The Narrator's Quest in Du côté de chez Swann

In October 1979, Umberto Eco gave a paper entitled "The Bitch and the Horse" in which he demonstrates a simple, semiotic-style inquiry. Eco focuses on chapter three of Voltaire's Zadig, "Le chien et le cheval," where Zadig's astuteness as an observer involves him criminally in the disappearance of the queen's bitch and the king's stallion. Eco speaks of "abductions," and using conclusions as a model, he shows that from a readily available S-code--nature--Zadig is able to construct a correlative S-code--the bitch--by this abduction. If Zadig's identification of the queen's bitch can legitimately be used by Eco to illustrate the semiotic problem, the linking of signs or traces to the objects or concepts they signify, then, on an immeasurably more complex and serious plane, the narrator in Du côté de chez Swann is undertaking to solve the same problem: the correlation of two S-codes, his past and his present. After this point, however, the two searches diverge significantly. Relying on Eco's analysis of "Le Chien et le cheval," and elaborating on a passing reference he makes to Sherlock Holmes, I will attempt to show that the events of Du côté de chez Swann can be both viewed as the first steps in the narrator's quest for time passed and considered as a sophisticated preliminary sketch of the authorial and intellectual strategies potentially useful in this quest.

In "Le Chien et le cheval," nothing so intangible as Time has been lost. While out walking Zadig learns that the queen's dog is missing. Zadig corrects the eunuch, keeper of the dog: a bitch, not a dog, is lost. "C'est une épagneule très-petite, ajouta Zadig. Elle a fait depuis peu des chiens, elle boite du pié gauche de devant, & elle a les oreilles très-longues." Yet Zadig denies having seen the bitch or having known the
queen possessed one. The eunuch is mystified but the explanation is uncomplicated:

J'ai vu sur le sable les traces d'un animal, & j'ai jugé aisément que c'était celles d'un petit chien. Des sillons légers & longs, imprimés sur de petites éminences du sable entre les traces des pattes, m'ont fait connaître que c'était une chienne dont les mamelles étaient pendantes, & qu'ainsi elle avait fait des petits il y a peu de jours. D'autres traces en un sens différent, qui paraissaient toujours avoir rasé la surface du sable à côté des pattes de devant, m'ont appris qu'elle avait les oreilles très-longues, & comme j'ai remarqué que le sable était toujours moins creusé par une patte que par les trois autres, j'ai compris que la chienne de notre auguste Reine était un peu boîteuse. (p. 14)

The reasoning is elementary for Zadig. He is observant, has studied Nature which he calls "ce grand livre que Dieu a mis sous nos yeux" (Eco subtitles Nature "the system of signs" and the "furniture of the world"), and whose object of inquiry, the bitch, is an actual organism, found in nature, with certain invariable attributes. Zadig has the good fortune to have his observations substantiated: when the eunuch asks him if he has seen the dog, he can assume that the animal, whose traces he has interpreted, exists.

Before Eco mentions Conan Doyle's famous detective, the similarities between Zadig's abductions and Holmes's methods are obvious. The problems of the two detectives are different: Zadig merely identifies two lost items; Holmes, by observation and abduction, discovers how a thing was done, a safe burgled, a butler murdered. In "The Adventure of the Speckled Band,"
for example, a sudden bizarre death accompanied by a low whistle and a metallic clang in the night, a bed clamped to the floor, a dummy bellrope, a useless ventilator, all combine with Holmes's knowledge of poisons to reveal that the murder weapon was a deadly snake. Holmes makes his abductions and their accuracy is confirmed by physical evidence: the snake, whose existence was, heretofore, speculative, is found wrapped around its dead owner's head. Holmes can only make his abductions from prior knowledge; he has to have read in the "great book of Nature."

In semiotic terms, the "great book of Nature" is an available S-code. This S-code acts as a definite description of the correlative S-code. In Zadig's case, this code is the bitch, for Holmes, the snake. The success of their abductions relies on a relevant code correlating these two codes; here, there is a referential or, more precisely, an attributive relation between the definite description and the object to which it refers. Nature provides a reliable system of signs, an already-written text, to which Zadig and Holmes can refer in drawing their conclusions. The narrator in Du côté de chez Swann, in contrast, is struggling to recapture his past, an S-code, with the help of the present, also an S-code, without an intermediate referential code, without any intervening or linking text.

The narrator's dilemma appears to be an impossible situation for a semiotic investigation. First of all, a crucial S-code, the past, cannot properly be said to exist in the way that Nature exists. Secondly, any references linking the narrator's past and his present have long ago mutated or disappeared with the passage of time. Nevertheless, this novel is about a search; the title of the entire work announces it. In this light, the narrator's task is that of a sleuth, but the sleuth here is simultaneously an artist and a creator who constructs his own codes and references and frequently defies the common logic of detective work.
It is clear, then, that the problems of the narrator as a detective are not simple ones. *Du côté de chez Swann* is the starting point of the narrator's attempt to recapture the essence of his past, to understand how time had passed imperceptibly until the day he tastes the madeleine. We see the narrator delineating boundaries, rejecting some strategies and exploring others for his trek into the past. At the very least, the narrator is able to name the object of his search. But the evidence that the child's creating spirit is dead and that time has passed is everywhere, in everything and everyone he has known; yet it exists only in his heart and his memory. There is no external sign—such as a client coming at "7h30" with a tale of a murdered sister—to aid the narrator in his search. There is the question, too, of whether the search will yield any results; is his quest in vain? Sherlock Holmes can cite occasions when it is not certain that a crime has been committed, in which case his research amounts to a demystification rather than a criminal investigation. The narrator, early in the work, concedes that what he seeks may ultimately be inaccessible:

A vrai dire, j'aurais pu répondre à qui m'eût interrogé que Combray comprenait encore autre chose et existait à d'autres heures. Mais comme ce que je m'en serais rappelé m'eût été fourni seulement par la mémoire volontaire, la mémoire de l'intelligence, et comme les renseignements qu'elle donne sur le passé ne conservent rien de lui, je n'aurais jamais eu envie de songer à ce reste de Combray. Tout cela était en réalité mort pour moi.

Mort à jamais? C'était possible.  

What sustains any search, or re-search, is the belief that the question can be answered, the goal attained.
The use of the intellect, of the reasoning process, in unravelling a mystery is, traditionally, indispensable. Holmes's cases and "Le Chien et le cheval" demonstrate classic detecting methods. Proust's narrator debunks these methods early on:

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

All the efforts of our intellect must prove futile; the nature of the past and memory dictates the inutility of a rational, Holmesian investigation. The essence of the past is in the sensation a material object can evoke. The narrator has this experience while sipping tilleul with crumbs of a madeleine. He cannot consciously recall why he feels this "plaisir délicieux." His involuntary memory is at work in this epiphany. As he consciously tries to capture this sensation by continuing to sip his tilleul, it eludes him. He decides, "Il est clair que la vérité que je cherche n'est pas en lui, mais en moi" (RTP, I, 45). The quest is an internal one. It will rely on epiphanies, privileged moments, aided and reconstructed by his voluntary memory. The problem of re-capturing the past must, therefore, be approached obliquely; a frontal attack with the full powers of the intellect only embeds the past further into the "mental soil." By writing about his past in an un-chronological, non-linear fashion, the narrator attempts to unearth his past, to discover and rediscover it, to provoke these privileged moments. He seeks to reveal
those material objects that harbor the past, his past.

In an important sense, the narrator is recreating his past. He is painting his self-portrait as a young artist and the problems of recapturing his past are, hence, tied intimately with those of artistic creation. To a degree, Zadig and Holmes are artists. The former imagines an animal that corresponds to all the imprints; the latter reconstructs a crime from the available evidence. Neither believes, however, that the dog or the crime exists only in the mind. Similarly, neither questions the processes by which each arrives at his conclusions. Proust's narrator, as a conventional sleuth, is in a serious quandary:

Grave incertitude, toutes les fois que l'esprit se sent dépassé par lui-même; quand lui, le chercheur, est tout ensemble le pays obscur où il doit chercher et où tout son bagage ne lui sera de rien. Chercher? pas seulement: créer. Il est en face de quelque chose qui n'est pas encore et que seul il peut réaliser, puis faire entrer dans sa lumière. (RTP, 1, 45)

The past and the fact that his real creative powers, those of his childhood, are lost to him must be dealt with at the same time. He admits that the images of Combray which he cherishes are inextricably bound to the child's imagination:

Mais c'est surtout comme à des gisements profonds de mon sol mental, comme aux terrains résistants sur lesquels je m'appuie encore, que je dois penser au côté de Méséglise et au côté de Guermantes. C'est parce que je croyais aux choses, aux êtres, tandis que je les parcourais, que les choses, les êtres qu'ils m'ont fait
As a child he "created" Combray; the adult seeks to re-create the child's vision of Combray, this village being for him the only reality. The narrator does not know whether this is because he has lost faith in his powers of creation or whether reality lives only in the memory. Undeterred, he develops strategies to situate Combray in the material world, to make the past into an S-code that exists as Nature exists. He must construct a reference code to link his present to his past while recognizing that many of his references, such as the people and places he knew in Combray, are changed or gone.

Through various techniques the narrator attempts to locate external reference points that will assist him in his search. He depicts members of his family trying to freeze time: his two aunts have grown deaf because nothing worthwhile is said anymore; his grandmother insists on giving old, fragile objets d'art and books as gifts. The narrator plays with time, ordinary chronology, in many ways. He telescopes time—the future into the present—by relating incidents where he suddenly acts grown-up (when he refuses to see his grandfather's shame at being taunted for drinking) or when he ages his mother instantaneously by insisting she stay the night with him. The narrative technique itself allows this convenient telescoping—convenient in that it permits the narrator to make connections that are not causally related—because the narrator is writing in retrospect. This distant past is telescoped into the child's present.
with the story of Swann's love affair. Events in the child's past can be linked as if the first actually entailed the second: when the narrator first glimpses Gilberte Swann, he is in love; he creates a magical aura around her name and treats it like a fetish. So strong are his visionary longings, it is as if he conjured Gilberte onto the Champs-Élysées the day he sees her again. A past hope for the future is being fulfilled in his present.

The structure of the narrative manipulates our sense of the chronology of the narrator's life. Oddly, the events in the section entitled "Combray" appear to be the result of the events in "Un Amour de Swann," although the two cannot be logically or causally related. Early in the novel, the narrator calls Swann "l'auteur inconscient de [ses] tristesses" because Swann's visits prevent the narrator from getting his ritual good-night kiss. This epithet, however, has a much wider application than to just this small domestic ennui. Many details in "Un Amour de Swann" prefigure the author's experience. These are the unrequited love and the phrase from the Vinteuil sonata which recalls to Swann his courtship of Odette as the madeleine evokes Combray to the narrator. Swann attempts to recapture his past by possessing Odette; the narrator is gathering his past up through art. Both Swann and the narrator are subject to the same anguish at the thought that the past is possibly "un état subjectif qui n'existait que pour lui, dont rien d'extérieur ne lui affirmait la réalité" (RTP, I, 345). There are innumerable parallels between the two lives. What is really interesting is that, because "Combray" precedes "Un Amour de Swann," the child seems father to the man.

In a traditional mystery story the sequence in which clues are uncovered is not generally of critical importance. It matters little that Holmes sees the dummy bellrope before he sees the dish of milk. Again in general, mysteries follow a linear path from the discovery of the crime, to the investigation, to the
revelation of perpetrator and motives. The linearity of the exposition imitates the linearity of the deductive processes essential to the successful solution of the mystery. The structure of Du côté de chez Swann indicates that this is no mere detective story with answers that can be deduced (abduced?) from clues in the text. The logic of this novel is unconventional. Causes are linked to effects thematically, not because the former produces the latter. A vast, interconnecting, mutually-reinforcing structure is being erected here, where elements from different time periods and from different geographical locations impossibly interrelate. I have given examples of this juxtaposition of different time periods above. The narrator's task is not simply Zadig's; the narrator cannot refer to "ce grand livre que Dieu a mis sous nos yeux" to rediscover his childhood and lost creative powers. He must literally create his own "great book," his own system of references. He must rebuild the furniture of his mind and his past. The chronology of Du côté de chez Swann plays an important role in this reconstruction.

A relatively minor but essential detail in the conventional mystery is who wants to uncover the mystery, and why. In Zadig, the queen's eunuch wants to know where the bitch is because he is her keeper, and failure to do his duty would undoubtedly lead to unhappy consequences. Holmes is usually engaged by someone whose interest in the matter is obvious, though not always honest. In A la recherche du temps perdu, what are the narrator's motives for his quest? A partial answer is suggested in the narrator's compulsive drive to name things, to place things in the real world. Giving something a name establishes a power over it, gives it an objective existence in the world of spoken things. But dreams and ideas must be simplified in the very act of being named. For example, when talking about all the city names which captivated his young imagination, the narrator says that these names "aimantaient maintenant mes désirs; mais
les noms ne sont pas très vastes" (RTP, I, 289). He incessantly writes "Gilberte Swann" all over his notebooks and then sadly realizes that the words symbolize nothing more than his own frustrated desires. Swann, too, has this need to establish things in the real world. A great step is made in his relationship with Odette when he notices the resemblance between her and Zipporah in Botticelli's Sistine frescoe. Both the narrator and Swann crave to transcend mere names and grasp the "essence" of the object they treasure. After tasting the madeleine the narrator writes:

Mais, quand d'un passé ancien rien ne subsiste, après la mort des êtres, après la destruction des choses, seules, plus frêles mais plus vivaces, plus immatérielles, plus persistantes, plus fidèles, l'odeur et la saveur restent encore longtemps, comme des âmes, à se rappeler, à attendre, à espérer, sur la ruine de tout le reste, à porter sans fléchir, sur leur gouttelette presque impalpable, l'édifice immense du souvenir. (RTP, I, 47)

The Vinteuil phrase elicits a similar response from Swann:

Au lieu des expressions abstraites "temps où j'étais heureux", "temps où j'étais aimé", qu'il avait souvent prononcées jusque-là et sans trop souffrir, car son intelligence n'y avait enfermé du passé que de prétendus extraits qui n'en conservaient rien, il retrouva tout ce qui de ce bonheur perdu avait fixé à jamais la spécifique et volatile essence. (RTP, I, 345)

"Past" and "happiness" are mere words. To name "time
past" as the object of a search by no means simplifies the endeavor. The narrator, though, is compelled to name things, to recapture lost sensations. (Swann is less delicate: he recaptures his past by marrying Odette). The text—and, after all, the text is a collection of names, of signifiers—is the narrator's attempt to rediscover his past by naming his goal and by naming possible approaches to that endpoint. The text is his strategy for regaining lost time.

Could semiotics qua science ever hope to explain adequately the complexity of this work? What would it mean to "explain" A la recherche du temps perdu? Of course, the latter question is rhetorical. The former is perhaps equally unfair, given that semiotics has a focus different from that of traditional criticism. Eco says that a semiotic inquiry is not commentary on the literary value or moral worth of a text. What is then the soi-disant scientific function of semiotics? I have demonstrated that the basic semiotic methodology exhibited in "Le Chien et le cheval" has very limited heuristic value: it fails to account adequately for the configuration of the search in Du côté de chez Swann. On what rational grounds could a semiotic approach to Du côté de chez Swann stand in the absolute absence of certain codes and referential relations? Classic, linear reasoning, the reasoning of scientists and detectives is, a priori, of no avail here. The narrator violates all logic of reference and deduction, while following the demands of his art, when he uses the events of his own youth to illuminate Swann's early life. As a detective and artist, the narrator faces awesome paradoxes: his intellect is practically useless; yet, when the privileged moments occur, they must be analyzed; the past which he seeks no longer exists, neither materially in houses, roads, avenues, nor spiritually; the child's creating spirit is dead. But the search must continue. Sherlock Holmes realizes, if unconsciously, the dilemma of the narrator when he remarks that the "commonplace, featureless crimes are the most puz-
zling." What is more commonplace than the inexorable passage of time?

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NOTES


2 Deductions are renamed abductions by Eco because, he says, solutions do not follow strictly from the evidence; it is the mind that unifies disconnected stimuli. I find it more convenient to retain his term since he uses it consistently in his analysis of Zadig.


4 Marcel Proust, A la recherche du temps perdu, ed. Pierre Clarac et André Ferré (Paris: Gallimard, 1954), I, 44. All subsequent references to this work appear in the text.