

Occupy Without Counting: Boulez, Proust and Time

Boulez has often raised the question of his relationship to writers and poets: Michaux, Char, Mallarmé... If it is true that a cut is not the contrary of continuity, if continuity is defined by the cut, then the same gesture establishes the continuity of a literary text and a musical text and places the cuts between them. There is no general solution: each time, the relationships must be measured according to varying and often irregular measures. Yet now Boulez has an entirely different relationship to Proust. Not a more profound one, but a relationship of a different nature, tacit, implicit (even though he often cites Proust in his writings). It is as if he knew him by "heart," by will and by chance. Boulez defined an important alternative: count to occupy space-time, or occupy without counting.¹ Measure to generate relationships, or implement relationships without measure. Wouldn't his connection to Proust be of this second type: haunt or be haunted ("What do you want from me?"), occupy or be occupied without counting, without measure?

The first thing Boulez grasped in Proust is how sounds and noises detach from the characters, places and names to which they are first attached to make independent "motifs" that constantly change over time, growing or shrinking, cutting or adding, varying

their speed or slowness. The motif is at first associated with a landscape or a character like a signpost but it then becomes the sole varying landscape or the sole changing character. Proust necessarily evokes the little phrase and Vinteuil's music to account for the alchemy that is present throughout the *Search* and he pays homage for it to Wagner (even though Vinteuil is supposedly very different from Wagner). Boulez in turn pays homage to Proust for having a deep understanding of the independent life of the Wagnerian motif to the extent that it undergoes changing speeds, moves through free modifications, and enters a continuous variation that presupposes a new form of time for "musical beings."² All of Proust's work is made this way: the successive loves, jealousies, slumbers, etc., all detach from the characters so well that they themselves become infinitely changing characters, individuations without identity, Jealousy I, Jealousy II, Jealousy III... This type of variable developing in the independent dimension of time is called a "block of duration," an "endlessly variable sound block." And the independent, non-preexisting dimension that is traced along with the block's variations is called *diagonal* to indicate that it cannot be reduced to either the harmonic vertical or the melodic horizontal as preexisting coordinates.³ The epitome of the musical act for Boulez consists in the diagonal, each time under different conditions, from polyphonic combinations, through the resolutions of Beethoven, the fusions of harmony and melody in Wagner up to Webern abolishing the frontier between vertical and horizontal, producing sound blocks in the series, moving them along a diagonal as a temporal function distributing the entire work.⁴ Each time, the diagonal is like a vector-block of harmony and melody, a function of temporalization. And the musical composition of the *Search*, according to Proust, appears to be the same:

constantly changing blocks of duration, at varying speeds and free modifications, along a diagonal that forms the only unity of the work, the transversal of all the parts. The unity of the voyage is not in the vertical roads of the landscape, which are like harmonic cuts, nor is it in the melodic line of the route. It is in the diagonal, “from one window to another,” that allows the succession of points of view and the movement of the point of view to be joined in a block of transformation or duration.⁵

The blocks of duration, however, because they go through high and low speeds, augmentations and reductions, appendices and deductions, are inseparable from the metric and chronometric relationships that define divisibilities, commensurabilities, proportionalities: the “pulse” is a smallest common multiple (or simple multiple) and the “tempo” is the inscription of a certain number of unities in a specific time. It is a *striated* space-time, a pulsed time, to the extent that the cuts can be determined, of a rational type (first aspect of the continuum) and the measures, regular *or not*, can be determined as sizes between cuts. The blocks of duration therefore follow a striated space-time where they trace their diagonals according to the speed of their pulsations and the variation of their measures. However, a *smooth* or non-pulsed space-time detaches itself in turn from the striated one. It only refers to chronometry in a global way: the cuts are indeterminate, of an irrational type, and the measures are replaced by distances and proximities that cannot be broken down and that express the density or rareness of what appears there (statistical distribution of events). A gauge of occupation replaces the gauge of speed.⁶ That is where one occupies without counting instead of counting to occupy. Couldn't we reserve Boulez's term “bubbles of time” for this new, distinct figure of blocks of duration? Numbers do not

disappear, but they become independent of metric and chronometric relationships; they become numerals, numbering numbers, nomadic or Mallarméan numbers, musical Nomos and no longer measure. And instead of dividing a closed space-time *according to* the elements that form a block, they distribute the elements contained in a bubble in open space-time. It is like the passage from one temporalization to another: no longer a Series of time, but an Order of time. Boulez's major distinction between striated and smooth is less a separation than a constant communication. The two space-times alternate and overlap, there is exchange between the two functions of temporalization, even if it is only in the sense that a homogenous division in a striated time gives the impression of a smooth time, while a very unequal distribution in a smooth time introduces *directions* that evoke striated time through densification or the accumulation of proximities. If we inventory all of the differences Proust describes between Vinteuil's sonata and his septet, there are those that distinguish a closed plane and an open space, a block and a bubble (the septet is bathed in a violet fog that makes a whole note appear as if “in an opal”) and also those that associate the little phrase of the sonata with an indication of speed while the phrases of the septet refer to indications of occupation. More generally, each theme, each character in the *Search* is systematically disposed to a double exposure: one as a “box” from which all kinds of variations in speed and modification in quality can come depending on the period and the time (chronometry); the other as a nebula or multiplicity that only has degrees of density or rareness according to a statistical distribution (even the two “ways”—Méséglise and Guermantes—are presented as two statistical directions). Albertine is both at once, sometimes striated and sometimes smooth; sometimes a block of transformation, other

times a nebula of diffusion, although according to two distinct temporalizations. The entire *Search* must be read as smooth and striated: a double reading following Boulez's distinction.

The theme of memory seems so secondary compared to these deeper motifs. Boulez can take up the "praise of amnesia" from Stravinsky or Désormière's statement "I abhor memory" without ceasing to be Proustian in his own way. For Proust, even involuntary memory occupies a very limited zone that art overflows in every direction and that only serves as a facilitator. The problem of art, the correlative problem of creation is the problem of *perception* and not memory: music is pure presence and calls for an extension of perception to the limits of the universe. Expanded perception is the aim of art (or philosophy, according to Bergson). Such a goal can only be reached if perception breaks with the identity to which memory binds it. Music has always had this object: individuations without identity that form "musical beings." Without a doubt, tonal language restored a principle of specific identity with the first degree octave or chord. But the system of blocks and bubbles leads to a general rejection of any principle of identity in the variations and distributions that define them.⁷ The problem of perception then becomes stronger: how can one perceive individuals whose variations are constant and whose speeds cannot be analyzed, or even individuals that evade any measurement in a smooth setting?⁸ Numerals or numbering numbers, avoiding both pulsation and metric relationships, do not appear as such in the sound phenomenon even though they create real phenomena, but precisely without identities. Is it possible that this imperceptible, that these holes in perception are filled by writing, and that the ear carries on through a reading eye that functions like a "memory"? Yet the problem takes another turn, for how can writing be *perceived*

"without the obligation to understand it?" Boulez finds an answer in defining a third setting, a third space-time *adjacent* to the smooth and striated that is responsible for perceiving writing: the universe of the Fixed. This universe acts through surprising simplification, as in Wagner or in Webern's three sound figures, or by suspension like Berg's twelve strokes, or by unusual accentuation like in Beethoven or Webern again, presenting itself like a gesture brushing against the formal structure or an envelope isolating a group of constitutive elements. The relationship between the envelopes creates the richness of perception and keeps sensibility and memory alert.⁹ In Vinteuil's little phrase, the high note held for two measures and "held like a curtain of sound to hide the mystery of its incubation," is a distinct example of the Fixed. As for the septet, Miss Vinteuil's friend needed fixed indications to *write* the work. That is the role of involuntary memory in Proust, to create envelopes of fixed.

This does not mean that the involuntary memory, or the fixed, reestablishes a principle of identity. Proust, like Joyce and Faulkner, is one of those who dismissed any principle of identity from literature. Even in repetition, the fixed is not defined by the identity of a repeated element but by a *quality common* to elements that would not be repeated without it (for example, the famous taste common to two moments, or in music a common pitch...). The fixed is not the Same and does not reveal an identity beneath variations. The contrary is true. It allows the *identification* of the variation, or individuation without identity. That is how it extends perception: it makes the variations perceptible in a striated setting and the distributions in a smooth setting. Instead of bringing difference to the Same, it allows the identification of difference as such. Thus, in Proust, taste as a quality common to two moments identifies Combray as always different from itself. In

music as well as literature, the functional play of repetition and difference replaces the organic play of identity and variation. That is why the fixed imply no permanence but *make instantaneous* the variation or dissemination they force one to perceive. And the envelopes themselves constantly maintain a “moving relationship” between themselves in a single work or in a block, or a bubble.

Extending perception means making forces that are ordinarily imperceptible sensible, resonant (or visible). These forces are not necessarily time, of course, but they mix and combine with the forces of time. “Time is not usually visible....” We easily and sometimes painfully perceive things in time. We also perceive the form, units and relationships of chronometry, but not time as a *force*, time itself, “some time in its purest form.” Using sound as the intermediary that makes time sensible, the Numbers of time perceptible, organizing the material to capture the forces of time and make them into sound: that is Messiaen’s project. Boulez takes up his project under new conditions (particularly serial). But the musical conditions for Boulez echo the literary conditions of Proust in certain ways: giving sound to the mute forces of time. In developing the temporalization functions that operate in the sound material, the musician captures and makes sensible the forces of time. The forces of time and the functions of temporalization unite to form the Aspects of *implicated time*. For both Boulez and Proust, these aspects are multiple and are simply reduced to a “lost-found.” There is lost time, which is not a negation but a full function of time. For Boulez, the pulverization of sound or its extinguishing is an affair of timbre, the *extinguishing of timbre*, in the sense that timbre is like love and repeats its end rather than its origin. Then there is “re-researched time,” the *formation of blocks of duration*, their journey along the diagonal: they

are not (harmonic) chords but veritable hand-to-hand fights, often rhythmic ones, sound or vocal embraces where one of the wrestlers subdues the other, and vice versa, like in the music of Vinteuil. That is the striated force of time. And then there is “re-gained” time; identified, but in the instant. It is the “gesture” of time or the *envelope of fixed*. Finally, “*utopian time*,” as Boulez stated in homage to Messiaen: finding oneself again after penetrating the secret of the Numerals, haunting giant bubbles of time, confronting the smooth—discovering, following Proust’s analyses, that human beings occupy “in time a place much more considerable than the all too limited place reserved for them in space.” Or rather that comes to them when they count, “a place on the contrary prolonged without measure...”¹⁰ In meeting Proust, Boulez creates a group of fundamental philosophical concepts that spring from his own works of music.