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BALZAC to BECKETT

*Center and Circumference
in French Fiction*

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/ /

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IV

PROUST AND THE ART OF INCOMPLETION

For Flaubert, the success of art depends on its ability to provide a definitive image of a reality anterior to art. Although the end of *Madame Bovary* gives to the novel a dimension it cannot explore but merely points to—that of a social order best characterized by the place it allows for Homais—this open-endedness is more apparent than real within the structure of the work. In its references to social history, *Madame Bovary* is deliberately incomplete, but formally its ending is an authentic conclusion, closing the work by helping, like the beginning, to enclose Emma's life within a larger and less analytically detailed picture of French provincial life. The intended finality of the work is indirectly reflected in Flaubert's awkward transitions from paragraph to paragraph and from chapter to chapter. His notion of style imprisons him in isolated, drawn-out battles with each narrative unit. And between the perfect and perfectly self-contained sentences and paragraphs, there is—ideally, we might almost say—nothing but the creative void in which the novelist's work (his novel and his struggle) has simply ceased to exist.

But what happens if the very impossibility of writing definitive sentences and definitive works—or, more radically, the *refusal* to do so—is recognized as the most interesting fact about artistic creation? Proust is the first major novelist to consider what we recognize as a still somewhat enigmatic but central proposition of contemporary art. But he formulates this proposition in a hesitant and even contradictory way, and much of the richness or the weakness (depending on how we feel about such hesitations) of *A la Recherche du temps perdu* depends on just this ambiguity in his commitment to changing the literary expectations and interests of his readers. Proust's characteristically qualified and almost subverted audacity is well illustrated in a passage from *La Prisonnière* on what the narrator calls the incomplete character of nineteenth-century masterpieces. Marcel has been praising Wagner; but “. . . I thought how markedly, all the same, [his] works participate in that quality of being—albeit marvellously—always incomplete, which is the peculiarity of all the great works of the nineteenth century, [a century marked by the literary miscarriages of its greatest writers, who, however,] watching themselves at work as though they were at once author and critic, have derived from this self-contemplation a novel beauty, exterior and superior to the work itself, imposing upon it retrospectively a unity, a greatness which it does not possess.”¹

1. Marcel Proust, *Remembrance of Things Past*, tr. C. K. Scott Moncrieff and (for *Le Temps retrouvé*) Frederick A. Blossom, 2 vols. (New York, copyright 1924, 1925, 1927, 1930, 1932 and renewed by Random House, Inc.), II, 490. *A la Recherche du temps perdu*, ed. Pierre Clarac and André Ferré, 3 vols. (Paris, 1954), III, 160. Subsequent page references to *A la Recherche* will be given in the text; the first reference in each case will be to the Moncrieff-Blossom translation, the second to the Pléiade edition in French. All other translations are my own. Moncrieff and Blossom worked with the *Nouvelle Revue Française* text published from 1919 to 1927; when it has been necessary in the passages I quote from *A la Recherche du temps perdu*, I have changed their translation to make the English correspond more closely to the most recent French edition.

If, as Ionesco has suggested, it is superfluous to speak of crises in art because interesting art is always an expression of crisis,² we can nevertheless speak of a specifically modern type of crisis in which artistic importance is identified with failure. It is true that Proust's narrator does not go so far as to say that the artists he mentions later on in this passage—Wagner, Hugo, Michelet, and Balzac—are great *because* they failed; in France, the necessity of failure in art will be argued and illustrated most explicitly by Blanchot and, as we shall see, by Beckett. Furthermore, the passage from *La Prisonnière* contains several shifts of tone and position. On the one hand, the narrator has suggested the irrelevance to modern art of centuries of esthetic theory. He implicitly defines "unity" and "greatness," which had traditionally been thought of as attributes belonging to the work itself, as myths of criticism—myths, we might add, engendered by certain cultural assumptions about the nature and function of art. But then what is there to admire in art? Having recognized and even praised the "literary miscarriages" of the nineteenth-century's "greatest writers," Proust's narrator is nevertheless tempted to turn from their art to the unifying—and falsifying—summaries of their art, summaries which announce intentions made obsolete by the works themselves. The prefaces to the *Histoire de France* and the *Histoire de la Révolution*—"prefaces, that is to say pages written after the books themselves"—are where we should look to find "the greatest beauties in Michelet" (II, 490; III, 160). Committed to humanistic canons of artistic appreciation at the same time that he is aware of how modern art undermines those canons, the Proustian narrator seems almost inclined to transform what he judges to be inaccurate description of art into the work of art itself. This implied promotion of criticism to the status of an activity as creative as art is not uncongenial to some of our views about the inventive rather than the purely descriptive nature of criticism. But in *La Prisonnière*, the narrator is

2. Eugène Ionesco, *Notes et contre-notes*, in *Collection Pratique du Théâtre* (Paris, 1962), p. 207.

attracted to the essentially *conservative* nature of Michelet's prefaces or Balzac's *Avant-propos*: the latter "recompose" the writer's work in a traditional language, and instead of suggesting intentions which might open and expand the works they consider, such summaries have only the ambiguous appeal of any pose or attitude sufficiently strong or blind or stubborn to ignore the experience which surrounds it.

The narrator's remarks raise other difficulties. He is both vague about the nature of incompleteness in nineteenth-century art and uncertain about the retroactive effect of such critical attributes as unity. We find a shift in the passage from "a unity, a greatness" which the works in question do not have to a unity which is apparently real and which the artist's enthusiastic appreciation just belatedly discovers. Wagner "perceiving all of a sudden that he had written a tetralogy," and Balzac deciding that the books he has already written would be more beautiful "brought together in a cycle in which the same characters would reappear" have not, we are now told, created a new beauty "exterior and superior to the work itself," but have merely articulated a design and a coherence already present *in* the works.

A unity that was ulterior, not artificial, otherwise it would have crumbled into dust like [so many] systematisations of mediocre writers who with the elaborate assistance of titles and sub-titles give themselves the appearance of having pursued a single and transcendent design. Not [artificial,] perhaps indeed all the more real for being ulterior, for being born of a moment of enthusiasm when it is discovered to exist among fragments which need only to be joined together. A unity that has been unaware of itself, therefore vital and not logical, that has not banned variety, chilled execution.

But it is immediately after these sentences that Marcel confesses how uneasy Wagner's "Vulcan-like craftsmanship" makes him. When he notes that "the melancholy of the poet" in Wagner "is consoled, surpassed—that is, [alas, partially destroyed]—by the delight of the craftsman," he is complaining about the happy

ingenuity by which the composer gives a definitive significance to what had been merely fragments of melodic inspiration by finding a place for them in an opera for which they had originally not been composed. Wagner's joyful intuition that a certain melody ("the half-forgotten air of a shepherd's pipe") could be harmoniously fitted into the larger operatic structure of *Tristan and Isolde* is, for Proust's narrator, a source of disappointment. It is as if Wagner were *not* discovering that "real" unity "among fragments which need only to be joined together," but had instead, by a piece of superior trickery, obscured the real *lack* of unity in his music, the incompleteness which Marcel began by finding "marvelous" in nineteenth-century art (II, 491; III, 161).

As these shifts of attitude show, two very different things appeal to the Proustian narrator: the fragmentary nature of major artistic productions in the nineteenth century, and the notion that great art, by definition, has a "vital" unity and completeness which critical recognition can make explicit but does not create. I think that the latter expresses a nostalgic view of the relation of art to the world and to the self which the narrator's experience—psychological, social, and esthetic—tends most profoundly to undermine. If the quality of completeness is recognized as a cultural imperative rather than an attribute inherent to art, art runs the risk of losing the privileged status it has always been granted among life's activities. If, like other processes in life, it can never be thought of as "completed," its relation to the rest of our experience can no longer be defined as that of a kind of epistemological monument which reassures us about the intelligible significance of reality, extracts its hidden meanings. The real is no longer the *object* of art any more than it is the object of any other activity—like making love or playing chess—which simply coexists with all the other activities we call reality. What Proust's narrator finds moving in nineteenth-century art is, it seems to me, the transparency of its lifelike incompleteness. It then naturally becomes much more difficult than ever before to

define what is specifically "artistic" about the activity of art, and the attempt to do so has, in the modern period, given us works which have become more and more open-ended and purely interrogative. Is art *about* anything? Is there a subject "behind" the work? Do we have to discard an esthetic of imitation or expressiveness?

The incompleteness which the narrator of *A la Recherche* sees in nineteenth-century art is, I think, the sign of this problematic self-reflection. And the insecurities and failures are all the more impressive in those grandiose enterprises of nineteenth-century art—for example, Hugo's *Légende des siècles*, Balzac's *Comédie humaine*, and Wagner's tetralogy—which make a last-ditch stand for a securely comprehensive art, for works which might be an adequate, cohesive, perhaps definitive *Summa* of human experience. These enterprises tempt Proust's narrator at the same time that he recognizes their moving and "marvelous" failure. Proust himself worked all his life perfecting a single work, dreaming of a book which would be finally and completely expressive, which, when finished, would have that "vital" unity he both attributes to the art he mentions and yet recognizes as factitious.

We find a similar ambivalence in the narrator's attitude toward his own work—or, more exactly, in the hints given to the reader about both the relation between the narrator's book and his past life, and the relation between the narrator's life and Proust's life. Now the subject of *A la Recherche* is precisely the relation between a writer's life and his work. The main character is the author of the book we are reading, and the reason he plays such an important role in his own work is, apparently, to demonstrate the equivalence between literature and history or autobiography. He has been unable to write as long as he has thought of art as anything *but* self-expression, as revealing the essence or truth of realities external to the artist himself. What Marcel discovers in the Guermantes library toward the end of *Le Temps retrouvé*

is that art simply expresses "our true life, reality as we have felt it," and, more significantly, that "we are not at all free in the presence of the work of art to be created," for ". . . it existed prior to us and we should seek to discover it as we would a natural law because it is both necessary and hidden" (II, 1002; III, 881). In a sense, then, the kind of criticism in which *A la Recherche* is meant to educate us might appear to be biographical. The artist translates a self already there ("The duty and the task of a writer are those of translator" [II, 1009; III, 890]), and here we seem to be close to the Flaubertian idea of the writer as the fundamentally inactive catalyst in the verbalizing of a preexistent reality. He may extract significance from events, but he neither changes their nature nor promotes new events. The pretense of impersonality has been dropped, but the self would seem to be as objective for the Proustian narrator as Flaubert's Platonic novelistic subjects.

Even more: the work invites us to confuse the fictional autobiography of Marcel with the real autobiography of Proust. The trap of biographical reference is particularly well set in the novel. There are enough similarities between the narrator's experience and what we know of Proust's life to make the reader think of the work as a disguised autobiography. Also, the very notion of disguised autobiography seems to justify the interpretive method which consists in removing the disguise—that is, in correcting the work by an appeal to its supposed sources in order to fill the gaps between the fictions of art and the supposed facts of biography. In the crudest version of this, it is argued that Albertine is "really" a man, or that Marcel is "really" a snob, or that he is "really" more hostile to his parents than he admits.³

3. See Justin O'Brien, "Albertine the Ambiguous: Notes on Proust's Transposition of Sexes," *PMLA*, LXIV (December 1949), 933-52. Harry Levin, in a brief comment on this article in "Proust, Gide, and the Sexes," *PMLA*, LXV (June 1950), 648-52, points out that a change in Albertine's sex introduces more difficulties than it settles, and that, in any case, the effect of narrative art depends on our accepting the novelist's characters and situations as he presents them.

George D. Painter's Biography of Proust (*Proust: The Early Years*

But *any* biographical argument, however careful and sophisticated it may be, tends to deaden the work by assuming that it transposes the writer's self instead of re-creating it. To emphasize re-creation rather than transposition is not to deny any continuity between the book and the writer's experience. But it does mean that we recognize the book as a self-constituting activity sufficiently energetic to create, to try out and explore, a self different from the selves experienced and explored before the experience of writing the book.

The peculiarity of *A la Recherche*, however, is that it makes us wary of such obvious distinctions. Written into the novel itself is an autobiographical intention which encourages us to identify the narrator and Proust much more effectively than any anecdotal similarities between their lives. Proust almost seems willing, within the work, to be taken for Marcel. His willingness is hesitant, since he avoids naming his narrator for more than two thousand pages. But on two occasions he finally does allow him to call himself Marcel, although he stops short of adding a last name which would commit Proust more definitely to the project of autobiography or to the rejection of autobiography. The way in which the name is given in *La Prisonnière* expresses this indecision. The description is of how Albertine wakes up in the narrator's room: "As soon as she was able to speak she said: 'My—' or 'My dearest—' followed by my Christian name, which, if we give to the narrator the same name as the author of this book, [would have made for] 'My Marcel,' or 'My dearest Marcel'" (II, 429; III, 75). Until now, much of the novel's

and *Proust: The Later Years* [Boston and Toronto, 1959 and 1965]), is, on the positive side, exhaustively informative about Proust's schedule. But, far from telling us anything about "the workings of [Proust's] imagination at the very moment of creation" (I, xiii), Painter's work merely juxtaposes aspects or "passages" from the life and passages from the work. It is further vitiated by Painter's nostalgia for the heyday of the French aristocracy, his tendentious manipulation of the available material, and his curious determination to rehabilitate Proust sexually. For a sharp review of Painter's first volume, see Elaine Marks, "The Relevance of Literary Biography" *The Massachusetts Review*, VII (Autumn 1966), 815-23.

interest has depended on our willingness to think of the narrator *as* the author. The Proustian view of the relation between an artist's life and his work can be convincingly dramatized only if the writer of the work we are reading and the man who has spent years wondering about the relevance of his life to literature are the same person. Only the present literary accomplishment of the narrator provides a possible resolution of the most urgent concerns in the past he evokes. The questions about art become pointless and merely pathetic if the recollection of asking them cannot be considered as a helpful experiment in answering them. The unexpected reference to *another* author in the passage just quoted advertises an indisputable fact of literary history (Marcel Proust wrote *A la Recherche du temps perdu*), but within the novel this fact is dramatically inadmissible. We know that Proust created the narrator, but how can the narrator know it? Proust's presence in the novel can be recognized only by the audience outside the novel. But if the main character begins to talk about the author, we wonder where the author is in the narrative—and of course he cannot be anywhere, since (from the first page to the last) we hear only the voice of the character who, mysteriously, suddenly refers to him.

The narrator is a superficially simple but profoundly important discovery: he allows Proust to connect as well as to distinguish between life and art because both are constantly contained within the work of art. Experience and literary expression, thanks to this discovery, are now comparable terms; the former exists nowhere outside of the narrator's literary effort. This trick of genius finally does send us back to Proust and to "life," but only because the narrator has convincingly shown how literary activity penetrated his life long before he began to write. And the demonstration is possible only if his life is entirely within the book. Proust is reluctant, and for good reason, to allow his narrator to suggest that *Proust's* life is behind the work. Although later on in *La Prisonnière* Albertine again refers to "Marcel," this time without any narrative reservations accompanying the

reference (II, 488; III, 157), in the earlier passage we are teased with a "Marcel" only conditionally proposed: Albertine uses the narrator's Christian name, "ce qui, en donnant au narrateur le même prénom qu'à l'auteur de ce livre, eût fait: 'Mon Marcel,' 'Mon chéri Marcel.'" ⁴

I have insisted on this passage because it is a striking example of an indecision important for the whole novel. It is connected to Proust's ambivalent feelings about "incomplete" art, and "Marcel" as a compromise between a purely fictional narrator and Proust can help us further to define the notion of incompleteness. The adherence to the narrator or Marcel not as Proust but as the principal character *and* author of this work reveals an aspect of literary creation which Proust hesitates to accept unreservedly: its self-inventiveness. To prevent us from thinking of the fictionalized narrator as a negligible convention, to force us to take him literally as the author of the book we are reading, and to make his vocation as a writer the subject of that book are to make impossible certain conclusions about art which I think Proust clings to in spite of his artistic experience.

The most essential (if unavowed) of these conclusions is that literature is a strategy for the enjoyment of death in life. This peculiar and terrible hope is expressed theoretically by the notion that writing is the psychologically passive activity of merely translating into language a life already lived. Dramatically, it is expressed with the greatest power in the final pages of *A la Recherche*, where we see the narrator settling down to his work as to a duty made stale and joyless by an unrelenting obsession with death. It seems at first that he feels only the ["reasoned fear"] of not having the time to finish his book (III, 1037), but after a mysterious accident one evening when he almost falls three times while going down a staircase, he becomes "indifferent" to his work itself, which he finds an "irksome" chore to get done before "the long rest that would eventually come." "Since that day on the staircase, nothing concerning the social

4. The italics are mine.

world, no happiness, whether it came from [people's friendship,] the progress of my work, the hope of fame, any longer penetrated to my consciousness except as such a pale ray of sunlight that it no longer had the power to warm me, put life into me, give me any desire whatsoever; and even at that, wan though it was, it was still too dazzling for my eyes and I preferred to close them and turn my head toward the wall." He hates death, but he speaks of it as lodging itself definitively within him with the power and pervasiveness of a love. The thought of death "adhered to the deepest stratum of my brain so completely that I could not turn my attention to anything without first relating it to the idea of death and, even if I was not occupied with anything but was in a state of complete repose, the idea of death was with me as continuously as the idea of myself" (II, 1119-20; III, 1041-42). As a result, the literary transcription of the narrator's past is begun in a state of terror: the resurrection of lost time is the condition for writing, but to carry the weight of the past is also felt as an immense task which finally destroys a man. With ["a feeling of fatigue and fright,"] the narrator has a sense of being "perched on [the] dizzying summit" of time, thinks of all men as engaged in a difficult and perilous walk on the stilts of their pasts, and wonders with anguish whether or not he will be able to keep his balance long enough to describe this fantastic extension of men in Time (II, 1123-24; III, 1047-48).

No life, it would therefore seem, is created by the work. Life is the oppressive burden of the work; the somber task of literature is to describe a paralyzing continuity in men's lives which is equivalent to death, since it leaves no psychic space for any future. There is something shocking in these final passages of Proust's novel, shocking in that we have just read over three thousand pages which demonstrate exactly the reverse of what is implied at the end. The novel has in fact shown—I will return to this—the astonishing lightness of the past, its almost negligible weight in the enterprise of recording it. We have seen in dra-

matic detail a process by which temporal continuity is made continuously re-creative. In each disappointment of the past, the narrator has exploited the liberating inventiveness he had failed to see at the time; and it is only while writing his book that he realizes how permeable each unhappy event might have been to his desires. In fact, we could even say that *because* everything that happens in *A la Recherche* is in Marcel's past, he has never in his life enjoyed more freedom than now. The final, definitive quality of events is felt at the moment we live them. It is then that we experience most concretely the impoverishing limitations and exclusions implicit in each emotion we have, each spectacle we see, each decision we make. It is only in memory that the future of each moment appears promisingly uncertain, and therefore open to possibility. For in memory we can profit from a larger notion of consequences than we can afford to use at the "first" or present version of each experience. Retrospectively, the immediate effects of events can be subverted by an interpretive will. At the actual time of those events, we were too busily engaged in their first consequences to see those consequences as anything but necessary and final. Proust's novel constantly illustrates this distinction. It is a literary dramatization of the psychoanalytic assumption that in certain conditions a restatement of the past creates new possibilities for the future.

We will, of course, have to look more closely at the conditions and the strategies, but for the moment it is enough to point out that for all its apparent backward-looking, *A la Recherche du temps perdu* is a more projective novel than *La Chartreuse de Parme*. Fabrice only rushes forward in time, and the pathos of his life is that his experience creates an irreversible destiny. Life narrows the range of his projects until, with unattackable logic, he has nothing more to do but die. When he returns to his past it is to rest, not to re-create. Proust's narrator, in a characteristic gesture of false surrender, turns his back on life in order to make some extraordinary claims for the future of his life. Aggressively

active and self-revising, he remakes a once disappointing and uninteresting past into the field of an extravagant exercise in self-expansion.

But this openness also frightens the narrator. It is as if, after the Guermantes *matinée*, he had to punish himself with the thought of death in order to obscure the fantastic amount of new life he has set out to invent. And the punishment is also an advantage: death would protect Marcel from the uncertainty of the new, and the attempt to write his work under the sign of death suggests an effort to find in art an escape from the anguish of the unexpected. The novel documents this ambivalent attitude toward the new in Marcel's shifting feelings about habit. Habit is secure but deadening; when it is broken we enter what Beckett describes as "the perilous zone in the life of the individual, dangerous, precarious, painful, mysterious and fertile, when for a moment the boredom of living is replaced by the suffering of being."⁵ The narrator knows that the destruction of habit is the condition for art, for any original perception of life; but he is also tempted by the security of the familiar, the effortless repetition of habitual, definitive versions of experience. And by almost allowing us to confuse the narrator with himself, Proust exposes this temptation as his own. It would be even easier for us to think of the writer as the mere "translator" of his life if we were to think of that life as the external, unknowable origin of the book. Nothing in the work could then be used as an argument against the psychologically passive nature of writing. The translation may be a difficult job, and we may also be able to list innumerable differences between Proust's life and his work; but neither of these possibilities would permit us to question the work's uniquely retrospective orientation. Its only project would be to fix the past; at the very most, it would distill the essence of a life already lived.

Psychologically, the function of art, if it is thought of in this way, is to consecrate a whole life as habit; esthetically, art can

5. Samuel Beckett, *Proust* (New York, 1931), p. 8.

then be defined as closed, definitively expressive documents. Incompleteness, on the other hand, means most profoundly that literature can never be final or finished because each of its statements brings forth a new project in the very process of attempting to express an old one. The alternative to a full recognition of the "marvelous miscarriages" Marcel praises in *La Prisonnière* is to prolong the fiction of art as the lifeless if instructive museum where we enter, in the "pauses" of experience, to replenish ourselves with the dead significance of safely immutable trophies of life.

A la Recherche du temps perdu is largely an account of the superficially nonliterary experience which explains the Proustian hesitation between two different kinds of literature. The issues I have raised so far—the difference between "complete" and "incomplete" art, the importance of accepting the fictional narrator (rather than Proust) as the author of the work we are reading, and the narrator's inclination to think of literature as a mere translation of lives already lived—are far from being specialized problems concerning novelistic form. Nothing illustrates more convincingly the intimate connections between art and the rest of life in *A la Recherche* than the fact that these problems are not raised in the novel in exclusively esthetic terms; instead, they are made to seem dramatically implicit in every aspect of Marcel's experience. The work itself accounts for the tension we find between two different kinds of art by a history much more personal than the literary history to which Proust naturally belongs and of which he was more than moderately aware. We can see the urgency of the literary choices which have been outlined only if we trace their formulation in contexts other than that of a specific program for literature. The revolutionary aspects of *A la Recherche du temps perdu* in the history of the novel coincide with courageous self-renewals on the part of a very particular, and very peculiar, personality; and the conservative elements in Proust's novel correspond to the

lingering nostalgia in Marcel's personality for the security of certain enthusiasms and anxieties which he has, in large part, learned to judge and transcend.

A Flaubertian preoccupation with the correspondences between language and reality would seem also to characterize Marcel in *A la Recherche du temps perdu*. But the problem is posed in a way which brings Proust's work, in spite of its bleak analyses of human possibilities, closer to the most optimistic Stendhalian assertions of human freedom than to the nihilistic conclusions of *Madame Bovary* and *L'Éducation sentimentale*. For Flaubert, the experience of dealing novelistically with the question of how expressive words are of reality does nothing to change the way in which he asks the question. Emma's tragedy is the result of what we might call her uncritical dependence on Flaubert's formulation of the novelistic dilemma. Apparently, nothing that happened in the writing of *Madame Bovary* led Flaubert to suspect that he had perhaps created an unnecessary dead end in thinking that art must be a perfect fit between expression and a preexistent reality. And Emma does nothing but reenact the same assumptions from, as it were, the other direction. Flaubert dreams of a style adequate to the independent reality of his subject; Emma searches for the reality adequate to the vocabulary of romantic clichés. Because Flaubert immediately equates having experience with a problem of verbal designation, language blocks Flaubert's interest in discriminating among the choices by which we experiment with different ways of defining the self and the world. The very fact that language has to be used in making such choices leads Flaubert to a tortured weighing of the instruments available to describe them. He is, as Sartre has argued, indifferent to the commitments which a use of language creates,⁶ and because he thus isolates language from the activities it inspires and accompanies, words naturally

6. And Flaubert can identify these word-objects, as Sartre says, with stupidity (Jean-Paul Sartre, "La Conscience de classe chez Flaubert," *Les Temps modernes*, XXI [May and June 1966], 2125-26).

appear to have a frighteningly impersonal life of their own. In one sense, Flaubert's disgust with life could be explained by his never having *reached* life in his epistemological investigations. And his choice of art as an alternative to life is, as the progress of his fiction from *Madame Bovary* to *Bouvard et Pécuchet* suggests, just as much a rejection of art as it is of life. His activity in both is paralyzed by his reluctance to examine the consequences of different uses of language and his obsession with its supposed essence.

Superficially, Proust's narrator is as concerned as Flaubert and Emma with the problem of what words designate. Marcel's life, like Emma's, appears to be structured by a series of hopeful fantasies and "falls": Madame de Guermantes does not provide the reality needed to make the notion of Merovingian mysteries come alive, Balbec does not embody the idea of nature's glamorously violent life, and Berma's acting, at first, cannot be fitted to the notion of dramatic talent. During his adolescence, Marcel, a little like Emma, waits for life to bring what he vaguely but passionately expects from it. Fascinated by words—the names of people and of places, and moral abstractions—he strains anxiously to receive "the secret of Truth and Beauty, things half-felt by me, half-incomprehensible, the full understanding of which was the vague but permanent object of my thoughts" (I, 64; I, 84). The disappointments Marcel suffers are of course important, but, interestingly enough, they do not provoke an obsessive mistrust of thought and language. And this, I think, is because his sense of self is so dependent on the shape of his expectations that their destruction literally *empties* his imagination. As a result, the Flaubertian rhythm of illusion and disillusion is redefined by Proust as a discordance between the self and the world rather than as an imbalance between inexhaustible, impersonal fictions and a reality which is always either hypothetical and beyond language (Flaubert's Platonic subject) or flatly material and inferior to language (Tostes and Yonville).

Marcel never has the psychological leisure to be tortured by

the impersonality of words. Significantly, the Flaubertian way of defining correspondences between language and reality is dismissed as a false problem in *A la Recherche* long before the narrator feels confirmed in his literary vocation. The second time that Marcel sees Berma act, his impression, "though more pleasant than on the earlier occasion," is not really different. "Only, I no longer put it to the test of a pre-existent, abstract and false idea of dramatic genius, and I understood now that dramatic genius was precisely this." He realizes the uselessness of returning to the *words* "dramatic genius" to wonder what they mean, since in fact they mean nothing apart from particular occasions which they name but do not describe.

The impression given us by a person or a work (or a rendering, for that matter) of marked individuality is peculiar to that person or work. We have brought to it the ideas of "beauty," "breadth of style," "pathos" and so forth which we might, failing anything better, have had the illusion of discovering in the commonplace show of a "correct" face or talent, but our critical spirit has before it the insistent challenge of a form of which it possesses no intellectual equivalent, in which it must detect and isolate the unknown element. It hears a shrill sound, an oddly interrogative intonation. It asks itself: "Is that good? Is what I am feeling just now admiration? Is that richness of colouring, nobility, strength?" And what answers it again is a shrill voice, a curiously questioning tone, the despotic impression caused by a person whom one does not know, wholly material, in which there is no room left for "breadth of interpretation." And for this reason it is the really beautiful works that, if we listen to them with sincerity, must disappoint us most keenly, because in the storehouse of our ideas there is none that corresponds to an individual impression. (I, 748; II, 49)

There is, the narrator goes on to say, an "interval" between the world in which we feel and the world in which we think and give names to things. If we can establish a certain correspondence or harmony between the two, we cannot really bridge the gap

that separates them (I, 749; II, 50). Emma tries to live up to the world of names. And while Flaubert condemns her for this, his own hatred of life was perhaps the result of a similar inability to experience impressions strong enough to compete with the abstract glamor of words. It is as if a fundamental passivity in Flaubert and in his heroine both protected them from the shocks of experience and created a kind of psychological idleness in which they could be precisely what Flaubert aspired to be as a writer: impersonal. Nothing could be more different from the way Marcel in *A la Recherche* is victimized by particular impressions. In destroying the world of names, they make imperative a reorganization of personality in which imaginative creation, far from "floating" among inaccessible realities, must actually sustain and even make the reality of the self and the world.

The fragility of Marcel's sense of self will be recognized by readers of Proust as the principal "theme" of Marcel's life.⁷ It is the source of an anguish from which there seemed no escape at Combray and which only literature can provide a way of circumventing or, more exactly, of transforming into a creative exhilaration. *A la Recherche* is punctuated by crucial episodes which dramatize a spectacular loss of being: the description at the beginning of "Combray" of the narrator's dizzying flights from one bedroom to another—and from one identity to another—when he awakes at night not knowing where, and therefore who, he is; the child's panic when he is separated from his mother at night; Marcel's horror at being surrounded, in the Balbec hotel room, by "enemies," by "things which did not know me" (I, 506–7; I, 666–67); and the emptiness of personality (" . . . I was nothing more than a heart that throbbed . . .") which prevents Marcel from recognizing the city of Venice when his mother angrily leaves without him for the railway station (II, 837–38; III, 652–53). In none of these cases is it a question

7. From here to the end of this section, I condense and develop aspects of ideas proposed in Chapters One and Two of my book on Proust (*Marcel Proust: The Fictions of Life and of Art* [New York, 1965]).

of the Flaubertian excess of designation which removes the individual from the world and imprisons him in a rich but objectless imagination. Rather, the failure to recognize a place is experienced as a failure of all designation—most profoundly, as a failure of self-recognition. Such incidents melodramatize the Proustian narrator's peculiar *lack* of imagination: at certain moments he is unable, as it were, to domesticate the strangeness, the menacing otherness of the world by finding analogies between a present spectacle and a familiar personal past.

The opening pages of *A la Recherche* and the Balbec and Venice episodes could be thought of as a satire of Flaubert's literary dream. For that dream involved the chimerical project of eliminating recognition from cognition. And in the passages just mentioned, Proust simply places a kind of impersonal and objective consciousness in front of the world and shows the resulting chaos and panic. All knowledge, as Marcel at first painfully and finally exuberantly realizes, is self-knowledge, and the inability to project the self on the world makes for the perfect and terrifying realism of Marcel's perception of Venice as merely heaps of solid and liquid matter. Any workable or coherent knowledge necessarily involves making analogies, and we have seen how uncomfortable Flaubert felt with analogies. Not only can the second term of an analogy be provided only by the experience which constitutes a personal history; there can also never be an exact equivalence between the two terms. Even the most recent memory of an object which we bring to the object in order to identify it is bound to differ somewhat from our present perception. The most habitual identifications are, therefore, analogies, and the abundance of metaphors in *A la Recherche* rightly emphasizes the approximative nature of all knowledge and, conversely, the epistemological function of metaphor. Finally, the analogy itself is a new event. When Marcel does succeed in finding images that make objects familiar to him, the juxtaposition of the image and the object is a creation of the

moment when it is made. The passage in which the narrator remembers comparing the "action" of the hawthorn's "blossoming" in the Combray church to the movement of a young girl's head (I, 85-6; I, 112) illustrates particularly well the inventiveness of metaphorical knowledge. Neither the hawthorns nor the image of the girl "disappears" in this act of recognition, but the activity of making a relation between the two creates something which did not exist before it was *expressed*.⁸

The full importance of such creative analogies, while they are the continuous achievement of the book we are reading, is not recognized by Marcel himself until late in his life. Indeed, his helplessness rather than his strength is emphasized most explicitly throughout a work which is of course a massive demonstration of his strength. Now the panicky sense of emptiness Marcel feels in Venice goes back to the *drame du coucher* at Combray. To be separated from his mother at night is for the child to be separated from himself: the message which Françoise agrees to bring to his mother appeases Marcel because it renews his own existence. An image of himself will penetrate his mother's attention as she reads his letter. And it is not only as a child that Marcel depends on his mother's readiness to provide an image of himself which serves as a guarantee of his identity. The sequence of events in the Venice incident makes it clear that what his mother has done in leaving for the station without him is, actually, to take him with her. She has, as it were, stolen his being, and he is reduced to the psychological anonymity of a "throbbing heart." As the narrator confesses at the end of *Le Temps retrouvé*, after describing how the guests at the Guermantes *matinée* laugh at his reference to himself as a young man: "I realised that the remark which had made them laugh was one that my mother, to whom I was always a child, might have made in speaking of

8. Georges Poulet has a good analysis of this passage (in terms of the internalization of a material object) in *Etudes sur le temps humain* (Paris, 1950), pp. 385-86.

me. From which I noticed that, when I wished to form an opinion of myself, I took the same point of view as she" (II, 1039; III, 931).

Marcel's relation to his mother suggests not only the historical origin of these crises, but also the reasons for it and, most profoundly, its convenience. "Combray" is not simply the record of the child's weakness and anguished dependence on his mother. The period the narrator describes is one of a great physical and intellectual awakening for Marcel. Not only does he feel himself on the threshold of discovering "the secret of Truth and Beauty" in art, nature, and history; he also experiences the exhilarating if undirected strength of his own body and, more specifically, of his sexual energies. Impressions of nature and of literature and the wish to find a peasant girl on the Méséglise way feed and intensify one another, ". . . and, my imagination drawing strength from contact with my sensuality, my sensuality expanding through all the realms of my imagination, my desire had no longer any bounds." But, crucially and mysteriously, this complex of immense energies becomes, to use the word in another sense, a debilitating complex. The peasant girl does not appear, Marcel can express his enthusiasm for nature only with an inarticulate "Zut, zut, zut, zut," and, deprived of other outlets and other kinds of expression, his energies are partially spent in what he imagines as the dangerous pleasures of masturbation. Enraged at the world for not satisfying his desires (he furiously strikes out at the trees in the Roussainville forest), he discovers the world as merely the "conventional framework," the unreal setting ("which from now onwards lost all its charm and significance") for desires which themselves are simply "the purely subjective, impotent, illusory creatures of my temperament." And masturbation seems to be experienced not so much as an expression of energy but rather as a fantasy-strategy to dissipate it: it is the "untrodden path which, I believed, might lead me to my death" and which Marcel sets out on "with the heroic scruples of a traveller setting

forth for unknown climes, or of a desperate wretch hesitating on the verge of self-destruction" (I, 120-22; I, 156-59).

In a sense, when night comes Marcel is dead: the strength of the day is gone, and he is nothing more than a "throbbing heart" waiting for the kiss from his mother which will bring him back to life. What connection can there be between the exuberantly active boy of the afternoon and the helpless, defeated child at night? These alternating states of strength and weakness provide the first evidence the narrator remembers for his shocked view of time as discontinuous, spatial units of experience, and for his view of personality as a series of deaths and resurrections: "And so it was from the 'Guermantes way' that I learned to distinguish between these states which [reign] alternately in my mind, during certain periods, going so far as to divide every day between them, each one returning to dispossess the other with the regularity of a fever and ague: contiguous, and yet so foreign to one another, so devoid of means of communication, that I [can] no longer understand, or even picture to myself, in one state what I had desired or dreaded or even done in the other" (I, 140-41; I, 183).

The "Combray" section does not present these different states or activities—Marcel's enthusiasm, his masturbating, and his nightly anxiety—in any causal sequence. Indeed, the passage just quoted expresses the narrator's feeling that there are no connections between the states which frequently divide his life. He is tracing his view of the self as discontinuous back to his boyhood at Combray, but he says nothing to suggest that the sense of discontinuity hides certain transitions from one state to another. There is, however, a psychological logic in what happens at Combray, although it is never spelled out in the text. But I think it is implied in the nature of the different feelings and incidents which the narrator merely juxtaposes without providing any links to connect them. What he describes—and the pattern is similar to one I have described in Balzac—is an overpowering

sense of strength and energy followed by a loss of all strength and energy. Or, to put it another way, we see a state of aggressive desire toward the world followed by a state in which Marcel feels defenseless and victimized by everything around him. The energy turned on the world is turned back on himself, first of all when he makes himself the object of desire in masturbation, and in a more hallucinated version of this switch, when the world, apparently dismissed as a dead, "conventional framework" unresponsive to Marcel's desires, suddenly comes alive in the evening and threatens to overwhelm him with its hostile energies.

Masturbation could be thought of as a mediating stage for Marcel between aggression and passivity. On the one hand, it is a direct expense of energy; on the other hand, it contains the punishment for this physical self-assertion by seeming to promise death, to be the suicide of desire. It therefore satisfies desire while controlling and atoning for it. And in Marcel that combination seems particularly significant. It is as if he were unable to enjoy desire or aggressiveness without feeling guilty about it, without having to punish himself for it. The world is condemned with precipitation for failing to produce objects to satisfy Marcel's desires; but this condemnation can perhaps be explained by the effect it has of allowing Marcel to think of his desires themselves as "impotent, illusory creatures of my temperament." The Venice incident dramatizes the relation between aggression and helplessness: it is immediately after defying his mother and thinking with feverish excitement of having sexual relations with the Baronne de Putbus's chambermaid that Marcel can no longer even find the energy to project enough of himself on the city so that he could recognize it as Venice.

But what, specifically, is the sinfulness of desire? The answer, I think, has to do with the individualizing nature of desire, that is, with the fact that it separates Marcel from his mother, makes him distinct from her. There is a guilt about individuality which seems to be passed from his mother to Marcel: she herself attempts to erase all signs of her own personality after her mother's

death, as if anything purely self-expressive were a blasphemous violation of Marcel's grandmother's memory. And while artistic creation itself will come to be defined in *A la Recherche du temps perdu* as the expression of the most unique accent of the artist's personality, the narrator shares this view of individuality as sin. The "original sin" of the women we love, he remarks in *La Prisonnière*, is simply what makes them different from ourselves: ". . . even more than their misdeeds while we are in love with them, there are their misdeeds before we made their acquaintance, and first and foremost: their nature" (II, 483; III, 150-51).

The connection between sexual desire and the essence of personality is explicitly made in *La Prisonnière* and *La Fugitive*. The narrator emphasizes that in seeking to find out if Albertine had sexual relations with other women at the baths in Balbec, he is not asking "subordinate, immaterial questions, questions of detail," but is rather probing into "the uttermost depths" of her being (II, 745; III, 516). Marcel's detective-like investigations into Albertine's activities have led Jean-François Revel to insist that Proust sees no real mystery in other people's personalities, that what is unknowable in someone else's life in *A la Recherche* is simply his or her "schedule."⁹ But such a judgment brings into the work notions of personality foreign to it. For Marcel, to get the schedule right, to satisfy "the painful, or wearying curiosity that I felt as to the places in which Albertine had stayed, as to what she might have been doing on a particular evening, her smiles, the expression in her eyes, the words that she had uttered, the kisses that she had received" (II, 649; III, 385)—all that is to penetrate another person's uniqueness, for the uniqueness consists in precisely those desires which do not have Marcel as their object.

9. *Sur Proust: Remarques sur "A la Recherche du temps perdu"* (Paris, 1960), p. 198. Marcel Muller echoes this idea: "Rather than an impression of a fundamental mystery of being, we have the impression of a lack of knowledge which could be remedied by some more information" (*Les Voix narratives dans La Recherche du Temps perdu* [Geneva, 1965], p. 128).

There is no reason to condemn such a view of individuality as trivial, for the only way we concretely experience other people's individuality may indeed be in our puzzled sense of their consciousness not being entirely occupied by the familiar image of ourselves. Any desire directed somewhere else (the loved one's sexual interest in other people is the most dramatic version of this) expresses a project for independence. It threatens the fantasy of a tranquil, really deathlike coincidence of being between two people in which each one merely receives, is wholly contained within, and sends back the image of the other. This is the security Marcel yearns for between himself and his mother and grandmother, and the two women seem to encourage this cult of love as self-sacrificial and yet all-devouring. To desire a peasant girl from Méséglise or the Baronne de Putbus's chambermaid is to *be* someone different from *maman*; and, perhaps most profoundly, desire is felt—with guilt—as dangerously aggressive because Marcel knows that in fact it is an aggression against those who would fix and limit his own being in their love. To immolate desire is to immolate the self; it is the payment he has to make in order not to escape from his mother's attention, in order to continue "receiving himself" from her.

And yet the temptation to be—which is the temptation of freedom—is painfully strong. Marcel yields to it with such intense excitement and such intense fright that his desire seems almost to have the magic power to destroy both the world and the self. What conquest could compare with that extraordinary assault on the universe which Marcel feels he is making the evening he tries to kiss Albertine in the hotel at Balbec? He approaches her room with "a strange feeling of absolute power"; the very idea of the world surviving his death becomes incredible, since ". . . it was it that was enclosed in me, in me whom it went a long way short of filling, in me, where, feeling that there was room to store so many other treasures, I flung contemptuously into a corner sky, sea and cliffs." Nothing could be more different

from Marcel's usual complaint that the world is out of reach and impenetrable. The exhilaration of desire makes the world an insignificant, inadequate field for his infinitely expansive appetite for absorption:

The sight of Albertine's bare throat, of those strangely vivid cheeks, had so intoxicated me (that is to say had placed the reality of the world for me no longer in nature, but in the torrent of my sensations which it was all I could do to keep within bounds), as to have destroyed the balance between the life, immense and indestructible, which circulated in my being, and the life of the universe, so puny in comparison. The sea, which was visible through the windows as well as the valley, the swelling breasts of the first of the Maineville cliffs, the sky in which the moon had not yet climbed to the zenith, all of these seemed less than a featherweight on my eyeballs, which between their lids I could feel dilated, resisting, ready to bear very different burdens, all the mountains of the world upon their fragile surface. Their orbit no longer found even the sphere of the horizon adequate to fill it. And everything that nature could have brought me of life would have seemed wretchedly meagre, the sigh of the waves far too short a sound to express the enormous aspiration that was surging in my breast.

At the time he remembers this incident, the narrator can of course exaggerate his intoxication; and this makes for a humorous contrast between Marcel's excitement and the deflating effect of the "precipitous, prolonged, shrill" sound when Albertine angrily rings the bell for help (I, 698–99; I, 933–34). But the feelings being remembered are no less important for lending themselves to a comic effect here. The intense exhilaration we find in this passage recurs, moreover, throughout the novel: it resembles Marcel's intellectual and sexual appetites at Combray, his excitement about meeting Madame de Guermantes, and his feverish need to possess the Baronne de Putbus's maid in Venice. There are, then, immensely powerful energies drawing Marcel out of

himself. And they are the energies which define his self, which express his designs on the world and give to his history its personal shape.

Because he seems to condemn these passionate projects and desires as a betrayal of his mother, and because the resulting conflict over them increases their potency while limiting their frequency of expression, Marcel comes to fear them, without, however, renouncing the independent identity they create. If the loss of self is the punishment for desire—that is, for energetic designs on the world—some new form of self-assertion becomes necessary in order to protect Marcel from the consequences of self-assertion. The very extremity to which Marcel is reduced—his emptiness, his loss of memory, the discontinuity of being from which he suffers—authorizes the most thoroughgoing investigation of ways to construct and possess a self which could no longer be lost. The punishment, we might say, legitimizes the crime. Literature in *A la Recherche du temps perdu* is Marcel's indulgence in the "crime" of his own individuality as well as his subtle strategy for imprisoning others within the designs of his own desires. But in the enactment of what can easily be seen in Proust as an ungenerous solution to this problem of being, the project of imprisoning the self and the world in a document of ontological security is transformed into the courageous exercise of making the self as indefinite and indefinable as possible, and even of protecting the freedom of others.

We can easily see the continuity between the drastic self-depletions from which Marcel suffers and the narrator's ambivalent attitude toward "incomplete" art. The dream of art as a way of achieving a deathlike fixity of self in life, for example, has the appeal of promising a kind of sculptural organization of the self and the world into immutably intelligible patterns. To salvage the self from the dissipation it suffers at moments of passionate desire, Marcel, while he never really considers the renunciation of desire, is tempted by the possibility of satisfying desires by de-

energizing them. A certain self-petrification would seem to be the compromise between an uninhibited appetitive attack on the world and the probably expiatory victimizing of a "throbbing heart" by a world hostilely different from the self. And the perspective of memory allows for just this sort of passionless reenactment of Marcel's desires, although, as I suggested earlier, it also permits a manipulating of the past for the sake of a richer future. In part, Proust's novel illustrates the truth of Sartre's claim that only in reflection can we posit affectivity for itself, that is, in terms of mental *states* which make for a psychology of the inert.¹⁰ Cut off from the objects which inspired and defined them, Marcel's desires, so to speak, now have nowhere to go. They no longer "move" toward the world, but only around one another, creating those peculiar inner constellations which encourage the narrator to speak of mental life as if it were organized into clearly delimited conflicting states, and enacted as allegorical confrontations. Thus the narrator can at last live according to his desires, or, more exactly, *within* his desires. The retrospective expression of desire coincides with self-expression. Indeed, it belatedly constructs a self shaped by projects now transformed into abstractions. The psychology of states in *A la Recherche du temps perdu*, like the general laws about human behavior, allows Marcel to think of literature as the reassuring completion of life. Both are maneuvers for placing art in the privileged position of giving permanent forms and significance to experience; as a distiller of psychological essences, the narrator's work defines and closes his life.

But Marcel discovers another possibility of self-identification (as well as of contact with the world), a possibility which allows for a richly incomplete life and a richly incomplete work. Marcel's jealousy can provide a first illustration of how this discovery is made. In *La Fugitive*, the narrator speaks of a certain "com-

10. "La Transcendance de l'ego," *Recherches philosophiques*, VI (1936-37), 102-3.

pensation" in the suffering which the lies of "insensitive and inferior women" inflict on sensitive and intellectual men:

And so these men feel that they are being betrayed without quite knowing why. Wherefore the mediocre woman with whom we were surprised to see them fall in love enriches the universe for them far more than an intelligent woman would have done. Behind each of her words, they feel that a lie is lurking, behind each house to which she says that she has gone, another house, behind each action, each person, another action, another person. Doubtless they do not know what or whom, have not the energy, would not perhaps find it possible to discover. A lying woman, by an extremely simple trick, can beguile, without taking the trouble to change her method, any number of people, and, what is more, the very person who ought to have discovered the trick. All this creates, in front of the sensitive and intelligent man, a universe all in depths which his jealousy would fain plumb and which is not without interest to his intelligence. (II, 814-15; III, 616-17)

Any statement recognized or felt as a lie evokes the possibly truthful statements to which it could be compared. But if the lover cannot fix on any one house or action or person as the reality behind the lie, the lie itself can never be eliminated from the attempt to know the truth. The fictive version of her behavior proposed by Albertine or Odette becomes the center around which Marcel and Swann organize a group of conjectures. The pain of not being able to eliminate that center—it is necessary to inspire the different conjectures whose greater or lesser probability it also helps to determine—is somewhat "compensated" for by the variety and depth which the lover's searching and unsatisfied imagination gives to the world. The need for truth stimulates the novelistic impulse, and the impossibility of truth makes of experience an infinitely expandable novel. The narrator explicitly makes the connection between his jealousy and his art in *Le Temps retrouvé*. The former is a good recruiter when there is a gap in the novelist's picture; if his jealousy of a woman to

whom he has now become indifferent is momentarily reawakened, his frantic imagination supplies the material he needed for his work: "The brushes, drunk with infuriated love, paint and paint!" (II, 1028; III, 916-17)

The psychological crises of emptiness in *A la Recherche* are moments when Marcel can no longer relate one image to another, when he cannot find a "second term." What saves him is not a sudden ability to describe reality accurately, but rather the discovery of *other* phenomena to which present phenomena can be compared and thereby made intelligible. As it has often been pointed out, affirmations of joy in *A la Recherche du temps perdu* generally occur in the context of occasions which give birth to analogies in Marcel's imagination. Even the torture of jealousy, as we have just seen, is alleviated by the pleasure of imagining relationships between various "truths" and the lies which distort them. The disappointments of going into society are somewhat compensated for by the historical allusiveness of the aristocracy's names. The garrulous and vain Duc de Guermantes holds Marcel's attention by partially disappearing from Marcel's field of vision: he merges into his family's past, into a harmonious set of associations among the names of different regions in France and among different periods of time. And Marcel's interest at the Verdurins' home on the Quai Conti in Paris is awakened only when Brichot tells him that the room they are in can give him an idea of the Verdurins' drawing room twenty-five years ago in the Rue Montalivet. "A certain common air of family life, a permanent identity" which Brichot sees between the Quai Conti and the Rue Montalivet, and which Marcel himself recognizes between the Quai Conti and the drawing room at La Raspelière, gives to the present room "a sort of profundity," a "patina" ("velouté") which things acquire when their ["spiritual counterpart"] has been added to them. And that spiritual counterpart is an image from the past which helps to dematerialize the present by relocating it in the "general element" it shares with another place and another time (II, 577-79; III, 284-86).

Involuntary memories have a similar function. Numerous commentators have rightly emphasized their importance in *A la Recherche du temps perdu*, but it seems to me that the crucial role they play in the novel derives from what most of Proust's readers have been unwilling to admit: their extremely modest significance. Involuntary memory is a brief coincidence between a present moment and a past one: a sensation now (such as the taste of the *madeleine*) accidentally awakens the full sensory memory of a past experience, and, "for the duration of a lightning flash," Marcel appears to exist "between" the present and the past, that is, in the similarity between the two—a similarity which is actually an abstraction from experience but which the senses fleetingly live (II, 996; III, 872). Now these memories *create* nothing. The extratemporal essence which the narrator claims they disengage from a present sensation and a past sensation may not have been previously felt as such, but it is nonetheless a truth about Marcel's *history* of sensations and in itself it contains nothing to inspire a future. In this respect, as we shall presently see more clearly, involuntary memory is unlike metaphor, although, as Robert Brasillach pointed out, Marcel's temporal illusion when he tastes the *madeleine* does resemble the optical illusions which are the metaphors of Elstir's painting.¹¹ We could perhaps say that involuntary memory is a kind of metaphor *of* metaphor: it provides a sensory analogy for the contiguity and conjoining of two separate terms which characterize metaphor.

The greatest interest of the so-called essences which involuntary memories reveal is that they make impossible any definitive self-formulations. The napkin with which Marcel wipes his mouth in the Guermantes library, having "precisely the same sort of starchy stiffness as the towel with which I had had so much trouble drying myself before the window the first day of my stay at Balbec," evokes a vision of "azure blue," spreads out, "in its various folds and creases, like a peacock's tail, the plumage of a green and blue ocean. And I drew enjoyment, not only from

11. *Portraits* (Paris, 1935), pp. 99 and 113.

those colours, but from a whole moment of my life which had brought them into being and had no doubt been an aspiration toward them, but which perhaps some feeling of fatigue or sadness had prevented me from enjoying at Balbec and which now, pure and disembodied, freed from all the imperfections of objective perception, filled me with joy" (II, 993; III, 868–69). This remark from *Le Temps retrouvé* implies nothing less than a reorganization of the hierarchy of interests and projects by which we rationally, and most habitually, recognize and define ourselves. It would be banal merely to point out that we are never completely aware of all our interests in any given situation. But, first of all, involuntary memory is a particularly powerful proof of this. Furthermore, Marcel's "return" to Balbec in the Guermantes library undermines the anxiety he felt at the time. It suggests that at least as strong as his fears was an aspiration toward certain colors, a thirst for sensation which complicates his arrival at Balbec by making it impossible for us—and for him—to settle on any one characterization of his feelings. Proust's exceptionally strong sensuality is revealed in a more continuously explicit way in *Jean Santeuil*, where the narrator insists over and over again on a richly cozy contentment of the senses, especially in nature and in scenes of quiet domesticity. We find this in *A la Recherche*, especially in the "Combray" section, but the narrator is now less interested in detailing the joys of the senses than in profiting from the psychological and literary implications of occasions which reconfirm his sensuality. Involuntary memory, while it appears to offer evidence of "an individual, identical and permanent self" and thus appeases Marcel's fear of psychological discontinuity (II, 800; III, 594), also *dislocates* self-definitions by illustrating how incomplete they always are.

The importance of this is somewhat obscured by the narrator's emphatic distinctions between loss of self and self-possession; but the strategies for self-possession are by no means strategies for permanent self-immobilizations. An involuntary memory "returns" Marcel to himself at the same time that it demolishes the

coherent views of his past which, in spite of the crises in which he seems to lose his past, he of course possesses all the time in his voluntary or intellectual memory. The taste of the *madeleine* and the sensations in the Guermantes library are trivial and tentative self-possession, and this is exactly why they point the way to a literature of inventive autobiography. The essence liberated by an involuntary memory is, therefore, first of all personal: it is not in things, but in the particular analogies or identities which Marcel's sensory apparatus establishes among sensations. And it is in no sense the essence of his personality; it is, instead, just the essence of a particular relation in his history. Finally, by relocating or at least raising doubts about what was most important to him at a past moment, Marcel's involuntary memories legitimize an open-ended view of personality which informs the psychologically re-creative activity of writing *A la Recherche du temps perdu*.

"Informs" in what way, exactly? How is the view of the self which I find implicit in Marcel's involuntary memories expressed and confirmed by style and novelistic structure in *A la Recherche*? If what the narrator calls the ["fundamental notes"] of personality (III, 626) is inadequately rendered in the language we ordinarily use in our attempts to be recognized by others as belonging to a life already familiar to them, he must find a language which contains his most personal accent without, however, sacrificing the signs by which that accent may be communicated to others. The solution to this problem depends on the literary exploitation of what we might call experimental knowledge through self-disguises. Now the disguises of personality have both a positive and a negative value in *A la Recherche*. The narrator insists so often on the pain caused by such disguises that he somewhat obscures his own indulgence in a liberating art of disguise. Sexuality—especially homosexuality—is presented in the novel as the field in which the Proustian ["creatures of flight"] can most effectively conceal their personalities by "dressing" them in desires inconceivable to the pursuing and possessive lover (II,

441; III, 93). Marcel cannot understand the "play" of Albertine's lesbianism because he fails to imagine what "role" she plays in it. Her love of women is an impenetrable disguise of his own love of women; she has his desires, but since she is a woman he cannot recognize himself in them. The connection between complicated sexual roles and the wilful elusiveness of personality is most strikingly dramatized in the scene at Rachel's theater in *Le Côté de Guermantes*. Rachel's flirtation with a young male dancer who reminds her of another woman and to whom she speaks of having "a wonderful time" with him "and a girl I know" plunges Saint-Loup's jealous imagination into a labyrinth of psychological disguises. Images of desire become inextricably embroiled in a costume play in which the man would presumably be playing the role of a woman for Rachel or her friend, or for both, and they might be taking the role of a man with a man looking like a woman. (See I, 841-44; II, 177-80.) Finally, the most baroque costumes of sexual desire are evoked in the letter Charlus accidentally reads from the lesbian actress Léa to Morel. In it Léa uses an expression about Morel which Charlus has always associated with homosexuality ("'. . . Toi tu en es au moins, etc.'"), but homosexuality here seems to mean that Morel has "the same taste as certain women for other women." Poor Charlus finds himself confronted with "the sudden inadequacy of a definition," and the letter sets up an unsolvable problem for the baron's imagination: by what images and identifications can the homosexual man calm his jealousy of another homosexual man who finds his pleasure with lesbians? "Where" is Morel in such pleasures? What is it like to be a man being treated like a woman who desires women acting like men? (II, 529-30; III, 214-15)¹²

Such are the disguises of escape from others, disguises which, as we see in Rachel's treatment of Saint-Loup, can be sadistically adopted in order to make the lover suffer from a spectacularly mysterious assertion of otherness. But in the literary work which

12. For a longer discussion of these complicated roles, see my book, *Marcel Proust: The Fictions of Life and of Art*, pp. 63-75.

devotes so much space to the anguished documentation of this sinister art of self-concealment, the narrator discovers other techniques of self-diffusion, techniques which transform the accidental and infrequent "airing" of personality which involuntary memory provides into a willed and continuous process of self-renewal. I'm thinking mainly of the therapeutical diffusiveness of metaphorical representation in art. Analogy in *A la Recherche* is often humorous. This is especially evident when the narrator compares some prosaic aspect of his past to an illustrious historical event. Françoise's passionate and fearful commentary of Léonie's slightest change of mood, of the way she gets up in the morning or has a meal, reminds the narrator of the nobility's anxious attentiveness to almost imperceptible signs of favor or disfavor in Louis XIV (I, 90-91; I, 118-19). The cruelty with which Françoise strangles the chickens she serves to Marcel's family at Combray changes the boy's view of her moral merits and makes him think of all the brutality hidden behind the official piety with which royal figures from the past are represented to us: "I began gradually to realise that Françoise's kindness, her compunction, the sum total of her virtues concealed many of those back-kitchen tragedies, just as history reveals to us that the reigns of the kings and queens who are portrayed as kneeling with clasped hands in the windows of churches, were stained by oppression and bloodshed" (I, 93; I, 122). Finally, the water lily ceaselessly carried from one bank of the Vivonne to the other by the water's currents fascinates Marcel, who watches it thinking of the "strange, ineluctable, fatal daily round" in the habits of "certain victims of neurasthenia," and then expands his analogy to include an illustrious literary precedent which, by a final humorous twist, brings him back to his own staring at the "possessed" plant: "Such as these [the victims of neurasthenia] was the water-lily, and also like one of those wretches whose peculiar torments, repeated indefinitely throughout eternity, aroused the curiosity of Dante, who would have inquired of them at greater length and in fuller detail from the victims themselves, had not Virgil, strid-

ing on ahead, obliged him to hasten after him at full speed, as I must hasten after my parents" (I, 129-30; I, 167-68).

On the one hand, such analogies make fun of Françoise, Léonie, and Marcel; they give a mock-heroic importance to the most unremarkable events or habits in their lives. But they also trivialize life at Versailles and Dante's trip through hell. From both points of view, the uniqueness of each element in the metaphor is undermined by its availability for an unexpected comparison. The analogies clarify, but they are also reductive, and they easily serve intentions of mockery. Historical repetition may be instructive, but it also parodies individuality. Or, perhaps more exactly, it makes us skeptical about or indifferent to individuality since the quality which two incidents have in common is detached from the historical existence of each incident. Life at Versailles is an episodic illustration of a *type* of life reincarnated in a scene from French provincial life at the end of the nineteenth century.

Such historical continuities are what the narrator finds, or invents, as he writes the story of his own life. But the repetitions of autobiography are of course *self*-repetitions. And in the purely verbal organization of a literary work, the chronological sequences of events can be thought of as "spatialized" in constellations of literary metaphors. From his perspective of re-creative memories, the narrator constantly anticipates future events by "trying them out" metaphorically before they happen. Poulet has spoken of a "reciprocal intelligibility" among originally distinct episodes in Marcel's life; analogies establish patterns that bring together apparently isolated moments.¹³ Each aspect of life Marcel has encountered becomes an inner resource for understanding other aspects of life; images that are first used to describe certain incidents may become later on real incidents in Marcel's life. Military tactics, for example, are used metaphorically to describe Marcel's servants' shrewd strategies for dealing with his character

13. *L'Espace proustien* (Paris, 1963), p. 133. From here to the end of this paragraph, I have used a passage from *Marcel Proust: The Fictions of Life and of Art*, pp. 236-37.

before we see Marcel at Doncières. But with Saint-Loup and his friends at Doncières, it is military strategy itself that Marcel has to understand with the aid of other analogies (provided, for example, by painting and surgery). Finally, the art with which Marcel becomes familiar at Doncières will be useful later on in helping him to understand the psychology of his pursuit of Albertine. Works of art help him to appreciate aristocratic genealogies; certain observations of nature provide a language in which to describe both Madame de Guermantes's beauty and the chance meeting between Jupien and Charlus; and the discontinuities in Marcel's own memory make intelligible the forgetfulness of those people who, at the last Guermantes *matinée*, think that Bloch has always been received in the highest society or praise a man they detested twenty years before during the Dreyfus Affair. These analogies both evoke what has already been written and point to what is yet to be written. As Georges Piroué has said, the memory of the work tends to be substituted for direct experience of the world; the narrator's book provides him with the comparisons he needs to finish the book.¹⁴

In returning to these remarks made in my book-length study of Proust, I now find the patterns of metaphorical *renvois* in *A la Recherche* interesting above all for their psychologically disintegrating and therefore psychologically creative consequences. This network of metaphorical correspondences does give to the work what at first appears to be a self-contained unity. But, more originally, they also have the effect of drawing us away from any fixed *center* of the self from which all its images might proceed. It has often been said that the narrator has little personality compared to the other characters of *A la Recherche*. And this is usually meant as an adverse judgment of the novel. As B. G. Rogers puts it: ". . . the absence of a real hero in Marcel is hard to reconcile with the massive emotional and spiritual emphasis placed upon him in *Le Temps retrouvé*."¹⁵ This impression is

14. Proust *et la musique du devenir* (Paris, 1960), p. 256.

15. Proust's *Narrative Techniques* (Geneva, 1965), p. 191.

particularly interesting in view of the fact that no reader can be unaware of the psychological repetitiveness in *A la Recherche du temps perdu*. And the narrator does tell us enough about himself so that we easily recognize the psychological patterns repeated throughout the novel as belonging to *his* personality. It is nonetheless true that he tends to disappear as the visible and sharply defined source of those patterns. But I take this to be the sign of the narrator's most impressive achievement. The vagueness of Marcel as the center of his world can be the basis of a reproach only if we impose on the work notions of what it means "to have personality" which the work is engaged in discarding. I think that even a critic as astute as Robert Champigny fails to realize this when he writes that ". . . the man of Proust can create, but cannot create himself"; as Roger Shattuck has appropriately answered, the narrator's role in *A la Recherche du temps perdu* is one of constant self-renewal.¹⁶ What we might call the narrator's scattering of self is the technique of an often humorous and always liberating displacement of his most crippling fantasies. There is no one version of these fantasies more authoritative than other versions, and the self therefore has the freedom of *being* the variety of its disguises.

The various uses of metaphor in *A la Recherche* have, fundamentally, the function of entertaining as many interpretive extensions of experience as possible. There is, for example, a certain type of social life which we recognize as the narrator's particular sense of society. The continuities among different social images in the novel are often astonishingly transparent. The Verdurin receptions repeat details from the Guermantes receptions. La Patronne, like Oriane, boasts of the paintings Elstir did for her. An annoyance with illness and death because they spoil dinner

16. Champigny, "Temps et reconnaissance chez Proust et quelques philosophes," *PMLA*, LXXIII (March 1958), 131; and Shattuck, *Proust's Binoculars/A Study of Memory, Time, and Recognition in "A la Recherche du temps perdu"* (New York, 1963), p. 152.

parties and dances is repeated in progressively more shocking (and more improbable) versions: in the Duc de Guermantes's refusal to be told that his cousin is dead at the end of *Le Côté de Guermantes*; in Monsieur Verdurin insisting, one day at La Raspelière, that no one speak of Dechambre's death to Madame Verdurin; and in the latter's nervy denial—during the party at the Quai Conti in Paris—that she feels any sorrow over the Princesse Sherbatoff's death. We might say either that the narrator describes three different social events in a surprisingly similar manner, or that he finds impressively different disguises for a rather simple and bitter view of social life. But the various disguises of that view make it difficult to fix the exact quality of the pessimism. There is a greater tolerance of emotional callousness in the presentation of Oriane's inability to decide if she should give up her parties after Swann tells her he is going to die than in the image of Madame Verdurin's defiant advertising of her indifference to the princess's death. The second incident enacts a pessimistic view of social life in a manner more likely to shock the narrator out of social life. Each repetition of a radical skepticism about human feeling allows for different consequences, broadens or narrows the range of possible response to an essentially unchanged but nonetheless flexible conviction.

Furthermore, the world Marcel is presumably remembering strikes us in many respects as a projection of his own psychology and history. In the process of remembering an impenetrable world, and while documenting with somber lucidity the hopelessness of seeking to know the lives of others, Marcel has both illustrated his thesis and partially refuted it by now drawing the world of his past into the orbit of a single, recognizably continuous personality: his own. What might be called the creative space between the narrator and the world he describes—the actual work of self-dramatization which Balzac and Stendhal hide by suggesting that the decisions of writing are decisions of point of view toward a world already there—becomes a principal object of our attention in *A la Recherche du temps perdu*. The novel

provokes the drama of our own unsettled feelings about the exact sense in which these people and events belong to Marcel's past. And they seem to "belong" to *him* in an allegorical sense. The narrator appears to be illustrating, more or less transparently and in spite of his explicit claims that he is reporting on the real world of his past, the processes by which a novelist invents a world of fiction and, more specifically, the degree of differentiation possible within a group of self-projective images.

The very inability to differentiate others from the self is dramatized within the novel as the anguish of love, at the same time that it defines the limits of characterization in a novel about love. Albertine is largely an unembodied name. She does have a distinct physical presence, and she is drawn clearly enough so that we certainly do not confuse her with Gilberte or Madame de Guermantes. But much of her personality is literally nothing but Marcel's jealous fantasies about her. As a character, she is fascinatingly unrealized; and we do not feel that Proust has failed in *his* attempt to make her come alive for us, but rather that the very vagueness of her image is necessary to authenticate Marcel's anguished jealousy. She is, as it were, a successful creation because she fails to become a definite character. By being so embroiled in Marcel's tortured doubts about her real personality, Albertine dramatizes an abortive attempt to disguise novelistic conjecture as a clear and fixed image of the external world.

Saint-Loup and Madame de Guermantes, on the other hand, are so sharply individualized that they do seem to exist, so to speak, independently of the narrator's inventiveness. The handsome, gregarious, self-consciously intellectual Saint-Loup provides an apparently complete temperamental contrast to Marcel. But his love for Rachel parallels Marcel's possessively jealous love for Albertine; and, less obviously but even more revealingly, Saint-Loup's "shift" to homosexuality in *Le Temps retrouvé* is part of that peculiar psychological and social return to self-images which announces the narrator's imminent discovery of his literary vocation as one of self-exploration. Even Oriane seems partly

a projection of Marcel. Her anxious reluctance (common to all the Guermantes) to let her guests leave at the end of a party reminds us of Marcel's terror at being separated from his mother. The fear of being alone, of an inner emptiness or lack of personality in solitude, is shared by the duchess, Charlus, and Marcel. But with Charlus and especially with Oriane, the psychological parallel with Marcel may strike us as less important than the effectiveness of a *social* comment. Because of their idle lives, the Guermantes's inner richness is "unemployed"; it seeks an outlet "in a sort of fugitive effusion, all the more [nervously excited,]" which, while it is part of their charm, also expresses the sterility of their lives (I, 1105; II, 545). The duchess's anxious self-exposure at the end of an evening is, then, a characteristic which both reminds us of the hypersensitive child at Combray and also provides a nicely condensed image of the aristocracy's unproductivity. Since the life of the *salon* fails to produce anything in which the Guermantes might continuously recognize and identify themselves, they hold on to the guests in whom they find temporary and intermittent guarantees of their own being. They are nowhere except in their public's appreciation.

But simply by summarizing Proustian social life in these terms, we find ourselves once again in the vocabulary of Marcel's particular psychology. The assumption that there is no purely inner evidence of personality, the need to arrange and control the world so that it gives a reliable and permanent assurance of the self's existence, and the inability to imagine any interesting life unless this condition is fulfilled: the pattern is of course Marcel's, and the brilliant social satire depends partly on our willingness to believe that his own anxieties about the self provide adequate criteria for judging the value of any form of social life. Indeed, the assumptions which we find so idiosyncratic and even pathological in "Combray" are sufficiently disguised, take into account enough variety of experience in *Le Côté de Guermantes* so that they appear to be intelligent conclusions about life rather than the given limitations with which Marcel approaches life. Every

incident and every character in *A la Recherche* could be placed on a range of self-projection, a range extending from the most transparent versions of Marcel's psychology to those complexly particularized images in which allegory and observation appear to coincide. The world of Marcel's past becomes, in the process of writing, a fiction dramatizing Marcel himself, but the very self-dramatization is such a liberal and inclusive one that it strikes us as a viable or livable framework in which to place the world.

Viable, and therefore capable of development. What Marcel gives us is by no means a final, limiting version of experience. The fact that in describing the world he shapes it into an almost allegorical reflection of his own imagination diminishes the constraints of reality on his life. Superficially, this psychological repetitiousness in his work would seem to testify to the narrowness of his responses. More profoundly, by illustrating the power of his self-projections, it subverts the impoverishing authority of reality in whatever he says. No fact is strong enough to expel Marcel's fantasies from his report of it, which means that nothing in his life, short of death, can prevent him from using fact for a continuous revision of fantasy. He is as free as his imagination can make him precisely because, when he is most faithful to his experience, he has no illusion of being able to make statements about reality from which his imagination would be absent. The inconclusiveness of "knowledge" allows for the theoretically limitless use of the world as a testing-ground for fictions.

Flaubert's superstition of the real naturally led him to a process of constant deletion in his writing: how could he ever be sure that each sentence or each metaphor was not saying too much about reality, and therefore violating it? Proust, on the other hand, can add endlessly to his work, for it is as if he discovered, through his narrator's self-re-creative memory, that even the most oppressively narrow experience can be interpreted into a constantly open-ended view of the world. And there is nothing naïve in this. Objects and other people are present; they impinge

on Marcel's consciousness and they make him suffer. But in the process of admitting his inability to possess and control them, he finds that the barrier of his subjectivity gives him another kind of power: the power to invent and revise the significance of events and, by the excesses of experimental revision, to coerce reality into the field of his desires. Furthermore, nothing in the novel has to "stand for" reality in order for the operations of fiction to be both meaningful and disciplined. The astonishing magnetism which draws the most diversified experience into an expanding but always recognizable individual psychology is an adequate exposure of Marcel's massive fictionalizing of his past. His fantasies can be measured and checked by their own history within the work. An unqualified commitment to fiction creates a kind of hierarchy of fictional viability, the standards which both control and encourage the self-transcending inspirations of fiction in art and in life.

Repetition in *A la Recherche* is therefore a mode of freedom. And while the freedom which the narrator enjoys throughout his work is self-creative, it also coincides with a kind of impersonality. The narrator's metaphorical style allows him to repeat himself at the same time that it raises the contents of self-definitions above any one embodiment of them. "In anyone we love," the narrator writes in *Le Temps retrouvé*, "there is always present some dream that we cannot always discern but which we constantly seek to attain. It was my faith in Bergotte and Swann which had made me love Gilberte, just as it was my belief in Gilbert the Bad which had made me love Mme de Guermantes. And what a wide expanse of unfathomable ocean was set apart in my love for Albertine, painful, jealous and individual though that love was! Moreover, just on account of this individual quality which we pursue with such eagerness, our love for someone else is already somewhat of an aberration." Our loves are most deeply characterized by a "persistent, unconscious dream" which seeks to incarnate itself in various persons (II, 972; III, 839-40). The dream is a specific type of desire; *it expresses an individuality*

more general than individuals. And that individuality is what the Proustian narrator calls an "essence"; it belongs to "the world of differences" which only art reveals (II, 572; III, 277).

Gilles Deleuze has brilliantly analyzed the Proustian notion of essences. An essence revealed in art is "a difference, the ultimate and absolute Difference." As in Leibniz, essences in *A la Recherche* "are veritable monads, each one being defined by the point of view from which it expresses the world, each point of view itself referring to an ultimate quality within the monad." Most important, the world thus expressed "does not exist outside of the subject which expresses it, but it is expressed as the essence, not of the subject itself, but of Being, or of the region of Being which is revealed to the subject."¹⁷ This is the "lost country" which the artist does not remember but with which he nonetheless remains unconsciously in harmony; and ". . . he is wild with joy when he is singing the airs of his native land . . ." when his work renders "externally visible in the colours of the spectrum that intimate composition of those worlds which we call individual persons and which, without the aid of art, we should never know" (II, 559; III, 257-58).

In spite of a certain ambiguity at the end of this passage, it seems probable that what Marcel means by the "lost country" of Vinteuil's music is not exactly equivalent to Vinteuil's personal existence. The individuality of a point of view embodied in but not dependent on the existence of an individual person: this is what the narrator comes to recognize as the source of the pleasure he experiences in front of great art. And this identification of the absolutely individual with a region of Being transcending individuals saves the Proustian narrator from the despair of feeling that language can never communicate the "fundamental notes" of an artist's personality. By distinguishing between individuality and what we ordinarily think of as subjectivity, he can entrust the expression of individuality to a system of communication in which meanings are always *shared* meanings. Only an esthetic of

17. *Marcel Proust et les signes* (Paris, 1964), pp. 36-38.

the ineffably personal rejects words because of their inescapably generalizing nature. Nothing could be further from the kind of personality which *A la Recherche du temps perdu* seeks to express. Its austere drama consists in the narrator's effort to *abstract* an individual style from a life in which style is constantly threatened by the obsessions of a particular existence.

The narrative texture of *A la Recherche* is open-endedly metaphorical, which is one of the ways in which it differs most strikingly from *Jean Santeuil*. Metaphor in *Jean Santeuil* is ornamental and psychologically distracting. In a sense, it is a far more "literary" or "written" work than *A la Recherche*. It has an uninteresting stylistic complexity which makes each of its sections a self-contained, carefully wrought—overwrought—"piece." Proust could not, I think, have changed the intrinsic discontinuity of *Jean Santeuil* by providing more links from one episode to another; to make smoother transitions would not have changed the underlying conception of style as an exercise of verbally enshrining disconnected experience. As a result of this conception, incidents in *Jean Santeuil* often have a kind of depth which is largely eliminated from the later work. In *A la Recherche*, on the one hand, metaphors enrich specific incidents without completely "covering" them; on the other hand, the freedom of the metaphors themselves is protected by their extensions into other parts of the novel, by their being containers always larger than whatever they contain at any given moment. There is no network of multiple interpretations in *Jean Santeuil*, and, consequently, we frequently *see through* episodes to a single, definite, and limiting significance. We may, for example, feel that Jean's overwhelmed reaction at the discovery that Charlotte is willing to give him certain erotic satisfactions is intelligible only if we think of the scene as a mask for an unexpected homosexual encounter.¹⁸ There is nothing in Proust's treatment of the scene which lifts it above the peculiarity of its literal detail. As far as "content" goes, *A la Recherche* has equally peculiar episodes. But the style

18. See *Jean Santeuil*, 3 vols. (Paris, 1952), III, 256–62.

now has a centrifugal energy which prevents us from considering such content as the transparent sign of something unsaid, of a hidden reality. Incidents no longer extend "behind" themselves into the author's veiled psychology; instead, they are now coerced by metaphor into extensions leading to other metaphorical inventions throughout the novel. They are, as it were, horizontally rather than vertically transcendent. The significance of each passage is limited only by the amount of novelistic space which the narrator will have the time to fill in the process of self-enlargement which is his literary vocation.

Literature in Proust's world does involve a certain moving away from life. The image of the writer sealed up in his cork-lined room is a dramatic enough metaphor for that removal. But the narrator in his hermetic seclusion reveals the mechanisms of self-removal as operative throughout his life. As a result, we see the establishment of esthetic distances as the most creative and liberating activities within *all* life's occasions. To be the artist of one's life involves the possibility of living within styles rather than within obsessions—that is, the possibility of repeating ourselves in an entertaining variety of performances rather than in the stultifying monotony of fantasies which break through each play of the self to be revealed as the boring "truth" of the self. A profound commitment to disguise (to what might even be labeled duplicity in an ethos of sincerity) is therefore perhaps essential for an exuberantly expansive self. *A la Recherche du temps perdu* is certainly a novel about art, but it is not—as *Madame Bovary* is—a novel about the impossible distance between art and life; it is rather an inventory of techniques which make for a highly artful life.

Self-re-creation in Proust has two boundaries beyond which it ceases to work in the manner I have been describing, boundaries which help to define a hierarchy of psychological and moral values. On the one side, there are the thin, transparent surfaces of *Les Plaisirs et les jours* and *Jean Santeuil*. Narrative drama in these early efforts collapses under psychological pressures (for

example, homosexuality and snobbery) which Proust seems to find more compelling than the stories which weakly mediate them. On the other side, there are the general laws, which merely sublimate those pressures by feebly mediating them as abstract universalities. The laws provide final conclusions about versions of experience we may find more interesting if we think of them as tentative. The narrator's maxims encourage us to think of his omniscience as that of the traditional realistic novelist: it is as if, in spite of all he has demonstrated to the contrary, the artist could confirm our ability to know the real with godlike objectivity. The general laws in Proust illustrate his sympathy with the Balzacian and Flaubertian impulse to deny novelistic processes as our only form of knowledge—that is, to use novelistic fiction as a way of promoting the belief that our perceptions of reality can go beyond the fictional. The laws are the Proustian equivalent of the “Vulcan-like craftsmanship” which we saw the narrator complaining about in Wagner. They obscure the incompleteness of his work, they deny its experimental nature. Their axiomatic finality suggests an ideal of art as vindicating the hope that reality is knowable and intelligible, and an image of the artist as the carrier of reality's “message” to other men—an ideal which Proust himself, in bearing witness to its disintegration in nineteenth-century art, was one of the first to expose as vainly nostalgic.

The proliferation of the general laws in the later volumes of *A la Recherche* is the touching evidence of Proust's vulnerability, as the time for his life and for his work drew to a close, to the non-Proustian ideal of finality. It is as if the effort to develop techniques to keep art and life permanently incomplete lost some of its energy as he felt the end of his life approach—as if the imminence of death intensified the nostalgia for finalizing life (for making its meaning definitive) before it could be overtaken by the only unattackable end we know. But within the self-limiting boundaries of both the general laws and reductive psychological depths is the major enterprise which Proust's nar-

rator undertakes: that of always postponing all conclusions in order to welcome each moment of experience as an occasion for trying out new versions of the self and of the world. Literature in *A la Recherche* is the activity of moving *toward* a finished literary work. At the end of *Le Temps retrouvé*, we can therefore feel that the narrator has in fact already written the work he has just outlined, and yet we can perhaps also agree with Germaine Brée's contention that only now is the narrator ready to begin that work.¹⁹ For nothing in what we have read *realizes* the narrator's literary ambitions, and everything that we have read suggests that what he might have gone on to write would have continued to illustrate the self's admirable talent for diversifying and multiplying its fictions. The inconclusiveness of *A la Recherche du temps perdu* is the narrator's—and Proust's—courageous gamble on the quality of life which this refusal to be defined and limited by the “lost time” of our past can produce.

19. See *Du Temps perdu au temps retrouvé: Introduction à l'œuvre de Marcel Proust*, in *Études françaises*, XLIV (Paris, 1950), 23–33.