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Becoming Proust in Time

Michael Lucey

More than a few of the very first readers of Marcel Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu* (*In Search of Lost Time*) found the novel difficult to appreciate. First readers often being the ones deciding if something will be accepted for publication, their opinions may well carry more weight than they deserve. Proust's status as a major writer may seem secure these days. The jacket blurbs of recent editions of his seven-volume novel tell us that it is "indispensable," an "inexhaustible artwork," "crucial." Online and in-person Proust reading groups are not hard to find. Various published guides can be found to help readers on their journey through the more than three thousand pages that make up the novel. There is an abundant scholarly literature about Proust and his writings, and there is an immense amount of lore that circulates about the man, his life, and his novel. Among that lore is the intriguing tale of the difficulties he had finding a publisher for the novel's first volume.

It was in 1912, at the age of forty-one, that Proust started looking in earnest for a publisher for what then seemed likely to be a two-volume novel. He contacted two different publishing houses, Charpentier and the *Nouvelle Revue Française*. (The *NRF* is the publisher known today as Gallimard.) To Eugène Fasquelle at Charpentier he wrote with a caveat: "I should like to warn you very frankly in advance that the work in question is what used to be called an indecent one, indeed much more *indecent* than what is usually published." The reader whom Fasquelle asked to provide an expert opinion on the manuscript did not react strongly to anything in the pages he read that might qualify

as indecent. He began his report in this way: “At the end of the seven hundred and twelve pages of this manuscript (seven hundred and twelve at least, because lots of pages have numbers graced with a, b, c, d)—after the utter depression of seeming to drown in fathomless complications and after irritating feelings of impatience at never being able to surface—the reader has simply no idea of what it’s all about. What is all this for? What does all this mean? Where is it leading to?—It’s impossible to make head or tail of it! It’s impossible to comment on it!” Toward the end of the report, he sums up as best he can: “It’s the study of a sickly, abnormally nervous little boy whose sensitivity, impressionable nature and reflective subtlety are in a state of irritation.” As for its indecency, the reader notes, “It’s hardly worth taking into account the very brief and misleading appearance of the future ‘homosexual,’ Baron de Fleurus. ... If the little boy does not become a homosexual what is the point of the whole book?” (We see that in 1912 Proust had not yet fixed the name of all of his characters. Fleurus would become Charlus in the published novel.) Obviously, this reader did not recommend publication, but he did add, “In the work as a whole, indeed, and even in each unit taken on its own it is impossible not to see here an extraordinary intellectual phenomenon.”

The *Nouvelle Revue Française* also turned down the manuscript. One of the moving forces at the *NRF* was André Gide. He would write remorsefully to Proust in January 1914, while reading the published volume: “For several days, I have not put down your book; I am supersaturating myself in it, rapturously, wallowing in it. Alas! why must it be so painful for me to like it so much? ... The rejection of the book will remain the gravest mistake ever made by the *NRF*—and (for I bear the shame of being largely responsible for it) one of the most bitterly remorseful regrets of my life.” Gide

claimed that he barely looked at Proust's manuscript, stumbling by chance across a number of sentences he found unappealing before unthinkingly rejecting it. Contributing to his decision, he admits, was the image he had of Proust as a fellow lacking in seriousness, a socialite and a snob, an image based on a number of chance encounters between the two many years earlier. A person like the one he imagined Proust to be could have no place at the *NRF*, he wrote, since the *NRF* meant to publish only the most significant and consequential kinds of literature by serious authors. (Proust certainly had been a socialite, and indeed he authored a number of society columns for a newspaper, *Le Figaro*, in the early years of the century, which he published under a number of pseudonyms. Perhaps atypically for society columns, a couple of them made extensive reference to the novels of Balzac and Stendhal.)

Proust tried a third publisher for his novel, Ollendorff, this time offering to pay the expenses of publication himself. Ollendorff refused, on the advice of another expert reader, who complained that there was no justification for spending the thirty opening pages of the manuscript describing someone's difficulties in falling asleep. Only on his fourth attempt, would Proust find someone willing to publish him. The first volume of his novel, *Du côté de chez Swann* (*Swann's Way* or, in some recent editions, *The Way by Swann's*), would finally appear in November 1913, published by Grasset, and at the author's expense.

In the second volume of Proust's novel, *A l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleur* (*In the Shadow of Young Girls in Flower*), which would not appear until 1919, after the end of World War I (but which would, along with the rest of the volumes, be published by the *NRF*), the narrator pauses to reflect on how long it can take for a difficult new musical

work to find a public that appreciates or understands those parts of it that are “newest” or most “novel”: “it is always the least precious parts that one notices first. . . . The beauties one discovers soonest are also those which pall soonest, a double effect with a single cause: they are the parts that most resemble other works, with which one is already familiar. But when those parts have receded, we can still be captivated by another phrase, which, because its shape was too novel to let our mind see anything there but confusion, had been made undetectable and kept intact.” Difficult works, Proust’s narrator notes, have to give birth to their own publics, a process that can take years, decades, or even centuries. “The work has to create its own posterity.” The reception of a work of art or of literature, its circulation, and the accumulation of value to it, the set of meanings associated with it, all happen over time and through a complicated set of processes that can be understood not only aesthetically, but also historically and sociologically. How—through what processes—does a public end up noticing, and then appreciating—giving value to—something *new*? Proust’s novel represents this set of processes unfolding in the way it talks about artists, composers, actors and actresses, and writers (both real and fictional) struggling to achieve recognition, but the novel was itself also caught up in the very processes it represents.

One of the qualities of Proust’s novel that people did notice immediately was that its writing is expansive; its sentences are complex; its thoughts and images are rich and detailed; its pace is leisurely; its structural features emerge only slowly. (“Proust tries our patience so long as we expect his story to move forward,” Clive Bell would write in 1928, “that not being the direction in which it is intended to move.”) The readers at Ollendorff and Charpentier obviously found the novel’s pace and density to be an

overwhelming obstacle to comprehension. Gide points to a similar experience when, having finally set himself to reading the book attentively, he finds himself “supersaturating [him]self in it, rapturously, wallowing in it.” With Proust, a little goes a long way, it seems, and opening the novel with the expectation of making quick progress turns out to be an unwise idea.

As early readers of Proust began to assimilate the novel’s opening volumes (the first volume appeared in 1913, the second in 1919, the final one in 1927, five years after Proust’s death in 1922), they quickly found ways to relate Proust’s project to other familiar reference points. Some immediately linked it to other contemporary modernist literary projects. J. Middleton Murry, writing in 1922, would note “three significant books, calling themselves novels” that appeared in 1913–14, Proust’s *Du côté de chez Swann*, Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, and Dorothy Richardson’s *Pointed Roofs*. They were all “attempts to record immediately the growth of a consciousness ... without any effort at mediation by means of an interposed plot or story.” What was different about Proust, for Murry, was that “he established as the starting point of his book the level of consciousness from which the exploration actually began.” That is, Proust’s narrative method involved “perpetual reference to the present adult consciousness of the author.” What Murry calls the author here, others will call Proust’s narrator, but the feature Murry identifies has become one that people take to be a hallmark of Proust’s writing: the subtle play of perspectives that can be found within the bounds of any one sentence from Proust’s novel, where the consciousness that seems to be responsible for the sentence in question shifts rapidly through time, locating itself temporarily at any one of many different points on the time line making up the narrator’s

life.

When Murry reaches for a figure to whom Proust could be compared or contrasted, he chooses the Rousseau of the *Confessions*. Others in the early years of Proust's reception would choose Montaigne or Saint-Simon. If Montaigne and Rousseau came to mind as part of an effort to understand the focus in Proust's novel on the workings of consciousness and memory in the elaboration of a self, Saint-Simon (whose celebrated *Memoires* chronicle the court of Louis XIV and the subsequent period of the Regency) came to mind not only because he is mentioned several dozen times throughout the novel, but because the novel also involves a great deal of sociologically acute observations of high-society people interacting within complex and carefully delineated social environments. Writing in 1923, in a special issue of the *Nouvelle Revue Française* honoring Proust after his death, the French critic Albert Thibaudet wrote: "In Saint-Simon we have a tide of history on the move, people in the mass, the whole of France and the living vehement soul of Saint-Simon ever-present and manifest everywhere. In Proust we have a psychological tide, as vast as the former but, so as to yield its full power and make headway, in need only of a soul, either the author's or the soul of a character whom it has failed to exhaust, inexhaustible as all creatures are." Thibaudet moves Proust away from the sociological to the psychological impulse in novel writing. Proust's sociological ambitions for his novel (honed through his reading of other novelists he deeply admired, such as Balzac, Flaubert, and George Eliot) were perhaps not so easily appreciated in the early years of his reception.

"The beauties one discovers soonest are also those which pall soonest," Proust's narrator had observed. In the case of *A la recherche du temps perdu*, for certain novelists

of the next generation it would be Proust's intense focus on the interior life of his characters that had palled. Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir would turn to American novelists of the 1930s (people like John Dos Passos) in an attempt to craft a different narrative style, a different way of representing human beings acting in the world. Instead of focusing on interior life, their intent, Sartre would write in 1939, was to arrive at an understanding of the world in which "finally, everything is outside, everything, even ourselves: outside, in the world, among all the others." Sartre would even go so far as to say in that same essay (written while he was planning his novel *L'âge de raison* [*The Age of Reason*] and Beauvoir was working on *L'invitée* [*She Came to Stay*]) that "we have put Proust behind us."

The project of writing novels with no interest in interior life would be taken a step further by someone like Alain Robbe-Grillet, a standard-bearer for the New Novel, exemplified by works such as his 1957 *La jalousie* (*Jealousy*). In an essay from 1961, Robbe-Grillet would state that the New Novelists were interested in pursuing the evolution of the form of the novel that could be traced through a line of precursors including "Flaubert, Dostoevsky, Proust, Kafka, Joyce, Faulkner, Beckett." In the course of its evolution, Robbe-Grillet affirmed, the novel was gradually shedding a concern with worn-out notions such as "character, chronology, sociological study, and so on." It now seems clear that the extent of Proust's impact on literature (both in France and around the world), and the nature of what Proust had achieved, was only starting to be felt and understood, as Sartre or Robbe-Grillet wrote; it might also be noted that the clear forward-moving path of the novel's formal evolution that Robbe-Grillet thought he could point to looks decidedly less convincing from today's point of view. Proust was not part

of an evolution in which the novel was *shedding* such categories as character, chronology, or sociological study. He was reinventing those categories; he was turning them to new ends.

It was around 1908, when Proust was in his mid- to late thirties, that plans for his novel began to solidify in his mind. As a younger man, Proust had published various literary essays and one collection, *Les plaisirs et les jours* (*Pleasures and Days*, 1896), which comprised a miscellany of short stories, essays, a pastiche of Flaubert, poetic portraits of painters and musicians, and poems in verse and prose. Around this time he also became fascinated with the writings of the English art critic John Ruskin, who had died in 1900. The English poet Richard Aldington wrote that the source of Proust's fascination with Ruskin lay in "Ruskin's essential appreciativeness, his capacity for the assimilation and understanding of beauty, his reverence for the arts as symbols and expressions of civilization." With the help of his mother, whose English was better than his, and a friend, Marie Nordlinger, Proust translated Ruskin's *The Bible of Amiens* (the translation was published in 1904) and also *Sesame and Lilies* (1906).

It is often in the lengthy preface that Proust wrote for *Sesame and Lilies*, called "Sur la lecture" ("On Reading"), that critics find the first premonitions of the major work that was to come. Proust's preface seems to be pursuing multiple agendas simultaneously, and it is perhaps in this multitasking quality it evinces that it most looks forward to his great novel. On the one hand, Proust offers a lusciously detailed description of what it feels like to read (or what it felt like for him to read as a child on a summer's day in his grandparent's home); how the feeling of the experience of reading was woven into the experience of interruptions to eat lunch or to go for a walk; and how the experience of

reading evolved across the day, taking place in the garden early in the day, and later in bed just before falling asleep. He addresses the difference between productive and unproductive kinds of reading experiences; he discusses what it means for a mind reading to be encountering the traces of the mind that wrote the words on the page; he develops his ideas regarding what it means to think of reading as an encounter with the past. The experience of Racine's syntax, for instance, is compared to the experience of ancient architectural structures—to the walls of old cities or the baptisteries of old churches.

Roughly two years after the publication of his translation of *Sesame and Lilies*, in May 1908, Proust wrote a letter to his friend Louis d'Albufera that has become famous because of the list of projects he tells Albufera he had under way:

I have in hand

- a study on the nobility
- a Parisian novel
- an essay on Sainte-Beuve and Flaubert
- an essay on women
- an essay on pederasty (not easy to publish)
- a study on stained-glass windows
- a study on tombstones
- a study on the novel.

The novel is, of course, a capacious genre, capable of incorporating many other kinds of discourse—poetry, essays, theoretical discourses of various kinds. Could a single novel be capacious enough to contain all the items on Proust's list? During 1908 and 1909, it seems that Proust decided that yes, in fact, what he was working on was a single novel. By August 1909, Proust wrote to Alfred Vallette, husband of the novelist Rachilde and editor of the *Mercure de France* (a major publishing house that had, for example, published works by both Gide and Colette): "I am finishing a book which in spite of its provisional title: *Contre Sainte-Beuve, souvenir d'une matinée*, is a genuine novel, and an

extremely indecent one in places. One of the principal characters is a homosexual. ... I fancy it contains some new things. ... The book does indeed end with a long conversation about Sainte-Beuve and about aesthetics ... and once people have finished the book they will see (I hope) that the whole novel is simply an implementation of the artistic principles expressed in this final part, a sort of preface if you like placed at the end.”

Charles-Augustin Sainte-Beuve was an imposing nineteenth-century literary critic, and Proust decided that it was against Sainte-Beuve’s approach to authors and their works that he would build his own aesthetic position. The novel Proust was envisioning would thus contain a metafictional aspect—it would be a novel about writing novels and about reading them, a novel calling attention to its own aesthetic beliefs and its own formal procedures through a discussion of what the right method for studying literature should be. (Gide’s 1925 *Les faux-monnayeurs* [*The Counterfeiters*] is another classic example of metafictional writing from these same years, containing a character who is a novelist, and including pages from that fictional novelist’s journal in which he writes about his attempts to write a novel called *Les faux-monnayeurs*. Gide would then publish his own *Journal des Faux-monnayeurs* in 1926.)

Would it be fair in 1909 to call the novel Proust was writing “extremely indecent” because of the homosexual characters and behaviors it described? Perhaps for some readers, but not for others. Rachilde, to whose husband Proust was writing, had published her scandalous *Monsieur Vénus* in 1884 (a novel about a cross-dressing female aristocrat and the tortuous relationship she constructs with an effete working-class man), and other authors who dealt with nonnormative forms of sexuality were not hard to find at the time Proust was writing. Gide, for instance, had published *L’immoraliste* (*The Immoralist*) in

1902. In his *Journal*, Gide recounts a conversation from 1915 with an older novelist, Paul Bourget, in which Bourget makes a point of inquiring as to whether the protagonist of *L'immoraliste* was a “practicing pederast.” People in these years were becoming familiar with the idea that literature was a place in which non-mainstream forms of sexuality could be represented, discussed, and analyzed. Between 1914 and 1922, Gide and Proust would exchange letters and have several late-night conversations regarding the representation of male homosexuality in the books they were working on (including Gide’s *Les caves du Vatican*, *Corydon*, *Les faux-monnayeurs*, and *Si le grain ne meurt* ...). Clearly for them (and for numerous other authors around them, including, of course, Colette) this topic and the kind of literary treatment it would be given could serve as key elements for cutting-edge literary writing.

The drafts Proust was working on around this time would be published after his death under the title *Contre Sainte-Beuve*. While one can recognize in them the lineaments of the novel to come, Proust’s project had a good deal of evolving left to do. Not much of the writing dealing with his specific disagreements with Sainte-Beuve (regarding how to understand the relations between the works an author writes and the social life an author leads) makes its way into the published novel. But one key element of his 1909 letter to Vallette—the architectural idea of a preface that comes at the end to lay out the principle on which the whole work has been constructed—is worthy of notice. At about the same time that *Du côté de chez Swann* was published, in November 1913, Proust penned some observations about his novel that were published in the newspaper *Le Temps*. In his remarks, he insists that although only one volume of the novel was appearing at that time, it constitutes a whole—one whose effects will only be apparent at

the end. “I hope that at the end of my book, some minor social event of no importance, some marriage between two persons who in the first volume belong to very different worlds, will indicate that time has passed and will take on the beauty of certain patinaed leadwork at Versailles, which time has encased in an emerald sheath.” Perhaps there is a clue here to something that interests Proust that he does not fully articulate: will that minor marriage do no more than merely give us the sense that time has passed? It seems rather that Proust is gesturing at a relationship between the passage of time and certain kinds of social processes for which he has something like an aesthetic appreciation, ongoing processes that can be perceived only in the effects they produce over time, visible only in the effects they produce on the persons and the object they shape or sculpt. Different processes, Proust’s novel will show us, become perceptible over different spans of time. Time holds certain things and also sculpts certain things, Proust seems to be suggesting, and part of his novelistic vision involved finding ways to show us time in its passage in order to make it possible for us to see what time holds and what it sculpts.

Along with insisting that his novelistic vision was meant, in a certain way, to make the passage of time visible, Proust emphasizes in his remarks for *Le Temps* the importance of a particular scene that occurs about fifty pages into the novel, the famous scene of the madeleine: “Already, in this first volume, you will find the character who tells the story and who says ‘I’ (who is not me) suddenly recovering years, gardens, people he has forgotten, in the taste of a mouthful of tea in which he has soaked a bit of madeleine.” This is the scene in which Proust (or his narrator) draws a distinction between voluntary and involuntary memory. In the article in *Le Temps*, Proust writes: “For me, voluntary memory, which is above all a memory of the intellect and of the eyes,

gives us only facets of the past that have no truth; but should a smell or a taste, met with again in quite different circumstances, reawaken the past in us, in spite of ourselves, we sense how different that past was from what we thought we had remembered, our voluntary memory having painted it, like a bad painter, in false colors. ... I believe that it is really only to involuntary memories that the artist should go for the raw material of his work.”

Now it turns out that the scene of the madeleine early in the novel, and the experience of involuntary memory provided in that moment, is only the first in a series of such scenes that occur periodically over the course of the novel. About halfway through the novel’s final volume, a flurry of such moments occurs, provoked successively by the narrator’s experience of stumbling over a paving stone, of hearing the sound of a spoon tapped against the side of a plate, of the feel of a starched napkin brushing across his face, and then, in a more complicated fashion, of the discovery on a bookshelf of a book (George Sand’s novel *François le champi*) that had played a key role in an important childhood moment. The first three instances provoke a profound sense of happiness and a renewed sense of commitment to a writerly vocation. In these moments, “the past was made to encroach upon the present and make me uncertain about which of the two I was in; the truth was that the being within me who was enjoying this impression was enjoying it because of something shared between a day in the past and the present moment, something extra-temporal, and this being appeared only when, through one of these moments of identity between the present and the past, it was able to find itself in the only milieu in which it could live and enjoy the essence of things, that is to say outside of time.” The long passage in which the narrator thinks over the nature of this experience of

involuntary memory seems to be the kind of moment Proust described to Vallette in his 1909 letter, a preface that comes at the end, describing how intellectual apprehension (voluntary memory) will always provide an inadequate account of our passage through the world. “For the truths that the intellect grasps directly as giving access to the world of full enlightenment have something less profound, less necessary about them than those that life has, despite ourselves, communicated in an impression, a material impression because it enters us through our senses, but one from which it is also possible to extract something spiritual.”

One of the most compelling and influential accounts of the importance of Proust’s distinction between voluntary and involuntary memory comes from a 1939 essay by Walter Benjamin called “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire.” Among the overarching themes of Benjamin’s essay is the idea that the modern world (the world of standardization, of mass culture, of information) has become increasingly inhospitable to a richly reflective kind of experience capable of tying a given individual to a given place and time, to a given culture and community. Many different thinkers and artists have dealt with this problem in a variety of ways, Benjamin tells us, discussing Proust alongside the poets Charles Baudelaire and Paul Valéry, alongside Sigmund Freud and the French philosopher Henri Bergson. In modernity, our senses are continually being shocked by stimuli from the world around us, keeping our sense of ourselves and our world in a fragmentary and unintegrated state. For Benjamin, Proust’s interest in moments of involuntary memory is an interest in moments when the “atrophy of experience” so typical of modernity can, almost accidentally, be overcome, when individuals can hold meaningful images of their lives in their minds for a moment. In another essay, “The

Image of Proust,” Benjamin writes, “*A la Recherche du temps perdu* is the constant attempt to charge an entire lifetime with the utmost awareness.”

If Benjamin’s comments help us focus on that aspect of the novel that relates to coherence and an overarching unifying formal structure (sometimes difficult to perceive because of the work’s enormous length), there is also the open form aspect of the book to consider, the sense that even after Proust had fixed in his mind how it was to begin and end, even after he had written the beginning and the end, the novel kept growing in the middle. Time kept passing around Proust as well. Notably, World War I intervened between the 1913 publication of *Du côté de chez Swann* and the 1919 publication of *A l’ombre des jeunes filles en fleur*. The later parts of the novel were reimagined to include the occurrence of the war and its effect on the characters. Moreover, at some point during the war, something crucial shifted in Proust’s sense of the novel. A new character emerged, Albertine, whose role seemed then only to grow and grow. She became the narrator’s major love interest, his obsession, his project, his prisoner. Her presence in the novel energized its treatment of certain topics, including obsessive jealousy and “indecent” forms of sexuality. She also introduced a different social class into the work (the narrator calls it “une petite bourgeoisie fort riche, du monde de l’industrie et des affaires” (a quite wealthy part of the middle class whose money came from the worlds of industry or commerce), altering its sociological ambitions as well.

Albertine first appears in the novel as one of a small group of girls whose social provenance mystifies the narrator. As he learns more about her, he finds himself falling in love not with some well-placed aristocrat (a possibility he has often dreamed of) or with someone from a cultivated and wealthy family of long-standing reputation (as was the

case with Gilberte Swann, his first crush), but with a bicycle-riding, golf-playing girl whose sociological profile seems utterly alien to him: she comes from new money, she is culturally right-wing (Catholic and opposed to the secular tendencies of the Third French Republic), and, when it comes to literary, musical, or artistic taste, decidedly middle-brow. The result is that he does not, he says, even know how to talk to her: “While talking to her, I had been as unaware of my words and where they went as though I had been throwing pebbles into a bottomless well. That in general the people to whom we speak draw from within themselves the meaning they give to our words, and that this meaning is very different from the one we put into them, is a truth constantly revealed to us by everyday life. But if in addition the person to whom we are speaking is, as Albertine was for me, someone whose upbringing is inconceivable, whose inclinations and principles, even the books she reads, are a mystery to us, then we cannot tell whether our words have any more semblance of meaning for her than they would if we tried to explain ourselves to an animal. Trying to strike up a relationship with Albertine felt like relating to the unknown, or even the impossible, an exercise as difficult as training a horse, as restful as keeping bees or growing roses.” We could notice any number of things about this passage: that it reveals what an unpleasant fellow the narrator often reveals himself to be; that it illustrates the novel’s ongoing preoccupation with mishaps in attempts at verbal communication (and with discrepancies between different varieties of French); that it indicates that the narrator’s own psychosocial makeup, the structure of his own forms of taste and his own kinds of ambition, are part of the puzzle the novel presents us with.

The Albertine story, a central part of all the volumes of the *Recherche* except the

first and the last, allows the novel to expand on its fascination with language as the main medium in which social identities are produced and experienced. It allows the novel more space to consider a wide range of sexualities outside the mainstream. (If the indecency Proust spoke of when referring to his novel before the war had for the most part to do with the sexual inclinations of men like Charlus, with the introduction of Albertine into the novel, someone whose sexuality will apparently remain as mysterious to the narrator as her upbringing was inconceivable, suddenly a whole range of non-mainstream sexualities between women, as well as between men who are attracted to men and women who are attracted to women, enters into the novel's purview.) It provides a new slant on the large sociological movements the novel traces (the seemingly endless process through which the aristocracy goes on renewing its prestige even as it heads toward inevitable obsolescence; the ascending sociocultural prominence of new segments of the middle classes). The introduction of Albertine into the novel shifts its balance, we might say, gives it freedom to pursue in new ways certain topics it already had on its agenda, to take them in new directions.

A la recherche du temps perdu is never about one thing at a time. It has an amazing ability always to be about a number of things simultaneously. Everyone will have his or her own list of what seem to be its central topics (and of course, our collective sense of what the novel is about will change as we and it continue to move through time), but here are six promising candidates: (1) The novel is interested in what aesthetic experience is, how it works, and what it is used for; it is interested in how the human sensory apparatus can be captivated by beautiful things in nature or by beautiful works of art; but then it is interested in how this aesthetic capacity is used or managed by people as

they move through the world and time, how people's taste evolves and why, how it might be possible (or impossible) to predict or manipulate one's own taste, or the taste of others. (2) The novel is interested in the faculty (or faculties) of memory, how it or they work, how they enable us to be and to become who we are, to function as the kind of people we imagine ourselves to be—or how sometimes different kinds of memory come into conflict at key moments of our lives, and leave us in a state of disorientated non-identity. (3) The novel is interested in how the social world is organized into groups (families, classes, nations, clans, religions, sexualities, professions, age cohorts), how those groups determine who we are, how they compete, replicate themselves through us, or are transformed, perhaps even disappear; the novel is persistently asking what the relationship is between the groups we belong to and the identities we imagine to be ours. (4) The novel is interested in sexuality, love, and jealousy as elements in the construction of both individual identity and social identity, as forms of energy that propel us through life, and as features of human existence that link human beings to other forms of life (animal and vegetal) and to the ecosystem around them. (5) The novel is interested in the large-scale transformations that characterize its own historic moment, in, for instance, how momentous historico-political crises (World War I being the main example) affect both the large sociopolitical institutions that organize our lives and the small structures of daily life through which we all move. Finally, (6) the novel is interested in novels, how they work, and what we use them for.

The passage of time and the instability of the experience of human subjectivity are a shared feature of all of these topics. Take just one example of this, related to the matter of how novels work—the interesting question of the way the novel deals with the

narrator's name. Often critics refer to the narrator as Marcel. The narrator is given this name nowhere in the first four volumes of the novel. Other characters apparently speak his name from time to time, but the novel makes a point of never recording it. One ostentatious example (among many others) is the scene in which the narrator is announced by the doorman upon his arrival at a party thrown by the Princesse de Guermantes: "The doorman asked my name, and I gave it to him as mechanically as a condemned man allowing himself to be attached to the block. He at once raised his head majestically and, before I had been able to beg him to keep his voice down ... he shouted out the disquieting syllables with a force capable of causing the roof of the house to vibrate." As for what those disquieting syllables were, we are given no clue.

There are only two places in the whole novel, both found in the fifth volume, *La prisonnière* (*The Captive* or *The Prisoner*), in which it could be argued that the narrator is named Marcel. The second of the two is a letter from Albertine to the narrator that begins "Dear darling Marcel," and ends "Oh Marcel, Marcel! Your very own Albertine." That might seem to be good evidence that, despite having avoided mentioning the fact for several thousand pages, the narrator is indeed named Marcel. However, earlier in the same volume the reader will have encountered a startling sentence that might make anyone wary of the truth-value of any attempt to specify the narrator's name. At the moment in question, the narrator is admiring a sleeping Albertine and watching her slowly wake up. (Note again that the confused state between sleeping and waking with which the novel began remains at the heart of its preoccupations.) "Now she began to speak; her first words were 'darling' or 'my darling,' followed by my Christian name, which, if we give the narrator the same name as the author of this book, would produce

‘darling Marcel’ or ‘my darling Marcel.’” What is disconcerting about this sentence is the difficulty in imagining who is speaking it, who is responsible for the words that make up its second half. Can a narrator mention the existence of his author? Is the author somehow intervening here, breaking the novel’s frame? Are we suddenly encountering words proffered by someone who is neither the author or the narrator, and if so—who could that be? The sentence seems intended to cause us to lose our bearings, almost as if we ourselves were being woken up, shaken out of a dream state by an occurrence that seems situated neither fully within the dream nor fully outside it.

Stop for a moment to consider this: When, in 1928, Colette’s novel *La naissance du jour* [*Break of Day*] was published in *La Revue de Paris*, it had an epigraph she claimed was from Proust, but which appears to be her modification of something Proust had said in his 1913 article for *Le Temps* about his relation to his narrator. Colette’s epigraph, ascribed to Proust, read “this ‘I’ which is me and which is perhaps not me.” Colette changed the epigraph when the novel appeared in book form, replacing the passage she claimed was from Proust with one cribbed from later in her own novel: “Is anyone imagining in reading me that I am portraying myself? Have patience: This is merely my model.” In reviewing *La naissance du jour*, the critic André Billy would write that this novel “offers something extremely new and daring, without precedent, I think, in literature ... it’s that the heroine of the novel is none other than the author.” Billy was, of course, exaggerating: Colette always played with the discrepancy between novelistic representations of self and public ones. Yet we could certainly say that Proust’s and Colette’s way of creating disturbances between real and fictional persons or personas, and disturbances in our everyday understanding of the patterns of coherence that usually

govern the use of the first-person pronoun proved extremely influential within French literature of the twentieth century. One might, for instance, think of Marguerite Duras in this light.

The *Recherche* performs a similar disruptive gesture in a remarkable passage from the final volume that deals with the selfless behavior of certain people during the hardest days of World War I. The narrator (or is that really who is speaking?) suddenly informs us that “in this book, in which there is not one fact that is not fictitious, not one real character concealed under a false name, in which everything has been made up by me in accordance with the needs of my exposition, I have to say, to the honour of my country, that Françoise’s millionaire relatives alone, who came out of retirement to help their niece when she was left without support, that they and they alone are real, living people.” How is it that the narrator, himself supposedly a fiction, suddenly knows who is “real” and who isn’t?

It is as if for the novel certain questions—what is the difference between being asleep and being awake? what is the difference between the narrator and the author? what is the difference between being real and being fictitious?—are all in some way versions of the same question. It is as if in all of the different topics it treats, the novel in fact encourages us to wonder if we are awake, if we are fictions. When we are caught up in aesthetic experience, who are we? When we decide we like something, what has been decided and by whom? Who do we become thanks to the aesthetic choices we imagine ourselves to make freely? When we are lost in memory, who, where, when, and what are we? When we pursue sex or love, do we know why we do what we do? Do we know the meaning of what we do? Are our actions automatic or conscious? Do we know who or

what we are as we perform them? When we use language, are we in full control of what we say and do? Are we aware of, awake to, the full significance of the way group identities transmit themselves through us? Is it possible to know the full extent of what and who we have been, what we are, what we will become, to cite the novel's closing words, "in Time"? Somehow the *Recherche* not only studies, it also offers us and is itself subject to, this complex experience of becoming. Even Proust, we could say, is still in the process of becoming who he is, as his novel goes on moving forward through time.

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The first English language translator of Proust’s *A la recherche du temps perdu* was Charles Kenneth Scott Moncrieff. His translation of the first volume of Proust’s novel, as *Swann’s Way*, was published in 1922; Scott Moncrieff also translated the five following volumes but died in 1930 before translating the end of the novel. A translation of the final volume, *Time Regained*, was completed by Stephen Hudson, a pseudonym of Sydney Schiff. The translation of this volume was updated by Andreas Mayor in 1970. Scott Moncrieff gave the entire novel the title *Remembrance of Things Past* (a phrase he borrowed from Shakespeare’s Sonnet 30), while also taking liberties with the titles of a number of the individual volumes. *A l’ombre des jeunes filles en fleur* was called *Within a Budding Grove*. *Sodome et Gomorrhe* was called *Cities of the Plain*. The sixth volume, which has been published in French both as *Albertine disparue* and as *La fugitive*, was

called *The Sweet Cheat Gone*.

The Scott Moncrieff and Mayor translations were updated by Terence Kilmartin in 1981. Kilmartin abandoned the title *The Sweet Cheat Gone*, replacing it with *The Fugitive*. The same translations were further revised by D. J. Enright in 1992 after the publication of a new scholarly edition of the novel in France between 1987 and 1989. Here the English title of the whole novel became *In Search of Lost Time*, and *Cities of the Plain* became *Sodom and Gomorrah*. Yale University Press is currently in the process of publishing yet a further revision of this translation by William C. Carter.

In 2002, Penguin Books published an entirely new translation of the novel, each of the seven volumes by a different translator, and the whole edited by Christopher Prendergast. That is the version quoted from here. (*The Prisoner* and *The Fugitive* were printed together as volume 5.) The title for the second volume became *In the Shadow of Young Girls in Flower*. The final volume is called *Finding Time Again*.

There are hefty standard biographies of Proust by Jean-Yves Tadié and William C. Carter, and a useful, slimmer, recent one by Adam Watt, *Marcel Proust* (London: Reaktion Books, 2013). See also William C. Carter, *Proust in Love* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006). Watt's *The Cambridge Introduction to Marcel Proust* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011) is an excellent guide for further investigations. An eloquent overall assessment of Proust's achievement can be found in Malcolm Bowie, *Proust among the Stars* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998). John Sturrock translated a handy volume containing many of Proust's other significant writings, *Against Sainte-Beuve and Other Essays* (London: Penguin, 1988). Those interested in the formally innovative features of Proust's novel could profitably consult

Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1980). For a recent study of Proust's social and historical context, see Edward J. Hughes, *Proust, Class, and Nation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011). On the importance of the character of Albertine, see Jacques Dubois, *Pour Albertine: Proust et le sens du social* (Paris: Seuil, 1997). For a feel of the literary and artistic culture out of which Proust's novel emerged, there is Roger Shattuck, *The Banquet Years: The Origins of the Avant-Garde in France 1885 to World War I* (New York: Vintage, 1968); or Jean-Michel Rabaté, *1913: The Cradle of Modernism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007). Thinking about Proust and sexuality was energized by several landmark chapters in Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990). This same aspect of Proust was studied in relation to a range of his contemporaries in Michael Lucey, *Never Say I: The First Person and Sexuality in Colette, Gide, and Proust* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006). See also Elisabeth Ladenson, *Proust's Lesbianism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999).