The Narrator's Quest in Du côté de chez Swann

In October 1979, Umberto Eco gave a paper en-
titled "The Bitch and the Horse" in which he demon-
strates a simple, semiotic-style inquiry.[1] Eco fo-
cuses on chapter three of Voltaire's Zadig, "Le chien
et le cheval," where Zadig's astuteness as an obser-
ver 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.[2] 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 sig-
nify, then, on an immeasurably more complex and seri-
ous 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 e-
vents of Du côté de chez Swann can be both viewed as
the first steps in the narrator's quest for time pas-
sed 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."[3] Yet
Zadig denies having seen the bitch or having known the

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queen possessed one. The eunuch is mystified but the explanation is uncomplicated:

> J'ai vû sur le sable les traces d'un
> animal, & j'ai jugé aisément que c'é-
> tait celles d'un petit chien. Des
> sillons légers & longs, imprimés sur
> de petites éminences du sable entre
> les traces des pattes, m'ont fait con-
> naître 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 boiteuse. (p. 14)

The reasoning is elementary for Zadig. He is obser-
vant, 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 detec-
tive, 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 but-
ler murdered. In "The Adventure of the Speckled Band,"

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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.

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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 com-
> prenait encore autre chose et existait
> à d'autres heures. Mais comme ce que
> je m'en serais rappelé m'eût été four-
> ni 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.[4]

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 pro-
cess, in unravelling a mystery is, traditionally, in-
dispensable. Holmes's cases and "Le Chien et le che-
val" 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'é-
> voquer, tous les efforts de notre in-
> telligence 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 ob-
> jet, 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 in-
utility 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 "plai-
sir 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 recon-
structed by his voluntary memory. The problem of re-
capturing the past must, therefore, be approached ob-
liquely; a frontal attack with the full powers of the
intellect only embeds the past further into the "men-
tal soil." By writing about his past in an un-chrono-
logical, non-linear fashion, the narrator attempts to
unearth his past, to discover and rediscover it, to
provoke these privileged moments. He seeks to reveal

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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 im-
prints; the latter reconstructs a crime from the a-
vailable evidence. Neither believes, however, that
the dog or the crime exists only in the mind. Simi-
larly, 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 en-
> semble le pays obscur où il doit cher-
> cher 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,I,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 im-
ages of Combray which he cherishes are inextricably
bound to the child's imagination:

> Mais c'est surtout comme à des gise-
> ments 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

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> connaître sont les seuls que je
> prenne encore au sérieux et qui
> me donnent encore de la joie.
> Soit que la foi créée soit tarie
> en moi, soit que la réalité ne se
> forme que dans la mémoire, les
> fleurs qu'on me montre aujourd'hui
> pour la première fois ne me sem-
> blent pas de vraies fleurs. (RTP,I,184)

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 pre-
sent 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 grand-
mother 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 inci-
dents 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 nar-
rative technique itself allows this convenient tele-
scoping--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-Elysées 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. Odd-
ly, the events in the section entitled "Combray" ap-
pear to be the result of the events in "Un Amour de
Swann," although the two cannot be logically or causal-
ly related. Early in the novel, the narrator calls
Swann "l'auteur inconscient de [ses] tristesses" be-
cause 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 un-
requited 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 at-
tempts 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

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revelation of perpetrator and motives. The linearity
of the exposition imitates the linearity of the deduc-
tive 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 unconvention-
al. Causes are linked to effects thematically, not
because the former produces the latter. A vast, in-
terconnecting, mutually-reinforcing structure is being
erected here, where elements from different time per-
iods and from different geographical locations impos-
sibly interrelate. I have given examples of this jux-
taposition of different time periods above. The nar-
rator's task is not simply Zadig's; the narrator can-
not 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 chrono-
logy 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 mys-
tery, 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 un-
happy consequences. Holmes is usually enagaged 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 com-
pulsive 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 exam-
ple, when talking about all the city names which cap-
tivated his young imagination, the narrator says that
these names "aimantaient maintenant mes désirs; mais

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les noms ne sont pas très vastes" (RTP,I,289). He in-
cessantly writes "Gilberte Swann" all over his note-
books 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. Af-
ter 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 immaté-
> rielles, plus persistantes, plus fidèles,
> l'odeur et la saveur restent encore long-
> temps, 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 sou-
> vent prononcées jusque-là et sans
> trop souffrir, car son intelligence
> n'y avait enfermé du passé que de
> prétendus extraits qui n'en conser-
> vaient 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

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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 col-
lection 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 criti-
cism. Eco says that a semiotic inquiry is not commen-
tary 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 semi-
otic 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 a-
vail here. The narrator violates all logic of refer-
ence 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 in-
tellect is practically useless; yet, when the privi-
leged moments occur, they must be analyzed; the past
which he seeks no longer exists, neither materailly
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-

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zling." What is more commonplace than the inexorable
passage of time?

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NOTES

[1]Umberto Eco, Lecture, "The Bitch and the Horse,"
University of Kansas, 8 Oct. 1979.

[2]Deductions are renamed abductions by Eco be-
cause, 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.

[3]Voltaire, Zadig, ou la Destinée, ed. Verdun
Saulnier (Paris: Librairie Droz, 1946), p. 13. All
subsequent references to this work appear in the
text.

[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.