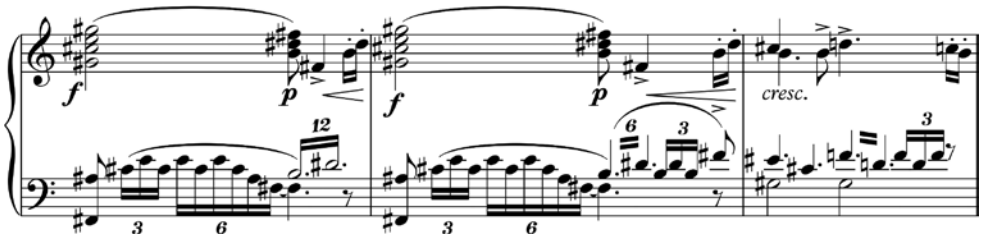


Ex. 9 *Das Rheingold*, Scene 3



Ex.10 *Götterdämmerung*, Act I, Scene 2

These are the three examples that Wagner gives, and they are the most complete and obvious: the first is the cry of joy over the Rhinegold, the second is a phrase associated with Alberich's kissing the ring and terrorising of the Nibelungen, the third is descriptive of Hagen's plot to utilise Siegfried's fearlessness in order to wrest the ring from Brünnhilde. But there are many others, for example:



Ex. 11 *Siegfried,* Act III, Scene 2

Here the Rhinegold cry is incorporated into the music as a depiction of Siegfried's joyful exuberance. There is no hint of the Rhinemaidens or the Rhinegold here – Wagner extends and enriches our experience of this music, and it invariably takes on new associations and meaning.

La Recherche is full of analogous passages that similarly extend the perceived meaning of themes throughout the work. One example is the sound of the bell: in the 'Overture' to 'Swann's Way' this is the feared sound that tells the young narrator of the impending visit of Swann and the probability that he will not receive the all-important good-night kiss from his mother. A very similar bell is the telephone in 'Sodom and Gomorrah' which on the contrary the narrator eagerly awaits because it may announce the visit of Albertine. His mother's good-night kiss, the leitmotif perhaps most closely associated with the narrator's insecurity and obsessive need for love, returns as the kiss that Albertine rebuffs in his first visit to Balbec; but in turn it becomes a symbol of his life with Albertine as his captive, when, as Proust comments, her very sensual good-night kiss nevertheless has the same effect of comforting his obsessive anguish and insecurity. Even such an unlikely candidate as the iris-scented odour in the little room at the top of the house at Combray in which the young narrator discovers the pleasures of auto-eroticism take on extraordinary and highly ironic associations – first as the public restrooms in the Champs-Elysées where he plays his proto-erotic games with his early love, Gilberte, but then again, as the same restrooms where his beloved Grandmother has her mortal stroke. The blooming of flowers and flowering trees is an amazingly rich and varied leitmotif, initially presented in the hawthorns on the border of Swann's estate in Combray, then developed over and over, in the first visit to Balbec, in the home of Mme. de Villeparisis, at the Verdurin's villa, La Raspelière, and finally on the train back to Paris after the war: each episode both recalls the previous ones, but also enriches and alters our associations and our understanding, not just of the episode at hand, but in retrospect, of all other appearances of the leitmotif.

It can be highly amusing – and even elucidating – to hunt for Proustian leitmotifs; but in *La Recherche* as in Wagner, there is always the danger of losing sight of the forest while examining trees. What is important, however, is to recognise how Proust, like Wagner, utilises a relatively small amount of basic material and creates with it a labyrinthine, intricate network of constantly changing meaning and interrelationships. In a way, Proust's own image of the steeples of the church at Martinville, cited above, as a metaphor for the act of artistic creation (itself a leitmotif, repeated and developed in later parts of *La Recherche*) is the key to the significance of Proust's adaption of Wagnerian techniques. In Proust, meaning can never be fixed in time. Meaning and the essence of reality are perceived only as a process in constant change and redefinition. In Wagner's mature works, the situation is the same: the meaning and beauty of any passage can only truly be perceived through its relationship with numerous previous and future passages. Studying Proust in the light of Wagnerian techniques is enormously helpful and offers important insights into his great work. But the inverse is also true: as we perceive how Proust understood and used Wagnerian techniques, we also gain valuable insights into Wagner. Music is after all the art whose only concrete measure is in the dimension of time. All musical form is based on the perception of time by the listener – from the very simplest ditty to the Beethoven C sharp minor Quartet. All other devices – formal schemes, tonal relationships, pre-compositional systems, or, in Wagner's case, leitmotif names – are essentially guides, descriptive and often helpful, but not at the heart of the experience of listening to music. In Wagner's great works, as in *À la recherche du temps perdu*, each moment is vital and radiant as the present, because it is laden with a multitude of pasts and pregnant with the future.

Music setting by Matthew Rye