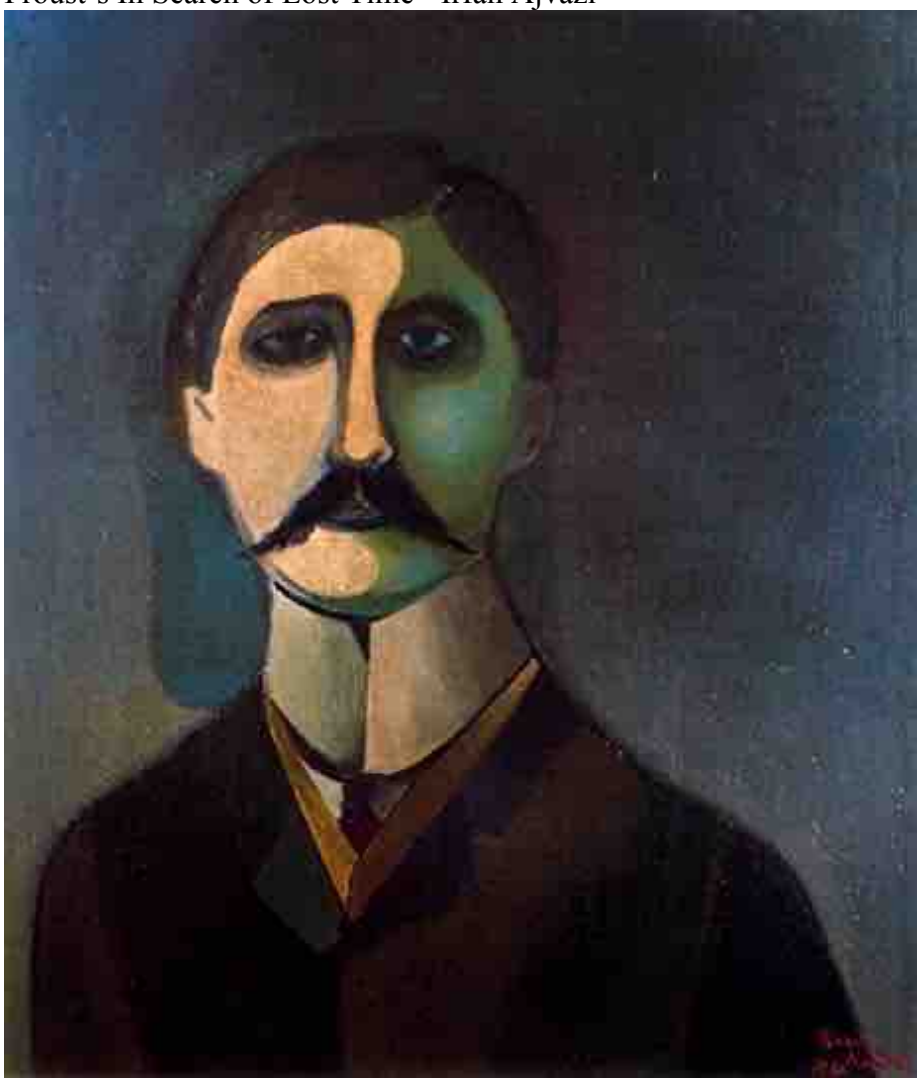
Proust’s In Search of Lost Time - Irfan Ajvazi



Proust is trying to tell us how the experiences of our past slip away from our memory and, as such, no longer have any obvious impact on us. In some cases, (i.e. sexual jealousy and grief), this is a good thing, lest the pain of these losses would forever burden us. But it also isolates us from those moments of pleasure, of experiencing pure beauty. We can try, through the vehicle of voluntary memory to retrieve \"the good old days\" but we will get nothing more than a snapshot, and will not feel the experience of what it was really like in those moments. The only way to recapture lost time, Proust tells us, is through the involuntary memories that spontaneously arise from random sensory input (the taste of a madeleine soaked in tea, the experience of standing on uneven paving stones, the clang of a spoon against a dish) as it triggers the memories of the last time we experienced the same sensations along with the other physical and emotional sensations with which the catalytic sensation is associated. The experience of these sensations is actually of a purer form than we experienced when they happened to us the first time, because they are not impeded by all the other competing stimuli that were impinging on us at the time. At the time, for example, we may have been disappointed that this resort was not exactly what we had in mind, we may have been worried about the health of a loved one, we might be distracted by concerns of our professional careers. In this moment of recapturing the past, all that comes to us is the unadulterated form of the experience of pleasure.

in the last pages of *Time Regained*, Proust describes the incident of the \"good night kiss\" (one of the earliest episodes of the book), I felt like this did occur 40 years ago, given how long ago I read it. And, as Proust, through his magnificent prose lovingly reconstructed the scene, it came back to me with the full force of his original description. He had succeeded in helping me recapture this literary event, and how beautiful the experience of it was!

In most novels, any given passage will serve some dramatic purpose: characterization, description, plot. However, there are times when the author will pull back from the story to make a more general comment, on society, humanity, or the world. These comments are, very often, pungent and aphoristic—the most quotable section of the whole book, since they do not depend on their context. Some authors, like Dickens, very infrequently make these sorts of remarks; others, like George Elliot, are full of them: *\"Will not a tiny speck very close to our vision blot out the glory of the world, and leave only a margin by which we see the blot? I know of no speck so troublesome as self.* \"

Elliot's masterpiece, *Middlemarch*, is distinguished for being simultaneously didactic and dramatic, equal parts analysis and art. Proust goes even further in the direction of analysis, totally overwhelming every other aspect of the book with his ceaseless commentary. No event, however insignificant, happens without being dissected; the Narrator lets no observation go unobserved, even at the cost of being redundant. This endless exegesis, circling the same themes with relentless exactitude, is what swells this book to its famously vast proportions. Tolstoy, no laconic writer, used less than half the length to tell a story that spanned years and encompassed whole nations. The story Proust tells could have been told by, say, Jane Austen in 400 pages—although this would leave out everything that makes it worth reading.

Different as the two authors are, the social milieu Proust represents is oddly reminiscent of Jane Austen's world, being populated by snobby aristocrats who jostle for status and who never have to work, a world of elegant gatherings, witty conversation, and artistic dilettantism. Austen and Proust also share an affinity for satirizing their worlds, although they use different means for very different ends. In any case, both Austen's England and Proust's France are long gone, and it can be very difficult for the modern reader to sympathize with these characters, whose priorities, manners, and lifestyle are so distant from our own. Why should we care about soirées and salons, dukes and duchesses, who do nothing but gossip, pursue petty love affairs, and pontificate ignorantly in their pinched world?

In this book, Proust sets out to show that our salvation lays in art. This means showing us that our salvation does not lay in anything else. Specifically, Proust must demonstrate that social status and romantic love, two universal human aspirations, are will-o'-the-wisps. He does this subtly and slowly. First, as a young man, the Protagonist is awed by high society. The names of famous actresses, writers, composers, and most of all socialites—the aristocratic Guermantes—hold a mysterious allure that he finds irresistible. He slowly learns how to behave in salons and to hold his own in conversation, eventually meeting all the people he idolized from afar. But when he finally does make the acquaintance of these elite socialites, he finds that their wit is exaggerated, their knowledge superficial, their opinions conventional, their artistic taste deficient. In short, the allure of status was empty.

And not only that, temporary. In the final volume, Proust demonstrates that status waxes and wanes with changes of fashion, often in unforeseen ways. By the end of the book, Rachel, who began as a prostitute, is a celebrated actress; while Berma, who began as a celebrated actress, ends as a broken down old women, still respected but no longer fashionable. The Protagonist's friend, Bloch, who is a flatfooted, stupid, and awkward man, ends the book as a celebrated author, despite a total lack of originality or wit. The Baron de Charlus, an intensely proud man, ends up doffing his hat to nearly anyone he runs into in the street, while the rest of society ostracizes him. Status, in other words, being based on nothing but mass whim, is liable to change whimsically.

Proust's views of love are even more cynical. The Protagonist does have a genuine affection for his mother and grandmother; but these are almost the only genuine bonds in the entire long novel. When Proust looks at romantic love, he sees only delusion and jealousy: an inability to see another person accurately combined with a narcissistic urge to possess and a paranoia of losing them. The archetypical Proustian relationship is that between Swann and Odette, wherein Swann, a figure in high-society, has a casual dalliance with Odette, a courtesan, and despite not thinking much of Odette, Swann nearly loses his mind when he begins to suspect she is cheating on him. He marries Odette, not out of romantic passion, but in order to gain some measure of peace from his paranoid jealousy.

Summarized in this way, Proust's views seem, if somewhat disenchanted, hardly radical. But the real thrust of Proust's thinking depends on a truly radical subjectivism. This book, as Harold Bloom points out, is wisdom literature, firmly rooted in the introspective tradition of Montaigne. But Proust is more than introspective. A true Cartesian, Proust is solipsistic. And much of his rejection of worldly sources of happiness, and his concomitant embrace of art, depends on this intensely first-person view of the world.

In his emphasis on the subjective basis of reality, Proust's thought is often oddly reminiscent of Buddhism. Our personalities, far from being stable, are nothing but an endless flux that changes from moment to moment; each second we die and are born again. What's more, we perceive other people through the lens of our own desires, knowledge, opinions, and biases, and therefore never perceive accurately. There are as many versions of you as there are people to perceive you. Thus we never really know another person. Our relationships with friends and lovers are really relationships with mental constructions that have only a tenuous connection with the real person: *The bonds between ourselves and another person exist only in our minds. Memory as it grows fainter loosens them, and notwithstanding the illusion by which we want to be duped and with which, out of love, friendship, politeness,*

deference, duty, we dupe other people, we exist alone. Man is the creature who cannot escape from himself, who knows other people only in himself, and when he asserts the contrary, he is lying.

You might think that this is a shockingly cynical view, and it is; but Proust adheres to it consistently. Here he is on friendship:
… our friends being friends only in the light of an agreeable folly which travels with us through life and to which we readily accommodate ourselves, but which at the bottom of our hearts we know to be no more reasonable than the delusions of the man who talks to furniture because he believes that it is alive…

And love, of course, comes off even worse than friendship:
Almost everyone was surprised at the marriage, and that in itself is surprising. No doubt very few people understand the purely subjective nature of the phenomenon we call love, or how it creates, so to speak, a supplementary person, distinct from the person whom the world knows by the same name, a person most of whose constituent elements are derived from ourselves.

In the dissolving acid of Proust's solipsism, one can see why he considers both social status and romantic love as vain pursuits, since they are not, and can never be, based on anything but a delusion.

Of course, status and love do bring people happiness, at least temporarily. But Proust is careful to show that all happiness and sadness caused by these things have nothing to do with their reality, but only with our subjective understanding of that reality. Depending on how we interpret a word or analyze an intention; depending on whether we hold someone in esteem or in contempt—depending, in short, on how we subjectively understand what we experience—we will be happy or sad. The source of all suffering and bliss is in the mind, not the world, but we are normally blind to this fact and thus go on mistakenly trying to alter the world: *\"I had realized before now that it is only a clumsy and erroneous perception which places everything in the object, when really everything is in the mind…\"*

As you can see, we are moving in a strikingly mystical direction, where love and success are just egotistic delusions, hypostatized mental artifacts that we mistake for solid reality. So what should we do? Proust's answer to this predicament is also mystical in flavor. Normally we are trapped by our perspective, thinking that we are viewing reality when we are actually just experiencing our own warped mental apparatus. To break us out of this trap we must first experience unhappiness: *\"As for happiness, that is really useful only in one way only, by making unhappiness possible.\"* And unhappiness results when something we mistook to be solid—reputation, love, even life itself—is shown to be fleeting and unreal, that our everyday reality is based on nothing but lies, mistakes, and misunderstandings. You might say this is Proust's version of Christian consolation. For in the despair that opens up during these crises, we can give up our fantasies and partake in Proustian mysticism.

This mysticism consists in reconnecting with our basic sensations. To do this, Proust does not, like the Buddhists, turn to meditation on the present moment. Instead, he relies on art and memory. Normal language is totally inadequate to this task. Our words, being universally used, only convey that aspect of experience that is common to everyone; all the individual savor of a perception, its most essential quality, is lost. But great artists—like the fictitious Vinteuil, Bergotte, or Elstir—can use their medium to overcome the usual limits of discourse, transmitting the full power of their perspectives. Even so, this artistic communication can only act as a spur for our own introspective quest. Shorn of illusory happiness, inspired by example, we can probe our own memory and experience the bliss of pure experience.

Memory is essential in this, for Proust thinks that it is only by juxtaposing one experience with another that we can see the perception in its pure form, without any reference to our conventional reality. This is why moments of involuntary memory, like the madeleine episode, are so important for Proust: it is in these moments, when a present experience triggers a long-buried memory, that we can re-visit the experiences of our past, free from delusion, as a pure impartial spectator. The final Proustian wisdom is essentially contemplative, passive, aesthetic, able to see the ironies of human life and to appreciate the recurring patterns of human existence.

Proust's goal, then, is to do for the reader what Bergotte, Elstir, and Vinteuil did for his Narrator: to create art that acts as a window to the self. And his style is exactly suited to this purpose. In my review of a book on meditation, I noted what I called the \"novelistic imagination,\" which is our tendency to see the world as a setting and ourselves as the Protagonist, beset by trials and tribulations. Meditation aims to break out of this rather unrealistic mindset by focusing on the present moment. Proust's aim is similar but his method is different. He takes the narrative tendency of the novelistic imagination, and stretches and stretches, pulling each sentence apart, twisting it around itself,

extending the form and padding the structure until the narration is hardly narration at all, until you are simply swimming in a sea of sounds.

By doing so, Proust allows you to feel the passage of time, to make time palpable and real, and to feel our memory processing and being activated over and over again in response to passing sensations. This way, Proust hopes to bring us in contact with reality: \"*An hour is not merely an hour, it is a vase full of scents and sounds and projects and climates, and what we call reality is a certain connection between these immediate sensations and the memories which envelop us simultaneously with them…*\"

This is my attempt to elucidate Proust's aesthetic religion. Of course, like any religion of art, it is objectionable for manifold reasons: it lacks any moral compass, it is elitist, it is purely passive. Not only that, but Proust connects with his religion a solipsism that is questionable on philosophic grounds, not to mention cynical in the extreme. It is a cold, antisocial, unsympathetic doctrine, with appeal only to disenchanted aesthetes. But of course, this is ultimately a work of art and not of philosophy; and so *In Search of Lost Time* must be judged on literary grounds.

When it comes to the criteria by which we judge a usual novelist—characterization, dialogue, plot—I think Proust is somewhat weak. There is, of course, little plot to speak of. And although Harold Bloom thought that Proust was a rival of Shakespeare when it came to characterization—a judgment that baffles me—I felt very little for any of the people in this novel. They all speak in Proust's longwinded voice, and so never came alive for me. It always seems as if I am overhearing Proust describe someone rather than meeting them myself.

But of course one cannot appraise Proust using these standards. This novel is, above all, audacious. It is a modernist tour de force, which turns nearly every novelistic convention on its head. More than that, it is a novel of ideas, which puts forward a radical view of the human predicament and its own answers to the perennial questions of life.

Proust is a great teacher. This may sound embarrassingly platitudinous, and yet I find that it is a fact altogether too easily overlooked in our incessant praise (or bemoaning) of his technical achievements as a stylistic innovator. Setting aside for a while the whole issue of innovative narrative technique (which is nonetheless essential to the realization of his thought through literary art), we can appreciate that he has something important to teach us about what it means to be wise, or, in short, a more fully realized human being.

He does so by bodying forth through narrative a model (I'd even say, a paradigm) of the process of self-knowledge. In so doing, he becomes an indispensable companion to our own most personal and intimate developmental struggle to compass the manifold, disjointed flux of experience into a coherent, meaningful whole that we can point to as \"our self.\" As psychologists now recognize, a series of narrative acts (or \"acts of meaning,\" as Jerome Bruner put it) weave together, one by one, the fabric of our identity. What we are fundamentally is a narrative identity, a carefully demarcated world of meaning to which we cling in the face of the flux (notice Proust's recurring focus of description: thresholds and borders, doorways and windows, walls and fences). The slow construction of this most fundamental narrative unity that constitutes the real ground of our most mundane awareness is Proust's chosen theme.

This fundamental understanding of the self-making self is, paradoxically, the culmination of the pursuit of self-knowledge. And in this, Proust puts his finger on the very pulse of what identity means and can mean in our historical epoch. As Charles Taylor points out in Sources of the Self, the fundamental understanding of an ineradicable and refractory (to the theoretical understanding and its search for pure transparency) poietic element that lies at the heart of all our acts of knowing is foundational for modern thought in general. In short, we make the self we strive to know, necessarily. Deliberations about meanings to entertain and construct form the very ground we stand on in our attempts to reflect and to know Self.

In this, Proust's narrative art implicitly critiques the foundational move of Western philosophy and intellectual history alike: namely, Plato's separation between narrative and knowledge, theoria and poiesis, art and philosophy. Proust seems to say that theoria is poietic, and poiesis is theoretical, and reminds us the more primal etymological sense of narrative (gno – to know). In this, he elevates the modern novel to the status of a privileged epistemic instrument and redefines the aim of wisdom. The artist stakes out for himself his own wisdom path distinct from that of the philosopher. The knowing to be sought is the kind of knowing we live by. His narrative re-enacts those acts of knowing by which we structure a life-story and come to affirm a self, and then later, transcend it.

The mainstream of modern thought has, of course, led in the opposite direction. Reductionist mechanism aspires to corner the mind into some ultimate system, a self-made cage of thought - a Theory of \"Everything\" - from which it

may never again emerge to see the light of day. Any access to immediate experience must be mediated by said totalizing System; any experience that does not fit therein is to be explained away. While we managed to keep at bay political totalitarianism as a civilization, intellectual totalitarianism still rules the day as an ever-appetizing lodestar. If we could but persuade ourselves to stay in the box we made, we might buy ourselves some semblance of certainty, provided we forget we ourselves have fabricated it. William Barrett, in \"The Illusion of Technique,\" outlines this totalizing aspect of modern thought well when he shows how time and again, the great thinkers of modernity are subject to the irresistible temptation to \"reify the objects of their symbolism,\" thereby becoming \"victims of their own language.\"

Proust's approach to the whole question of how we may become wise differs from this mainstream in two ways: first, he avoids becoming a \"victim of (his) symbolism\" by adopting a \"meta\" stance vis-a-vis his own cognitive framings, and second, he validates the adequacy to experience of his methodology by continually touching base with where we actually stand in our most intimate dealings with the world through a close description of detail.

I already touched on the first, but essentially, the critical decision here lies in his not assuming transparency and instead foregrounding and scrutinizing the constructive process of knowing a life as it unfolds. There is wisdom in this, for by pretending that our mental filters are transparent to reality, we risk mistaking the specks of dirt on our windowpane for features in the landscape. The fundamental working metaphor Proust operates with here is the magic lantern of the mind. This is introduced early on in the context of one of those childhood revelations that seems to suddenly make clear for us the sense of this strange, shadowy life. The young narrator lying in his bed awaiting sleep while struggling with separation anxiety from his mother, watched the projected fairytale images of the magic lantern gliding across his walls, furniture, doorknob. The reference to Plato's Cave is unmistakable, and yet the wisdom to be found here lies not in \"peering through\" to the substantial origin of these shadowy fairytale forms that float over the surface of our awareness. The umbilical chord to such cosmic orders is severed, for Proust as for so many moderns. We are left floating in a sea of images, that strange, in-between realm where mind approaches nature but never quite rests in a secure grasp of it.

The best lucidity we can hope for comes from an acceptance of the free-floating quality of the magic lantern of our minds: it touches reality only when, as the projected fairytale images, the form is distorted as it glides over an obtruding object, such as the doorknob. The entire rest of the narrative is like a grand cartography of the magic lantern of the mind, and of the unshakable, unsettling, yet poignant sense of irreality that it brings to the heart of even our most lucid daylight experience. In this, Proust has a lot in common with the stripping down of layer upon layer of formal illusion that characterizes Zen meditation. The work is indeed much like a guided meditation manual. The hard-earned lucidity to be found at the culmination of the gathering back together act at the end of the narrative, in Time Regained, is one not of \"seeing through\" to some architectonic world-structure (which must always in the end be a cognitive artifact endlessly referencing us even as we struggle to wipe ourselves out of our picture); it is instead a lucidity that comes from a comprehensive grasp of the ineradicable stain our filtration systems leave on even the most intimate, seemingly immediate moments. We never stand in the light of day. It is a scary realization, but an unshakable one, and one that peers at the very heart of the human condition. We always stand in the shadow of our own form, and of our limited capacity for realization. Our relation to reality must be understood (and more fully realized) by incrementally beating against our walls, at last coming to make peace with them, and in so doing, finding our only possible transcendence.

His analysis of the pervasiveness of Habit as our substitute for awareness here is sobering. \"Most of our faculties lie dormant because they can rely upon Habit, which knows what there is to be done and has no need of their services.\" He shows how through it, we fall back on prematurely fossilized interpretive structures - \"our personality\" - and fail to rise up to the task of continuing to develop resources for gathering meanings as they continue to unfold and emerge. The entire work seems to urge us to recall that psychological maturation, unlike physical, doesn't occur automatically or is finished once and for all at a specific moment in time after puberty. It ends with death, or with its psychological correlative – the death we experience when we opt out of the necessarily ongoing struggle to continue articulating an increasingly integrative perspective on our lives.

This is a book that feels like a hypnotic river that both transports, nourishes, warms and transcends. 4211 pages later and I feel like this is a novel I want to read again (both immediately and much much later). I had barely put down Time Regained and I was, like an orobus, reaching for 'Swann's Way'. I'm going to chew on my BIG review of ISoLT for awhile. I don't know if I'm ready to try to explain or even understand the whole of Proust yet. Hell, I'm not sure I'm ready to look at myself that closely yet.

Reading Proust was a bit like reading 'Finnegans Wake'. Certainly not the details or style mind you. Proust wasn't

deliberately sending his prose into language fractals, neologisms and ghillie suits of his own idioglossia. Proust isn't trying to capture or interpret the night or dreams (although dreams and sleep do play a part of ISoLT). Proust isn't trying to hide, he is seeking to uncover.

This resignation from the present, this active search for a meaning that is inside ourselves runs so counter to our modern values, but instead of struggling against it, perhaps we should seek to take what lessons we can from it, for does not the creation of most, if not all art require a separation from our earthly realities, if only for a moment, to draw upon memory in our solitude?

It’s the ultimate Idealist state of existence outside of time when involuntary memory is experienced, and this is generally what this book equally strives to do in art. As Czapski put it, in Proust's book he doesn't simply lay down a bunch of plain facts and laws of humanity, but rather the effect of those facts when it comes in contact with his own head to send off literary sparks and reflections that comprise his work.

For our Search and the many states of existence that will inevitably comprise it, and states within states in a long continual line bound only by our feeble consciousness, much suffering is needed. Proust marries the ideas of Goethe and Dostoevsky in Time Regained, a major accomplishment spanning three centuries and perhaps able to only be adequately done by representation, that is to say by fiction. This is already a miracle in itself, and Proust tells it in such prose too that his call to action of all young prospective artists may have the opposite effect of making them wither under the spell of his sentences that one can't even hope to replicate, thereby making a possible shameful imitation even more shameful from how much it will inevitably pale in comparison. It is fine, however, Proust (like Ruskin) acknowledges that first we must cast off our influences to make something truly worthwhile, and it's clear how much Proust himself has swallowed, digested, and spat out writers from every possible milieu to create his work.

What art and involuntary memory are is nothing less than a salvation from death. A figure perhaps long forgotten by history is invoked in the character of Swann, reviving the real person for just a moment from oblivion, and my own joy was immense when I rediscovered the pleasure I had at reading the Kolyma Stories, a part of my life that could have been completely swallowed by Time and never remembered otherwise. Thus does an artist play god in a way that concerns the human soul, something that science is yet quite in the dark about.

Moreover, the thesis above is not Proust's entire thesis exactly, as Proust is the first one to point out how faulty our memory can be. What matters is artistic invention and construction, panning the gold from the muck of the rest of our life to use it in creation, precisely what Elstir meant thousands of pages ago in the second book of the Search and what the narrator takes much too long to realize himself. This realization is absolutely essential so that the Search itself is not some dull autobiography. Proust in his unbound writing and often unabashed delight in his own sentences on nature, art, and life frees at once the constraints of the novel from its formulaic predecessors and his own soul from the burdens of the society which he frequented and the indifferent bourgeois face he had to put on his whole life.

The writing of Proust is as equally as flowery as it is brutal. Despite its often humorous nature the novel is very cruel at times and incredibly despairing, callous, and paranoid at others. A great and complete novel has all these aspects of life however, and of course this one is no exception.

Proust mentions that a truth in life can be better expressed when \"recomposed\" as in music, but also in a work like ISoLT, which makes it greater than any sterile analysis might do. In fact it seems that one of the largest impressions upon Proust that gave way to the genesis of this book was music, just as important if not more so than the madeleine in tea, as Proust has had similar experiences throughout his whole past of this involuntary memory, but would not have been able to recognize the artistic impulse it possessed had he not first recognized this expression of a higher truth in music. So this involuntary recall for the past does not preclude our more classical and Romantic recognition of truth in art; they go hand in hand. Perhaps I may be drawing too similar of a comparison between the narrator and Proust or making assumptions, but they are not without them being based in the text.

Despite Proust's great wealth of quotable material, I don't include any here except for the first one as they can be quite odious when read out of context and can often give the completely wrong impression.

Volume I

\"Sometimes, too, as Eve was created from a rib of Adam, a woman would be born during my sleep from some misplacing of my thigh. Conceived from the pleasure I was on the point of enjoying, she it was, I imagined, who offered me that pleasure. My body, conscious that its own warmth was permeating hers, would strive to become one with her, and I would awake. The rest of humanity seemed very remote in comparison with this woman whose company I had left but a moment ago; my cheek was still warm from her kiss, my body ached beneath the weight of hers. If, as would sometimes happen, she had the features of some woman whom I had known in waking hours, I would abandon myself altogether to this end: to find her again, like people who set out on a journey to see with their eyes some city of their desire, and imagine that one can taste in reality what has charmed one's fancy. And then, gradually, the memory of her would fade away, I had forgotten the girl of my dream.\"

\"....
The truth was that she could never permit herself to buy anything from which no intellectual profit was to be derived, above all the profit which fine things afford us by teaching us to seek our pleasures elsewhere than in the barren satisfaction of worldly wealth. Even when she had to make someone a present of the kind called \"useful,\" when she had to give an armchair or some table-silver or a walking-stick, she would choose antiques, as though their long desuetude had effaced from them any semblance of utility and fitted them rather to instruct us in the lives of the men of other days than to serve the common requirements of our own. \"

\"....And I begin again to ask myself what it could have been, this unremembered state which brought with it no logical proof, but the indisputable evidence, of its felicity, its reality, and in whose presence other states of consciousness melted and vanished. I want to try to make it reappear. I retrace my thoughts to the moment at which I drank the first spoonful of tea. I rediscover the same state, illuminated by no fresh light. I ask my mind to make one further effort, to bring back once more the fleeting sensation. And so that nothing may interrupt it in its course I shut out every obstacle, every extraneous idea, I stop my ears and screen my attention from the sounds from the next room. And then, feeling that my mind is tiring itself without having any success to report, I compel it for a change to enjoy the distraction which I have just denied it, to think of other things, to rest and refresh itself before making a final effort. And then for the second time I clear an empty space in front of it; I place in position before my mind's eye the still recent taste of that first mouthful, and I feel something start within me, something that leaves its resting-place and attempts to rise, something that has been anchored at a great depth; I do not know yet what it is, but I can feel it mounting slowly; I can measure the resistance, I can hear the echo of great spaces traversed.
Undoubtedly what is thus palpitating in the depths of my being must be the image, the visual memory which, being linked to that taste, is trying to follow it into my conscious mind. But its struggles are too far off, too confused and chaotic; scarcely can I perceive the neutral glow into which the elusive whirling medley of stirred-up colours is fused, and I cannot distinguish its form, cannot invite it, as the one possible interpreter, to translate for me the evidence of its contemporary, its inseparable paramour, the taste, cannot ask it to inform me what special circumstance is in question, from what period in my past life.\"

More than a commentary on Swann's jealousy or M. Charlus's homosexuality or the frivolity of the Guermantes' sorties, Marcel Proust's monumental work In Search of Lost Time paints the unsuccessful reconstruction of a forgone world and a lost existence from fickle memories, which like morning mists would fade with the rising sun. The narrator Marcel, longing for a past that didn't exist but must be created, sought to experience Bergson's continuous time rather than the fragmented and still-framed instantaneous moments by attempting to blur the boundaries between Cambray and Paris, childhood and adolescence, and Swann and himself and integrate here and there, before and after, and him and me through memory fragments of previous objects, people and sensations. As in a neural network or a mind-map, the madeleine linked his aunt to his mother, who in turn was linked to Albertine through jealousy, which also connected Marcel with Saint Loop and Swann, who, as with his (Marcel's) grandmother, linked his childhood and adolescence. And through recollection, Marcel would try to relive the buried years and resurrect his grandmother and Albertine.

But even during his narrative, Marcel realized memory's willfulness and the variation in hues, shapes, pitch and timbre between the actual object and its mental reconstruction. When he encountered an old friend, the facial features were so different from his recollection and reconstruction, for better or for worse pregnant with all the emotions, preoccupation, biases, that he could not match face with voice.

Because recollected sensation can never equate with the actual experience and time, like a patient thief, steals memories a morsel at a time until one day the owner would realize he was ruined, Marcel ultimately would fail to recapture and assemble stolen sensations and decayed seconds and in the end, must create new moments, new

sensations and ultimately a new biography, through the synergy between past experiences and creative imagination. From those deceased hours and decayed memories sprouted In Search of Lost Time, not only Proust's novel but also that of the narrator.

Reality - the connection between Time Lost and our present sensations - can be reconstructed, perhaps with the aid of a skilled writer possesing heaps of psychological insight (and who better than the great Marcel himself?). Such a writer \"recalls only what is general\", and \"through certain ways of speaking, through a certain play of features.. the life of others remains within\" that writer and that life will, in turn, help to recreate reality. These writers can thus induce \"madeleine moments\" in others, just as the phrase from Vinteuil's sonata induced such a moment in the Narrator himself. With artists and writers like these, \"we do really fly from star to star\", because they themselves, most likely, have flown likewise. Proust certainly did.

And so the Narrator's burning desire, quite understandable at least to this reader, to inhabit the minds of others, to penetrate their hidden and \"mysterious\" lives, takes on a new dimension, as do his Parfitian realisations that the self is an illusion and his musings on the origin and purpose of art. All help him conquer his fear of death. The desire for eternal life was always a mirage, Proust writes: \"the only fountain of Eternal Youth would be not to visit strange lands but to possess other eyes, to behold the universe through the eyes of another, of a hundred others, to behold the universes that each of them beholds, that each of them is\". Every so often, memory will cause those universes to collide, allowing an individual to become an \"extra-temporal being\" - to stand outside of Time itself, indifferent to the worries of the future or the stresses of the past.