

Clouds and Circles: Rotational Form in Debussy's 'Nuages'

Studies of 'Nuages', the first movement of Debussy's *Nocturnes*, have generally centered on its innovative harmonic language, not on the connotations of its large-scale form. Most commentators have considered 'Nuages' to exhibit a more or less traditional (and hence unremarkable) ABA' format. It is more productively read, though, as a rotational structure, unfolding in five cycles of differing lengths, with the 'D# [modal] minor' center of Rotation 4 (mm. 64-79, the B-section of the standard reading) understood as a separately bounded internal variant – a subsection within the rotation – that also functions as the movement's *telos* or zone of maximal sonic disclosure. Each rotation is governed by the succession of two motives and their variants, which, adapting remarks of Debussy, I designate as CLOUDS (m. 1) and SONIC SIGNAL (m. 5). While much of this paper is devoted to explicating this reading, it is also concerned, on the hermeneutic level, with the task of interpreting the larger, *fin-de-siècle* connotations of the composer's structural and textural choices – dissolving traditional architectonic formats in favor of a freer, less constrained music of varying sonic intensities and circular durational spans.

Issues of time and proportionality are concerns fundamental to music analysis, and topics involving manipulations of temporality can be approached in any number of profitable ways. How does any musical work fashion a unique sound-sculpture in time, perhaps calling upon familiar formats in the casting of its individualized shapes but perhaps on other occasions seeking to suggest new or ad hoc temporal shapes, ones that might call attention to such matters as circular recursion or varied rotational cycles? As is often the case in discussions of musical processes, looking at specific instances can be more valuable than speculating broadly about the matter. It is for that reason that I wish to address elementary questions of form, time, and circularity in a single work by Claude Debussy: the opening movement of the orchestral *Nocturnes*.

While studies of temporal structure (the linear ordering and grouping of modular successions) are relevant to all musical repertoires and periods, they seem nowhere more pertinent than in the works of Debussy. It was he, after all, as Simon Trezise has recently reminded us, who in 1907 referred to the essence of music as something by nature free, something that should seek to resist capture by a mere 'rigorous and traditional form'; instead, more primarily, music consists of 'rhythmicized colors and time'.¹ And even while

I am grateful to Brian Kane, Michael Puri, Patrick McCreless, and Steven Rings for their helpful reactions to and suggestions regarding earlier versions of this essay.

- 1 Debussy to Jacques Durand (in the context especially of 'Rondes de printemps' from the *Images pour orchestre*), 3 September 1907, in: Claude Debussy, *Correspondance 1884-1918*, ed. François Lesure, Paris: Hermann, 1993, 230-231: 'Par ailleurs, je me persuade, de plus en plus, que la musique n'est pas, par son essence, une chose qui puisse se couler dans une forme rigoureuse et traditionnelle. Elle est de couleurs et de temps rythmés.' Transl. in: François Lesure and Roger Nichols (eds), *Debussy Letters*, London: Secker & Warburg, 1987, 184, although the phrase in question ('de couleurs et de temps rythmés') is translated there as 'colours and rhythmicised time'. It is more likely that 'rythmés' (plural) modifies both 'couleurs' and 'temps'. Nichols's translation was passed on in Simon Trezise, 'Debussy's "Rhythmicised Time"', in: Trezise (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Debussy*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003, 232-255. Trezise went on to interpret the concept of Debussy's 'temps rythmés' as bearing suggestive affinities to those mid-twentieth century 'moment forms' that emphasize the sensuous resonance of every disclosing present, steering clear of the characteristic beginning-middle-end formats (233).

music-theoretical discussions of Debussy's music have more commonly centered around pitch- and scale-oriented issues – the dissolution of traditional harmonic practice – the composer has also been treated to an extensive study of time and proportion by Roy Howat, in his provocative claim in 1983 of golden-section organization in Debussy's mature works.²

My point here is neither to endorse nor to cast doubt on Howat's analytical readings but rather to observe that any such proposal brings up the question of how the large-scale architecture of some of Debussy's works might be appropriately grasped. This is a particularly thorny issue in those mature compositions where appeals to traditional *Formenlehre* patterns are either irrelevant or can strike us as strained. Throughout his letters and essays from the turn of the century onward one reads again and again of his urge to break free of the encumbrances of standard harmonies and mechanistic formulas in order to reach for a more intuitive art dwelling in an unhampered, *plein-air* freedom. This entailed, he claimed, the unfettering of traditional instrumental formats and individual musical lines into dreamlike realms of aesthetic fluidity and the ornamental curve of the arabesque.³ In this quest, as Debussy insisted in a letter from 1901, the goal of the listener was not mistakenly to suppose that music existed to make one 'think'; instead, 'it would be enough if music could make people listen, despite themselves and despite their petty, mundane troubles.'⁴

This materially sensuous emphasis on *écouter* (and not *penser*) advanced a binary skeptical of the academic-hermeneutic enterprise and its disciplinary preconceptions.⁵ In pursuit of an enrichment of this hyper-refined sense of *écouter* (a mode of cultivated interiority and identification affording openings to exquisite realms of cognitive, imaginative fantasy), issues of time, proportion, and recurring, freely varied circularities played significant roles. Quite often this involved the staging of a semi-ritualized, cyclical sense of time: a simulated ceremony of underdefined mystery, spiraling a recursive course through the *de facto* linear or chronological time within which any performance of music is obliged to unfold. Some of the earliest compositions along these lines are *Prélude à l'Après-midi d'un faune* (composed 1891-94) and the three movements of the

2 Roy Howat, *Debussy in Proportion*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983.

3 Statements on these and closely related matters abound in Debussy's comments and writings around the time of the *Nocturnes*. See, e.g., his remarks in *La revue blanche*, 1 May ('Vendredi saint') and 1 June 1901 ('La musique en plein air'), repeated in *Debussy, Monsieur Croche et autres écrits* (revised and enlarged edition), ed. François Lesure, Paris: Gallimard, 1971, 33-36, 46-47; transl. by Richard Langham Smith in *Debussy on Music*, New York: Knopf, 1977, 26-28, 40-42. For a recent view of the arabesque, see Jann Pasler, 'Timbre, Voice-Leading and the Musical Arabesque in Debussy's Piano Music', in: James Briscoe (ed.) *Debussy in Performance*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999, 225-255.

4 Debussy to Dukas (concerning the *Nocturnes*), 11 February 1901: 'Il est même inutile que la musique fasse *penser!* (C'est trop souvent ridicule, le coin de pensée que les gens réservent à cet exercice, même les plus avertis.) Il suffirait que la musique force les gens à *écouter*, malgré eux, malgré leurs petits tracas quotidiens et qu'ils soient incapables de formuler n'importe quoi ressemblant à une opinion, il faudrait qu'ils ne soient plus libres de reconnaître leurs faces grises et fades, qu'ils pensent avoir rêvé, un moment, d'un pays chimérique et par conséquent introuvable.' Debussy, *Correspondance 1884-1918*, 161-162; transl. available in Roger Nichols, *Debussy Letters*, 117-118.

5 The binary – a false one, in my view – was famously resuscitated, on behalf of the 'ineffable' and the 'drastic' (as opposed to the 'gnostic' or the hermeneutic) by Vladimir Jankélévitch, *Music and the Ineffable*, transl. Carolyn Abbate, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003, and given new life in recent times by Carolyn Abbate, 'Music – Drastic or Gnostic', *Critical Inquiry* 30 (2004), 505-536. See also the riposte to Jankélévitch and Abbate in Steven Rings, 'Mystères limpides: Time and Transformation in Debussy's *Des pas sur la neige*', *19th-Century Music* 32 (2008), 178-208, whose methodologies and conclusions are similar to those pursued in the present essay.

orchestral *Nocturnes* from 1897-99, 'Nuages', 'Fêtes', and 'Sirènes'. My topic is the first of the *Nocturnes*, 'Nuages'.

The Traditional Reading of 'Nuages'

It is the harmonic practice of 'Nuages', not its formal design, that has engaged most commentators. Thus the work's harmonic innovations, the more familiar domain of music theory, have typically been prioritized over formal ones in orthodox approaches to musical modernism. To the extent that the morphological shape of 'Nuages' has been considered at all, it has almost always been read as tracking through a free, internally elaborated ternary form, ABA', where the final A' is compressed or treated freely and at the end contains also a brief, final allusion to B. The initial A, of course, starts at the opening. (Example 1 reproduces mm. 1-13 of Maurice Ravel's four-hand piano reduction from 1909.) The contrasting central section, B, occurs at m. 64 (Example 1b, first portion), with a change of tempo, *un peu animé* (in the orchestral score; Ravel's piano reduction added the word *plus* here), along with the sustained D# minor chord, *divisi*, and the pentatonic melody above. The concluding A' an altered, recomposed return to materials from the opening, is usually taken to begin at the re-entrance of the English horn at m. 80 (Example 1b, concluding portion), marked *1° tempo* (in the orchestral score), an indication suggesting a return to the *Modéré* that had preceded the central B-section.

Within the last quarter-century, this has been the view of such writers as Randolph Sepe, Ira Braus, Matthew Brown, Bruno Plantard, Joseph Kerman, Mark DeVoto, Richard Taruskin, and others.⁶ While these commentators differ on how they interpret some of the internal processes of 'Nuages', none of them has regarded its fundamental format as anything other than a creatively inflected ABA' shape, a format that is typically taken for granted as so self-evident as hardly to be worth mentioning. This tendency is anything but surprising: analysts in the past half-century have often taken the view that the real form of a composition is most properly locatable in its tonal form (or inner form), its manipulations of pitches, chords, and keys, not in its outward rhetorical design, much less in that design's relatability to traditional *Formenlehre* patterns or topical gestures, which are sometimes regarded as factors that are better understood as secondary by-products of a more generative, tonal-harmonic process.⁷ In the more sophisticated readings the ABA' contention is typically both advanced and shied away from, as though to insist upon it too strongly would summon unwelcome memories of a more naive-schematic era of pedantically classificatory formalism, the very sort of thing that at least the later Debussy would seek so diligently to avoid.

A few of these descriptions are worth sampling as representatives of the near-ubiquity of this reading. DeVoto's 2004, professionalized study of the piece's harmony contains only a brief remark about its broader rhetorical outline. DeVoto steers clear of ABA'

6 Randolph Neal Sepe, 'Large-Scale Structure and the Compositional Idea in the Music of Claude Debussy', PhD thesis Yale University, 1993, 172; Ira Braus, 'Clouds or Fog? Demystifying Meter, Harmony, and Structure in Debussy's *Nuages*', *Journal of Musicological Research* 19 (2000), 329-372; Matthew Brown, *Debussy's Ibéria*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003, 126-127; Mark DeVoto, 'Nuages and Reduced Tonality', in: DeVoto, *Debussy and the Veil of Tonality: Essays on His Music*, Hillsdale: Pendragon Press, 2004, 96-125; Bruno Plantard, 'Deux études du mouvement: "Nuages" et "Fêtes,"' in: Maxime Joos (ed.), *Claude Debussy: Jeux de forms*, Paris: Rue d'Ulm, 2004, 159-188. For Kerman and Taruskin, see nn. 9 and 10 below. One exception to the ABA' reading is found in Richard S. Parks, *The Music of Claude Debussy*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989, 243-248. Parks claims that the piece unfolds in six 'sections', which begin at mm. 1, 21, 43, 64, 80, and 94 (and which do not correspond with the rotational reading to be proposed in the present essay).

7 Much of this is standard fare among those influenced by Schenker's writings. For one influential account of the distinction between inner form, outer form, and design, see Felix Salzer, *Structural Hearing: Tonal Coherence in Music* [1952], New York: Dover, 1982, 223-254.

Example 1a

Debussy, 'Nuages', mm. 1-13 (Maurice Ravel's Reduction; Paris: E. Fromont, 1909).

The musical score for 'Nuages' (mm. 1-13) is presented in two systems. The first system covers measures 1-4, and the second system covers measures 5-13. The score is for two pianos, labeled PIANO I and PIANO II.

System 1 (Measures 1-4):

- PIANO I:** Measures 1-4. Markings: *Modéré*, *très expressif*, *pp*. The music features a series of chords in the right hand and a more active bass line.
- PIANO II:** Measures 1-4. Markings: *Modéré*, *pp*, *expressif*. The right hand has a melodic line starting in measure 3, while the left hand is mostly silent.

System 2 (Measures 5-13):

- PIANO I:** Measures 5-13. Markings: *pp*. The music consists of sustained chords in the right hand and a melodic line in the left hand.
- PIANO II:** Measures 5-13. Markings: *p* *expressif*, *pp*. The right hand has a melodic line with a triplet in measure 5, and the left hand has a more active bass line.

terminology *tout court* but implies it by reading the final section, with nuances, as a back-reference to the first, thus replicating formal schemes found in earlier Debussy as well:

Like many of Debussy's works from the *Arabesques* and *Suite bergamasque* to *Faune* and beyond, *Nuages* exhibits a three-section form. ... Part III is not an abbreviated *da capo* of Part I but employs the same tonal, thematic, and harmonic material, and includes, in addition, a brief but distinctive thematic gesture from Part II (m. 64) at m. 98.⁸

8 DeVoto, *Debussy and the Veil of Tonality*, 113-114.

Example 1b

Debussy, 'Nuages', mm. 64-84 (Maurice Ravel's Reduction; Paris: E. Fromont, 1909).

The musical score is presented in three systems, each with two staves (I and II). The key signature is G major (one sharp) and the time signature is 3/4. The score includes the following markings and annotations:

- System 1 (mm. 64-68):**
 - Staff I: *pp* (piano), *Un peu plus animé* (a little more animated), measure 65.
 - Staff II: *pp*, *Un peu plus animé*, *La petite note presque en même temps que l'ye* (The small note almost at the same time as the eye), *p très expressif* (piano, very expressive).
- System 2 (mm. 69-74):**
 - Staff I: *pp*, *pp*, *pp très expressif et* (piano, very expressive and).
 - Staff II: *pp*, *pp*, *pp*.
- System 3 (mm. 75-84):**
 - Staff I: *très soutenu* (very sustained), *pp*, *pp*.
 - Staff II: *p très expressif* (piano, very expressive).

Kerman's thumbnail overview from 1996, included in a music-appreciation text for novices, had suggested much the same thing, with the usual caveats:

Clouds might be said to fall into an A B A' form—but only in a very general way. Debussy shrinks from clear formal outlines; the musical form here is much more fluid than that of A B A structures observed in earlier music. ... By design, avant-garde composers break down the sharp and (to them) oversimple divisions of older musical styles. If they avail

themselves of form types such as rondo, sonata form, and so on, they do so in very free, imaginative ways. ... [Thus A' is] not a 'real' return of A [but] only of selected elements standing in for A.⁹

Example 1b continued

The musical score consists of two systems. The first system (measures 75-79) features a piano (I) and harp (II) part. The piano part has dynamics *pp*, *ppp*, and *p*. The harp part has dynamics *pp* and *pp*. The second system (measures 80-84) features a piano (I) and harp (II) part. The piano part has dynamics *ppp* and *p*. The harp part has dynamics *p* and *pp*. The tempo is marked *expressif*.

On the other hand, Taruskin's 2006 description of the form (in his massive *Oxford History of Western Music*, in which 'Nuages' is singled out for examination) cites the ABA' design of 'Nuages' in a blunt, casual way, then interprets it to suggest that for Debussy (or at least for early Debussy) form is something of a throwaway matter, an issue of minimal concern in his musical thinking:

As is often the case with Debussy [!], the overall musical shape is simple and conventional: an ordinary ABA, articulated by a modulation (from two to six sharps and back again). Tonally, however, the music is as unconventional as can be.¹⁰

From some perspectives the contention of this ABA' framing might seem unassailable. Or is it? Is 'Nuages' most profitably regarded as yet another instance of Debussy's 'three-section' forms (DeVoto), or what Trezise called 'the ternary forms Debussy was so devoted to', as is clearly evinced in such earlier, short piano pieces as the two arabesques, 'Clair de

9 Joseph Kerman, *Listen*, in this case taken from the Third Brief Edition of a much-revised and reissued textbook (New York: Worth Publishers, 1996), 305-306.

10 Richard Taruskin, *The Oxford History of Western Music*, Vol. 4: *The Early Twentieth Century*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2006, 79.

lune', and so on?¹¹ But if the widely perceived ABA' form in 'Nuages' is the most intuitive way to grasp its broad outlines, to what extent does that ternary architecture matter? Are we obliged to regard it, with Taruskin, as only incidental to more important things that are happening in the piece? Are we dealing only with a perfunctory nod toward a shopworn textbook template? But if so, for which expressive purposes would Debussy, so concerned with innovation and freedom on all levels, wish to make such a nod? And what if his much-noted dissolution of traditional tonality were complemented by a parallel dissolution of traditional formal practice, as is suggested by his full-blown aversion, stated in 1907, toward the mere mechanisms of 'rigorous, traditional form[s]'?

My own conviction is that no architectonic form, even a traditional one, is an expressively neutral vessel. Forms mean something as music is made to process through their quasi-ritualized action-spaces, always fraught with pre-loaded historical connotations. These formal shapes are blueprints according to which composers choose to organize their discourses. They are anything but irrelevant to the way that we experience a work of music, moment-to-moment. Accordingly, we need to inquire how a composer puts any such form to conceptual work. For the music of Debussy, 'Nuages' is an instructive place to start.¹²

'Nuages' as an Exemplar of Rotational Form

By no means do I wish to dismiss the ternary, ABA' effect of 'Nuages'. The ABA' impression is there to be perceived, doubtlessly at some level intended by Debussy. But it is possible that activating a different mode of conceptual framing, coexisting with the ABA' impression, can invite us to hear this movement on different terms, ones that may have been a more esoteric component of Debussy's organizational plan and aesthetic of *écouter* – and ones more occupied with ongoing temporal circularities and freely expansive rotations. Suppose that we choose to observe other patterns that also pervade this piece and perhaps even govern it. Suppose that we notice, for instance, that the opening music, mm. 1-10, sets the terms for the recurrent successions that are to follow, as though the defining features of that initial passage are freely recycled – rotated through – several times, with expansions. Let's follow the thread of this thought and see where it leads us. We shall start what I call Rotation 1, mm. 1-10.

This opening ten-bar zone, mm. 1-10, introduces two differing ideas that will recur throughout the movement. We may regard the first, mm. 1-5, here in the winds only, as a gesture of cycle-initiation marking the onset of a rotational cycle. We shall consider the second, mm. 5-10, starting with the English horn, to be a gesture of rotational conclusion, since what follows it is a varied reappearance of the opening gesture and hence a new rotational cycle. I call the opening module, mm. 1-5, the CLOUDS gesture. In the original program booklet from 1900-01 Debussy cited the entire piece's intended affinity with 'the unchanging aspect of the sky with the slow and melancholy movement of the clouds, extinguishing in a gray softly tinted with white'.¹³ The varied features of this motive have a large role to play in that allusion. On another occasion, more specifically and in conversation with his friend Paul Poujaud, the composer also mentioned that he associated this movement with the experience of 'the effects of clouds on the Seine

11 Trezise, 'Debussy's "Rhythmicised Time"', 233.

12 Within an entirely different repertory (sonata forms), see my broader discussions of the internal connotations of established forms and the principles of 'dialogic form' in, e.g., William E. Caplin, James Hepokoski, and James Webster, *Musical Form, Forms & Formenlehre: Three Methodological Reflections*, ed. Pieter Bergé, Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2009.

13 'C'est l'aspect immuable du ciel avec la marche lente et mélancolique des nuages, finissant dans une agonie grise doucement teintée de blanc.'

[*sur la Seine*] at the Place de la Concorde.¹⁴ If this information is accurate, the musical images may involve an additional factor, that of *reflets dans l'eau*, image reflections on a cloud-darkened, now subjectively melancholic urban river. This may be understood as an added distancing factor (if a sporadic or supplementary one) from a more unmediated representation of sky clouds themselves or of the personalized responses that they evoke from the observer.¹⁵

As a musical idea, CLOUDS is characterized by several features. Emerging out of the initial vacancy of silence (as if just now grasped as the object of an intentional act of noticing, a consciously directed act of *écouter*), these include: first, lazily floating but steadily pulsing quarter notes (metrically ambiguous, poised between $\frac{6}{4}$ and $\frac{3}{2}$ implications);¹⁶ second, a clouded sense of an unprecipitated tonality (mere suggestions, deploying instead a pitch centrality around an often modally inflected B – what Mark DeVoto, in his 2004 harmonic study of the piece, described as a ‘reduced tonality’)¹⁷; third, a predominance of open fifths in the gesture itself; and fourth, a vaporous suppleness of timbre, contour, and shape as the virtually expressionless acoustic presence, the acoustic ‘thing’, is made to drift forward through temporal space. This final point – mutability – is crucial. Debussy composed the recurrences of CLOUDS as hazy and non-solid: they resist a stable shape and course their paths largely through similarly mobile harmonies, as Jankélévitch also noted.¹⁸ More specifically, CLOUDS’ drifting harmonic vapor is pulled here and there into static (but fleeting) barometric hollows, temporary pools of harmonic lingering. CLOUDS proceeds through time as a floating harmonic mobility that occasionally seeks to empty itself into ephemeral chordal stases of varying degrees of harmonic surprise and discovery. (Expressive alternations between harmonic motion and short-lived dissolutions or pulls into a mysterious stasis are central to ‘Nuages’ as a whole.) Here in its first appearance, scored with the palpable, reedy blankness of clarinets doubled an octave below by bassoons, it settles initially, m. 5, on a hovering stillness, a doubled G/B dyad. In each subsequent appearance Debussy will not only alter the orchestral sonority of this idea but also expand the CLOUDS section to differing proportions and, often, lead it into differing textural and harmonic outcomes. Harmonic and orchestrational effects work in tandem throughout, seeking to appeal to the rarefied musical aesthete or connoisseur in pursuit of not only an emphatic originality of conception but also a maximized exquisiteness of timbral sensation.

Rotation 1’s English-horn module of closing, mm. 5-10, sounded in a contrasting $\frac{4}{4}$ meter surrounded by a persisting $\frac{6}{4}$ background, is what I call the SONIC SIGNAL (or, more succinctly, SIGNAL), an intervening otherness that pierces the misty cloud veils of

14 Denis Herlin, ‘Avant-propos’ to the critical edition of the *Nocturnes, Œuvres complètes de Claude Debussy*, Paris: Durand, 1999, Musica Gallica, Série V, vol. 3, xiii-xiv. (I use here the translations provided in the subsequent ‘Foreword’, xxi-xxii.) Herlin also outlines the sources and transmission of this remark.

15 For our present purposes, we shall put aside its much-noted allusion to the third song from Musorgsky’s cycle, *Sunless (Bez solntsa)* [1874]. The motive in question occurs in the interior of *Sunless*, No. 3, ‘The Useless, Noisy Day Has Ended’ (‘Okenchen prazdnïym shumnyden’).

16 The metrical ambiguities of this music have been studied by Ira Braus, ‘Clouds or Fog?’

17 DeVoto, ‘Nuages and Reduced Tonality’, esp. 100-101, 114: ‘The harmonic world of *Nuages* is even more remarkable than the melodic quality, above all because of its exposition of familiar chordal types in a new structural context. This context is tonal, but it amounts to a *reduced tonality*, in which the tonic, with one exception, is nowhere represented by a conventional triad, and in which dominant-tonic relationships are not realized. ... B minor as represented by a *B-minor triad* is explicit only once, at m. 29.’

18 Vladimir Jankélévitch, *Debussy et le mystère de l’instant*, Paris: Librairie Plon, 1976, 77: ‘Semblable à un train d’ondes, le défilé de Quintes et de Tierces alternantes évoque, dans *Nuages*, une forme qui s’étrangle et se dilate tour à tour. Car qu’est-ce qu’un nuage sinon une forme instable et sans cesse déformée?’

the *divisi*, muted strings that enshroud it.¹⁹ In the 1932 edition of *Claude Debussy et son temps*, Léon Vallas wrote that Debussy ‘confided to one of his friends’ not only that the view of clouds on or from the Seine at the Pont de la Concorde was an ‘inspiration’ for ‘Nuages’ (‘a view of clouds captured by a wind storm’) but also that he had additionally had in mind ‘the passing of a boat [*bateau*] on the Seine, where the siren [*sirène*] is evoked by a short chromatic theme from the English horn.’²⁰ In other words, its effect is that of a disembodied sound of a more palpable material reality ‘somewhere out there’ whose source, perhaps a *bateau-mouche*, might be intuited but is not always visibly perceived. Interpreted subjectively and in the vaporous context of the floated, unanchored drifting of the cloud timbres that surround it, it invites us to hear it as a different, unsettling bid for our reflective attention, a precipitating acousmatic call, a riddle, an unanswerable question. Its directedness toward us is urgently suggestive but remains indecipherable amidst the mists, whose obscuring veil never completely lifts.²¹

Unlike CLOUDS, this metrically dissonant, quasi-octatonic SONIC SIGNAL tends to be invariant with regard to register, timbre (English horn), pitch class, and thematic shape for the remainder of the piece. Its near-invariance or repetitive, refrain-like quality is a crucial feature that differentiates it from the varied versions of CLOUDS that precede it. Even though in later rotations SIGNAL is expanded by repetitions and extensions and its F-B tritone borders are given different harmonic colorations and accompanimental textures, it produces a recurrent sameness of responsive effect, an *objet sonore* whose implications remain ambiguous: could it also be construed as an anchoring counterbalance to CLOUDS? A dialectical other? An unexpected apparition, shiver, or incursion? Additionally, SIGNAL typically intervenes into one of the openings provided by the sensuous, static harmonic pockets into which CLOUDS has momentarily emptied itself. It intrudes within sustained moments of slippage onto harmonic stasis, a locking onto a single harmony subjected only to minimal internal inflection. Formally, it functions as the marker of the concluding phase of a rotation, one articulated motivically, not by tonal or harmonic closure.

Rotation 1 has laid down a succession pattern, CLOUDS + SIGNAL, that we can recognize in later temporal cycles. On this account there are five rotations in all, and from this point onward, perceiving the subsequent rotational form is an elementary matter. (It can serve also as an exemplary introduction to the concept of rotational form.) Each subsequent rotation is begun with variants and expansions of CLOUDS, only to be responded to with the relatively invariant and harmonically static SONIC SIGNAL. In turn, the SIGNAL that completes a rotation flows into the onset of the next one, which freshly renewed cycle begins with variants of CLOUDS, and so on.

This reading becomes clearer when we consider what follows, the stretch of music from m. 11 through m. 28, obviously an expanded variant (Rotation 2) of mm. 1-10. Mm. 11-20 (whose first three bars may be found at the end of Example 1a) are dominated by a texturally richer though still thematically unstable recasting of CLOUDS in the persistently

19 SIGNAL proper is best confined to the English-horn figure. The SIGNAL complex, however, includes the textural persistence of largely static CLOUDS as a surrounding backdrop, a moistly hovering veil through which the figure cuts.

20 Leon Vallas, *Claude Debussy et son temps*, Paris: Librairie Félix Alcan, 1932, 162-163, transl. and cited in Herlin, ‘Avant-propos’, xiv (English translation, xxii), n. 34. (In an adjacent paragraph Herlin, xiv, terms the *bateau* a *bateau-mouche*.) This remark does not appear in the edition more widely available in English, *Claude Debussy: His Life and Works* [1933], transl. Maire and Grace O’Brien, New York: Dover, 1973.

21 Cf., e.g., Pierre Schaeffer, ‘Acousmatics’ in: Christoph Cox and Daniel Warner (eds), *Audio Culture: Readings in Modern Music*, New York: Continuum, 2004, 76-81. The glossary at the conclusion of this book defines ‘acousmatic listening’ (409) as: ‘Term coined by Pierre Schaeffer to describe a listening experience in which sound has been decoupled from its source (also known as “reduced listening”).’ Cf. also Charles Ives’s somewhat similar evocation of puzzling existential riddles in *The Unanswered Question*.

divisi, muted strings, while in mm. 21-28 we hear the intrusive SONIC SIGNAL concluder and new responses to it. The CLOUDS portion now trends, first, toward the barometric hollow of an unexpected and temporarily sustained B \flat ⁹ (mm. 15-16), and then to a 'G¹¹' with omitted third, mm. 17-18, recurring as a G⁹ in mm. 21 and following bars. As it does so, this second rotation spawns two important variants. In mm. 14-20 the CLOUDS music shifts into parallel chord motion, mostly parallel ninth chords. We should take special note of the downward-swooping parallel ninths in m. 14. I call this the *parallel-chord* variant of CLOUDS – harmonic vapor pulled locally, in this case, into the B \flat ⁹ hollow of m. 15. A second variant may be discerned in the upper voice of mm. 17-18, thickened through the persisting parallel chords. Here we should observe the suggestively pentatonic upper voice also evoked in an upward-floated but varied sequence in mm. 19-20. I call such upper-voice lines the *quasi-pentatonic* CLOUDS variant, noting that motive's occasional tropism to alter itself into fleeting, quasi-pentatonic melodic shapes. Mm. 17-18 and 19-20 can be heard as embryonic anticipations of the pronounced melodic pentatonicism found at the central internal moment of this movement (what ternary analyses identify as the B section). In mm. 21-28 we find not one but two soundings of the SONIC SIGNAL (mm. 21-24, 25-28) – subcycles within Rotation 2 – with important horn- and low-string echo responses – distant, resounding echoes – to each of them. As CLOUDS has expanded in Rotation 2, so has its closing phase, SONIC SIGNAL, sounding through the virtually suspended G⁹ chord, now shimmering with the even-quarter pulsations of the CLOUDS rhythm. The original ten bars of Rotation 1 have grown into the eighteen of Rotation 2.

This ordered temporal recycling through the mobile CLOUDS plus static SIGNAL persists as the piece unfolds. At the beginning of Rotation 3 (Example 2) m. 29 brings back not the opening motto proper but rather a recast version of its parallel-chord variant. It is now momentarily clarified in parallel triads, swooping downward this time into a delicious C-chord barometric pocket in mm. 31 and 32, made even more *plein-air* resonant via an open-string C-natural in the cello. Thus CLOUDS, our cycle initiator, is present at this point: it is alluded to by one of the variants into which it had mutated in the preceding section. Rotation 3 proceeds with a labored, whole-tonish climb from m. 33 to 42, accumulating forward and upward, in *crescendo* from *pianissimo* to *forte*, as if the protean mistiness of the clouds, now more dense and opaquely watery, were churning to bring forth something else, something more substantial – and nearly getting there with the locally climactic 'almost' at m. 42. At m. 43, though, the sudden release into a choked-back, *pianissimo* stasis (another hollow pocket) lapses into a recurrence of the 4/4 SONIC SIGNAL, and we encounter once again a static but embellished G⁹ chord, this time with its third, B, in the bass, and with a new ECHO response in the muted horn (mm. 46-47 and 50-51, also an obvious foreshadowing of one of the main ideas of the final movement, 'Sirènes'). While there are many other details to notice – prominent among them the expanded fade-out of the English-horn SIGNAL in mm. 51-57, incorporating in the same bars a conforming metrical absorption into the surrounding 6/4 current – the main point here is the rotational CLOUDS + SIGNAL succession. Rotation 3 is an enhanced and lengthened intensification, now extended to 28 bars, lasting from m. 29 to m. 56. (One might additionally observe that the measure counts of Rotation 1 plus Rotation 2, 10 + 18 bars, equals the measure count of Rotation 3, 28 bars.)

The rotational pattern so far could hardly be more clearly established, with each rotation expanding upon and intensifying its predecessor. Something is being groped toward; expressive pressure is mounting. This brings us to the longest and most important cycle, Rotation 4 – occupying some 37 bars from m. 57 to m. 93. As was the case with the earlier rotations, this one is discernible by the appearance once again of the structurally tagged opening and closing ideas that mark the boundaries of the cycle. Rotation 4 begins at m. 57 (the second bar of Example 3) with a return to the original CLOUDS (featuring a subjectively *expressif*, now unmuted solo-violin counterpoint inviting attention to the wistful onset of this rotation),

Example 2

Debussy, 'Nuages', mm. 29-32 (Maurice Ravel's Reduction; Paris: E. Fromont, 1909).

Example 3

Debussy, 'Nuages', mm. 56-63 (Maurice Ravel's Reduction; Paris: E. Fromont, 1909).

and its concluding phase is entered at m. 80 (see the concluding portion of Example 1b), where one encounters the interruptive English-horn SIGNAL motive, which lasts from m. 80 to m. 93 and includes another sounding of its fade-out variant from the preceding rotation. Mm. 57-93 lay out a single rotation, Rotation 4, bounded by our now familiar beginning and ending indicators. But in its middle something remarkable happens.

By this point it is clear where this reading is headed, and I can summarize it quickly. At m. 61 the parallel-chord variant of CLOUDS – an initial ‘Tristan’ chord flowing into a succession of major-minor-seventh sonorities in $\frac{4}{2}$ position – is pulled down toward another barometric hollow, another delicious chord pocket. M. 62 momentarily blocks the expected goal with a blindly opaque whole-tone chord embellished by an interior swell. But m. 63 repeats the downward swoop, and now, in m. 64, is attracted into the richest, most resonant zone of the movement, the D \sharp -minor modal centerpiece, its *telos* or sonorous goal, sustained and hovering from m. 64 through m. 79 (see Example 1b). The sustained, dusky luminescence of this central event may be read as a hushed opening into one type of unforeseen potential within CLOUDS – a further expansion of it – here given the character of what we might construe as the shifting mists now arranging themselves into an imaginary but evocative cloud picture. And yet in this context it might suggest more than this, even a pseudo-sacramental transformation, an invitation to suppose the presence of a suggestive but inscrutable mystery concealed within the clouds. (As paratextual images, of course, these clouds can be construed as allusive metaphors for the many different, quasi-sacralized mysteries prized within the symbolist aesthetic.) Or, in a more specifically musical context, we might grasp this music as suggesting the inner sanctum of *frisson*-inducing arcana, whispered in pianissimo, concealed within the palpable materiality and *volupté* of the *divisi*, muted-string clouds and transmitted by means of the smoky incense of musical sound itself.²² Here at m. 64 the D \sharp -minor sound cloud emerges in a resonant registral plenitude, with all of the strings in multiple *divisi*.²³

The pentatonicism of the melody here can recall the fragmentary pentatonic variant of CLOUDS, mm. 17-18, there embryonic but here released into a fuller realization in the precipitated sonic center of Rotation 4, a dark and mysterious translucence. Nor is its pentatonicism without connotations. As so often in Debussy, one might read it, along with its ritualistically marked steps, proceeding in the measured circlets of a simulated mystical rite, an evocation of primordial pentatonicism: foundational, ancient, hieratic, a simulacrum of a fictive, *sotto voce* secret inaccessible to mere words. (It also deploys the composer’s much-favored black-note pentatonicism. Might there additionally be an exotic allusion to be imagined here: perhaps a memory trace of a gamelan or other sounds from Asia?) This resonant *telos*, a concentrated cloud-picture phantasm with internal, archaic modal swells and fades, is shaped into a rounded-binary format, aa’bba’’, as though suggesting that the pentatonic idea were close to attaining a lyrical clarity of format and closure absent from its surroundings, a closure that it ultimately fails to provide.²⁴ And with that dissolving-away from closure in mm. 77-79, the SONIC SIGNAL in the English horn returns more emphatically than before, with a new *sforzando* shock, jarringly dispersing any remaining hope of the *telos* dream’s fulfillment, and proceeds onward, in full fade-out mode (again merging into the $\frac{6}{4}$ meter, m. 88), as though our *bateau-mouche* were receding into the distance.

22 On the intense interest of *fin-de-siècle* decadents in the ornate rituals and artifacts of European Catholicism – directly relevant here (implied by the ‘smoky incense’ metaphor) – see Ellis Hanson, *Decadence and Catholicism*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997.

23 In terms of strict measure-count this is quite close to the golden-section moment (whatever that might suggest). Coincidentally or not, m. 64 marks the .627 point on the way to the 102 bars of the whole piece. With regard to the *divisi* strings (and the earlier English horn), cf. Sibelius’s contemporaneous *The Swan of Tuonela* (also mentioned in DeVoto, ‘*Nuages* and Reduced Tonality’, 124).

24 The emergent sense of what we might call a mysterious clarity at m. 64 is subtly fortified harmonically: the chord immediately preceding the D \sharp minor of m. 64 is (by spelling) B \flat $\frac{4}{2}$, whose root is enharmonically related to the D \sharp minor by fifth – perhaps obliquely hinting at something like a localized ‘resolution’ of the B \flat $\frac{4}{2}$.

The final Rotation 5 need not concern us for long: more fading-away and a receding out of earshot. Both CLOUDS and SIGNAL recur only in either fragments or allusions. Mm. 94-97 are bass-register residues of CLOUDS, now vanishing away. Allusions to CLOUDS continue in m. 98 with a lingering memory trail of the earlier pentatonic *telos* experience, the peak moment, now lost in real time but remembered fragmentarily in the flute. The rotation concluder, the SONIC SIGNAL, is represented only by its echoes, tritones in the horns in mm. 99-100, its recurrent English-horn idea having now moved far downstream, out of our range of audibility. In the last two bars, mm. 101 and 102, all of it fades out into full evaporation into the invisible, thin air of silence.

There is much to pursue further here in analytical terms, including such issues as how the later two movements, 'Fêtes' and 'Sirènes', in their transformations and recyclings of these same motives, might be understood as continuing on different terms the rotational processes begun in 'Nuages': the possibility of multimovement rotations, of new, perhaps reordered rotations springing again to life, after a pause of blankness, with 'Fêtes', and then again with 'Sirènes'.²⁵ Still another issue concerns the analogies of the rotational structure of 'Nuages' to that of other works of Debussy – for instance, to that of the earlier *Prélude à l'Après-midi d'un faune*, with which it might be profitably compared. (Once 'Nuages' is grasped rotationally, one's approach to the less straightforward, much debated *Faune* can be clarified.)²⁶ Rather than expanding toward those issues, however, I shall conclude with an overview of some larger questions of temporality and implication within the kind of structure exemplified by 'Nuages' – for rotational structures inevitably bring up issues of musical time, recurrence, and circularity.

Rotational Structure and the Aestheticist Projection of Temporality

Rotational structure – varied recyclings of a series of modules whose referential ordering is established at the outset – is not unique to Debussy, nor am I the only person to call attention to it in his *œuvre*.²⁷ As I have been proposing for several years, recurring temporal cycles provide the deeper backdrop for many of the familiar musical forms of the past several centuries: ostinato-bass processes, ritornello structure, da capo and other ternary structures, sonata and rondo formats, strophic song, theme and variation, popular song structures with recurring refrains, and so on. Each of these formats – most of our standard forms – may be construed as differently patterned foreground manipulations of a deeply seated human impulse toward repetitive circularity. Why this might be so invites us into speculations beyond the scope of this essay and would lead into broader questions, including those recently explored by evolutionary psychology

25 This suggestion is different from that pursued in Sharon Gelleny, 'Cyclic Form and Debussy's *Nocturnes*', *Cahiers Debussy* 20 (1996), 25-40. Gelleny is concerned with charting the motivic and thematic transformations of *Nuages* material and motives in the later two movements, thus creating a free (and characteristically French) cyclic form within the composition as a whole.

26 A rotational reading of *Faune*, for instance, would understand its 'B' section – the D \flat major, seemingly contrasting 'big tune' and *telos* at m. 55 – as a more diatonized variant of the opening flute motive and consequently the onset of another, more tonally clarified interior rotation. In *Faune* (obviously a precursor of 'Nuages') the issue of large-scale design is complicated by the presence of numerous internal repetitions perhaps understandable as subrotations occurring within broader, more obviously sectionalized rotations. Additionally, unlike the case with 'Nuages' (and notwithstanding the parallels between the two pieces), the rotations in the *Faune* are not as consistently marked at their ends by the return of a separately articulated, contrasting closing module.

27 See especially Rings, '*Mystères limpides*'. See also David Lewin, 'A Transformational Basis for Form and Prolongation in Debussy's "Feux d'artifice"', in: *Musical Form and Transformation: Four Analytic Essays*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993, 97-159 (although Lewin does not use the term rotation); and Cara Pickett, '*Images of the Sacred in Select Works of Debussy, 1909-1913*', PhD thesis Yale University 2008.

(for example, the back-and-forth of human respiration, physical aspects of sexuality and reproduction, the foundational experiences of day-night cycles, circadian rhythms, lunar cycles, seasonal cycles, the connectedness of all of these things with burgeoning cultic ritual, and so forth).

What is crucial in so many aspects of cultural organization is the explicit, often ceremonial projection of circular experience: recurring cycles or spirals of what are often believed to be richly textured, revelatory meanings onto a flatter, chronological time span, a linear, more tragic sense of time that decrees a fixed beginning and a fixed end – a single birth and a single death – surrounded by the mystery of emptiness on either side and enclosing a sequence of non-repeatable, self-extinguishing moments. None of this is news to modern humanistic scholarship. It has been discussed and debated, for instance, in well-known anthropological and religious-studies literature, where such ceremonies of circularity are frequently described as evocations of mythic time, recurrent time, cyclical time, the wheel of life or time, the doctrine of eternal return or recurrence, and so on. And of course it has been pursued of late (though in differently inflected ways from what I am suggesting here) by Stephen Jay Gould (*Time's Arrow, Time's Cycle*) and, within music, by Karol Berger (*Bach's Cycle, Mozart's Arrow*).²⁸

One's perception of the same pattern or principle in so many different types of music is no invitation to crude reductionism. The point of any analysis is not merely to spot and label the rotations, and I am not proposing that all instances of this nearly ubiquitous musical rotationality carry the same connotations. What matters is how and for which differing purposes these rituals of circularity were deployed within given historical genres or within individual pieces at certain moments of history. These questions take on an enhanced urgency when the foundational principle of rotational circularity rises to the fore to displace more generically standard formats. This is what happens in 'Nuages', where, in the reading that I am proposing, the conventional ABA' impression is present only secondarily, albeit significantly, as a telling side-effect of the more generating rotational principle: the internal, mirage-like production of apparent difference and pseudo-sacralized stasis in the midst of transformative recastings and reconfigurations of fundamental motives.

A broader interpretation of 'Nuages' would situate the movement's ritualistic circularities within at least one current of emerging European modernism at the turn of the century, that of staging an emphatic withdrawal from the mechanistic and alienating instrumental rationality of an ever-advancing urban technological culture. Here the aim, in solidarity with a disaffected cultural elite, was to escape into philosophical, cultic, or aestheticist fantasies of displaced or discontinuous time, synthetically constructed alternative worlds of recurring temporal cycles. This is by no means an exclusively French phenomenon: one recalls, for instance, Nietzsche's *ewige Wiederkehr* pronouncements of the 1880s or, later, the extravagant cyclical doctrines of Yeats or the oracular circularities of

28 Gould's *Time's Arrow, Time's Cycle*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987, concerns different scientific conceptions of geological or evolutionary time. 'Time's arrow' implies linear time with a fixed beginning and end; 'time's cycle' is not so much the tracing of a metaphorical circle in the sense of the present essay but rather a constantly present, abiding, non-linear concept of time. Berger's *Bach's Cycle, Mozart's Arrow: An Essay on the Origins of Musical Modernity*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007, adapts Gould's concepts to apply them to a changing concept of time that is played out also in the history of music in the epochal shift from the 'baroque' to the 'classical' style. While the latter foregrounded the plot-oriented vector of musical time itself ('earlier' and 'later' matter as concepts), the former is claimed to have produced works – such as Bach's C-major fugue from *The Well-Tempered Clavier*, Book 1 - 'simply "in time"' (9), that is, in an eternally present fullness of time in which linearity was less significant: 'Events had somehow to be arranged successively, but the distinction between past and future, "earlier" and "later," mattered little to the way the music was experienced and understood.' (9)

Joyce, Pound, and Eliot. But *fin-de-siècle* France was also shot through with aestheticized variants of the cyclical idea. This was the postured cultural world of Debussy's Paris, that of the so-called decadence and its aftermath. It was typically marked by a melancholy consciousness of morbidity, mortality, and death, by an obsession with the fatal pressure of irreversible, chronological time and modes of aestheticist escape from it – escapes marked by the search for maximally intense and refined experiences. In Mallarmé's aesthetic (well known to Debussy) we find a recurring emphasis on non-linear discourse, circularities, temporal discontinuities, cycles of crests and troughs, births, deaths, and rebirths. All of these are constituents of his quest for an eternal present – the perfect and sustainable epiphany-burst of pleasure. Moreover, the whole poetic program was to be carried out within a quasi-sacralized art of ritualistic observance that sought to create a cultic, separately absolutized poetic space of heightened intensities, experiential epiphanies outside of ordinary time.²⁹ Melancholy circularities intertwined with a search for enhanced aesthetic moments (cultural progeny of Baudelaire's *Les paradis artificiels*), now savored in a flight from the sorry and banal *praxis* of everyday life, are also characteristic of Huysmans, Maeterlinck, Proust, and many others.

In literature, this aspect of modernism is often interlinked with an aversion to normative teleological narrative – replacing the 'suspense or expectation' associated with standard plot types and their eventual denouement or satisfactory resolution with a quest for recurring, heightened literary epiphanies.³⁰ This, too, has resonances relatable to Debussy and 'Nuages'. As Berger and others have underscored, European nineteenth-century music, too, had its standardized teleological designs, particularly those linear formats involved with tonal departure and eventual resolution and closure. But these concepts of plot-suspense and final resolution were the very mechanisms that Debussy was dismantling in such works as 'Nuages'. Here we encounter a different concept of musical linearity and purpose.

In this kind of music one is unconcerned with the traditional *telos* of tonal resolution and closure. While the music of 'Nuages' does crest in a translucent *telos* in Rotation 4, this is not a moment of closure but rather one of disclosure. What we find is a temporary *telos* of concentration that has nothing to do with resolution in the normal, tonal sense of the word. While the experience of sound is vital to the piece, the customary suspense of a tonal plot is by and large irrelevant. From the tonal perspective the spirals or cycles of

29 These are epiphanies in which the quasi-sacralized ceremonies and aspects of ever-mysterious music and its regulated concert rituals, secular analogues to the Catholic mass, were also to serve as a model. See, e.g., Stéphane Mallarmé's essays in vol. 2 of the *Œuvres complètes*, Paris: Gallimard, 2003: 'Plaisir sacré' (235-237), 'Catholicisme' (238-242), 'De même' (242-44), and many others. A still useful summary of Mallarmé's aestheticized concept of time, circularities, and rebirths – one that helped to shape the basis of my own observations here – may be found in Paula Gilbert Lewis, *The Aesthetics of Stéphane Mallarmé in Relation to His Public*, London: Associated University Presses, 1976, especially Ch. 2, 'The Function of Art', 45-85. Cf. also my remarks a quarter-century ago on ritual and sacralization in Debussy's music, 'Formulaic Openings in Debussy' *19th-Century Music* 8 (1984), 44-59; repeated in Hepokoski, *Music, Structure, Thought: Selected Essays*, Aldershot: Ashgate, 2009, 197-212.

30 The phrase 'suspense or expectation' and the same general point (here and in the following paragraph) are borrowed from Northrop Frye's once classic *The Critical Path: An Essay on the Social Context of Literary Criticism*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1973, 30: 'In modern literature there has been a strong emphasis on demanding a response from the reader which minimizes everything "naïve", everything connected with suspense or expectation. ... Fiction tends increasingly to abolish the teleological plot which keeps the reader wondering "how it turns out"; poetry drops its connective tissue of narrative in favor of discontinuous episodes. ... The emphasis, though it starts with unity, is not on unity for its own sake, but on intensity, a word which brings us back to the conception of an ideal experience ... which in one way or another seems to be the real goal of life.'

'Nuages' are non-linear, non-teleological. On the other hand, they are teleological in the sense that in succession they rise to a fuller experience of sonic presence and concentration, peaking in Rotation 4, and then, for the remainder of the piece, fading away from it. In short, Debussy abandons the traditional quest plot of tonal resolution and closure in favor of a managed fluctuation of intensities, rhythms, and orchestral colors facilitated through the cyclical processes of rotational form, acts of meditation and re-meditation on recurring sonic objects. Still, all of this is of necessity deployed through the linear time of performance, here unspooled as a series of varied rotational cycles. Thus we have an interplay between an inexorably non-repeatable time and the recurring rounds – births, deaths, rebirths – of cyclical time.

And yet what is staged as a ceremonial epiphany in Rotation 4 – the D \sharp -minor central event (Example 1b) – remains purposely underdefined, clouded over, indecipherable in whatever implications we might imagine it might have. While one might experience the precipitated mists of its material presence with a connoisseur's shiver, one is not invited to explicate it as though it had been intended to convey a fixed, recoverable meaning. Skeptics critical of such knowing escapes into this hushed haze of a newly unveiled, archetypal purity might regard it as a *telos* of intentional mystification, a staged slippage into false consciousness. As has been pointed out by Jankélévitch and others, this evocation of *mystère* and the exquisitely heightened moment is a central feature of the Debussyan aesthetic. But what is important to grasp – against the Jankélévitchian grain – is that this effect of fragile, delicate *mystère*, saturated with purposeful ambiguity, was meticulously and artificially engineered as an urban-ideological product for the gratification of specific, in-the-know audiences. Somewhat paradoxically, this pseudo-ineffable art is self-consciously manipulative, manufacturing its pretended mystifications deliberately as sonic opiates for aesthetic connoisseurs in an increasingly disenchanting world. Not too far underneath, the delicious shivers and high craft harbor a vision of darkness and loss for which the hyper-rich acoustic surface can be construed as a sumptuously fictive but only temporary compensation.

Here in the centerpoint of the movement we have a secularized simulacrum of the theophany of mystery, a simulated disclosure of the primordial, the pentatonic-archaic basis of sound and scale, the enigma of a feigned sphinx-like antiquity. In 'Nuages' the falling-away of diatonic common-practice tonality annuls the traditional function of chords in order to conjure up a pretended realm of mystery. The blur of tonal practice, the chromatic shifts around pitches, the ambiguous sense of pitch centrality, the rotational cyclings: these are all components of a temporary but luscious flight from the banalities of everyday-world clarity and stultifying musical tradition in pursuit of a voluptuous alternative. But that alternative was no land with any claim to truth. Instead, as Debussy wrote in its praises in 1901, it was the product of only an escapist dream, 'an imaginary country' (*un pays chimérique*) to be found nowhere in this world (*introuvable*), or, as he penned in the *Monsieur Croche* essays in 1902, art is 'the most beautiful of lies' (*le plus beau de mensonges*).³¹

For Debussy the pseudo-sacred pathway to this world of self-induced, contemplative fantasy, to this *pays chimérique*, was not infrequently a circular one. Rotational structures could encourage a heightened attentiveness to successive disclosures of sonic presence and therefore of time itself, momentary experiences of change and deepening within each temporal cycle, each offered to us as a replenished ritual object for self-indulgent contemplation – a melancholy, *fin-de-siècle* substitute for a long-collapsed religion. The rotational process could become a pseudo-sacralizing strategy, one that approached the

31 Debussy to Dukas 11 February 1901: see n. 4 above for the complete quotation; *Debussy Letters*, 118; Debussy, *Monsieur Croche et autres écrits* (from *Musica*, October 1902), 66 ('mensonges'); Smith, ed., *Debussy on Music*, 85 (transl. as 'the most beautiful deception of all').

palpable inscrutability of musical sound's exquisite emergence and passage through time – those magical apparitions – as its ultimate objects of contemplation. Here one might be reminded again of Debussy's *penser-écouter* binary conveyed to Paul Dukas in February 1901, which directly concerned the *Nocturnes*. 'There is no need ... for music to make people think (*penser*). ... It would be enough if music could make people listen (*écouter*), despite themselves and despite their petty, mundane troubles.'³²

Musical form, now construed as cyclical process (but surely also as deep-seated psychological process), is inextricably implicated in this ritualized effort to flee the vapid emptiness of the everyday world, however temporarily, at least for the duration of an exquisitely fashioned escape-dream. The escape on offer is that to an 'if-only' alternative world of aesthetic *frissons* and vague intimations, a realm of clouds that asks its real-world listeners, as the ticket for admission, to discard their own hopes with regard to finding therein any social or metaphysical truth-content. It may be that underconsidered appeals to such textbookish moulds as ABA' form can dampen or normalize one's perception of this movement by inviting us to assimilate the complexity of its details into an established, ready-to-hand formula. On the other hand, an analysis awakened to the functional purposes of rotational form can entice us into more trenchant reflections on the concept and experience of musical presence and its accompanying claims. And it can make us more attentive to – or perhaps, in the end, more suspicious of – Debussy's seductive but deeply problematic injunction to turn away from the hermeneutics of thought and interpretation (in short, to stop thinking) in order simply to listen.

32 See n. 4 above.