

MARCEL PROUST

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More than two centuries ago, a sixteen-year-old Swiss boy of French descent, born with a vivid imagination and acute sensibility, left his country and what he regarded as homely and drab surroundings. He started by himself in pursuit of a more varied and abundant life. His baggage consisted mainly of a bunch of sentimental and romantic recollections. When still but a youngster, he had been read to for hours by an irresponsible father, fond of endless romances of heroic adventures, fine feelings, and artificial love. Their intricate plots unfolded themselves in unreal lands inhabited by fair princesses, noble lords, high-born shepherds and shepherdesses. "My ambition" (wrote J.-J. Rousseau, in his *Confessions*, referring to his departure) "would have been contented with only one château and to be a favorite of the lord, and his lady, a lover of their daughter, a friend of their son, and a protector of their neighbor. That was enough, I did not desire anything more." The wish of the young dreamer was soon realized. If not a lady with a château, Mme de Warens was a comely young woman, with a questionable income and a fairly comfortable home to which she welcomed youths disposed to give up the Geneva heresy for Catholic orthodoxy. Meanwhile, she offered interesting young J.-J. board, room . . . and the rest. The benefactress' hospitality was so generous and pleasant that the future great apostle of the return to nature did not see why the snug harbor expected and found, at the first turn of the road by a romantic boy, should not befit all the way some-

body with so noble a purpose. From women of wealth and birth, the philosopher received plenty of material and moral help. Mme d'Epinay, Countess d'Houdetot, Duchesse de Luxembourg, petted and tamed the bear. Plebian Rousscau became the spoiled child of an aristocratic society. His amorous experiences with some of the sympathetic ladies he blended together and immortalized in his romance *La Nouvelle-Héloïse*, which became his romanticized life.

A few years after the Franco-Prussian War, another hypersensitive child, while waiting for the much-coveted goodnight kiss of his mother, strove to bear the interminable minutes by looking at the brilliantly colored images of a magic lantern, which depicted the dramatic legend of Genevieve of Brabant. Like the colored-glass windows of Gothic churches, the projections substituted for the opaque walls a bodyless iridescence, supernatural variegated apparitions. The boy's sadness, far from being alleviated, was intensified. The change thus brought to his bedroom made it look unfamiliar. It had become new and strange to him, in fact quite hostile. Golo, the tale's villain, emerged from a dark-green, triangular forest and bounded, full of evil intent, toward poor Genevieve's castle. This castle was shown only in part, cut by the oval edge of the plate. In front of this fragment of a building was a stretch of moorland where the heroine, with a blue sash around her waist, stood deep in thought. Both castle and moor were yellow, but little Marcel was not surprised. He knew they were yellow, long before the plate had been put in the lantern, from the title itself. The sound of this name, Brabant, had evoked for him an orange or russet color. Golo, listening with distress to the accompanying text, read by Marcel's grandaunt, seemed to understand every word of it and submissively, but not without dignity, struck the attitude suited to the passage. If the lantern was moved, Golo, on his horse, was seen riding across the window drapery, bulging over the folds, sagging in their hollows. Both surmounted easily every object en-

countered, absorbing it, so to speak, even if it were the door-knob, to which stuck and clung his red coat or his pale face.

Calmed and made heavenly happy by his mother's gift of her lovely soft cheeks to his lips, little Marcel at last fell asleep. How glad he was! Here was the land of dreams! Are not their illusions more real than what is called reality, and is not reality in dreams so much more attractive than when seen with open eyes? A woman's face, young and loving, an old city, strange and far away, appearing in dreams will be possessed with such an overwhelming charm! As soon as awake, the sleeper will have no rest until he starts in quest of them. And if they come not up to this vision of them, nevertheless the dream spell will long float around them.

And where is he when he wakes up? For a short while he does not know, until some familiar object acts as a talisman to bring back the world of the previous day. But, before this intervention, everything had time to turn around him, objects, people, places, and years. By the way, it may be that what seems motionless is not so. Perhaps it is without motion simply because our thought of it is motionless.

Now, the sun shines in his room, he is in Combray, a small town in Champaign, at the home of his Aunt Léonie. Every year, Marcel's family comes here to spend the whole long summer. These Parisians need the outdoor life and are glad to renew acquaintance with their near and distant neighbors. Rides and walks are limited. One may go toward the village of Méséglise and see plains and fields after passing in front of Mr. Swann's estate. In the opposite direction, one goes toward the Guermites château. It takes longer, but the woods and water make the trip more pleasant.

Yes, on Guermites' side, the steady companionship of the river Vivonne is a constant delight. Along its bank, large meadows with their tall grass cover the remains of the gallant Counts of Combray's castle. Only by alliances did it fall into the hands of the proud Guermites. Buttercups grow a-plen-

ty in this place, and through many a gratuitous association of his own, Marcel cannot see them without thinking on the spot of a handsome oriental prince who had come hither long, long ago and settled on the domain of Combray, without losing the least gleam of his Asiatic splendor. Marcel loved the cool and clear stream and the pink water lilies which, on the surface of the liquid mirror, seemed to thrive on a ground as celestial as the blue sky. The source of the Vivonne is so far away that the small boy could never reach it and had to rest among the iris at the water's edge. He could not visit the Guermantes either, this goal so eagerly desired. There resided the Duke and the Duchess of Guermantes, real persons still living, although Marcel could never think of them as real, but as personages in an old tapestry or in colored windows—for, in the Gothic church of Combray, a Countess of Guermantes represented Mordecai's niece in the "Crowning of Esther," and a forefather of the Guermantes, Gilbert-the-Wicked, as Marcel walked from the font to his pew, passed from cabbage green to plum blue. Sometimes both were as bodyless as Genevieve of Brabant, the legendary ancestor of the Guermantes family, whom the magic lantern projected on his curtains or raised up to his ceiling. But, wherever they went, they always remained clad with the mystery of Merovingian times or bathed, as it were, by a sunset, nay, in the golden light that flows ceaselessly from the final syllable of these names, Guermantes, Brabant. The crystal-like Vivonne, its water lilies, the buttercups and iris, the majestic trees, the many sunny afternoons—all that was etherealized in the name Guermantes, all that floated in the air, between heaven and earth, like Gilbert-the-Wicked, whose back, in the church window, Marcel saw every time he was sent to Mr. Camus, the grocer, to buy a penny's worth of salt when Françoise the cook needed it for a stew. This glamorous concept was further enriched when Marcel had learned from Dr. Percepied that the distant park of the Guermantes château contained beautiful flowers

and fountains. He dreamed that the Duchess invited him to visit her, having become suddenly and unaccountably infatuated with him. All the day she fished for trout with him. At dusk, taking him by the hand and leading him past the small gardens of her vassals, she showed him flowers, telling him their names. In return, at her special request, he told her of the poetry he was planning to write for her. So, in these fancies, Marcel read a warning that since he wanted some day to become a writer, the time had come to find out what he was to write about.

And he wrote books, or rather a long book, based on his recollections, not a true-to-fact but a sort of psychological autobiography. For, in spite of his impatient denial that the Marcel who tells the story is himself, the method he used, the title he chose, remind his reader of three outstanding personal performances: Rousseau's *Nouvelle-Héloïse* and *Confessions* taken together, the Duke of Saint-Simon's *Memoirs*, and Montaigne's *Essays*. Of course, in Proust's work, imagination has a large share, both reproductive and productive imagination. His emphatic assertion that the narrator is not himself, and that his characters are not portraits of his contemporaries, coupled with his repeated declaration that he was not an observer—meaning in an objective capacity—what can this imply save that he resorted to imagination?

Can these seemingly contradictory statements be reconciled? In any work of art, be it the most extravagant and fantastic, recollection plays its part by the side of imagination. In fact, as Proust believed that nothing is in the mind that has not been apprehended by the senses, what is commonly called imagination is recollections, arbitrarily, voluntarily combined. If the arrangement is less like what takes place ordinarily in the customary order, the greater appears to be the share of the imagination. It is a matter of dosage. A great poet, a prize liar, is a crafty chemist, he concocts amazing mixtures. This does not imply that imagination and verisimilitude are incom-

patible. Powerful and rare invention, the choice fruit of a fertile imagination, may be traced in a matter-of-fact production. Such is Balzac's dying miser, Grandet, whose last gesture is to grasp the gilded crucifix presented to his lips. On the other hand, the Goncourt brothers distrusted so much recollections and imagination that they would fill up their notebooks with everything they saw and heard, snapshots of actual life, the warm documents being, in their opinion, the exclusive reliable material of the novel. By the way, Proust thought it most fortunate for the good brothers that unconsciously their memory transfigured their authentic realities. As for him, let us bear in mind that he did not write his long novel with the world-show going on under his eye, like a portrait painter copying his subject model during a sitting. The world unfolded itself to him in retrospect, with the unevenness of duration, the shortenings and extensions, the blanks and crowdings, all the enigmatic quirks and freaks of our unreliable memory. The Goncourt brothers and Marcel Proust used methods diametrically opposed.

Of what precedes, Proust's life provides a convincing proof. He belonged to a respectable, very well-to-do family, and he was raised in the atmosphere of refinement and culture that the best Parisian surroundings may yield. For his misfortune, doubtless also for his fame, from the age of nine he was a victim of a persistent and distressing hay-fever asthma. His case grew worse with the years and because of the drugs he used to deaden physical pain when either business, social engagements, or his work demanded these sedatives.

A mother's son, but not a spoiled child, Marcel enjoyed a good deal of freedom. After his parents' death, the small fortune he inherited allowed him to lead a life of ease, reflection, and pleasure, including whimsical extravagance. Miserable when out in the open air, his asthma being aggravated by pollens and certain smells, thus deprived of the country sights and travel he loved dearly, he was driven to stay in-

side, to live in hotel lobbies, cafés, restaurants, and clubs, to frequent theaters, concerts, receptions, and balls. Not an imposition, to be sure, for he was inordinately fond of all sorts of social intercourse.

Nor did his habits favor an improvement in his state of health. A neurotic, his sensibility, acute by nature, developed to a point that was the wonder of his friends. They tell us, for instance, that Marcel when talking with them would suddenly remark that one of them was being impressed by a thought or a recollection, and it was true. Such a sensibility served his talent very well. Moreover, his lucid intelligence was spurred to accomplishments by his tireless and many-sided curiosity. The satisfaction and delight he found in society life were so intense, his thirst for an exact knowledge of all its aspects, changes, phases, rites, and ceremonies was so insatiable, that what is for many a relaxation was turned by his fervor into a duty, not to say a mania. People who cannot see anything but frivolity and inanity in social functions will wonder how it was that so bright and studious a young man, much interested in history, philosophy, and the natural sciences—as we know he was—could ever endure the boredom and emptiness of gatherings that attract men and women of an entirely different type of mind.

In fact, his college friends frankly thought that Marcel was a "snob," in the French sense this English word has taken—that is to say, that he took altogether too much interest in titled people and the rich accepted by them—and desired to hob-nob with this "uppercrust" ("le gratin") of the Third Republic social order. On the other hand, Proust's work does attest that he was an artist and a poet, likewise that, as a boy, his imagination was excited by a world of wonder where brave men and fair women spent their days with no other earthly care, evidently, than to show and enjoy their courage and their beauty. Tradition, this magic wand of time, which transforms fallible mortals into omnipotent gods, imposes early its

majestic awe on children, the offspring of man. As the little Marcel admired giants and fairies, so the grown Proust was intrigued by the "uppercrust," and the poetic sensitiveness of the child was never dulled by the sophistication of the man. What his classmates took for vanity and "snobisme" was originally a naïve worship the young bourgeois had for a class of people that appeared to him made of a better stuff than his own. Blue blood certainly ran in their veins. Were not some of them bearing, still, names he had read again and again in the first pages of his *History of France*? The very sound of nouns such as La Trémoille, Montmorency, La Rochefoucauld, La Fayette, even Bourbon and Bonaparte, à la *rigueur*, impressed his ears as the precious stones adorning their crowns dazzle the eyes with their brilliancy. The prestige enjoyed by these illustrious families or dynasties acted upon him like a bewitching charm. One of the gifts that made of him the great novelist he has become is precisely his ability to handle in turn the analyst's merciless scalpel and the magician's conjuring amulet. And young Proust had no greater ambition, in the late nineties, than to be received as a friend by the descendants of these his heroes who so generously divided with their ancestors their deeds and glory, just as the boy Marcel had yearned to contemplate the Guermantes château and his fair lady, both bathed in the golden light shed by her illustrious name. If in the young man enough of the child had remained to keep alive the capacity of wonder, a good deal of the mature man also was already active in him to study high society in the light of his intellectual pursuits.

In spite of the fact that Proust was handicapped by being a commoner and a half-Jew, the Guermantes' exclusive gates did open to him. His demeanor and good looks, two social assets he owed to his refined and beautiful mother, greatly helped him. How could the proudest duchess of Faubourg St.-Germain resist his faultless courtesy, excellent manners, elegance, and tact, his delicate and ingenious politeness, qualities

particularly winning with the ladies? The more so when such ultra good breeding and natural amiability go hand in hand with an attractive personality lodged in a handsome fellow. Did not Marcel parade in her drawing-room a fine crop of raven black hair that remained so to his last day, and heavy oriental eyelids bordered with a blue circle? His large, dark eyes rested long on the object of their attention with an expression of languor and longing, or else quickly flitted to and fro as if to follow the secret thoughts of his interlocutors. And what a contrast between his elegant moustache, Roman nose, white complexion, and this air of an indolent but sharp-witted child! Here is, forsooth, an ensemble both ornamental and pleasant to gaze upon, which got him the nickname of "Prince of Assyria." Moreover, it was whispered around that a piquant courtesan of note, in these radiant days, had presented His Highness with a copy of her favorite book bound with the silk of one of her petticoats. Indeed, high society accepted him for himself and even dubbed him, not without a bit of banter perhaps, but yet with sincere affection, for his gentleness and kind-heartedness made him lovable: "le p'tit Proust." Very fine of them! However, not so happy and picturesque a find as was made by the Phryne with the book who singled out Marcel from the crowd of her admirers by calling him: "My dainty psychological old Saxe." A witty prophecy, this.

Proust's visits to Vanity Fair continued until he was well past thirty. With the advent of the new century, the notes he was taking for his novel were piling up. The artist, latent in him, had gained decidedly the upper hand over the man of the world. When his distressing disease, growing worse, barred him from society life, he chose to devote himself to the inner life, a second nature with him, and in order to keep alive the light of its consuming fire, he resolved to safeguard it in a work of art. He would thus survive himself, his experiences would not be lost. He lived from then on practically in com-

plete retirement, shut up in a cork-lined bedroom, sound and airproof, sleeping during daytime, writing at night, when his asthma seemed less severe. A very ill man at thirty-five, resigned to his doom, Marcel Proust set out "in search of the time past."

In 1905, Henri Bergson's philosophy was fairly well known. Proust's novel reveals that he fell under its attraction. Strangely enough, the two men were to become related by marriage. Like most French men of letters of importance, Proust thought a great deal about his art. His going to the root of the artistic creation persuaded him that the inexhaustible source of the material of art, subject and treatment, is *memory*—memory as a burning, present picture of the past. Was not all he had seen, heard, learned, and above all *felt* registered in his plastic brain? From his childhood on to his retirement, through his society experiences, his mental stock had become plentiful and his extraordinarily sensitive memory set to work either rummaging or lying in wait, and entrusting to the written word what he felt worth transmitting. This fills sixteen 250-page octavos. Let us now picture to ourselves Marcel Proust, as a sort of recluse, saving from oblivion not the objects with which he had come in contact—this he deemed impossible—but his own perceptions of them just as they were modified by the interplay of their numberless reactions. Through them and solely through them is possible the re-creation of reality or artistic creation.

Someone will exclaim: "Nothing new, nothing specially noteworthy about this. All creators of works of art have certainly levied tribute on their memories. Are not the nine Muses the daughters of Mnemosyne or Memory?" Very true, but these authors, following the traditional idealist or rationalist philosophy of their time, applied their will and reasoning power, their intelligence, to free their recollected perceptions from all alterations, they labored to seize the objects in their original form and purity. "You can't do it very well," Proust would

say. "Intelligence is not a good tool to dig into the past. What you would rescue thereof would be in such an unsatisfactory state that it would not be worth the effort. Let me recommend affective memory and you will see." Therefore, Proust refused to denude his recollections, to strip them of the garments with which Time, the great artist, had clothed them. Has not a distinguished philosopher defined "memory" as the "faculty which forgets"? Sure enough, our memory forgets—too often totally and *always* partially. And when we try our best to find again the object in its wholeness, what happens? To fill the gaps and holes, to supply what has dropped in the course of time, however, short it is, all the perceptions mysteriously related to that one perception we hold by the throat, or rather by a thin hair, begin to play upon it, like a gang of mischievous imps, all sorts of tricks. And there we are. Just the same, our recollection, in spite of its deformation or transformation, at the instant it flickers in our mind, is for us *the true reality*. Indeed, how many recollections have I of this sort! Here is one, a pitiful rag, a piece of my life-cloth evenly woven by Fate, soiled, worn and torn as it is by my slovenly charwoman memory. But the wretch may be dyed over, crazily mended, and richly embroidered by my whimsical gypsy-wench memory . . . provided I am an artist. There are different sorts of memory. Proust's was to a high degree extensive, complex, and picturesque.

Everybody knows by experience that there are two kinds of recollections, voluntary and spontaneous. Since Proust had decided to start hunting for all his stored perceptions in order to re-create the past reality, he used the voluntary *faute de mieux*, but was happier when the spontaneous sprang into his consciousness. "This one," he says, "gives you joy." In spontaneous recollection there is a nearness, an intimacy, a warmth sadly lacking in voluntary recollection.

Few of us ever take the trouble to investigate the reason why, suddenly, a certain image will pop up in our mind like a

jack-in-the-box. The fact is so common we take it for granted. Proust had evidently been much impressed by these abrupt side-steppings in his mental train and he paid special attention to them. When our senses are idle, when they seem to sulk in their tents, gratuitous associations must necessarily be something like those lawless happenings watched with elation by some modern physicists. However, Proust's experience of this sort is not so much of a puzzle. Our author does not make any mystery of these occurrences, he is not jealous of his luck. The gentle reader is invited to enter his workshop and observe while he himself analyzes the case. Some of these cases are so well known today they have become typical, and the objects occasioning them have been raised to the dignity of catchwords. The best known is the morsel of "madeleine" cake dipped in tea. It is the only example of *taste*. Others depend upon *hearing* (four), *sight* and *touch* (three each), and *smell* (one). A *motion* is also responsible for one illuminating analysis of the ups and downs of our heart. Since the recollections set free by the effects of ordinary objects are the most vivid, since they are valued and used by Proust as the one and only means to be in direct contact with reality, let us attend to the investigation of some of these experiences, which he calls "revelations." In my abridgment, I translate freely.

First, the cake and tea. As we have seen, Proust contends that all the efforts of our intelligence to bring back the real past fall lamentably short. Consequently, this past must be hidden out of our intelligence's reach in some material object which we do not even suspect. Its discovery depends upon chance and we may very well die before this object ever comes to our notice. Of Combray, the country-place where little Marcel spent so many happy hours, a good many years after, nothing had remained in his memory, save the dramatic scene of the goodnight kiss.

Now, one winter day, when he reached home in Paris, cold and depressed, his mother offered him some hot tea. It was not his habit to drink tea and he refused, but after a while changed his mind. Much under the weather, discouraged, and made blue by the lack of any brighter prospect, like an automaton he carried to his mouth a spoonful of tea in which was a bit of "madeleine" cake. At the instant this touched his palate, he felt a thrill of joy. Without apparent cause, he had become free, free from care and misery, unconcerned with the dreaded brevity of life. Whence had come this overpowering state of happiness and security? How to find out? To be sure, the cause was in himself. Tea and cake acted only as a talisman. This state of bliss had come suddenly without any logical cause, but it was here in its full evident blessedness. Marcel endeavored to come back to what he felt when he tasted the first spoonful. It was of no avail. He dismissed the whole matter and went on drinking his tea, eating his cake. He had been left high and dry on the barren rock of his weariness and dejection. . . . Good heavens! There it was! The magic taste was nothing else than the taste of the cake dipped in tea, the "madeleine" cake, that his Aunt Léonie was wont to give him when he used to come to tell her good morning in Combray before mass. The sight of the tea and cake had not had the slightest effect. Taste was the victor, sight had failed miserably. So, "when nothing remains of a distant past, after the death of dear ones, after the destruction of everything they loved, alone, more immaterial, more persisting, more faithful, more frail but more vivid, like souls who wait and hope upon the ruin of it all, smell and flavor subsist still a long time sustaining on their tiny drop of aroma the tremendous edifice of remembrance. Indeed, the whole town, Combray, in its entirety, rose from naught."

It may be that Proust's philosophy throws some light on what we mean by "to experience a change of heart." Marcel deeply loved his grandmother. After her death he more than

once accused himself of being cold-hearted, for he did not feel as sorry as he ought over her loss. One evening, suffering intense pain in his chest, he bent carefully over to remove his shoes. Then sobs rose to his throat, his bosom was filled with a divine presence. The being who was coming to his rescue, to deliver him from the coldness of his soul, was the same who, several years before, in a moment of identical distress and loneliness, had entered his room. He had just found in his memory, leaning over him, his grandmother, her visage full of tenderness and anxiety. Not the woman who was his grandmother receiving callers in her drawing-room, attending to business in her home, paying his hotel bills, etc. The mysterious visitor was his grandmother waiting on and nursing him, coming to find out how he was. A spontaneous and perfect recollection had revealed again the burning reality.

What occurs, then, in the lapse of time between a perception and its recollection, the latter enhanced by a vividness often sorely lacking in the original? The answer is that the flow of consciousness is a succession of *me*, each and all busy with a host of perceptions unrelated with, foreign to, the perception in point. In between spreads a sort of no-man's land. Solar time does not coincide with the calendar of our emotional perceptions. "An hour is not merely an hour, it is a vase filled with perfumes, with sounds, with projects, with climates." Hence the ups and downs of our hearts, these downs that make us so ashamed of ourselves.

Among the ear's revelations, there is an outstanding one experienced by Mr. Swann, one of his characters in which Proust put a good deal of himself. This superior man, as fond of beauty as the author himself, had met a young "cocotte" whom, at first, he did not care much for. One day, however, he was struck with the resemblance she bore, at a certain angle, to Jethro's daughter, Zephora, in a Botticelli fresco. Now Swann had been much taken with this painted female figure, and henceforth Odette de Cr  cy, the "cocotte," like

Golo of the magic lantern over the doorknob, was thoroughly blended with Zephora, and Swann, the esthete, began to fall in love with Odette as Zephora's model in the flesh. Sometime before his *liaison*, Swann happened to have a musical experience that impressed him very deeply. Until then, music was indifferent to him, but a short phrase in a sonata filled him with the same sort of emotion Odette aroused in him. When later the shameful conduct of this woman toward him had killed his love for her, whenever he happened to hear the sonata short phrase, all the recollections of the days when Odette was in love with him, "which he had succeeded to confine in the deepest recesses of his self, as if fooled by this sudden flash of returned love, awakened and swiftly rose, singing to him without a shade of pity for his present wretchedness, the long forgotten strains of happiness."

This we must bear in mind to appreciate Proust's attitude toward his characters and himself. He has been criticized for their as well as his own inconsistencies. What a comedy of errors! This criticism is based on an old conception of man which still prevails in many quarters nowadays. Authors of former days, especially the dramatists, on account of the exigencies of their trade, reflected naturally the general philosophic ideas of their time. The novelists, in turn, although having more elbow-room, but handicapped by the disregard in which their calling was traditionally held, submitted to the tyrannical influence of the drama. From the Renaissance on to the change brought by the eighteenth-century enlightenment and subsequent Romanticism, they recognized, therefore, an abstract man—man in general, animated by a certain number of passions, virtues, and vices, all of them well defined, isolated, classified, contrasted. Ideals of goodness, justice, truth, etc., stamped man as a creature made in the image of a perfect God. Graeco-Roman wisdom and the Scriptures' righteousness vied, one with the other, to uphold this standard man, whose very creation had withdrawn from the contingent-

cies of time and space. Moralists and dramatists recognized different set types of man—heroic man, generous man, vain man, wicked man, miserly man, the “gentleman,” etc. The eighteenth century restored space to this mummy, which was henceforth carried from one place of the globe to the other. There were, then, the jealous and cruel Turk, the speculative Hindu, the wise Chinese, the good savage, the noble American Indian. Racial features began to be distinguished. Romanticism went a step farther, it gave back *time* to man. Hence the courteous knight, the sentimental troubadour, the idyllic ancient Greek, all the lyric poetry whining over the days of yore, inquiring whether Nature keeps or not any trace of long dead loves like initials cut into the bark of a tree. But, if these two capital restitutions of space and time increased the number of types, types remained. Dickens and Balzac have quite a collection of them. Let this sketch serve as a general background. In spite of the advance made by psychology as a science, and some timid corresponding improvements in character evolution in fiction, bringing us gently to Proust’s viewpoint, the traditional abstract and rigid conception of man has stood by its guns with a good many readers, authors, and critics. So much so that some of the most friendly reviewers regard our author as an idealist, others as a Platonist, others as a romanticist! Alas! What is the use of making reiterated and lucid expositions of your theory and filling volumes with your practice? The fact is, his critics have read him with the colored glasses of their habits of thinking and preconceived ideas, confirming, by the way, in so doing, the main point of his contention.

According to Proust’s philosophy, characters, in the literary meaning of individuals defined by fundamental mental features, are unthinkable. Although a work of fiction, Proust’s *In Search of the Time Past* reads like Saint-Simon’s *Memoirs*, Mme de Sévigné’s *Letters*, or Montaigne’s *Essays*. The personages, while living in our sort of desultory way, are all the same

so vivid that they seem like men and women who have existed. Concerning some of them, it is not altogether a wrong impression. Charles Swann is at the same time the clubman, Charles Haas, and the author himself in many respects, Baron de Charlus has many peculiarities borrowed from Count Robert de Montesquiou. And what we behold, in Montaigne's words, is the "mightily vain, various and unstable being man is." The novelist neither praises nor blames his creatures' conduct. He is neutral, amoral. His wordly experiences have swept away his childhood and childish illusions, the "uppercrust" at bottom does not differ from the "undercrust." Masters and servants are just as inconsistent and vainglorious. No logical relation of cause and effect, but juxtaposition resulting from habit. A superior being, like Swann, not even urged by a blinding passion, takes as a wife a nonentity like Odette. Again, as Montaigne says: "it is an ungrateful task to base on man a constant and general judgment." Each and every one of us changes with the years. The change is more or less rapid. If we remember certain days, they overflow with a mass of recollections and the period seems long. On the contrary, weeks, months, even years seem a perfect blank and the period short. Our own time is duration versus homogeneous time. How may we ever have the pretension to understand ourselves, since we are dealing with an ever shifting subject, observed as well as observing? Proust is at his best when he shows these incongruities. First of all, the best friends, best matched lovers, misunderstand each other. The same feelings do not move them at the same time. The famous "misunderstood soul" of Romanticism has been derided more than once. However ridiculous *she* was, with her claim to angelic aloofness, her position might be supported by Proustian psychology. Moreover, what one loves in another is really his own feelings. He projects them on the other and they are returned to him as by a reflection or an echo, and greeted by him as welcome strangers. The wonder is, in fact, that lovers

or friends do not misunderstand each other more and oftener than they do. In real understanding, good will plays a larger part than fitness.

As it would be impossible for the novelist to follow his personages day by day, they are seen sometimes at length and in minute details, and then are dropped completely out of sight. When seen again, they are different. The reason is that they appear, so to speak, at halting-places of the author's acquaintance with them, and their discontinuous, fragmentary persons are separated from each other by "the colorless ether of the years." Examples of inner changes due mainly to very different waters in the stream of consciousness have not been unknown before Proust. A French critic, Edmond Jaloux, has cited Dostoievski's Dimitri Roudine, and Lydgate at the end of *Middlemarch*. But this kind of transformation was not so fundamental nor so general as with Proust. He regards time expressly as a dimension: the new physics is at his elbow. His personages, in moving from one place to another, submit, of course, to the influence of their surroundings. However, moving from one Paris quarter to another means much more than a motion in space, it means also one in time, progress or regress in milieux. Here, again, let us remember Golo of the magic lantern. As a wealthy bachelor and an art collector, a friend of the Count of Paris and the Prince of Wales, Charles Swann could live in an antiquated residence, in an old part of Paris decidedly *passé*. Once married to the former "cocotte" Odette, Swann rented a most modern apartment in a new fashionable quarter, at the imperative request of his socially ambitious wife. He was not so regular at the Jockey Club, and Odette's catch of the high society man did not bring her the expected return. But, as Swann's widow, she was in a better condition and began to climb up the social ladder. She became Countess of Forcheville, then the Duke of Guermantes' mistress, if you please. As such, she might be seen at a Princesse de Guermantes'

party, where she had the delectable pleasure of mortifying her gentleman friend's wife, that very woman who had consistently refused to open the door of her drawing-room to her. But this satisfaction given to her vanity caused her to slip back a few social rounds. Was she not again a kept woman and jealously watched? This *liaison*, on account of the age reached by the two parties, was more due to the general law of analogy or respect for precedents than to fancy or vice. Was this veteran couple the fascinating pink lady and Gilbert-the-Wicked's glamorous descendant of little Marcel's childhood at Combray? In Proust's words: "people appear to us subdivided according to a series of fractions of time."

Social clans and circles dissolve and form over again and their component elements, although bearing known names, may be newcomers, apparent intruders. Society is made up of groups continually shifting. Someone ostracized at a certain time may very well be greeted with open arms by the same group at another time. Memory interprets feelings in terms of time. The affectionate expression "old top" implies friendship of long standing, although the "old top" may be a recent acquaintance. Memory is also apt to forget past shame in the brilliancy of the present state.

"No man is a hero to his valet." Accordingly the real man does not appear in his public relations, but only in his private. A diplomatist, a professor, a surgeon, a painter, a musician, a writer, an army officer, two art critics, all good, nay, prominent men in their professions, are not shown while exercising these professions, but merely when they are conversing with their friends and acquaintances, talking with their servants. It is the social being who interests our novelist. How does he analyze his numerous personages?¹

¹ They are so numerous that it has been deemed convenient to publish a repertory, mentioning the places of their appearances in the sixteen volumes, with a brief statement of the occasions. There are *ten* main characters, *twenty-four* secondary ones, *thirty* of less importance, and *one hundred sixty-five* in the background. Altogether, *two hundred twenty-nine*.

They are found in all places where their essential nature may be revealed, from the most exclusive and formal drawing-rooms to the vilest dens. Men act and speak, but the objective aim of their actions, the meaning of their words, have little to do with reality. You cannot understand them, but you may feel them. Your intuition, not your intelligence, is the tool that does the trick. Self-expression is not found in the meaning of speech as it is—for instance, in a play you read. It is found in the choice of the emphasized words, peculiarities of pronunciation, personal affectations, gestures, facial expressions, looks, glances, airs and miens, attitudes of the body. These are the symptoms, it remains for you to be a well-trained diagnostician. The awkwardness, ignorance, affectation, misconception, simian imitation evinced by most people in their talks recall pleasantly the cynical remark: "Language has been invented by man in order to disguise his thought." With Proust man does not succeed in disguising much, and the disguise, if any, is more involuntary than intended. Only the careful reading of his novel can inform you about his talent of interpretation. "The work of art is a translation," he says, "the artist a translator."

Thanks to his other talent of imitation and mimicry, attested by the testimony of his friends and his books of literary parodies, Proust makes each of his personages speak his own jargon. As he believes that the individual's ways betray the arcana of his personality, the reader who has no taste for this sort of investigation will follow him reluctantly, but the kindred mind will enjoy a keen delight. How a male Guermantes holds his hand to give a handshake to a stranger introduced to him is an unforgettable sketch. One understands why Marcel was eager to be admitted to these aristocratic circles where words and manners are artificial, the result of good breeding—which is to say, never have their apparent meaning. They are a puzzle whose solution depends upon your sensibility. However, these exclusive gatherings have not the monopoly of

presenting enigmas. There social relations reach their maximum of concentration—but Faubourg St.-Germain is the social milieu to which every social milieu, from the top to the bottom, strives to conform and must be compared. It is the model, it sets the standard. The motivation of all words and actions of a society queen, like the Duchess of Guermantes, as well as of the family cook, Françoise, even the seemingly least important is for the novelist the most important. In the exploration of the subconscious, Proust is a Diogenes whose lantern finds its man.

Such is mankind that it keeps a great many surprises in store for the penetrating observer. This element of surprise plays a very important part in this long novel. Instead of wondering where the plot leads him, the reader asks himself what unsuspected feature a personage will reveal. Some of these revelations have been disconcerting to many.

Proust has detected homosexuality in a number of individuals and he has introduced it squarely in his work by the side of the normal instinct. For him, there is no special psychology of the men and women afflicted with what he calls a disease. They may be perfectly normal in other respects. In fact, their feelings for the objects of their affection do not differ from those experienced for each other by two persons of opposite sexes. The novelist's interest in these people is neither physiological nor psychological, it is prompted neither by sympathy nor repulsion, it is eminently social. Their practice being reproved by society, they are forced to keep it secret. Now, most of us, Proust believes, are more or less inclined to speak of the very subject we have an interest to conceal. We do it, of course, in general and unconcerned terms, but we do it. The inverts' efforts to resist this impulse, their notable and pitiful failure, all the devices and tricks they resort to in their terror that their inclination may be spied out and their reputation ruined, all this inner drama of anguish has been masterfully treated by the keen analyst. Since two of his main per-

sonages, Baron de Charlus and Albertine, are invert, Proust had originally chosen, as a title to his work, the name limited to a part of it now: *Sodome et Gomorrhe*. Swann's jealousy, due to Odette's twofold misconduct, and Marcel's love for the Lesbian Albertine, are the two prominent psychological studies of the novel. They will not be easily surpassed.

Before leaving the forbidden ground of the "Cities of the plain," let us face another unpleasant human failing—sadism, both physical and moral. Baron de Charlus' failure to find an admirer cruel enough to his taste is a story half pathetic, half ludicrous. It lessens the horror of the subject. This effeminate noble lord, so ready to speak of virility, suffers from a feudal heredity. He merges in a background of portcullis and pontlevis chains as Golo does in the doorknob. A second stroke of apoplexy lies in wait for this one of the last of the Guermantes. Albertine's case is less remote. It illustrates the peculiar love sufferings of a man whose mistress accepts his attentions, seems to return his passion, but inspires his suspicion that she is not entirely his. She was a sly woman whose real nature is known only after her death. Mlle Vinteuil is another Lesbian who is, in addition, a moral sadist. She finds pleasure in blaspheming her devoted father's memory. This unfortunate girl gives to the novelist an opportunity to reach a paradoxical conclusion. Moral sadism, although posthumous, presupposes some sentimental interest on the part of the tormentor for his victim, while indifference to the suffering one inflicts is "the terrible and permanent aspect of real cruelty." Only a believer, it is true, may be sacrilegious. A perfect atheist in private cannot be so.

In Search of the Time Past is in the best tradition of the French novel. Its main object is the study of man's nature by the analytical method. Thanks to it we know a good deal more about our complex nature. The author has not built a thesis with the material he found, and does not defend a position. He presents simply to his readers the result of his re-

searches. Like an entomologist, he has pinned on boards the parts isolated by his dissection, and he offers them to the public, who are left free to draw their general conclusions.

The first readers of this long novel were disconcerted by what they called the lack of order, the absence of proportions. Although they did not know what size the novel would finally reach, the threatening length frightened them. Romain Rolland's *Jean-Christophe* was a precedent, but likewise a warning! Readers were lost in the mass of details they thought useless, tedious, irrelevant, and senseless, for the author's method was not at all understood at the beginning. What he meant was slow to dawn upon the public. As the novel was first planned, it was only a third of what it has become. The last two volumes, *Time Found Again*, came then as an earlier conclusion; none the less the explanation of the new process in fiction was delayed.

Enough of Proust's philosophy has been presented here to see that *In Search of the Time Past* is a Bergsonian novel. Although the writer does not accept all the conclusions of the philosopher, it will not be easy to go farther in the use of the intuition. So, his work will very likely remain *the* Bergsonian novel.

It is also a good example of the modern novel, which seems to absorb in its bulk all the literary genres from the lyric poetry on the beauties of nature to the discussion of a pathological case. Here you may take your philosophy straight in short essays, psychological observations, moralistic reflections. All aim at generalizations. These pauses in the course of the narration, these comments and digressions, remind us of the *Essays*. With Montaigne, Proust may indeed be compared in several respects. Another and piquant essay might be written about what both have in common. Suffice it to say now that Montaigne has assaulted human reason, exalted by the Renaissance, and Proust has not been less hostile to intelligence. Montaigne's method is the implacable comparison of ideals

with facts dealing with human life, which is the subject of his inquiry. On his side, Proust exposes how facts are continually modified by our so-called ideals—better, perhaps, wrong ideas. To both world-literature is indebted for monuments devoted to the study of man's mind. In foreign countries, Proust has already as many admirers as in France. The two prose writers are marvelous creators of images.

From another point of view, *In Search of the Time Past* reminds you of Rousseau's *Confessions* and *Nouvelle-Héloïse*. Jean-Jacques and Marcel have written their personal recollections in the form of fiction—the *Confessions* being as much of a romance as *Julie*—or novels largely made of their remembrances. Both have seen people through the magnifying glasses of their original and acute sensibility. Rationalists will say "their morbid sensibility," but they are poor judges of art and poetry. Both, as small and precocious boys, received from lovely fairies rare and precious gifts. Their eyes were early opened to a world of wonder, and its magic light shone in their depth to their last day. Poor health and other material hindrances never downed them. They remained, like children, all excited by the enchantment of the impassioned drama which their ingenious imagination continually built on the very ruin of their illusions. Both were blessed with the sense of form and artistry. Their respective style, vibrating with their emotions, is so adequate to their philosophy and art that it remains their exclusive possession. Their prose has the rhythm, the warmth, the plenitude, the imagery that reveal the great poets they are. A study of Jean-Jacques' works and mind in the light of Proust's philosophy might explain some obscure sides of the much abused sophist but great artist.

Whatever one may think of Proust's method or art, he stands as a good teacher. One of his devoted readers confided to me: "He has led me by the hand in exploring the maze of my consciousness and the obscure place directly below. He has warned me of the presence of treacherous pitfalls and has

outlined for me a *modus vivendi* with my moral and mental enemies. Therefore, I am very grateful to him." As for me, my admiration for him colors to a certain extent my judgment. But timely warning makes one doubly safe. So I have been cautious and conservative. Let me conclude with an objective note, if possible.

Curiously enough, Proust, the profound analyst, is also a great creator. His critical mind dissects, but his imagination reconstitutes and his sensibility breathes life. The clubman Swann, the "cocotte" Odette with her universal mediocrity, the peasant cook Françoise, Dr. Cottard, Professor Briehot, Elstir the artist, Bergotte the author, Mme Verdurin the parvenue, like other great characters of fiction, have become passwords. However, good as these are, untainted unanimous praise goes to the two fascinating Guermantes with their "Merovingian mystery." First, the young, charming, and heroic Robert, Marquis de St.-Loup, a noble and pathetic figure. We admire the efforts made by this aristocratic, elegant, and valiant knight, a soldier by his ancestry, a lord by his perfect breeding, to become an intellectual, and succeeding only in so far as in displaying such an affectionate friendship for Marcel, whose intelligence has conquered him. He dies gallantly on the battlefield.

Then his uncle, Baron de Charlus. This extraordinary personage has no precedent in any novel. In spite of his enormous pride, ambiguous personality, and monstrous heredity, prejudices, and absolute uselessness, Proust has succeeded in making him most interesting and at times almost sympathetic. Anyway, as soon as the Baron enters the stage you are pretty sure something will happen. He is so diversified that a surprise will hit you in the eye. Who would not be glad to be seen in the company of this imposing figure with the grand manners? In actual life, you might hesitate, but certainly not between the pages of the book. Although the disillusioned Marcel chose him as the victim of his lashing satire of an outworn.

degenerate aristocracy, and although the haughty gentleman does not inspire in us the least feeling of pity, he makes an undeniable appeal which is not entirely due to our curiosity.

To conclude, let us be glad Marcel Proust found again the days lost in the wilderness of oblivion. Many a reader can enjoy the sundry ways whereby he recovered them. I for one am very sorry, indeed, to close his long work. Now, it is also a memory. Nevertheless, I regret nothing, for as he has said: "Real paradises are paradises lost."

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