

REVELATIONS OF REALITY

IN

A LA RECHERCHE DU TEMPS PERDU BY MARCEL PROUST

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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

A la Recherche du temps perdu is the story of a search in the life of the narrator, Marcel, as he grows into adolescence and develops into a man. It is a search for truth, reality, self-fulfillment, and a vocation which will bring meaning to his life. Even though the setting is placed in the first part of the twentieth century, the novel still holds much relevance for the youth of today. Every generation finds itself in search of something better than what its environment offers, hopeful of discovering some significance and meaning in life. Marcel's idealistic expectations of the imagination and his sentiment of despair and disillusionment in the face of the world's reality are evident in the youthful generations of every age. The universality of this theme gives Proust's work a living quality of significance for modern readers, who are sympathetic with his need to discover the unknown and grasp the truth of life. In reading the novel, it is easy to identify with the young man who is sensitive to the aesthetic beauty of the world, but who is also conscious that he must discover

that inexplicable "something" which will bring him happiness and self-fulfillment.

The novel progresses through the various stages in the narrator's life. As he grows into adulthood, he encounters revelations one after another which enlighten him in his search for happiness. One must read the novel in its totality in order to grasp the significance of each new discovery and comprehend the solution which eventually makes the unity of the novel evident to the reader. Marcel is puzzled by the sensations of joy that he experiences from his encounters with various objects from time to time. These experiences hold significance for him as signs of some unknown reality. He believes that if he can uncover the secret which lies beneath these sensations, he will have found the truth of life itself.

Extremely sensitive and over-protected, Marcel is overwhelmed by the beauty of art in all its forms. He develops a taste for the finer elements of life and strives toward perfection. He senses the existence of an unapprehendable reality which lies just beyond his reach. His life is filled with hints of this reality, revealed to him through numerous experiences of sensation which he cannot totally comprehend. This reality fails to take a definable form, but this fact only seems to strengthen his belief that it exists. The mystery becomes almost an obsession to Marcel, who feels the need to

break through the wall which separates him from the unknown secret of life hidden behind it. Unknown to Marcel is that which he will find beyond that barrier or the means of attaining it. He is filled with a feeling of vagueness and emptiness which can be conquered only by discovering the truth. Marcel is convinced that he will find meaning for his life if he can solve the mystery of this reality, the presence of which he is continually conscious.

The quest for truth leads Marcel into a dreamlike existence, where his imagination is able to build a fantasy world from his expectations. The harder he tries to discover the reality of life, the deeper he becomes involved in his world of fantasy, enveloped in dreams created by his imagination. As a sensitive and creative individual, he sees the artistic beauty of the world around him from an impressionistic point of view. For Marcel, the truth for which he searches is perfection; it is a mysterious and vague beauty that can only result in complete happiness. The world becomes an illusion of his expectations. In hopes of discovering the truth, he is filled with high unrealistic expectations whenever he believes himself to be on the verge of its revelation.

Marcel is disappointed again and again as each expectation turns into disillusionment. Just as he is sure that he will discover true happiness in some person, object, or place, its reality is revealed to him as something different than what he had hoped for. Marcel is

only able to increase his mental suffering and unhappiness as each disappointment seems to push him further away from the truth. He cannot find the sense of beauty that his imagination had identified with the exterior world. As a result, he finds himself lost deeper in a dream world where the ugliness and insignificance of the real world cannot touch him.

A la Recherche du temps perdu is a series of revelations, experiences which give the narrator hope in his search for meaning in life. It is a slow process which gradually begins to uncover the secret, while at the same time never bringing about total comprehension and always leaving him in despair. He discovers the key which will eventually unlock the door to the mystery of the reality of life. As he is in search of truth in the objects of the exterior world, he finds the first glimpse of what he has been searching for in himself. Through involuntary memory, a moment from his childhood is relived, and he feels true happiness and self-contentment in the sensation that is experienced. He is finally sure that his hunch has been right, although he is at a loss to retain this sensation or force its reoccurrence at will. He knows now that reality is relative and must be a personal experience. One cannot find truth in the world around him; one must find it within himself. Marcel takes the first step toward understanding, but the question of its meaning for his life remains unsolved.

Finally, as a man, the meaning of these experiences is revealed to him as he discovers his vocation in literature. The reality of his dreams has been present within him all these years, lying dormant and waiting to be discovered. The search is over in his realization that the reality of the past, experienced through involuntary memory, can be captured forever in the art of literature. He understands that his ability as a writer can conquer time by not allowing his past to be lost to it. Marcel sees art as the only means of stopping the destructive force of time, by giving the moments of happiness in his life the momentum to exist outside of time without fear of losing them forever. Marcel's quest for truth is over, and he is faced with the great task of fulfilling his mission. He has found meaning for his life through his discovery of the personal reality existing within him and his ability to capture that reality in art.

This thesis is an attempt to show the progression of revelations in the narrator's life as he searches for the truth of reality: the world of fantasy as it moves into disillusionment in the face of reality; the mystery of life experiences and sensations; the revelation of involuntary memory and the magic of the unconscious; and finally the discovery of a literary vocation and the power of art to transcend time.

Chapter 2

BIOGRAPHY OF MARCEL PROUST

Marcel Proust, author of A la Recherche du temps perdu, was born July 10, 1871, in Auteuil, a Parisian suburb, under the name of Valentin-Louis-Georges Eugène Marcel Proust. Marcel was born into the wealthy Parisian bourgeoisie. His father, Achille Adrien Proust, was an energetic and competent physician and professor of medicine at the University of Paris, who came from traditionally Catholic, French provincial stock. André Maurois describes Marcel's father as "un homme beau, majestueux et bon."¹ He was especially involved with the problem of cholera epidemics and received the Legion of Honor for his work. As Minister of Public Health in the Republic, his father was away on government business a great deal, leaving Marcel in the care of his mother and grandmother, both sensitive and aesthetic-minded women. For the most part, Marcel's father had little patience and understanding of his son's apparent idleness.² However, Proust's brother

¹André Maurois, A la Recherche de Marcel Proust (Paris: Librairie Hachette, 1949), p. 9.

²Henri Peyre, "Marcel Proust," Contemporary French Literature (New York: Harper and Row, 1964), p. 19.

Robert, two years his junior and more robust, followed his father into the medical profession.

Marcel's mother, Jeanne-Clemence Weil, was from a well-to-do urban Jewish family. She was a gentle and sympathetic woman with a charming personality and lively sense of humor. An intelligent and well-educated woman, she played the piano, was well-read, and knew English, German, and some Latin and Greek. Proust's devotion to his mother never ceased, and his dependence upon her grew as the years passed. In his younger years, he considered the worst possible misery to be separation from his mother.³ Despite his parents' different religious backgrounds, their home life was filled with harmony.⁴ Proust was raised as a Catholic, and although he was never profoundly religious in the conventional sense, he loved the ritual of the church and found inspiration in the cathedrals as a form of art. André Maurois explains that "il a montré dès l'enfance un sens très vif de la beauté des églises et de la poésie des cérémonies religieuses."⁵

Marcel was a delicate child, who was not expected to live at first. The delicacy of his health was even

³Harold March, The Two Worlds of Marcel Proust (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1948), p. 20.

⁴Derrick Leon, Introduction to Proust (London: Broadway House, 1951), p. 16.

⁵Maurois, op. cit., p. 13.

evident in his frail physique and fine facial features. He had a slender frame, small mouth, finely modeled nose, and large dark eyes. A sweet, timid, and emotional child, he continually demanded the affection of his parents.⁶ His abnormal sensitivity manifested itself in bursts of excitement and fits of crying. At the age of nine, Proust became subject to asthma attacks, which were further complicated by a nervous disorder. He developed psycho-neurotic allergies to cold, dust, flowers, perfume, and other things. According to Dr. Milton L. Miller, "he himself admitted his illness was psycho-neurotic, but he said he preferred it to unknown evils that might replace it, were he to relinquish it."⁷

His constant illness prevented him from attending school regularly, forced him to limit himself to indoor activities, and eventually made a chronic invalid of him. It remained an ever-present condition, which affected his life until the end. At first the family spent the summer holidays in the Loire region near Chartres, and the Easter holidays took them to Illiers or his uncle's home at Auteuil. Illiers, the home of his aunt Amiot, is the original of Proust's fictional Combray.⁸ Later,

⁶Richard Hindry Barker, Marcel Proust (New York: Criterion Books, 1958), p. 5.

⁷Milton L. Miller, M.D., Nostalgia: A Psycho-analytic Study of Marcel Proust (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1956), p. 5.

⁸March, op. cit., p. 22.

to protect their son's state of health, they began spending the summer on the seashores of Normandy in hopes that the sea air would help his condition. Dr. Milton L. Miller believes that "Proust's genius was related to his illness and emotional sufferings," and that all of his works "were tied up with the anguish of homosexuality and asthma."⁹

Partly as a result of his delicate health and the influence of his mother, Proust developed a deep interest in literature. Since he was unable to engage in strenuous outdoor activities, he spent the majority of his time reading. During his school years, he belonged to a clique of admiring and brilliant friends with similar interests. Although his illness interfered with his studies at the Lycée Condorcet, he took part in a literary-minded group of knowledgeable young men who read and discussed the avante garde of literature. Proust developed a taste for the classics and distinguished himself by his conversation and writing. Already he employed literary phrases and long, complex sentences in his speech, elements which carried over into his essays at school and then characterized the masterpiece, to which he devoted his life.

As an adolescent, Proust displayed intellectual maturity and had an acute critical sense, while at the

⁹Miller, op. cit., p. 3.

same time he was noted for his exaggerated observance of social amenities and desire to be accepted into aristocratic society. He was thought to be a generally well-liked fellow because of his social charm and socially correct manners, always showing consideration for others. Sometimes he would carry apologies or excessive gratitude to the point of embarrassment. His friends originated the phrase, "to Proustify," referring to his over-observance of social amenities.¹⁰ He felt a great need for affection, and as a result, he cherished his close fraternal relationships with friends, whom he lavished with gifts, flowers, and letters.

Proust received the baccalauréat in 1889 from the Lycée Condorcet in Paris and then completed a year of military service in the infantry at Orléans, which he managed despite his ill health. Afterwards he enrolled at the Ecole des Sciences Politiques and the Ecole de Droit to study law. This interest was short-lived, and soon Proust was attending lectures in literature and philosophy at the Sorbonne, where he studied in part under Henri Bergson, the great philosopher of intuition and a new concept of creative time. Bergson (1859-1941) later married into his family, making him a cousin to Marcel.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 6.

After abandoning the study of law, he began to frequent the best society, occasionally writing little essays for the aristocratic Figaro. He spent his time writing, socializing, and studying the paintings at the Louvre, music, geneology, and history. He had successfully found a place in the aristocratic social world of the Faubourg Saint-Germain. This was also the debut of his literary career. Proust and a group of fellow writers and former schoolmates, including Fernand Gregh, Daniel Halévy, and Léon Blum, founded a literary review entitled Le Banquet. One of the basic editorial purposes of the review was to combine the viewpoint of the great classics of the past with typically French traditions as a foundation for French literature. Proust contributed book reviews, sketches, portraits, and stories to Le Banquet and Revue Blanche, another more well-known periodical of the times. He also had opportunities to write for Figaro on the salons of the period, articles which became known to the elite of France. He wrote portraits of fashionable women, literary criticism and articles about historic churches and famous families of old France.

His works, however, did not draw any special attention to his talent, and Proust established the reputation of being a wealthy snob and an amateur society

writer.¹¹ Actually this was the beginning of the career of one of the greatest novelists of the century, because during those years he was continually in the process of filling his notebooks with correspondence, notes, and pieces of writings for future use. Walter A. Strauss in his Proust and Literature states that Proust's artistic inactivity before 1910 is a misconception, as "Proust was always in quest of a literary vocation but did not discern until rather late precisely what direction his literary exploration was to take."¹²

Between the years 1892 and 1900 Proust led a nearly normal life, except that his poor health caused him to write or go out mainly during the night hours, since his asthma attacks came more frequently and severely in the daytime. He persisted in his devotion to his mother and continued to live at home with his parents. In 1895 Proust passed a competitive examination for attaché to the Bibliothèque Mazarine, a job that he accepted in order to please his father. The job paid nothing and required five hours a day at the Ministry of Public Instruction. Five years later in 1900 his absences at work required him to leave his post. That was the last

¹¹ Germaine Brée and Carlos Lynes, Jr., "Introduction" to Combray (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, Inc., 1952), p. 4.

¹² Walter A. Strauss, Proust and Literature (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1957), p. 6.

employment held by Proust during the course of his lifetime.¹³

The year 1896 witnessed the publication of Les Plaisirs et les jours, a collection of his writings with several new sketches. It was an elaborate work with an introduction by Anatole France, musical text by the famed musician Reynaldo Hahn, and illustrations by the well-known Madeleine Lemaire. The work was an indication of Proust's genuine interest in a literary career, but it was received with indifference and found no success.

During these last years with his parents, Proust was plagued by emotional tension due to his health, his failure to accomplish his vocational goals, and a feeling of guilt over the homosexual inclinations that he recognized within himself.¹⁴ He felt that his ultimate goal in life would be the creation of a literary work of art, but his emotional problems hindered his attempts to begin his work. With the aid of his mother, who knew English very well, Proust did translations of Ruskin. He also spent some time entertaining notable guests at dinners in his home, attended by his parents.

His brother, Robert, married in 1903, and that same year his father died suddenly of a stroke. The shock of his death weighed heavily upon his mother, who

¹³Miller, op. cit., p. 9.

¹⁴Brée, op. cit., p. 5.

was then burdened by grief at the loss of her husband, her own poor health, and Marcel's illness. Proust began searching for a suitable sanitarium for himself and entered Sollier's for six weeks after his mother's death in 1905.

The death of his mother signified a turning point in Proust's life.¹⁵ He felt an urgent desire to take his literary ambitions more seriously and moved into his deceased uncle's apartment at 102 Boulevard Haussman. There he almost entirely shut himself off from the outside world, except for seeing a few close friends at very late hours or attending extravagant dinner parties, which he arranged at the Ritz for friends or literary associates. For the most part, he remained shut up in a sound-proof, dust-proof, cork-lined room, wrapped up in blankets, surrounded by medicines and his manuscript, with a faithful servant in attendance.¹⁶ His appearance grew progressively stranger, and he became more eccentric until he eventually went into almost total seclusion. Georges Cattauli describes Proust in the years between 1910 and his death:

. . . a living man entombed in his work . . . a man who wanted revenge from life and who, literally, could no longer spare a minute, who was a sort of fabulous animal half-blind to the lights of the world, but endowed with strange antennae, which made him sensitive to unknown vibrations.¹⁷

¹⁵Ibid., p. 6.

¹⁶Ibid.

¹⁷Georges Cattauli, Marcel Proust, translated by Ruth Hall (n.p. : Minerva Press, 1967), p. xiii.

He led an intense, demanding life as well as a complicated emotional life. During this time he formed attachments to handsome young men, who would sometimes share his apartment. These homosexual affairs only brought him further anguish. A confession to André Gide revealed that he had never experienced physical love except with men, and that his love for women had always been in the spiritual sense alone.¹⁸

A newspaper article by Proust appeared in Figaro in 1907, which brought a degree of notoriety to its author. The article had been requested because of some correspondence between himself and a young man of Parisian society who had recently murdered his mother and then committed suicide.

Around the age of thirty-four, Proust began to write his masterpiece, which was not published until he was forty-eight. By 1911 he had completed the work according to his original plans and began to search for a publisher. Several publishers, including the newly distinguished Nouvelle Revue Française headed by André Gide, turned down the manuscript. Finally Bernard Grasset agreed to publish the work at the author's own expense, persuading Proust to divide the extensive novel into three divisions for publication: Du Coté de chez Swann, Le Coté de Guermantes, and Le Temps retrouvé with A la

¹⁸Miller, op. cit., p. 15.

Recherche du temps perdu as the inclusive general heading. Du Coté de chez Swann was published alone, but with the exception of some favorable comments expressed by friends, it met with a lack of interest by critics. The Nouvelle Revue Française, regretting their previous rejection, then offered to publish the remaining volumes, but this publication was delayed five years by the coming of World War I.

The war years brought much unhappiness to Proust. His young chauffeur and friend, Alfred Agostinelli, was killed in an airplane crash, many of his friends lost their lives in the war, and the world in which he had grown up was being totally destroyed.¹⁹ The indifference with which Du Coté de chez Swann was received brought him grief, but he realized the importance of the remaining volumes to the total comprehension of the work. Despite the failures and sorrows, Proust spent these years working continually on additions and revisions until the original 1500 pages had grown to over 4000.

The second part of his work was finally brought out by the Nouvelle Revue Française after the war, during which time the first volume had become known and admired. A l'Ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs received the Goncourt Prize in 1919, stimulating controversy over the question of Proust's talent. With this newly received fame, the

¹⁹Brée, op. cit., p. 7.

celebrity renewed his social activity for a few months, but his health and unfinished writing forced him to withdraw again from the outside world for the remaining three years of his life.

Proust had ceased his homosexual relations, and he took into his service a woman servant to take care of him. Céleste had been the wife of his chauffeur. She dressed him, cooked for him, and medicated him until his death.²⁰ He continued to work feverishly on his work, which had expanded from the three originally planned volumes to nine and then seventeen. Le Côté de Guermantes and Sodome et Gomorrhe appeared in 1920-1922. When he died, he had not yet revised the last three sections, but his brother and publishers undertook the task of organizing his manuscript. La Prisonnière, Albertine disparue, and Le Temps retrouvé appeared posthumously in 1923, 1925, and 1927 respectively.

Proust was seized by a case of bronchitis, and his physician, Dr. Rize, called in his brother and ordered Proust to the hospital, but the totally dedicated author refused to go or allow anything to disturb his work. He insisted upon going out while still ill, drank cold beer, and denied himself any rest from his work. Although he began to feel slightly better, Proust knew he was dying and struggled on with his novel in an attempt to

²⁰Miller, op. cit., p. 22.

complete it. He had hallucinated a frightening fat woman in black in his room, which symbolized for him his approaching death.²¹ His brother stayed with him three days, giving injections which annoyed the patient, until he died on November 18, 1922.

So many parallels can be drawn between the author's life and that of the narrator of A la Recherche du temps perdu that one is inclined to consider the work an autobiography. However, Proust makes it clear that the Marcel of his novel is a fictional character, not to be confused with the author himself. According to Derrick Leon:

. . . the novel must be considered less as an autobiography than as a deliberate effort to present various aspects of the life he had known, in a reconstructed form that would the better express the truths he had been able to extract from it.²²

In his "Introduction" to Proust, René Girard states that "Like Montaigne, and more than Montaigne perhaps, Proust could have boasted that he, himself, was the substance of his book."²³ Even though the novel belongs to fiction, the work cannot, of course, be disassociated with its author, who gave of himself in creating perhaps one of the greatest novels of the twentieth century.

²¹Ibid., p. 23.

²²Leon, op. cit., p. 171.

²³René Girard, "Introduction," Proust (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1962), p. 1.

Chapter 3

FANTASY AND DISILLUSIONMENT

During his Combray years the narrator lives in a world of fantasy, which is surrounded by an aura of mystery and charm. For Marcel, the characters in the novels he reads and those portrayed on the stain-glass windows of the church are as real as the living people that he encounters in his environment. His dreams lead him into a world of fantasy and imagination. He experiences feelings of adventure and glory as he imagines historic personages of another century; he sees in them a spiritual beauty that he wishes he could find in the world around him. As a child his make-believe world is more than just a fantasy; rather, it is an existing reality in his life, where he finds the security that is so necessary to his existence.

He finds that one cannot grasp reality in the material world, because the consciousness of its existence forms a barrier which prevents one from totally enveloping its meaning. Marcel always feels shut out from the reality of the material world:

Quand je voyais un objet extérieur, la conscience que je le voyais restait entre moi et lui, le bordait

d'un mince liséré spirituel qui m'empêchait de jamais
toucher directement sa matière²⁴

As a result, he derives pleasure in creating life's counter-
part in his dreams--a fanciful world that corresponds
to his concept of what the world should be like.

Literature is an important part of Marcel's life,
and he spends many hours with the characters of the novels
that he reads. While Marcel is in the process of reading,
he is able to shut out the exterior world and devote
his complete consciousness to the action of the book.
His involvement in reading seems to him to be "magique
comme un profond sommeil" (Combray, p. 130). He believes
that a novel, as a form of art, is capable of revealing
truth.

According to Proust, an individual can assimilate
the ideas and objects of a novel to his own being. A
novelist has the power to project the emotions of his
characters to the minds of the readers, so that they
are adopted by the readers and become real. Marcel finds
that the impressions left by a novel are even deeper
and more lasting than those experienced in a dream.
One is able to experience all the joys and sorrows of
the world, some of which one would never know in real

²⁴Marcel Proust, Combray, vol. I of A la Recherche
du temps perdu, edited by Germaine Brée and Carlos Lynes,
Jr. (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, Inc., 1952), p.
126. After each book by Marcel Proust has been indicated
in a footnote, it will be referred to by name and page in
parentheses in the body of the thesis.

life, because perception of them is hindered by their slow development. The only way to discover these emotions intensely is through the characters of a novel.

One cannot assimilate the emotions of real people to his own being in the same way that a novel makes it possible. One can simply sympathize with another human being, because he is only perceptible through the senses, whereas it is possible to know true emotion as one lives and experiences right along with the characters of a novel. In the following passage, Marcel explains his concept of a novel and the effect of reading upon his sensibility:

Qu'importe dès lors que les actions, les émotions de ces êtres d'un nouveau genre nous apparaissent comme vraies, puisque nous les avons faites nôtres, puisque c'est en nous qu'elles se produisent, qu'elles tiennent sous leur dépendance, tandis que nous tournons fiévreusement les pages du livre, la rapidité de notre respiration et l'intensité de notre regard. Et une fois que le romancier nous a mis dans cet état, où comme dans tous les états purement intérieurs toute émotion est décuplée, où son livre va nous troubler à la façon d'un rêve, mais d'un rêve plus clair que ceux que nous avons en dormant et dont le souvenir durera davantage (Combray, p. 128).

Marcel feels that he has found the secret of truth and beauty in the art of literature. This is a first step toward the narrator's understanding of his own creative ambitions in life, although it is many years before his faith in literary inspiration is restored to the pure state of his childhood devotion.

Closely connected with the reality that can be found in literature is the power of imagination.

Imagination is the element which brings out the real aspects of a novel. Each individual creates in his mind the situations, characters, and emotions as he understands them. The art of literature is a revelation of truth only to the extent that a reader can imagine its contents and assimilate its ideas to himself. The words of a novel are enhanced to an even greater degree by the mind of the reader, leaving him with a strong impression of the book. Each image created by the novelist is surrounded by the reader's own associations and adopts his own personal touches, which make it then, in part, his own creation. Marcel realizes the power of his own imagination to complement and enrich the images that he comes upon in his reading:

Ce n'était pas seulement parce qu'une image dont nous rêvons reste toujours marquée, s'embellit et bénéficie du reflet des couleurs étrangères qui par hasard l'entourent dans notre rêverie; car ces paysages des livres que je lisais n'étaient pas pour moi que des paysages plus vivement représentés à mon imagination que ceux que Combray mettait sous mes yeux, mais qui eussent été analogues (Combray, p. 129).

The individual experience and background of each reader are the basis upon which he can relate the book's images to himself. Therefore, the reality that is revealed in a novel is a personal truth, the same illusions evoking different images and holding various degrees of significance for each reader. The narrator turns to literature to find the sensations and life experiences that he would normally miss in his lifetime due to his poor state of

health. This preoccupation with literature increases his sense of the imaginative, enveloping the young boy deeper into a dream-world of his own creation.

Throughout his life, Marcel is torn between his built-up images and the disillusionment that he feels when he encounters the long-awaited objects of his expectation. The images that he creates in his imagination never seem to correspond with what his senses perceive in reality. Leo Bersani, author of Marcel Proust: The Fictions of Life and of Art, points out that "external reality is disappointing because it is different, because it does not send back to us the material equivalents of our dreams."²⁵ The narrator's life becomes filled with frustration as his imagined world crumbles around him, leaving him nothing but the ugliness of the material world. Each discouraging incident adds to his eventual disillusionment with life.

Even though Marcel feels shut out from the outside world, at the same time he is convinced that it is in the material world that he will find the truth of life. He continues to search for reality in the objects, people, and places of the exterior world, because "there is clearly a persistent and fundamental need to merge with a source

²⁵Leo Bersani, Marcel Proust: The Fictions of Life and of Art (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965), p. 39.

of strength outside of himself."²⁶ He becomes extremely impatient with his own personality, which seems to stand between himself and the external sources of truth that he is sure exist in the material world. The narrator believes that he will find reality in the external equivalents of the images created by his imagination.

A sense of exclusion always accompanies the objects of his desire. He feels hopelessly separated from those things that he believes possess the secret of truth. As a result, the objects of his expectation always take on an air of mystery due to their unfamiliarity and his inability to possess them. Leo Bersani believes that "the idea of the real is so inextricably linked with the idea of the unknown that inaccessibility is the sign by which Marcel recognizes something worth knowing or possessing."²⁷ Upon coming in contact with the external objects of his expectation, they immediately lose their mysterious quality. As soon as he is able to remove that obstacle of inaccessibility, the narrator's desire vanishes, only to be replaced by disappointment and the need to look elsewhere for satisfaction.

Marcel is intrigued by the theatre as a boy, although his parents have never allowed him to attend a performance. He imagines the pleasures that the theatre must offer, and he expects the scenes to hold a special

²⁶Ibid., p. 34.

²⁷Ibid., p. 45.

significance for each spectator. He compares this personal aspect of the theatre with that of a stereoscope:

. . . et je me représentais d'une façon si peu exacte les plaisirs qu'on y goûtait que je n'étais pas éloigné de croire que chaque spectateur regardait comme dans un stéréoscope un décor qui n'était que pour lui quoique semblable aux milliers d'autres que regardait, chacun pour soi, le reste des spectateurs (Combray, p. 115).

Every morning he runs to the Moriss column, on which are posted the plays and concerts, just to read their titles, allowing his mind to become saturated with dreams of performances, the magnificence of the theatre, and the elegance of its actors and actresses. He considers the theatre to be the foremost form of art, and his anticipation of attending a performance is magnified by his total devotion to each minute detail involved in the creation of such an art form:

Toutes mes conversations avec mes camarades portaient sur ces acteurs dont l'art, bien qu'il me fût encore inconnu, était la première forme, entre toutes celles qu'il revêt, sous laquelle se laissait pressentir par moi l'Art (Combray, p. 116).

The narrator's most prized ambition is to witness a performance by the famous Berma, even at the risk of injuring the delicate condition of his health. When the time arrives that his parents finally allow him to attend his first performance, Marcel has created an ideal in his mind and is expecting the most inspirational experience of his life. He even studies the lines of the play very thoroughly beforehand, imagining each character's presentation of them. He expects Berma's

performance to exceed any that his imagination could contrive in his reading of the play. At the same time, however, it is the dissimilarity of the experience from his own created image that is precisely what destroys any sense of pleasure in the performance.

When the curtain falls, Marcel is torn between disappointment that the expected pleasure was no greater and a longing to prolong the performance. His highly expectant attention during the performance prevents him from grasping the reality of the experience. He fails to discover the admirable qualities that he had hoped to find in the actress, Berma:

Mais en même temps tout mon plaisir avait cessé; j'avais beau tendre vers la Berma mes yeux, mes oreilles, mon esprit, pour ne pas laisser échapper une miette des raisons qu'elle me donnerait de l'admirer, je ne parvenais pas à en recueillir une seule.²⁸

Marcel is further confused by a review which praises Berma's performance that evening and then by the distinguished M. de Norpois' admiration for the actress.

It is not until later that Marcel is able to appreciate what he has witnessed at the theatre, at a time when the performance is no longer a present reality to him. During the play, Marcel could not grasp the essence of what he was experiencing, because the reality

²⁸ Marcel Proust, A l'Ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs, vol. II of A la Recherche du temps perdu (Edition de la Nouvelle Revue Française, Paris: Librairie Gallimard, 1925), p. 22.

of its existence kept him from forming images based on his own experience and from enhancing the scene in his mind through imagination. After the matinée, however, he is better able to put it into proper perspective and analyze its effects. All that now remains is the memory of the event, which is further molded into shape by others' opinions and one's own personality:

Mon intérêt pour le jeu de la Berma n'avait cessé de grandir depuis que la représentation était finie parce qu'il ne subissait plus la compression et les limites de la réalité (A l'Ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs, p. 30).

The narrator's desire to find satisfaction continues to stimulate his interest in Berma after the play is ended, even though his initial contact with the reality of the theatre was disappointing. Marcel is continually faced with disenchantment in the face of reality, but once the limits of reality are removed, his imagination is freed to create the images that offer him pleasure and to fulfill his expectations.

Marcel associates certain names with his world of fantasy--names such as Balbec, Venice, and Guermantes. These places and people contain a special element of charm for the boy, who would like to come in contact with the unknown worlds of travel and society. Georges Cattauli explains what Proust refers to as the genius of names:

. . . he had an aesthetic pleasure upon hearing certain syllables or certain words which he felt to endow with magic both the physical and social universe,

as if they possessed evocative virtue, poetic content and almost magical charm associated with the memory of a place or of an environment, and this awakened the echoes of the more or less distant past, charged with desire or with its own mystery.²⁹

Marcel is able to build a whole network of images around each name that strikes him as being endowed with a mysterious and magical quality.

Although it is within close proximity to his boyhood home at Combray, the coté de Guermantes represents an unknown world to Marcel, that of society. He associates the Guermantes family with the highest social goal, the epitome of aristocracy, endowed with an historic and noble heritage. He has never seen the Duchess of Guermantes, but in his mind he creates an image of beauty, graciousness, and unsurpassed nobility. His imagination does not place her in the same category with other living people. Rather, she belongs to some other century for Marcel, an idea which encompasses him with romantic intrigue and mystery. ". . . je me la représentais avec les couleurs d'une tapisserie ou d'un vitrail, dans un autre siècle, d'une autre matière que le reste des personnes vivantes" (Combray, p. 223). She is part of his dreams, in which he creates an ideal world full of inspiration, love, and beauty.

²⁹Cattauli, op. cit., p. 53.

Having created an image of nobility in its most perfect form, Marcel is extremely disillusioned by his first encounter with the real subject of his imagination:

'C'est cela, ce n'est que cela, Mme. de Guermantes!' disait la mine attentive et étonnée avec laquelle je contemplais cette image qui, naturellement, n'avait aucun rapport avec celles qui sous le même nom de Mme. de Guermantes étaient apparues tant de fois dans mes songes. . . (Combray, p. 223).

The Duchess that he sees before him is "une dame blonde avec un grand nez, des yeux bleus et perçants, une cravate bouffante en soie mauve, lisse, neuve et brillante, et un petit bouton au coin du nez" (Combray, p. 222). It is definitely not the same image that the narrator has built up in his mind, and again his encounter with the real world destroys some aspect of his world of fantasy.

Once his perspective of this new impression is settled in his mind, Marcel finds only beauty in the Duchess' face and an admiration develops in his regard for her noble heritage and social supremacy. He is impressed by her simplicity and natural charm, which inspire in him a deep love for the Duchess. People do not like to admit that they have been deceived; they have a tendency to try to put back the pieces of a shattered image in order to hold on to something that has been good for them. Marcel believes that his childhood illusions must not be completely destroyed if he is to find any self-satisfaction in his life. Therefore, he bases his love for the Duchess de Guermantes on his former concept

of her genuine nobility and grandeur, blocking out the impression of her physical reality:

Maintenant que me le faisaient trouver beau toutes les pensées que j'y rapportais--et peut-être surtout, forme de l'instinct de conservation des meilleures parties de nous-mêmes, ce désir qu'on a toujours de ne pas avoir été déçu--la remplaçant (puisque c'était une seule personne qu'elle et cette duchesse de Guermantes que j'avais évoquée jusque-là) hors du reste de l'humanité dans laquelle la vue pure et simple de son corps me l'avait fait un instant confondre . . . (Combray, p. 224).

In the literary world, the author Bergotte is linked in Marcel's mind with the truth and beauty of artistic talent. His friend, Bloch, brings his attention to the writing of Bergotte, making him aware of its aesthetic qualities. Bergotte opens up a new world for Marcel, one in which the beauty of all elements in the universe is revealed to him through this author's imagery. Bergotte's insight into the world around him is conveyed to the narrator by expressive images, which create in him an explosion of beauty never before realized:

Chaque fois qu'il parlait de quelque chose, dont la beauté m'était restée jusque-là cachée . . . il faisait dans une image exposer cette beauté jusqu'à moi (Combray, p. 138).

Marcel realizes the value of literary art as he learns to appreciate it in Bergotte's melodic, idealistic, and expressive passages. He finds that the artistic talent of Bergotte is his ability to convey to his readers a sense of beauty in objects, where they would never have recognized it on their own:

Aussi sentant combien il y avait de parties de l'univers que ma perception infirme ne distinguerait pas s'il ne les rapprochait de moi, j'aurais voulu posséder une opinion de lui, une métaphore de lui, sur toutes choses, surtout sur celles que j'aurais l'occasion de voir moi-même . . . (Combray, p. 138).

Through his reading, Marcel has the opportunity to experience an aesthetic joy in life, caused by the author's creative power to build revealing images in his mind. As a result of his enlightenment, he develops an increased sensitivity to the beauty of the world around him.

Marcel's neighbor and old family friend, Charles Swann, instills an envious desire in Marcel to know this highly distinguished author. Swann informs him that Bergotte often dines at his home and is a good friend of his daughter, whom he accompanies in visits to old towns, cathedrals, and castles. This fact distinguishes the narrator's own family from the Swanns, giving the latter prestige in his eyes. He imagines Bergotte as a god among mortals, and Gilberte Swann becomes the privileged little girl who is lucky enough to be in the company of such a man, continually exposed to his superior intellect and sensitivity. Marcel is filled with desire and despair at the impossible prospect of becoming Gilberte's friend. The impossibility of such a glorious contact immediately places Bergotte and Gilberte in that realm of his imagination, which is only reserved for the most precious objects of his desire:

. . . quand elle (Gilberte) allait visiter des villes, il (Bergotte) cheminait à côté d'elle, inconnu et

glorieux, comme les dieux qui descendaient au milieu des mortels; alors je sentis en même temps que le prix d'un être comme Mlle. Swann, combien je lui paraîtrais grossier et ignorant, et j'éprouvai si vivement la douceur et l'impossibilité qu'il y aurait pour moi à être son ami, que je fus rempli à la fois de désir et de désespoir (Combray, p. 143).

Marcel believes that existence in the idealistic and inspirational world occupied by Bergotte and Gilberte must be filled with enchantment and inner happiness.

Having eventually gained the friendship of Gilberte and the acceptance of her parents, the narrator finally comes face to face with the "god" of his dreams at a dinner party. Again the reality of what he sees falls short of his unusually high and unrealistic expectations. Once he finds himself in a position where he can "touch" the reality of Bergotte, the mysterious qualities, which previously surrounded the man in his fantasies, quickly disappear. Bergotte is stripped of his idealized personality, an experience which adds to the series of disappointments in Marcel's life.

The narrator feels deep respect for the architectural beauty of churches and cathedrals, most of which are known to him only by name of photographs. He is filled with anticipation at the prospect of viewing the church at Balbec on a trip to the seashore with his grandmother. He describes being able to actually see the famous Apostles and the Virgin of the Porch as "c'est bien plus," but when he arrives at the scene, he finds that "c'était moins aussi peut-être" (A l'Ombre des jeunes filles en

fleurs, p. 210). The reality of the scene shatters the ideal that Marcel had previously envisioned. His mind had exalted the Virgin of the Porch far above the reproductions, endowing it with universal value, but now he "s'étonnait de voir la statue qu'il avait mille fois sculptée réduite maintenant à sa propre apparence de pierre . . . (A l'Ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs, p. 210).

The once invincible statue finds itself inseparable from the everyday vulgarity of the streets in the vicinity --an election placard, cafe, money-lending establishment, omnibus office, and smells from the pastry shop. The formerly unique Virgin of Balbec suddenly appears powerless as she stands before admiring strangers, "encrassé de la même suie que les maisons voisines" (A l'Ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs, p. 211). In Marcel's mind, the Virgin undergoes a transformation from an immortal work of art to a mere stone image:

. . . c'était elle enfin l'oeuvre d'art immortelle et si longtemps désirée, que je trouvais, métamorphosée ainsi que l'église elle-même, en une petite vieille de pierre dont je pouvais mesurer la hauteur et compter les rides (A l'Ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs, p. 211).

Marcel is filled with disappointment that the long-desired Church of Balbec does not measure up to the image that he had created of it. No longer intact and powerless to defend herself against defacement, the Virgin of Balbec joins the other destructible elements

of the world. The narrator's only recourse is to rationalize away his feeling of disillusionment, blaming his health, the journey, and his inability to view things correctly. These excuses cannot, of course, bring back the beauty and splendor that vanished when his illusion of the Balbec Church was destroyed.

After numerous and successive disappointments in life, Marcel finds himself in a state of total depression and retires to a sanitarium. He believes that any literary inspiration, that he may once have possessed, is certainly dead now. This sentiment is most clearly pointed out to him on his return to Combray for a visit to Gilberte and Robert de Saint-Loup at Tansonville. On his walks with Gilberte, the couple take the same paths that he had followed as a child--the Méséglise "way"--where he was inspired by the hawthorn blossoms and his first love for Gilberte, and the Guermantes "way" which used to create in him dreams of the historic and noble heritage of France. The fantasies of his boyhood dreams have all vanished throughout the years, and there is no longer any mystery or enchantment linked with these two "ways." Marcel is convinced by his lack of interest in Combray, once so full of inspiration, that his imagination and sensibility have grown feeble and that he will never be able to write anything:

. . . or comment n'eussé-je pas éprouvé bien plus vivement encore que jadis du côté de Guermantes le sentiment que jamais je ne serais capable d'écrire,

auquel s'ajoutait celui que mon imagination et ma sensibilité s'étaient affaiblies, quand je vis combien peu j'étais curieux de Combray? . . . je m'attristais de penser que ma faculté de sentir et d'imaginer avait dû diminuer pour que je n'éprouvasse pas plus de plaisir dans ces promenades.³⁰

The narrator realizes now that the Guermantes "way" and the world of society were not as inaccessible as he once believed. He is also struck by the realization that the two "ways" were not as distinct from each other as he had supposed, forming a circle so that one would arrive at the same point no matter which path he followed. His entire impression of the countryside around Combray is completely altered from his perception of it as a child. He finds it impossible to relive his childhood years during this visit. Even the Vivonne has diminished to a meagre, ugly rivulet:

Un de mes autres étonnements fut de voir les "Sources de la Vivonne" que je me représentais comme quelque chose d'aussi extra-terrestre que l'Entrée des Enfers, et qui n'étaient qu'une espèce de lavoir carré où montaient des bulles . . . Mais ce qui me frappa le plus, ce fut combien peu, pendant ce séjour, je revécus mes années d'autrefois, désirai peu revoir Combray, trouvai mince et laide la Vivonne (Albertine disparue, p. 206).

The narrator's contacts with the reality of the external world always end in disenchantment. Even the sources of his childhood pleasure no longer contain any degree of satisfaction for him. Marcel's world of fantasy,

³⁰ Marcel Proust, Albertine disparue, vol. VII of A la Recherche du temps perdu (Edition de la Nouvelle Revue Française, Paris: Librairie Gallimard, 1925), p. 204.

where life was an array of beautiful and inspiring impressions, has been gradually torn down with each disappointment. It seems to him that his imagination has ceased to function, stranding him in a cold and lifeless existence. Having failed so many times to find the material equivalents of his dreams, Marcel is now left without any hope. A state of disillusionment has taken the place of his world of fantasy.

Chapter 4

THE MYSTERY OF LIFE

The narrator has a series of unique experiences during his lifetime, sensations derived from objects in nature or art. He finds himself struck by inexplicable sensations of joy, that he is unable to comprehend initially. A sight, sound, smell, or touch evokes the sensation, but at the same time Marcel has the feeling that each sensation holds something more profound for him than mere sensual pleasure. Marcel is at a loss in his attempts to delve further into the nature of these experiences. He wonders what meaning these sensations could have for him and whether he will ever discover the secret which lies beneath them. He believes that he would perhaps be able to find a real meaning in life if he could only solve the mystery that surrounds these experiences. In the novel, Proust gives special emphasis to three particular moments in the narrator's life, those involved with the hawthorn blossoms along the Meseglise way, the steeples of the church at Martinville, and the three trees at Balbec.

One day Marcel, his father, and grandfather are walking along the path which leads them by the Swann

estate, when Marcel is overcome by the odor of blossoming hawthorns. It is not a new experience for him; he had first fallen in love with the hawthorn blossoms at the May church services, where they were arranged decoratively upon the altar. Even at that time he felt that it was nature which had made them worthy of rejoicing while simultaneously keeping an aura of solemn mystery. However, this particular time the smell of the hawthorns evokes a special feeling of wonder and enchantment. He desires to make their impression last longer in order to allow his mind time enough to penetrate deeper into the experience with hopes of uncovering some profound secret in its depths:

Mais j'avais beau rester devant les aubépines à respirer, à porter devant ma pensée qui ne savait ce qu'elle devait en faire, à perdre, à retrouver leur invisible et fixe odeur, à m'unir au rythme qui jetait leurs fleurs, ici et là, avec une allégresse juvénile et à des intervalles inattendus comme certains intervalles musicaux, elles m'offraient indéfiniment le même charme avec une profusion inépuisable, mais sans me laisser approfondir davantage, comme ces mélodies qu'on rejoue cent fois de suite sans descendre plus avant dans leur secret (Combray, p. 184).

Marcel is inspired to an even greater degree by the marvel of nature when his grandfather points out another hawthorn bush--this time with pink blossoms instead of white. It communicates to him a feeling of festivity and gives him a sense of rapport with nature. It is no longer one of those numerous things in his everyday life, that he takes for granted and never really learns to appreciate. The hawthorn blossom becomes a symbol of

his childhood happiness at Combray and his first sensations of love for Gilberte. In the following passage, Proust expresses the marvel of nature that the narrator discovers in the essence of the pink blossoms:

Et certes, je l'avais tout de suite senti, comme devant les épines blanches mais avec plus d'émerveillement, que ce n'était pas facticement, par un artifice de fabrication humaine, qu'était traduite l'intention de festivité dans les fleurs, mais que c'était la nature qui, spontanément l'avait exprimée avec la naïveté d'une commerçante de village travaillant pour un reposoir, en surchargeant l'arbuste de ces rosettes d'un ton trop tendre et d'un pompadour provincial (Combray, p. 186).

Although the hawthorns make a deep impression upon Marcel's mind, he is unable to explain the experience. It is a revelation to him that something exists beyond the visual and tactile world, a dimension filled with mystery, beauty, and truth. He does not understand how or why he is filled with sensations of joyful ecstasy, but he is sure that it must be more than a mere sensual pleasure derived from an external object. Marcel is struck by an overwhelming desire to penetrate the walls of this newly discovered dimension and find its meaning for his life.

Marcel finds that nature is not the only stimulus which is capable of creating within him joyful exultations. He discovers the same kind of sensation at the sight of the steeples of the church at Martinville as he passes them in a moving carriage. The artistic outline of the steeples against the sky suddenly brings a pleasurable

sensation to the narrator. He has seen the same sight many times before, but it had never had this kind of effect on him previously. One might note the similarity of this occurrence with that of the hawthorns--an everyday and familiar sight or smell that usually receives little notice unexpectedly reveals an essence never before made evident. Having caught a ride in Dr. Percepied's carriage, Marcel passes in sight of the two steeples as the sun is setting, a sight which creates an impressive and unique image in his mind:

En constatant, en notant la forme de leur flèche, le déplacement de leurs lignes, l'ensoleillement de leur surface, je sentais que je n'allais pas au bout de mon impression, que quelque chose était derrière ce mouvement, derrière cette clarté, quelque chose qu'ils semblaient contenir et dérober à la fois (Combray, p. 228).

For the first time, Marcel is aware of the beauty which is inherent in the steeples. Still he cannot grasp the full meaning of his impression. He feels that more exists in the experience than he is presently able to comprehend. The reason that the steeples evoke such a pleasure is a mystery to Marcel. He wishes that he could keep in reserve his impression of the steeples, so that it would not be necessary to think about it now. However, he knows that the steeples will probably join the other objects, which he had set apart by similar experiences, but had ultimately failed to explore further:

Et il est probable que si je l'avais fait, les deux clochers seraient allés à jamais rejoindre tant d'arbres, de toits, de parfums, de sons, que j'avais

distingués des autres à cause de ce plaisir obscur qu'ils m'avaient procuré et que je n'ai jamais approfondi (Combray, p. 228).

Suddenly the sight contains something new for Marcel that gives him revived hope in his literary aspirations. The sensation that he experiences inspires in the young man a desire to express his feelings on paper. He finds that it is satisfying to be able to express the sensation, and furthermore, it appears to be a natural way to follow up his impression:

Sans me dire que ce qui était caché derrière les clochers de Martinville devait être quelque chose d'analogue à une jolie phrase, puisque c'était sous la forme de mots qui me faisaient plaisir que cela m'était apparu, demandant un crayon et du papier au docteur, je composai malgré les cahots de la voiture, pour soulager ma conscience et obéir à mon enthousiasme . . . (Combray, p. 229).

It is a revelation that his artistic inspiration is not dead, but that it is a living part of his own being. He experiences for the first time the joy of artistic creation. "Je me trouvais si heureux, je sentais qu'elle m'avait si parfaitement débarrassé de ces clochers et de ce qu'ils cachaient derrière eux . . ." (Combray, p. 230).

An incident similar to that of the steeples of Martinville occurs some time later during the narrator's visit to Balbec. This time it is not the view of steeples but three trees which catch his attention from Mme. de Villeparisis' carriage. He is overwhelmed by a sense of profound happiness as he catches a glimpse of the

trees, which form a strikingly familiar pattern. His first impression is that he must be in a world of make-believe, Balbec being a place to which he had never gone save in imagination. This impression reminds him of the belief in an imaginary environment, to which one is transported while reading a book. He recognizes the significance of the experience, one of those rare moments which make the rest of his life seem unimportant:

Ce plaisir, dont l'objet n'était que pressenti, que j'avais à créer moi-même, je ne l'éprouvais que de rares fois, mais à chacune d'elles il me semblait que les choses qui s'étaient passées dans l'intervalle n'avaient guère d'importance et qu'en m'attachant à la seule réalité je pourrais commencer enfin une vraie vie (A l'Ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs, part II, p. 162).

Just as on previous occasions, the narrator feels that the trees are concealing something which he has failed to grasp. Proust makes a mental image of this feeling--he suggests that it is like being able to touch only the outer surface of some object placed out of reach, without being able to actually grasp it. Marcel is unable to discover the source of his pleasure, and the experience remains incomplete. The site does not recall any memory from his past; he recognizes the image, but its origin is obscure in his conscious memory.

The narrator chooses to believe that these trees are "phantoms of the past," which are beckoning him to bring them to life:

Je crus plutôt que c'étaient des fantômes du passée, de chers compagnons de mon enfance, des amis disparus qui invoquaient nos communs souvenirs. Comme des ombres ils semblaient me demander de les emmener avec moi, de les rendre à la vie (A l'Ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs, part II, p. 164).

Marcel feels the urgency of the message that the trees are trying to convey to him. He believes that he must learn the meaning of this experience while the opportunity is at hand. Otherwise, he may lose his chance, and this part of himself may never come alive again. The trees appear to be warning him not to let the opportunity slip away from him:

Je vis les arbres s'éloigner en agitant leurs bras désespérés, semblant me dire: ce que tu n'apprends pas de nous aujourd'hui tu ne le sauras jamais. Si tu nous laisses retomber au fond de ce chemin d'où nous cherchions à nous hisser jusqu'à toi, toute une partie de toi-même que nous t'apportions tombera pour jamais au néant (A l'Ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs, part II, p. 164).

Although the narrator does not grasp the essence of this experience, many years later the mystery of these sensations is revealed to him. Then he is finally able to put together the pieces of the puzzle of life. The steeples of Martinville, the hawthorn blossoms of the Méséglise "way," and the three trees at Balbec have been revelations of the reality existing within the narrator.

Proust conveys to his readers his total sensitivity to the world around him. Georges Cattau, author of Marcel Proust, explains Proust's sensitivity to beauty and his ability to convey that experience to his readers:

. . . the slightest perception awakens in Proust a thousand echoes, reflections, and connections so that, at every step, we are led to discover new worlds. He associates us in his discoveries and leads us to share his aesthetic joys; his intonations seek the source of life within every object.³¹

Proust leads the narrator through numerous situations which reveal to him the beauty and happiness that can be found in the things around him, whether it be in nature or in art. He discovers a sense of beauty in the familiar things of everyday life.

The reality of every object is relative to its beholder, deriving its significance and being from those who encounter it and their individual perceptions. The pink hawthorns, the steeples of Martinville, and the three trees hold a special significance; they represent the beauty of nature and art for Marcel. Therefore, that is reality for Marcel. The hawthorns do not evoke similar feelings in his grandfather, although he regards them simultaneously with Marcel, and Dr. Percepied sees nothing in the steeples while Marcel is filled with awe at the sight of them. Each individual must discover his own personal reality. Proustian scholar, Derrick Leon, explains the importance of individual perception:

The external world has existence for us in direct ratio to the breadth and intensity of our impressions, and ideas have meaning only to the extent that we assimilate them. Apart from our own perceptions and our own understanding, we can possess nothing;

³¹Cattai, op. cit., p. 48.

and beauty, whether it resides in nature or in art, is only ours when we can appreciate its significance.³²

Through his experiences of sensation, Marcel learns to know the happiness of uncovering the truth of familiar objects in his environment. Life reveals to Marcel that the reality of the external world is a product of his own being.

³²Leon, *op. cit.*, p. 170.

Chapter 5

THE MAGIC OF MEMORY

The theme of the subconscious is a vital element in the Proustian concept of reality. Proust sees the subconscious as a means of retaining a true experience or sensation from the past without rearranging or distorting its essence through the process of time. The habits and opinions formed throughout the years will not allow one to know the truth, because his perception of every experience is blurred or reorganized according to the way that he has learned to regard his environment, other people, and himself.

According to Proust, an event or sensation can be brought back to life and restored to a person's conscious memory without his conscious effort. This memory has transcended the realms of time in order to present itself as a present reality to the individual, if only for a fleeting moment. Margaret Mein describes this experience in terms of its relation to time: ". . . then the past floods our consciousness with such dazzling completeness of array that the essence of time, so disengaged, displaces the mockery of a chronological ordering

of events."³³ An awareness of the past is joined to a sense of present existence in order to form a moment of time in its purest essence. It is a momentary liberation from time's usual command of the order of events--an existence outside of the laws of time as we know them. This phenomenon is the reality sought by the narrator of A la Recherche du temps perdu. Derrick Leon, author of Introduction to Proust, believes that Proust has hit on the one true reality in human existence:

The whole of our times is stored in the series of authentic memories in our unconscious, and our true life is only possible when we are no longer separated from them. Only then the essence in us which is unchanging, and therefore independent of time's laws, can reach the surface--the part of our being which was aware of that past, and lives still--the part of ourselves which in consequence is timeless, and can thus contact a reality which is impervious to change.³⁴

A moment from the past, sometimes believed to be long dead, becomes again a true experience that is often more relevant than it was initially. The original importance of each detail in our vast store of memories has no bearing on which of them may come to mind later. Proust realizes that our involuntary memory may bring to the surface some event or sensation that had seemed trivial or insignificant many years before. This Proustian phenomenon seems amazing when one contemplates the time

³³Margaret Mein, Proust's Challenge to Time (New York: Barnes and Noble, Inc., 1962), p. 10.

³⁴Leon, op. cit., p. 292.

interval that may take place and the triviality of the original experience.

Nevertheless, it is a universal experience familiar to all. The moment was perhaps not appreciated at its first appearance or the full impact of the situation was not completely realized or perhaps its meaning was not directly comprehended because of the experience's inconspicuous nature at that time. This same event may, however, take one unaware some time later. Suddenly, the once uneventful moment bursts forth as a memory full of significance. This sensation is a reality to its beholder, more meaningful to him than was the original experience. In A la Recherche du temps perdu, Marcel becomes aware of an inner reality and learns to appreciate some remembrances of his childhood days that he had long forgotten and of which he had initially failed to see the significance--a petite madeleine, a book read to him by his mother one lonely night, the feel of the uneven stones of the Baptistery of Saint-Marks.

Voluntary as opposed to involuntary memory merely brings to mind the facts of a past event, without any conviction of reality. The difference is that one does not re-experience the past as he remembers it. During the rare moments of involuntary memory, one actually relives a past moment, experiencing once again the previous sensations. Simultaneously one becomes again that person from the past and yet remains what he has become since.

These sensations produce feelings of timelessness and reality, because the essence of the experience is not inherent in an outside stimulus but in the person's own being. Through the process of time, one builds up a wall of prejudices, opinions, theories, and habits which prevents him from becoming aware of his "real self."

According to Proust, it is possible to know reality in childhood, because a child has not had the time to form opinions, prejudices, and habits which form a screen around him, dulling and distorting his perception of the world. A child is able to see clearly into the beauty of the real world. William S. Bell explains the reality of childhood:

The experiences of childhood have a solidity and a reality missing from most of the experiences of later life. This is because the child experiences for the first time. He has not yet erected between himself and the exterior world a screen of the intellectual skills of rationalization, generalization, analogy, explanation, and interpretation which prevent his total adherence to the object perceived and diminish its reality for him.³⁵

In A la Recherche du temps perdu it is made evident that the narrator's most meaningful years are the days that he spent at Combray as a child.

In later years the narrator still finds joy in the thought of the people and things he encountered along the Méséglise and Guermantes "ways," while at the same

³⁵William S. Bell, "Introduction" to Un Amour de Swann (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1965), p. 12.

time his nostalgic memories subject him to much disillusionment as an adult. He finds it difficult to find a happiness in adulthood that is comparable to his happy childhood experiences. Marcel wishes that he could know the reality of those days in his adult life. He discovers that any sense of reality for him at the present time can only be possible through the workings of involuntary memory:

Soit que la foi qui crée soit tarie en moi, soit que la réalité ne se forme que dans la mémoire, les fleurs qu'on me montre aujourd'hui pour la première fois ne me semblent pas de vraies fleurs (Combray, p. 232).

According to Proustian thought, "a moment can endure in the consciousness, unimpaired, simply because it has lain forgotten, untouched by habit, change, and reflection."³⁶ In this statement lies the key to the reason that these experiences from the past do not occur frequently or as a result of any conscious effort to bring them to mind. Past life is only an accumulation of impressions and memories, which, for the most part, have become sterile and distorted because of our inability to comprehend anything outside of our own experience. Through the process of time, habit becomes a factor which controls our impressions, memories, imagination, and concepts of reality:

Our minds become cluttered up with stale images and lifeless knowledge, until there is formed around us an impermeable shell that shuts us off completely

³⁶Mein, op. cit., p. 8.

from the world. Crystallized, at last, in an almost blind, insentient and impervious combination of reflexes and reactions, all real life in us becomes extinguished and thus we are separated forever from the spontaneous happiness we knew in childhood.³⁷

Built-up defenses will not allow one to come into direct contact with the reality of childhood at will. One can only wait for the moments of involuntary memory to manifest themselves and learn to appreciate the beauty of the experiences as they occur:

This hidden goal, with all the truth, the significance, the profound and elusive beauty of a different state of consciousness dimly discerned but rarely realized, is the source from which flow the only waves of true reality, however faint, that ever reach us--the only intimations of immortality that we can ever know.³⁸

Marcel realizes that the memories of his childhood years still exist within him, although he cannot always feel their presence or grasp their essence. He remembers the hours spent with his mother, those precious moments when she would come into his bedroom to kiss him goodnight. He regrets that those times will never return. For Marcel, the past remains locked up in his subconscious. "La possibilité de telles heures ne renaitra jamais pour moi" (Combray, p. 72). He is aware that his sobs on those nights are still a part of him, but he is unable to resurrect that part of his being because of the wall that he has built up through the years. His stifled

³⁷Leon, op. cit., p. 287.

³⁸Ibid., p. 269.

memories are compared to the convent bells which are drowned out by the town noises during the day:

En réalité ils (les sanglots) n'ont jamais cessé; et c'est seulement parce que la vie se tait maintenant davantage autour de moi que je les entends de nouveau, comme les cloches de couvents que couvrent si bien les bruits de la ville pendant le jour qu'on les croirait arrêtées mais qui se remettant à sonner dans le silence du soir (Combray, p. 72).

Only by freeing himself from the prison of his present existence with its walls of attitudes and habits will he be able to experience again those hours from the past. The memories are not dead and exist as part of his being, but like the convent bells, they cannot be heard above the "noises" of the daily routine.

Similar to his ideas on involuntary memory, the celtic belief in after-life seems reasonable to Marcel. The Celts believed that the souls of those they had lost became captive in some inferior being--an animal, vegetable, or inanimate object. They were lost to those living unless, by chance, one came in contact with the object of their prison. If the finder recognized the imprisoned soul, the spell was broken, death was conquered, and the deceased could return to the world of the living. Marcel compares this celtic belief to his theory on involuntary memory. It is necessary to depend upon chance that one may someday find the stimulus which will uncover some part of the past. Only in a chance encounter with some particular object, when one is most unsuspecting, does the opportunity to relive the past appear. If one does

not happen to stumble onto the object which will revive the past, then that memory remains locked forever in the individual's subconscious. Our conscious memory is impotent in any attempt to resurrect the past. In the following passage, Proust makes a reference to the celtic belief, showing its similarity to the theory of involuntary memory:

Il en est ainsi de notre passé. C'est peine perdue que nous cherchions à l'évoquer, tous les efforts de notre intelligence sont inutiles. Il est caché hors de son domaine et de sa portée, en quelque objet matériel (en la sensation que nous donnerait cet objet matériel) que nous ne soupçonnons pas. Cet objet, il dépend du hasard que nous le rencontrions avant de mourir, ou que nous ne le rencontrions pas (Combray, p. 80).

When Marcel finally becomes aware of the true reality which exists within him, he is extremely impressed by the aesthetic value of the world. His experiences with involuntary memory reveal to him an insight into the beauty that exists in the realm of reality--a beauty that he desires to convey to others through his literary art. It is now made obvious why the narrator has previously found only disillusionment in his encounters with the external world. An individual's active memory is incapable of revealing the inherent beauty of objects that are only perceived by the senses. Derrick Leon explains the reason that the beauty of the real world is seldom part of our daily lives:

The real world, he understands at last, is always saturated in beauty, but usually we remain unaware of it because we substitute within ourselves arbitrary

interpretations for impressions that we do not understand, or else base our opinion of the weariness and boredom of life upon a series of sterile perceptions that are devoid of beauty and vitality simply because of our own obtuseness.³⁹

The most well-known scene in A la Recherche du temps perdu is Marcel's revelation that he has captured a moment from his past, overwhelmed by the knowledge that some part of his childhood happiness is still alive within him. The sensation manifests itself in a sip of tea, in which he has dipped a petite madeleine given him by his mother. Automatically the taste fills him with an unexpected sensation of joy, a feeling of exultation that only stays with him for a fleeting moment. "Un plaisir délicieux m'avait envahi, isolé, sans la notion de sa cause" (Combray, p. 80). He recognizes the taste, which takes him back to his Aunt Léonie's chamber on the mornings that she would give him a taste of madeleine dipped in her tea. His whole childhood at Combray comes alive for him, and he rediscovers the happiness that he had known as a boy.

Time stands still for Marcel, and he realizes the beauty of this pure state, when two separate moments in time coincide and unite to become one unique experience. It is an experience that lies in a dimension beyond the laws of time known to the universe. The narrator contemplates the miraculous revelation which has occurred:

³⁹Ibid., p. 291.

Mais, quand d'un passé ancien rien ne subsiste, après la mort des êtres, après la destruction des choses, seules, plus frêles mais plus vivaces, plus immatérielles, plus persistantes, plus fidèles, l'odeur et la saveur restent encore longtemps, comme des âmes, à se rappeler, à attendre, à espérer, sur la ruine de tout le reste, à porter sans fléchir, sur leur gouttelette presque impalpable, l'édifice immense du souvenir (Combray, p. 82).

The memory of the madeleine had seemed too trivial to find a place in Marcel's conscious memory, but at the same time, it was a vital part of his subconscious, where the truth of his real life was stored. The experience stands as a symbol and a reminder of the long past childhood happiness that Marcel once knew.

The taste of the madeleine dipped in tea is the stimulus which triggers the unexpected revival of childhood memories, but this taste is not the source of the pleasure experienced. Marcel comes to the realization that the object of these sensations does not hold the essence of the true experience. The memory is a part of himself, and he must look inward to find any sense of reality in life. The revelation becomes clearer as he attempts to recapture his initial sensation by taking a second and third sip of the tea, only to experience his original feeling diminishing. "Il est clair que la vérité que je cherche n'est pas en lui (le thé), mais en moi" (Combray, p. 80).

Proust moves the reader from this significant experience of the petite madeleine through a series of pessimistic incidents of disillusionment, only occasionally

inserting optimistic hints of the eventual revelation in Le Temps retrouvé, which puts the last piece in the puzzle in order to solve the mystery of these experiences. Any illusions of finding happiness or self-fulfillment having long vanished, the narrator attends an afternoon reception given by the Princesse de Guermantes. There, Proust takes the reader back to the incident of the petite madeleine as the narrator experiences similar occurrences numerous successive times. It is as if the narrator has gone in a circle, arriving at the point of departure after a lifetime of mental suffering and anguish--a lifetime of knocking on doors that lead nowhere. Although all appears to be lost, the one door that opens on the truth suddenly comes open for the narrator:

Mais c'est quelquefois au moment où tout nous semble perdu que l'avertissement arrive qui peut nous sauver: on a frappé à toutes les portes qui ne donnent sur rien, et la seule par où on peut entrer et qu'on aurait cherchée en vain pendant cent ans, on y heurte sans le savoir et elle s'ouvre.⁴⁰

Upon entering the courtyard of the Guermantes residence, the narrator jumps back to avoid being struck by a moving automobile, and in doing so, strikes his foot against some uneven flagstones. As with the savour of the madeleine, he is filled with a feeling of happiness which dispells all anxiety as to the future. Magically

⁴⁰ Marcel Proust, Le Temps retrouvé, vol. VIII of A la Recherche du temps perdu (Edition de la Nouvelle Revue Française, Paris: Librairie Gallimard, 1927), p. 237.

the reality of his literary talent comes to light. He succeeds in recapturing the sensation, refusing to let it slip into oblivion as had so often happened on previous occasions. He recognizes the sensation as the same that he had once felt as he stood on two uneven flagstones in the baptistry of Saint-Mark's in Venice:

Et presque tout de suite, je le reconnus, c'était Venise dont mes efforts pour la décrire et les prétendus instantanés pris par ma mémoire ne m'avaient jamais rien dit et que la sensation que j'avais ressentie jadis sur deux dalles inégales du baptistère de Saint-Marc, m'avait rendue avec toutes les autres sensations jointes ce jour-là à cette sensation-là, et qui étaient restées dans l'attente, à leur rang, d'où un brusque hasard les avait impérieusement fait sortir, dans la série des jours oubliés (Le Temps retrouvé, part II, pp. 8-9).

Just as his whole childhood at Combray came alive at the taste of the madeleine, now all his forgotten memories of Venice are revived.

The second incident comes in direct succession as he is waiting to enter the reception room. In a small library adjoining the buffet, the narrator hears the sound of a spoon striking a plate, and he is immediately transported, in a sort of hallucination, to a railway carriage from which a little clump of trees is visible. The noise is the hammer of a workman making some repairs to a wheel while the train is stopped. The very row of trees, that he had studied wearily at the time of this incident so many years ago, now stand before him, filling him with delight:

Le même genre de félicité que n'avaient donné les dalles inégales m'envahit; les sensations étaient de grande chaleur encore mais toutes différentes, mêlée d'une odeur de fumée apaisée par la fraîche odeur d'un cadre forestier; et je reconnus que ce qui me paraissait si agréable était la même rangée d'arbres que j'avais trouvée ennuyeuse à observer et à décrire, et devant laquelle, débouchant la canette de bière que j'avais dans le wagon, je venais de croire un instant, dans une sorte d'étourdissement, que je me trouvais, tant le bruit identique de la cuiller contre l'assiette m'avait donné, avant que j'eusse eu le temps de me ressaisir, l'illusion du bruit du marteau d'un employé qui avait arrangé quelque chose à une roue de train pendant que nous étions arrêtés devant ce petit bois (Le Temps retrouvé, part II, pp. 9-10).

He finds happiness in the memory of his stay at Balbec, a place which he had originally failed to enjoy.

According to Proust, reality is never revealed when one is in conscious contact with the external world, because imagination can only function when the object of its creation is absent. Therefore, one is able to discover the reality of the world only through memory. Marcel is impotent in sensing any illusions of reality in the present. It is only when the past presents itself in a coalition with the present that the truth of certain objects and people is revealed.

He feels nothing at the time of his beloved grandmother's death, but more than a year later during his second visit to Balbec, he is struck with grief at the loss of his grandmother. Suffering from ill health the first night of his return, he cautiously bends over to remove his boots and is immediately filled with an unknown and divine presence which moves him to tears. He perceives

in his memory the tender but dejected face of his grandmother, as it had been on the first night of their arrival at Balbec. The fact that she is dead and removed from the immediate present makes it possible for the narrator to know his "true" grandmother, whose living reality is recaptured in a complete act of recollection.

The subconscious can keep in reserve not only moments of happiness, but also grief, sorrow, or any emotion that may capture the true essence of each experience from the past. This fact is made evident to the narrator in Le Temps retrouvé as the revelation of these experiences of involuntary memory continues to expand. The shrill noise of a hot-water pipe becomes a blast from a pleasure boat off the coast of Balbec at the end of the afternoon. Then in browsing through the books in the library, Marcel picks up a copy of François le Champi. He finds himself moved to tears at the sight of its title. It is a painful, but true experience, becoming again that wretched and miserable child on the night of his parents' initial abdication and the beginning of his decline. The book is the same that his mother had read aloud to him that lonely night, and now he finds that the title still holds the spell of that night:

Je m'étais au premier instant demandé avec colère quel était l'étranger qui venait me faire mal et l'étranger c'était moi-même, c'était l'enfant que j'étais alors, que le livre venait de susciter en moi . . . Aussi ce livre que ma mère m'avait lu haut à Combray presque jusqu'au matin avait-il gardé pour moi tout le charme de cette nuit-là (Le Temps retrouvé, part II, p. 32).

Nevertheless, the reality of the experience reveals to the narrator a sense of beauty in this copy of Francis de Chamois, which is independent of the value of the book itself.

The narrator now knows that his attempts to find the truth of life in the external world were in vain, because the reality, for which he was in search, exists within him in the realms of his subconscious. It is only for him to recognize the reality of the past as it is revealed to him through experiences of involuntary memory. The revelations of Le Temps retrouvé are also a calling to realize the imaginative qualities and literary inspiration that have shown themselves in the depths of the narrator's real being. Marcel no longer fears death, because his real life exists outside of time in a fourth dimension. Margaret Mein in Proust's Challenge to Time emphasizes the significance of the narrator's calling to use his discovery: "For all concerned, hope must surely lie in one direction only, to take increasing refuge in inner or psychological time, in cultivating the technique of involuntary memory and in using the fourth dimension."⁴¹ Reliving the past through involuntary memory is a transcendent experience which reveals the metaphysical and subjective truths in every person's life.

⁴¹Mein, op. cit., p. 12.

Chapter 6

THE TIMELESSNESS OF ART

The theme of art is closely linked with Proust's concept of reality. Throughout the novel, Proust portrays the world of art in its various forms. During the course of his lifetime, the narrator is influenced by certain artists in their perspective fields--Bergotte in literature, Berma in the theatre, Vinteuil in music, and Elstir in painting. Each in turn adds to the reader's understanding of the meaning of art for Proust. Bergotte could be Proust himself with his talent for metaphorical imagery, and Elstir, probably patterned after the impressionist Monet, is the artist who sees beneath the surface of objects, penetrates into their being, and paints his impressions of the world. All of these artists stand as symbols of the creative life that the narrator is struggling to attain.

It is in Le Temps retrouvé that the narrator's own calling in art is realized. The reality that he has discovered within him becomes now the sign which points the way to artistic creation. According to Proust, reality is a true relationship between the sensations and memories that can surround an individual simultaneously:

Ce que nous appelons la réalité est un certain rapport entre ces sensations et ces souvenirs qui nous entourent simultanément . . . --rapport unique que l'écrivain doit retrouver pour en enchaîner à jamais dans sa phrase les deux termes différents (Le Temps retrouvé, part II, pp. 39-40).

The writer's task is to recapture that relationship so that he may bind together its two distinct elements forever in a phrase. For the writer, the truth begins when he takes two different things, establishes their relationship, and makes their essential nature stand out clearly by joining them in a metaphor, thus removing them from the contingencies of time. At the heart of true art exist the same kind of relationships which are present in nature. In The Two Worlds of Marcel Proust, Harold March discusses the relationships which constitute the essence of reality:

It is the business of the writer, according to Proust, to portray reality, and reality is not attained simply by looking at objects in succession; it lies rather in a relation, established by sensations, between a moment of the present and a moment of the past; it also lies in the relation, perceived in contemplation, between two objects viewed simultaneously, or of which one is viewed and the other voluntarily recalled. The principle by which such relationships exist is the essence.⁴²

The metaphor stands out as a basic artistic tool for the writer who wants to portray the relationships existing in reality. It is a procedure of "laying side by side" the things, in which one can find similarities of essence.⁴³ By binding together these objects in a

⁴²March, op. cit., p. 233.

⁴³Ibid.

metaphor, the artist uncovers the profound and inherent qualities which have been revealed to him as real. It is a question of extracting the essence from life and establishing relationships based on that essence. Georges Cattaui sees the metaphor as a means of escaping the limits imposed by time's laws:

In literature, metaphor and analogy confer a kind of unity on style by extracting the essence from experience and placing it in a sphere outside the laws of time and contingency. Such eternity and transcendence of time-laws are at the very heart of Proust's exultant message of triumph over time.⁴⁴

The use of metaphor allows the writer to capture the essence of life's relationships and to guard those visions of reality from the destruction of time.

It is necessary for the artist to extract the personal aspect from his impressions of the world. From this point of view, documentary realism has no value at all, since it is beneath the noted objective details that reality is hidden. This art called "realism" reproduces the lie which has built up around inaccurate impressions based on habit, prejudice, opinion, and the intellectual processes. Mere cinematographic presentation destroys the beauty of life's relationships and gets further away from the truth the more closely it claims to adhere to it. The literature that is satisfied to just describe is the farthest removed from reality,

⁴⁴Cattaui, op. cit., p. 17.

because it destroys communication of the present self with the past, the essence of the past being preserved in the objects of the present. An artist needs the courage to believe in the truth of his own vision and must have the ability to project that vision into the consciousness of the world.

According to Proust, the artist must strive to present the truth of reality from his own subjective point of view, because "the hall mark and the measure of true talent lie precisely in its difference from popular imitations, and its value is proportionate to the originality of the aspect that it affords in a sincere approach to truth."⁴⁵ He rejects the idea that art can be subservient to any cause other than its own. The true artist does not use revolution, a particular nation, or social problems as a reason to write. For Proust, a work of art remains the subjective presentation of the artist's perception of the world, and this purpose suffices to warrant its creation. Milton Hindus, author of the Proustian Vision, explains Proust's justification for art: "If art could serve society, this service must always be an incidental by-product of its main purpose,

⁴⁵Leon, op. cit., p. 266.

which is concerned with the revelation of the essential nature of things.⁴⁶

Proust considers a work of art to be the only means of recapturing the past, and with this idea comes the narrator's revelation that the materials for his literary work are none other than his own past life, moments stored up in his mind whose purpose or even survival he had not foreseen. He has now found meaning for his life, because he has been living for this work of art without knowing it. The subject, which he had never been able to find when he sat down to write, is nothing more than his own past. The grandeur of real art in the Proustian scheme is to rediscover and translate that reality, from which most people live so far removed. It is for the artist to seize the essence of his reality, despite the fact that formal knowledge, so often substituted for the truth, usually separates the individual from his true reality. For every individual, true reality is simply his life--the only life that is really lived:

La grandeur de l'art véritable, au contraire, de celui que M. de Norpois eût appelé un jeu de dilettante, c'était de retrouver, de ressaisir, de nous faire connaître cette réalité loin de laquelle nous vivons, de laquelle nous nous écartons de plus en plus au fur et à mesure que prend plus d'épaisseur et d'imperméabilité la connaissance conventionnelle que nous lui substituons, cette réalité que nous risquerions fort de mourir sans l'avoir connue, et

⁴⁶Milton Hindus, The Proustian Vision (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1954), p. 63.

qui est tout simplement notre vie, la vraie vie, la vie enfin découverte et éclaircie, la seule vie par conséquent réellement vécue, cette vie qui en un sens, habite à chaque instant chez tous les hommes aussi bien que chez l'artiste (Le Temps retrouvé, part II, p. 48).

Since a subjective reality exists in every human being, the great writer need not invent it. The substance of art can be found in the subconscious of every individual; it is simply that person's impressions of the world as they are revealed to him through the memories of his past life. The images conveyed by the writer should be true impressions which come directly from his world of reality. Reality is filled with beauty, truth, and poetry, which can be transformed into a work of art. This idea is expressed in Nostalgia: A Psychoanalytic Study of Marcel Proust:

Proust makes it clear that memory unfolds in patterns. If we strike the right sensory keys to recall, these emotional patterns may emerge from the unconscious into poetic images, which may become the substance of art.⁴⁷

The writer need only discover his own personal sense of reality and translate it. Proust sees the duty of a writer to be that of translator: "Le devoir et la tâche d'un écrivain sont ceux d'un traducteur" (Le Temps retrouvé, part II, p. 41).

Style is not a question of technique for the writer, but of vision. It is the revelation of the different ways in which the world is perceived. Thanks

⁴⁷Miller, op. cit., p. 229.

to art, one is given the opportunity to get "out" of himself and know the world as another sees it, there being available as many different concepts of the world as there are original artists. In Derrick Leon's Introduction to Proust, art is described as "the great bridge by which man can occasionally glimpse and even gain entrance to a supraterrrestrial and secret world which usually is inaccessible to him."⁴⁸ Through a work of art, an individual can actually experience previously unknown "worlds," he can see things through a different pair of eyes, and he may perhaps find beauty where it has never before been revealed to him.

Proust views suffering as a necessary prerequisite to creation. He believes that it is only while one is suffering that his thoughts can bring the real world within visual range. He likens this upsurge of mental power to the perpetual, changing movements of a storm, contrasting it with the calm of happiness which leaves one unaware and void of true feeling:

Car si peu que notre vie doive durer, ce n'est que pendant que nous souffrons que nos pensées en quelque sorte agitées de mouvements perpétuels et changeants font monter comme dans une tempête, à un niveau d'où nous pouvons les voir, toute cette immensité réglée par des lois, sur laquelle, postés à une fenêtre mal placée, nous n'avons pas vue, car le calme du bonheur la laisse unie et à un niveau trop bas . . . (Le Temps retrouvé, part II, p. 50).

⁴⁸Leon, op. cit., p. 267.

It is grief that develops the powers of the mind, by bringing one back to the truth, forcing him to see through the network of habits, skepticism, and indifference that usually surround him, and making him analyze his sentiments seriously. Proust concludes that the pain of suffering is priceless to the artist; it is the nourishment required for the strengthening of his creative powers. Derrick Leon explains the relationship between suffering and artistic creation:

But suffering, for Proust, is one of the first requirements--the inevitable nourishment of the artist's life. For it is only when his whole being is in a state of agitation and many hidden springs of action are therefore flung to the surface, that he can experience, observe, study and understand fully those invariable laws which govern human life.⁴⁹

Suffering furnishes the motive power to start the wheels of imagination and sensibility turning. The narrator considers his happy years as wasted time. He believes that the only good in happiness lies in its contrast to unhappiness, rendering the latter more profound and painful.

On the other hand, suffering as it is depicted in art creates an interesting paradox, by becoming transformed into a source of delight for the beholder. For the artist, the sources of suffering become the subjects of contemplation and emerge as pure ideas, which evoke instant joy in place of sorrow. The artist must make use of those causes of suffering to enable him to draw

⁴⁹Ibid., p. 265.

nearer to their divine forms, which constitute the essence of reality. Through the process of creation, the artist resuscitates these moments of suffering, represents them in a general form, and makes the whole world share in his sentiments. This enables the artist to escape the strangling hold of suffering and brings him a certain feeling of joy. Proust believes in the power of art to transform the darkness of sorrow into an atmosphere of poetry which radiates joy:

Et comme l'art recompose exactement la vie, autour des vérités qu'on a atteintes en soi-même flottera toujours une atmosphère de poésie, la douceur d'un mystère qui n'est que le vestige de la pénombre que nous avons dû traverser, l'indication, marquée exactement comme par un altimètre, de la profondeur d'une oeuvre (Le Temps retrouvé, part II, p. 52).

The process of creation is a difficult task and one which the artist must undertake alone. Proust understands that the acceptance of an artistic creation is very seldom realized within the duration of the artist's life. However, he believes that a genuine work of art will eventually be accepted into the consciousness of the period. The narrator no longer fears death, because time no longer has any meaning for him. He has found the only way possible to defy the destructive forces of time, by implanting the essence of his life in the pages of a literary work of art. The reality of his life will have meaning, because it will continue to exist even after his death, recorded forever in the work of art which he has set out to create.

It is relevant to note that Proust performed a phenomenal feat in the structuring of A la Recherche du temps perdu. A full cycle is completed--the reader arrives at the conclusion only to find himself back at the beginning. Just as the narrator is prepared to undertake the writing of a novel, the reader comes to the realization that he has just finished reading that novel. Proust's novel itself becomes the foremost example of the work of art which he discusses so fully in the text of A la Recherche du temps perdu; it is the existing evidence of the author's views on literary art. The beauty of the phenomenon lies in its adherence to the Proustian concept of the metaphysical and timeless qualities of true art.

Chapter 7

CONCLUSION

This thesis has been an attempt to extract the episodes from A la Recherche du temps perdu which best illustrate the Proustian concept of reality and to show the unifying logic behind these episodes by summarizing the message contained in Proust's novel. It is an analysis of the novel from an optimistic point of view-- a presentation of the events as a progressive building and enlightening process. Chapter 3 of the thesis necessarily appears to be pessimistic, but it is an essential step in the narrator's search for reality, the purpose of which becomes evident in the following chapters. The thesis basically follows the sequence of the novel itself as the narrator gradually discovers the meaning of reality and the relevance of this discovery for his own life. Numerous other themes recur throughout the novel and these have been discussed in light of their pertinence to the narrator's search, his revelations of reality, and his eventual self-fulfillment.

The themes of childhood, imagination, nature, society, love, memory, and art form a vast and complicated network of ideas, which Proust has carefully synthesized

into a basic philosophy of life in A la Recherche du temps perdu. The unity of these themes comes to light as a multi-layered collection of revelations on the nature of life. Throughout the novel, the narrator continually progresses toward an understanding of his own personal truth and the fulfillment of a literary vocation. One can see Proust's narrative as a chain of psychological revelations leading to the eventual attainment of truth, reality, and self-fulfillment.

Even the numerous disappointments in the narrator's life take on significance as he realizes his vocation. His periods of disillusionment with the external world now have become integrated with the rest of his past life--that life which is his reality and the substance of the work of art that he plans to create. The narrator's life can be viewed as a forward and optimistic progression toward self-fulfillment, despite the mental suffering and disillusionment. Proust provides the means to transform the feeling of alienation and discouragement into a spirit of self-assurance in the knowledge of truth.

Among the basic revelations which appear to the narrator are a realization of the past existing within him, the power of the subconscious to retain the essence of past experiences and sensations, and the ability of involuntary memory to bring those moments back to life. Through his experiences of involuntary memory, the narrator discovers that he cannot find the truth of reality in

the external world, because it exists within him. This revelation of a subjective reality living within his own being brings him to the understanding that each individual must find his own personal sense of truth. Marcel recognizes and learns to appreciate the beauty that is contained in the world of reality.

In Le Temps retrouvé comes the final step in these revelations of reality; this step reveals the relevancy of his past experiences and unifies the preceding volumes. Through an artistic vocation, the narrator can record the reality of his life and communicate his vision of the world forever, thus bringing about self-fulfillment and immortality. Art provides the means to transcend time's laws. The essence of reality transformed into an artistic creation is freed from the destructive forces of time. The power of art is Proust's final revelation; it is a message of triumph over time.

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