The Persistence of Subjectivity

On the Kantian Aftermath

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On “Becoming Who One Is” (and Failing)

Proust's Problematic Selves

I

Oscar Wilde once noted that for antiquity and for long afterward, the great imperative in human life was to “Know thyself.” This was the path to wisdom given by the oracle at Delphi and was often cited by Socrates as his greatest task in life. It did not imply in antiquity what it might to us; it had much less the sense of “avoid self-deceit,” “be true to yourself,” or “know your limits.” It had much more the sense of “avoid ignorance about what it is to be a human being and what happiness for such a creature consists in.” However, said Wilde, for us moderns, the major life task had become something different. It is now: “Become who you are.” This imperative has also been of central concern in a strand of modern European and American philosophy (sometimes called a “romantic” strand) that stretches from Rousseau to Hegel, Emerson, Thoreau, Nietzsche (with whom the phrase itself is now probably most associated), Heidegger, and Sartre. A kind of anxiety that in our official or public roles we are not really or authentically “who we are,” that we are not what we are taken to be by others, now seems familiar to us as a characteristic problem in modern Western life.

1 I am much indebted to John Coetzee, Nikolas Kompridis, Glenn Most, and Thomas Pavel for comments on an earlier draft of this chapter, and to Jonathan Lear, James Chandler, Joshua Landy, Lanier Anderson, and Candace Vogler for conversations about its content.

2 There is a thoughtful comparison of Nietzsche and Proust in Nehamas 1985, 167–70. I shall be stressing here much more the ineliminable social dimension to any "self-fashioning." See also my discussion in Pippin 1999a, 99–113.

3 Cf., though, Pindar’s Second Pythian Ode (2.74), where one is encouraged to “[b]ecome such as you are, having learned what that is” (1997, 239). Pindar, as the context reveals,
However familiar, the imperative and the issue also seem to be quite paradoxical. Why would you need "to become who you are"? Who else could you be? And even if that could be worked out, the idea of a contrast between the two maxims is paradoxical for other reasons. How can the imperatives be separated and contrasted? Doesn't one have to know who one is, before one can struggle to become who one is, struggle to resist the temptation to be false to oneself?

To answer the first concern we have to appreciate that the subject in question – the "you" that you are to become, at least in the explorations undertaken in the modern novel or confessional poetry – has little directly to do with the familiar philosophical questions about the minimum conditions of self-identification, personal identity, and so forth. At issue is not the Humean worry about the possibility of an awareness of an enduring, stable self but something like acknowledgment of (and faithfulness to) one's "practical identity," what is sometimes referred to as one's character (what one is "being true to" when one is "being true to oneself").

Or, as it is sometimes put, the problem is not of individuation but of individualization; the problem of the self's unity is not so much the formal problem of possible continuity over time but the substantive problem of self-knowledge, ego ideals, grounding commitments, all understood as an ethical as much as an epistemological problem. What most seems at stake is what is meant when, in extremis, someone might say: "I couldn't live with myself if I did that" or, more commonly, "I don't know why I did that; I don't recognize myself in that deed." And, said the other way around, many people, after all, have self-images that they count as solid self-knowledge but that are better described as self-indulgent fantasies or delusions. They especially might be said to need to become in reality the person they take themselves to be (because they are not or are not yet). Put in a much more general way and anticipating my conclusion: Being the subject of one's life, a subject who can lead a life: rather than merely suffer what happens, who can recognize her own agency, the exercise of her subjectivity, in the deeds she produces, also means being able to fail to be one. That already indicates that being such a subject cannot be something is talking about a kind of integrity, being true to yourself no matter what the "cunning slanderers" say. But there is no sense that who one is might just consist in a constant, experimental "becoming," one that never ends in a realization. Proust's vision is much more like this latter, ever suspended, unresolved becoming, I want to show. (I am grateful to Glenn Most for discussions about the topic.)

Contra, to some extent, the approach suggested in Landy 2001b.

one just substantially "is" over time and so can report. As we see below several times, a "practically relevant self-knowledge" is the question at issue, and such first-personal knowledge cannot be understood on models of introspecting an inner essence, on the model of being S or not being S, but it is more like the expression of a commitment, usually a provisional commitment, which one can sustain or fail to sustain, and so is something one can always only "be becoming" (or failing to become).

Accordingly, the answer given by philosophers such as Nietzsche and novelists such as Proust to the second concern (the apparent priority of self-knowledge over self-becoming) is to deny such priority, and so to suggest a deeper paradox. They want to say something like: Any settled piece of self-knowledge or presumed fixed commitment or ego ideal is, because of considerations like those just advanced, always, necessarily, provisional, in constant suspense, always subject to pervasive doubt. The reality of such a self-image, what turns out to confirm it, is not fidelity to an inner essence but is ultimately a matter of action, what we actually do, a matter of engagement in the world, as well as, in a way, a kind of negotiation with others about what, exactly, it was that one did. (So, to determine

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4 I am going to take up and follow the psychological language with which Proust treats problems such as this, but the general ontological puzzle that this introduces (being a subject by not really "being," being identical with, anything at all) can be understood as a framework for understanding the condition of literary and aesthetic modernism. (In this context one need only replace the "becoming who one is" language with a "Marcel writing himself into existence" formulation to see the relevance of the provisionality and "ungroundedness" in terms of the textuality problems of the latter.) This means a great self-consciousness about what it is to "be an artist," say, without the question ever being such as to allow an "answer." I discuss this general issue a bit more below.

5 Cf. Leo Bersani's apposite remark: "For Marcel, personality – his own and that of others – is by definition what has not yet happened or has not yet been revealed; it is in essence a secret" (1985, 77). One might also put the point by stressing the nonpropositional character of the content of self-knowledge. One must always "make true" what one claims to know about oneself, rather than "find such true propositions." A contrast between "reports" and "knowledge" in first-person knowledge is discussed in Richard Moran's valuable 2001 book, although he retains a sense of first-person authority that, I think, emerges quite "scathed" in Proust's treatment, even though it does not disappear. I have also benefited a great deal from David Finkelstein's fine 2003 book.

6 See the very typical "hesitation" style in this simple "report" on the Balbec elevator boy and his reluctance to enter conversation:

But he vouchedsafe no answer, whether from astonishment at my words, preoccupation with his work, regard for etiquette, hardness of hearing, respect for holy ground, fear of danger, slowness of understanding, or the manager's orders.

All references will be to the C. K. Scott Moncrieff and Terence Kilmartin translation (Proust 1982). References will be cited in the text and refer to the volume and page number of this edition (1, 715–16).
that something is true about myself is much more like resolve than
discovery.\textsuperscript{7} As such, our actual practical identity is always also the subject of
contested interpretations and appropriations by others (another mark of
its provisionality). And there is very often a kind of struggle to hold fast
to such an image or to alter it properly in the face of finding out that one
"was not whom one took oneself to be." The idea is that it is only in trying
to become who one (provisionally) thinks one is that one can begin to
find out who one really is (what one would really do), even though that
putatively discovered result is only a provisional pledge of sorts to act in
certain ways in the future. That is, this finding out does not discover a
stable essential self thereby simply "revealed" in action. We get, at best,
another temporary resting place that further demands on us could and
very likely will dislodge. In this context, the question of whether there can
ever be any end to this provisionality, reformulation, and re-engagement
is obviously a pressing one.

So is another necessary struggle: for some perspective from which the
unity of such deeds and manifestations can be made out. We need to
achieve some such coherent connections among deeds – to be able to
understand why someone who did \textit{that} would do \textit{this} – or we will not be
able to recover the deeds as \textit{ours}, to recognize ourselves in them. Some
will seem strange, alien episodes, absent such connectability; more like
things that happen to us rather than things we do. (And again, all such
claims to unity by any individual, even to himself, are \textit{claims}, are also
subject to dispute and denial by others, especially when we act on such a
self-understanding and affect what they would otherwise be able to do.)

This is the problem of recovering "lost time," attempting to retrieve
what really happened as one's own or to recover who one "really" was. It is
the attempt to avoid being trapped in some wish-fulfilling fantasy or in yet
another, merely successive provisional point of view. And it is the attempt
to avoid being subject to the interpretive will of another. This issue is, of
course, the chief subject of Proust's great novel, at issue in questions such
as Marcel (or Swann) becoming "a writer," what it is to be truly "in love,
why social prestige and snobbery (or radical social dependence) are so

\textsuperscript{7} The following is a typical passage indicating Proust's sense of this issue, from \textit{The Fugitive}
(Marcel is hesitating after he has told his mother he will not leave Venice with her):

I was well aware that in reality it was the resolution not to go that I was making by remaining
here without stirring, but to say to myself: "I'm not going," which in that direct form was
impossible, became possible in this indirect form: "I'm going to listen to one more phrase
of "O sole mio."

\textsuperscript{8} Cf. Genette 1980.
fantasy, self-fashioning, and creation in, paradoxically, knowing the truth, especially the truth about oneself. More generally then, the novel invites us to entertain, as a premise for what it will work through, Marcel's unusual anxiety that he will fail to find, or will always have lost, his "self," whom he is to become, and this "in time" (that there might be no successful narrative point of view), in love (the beloved remains unknown, his desires never stabilize), in rejection from society, and in failing to become a writer. What is it to be worried about such a matter?

II

In the novel, a narrator, near the end of his life, now mostly isolated from society, alone, often ill, attempts to remember and reconstruct narratively the story of his boyhood and early adulthood. (At two and only two very isolated moments in the novel, this object of memory, the narrator's younger self, is called "Marcel.") For the most part, he is nameless and speaks in the first person, as the narrator seems to assume the persona of, seems to enact or re-enact the voice of this younger person, expressing things as this young Marcel would, as well as apparently sometimes stepping outside him to comment on what was really happening to the younger Marcel, as if this were accessible not to that character then but to his older self. To complicate matters, the novel is also often interrupted by what appear to be long, independent philosophical reflections on love, jealousy, time, art, memory, and human psychology. It is often unclear whether these reflections capture the young Marcel's thinking at the time, reflect the narrator's considered view, or are philosophical insertions by the real Proust, the absent author of the narrator's reflections. Many readers have stumbled over this issue, taking it as simply unproblematic that the reflective passages are bits of "Proustian philosophy" meant to illuminate the narrative passages. But the presence and meaning of those passages are quite problematic indeed, something to be thought about, not a given, and it is more likely that Vincent Descombes has right when he suggests in his recent book that the situation is rather the other way around: that the narrative helps us to contextualize and understand the reflections and especially the limitations of the quite specific point of view that they express. A "philosophical reading" can occur only after this is appreciated.9 Put much more simply, we have to be as constantly aware as

9 Descombes 1992, 6. See also his very useful formula summarizing his approach: "The thoughts reported in the narrative do not coincide with the thoughts communicated by the

Marcel that nothing is what it seems. Society matrons are ex-prostitutes, marly aristocrats are homosexual masochists, one's beloved is a lesbian, and the book we are reading does everything possible to convince us it is a memoir; a reportage of inner states, a psychological work. But it is not. There is no historically real Marcel, no real narrator. And characters report their inner states, even to themselves, in ways that turn out to be fundamentally untrustworthy, prompting a constant search for truth, and this more "in" (always contestable) social action than in "deeper" psychological insight.10

There is a passage from Proust's letters, quoted by Descombes, that sums up this problem:

No, if I had no intellectual beliefs, if I were trying simply to remember and to create through memory a useless depiction of days gone by, I would not, ill as I am, take the trouble to write. But this evolution of a mind – I have chosen not to analyze it in an abstract way, but rather to recreate it, to bring it to life. And so I am forced to depict errors, but without feeling bound to say that I hold them to be errors. So much the worse for me if the reader believes I hold them to be the truth. The second volume will encourage this misunderstanding. I hope the last volume will clear it up.11

And the novel itself warns us, even if that warning appears hard to remember for most readers: "A book in which there are theories is like an article which still has its price tag on it" (III, 916).

So, in testimony to the relevance of our problem (how one becomes who one is), the novel directs us to three main personas, and the relation among them is not clear. (And I should emphasize that I mean three main narrative "I's." Marcel Muller has argued for seven narrative...
For a very long time, though, Marcel is a writer who does not write or writes very little as he struggles to understand how a writer lives, how one responds to and tries to understand the people around him "as a writer would" and struggles to find out whether he can ever become in reality, however much he actually writes, "a real writer." The issue that he is most puzzled about - what does it mean in this society to become a writer? - is already prominent in the narrative or more formal structure of the novel, which is often built on "surprising revelations."

That is, Marcel, in this quest to know who he is, to know whether he is a writer, finds that his beliefs about that issue and many others (especially about what he should do, given those beliefs), almost inevitably fail to correspond with how he actually does react to events and are out of sync with the way in which what he does is understood by others. He is sure he is not in love with someone and is then devastated by some slight or neglect or indifference; he is sure the attainment of some goal is crucial to his happiness, yet finds himself indifferent in acquiring it. (An important example: Marcel is frustrated by his father's opposition to his becoming a writer, but when, influenced by M. Legrandin, his father drops his opposition, Marcel immediately finds the prospect dubious.) We are thus shown that reports of self-knowledge are very likely not reports of mere inner facts, gained by some special access the subject alone has (as if one could discover whether one had a writerly essence or not). The relation between such beliefs and their expression in actions is much tighter than this; the latter turns out to be crucial to the truth of any such former claim, and such truths often turn out different from how a provisional, prior expectation would have it. Introspection is thus singularly unreliable, as in this extraordinary passage:

Now, since the self is constantly thinking numerous things, since it is nothing more than the thoughts of these things, when by chance, instead of having them as the objects of its attention, it suddenly turns its thoughts upon itself, it finds only an empty apparatus, something unfamiliar, to which, in order to give it some reality - it adds the memory of a face seen in a mirror.

12 Muller 1965; Landy 2001b, 124. (Landy has a fine book, Proust, Philosophy and Fiction, forthcoming from Oxford University Press, in which many of these narrative and chronological details are clearly set out; some, as far as I know, for the first time.)

13 Indeed, the temptation to read the novel as a roman à clef, and such curiosity about "who" the "real" author is, is a bit like the obsessive need to know if Albertine is a cyanide, if Odette was with Forcheville, and so forth.

14 This expands on a brief suggestion in Shattuck 2000, 32. I should stress that there must definitely is also a sense in which the three are one. So many readers automatically assume this, though (that what Marcel thinks, what the narrator says in his philosophizing, and what Proust believes are the same thing) that while the three-in-one, one-in-three structure of the novel is the complete picture, the difficulty of simply identifying all the thoughts in the book with Proust's should be especially stressed. The view from far off cannot be wholly deceptive, since the narrator himself uses the "distance" metaphor when he claims that he can see only from "far off," though with a telescope. I am indebted to conversations with Jim Chandler on this point.

15 Landy has established in his forthcoming book that this is not so, even from the novel's (narrator's) own point of view.

16 During this "apprentice" time Marcel pays very close attention to three ideal or model artists - the novelist Bergotte, the painter Elio, and the composer Vinteuil - trying to understand what makes them artists and how they are both formed by and help to form their milieu. (They appear to be arranged in some order of importance in the novel, and one of the most important passages is in the last volume: It presents a reflection on a septet by Vinteuil and its implications for the self. I discuss it in section V below.)

17 This is from a passage not included in the French edition used by Moncrieff; quoted by Bersani 1965, 106-7.
As Sartre would later put it, these reports of self-knowledge reflect provisional promises or pledges at a certain time (in effect, promises to oneself and others) to act in certain ways, which one may fail to keep for all the sorts of reasons people fail to keep pledges. To summarize several of these points at once: The fact that Proust’s narrator is also a character in the novel we are reading is not merely the exploration of an unusual point-of-view technique; it manifests the paradox and tensions of any self-reflection, and so the necessary link between such reflection and action; it manifests these tensions more than perhaps any other book, or so I am trying to claim.

And often these reflective failures are not matters of simple weakness or moral failure; they can be results of the simple pressures of time. One has to make such pledges at some moment, before one can even begin to know how to understand the implications of the commitment, something one learns only “as time unfolds,” given some principle of narrative connectedness. For this reason, “the bluff” — pretending, when some situation calls for action, that one knows what one is about, knows what should happen, and so on — is an important, unavoidable, and often hilarious social mechanism throughout Remembrance and thereby also a valuable way to learn about oneself in a fairly standard (not absolutely unique, first-personal) way. And for similar reasons the novel itself embodies, constantly exhibits, a narrative and point-of-view uncertainty and complexity consistent with the often confusing temporal and social instabilities exhibited in its details. While much in the novel conspires to have us believe that the vain, social-climbing young Marcel grows into a wise, reflective narrator Marcel who writes the books we have just read and that

that narrator is “really” Proust himself, the novel does nothing to establish that there is or ever can be any point of view “outside” the narrative flux and instability described, that Marcel’s quasi-religious discovery of “real time past” in the last novel is anything other than yet another moment in a temporal story that has led Marcel in hope to, and then in disappointment away from, other idealizations: Swann, Berma, the Guermantes, his grandmother, art itself, Albertine, time regained, and so forth. There is no reason to take Marcel’s “death bed” conversion away from the radical temporal instability we have just seen as any more authoritative than these other putative moments of redemption. If Marcel is to become who he is, it will not be in any such moment of stalled or stopped time. We have just read the account that shows why it cannot be.

Put one final way, the problem I have called Marcel’s “becoming who he is” amounts to his becoming a determinate agent, someone who leads his life, both carries the past into the future in a certain way and does so, acts, in the light of some conception of the subject he is struggling to become. But this is mostly manifested by a kind of vita negativa, the often palpable sense in the novel of the great and almost intolerable burden of the demands of such agency and the sweet pleasures to be gained by avoiding such a burden. We are introduced to this theme in a famous archetypal scene, Marcel’s intense pain at being separated from his mother, that great rip in the fabric of presubjective, harmonious being that can never be avoided or ever healed. But the figure for this problem actually begins earlier in the first novel, in its first, most famous line: “For a long time, I used to go to bed early.” We are thus subtly introduced to the odd desire, not just for the nighttime kiss, but also for “earlier sleep,” a desire for some release from the burdens of “waking” agency that introduces the recurring images of passivity and its many pleasures: being pursued, being a beloved, and even the later themes of masochism and betrayal, being made an object. It is enough to note here the importance and potential, perhaps very deep irony of this theme in Marcel’s (that

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18 This despite the fact that Sartre almost willfully refuses to notice those passages in Proust so similar to the views of Being and Nothingness and treats him as if wholly wedded to an introspective account of self-knowledge. Bersani 1985 is very good on this point (106).
19 I agree with Bersani that the absence of omniscient narrators in novels such as Proust or Henry James not merely is a matter of technical experimentation but evinces a historical and social crisis manifest in literary modernism and one ultimately most threatening to that bourgeois consolation that had been so often evoked as a refuge from the secular harshness and uncertainties of the bourgeois world: romantic love. See the discussion in Pippin 2000.
20 There is a fine description of the bluff and its dialectical twists in III, 360–1.
21 There are philosophical controversies aplenty here. As stated, this “Proustian” theory is quite incomplete. It especially leaves unclarified our strong intuition that there nevertheless is something distinctive and unique about the first-person perspective on “who I am,” distinct, that is, from one’s knowledge of other persons and objects. The novel is, in effect, “disputing” that. But for the purposes of this chapter, those refinements are not yet relevant.
22 I note that this claim, which I return to at the end of this chapter, does not undermine Marcel’s experience of the way past time can be “held” in objects, sounds, sights, and food, like a genie in a bottle, to be released in an involuntary rush when the right key happens to be found. At issue is what Marcel makes of this, needs to make of it, especially the way he tosses around the notions of “truth” and “reality.”
23 This introduces an extremely large issue that has dominated much European philosophy since Heidegger. Cf. Gadamer’s remarks in Truth and Method: “Reconstructing the original circumstances, like all restoration, is a futile undertaking in view of the historicity of our being: What is reconstructed, a life brought back from the past, is not the original.” (1996, 107).
Expression

is, not “Proust’s”) enormous faith in “involuntary memories,” supposedly the key to the novel’s success. This would be to make a point, by way of attention to irony, that Benjamin makes in a different way: that Marcel’s near sanctification of involuntary memory figures a failure, a kind of breakdown, in modern temporal experience. For Benjamin that failure consists in a gap opening wide between individual and collective, inherited-memory, or tradition, an inability to place oneself in such a collective memory that means it is wholly “a matter of chance whether an individual forms an image of himself, whether he can take hold of his experience.”

III

A great part of such a struggle to become who one is, an agent, obviously concerns our proper relation to people around us, concerns our social self. A self-image, for example, is not at all reflected or accepted in practice by others or, especially, that is contradicted by the way one is treated or regarded would have to count as some sort of failure to become who one is. An obvious example: the reputedly large number of our contemporaries who think of themselves as poets, novelists, writers, or artists but whose work (the objectification of such a self-understanding) is universally rejected. (At a certain level of rejection, being such a bad writer, for example, has to count as not being a writer at all.) And the case is even more obvious in those who profess such self-knowledge but who have not yet even begun to write, who know something that in their inner being, a great writer lurks, waiting only for the time and leisure to escape. A self-image never realized in social space, never expressed in public action, has to count as more a fantasy than a piece of self-knowledge, even though when expressed in such action, the public deed cannot be said to be exclusively owned by the subject, to have the meaning that the subject insists on. It is “up for grabs” in a certain sense. One’s self-image becomes a social fact through action, and its meaning can then no longer be tied to the intention or will of the agent alone. This is, of course, exactly why many people forever postpone such action, never write that book, send off that manuscript, finish that dissertation.

And yet, on the other hand, there are clearly people whose self-image, whose practical identity, has been formed so extensively by the expectations and demands and reactions of others that, while their own self-image does circulate successfully in society, their view of themselves is indeed very well mirrored in how they are regarded and treated; it has to be said that they have become the person whom “they” want one to be, that one does not have one’s own identity, has not become who one is. As noted above, this type of slavish conformism has to count as just as much a failure to become who one is as the action of the fantasy-indulging narcissist we just discussed.

We are also often shown another implication of this theme: that the “you” who you can become is not entirely “up to you.” For one thing, our self-identity is very much linked to some commitment to values, and we do not think of ourselves as committing to values arbitrarily or of values themselves as just expressions of our preferences. They make some claim on us. When we say that we know ourselves very well, we often mean to imply that we know something such as where we would draw some line beyond which we would never cross, that our sense of self is essentially a sense of values we cannot give up in the face of demands by others. (Having a practical identity – husband, father, professor, American – always involves something like commitment to a norm, something that I must initiate in response to such a claim and actively sustain over time. I do not regard myself as having the option of just abandoning such a commitment.)

For another, the realization of such value must make some sense within the historical, social world in which we live. We can adopt the values of chivalry and try to become a knight in the modern world, but we won’t be able to become a real knight; we’ll end up a comic character, a Quixote. (The growing absurdity of Charlus’s aristocratic pretensions is connected with this theme. His decline into sadomasochistic farce is not at all simply a matter of psychological deterioration but is both an effect of

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84 In fact, reliance on such memories is what we might call ideological, something Marcel needs badly to believe rather than what is in itself believable. As Adorno pointed out, no past memory is ever safe, neatly stored away; it can be “revoked in its very substance by later experience. He who has loved and who betrays love does harm not only to the image of the past, but to the past itself” (MM, §106, 166). Cf. also Leo Bersani’s remark: “And the act of memory seems to involve such a liberal re-creation of the past, rather than a mere fidelity to past impressions, that some of the theoretical positions that inspired the narrator’s work are made obsolete by the work itself” (1969, 18).

85 Benjamin 1977, 158. I think the irony goes even deeper.

86 Cf. the formulation by Bersani: “Our knowledge of the outer world is, then, dramatic rather than conceptual; unable to describe it, we nevertheless spend our lives meeting it” (1969, 134). I discuss this issue at considerably more length in Pippin forthcoming a.

87 As is often pointed out, a great deal of the nineteenth-century realist novel obviously involves such a “lack of fit” between idealistic expectation and the emerging social reality of bourgeois Europe.
and, when properly appreciated, simply will not allow the intelligent and aware characters a "Françoise-like" solution. (Even a character such as the Duchesse de Guermantes prefers not to observe rigid social hierarchies based strictly on family and fancies herself a social adventuress, thus raising the question that the Parisians must now face: What is it to "make" a society in these altered social conventions? How does one play the great and unbelievably complex "game" of invitations and refusals?)

The evidence for such change is often slipped in quietly in the narrative details but begins to accumulate as the events in the novel head for two decisive historical and social crises: the Dreyfus affair and World War One. These details include enormous technological change: the arrival of electric lighting in the home, the telegraph and railway, Marcel’s first telephone call, and, above all, the arrival of the automobile. (In a famous passage in *Cities of the Plain*, Marcel actually weeps when he first sees an airplane (II, 1062).) These are all shown to contribute to a great "compressing" of social life, as if various communities grow more and more compacted together, making more and more impossible the isolation of little villages, such as Combray, and so exposing everyone more and more to more social pressures than before, resulting in greater conformism and anxiety about authenticity. It is all presented as if these devices, by drawing people closer together, in ever more rapid physical and communicative contact with each other, rather than increase communicative closeness and daily intimacy, mostly increase the sense of being regarded, of being monitored ever more constantly and effectively by others, as if, in effect, there are fewer and fewer places to "hide," fewer reasons to avoid contact, fewer real opportunities for solitude and the development of a socially independent self.

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28 Or it is a manifestation of the even more deflating revelation that there was essentially never any difference between these social cliques.

29 Descombos 1993, 166, notes that because no real events happen in Combray (anomalies that might seem like novelties, such as the social success of Swann or Le Grand d’A., are successfully filtered out), this "world" is not a novelistic world, as is the world of Paris. Throughout his book, Descombos makes an interesting case, using Proust for a historical theory of the novel, similar in ambition to Girard’s.
Finally, another consequence of the socio-historical Proustian world is even more important but harder to summarize without a separate chapter (or book). A simple term for it would be the untrustworthiness of direct or immediate experience, something that seems linked to the inadequacy of the historically specific evaluative and descriptive terms available to Marcel. We all know that the official Proustian doctrine is supposed to be that immediate experience is experienced too quickly, caught in too great a jumble of associations and affective responses, to be fully intelligible. Experiences "according to Proust" supposedly reveal their true meaning in a mémoire involontaire, when they supposedly can jolt their way through the surveillance of quotidian consciousness and appear as, it would seem, the thing in itself, an experienced moment in its original meaning and importance. But we sometimes neglect to note that such "experiences of not clearly or reliably experiencing" in the historical present are not treated as epistemological theses but as a record of such flux and uncertainty in a certain historical world. Françoise's world, the largely premorden world of Combray, we can easily infer, suffers no such confusions or uncertainties, since within it the patterns of repetition and reidentification familiarize the familiar and screen out what does not fit. Marcel, however, in a world where the unprecedented is common, a world always overdetermined in meaning, cannot even directly experience the greatest life event in the novel, his grandmother's death. He must later, at Balbec, re-experience what he paradoxically did not originally experience. This is yet another image of the inevitably reflective and thereby unstable characterization of experience in the novel, a feature that I would argue is historically indexed, tied to the sort of world where sexual identities can seem to change instantaneously, information circulates rapidly and often without context, and moral hierarchies crumble and are rebuilt unpredictably. (It is also in, and probably only in, such a world that such extreme claims about the power of involuntary memory can seem to make sense. That is, we need again to be attentive as well to Marcel's need for such a touchstone — something independent of any supposed Proustian theory — before we can properly evaluate what Marcel thinks he experiences in the novel's final volume.)

of view, developed by oneself, is harder to have some faith in. Marcel himself complains about how the automobile, by bringing villages "closer," is also homogenizing them.


In the novel's many love affairs, the issue of being or becoming a lover or beloved is raised in both a temporal and more directly psychological framework. The temporal problem in human relations is pronounced and stressed very frequently, almost ad nauseam. A typical passage:

Every person is destroyed when we cease to see him; after which his next appearance is a new creation, different from that which immediately preceded it, if not from them all. ... Remembering a strong and searching glance, a bold manner, it is inevitably, next time, by an almost languid profile, a sort of dreamy gentleness, overlooked by us in our previous impression, that at the next encounter we shall be astonished, that is to say almost uniquely struck. (I, 979)

Because of this phenomenon of instability, the very attainment of desire is treated as temporally complex and problematic. For when we achieve what we thought we desired, we often find that we are "no longer the person who desired that," that we formed the desire at a time and under conditions specific to that period, not any longer to this new one. (And I stress again the terrible complication: All we know is that this is what the narrator believes about such matters, perhaps for his own defensive, still obsessional motives. As always, we as readers have to try to figure out just who is speaking, as the speaker or rememberer is also trying to figure out who he is or was. These opinions are part of that process and so part of ours.)

Moreover, Proust treats imagination and fantasy as essential to desire, especially necessary to intense, powerful desires such as romantic love, which are formed and sustained largely under the influence of fantastic idealizations of the beloved or lover. (In the language used here, one forms various aspects of one's self- and other image under the inevitable sway of these erotic illusions.) Without such fantasies, love could become too much like that dreary contract between consenting partners for the reciprocal use for pleasure of each other's bodies that Kant so infamously defined as the basis of any ethical marital relation. Yet such fantasies — so essential to a person's self-identity — also cannot withstand the great pressure of having finally to acknowledge the humdrum reality behind such illusions, and so the identities of lover and beloved are in constant suspense.

33 To be able to be satisfied now with what we desired "then" is as "illogical," Beckett notes in his book about Proust, as "to expect one's hunger to be dissipated by the spectacle of Uncle eating his dinner" (1993, 3).
For this and many other reasons (such as the unreliability of experience sketched above), the central plot event in the novel is disappointment after disappointment after disappointment. The great actress, Berma, whom Marcel yearned to see with every fiber of his body, turns out (at first, anyway) to be a prosaic disappointment. The imagined ancient church at Balbec is in reality prosaically stuck among some shops in a dull village. The great, mysterious Swann is a pathetic dilettante, captured in love affair with a woman whom he does not even like, tortured by constant jealousy. The mysterious world of the Faubourg St. Germain, the Guermantes's world, turns out to be a collection of petty, venal, essentially worthless people. In fact, society itself, the very necessary condition under which one forms a sense of who one is and should become, looks to be little more than a tissue of lies, evasions, delusions, vain pretensions, a hall of mirrors for social posturing, with each figure trying hard to imitate those regarded as the originals, the setters of fashion, who are themselves trying to imitate those who are trying to imitate them. (There is even a Groucho Marx element to this disappointment: Marcel's constant sense that the objects of his desire must be so valuable and rare and difficult to achieve that if he, poor Marcel, has attained them, they must be worthless in reality, thus confirming Groucho's law that he would not want to be a member of any club that would have him as a member.)

In this doomed economy of love, the beloved wants the lover, but that means wanting the lover to want her, and so she wants to become what the lover wants to love. "Success" in such an enterprise is then obviously double-edged, since she is always left wondering whether the love: really loves her, the "real her," and what will happen when he "finds out" who she really is, behind all the mystery, makeup, fine clothes, tailored persona, and so forth. And as she is assessing what the lover wants, she is also assessing the lover's self-presentation to the beloved, which is of course his attempt to be whom she thinks she wants a lover, or him, to be.

And we see over and over again that the enemy of love's intensity is the grinding, soul-deadening familiarization of habit and the everyday. (Cf.: "stupefying habit, which during the whole course of our life conceals from us almost the whole universe, and in the dead of night, without changing the label, substitutes for the most dangerous or intoxicating poisons of life something anodyne that procures no delight" (III, 5:4).

Proust suggests that it is almost as if we had a motive to find constant occasions for jealousy, to want to consider the beloved as eluding us, absent (thereby defeating habit, even if in a Pyrrhic victory). Marcel wants to convince himself that he does not really know Albertine and so must constantly experience a great anxious unsettled doubt about her life apart from his. This, though, however painful, means that their love has not been completely settled, has not become a matter of habit. The difficulty of becoming who one is, in other words, is something one easily and unavoidably and sometimes eagerly projects onto others; one realizes that the beloved may not really be the person that the lover, or even she herself, takes herself to be or that she may suddenly, given some chance encounter with another, not just reveal herself to be in fact other than she appeared, but might become someone else. (Marcel's Law seems to be: Anxiety and jealousy make the heart grow fonder.)

Now Marcel appears to react to this with an almost insane possessiveness, tries to keep Albertine a prisoner. But this, too, is treated with great irony by Proust. We see pretty quickly that Marcel is as much, if not much more, the captive of Albertine as vice versa, and the situation itself is already paradoxical. (The jailer must be constantly on guard lest his prisoner escape; they are in effect chained to each other, the jailer as much a prisoner.)

Finally, this whole set of considerations—escaping from habit, avoiding the dullness of familiarity, and so forth—is another reason why, in a novel that is so much about remembering, forgetting is so important. Moments of past time must be lost, however painful that is, so that they can escape the control of habit and habitual associations and then be (apparently) recaptured in moments of sudden, unplanned, involuntary memory. Said another way, the picture Marcel presents suggests that our real life, wherein we can come to understand ourselves, understand what it is to become who one is, is so wholly false, routinized, saturated with habit, familiarity (and the contempt it breeds), as well as, paradoxically, so subject to radical temporal flux, that it can be really lived only "too late," afterward, in (mostly involuntary) recollection and a kind of intense re-experiencing. (We can become who we are only when, in a way, we cease

34 "Habit then is the generic term for the countless treaties concluded between the countless subjects that constitute the individual and their countless correlative objects" (ibid., 8).

35 There are many other examples of this issue in society. For example, there is the story of Oriane, who in order to demonstrate or even create her independence, makes a show of not attending the party of Mme. de Saint-Euvre and pretends to have a sudden desire to see the fjords of Norway. The suggestion is that she is no more free of social pressures than if she had accepted (II, 495; see also Descombres 1992, 289). There is a fine discussion of this problem in Earle forthcoming.
to be, at least cease to be so "in control."”) In his famous, sad phrase: The “true paradies are the paradies we have lost” (III, 903). (If they are lost, forgotten, they at least have a chance of escaping habit and can reappear with some freshness and vivacity as “true” paradies. This is a mirror of the earlier point – that the only successful (sustainable) love is unrequited love.) The suggestion is that while we like to think of ourselves as living our life forward, as if a life were in the control of a subject, enacting a clear self-identity, in fact that direction would not make much sense unless we were able to live it constantly "backward," too, making sense later of what could not make sense at the time. This is already the beginning of a claim for what amounts to the priority of art to life itself in the novel, for a radical aesthetics as the solution of sorts to the "become who you are" imperative.36 Since lives are such backward-looking narrated novels, the best narrator is the wisest judge, the most successful at life; he is perhaps most of all "who he is." Or at least he is the most self-conscious. And this is also an answer of sorts to the obvious question raised by the book’s title. Why must lost time be searched for? Because that is where your life lies hidden, Marcel seems to say. Contrary to the conventional wisdom – "Don’t live in the past" – Marcel often suggests that one can truly live only in the past, at least live in a way that can make some sense, can be rescued from habit, the rush of time, the confusing swirl of immediate impressions, and the difficulties arising from one being a character in the novel one is narrating – all if such lost time can be "found."37

In the treatment of love in high society, what would otherwise seem to be a rather bizarre intense, frequent emphasis on male and female homosexuals (what Proust calls "inversion") and prostitutes is more intelligible as linked to the social dimensions of this identity theme. This is so

because such characters allow Proust to raise frequently the question of the “theatrical self” (existing only in the beliefs and perceptions of others) or the importance of role playing, acting, and so the nature of the difference between the public self (in conventional terms, often false, hypocritical, as with homosexuals who present a straight face to the world, one full of hostility for gays, or prostitutes such as Odette Swann, who have become society matrons and try hard to stay well to the right of any social issue of the day, as in the Dreyfus affair.) Indeed, this concatenation of themes – homosexuals, prostitutes, actors, Jews – seems designed to raise the question of the relation between “inner” and “outer” self and the link with the nonsocial/social dialectic noted earlier. For secularized Jews, it was the problem of what it was to be “Jewish” (or to deny being Jewish) in those heated times. For some women, it was a question at least as old as Mary Magdalene: How does one become a thoroughly “ex”-prostitute after one has been one? And the acting theme (and so the difference between pretense and reality) is everywhere, as one might expect in a work where Proust is in effect “acting the part of himself” all the way through.

This theatricality, then, also carries us back full circle to the romantic theme, and so to the question of how to distinguish between regarding a persona as a finely crafted work of art, something that does express one’s self or the artist’s truth but that takes account of what can be socially understood and circulated (and so avoids the simplistic solution – just be who you are honestly and forget about what the world thinks), and, on the other hand, as being inauthentic and deluded, a victim of a self-serving conformism. (A typical anxiety of Marcel’s: “[O]ur social personality is the creation of the thoughts of other people” (I, 20)).

V

Now, if one tried to sum all this up too quickly, one would end up with a vast novel of horrible disillusionment. “Becoming who one is” would simply look impossible in such a society with no sense of what is worth wanting and why it would be worth wanting, trapped inside an endless cycle of snobbery, fashion, and hypocrisy, without genuine worth, unsettled every second by the radically temporal, mutable nature of the human subject. Or such a goal seems possible only in a pure, rarified aesthetic domain, bought at the price of a great distance from life-as-it-is-lived, at the price, to use such a frequent modern image, of an isolating illness, making real contact with others impossible, but just thereby allowing separation and insight, a living death or nunc stans, outside time but thereby

36 At one point, Marcel can confuse relations of original and image to such an extent that he can describe the moonlight as “copying the art of Hubert Robert.” (1, 124).

37 This central theme in the novel – unrequited love – deserves a book-length treatment. It could easily be invoked as a figure of sorts for the condition of modernity itself. Even the resolutely prosaic Kant must resort to it to describe our condition, fated to ask questions we cannot answer, in love philosophically with an unattainable goal: that the subject’s relation to metaphysics is like that of an unrequited lover (Kritik der reinen vernunft, A850/B898). It’s a prominent image in Nietzsche. He notes that “our passion,” “the drive to knowledge,” has become too strong for us to be able to want happiness without knowledge (or to be able to want the happiness of a strong, firmly rooted delusion; even to imagine such a state of things is painful to us! Restless discovering and divining has such an attraction for us, and has grown as indispensable to us as is to the lover his unrequited love, which he would at no price relinquish for a state of indifference – perhaps, indeed, we too are unrequited lovers. (1982, 428)
outside life. (At one point in the last volume, the narrator remarks that people think he has looked at them under a microscope, but it was really a telescope, far away enough for distance, but with the power to magnify from that distance (III, 1098).) We seem left with a human world with no possibility of adult, romantic love; one where love is possible (if it is) only within the family.

And there is almost a religious dimension to such an attitude. It is in one sense true that Proust seems to show us only the vanity and corruption "of the world," in some Augustinian way (or the reduplication in the modern world of the diseases of court culture, an old, tried and true theme in French literature), and to propose salvation only in another realm, isolated, nonsocial (or proposed for a thoroughly idealized society), a religion of art. But real society is also what makes possible Marcel’s education, his Bildung, his meeting Bergotte, Elstir, and Swann (all of which is made possible by his grandmother’s social position and her social and aesthetic taste); there are genuine friendships (Bergotte’s beautiful ministrations to the grandmother when she is dying; the early friendship with Saint-Loup); and there is the telling and rich spectacle of Charlus’s disintegration and what it teaches Marcel. So there are various things about the "human mystery" that appear to require not just a social existence but a complex form of social sensibility, refined over time, and that turns out to be indispensable for Marcel’s vocation. How to state properly this relation of dependence (the novel is, after all, about the social world, and not in a moral, or condemnatory way) and social independence (there must be some break – the sanatoria stays and his later isolation – for Marcel to gain the perspective he needs to write) remains the riddle that must be solved.

That is, the novel seems to suggest a kind of "capacity" view of one’s practical identity and unity, and the capacity in question is an ability to negotiate properly the relation of dependence and independence with one’s fellow agents, what to accept of how others take up and interpret and react to one’s deeds, what to reject. Swann seems at first to negotiate the aristocratic social world with some proper measure of independence and integrity, in what appears to the young Marcel, anyway, to be an ideal way. Bloch’s pretended integrity is as false as, ultimately, Charlus’s. There seems to be an endless dance of domination and submission in all the love affairs. But the social world in which all this occurs and its great temporal and psychological instability seem to leave no place for such a settled balanced capacity, no space even for it to develop properly.

But such a pessimistic reading would be much too hasty. For one thing, neither our narrator nor the younger Marcel can be granted complete authority in what they pronounce about these issues. Marcel is shown to be vain, deceptive, weak-willed, neurotic, hysterical, and untrustworthy, and he spouts a lot of half-baked philosophy about idealism, solipsism, egoism, the impossibility of love, the prevalence of vanity, and so forth, views that have no independent weight in the book and are opinions that themselves undergo considerable, manifest change over time. Accordingly, as in all great novels, we have to pay attention to what is shown more than what is said if we are to come to any conclusions about the possibility of becoming who one is.

And we are shown a great deal. We are shown how the possibility of "becoming who you are" and all that comes with that – sustaining a commitment to a value, living in a social world without living under the suffocating, conformist weight of that world, living a coherent, relatively unified life (being able to narrate one’s life, to live backward as well as forward, and so forth) – should all also be understood as some sort of function of the kind of society one lives in as well as a result of a refined capacity one might develop. (Generalizing from such a society to the "in itself" or essential problem would be dangerous.) As the novel shows, a practical identity, our sense of our own individuality, is the coherent realization in deeds of such a self-consciousness and so such a capacity, a kind of (relatively fragile, easily lost) achievement, not a simple discovery, and in all such achievements one needs help from others, and the right kind of help. Social dependence need not itself mean a loss or qualification on independence and so a restriction of the achievement of individuality; it all depends on the sort of dependence.

And the most salient feature of the society of aristocrats that becomes Marcel’s world is that they have nothing to do with any project larger than preserving privilege and the system that enhances them; they are desperately dependent on each other, and so some aspect of this theme in the novel must appear in a distorted way. They are, as

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38 As Walter Benjamin has pointed out, the significance of Proust’s snobs extends far beyond French society. They are avatars of that deadly modern type, the consumer, who wants to be flattered for his discriminating taste but whose taste amounts to nothing more than liking what will get him flattered, taking refuge in brand names and high-end merchandise, much as the snob does in supposedly high-end people. A whole society looms where no one is or even wants any more to be "who one is" – another Nietzschean nightmare. See Benjamin 1974.

39 I am grateful to Thomas Pavel for noting the relevance of this Augustinian theme in French literature and its continuing relevance to Proust.
Ortega y Gasset said, like plants: rooted in their natural spots, moving only to turn to catch the rays of the sun of flattery and esteem, without which they would surely wilt and die, and so they have no help to offer in any common project. They have no project. Or they are more like strutting, well-dressed animals in a zoo than human beings.\(^{49}\) They have no historical time because they have no future, have no way of stretching the past on along into the future, the modern world. They only have one way of making sense of their past, “narrating backward,” as we said earlier: lineage and genealogy. (By contrast, the peasants of Combray are privileged with the burden of necessity; they must work and their lives are purposive and ordered by means of the structure of this work.) There is a description of Swann that is telling in this regard:

The fact was that Swann had reached an age whose philosophy – encouraged, in his case, by the current philosophy of the day, as well as by that of the circle in which he had spent much of his life, the group that surrounded the Princess des Laumes, where it was agreed that intelligence was in direct relation to the degree of skepticism and nothing was considered real and incontestable except the individual tastes of each person – is no longer that of youth, but a positive, almost medical philosophy, the philosophy of men, who, instead of exteriorizing the objects of their aspirations, endeavor to extract from the accumulation of the years already spent a fixed residue of habits and passions which they can regard as characteristic and permanent, and with which they will deliberately arrange, before anything else, that the kind of existence they choose to adopt shall not prove inharmonious. (I, 304–5)

For a good part of the novel, until a large temporal break at the end (Marcel’s illness requires two very long stays at sanatoria), Marcel struggles (and fails) to become who he is in this sort of world, modeled on that world, struggles to become what would be an artist for this audience, at such a time. He clearly at first regards their leisure and education and worldliness as the key to their freedom from necessity and so their capacity for an undistorted view of the higher things. If there is any group, he seems to reason, where a free appreciation of the best aspects of human life can be had, especially an appreciation of beauty and nobility, this must be it. That is all, we are shown (especially in the case of Charles, whose pretense of near god-like independence is finally revealed as in reality a craven masochism, as he enacts this cult of dependence in sexual-pathological terms), and it leads to a hopeless counterfactual about art. At first, it is only once free of such a community (one that regards art as an escape into some realm of purity and eternity, away from life) that he can write, he can be for himself a writer.\(^{1}\) Not being able to become who he is is not the difficulty it is because of some intrinsic limitation, some inherent tragedy in human life, dooming us to perpetual alienation, and it is not due to some inherent falseness of the modern world. It has everything to do with Marcel’s historical world.

What he comes to appreciate, I would suggest, is that artists have no secure place in this society because this society, both the remnants of the feudal, ancien régime and the new “fast” society of consumption, rapid technological change, great social instability, and a new power of fluid capital, is about nothing, stands for nothing, devours its artists as entertainment or fetishizes them as sacred priests, disguising in Mme. Verdurin’s paroxysms of aesthetic delight its own vacuity. Bergotte, Elstir, and Vinteuil are in the novel served by, their aims are realized by, and their social reality is largely determined by acolytes such as Mme. Verdurin, Berma, Rachel, Swann, Charles, and Morel. The relations among patrons, artist, and audience have always been complex, but there is not much hope for the artist as such when he is bounded on either side by such unrelenting phallosity and self-serv ingness or, in cases such as Swann’s, such cynicism and boredom.

Marcel’s reaction to this realization is complex. Such a “negotiating capacity” still has to be directed in some way, in one direction rather than another, under some assumption or other about who one is, who one takes oneself to be, however provisionally. And this still raises the question of the conditions for the success of such a goal. He does, after all, become who he is in spite of all this, he becomes a writer, and the conditions for his success are presented in a complex or double-edged way, not just as an escape from a concern with society (a flight that would suggest the naiveté of a claim for complete societal independence, a “beautiful soul”). In the simplest terms, he can become a writer when he gives up the search for something like the “writerly essence” inside him, ceases looking inward at all, and begins the act of writing, an action that is inevitably also an exposure to the social world. And this is all of a piece with what we have seen before: Marcel’s breaking free of understanding the first-person perspective as introspective and observational, such that he comes to see that attitude as more projection than reportage, projections, or pledges that

\(^{49}\) See Bersani on “Le royaume de néant” (1965, 166–77).
must be sustained and backed up. His hesitancy in the writing case is a product of the somewhat ludicrous elevation of art's importance that he inherits through his grandmother and his grandmother's relation to art, is, as Shattuck has pointed out so well, a kind of idolatry, an absurd project of investing in art virtually every dimension of human value and of thinking of that activity and its creators in essentialist, Platonic ("antitemporal") terms. This is, after all, a woman who gives a small boy a George Sand novel, so risqué or adult that his mother must censor so much in reading to Marcel that nothing makes any sense. (The fact that the novel, François le Champi, is almost about incest, about a foundling who marries a woman who is "like a mother to him," is a topic best left for another discussion.) Likewise, there is something hysterical and defensive about the "aristocratic" (and late nineteenth-century) relation to art, as if in compensation for the sterility, the nongenerative character of their lives (another link to the homosexuality theme), and both influences set up Marcel's hopelessly Platonic aspirations for art, as a way of rescuing truth from time or communing with eternal essences and revealing them all to everyone. 42

The central transformation that makes possible not only Marcel's success in becoming who he is but a Proustian way of thinking about such an issue in an age where such identities, practices, and types are always in suspense and contestable and cannot be secured by anything, any value or reality that transcends the wholly temporal human world, is that his time so long away from society has broken the hold of such "Platonic" illusions. 43 He comes to understand that his world's not being redeemable in this sense is his subject, and an infinitely variable one it is, too, making some sense now of the modern anxieties of love and jealousy, the prevalence of vanity, his constant disappointment with society. It was, in other words, by failing to become "what a writer is," to realize his inner "writerly essence" -- as if that role must be some transcendentally important or even a definite, substantial role -- that Marcel realizes that such a becoming is important by not being secured by the transcendent, by being wholly temporal and finite, always and everywhere in suspense, and yet nonetheless capable of some illumination. (Marcel thus accepts the idea that his own book "will never be completed.") This realization is expressed a number of ways:

How much more worth living did it appear to me now, now that I seemed to see that this life that we live in half-darkness can be illumined, this life that at every moment we distort can be restored to its true, pristine shape, that a life, in short can be realized within the confines of a book. (III, 1688)

And when talking about the readers of his book and pointing us away from the notion of the book's "content":

For it seemed to me that they would not be "my" readers but the readers of their own selves, my book being a sort of magnifying glass like those which the optician at Combray used to offer his customers -- it would be my book, but with its help I would furnish them with the means of reading what lay inside of themselves. (III, 1089)

At another point, the emphasis on the instability and temporariness of any such putative inner "self" we might become is not invoked as a reason to despair:

For I realized that dying was not something new, but on the contrary, since my childhood, I had died many times. . . . These successive deaths, so feared by the self which they were destined to annihilate, so painless, so unimportant once they were accomplished and the self that feared them was no longer there to feel them, had taught me by now that it would be the merest folly to be frightened of death. (III, 1094-5) 44

And Marcel goes on here to contemplate with the same equanimity the death of his book itself ("Eternal duration is promised no more to men's works than to men") (III, 1101).

But how can the "illumination" of these successive deaths and even successive selves, this acknowledgment of contingent temporality as sweeping as that very soon thereafter embraced so famously by Heidegger, serve as some sort of answer to the question of "how one becomes who one is?"

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42 There are several hilarious send-ups of the members of the Verdurin salon on this score and of the "High Art" religion of Charles and his crowd. See The Captive, vol. III, 256ff. Moreover, the narrator has set out these examples with some design in view. Elstir, the painter, is sometimes described as "stopping" time by painting moments of it; Vinteuil as composing a purely temporal art, leading to the suggestion that Bergotte and the novel form represents some possible synthesis.

43 In Beckett's apt phrase, "from the victory over Time he passes to the victory of Time, from the negation of Death to its affirmation" (1931, 51). See also Giff. for Beckett's discussion of Proust's "romanticism."

44 This is the theme that begins very early, as in this passage from Swann's Way:

And so it was from the Guermantes way that I learned to distinguish between these states which reign alternately within me, during certain periods, going so far as to divide each day between them, the one returning to dispose of the other with the regularity of a fever; contiguous, and yet so foreign to one another, so devoid of means of communication, that I can no longer understand, or even picture to myself, in one state what I have desired or dreaded or accomplished in another. (I, 200)
It seems to be saying, when all is said and done, that you will be several (contested, provisional) "selves" in your life and that most of these will not care very much about the past others and the ones to come, and the best thing to be said about all that is that at least you will be well prepared for your actual death.

Proust’s treatment here is quite deliberately indirect, and his response to this question involves an even further shift away from thinking of one’s self-identity as a kind of content revealed in a redemptive moment. This is to be expected, of course. The emphasis we have seen on breathtaking temporal transformations (that of Marcel’s friend Saint-Loup being, for Marcel, one of the most painful, since it involves the death of a friend; the “death” of his love for Albertine is another), the effects of habit on daily perception and understanding, and the overdetermination of possible meaning in the words and gestures of other people are all just as relevant to self-understanding as the understanding of anything in society. If Marcel has become who he is, and this somehow continues with and a product of the experience of his own past, it is unlikely that we will be able to understand that by appeal to a substantial or underlying self, now discovered, or even by appeal to successor substantial selves, each one linked to the future and past by some sort of self-regard.

If the details of the novel suggest that becoming an individual is a kind of achievement, one that involves an implicit, not formalizable or thematizable capacity to negotiate the social world in a way true to the inevitable dependencies and relative independence required, is there a right or better way to embody this, and a wrong or worse way? If one never becomes who one is but is always, inevitably becoming and revising a practical identity in exercising this capacity, if one is always in a kind of suspense about who one will turn out, yet again provisionally, to be, what is the proper acknowledgment of this state of affairs?

Even the right formulation of the question suggests an important, required acknowledgment. It reveals that it is a matter of some significant Proustian irony that “Proustianism” or “Proustian idealism” is supposed to consist in a solipsism beyond the merely methodological or even epistemological; that it reaches metaphysical dimensions. Yet the questions that dominate the interior monologue of the narrator and Marcel—What do I really believe? What do I really want?—are revealed never to be asking, cannot be asking, “Do I have such a determinate belief? Do I have such a determinate desire?” Marcel constantly surprises himself by what he turns out to desire, and so in some sense learns (or at least we learn) that the content of the desires ascribable to him is manifest only in deeds, demurrals, social interactions, and actual struggles, “out there.” And even “there,” where it is manifest, it is not ever wholly or fully manifest. What is manifest is a subject of contestation, possible retraction; provisional yet again. That is why the book is a novel, not a lyric poem, and the “unfinished” character of this provisionality tells us something of why it is not a work of philosophy. (The logic of the claim Proust is implicitly making is important to stress. It is not that Marcel is simply self-deceived (although he often is), not that his true practical identity, the true commitments have already been made and lie somewhere hidden. Again: He becomes who he is only when he acts in some way, and even then what he intended to do and what he did are both subjects for much uncertain retrospective contestation.)

A different “answer” of sorts is suggested by a long passage about a musical concert in The Captive. What we are presented with is a different way of thinking about who one is, one that, oddly, undermines any way of thinking of such an achievement as a possible intentional goal that can finally be reached and that shifts our attention from center to periphery in the “search for self.” The concert occurs in one of the funniest and yet pathos-filled party scenes, the one organized by Charlus for his lover, the violinist Morel, at the home of Mme. de Verdurin. The party is a social catastrophe, as Charlus’s posh friends treat the Verdurins like the butler and maid and titter openly about their social pretensions, thus ruining forever Charlus’s relations with the Verdurins and so his relation with Morel. But at this party, Marcel hears a new piece of music, a “septet” by Vinteuil, a composer who, along with an earlier piano sonata, has figured intermittently and importantly in the novel since Swann’s Way. The sonata serves as a figure for the Swann-Odette story and perhaps as well for what that story could have meant to us “then,” all to be contrasted with the now much more complex “septet,” figuring as it does the culmination of our experience of love in the novel. (It is important, too, that the septet was written by Vinteuil in a kind of code or shorthand and required translation, especially since Marcel has already referred to the writer’s task as translation. Whatever the meaning of Vinteuil’s notes, the record of temporal movement, they will require as much interpretive or

45 This is the standard translation of “septuor,” but it is a bit misleading. I quote Joshua Landy’s note on the subject, from his forthcoming Proust, Philosophy and Fiction. “In Proust, the term ‘septuor’ does not appear to mean a piece for seven players—a septet—but rather a piece whose primary theme has seven notes. Thus Vinteuil’s masterwork can be a ‘septuor,’ even though it is a ‘pièce pour dix instruments,’ because it is a ‘song on seven notes’” (note 99, from the Introduction).
decoding work as is demanded of the reader of Remembrance.) Marcel’s reflections on the differences between that earlier, “prettier” piece and this more complex, almost discordant, but much more “profound” work provide a context for an indirect reflection on his own history and his relation to art and identity. (It can even be read as an indirect manifesto for modernism in the arts, the aesthetic analogue to the social suspension of the self’s stability.) The earlier works of Vinteuil are called “timid essays, exquisite but very slight, besides the triumphant and consummate masterpiece now being revealed to me” (III, 253). This seems to be a reference to his own little pieces, his small essay for Figaro. He continues to use the language of youth and innocence to describe that sonata (“lily-white,” III, 256), and the language of a dawning maturity to describe the septet, but he also begins to realize that the two pieces are profoundly linked, and his reflections on how they are linked seem like reflections on the question Marcel has always asked himself, “Who am I?” While the earlier sonata is “so calm and shy, almost detached and somehow philosophical,” and the later septet “so restless, urgent, imploring,” they, Marcel realizes,

were nevertheless the same prayer, bursting forth like different inner sunrises, and merely refracted through the different mediums of other thoughts, or artistic researches carried on through the years in which he had sought to create something new. (III, 257)

Although the works are so different, Marcel realizes that they teach him that “in spite of the conclusions to which science seemed to point, the individual did exist” (ibid., my emphasis) and that individual exists as a kind of “accent” throughout so much temporal change. (It is thus important that the image is musical, where such an accent is not exactly an inflection on content. Since there is no independent content in music, it, the accent, is the “content,” the music, and by its existence serves as “a proof of the irreducibly individual existence of the soul” (III, 258).) All artists are thus like travelers from an unknown land that they have forgotten, but which stamp their talk and manner nonetheless, to which fatherland they remain all our lives “unconsciously attuned,” able thus to express “who they are” only as an “ineffable something” more than the substantial content of their roles and practices and ideals.46

As noted before, I have adopted the largely psychological language invoked by Marcel to describe this notion of transformation. But Proust’s

novel is not only or not even primarily a Bildungsroman. These figurative references to art and artists are not casual and already intimate a view of modernism in the arts that underlies “what has happened” to Marcel and to the condition of art. For Marcel, despite his own memorializing, nostalgic hope for the pure return of the past, has in effect implicitly had to give up the notion of some sort of internal teleology in his life, and therewith the notion of having arrived somewhere, either at the essence of (finally autonomous, formally self-reflexive) art or at the dissolution of the art/nonart distinction, the inauguration of art as mere play. To use more contemporary language, writing, as manifested in the theme of the text, is not pure text, nor an endless constitutive writing about writing, nor the overcoming of writing through pure insight, rescued from time. All such resolutions are moments of rather grand “arrival,” and it is understandably what part of Marcel still devoutly wants, as he faces the end of his own time, his death. What it is to have given up the notion of arrival but yet still to be somewhere and someone is what is being hinted at with such notions as tone and accent.47

We as readers have thus also come to the strange “place and time” to which Marcel has come; we understand who he is, but not by knowing anything substantial directly about him; we have not “arrived” at the end,” in any eschatological sense of finality. We and Marcel are simply close to his end, his and the characters’ death. We know what we do know by having become “attuned,” after three thousand pages and months and months of reading, to this “accent,” the musical image for his distinct capacity, his “attunement.” And this result has a number of implications. It suggests that “one’s true self” is not a thing one can pursue directly, that it is much more something like “the bloom of health in a youth.” Trying to find “it” almost ensures that it will be artificial. (And many of the other grand themes have this quality: You cannot really seek love or

46 Cf. a similar image in Nietzsche’s The Gay Science: “One thing is needful — To ‘give style’ to one’s character” (1974, §290), and see the discussion in Nehamas 1985, 170–99.

47 This all also means that the romantic idea of “creating” yourself, writing yourself into existence, and so forth must be invoked very carefully in this context. Such a question always raises the issue of what it would be to create successfully in this way or not, what it would be to fail. As the novel in effect “teaches,” such a normative dimension requires that we consider the role of others in any such self-constitution and the much more difficult problem of self-location in time. The “finality” of the realization that Marcel seems to undergo at the end thus has two dimensions: the alleged or hoped-for finality of the retrieved “essence” of lost time, truly what it was to have been so and so or to have experienced such and such, and the temporal finality, nonrepeatability, the absence of much possible future re-experiencing in a different context, at a different time, simply for Marcel and these subjects. They are facing death, in other words, a much different sort of finality. And, as Heidegger would put it, death is not an arrival, and is final only in the latter sense.
certainly cannot seek to be “in love”; you cannot achieve social prestige by trying to achieve such prestige. Even Mme. de Verdurin has to fake her aesthetic swoons of appreciation. You cannot write by imitating the essence of writing. In all such cases, including this practical identity, these are things that one cannot achieve alone; they reflect quite a complicated social and temporal dependence.)

This would mean, too, that any expression of putative self-knowledge is always something provisional and hypothetical, a matter of dispositions with uncertain realizations and commitments of uncertain strengths. (This position again bears comparison with Sartre’s early position in The Transcendence of the Ego, with his claim that one’s “self” is so linked to action and possible action that it can be said to be “out there,” as much “in the world” as anything else.)\(^{48}\) More important, lest this sound like the familiar kind of aestheticism ascribed to Proust, accents also exist in being heard in contrastive contexts and interpreted for what they show about origin; they have their own social dimension as well and, in the same sense noted throughout, can never “settle” anything. Our own difficulty in settling on what we really believe, are committed to, is thus as much a problem as the reader’s difficulty in identifying “which” Marcel is speaking, from which stage of development, in which relation to the absent Proust. And that is paradigmatic for the problem itself in the novel.

(To know anything about anyone is not to have propositional knowledge about an object but to be able to inhabit, to become the point of view of such a person; more simply, to be able to imagine what they would do. In a deeply paradoxical way, Proust is suggesting, this is just as true of self-knowledge. It is the task of “becoming who one is.”) Indeed, finally, our narrator goes very far to make his point, so far as to say that it is only in art (or in the aesthetic dimensions of our own lives) that this “ineffable something . . . which we call individuals” can be known:

A pair of wings, a different respiratory system, which enabled us to travel through space, would in no way help us, for if we visited Mars or Venus while keeping the same senses, they would clothe everything that we saw in the same aspect as the things of Earth. The only true voyage of discovery, the only really rejuvenating experience, would be not to visit strange lands, but to possess other eyes, to see the universe through the eyes of another, of a hundred others, to see the hundred universes that each of them sees, that each of them is; and this we can do with an Elstir, with a Vinteuil; with men like these we really do fly from star to star. (III, 260)

\(^{48}\) Sartre 1989.