



Leo Bersani

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 the apothecary, M. 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 authentically concludes 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 also say—nothing but

the creative void in which the novelist's work (his novel and his struggle) has simply ceased to exist.

When Proust's narrator praises, in *La Prisonnière*, the "marvelously incomplete" nature of nineteenth-century masterpieces, he is suggesting—hesitantly and ambivalently, it is true—that the most interesting fact about artistic creation may be the very *impossibility* of writing definitive sentences and definitive works. The passage I am thinking of (in which Marcel refers to Wagner, Hugo, Michelet, and Balzac) has several shifts of tone and position, for 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 tends most profoundly to undermine. And we can easily see the possibly radical consequences of Marcel's admiration for what he calls the "literary miscarriages" of the nineteenth century's "greatest writers." 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," it no longer stands as a kind of epistemological monument in relation to the rest of our experience. Art ceases to reassure us about reality as intrinsically meaningful and conclusively shaped. 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. It then naturally becomes much more difficult than ever before to de-

fine 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 aesthetic of imitation or expressiveness?

At the extreme limit of this problematic self-reflection in contemporary literature, we have, in Maurice Blanchot and in Samuel Beckett, a literature about the necessity of its own failure. The narrator of *A la recherche du temps perdu* is, of course, far from maintaining that the most interesting nineteenth-century artists are great *because* they failed. But his remarks in *La Prisonnière* correspond to the most original aspects of his own literary achievement. It is the lifelike incompleteness of that achievement which I want to examine. The Proustian art of incompleteness has helped to subvert an aesthetic 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.

The correspondences which Proust's narrator will establish between art and the rest of his life appear to have, as their point of departure, questions raised by Flaubert in order to assert the separation between art and life. 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 subjects; 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 indifferent to the commitments which a *use* of language creates, and because he thus isolates language from the activities it inspires and accompanies, words naturally 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": Mme 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." 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).

The fragility of Marcel's sense of self will of course be recognized by readers of Proust as the principal "theme" of Marcel's life. 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"; 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. In none of these cases is it a question 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 painfully, as a failure of self-recognition.

Such incidents could, I think, be traced to Marcel's sense of the sinfully individualizing nature of desire. Marcel's desires—sexual, social, and aesthetic—define his self; they express his designs on the world and give to his history its personal shape. But he feels 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, for anything purely self-expressive might be a blasphemous violation of Marcel's grandmother's memory. It is as if Marcel came to feel that *any* desires directed somewhere else (the loved one's sexual interest in someone else is the most dramatic version of this) express a sinister project for independence. They threaten 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*; thus 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. Because Marcel seems to condemn his own 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, he 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 he 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 desires, although, as we shall presently see, it also can permit 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. Cut off from the objects which inspired and defined them, Marcel's desires, so to speak, no longer have anywhere to go. They do not "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-possession. 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 the place in which psychological truths are distilled, 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 "compensation" in the suffering which the lies of "insensitive and inferior women" inflict on sensitive and intellectual men. Behind each of the loved one's words, the narrator writes, such men "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." And, he concludes, "all this creates, in front of the sensitive and intelligent man, a universe [in depths] which his jealousy would fain plumb and which is not without interest to his intelligence." Any statement felt or recognized 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 their behavior proposed by Albertine or Odette becomes the center on 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 lesser or greater 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.

Involuntary memories provide a similar variety of points of view, and this time we can see more explicitly how expandable versions of experience in *A la recherche* are equivalent to expansive self-definitions. Numerous commentators have rightly emphasized the importance of involuntary memories in the novel, but it seems to me that the crucial role they play in Proust's work derives from what most of his 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. Now these memories *create* nothing; the extra-temporal 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.

The interest of the so-called essences which involuntary memories reveal is that they make impossible any definitive self-formulations. The towel 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 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 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." 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 sensations which complicates the episode of his arrival at Balbec by making it impossible for us—and for him—to settle on any one characterization of his feelings. Involuntary memory, while it appears to offer evidence of "an individual, identical and permanent self," and thus appeases Marcel's fear of psychological discontinuity, 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. And 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 intellectual or voluntary 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 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 we may not see at once the extent of 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. Marcel cannot understand the “play” of Albertine’s Lesbianism because he cannot 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 willful 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. 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”), 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 pleas-

ures? What is it like to be a man being treated like a woman who desires women acting like men?

Such are the disguises of escape from others, disguises which, as we see in Rachel's case, can be sadistically adopted in order to make the lover suffer from a spectacularly mysterious assertion of otherness. But in the literary work which 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 memories provide into a willed and continuous process of self-renewal. I am 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. And 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 in religious art. Finally, the water lily ceaselessly carried from one bank of the Vivonne to the other by the river'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, striding on ahead, obliged him to hasten after him at full speed, as I must hasten after my parents."

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 precisely, 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. Now such historical continuities are exactly 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 sequence 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. Georges Poulet has spoken of a "reciprocal intelligibility" among originally distinct episodes in Marcel's life; analogies es-

establish patterns that bring together apparently isolated moments, and they both evoke what has already been written and point to what is yet to be written.

This network of metaphorical correspondences does give to the work what at first appears to be a self-contained unity. But, more originally, such correspondences are also psychologically disintegrating. They 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 very 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*.” This impression is 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. 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 those 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. And the continuities among different social images in the novel are often astonishingly transparent. The Verdurin receptions repeat details from the Guermites receptions. La Patronne, like Oriane, boasts about the paintings Elstir did for her. An annoyance with illness and death because they spoil dinner 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 M. Verdurin's insisting, one day at la Raspelière, that no one speak of Dechambre's death to Mme Verdurin; and in the latter's nervy denial—during the party at the quai Conti in *La Prisonnière*—that she feels any sorrow over the princess 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 Mme 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 re-

sponse 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 thus seems 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.

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 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. Thus Albertine, by being so em-

broiled in Marcel's tortured doubts about her real personality, is an occasion for demonstrating an abortive attempt to disguise novelistic conjecture as a clear and fixed image of the external world. Saint-Loup and Mme 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, although Saint-Loup's love for Rachel parallels Marcel's possessively jealous love for Albertine, and Oriane's 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 psychology which we find so idiosyncratic and even pathological in *Combray* takes into account enough variety of experience so that its social "disguises" impress us as intelligent conclusions about life rather than the given limitations with which the narrator approaches life. If the world of Marcel's past becomes, in the process of writing, a fiction dramatizing Marcel himself, 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.

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. For all its apparent backward-looking, *A la recherche du temps perdu* is a more projective novel than, say, *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 re-makes a once disappointing past into the field of an extravagant exercise in self-expansion.

Repetition in *A la recherche* is therefore a mode of freedom. But while the freedom which the narrator enjoys throughout his work is self-creative, it also coincides with a kind of impersonality. His 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 Guer-

mantes. 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. The dream is a specific type of desire; *it expresses an individuality more general than individuals*. And that individuality is what Proust's narrator calls an "essence"; it belongs to "the world of differences" which only art reveals.

The individuality of a point of view embodied in but not dependent on the existence of an individual person: as Gilles Deleuze has brilliantly defined it, 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 aesthetic of 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 that of *Jean Santeuil*. Metaphor in *Jean Santeuil* is essentially ornamental and psychologically distracting. In a sense, that novel 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 essential 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 experiences. 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. 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 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 aesthetic distances as the most creative and liberating activity 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.