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## The Lover's Way – Reevaluating Proustian Desire

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Bard

The Lover's Way – Reevaluating Proustian Desire

Senior Project submitted to

The Division of Languages and Literature

of Bard College

by

Nyi Nyi Ohn Myint

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

May 2018



Dedicated to my professors, family, friends, and Linh.



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Real life, life at last laid bare and illuminated – the only life in consequence which can be said to be really lived – is literature, and life thus defined is in a sense all the time immanent in ordinary men no less than in the artist.

–Marcel Proust, *Time Regained*



1.

A few years ago, as I was taking a French translation course, my professor had one day introduced to me a particular first passage of a book which struck me with a most unfamiliar and delightful impression. The first line of this passage read: *Longtemps, je me suis couché de bonne heure*, and what followed were pages further elaborating on how this 'je' tossed and turned in bed. As an aspiring professional video gamer and Netflix connoisseur, I was not well acquainted with the realm of literature. Nonetheless, this unnamed narrator caught me by surprise as I was better able to relate to him in just these few pages as opposed to the years I had invested in the avatar with which I roamed the virtual universe. As such, I felt an urgent desire to read, and, being raised in the age of instant gratification, I was also utterly impatient to learn how to write.

2.

Who could help me?<sup>1</sup>

As my luck would have it, I did not have to look too far. This unnamed narrator, who is later suspected to be called Marcel, was to become my guide. *In Search of Lost Time* is in an extremely reductionist sense, a novel about Marcel becoming a writer. As ambitious as I am ignorant, I came up with a theory that because the *Search* is ultimately about becoming a writer, following any big theme in this novel would circuitously lead me to the same destination regardless of which path I take. Therefore, I have decided that the big theme that we will follow, or study, is desire in Proust, with the silent hope that an acquaintance with Proustian desire will potentially also reveal what it takes to become a writer.

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<sup>1</sup> Barthes, perhaps, given that I have just borrowed word for word, the introductory question from his second section of *Camera Lucida*.

### 3. Desire Defined & the Search for Truth

We have decided that the topic of ‘interest’ is desire. However, an issue persists in that following every thread of desire within the seven volumes of the *Search* would be an endeavor that would leave any reader in a tangled mess, for one could be tracking this phenomenon from multiple angles. Namely, desire could apply to the ambitions of social climbing, the pursuit of companionship, the charms (and cruelty) of love, or more abstractly, the urge to write or the search for truth. But this is not to say either that these different notions are independent of one another for they constantly overlap; the desire for truth for instance, in the case of the narrator following Albertine’s death, is inherently a yearning that developed from unrequited love,<sup>2</sup> and we learn that the urge to write is a calling that must ultimately be chosen over every other need, but at the same time, writing cannot be done without first experiencing, say, the disappointments in friendship or the pangs of jealousy.

How then, should we situate and go about studying desire? Perhaps the cleanest approach would be to limit ourselves to examining a specific aspect of it. For example, let’s say that we will refine our focus to topics only concerning Marcel’s experience of love, without of course, ignoring Swann’s influence in this respect. This way, a focal point and a sense of direction is established, but these rules are made so that we can eventually break them. Thus, upon analysis, while one should pay close attention to the nuances of each scene, the peripheral developments that occur outside our direct line of sight are of equal importance. The *Search* is after all, a sleight of lens; one moment we may be looking through a microscope to study the fine details of an event not realizing halfway through that the optical tube has discreetly been substituted with that of a telescope, and what we then continue to perceive merely as petty details are in fact seemingly

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<sup>2</sup> Marcel sends Aimé to Balbec on a quest for truth as a private inspector to confirm rumors of Albertine’s lesbianism.

small, distant worlds that could potentially reveal great laws.<sup>3</sup> For the sake of structure, the slides we will be placing ‘under the microscope’ for inspection are those that fall under the category above established, when really, we will also be tackling the broader implications brought about by desire through the sly switch. As such, these essays are mainly influenced by two modes of thought, one analytical (microscope) and the other theoretical (telescope). As Howard Moss beautifully puts it, “in the first, we observe phenomena; in the second, we try to understand the laws that govern them.”<sup>4</sup>

Considering that we will be ‘focusing’ on Marcel’s encounters with love, the overlaying question of this project is relatively straightforward: how might he capture the object of his desire? And if it is indeed possible to seize the seemingly uncatchable, how might he subsequently preserve his prize, retain his love? I will argue that the solution may lie in encapsulating the desired within the confines of a simulacrum. While Swann tries to arrest the essence of Odette through imagining her as a painting, Marcel’s approach is to engulf through literature. But before we delve any deeper into these notions, a more appropriate starting point perhaps, would be to begin by learning more about what is at stake when one is in love.

In case the title of his book was not sufficiently suggestive, Deleuze insists right away in *Proust & Signs* that learning is essentially concerned with *signs*.

“One becomes a carpenter only by becoming sensitive to the signs of wood, a physician by becoming sensitive to the signs of disease.”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> *The Past Recaptured*, Marcel Proust, p. 393-394, as is quoted in *The Magic Lantern of Marcel Proust*, Howard Moss, p. 27-28, when the narrator discusses the book he is about to write: “Soon I was able to show a few sketches. No one understood a word. Even those who were favorable to my conception of the truths which I intended later to carve within the temple congratulated me on having discovered them with a microscope when I had, on the contrary, used a telescope to perceive things which, it is true, were very small but situated far off and each of them a world in itself. Whereas I had sought great laws, they called me one who grubs for petty details.”

<sup>4</sup> *The Magic Lantern of Marcel Proust*, Howard Moss, p. 28

<sup>5</sup> *Proust and Signs*, Gilles Deleuze, p.4

Over the course of these pages, we will attempt to become sensitive to the signs of love. To fall in love, in the words of Deleuze, is to undergo an apprenticeship to someone; to individualize the object of desire according to the signs he or she emits. The beloved represents not only a person but an unknown world to which the lover has no access, and it is from this *terra incognita* that the beloved gives clues tailored to her preferences that are open for interpretation. The lover's task then, "is to try to *explicate*, to *develop* these unknown worlds".<sup>6</sup> In everyday terminology, this may refer to what one might describe as 'the thrill of the chase', except what seems to be suggested in Proust is that even if the chase leads to a moment of capture, the duration of captivity is always limited. The mother's kiss is so sweet but is immediately followed by the anguish of her departure, and the delight of watching Albertine sleep is interrupted by the questions roused by her drowsy murmurs.

The journey to love is consequently a road paved by jealousy. Like a cartographer who thinks he has discovered a new land is disappointed to find that its regions have already been mapped, a lover who begins his apprenticeship to the world enveloped within the beloved cannot help but be suspicious as to if others might have already accessed this realm. For a world in which the lover does not belong suggests a possible world that is open for others to decipher, access and possess. Worse yet, the lover could come to discover that this *terra incognita* is also one that cannot be emulated, that it is physically impossible to please the beloved in all the ways she desires, let alone conceive just how these pleasures might be expressed. The signs of Gomorrah are thus the ones that strike for Marcel the most violent blows, but it is this same violence that impels and initiates the lover's apprenticeship. The jealous man (a man in love) is a suffering man, but he is also one that is set on the path for truth.

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid, p. 7

By design, this path is decorated with an abundant array of external signs, but there is also a major temporal component to its blueprint. We come to learn that the search for truth is in fact a search for lost time, or rather, an evaluation of (supposed) time wasted. Specifically, the time that Marcel wastes on love could have been used to tackle the literary work that he announced to his family that he would pursue. The irony however, is that the deferment of writing is precisely what allows him to become a writer, given of course, that he works with respect to the final due date: namely, as he discovers in extremes, one imposed by death (perhaps this is why it is called a deadline). The act of writing is what allows Marcel to create the simulacrum in which all of his remembered experiences (that is to say, including that concerning the ever-fleeting object of desire) are to an extent captured, or at least held captive in his perpetual piece of art. If writing is the solution to the problems posed by the elusive nature of desire, how does Marcel arrive to a position of authorship? And if it is not the solution, then what is?

#### 4. A Question of Chronology

In the beginning sections of *Time Regained*, there is a striking passage in which the narrator superposes an evening in Paris during dinner time with the perspective of a wretched soldier on leave. In a scene that describes the purposely ignorant and habitually numbed manner in which the inhabitants of war-torn France went about their lives in the capital, jostling one another in their efforts to secure a table at a restaurant, the lucidity of those stripped from the comfort of habit is also accentuated. The narrator himself belongs to the latter category as he had freshly returned to Paris from his retreat at the sanatorium, similar (although only in terms of lucidity), to the soldiers who had just left the trenches of war. Marcel, in his short-lived period of fresh gaze, makes an important discovery before habit steers the wheels once again, through a phrase that he utters in the most nonchalant fashion concerning the frustration of Saint-Loup and the Baron de Charlus when they arrive too late or too early to the object of their fascination:

“It is all a question of chronology.”<sup>7</sup>

In this manner we are given a formula that can apply to questions regarding almost any big theme in the novel. How does Marcel become a writer? To what can we accredit the rise of the Verdurins? What is the significance in the unification of Swann’s and Guermantes’ way? To respond to any of these inquiries, one must first establish that it is indeed a question of chronology, and attempting to explore the implications of Proustian desire on and for the narrator is no exception to this golden rule. As such, the scenes we will analyze are chronologically ordered, but of course, we must keep

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<sup>7</sup> *Time Regained*, p. 67: “Thus, by a process of compensation, while virtuous young men abandon themselves in their later years to the passions of which they have at length become conscious, promiscuous youths turn into men of principle from whom any Charlus who turns up too late on the strength of old stories will get an unpleasant rebuff. It is all a question of chronology.”

in mind that again, these rules are set so that we can later break them. In fact, the obliteration of chronology is a necessary component in experiencing the raptures of involuntary memory.



## 5. The Sea!

One of the first encounters with love occurs for Marcel when he and his family decides to one day take the Méséglise Way back home and walk through Swann's park, unaware that Odette (whom they make a conscious effort to avoid) and her daughter Gilberte, are present. There is a little path leading to the open field that Marcel uses in order to catch up with his family who had walked on ahead of him. To his surprise, there is something peculiar about this path.

I found the whole path throbbing with the fragrance of hawthorn-blossom. The hedge resembled a series of chapels, whose walls were no longer visible under the mountains of flowers that were heaped upon their altars; while beneath them the sun cast a checkered light upon the ground, as though it had just passed through a stained-glass window; and their scent swept over me, as unctuous, as circumscribed in its range, as though I had been standing before the Lady-altar,<sup>8</sup>

As a gifted perceiver, Marcel elevates the ordinary to the sacred realm of art (quite literally, as he is drawing a religious comparison) through the eradication of distinction between the hawthorns and the chapels. Through the freshly conceived metaphor, a new light (a checkered one at that) shines through the mundane, in turn blessing it with aesthetic value. But at this point in time, Marcel does not realize the reason why he is so intrigued by these hawthorn bushes. He recognizes that this sensation is a sign but he simply does not know how to respond it.<sup>9</sup>

It was in vain that I lingered beside the hawthorns – breathing in their invisible and unchanging odor, trying to fix it in my mind (which did not know what to do with it) [...] they went on offering me the same charm in inexhaustible profusion, but without letting me delve any more deeply,<sup>10</sup>

In this moment of disorientation, the experience of the hawthorns is perceptively loaded with meaning but is somehow avoiding theoretical appropriation. In a desperate attempt, Marcel decides

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<sup>8</sup> *Swann's Way*, p. 193-194.

<sup>9</sup> This sensation is the aching pain that occurs as a result of experiencing what Barthes calls a *punctum*. See section 8: *Punctum and the Ordinary*, p. 16.

<sup>10</sup> *Swann's Way*, p. 194.

to look away for a moment hoping that this forced distraction will provide him with a fresh gaze upon his return.

My eyes travelled up the bank which rose steeply to the fields beyond the hedge, alighting on a stray poppy or a few laggard cornflowers which decorated the slope here and there like the border of a tapestry whereon may be glimpsed sporadically the rustic theme which will emerge triumphant in the panel itself; infrequent still, spaced out like the scattered houses which herald the approach of a village, they betokened to me the vast expanse of waving corn beneath the fleecy clouds, and the sight of a single poppy hoisting up its slender rigging and holding against the breeze its scarlet ensign, over the buoy of rich black earth from which it sprang, made my heart beat like that of a traveler who glimpses on some low-lying ground a stranded boat which is being caulked and made sea-worthy, and cries out, although he has not yet caught sight of it, "The Sea!"<sup>11</sup>

This little visual detour was initiated with the intentions of turning off this 'aesthetic perception mode' that Marcel didn't realize was on, but this attempted distraction only brings to his attention another minute detail that pricks him yet again. 'A single poppy hoisting up its slender rigging' makes his heart pound with excitement. Although his emotions are present, the narrator fails to wait for his intellect to catch up and rationalize the matter, so in an impatient and anxious attempt at situating this experience, the tongue-tied narrator exclaims: 'The Sea!' This inarticulation does not necessarily imply a lack of meaning, but rather just a lack of explanation. If we consider it closely, one could argue that through this utterance, Marcel did inadvertently realize the nature of his circumstance; it is similar to the excitement of a traveler who cries out 'The Sea!' merely after catching a glimpse of a stranded boat. Such enthusiasm would be considered unwarranted unless of course, this particular traveler has long been in search of the sea, in which case his glee is justified as the stranded boat suggests that water must be close at hand. Similarly, the narrator must have been in pursuit of a specific something to which this particular experience with Hawthorne's

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid, p. 194-195.

alludes to. The final revelation does not arrive until yet another perspective is offered to Marcel through the unintentional guidance of his grandfather, who suggests to him:

You're fond of hawthorns; just look at this pink one – isn't it lovely?<sup>12</sup>

This recognition of a familiar object through an unfamiliar version of it (in this case a pink hawthorn instead of a white one), oddly inspires in the narrator a rapture like that 'we feel on seeing a work by our favorite painter quite different from those we already know'.<sup>13</sup> The joys of experiencing a replacement of the familiar with another that shares a similar essence to its original, though young Marcel may not have realized it, is an introduction to metonymy. Just as the boat is a metonymy for the sea, the experience of the hawthorns appears as a metaphor for the church, and this metaphor can subsequently function as a metonymy for literature itself. The little detour did after all, reveal a lot: the goal of the traveler is to find the sea and Marcel's ambition is to become a writer, and just as a glimpse of the stranded boat hints that water is near, the discovery of the metaphor indicates Marcel's proximity to the sea of literature, a premonition of the book he will come to write. But this artistic calling is intercepted by yet another sudden appearance...

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid, p. 195.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, p. 195.

## 6. The Same, but Pink

And it was indeed a hawthorn, but one whose blossom was pink, and lovelier even than the white. It too, was in holiday attire – for one of those days which are the only true holidays, the holy days of religion, because they are not assigned by some arbitrary caprice, as secular holidays are, to days which are not specially ordained for them, which have nothing about them that is essentially festal – but it was attired even more richly than the rest, for the flowers which clung to its branches, one above another, so thickly as to leave no part of the tree undecorated, like the tassels wreathed about the crook of a rococo shepherdess  
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Like the serpent who tempts Eve to eat from the tree in the garden of Eden, the narrator's grandfather (although with harmless intentions) gestures to the pink hawthorns in Swann's park. Just as a bite from the apple would unlock a horizon of knowledge, the discovery of the pink hawthorns marks for Marcel the genesis of a new literary understanding of the world. So begins the fragmented description that gradually materializes the spectacle that is Marcel's first love: Gilberte.

The first line of this description makes use of the comparative adjective 'lovelier'. The addition of 'even than' following this word acknowledges how charming the preceding object (the white blossom) is, but the distinction in using a comparative as opposed to a superlative suggests that however marvelous this pink hue may be, even lovelier tinted blossoms are to follow. This distinction highlights the multiplicity and the infinitely replaceable yet singular quality of, in this specific case, a hawthorn.<sup>15</sup> This sentence is followed by the personification of the plant, as the narrator notes that '*it, too, was in holiday attire—*'. However, before completing this description, there is a deliberate digression that specifies what is intended exactly by the use of the word 'holiday', by which he means 'true' holiday, that is to say, the days specifically ordained by

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<sup>14</sup> *Swann's Way*, p. 195-196.

<sup>15</sup> Although this infinitely replicable object can refer to other things as well. Love, for example, also proves to have no end in the chain of substitution.

religion. This is a nod to Marcel's reverence for the fourth dimension that is time, and his admiration for all that has endured its crushing weight, namely culture and religion – although this specific understanding of holidays or holy days is linked rather for him, to a *hatred* of the arbitrary in favor of something essential, necessary, and ordained. Nonetheless, the hints of atavism that can be found, for example, in dipping one's fingers in the stoup of a church, in observing the mannerisms of Françoise, or encapsulated in the name Guermites are all subjects of fascination to the narrator. Days in themselves are not special in the sense that any day can be forgotten, but holidays (the non-secular ones) are days marked with significance that are remembered every year. The existence of this passage is evidence that this day was marked for Marcel, although not through holy means but rather, as we will soon come to learn, a devilish gesture, 'a deliberate insult.'

The personification ends with a vignette of a rococo shepherdess holding her crook, and it is not much later that we meet the little girl holding a spade, Marcel's first love. Descriptions containing pink and red are sprinkled thoroughly across pages 196 and 197 of *Swann's Way* and finally materialized in Gilberte's reddish hair and pinkish freckles. These manifestations suggest a curious relationship between literature and the object of desire as the crook and colors function as the metonymies that introduce and assemble in flesh the character of Gilberte. Fragments, when appropriately manipulated, seem to provide access to totality.<sup>16</sup> But to Marcel, this totality is an enigma.

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<sup>16</sup> Such is also the case with the workings of involuntary memory. It is through a crumb of pastry and a sip of tea that the entire village of Combray is revived.

## 7. A Devilish Gesture

I gazed at her, at first with that gaze which is not merely the messenger of the eyes, but at whose window all the senses assemble and lean out, petrified and anxious, a gaze eager to reach, tough, capture, bear off in triumph the body at which it is aimed, and the soul with the body; [...] She went on staring out of the corner of her eye in my direction, without any particular expression, without appearing to see me, but with a fixity and a half-hidden smile which I could only interpret, from the notions I had been vouchsafed of good breeding, as a mark of infinite contempt; and her hand, at the same time, sketched in the air an indelicate gesture, for which, when it was addressed in public to a person whom one did not know, the little dictionary of manners which I carried in my mind supplied only one meaning, namely, a deliberate insult.<sup>17</sup>

This gesture made by Gilberte upon their first encounter has on young Marcel the effect of a *punctum* as is defined by Barthes (although technically it may not fully constitute its definition), an effect that Marcel is unable to specifically identify as Gilberte's expression does not exist in his 'little dictionary of manners', but one nonetheless that pricks him and fills him with anguish.<sup>18</sup> It is a sign that is unread, or rather, misread. He only finds out six volumes later that this sign would have unlocked for him a realm of pleasures to which she was inviting him to, a society of experimental youth exploring in the dark.

It is actually only after this gesture that the name 'Gilberte' officially appears. A lady in white, formally a 'lady in pink', presumably her mother, calls out: 'Gilberte, come along; what are you doing?' And in this roundabout manner Marcel learns her name, and his cumulative experiences up to this point, the fragrance of hawthorn-blossom, the taste of its colors,<sup>19</sup> the sight of the little girl holding a spade and the sound of her name all comes together to form a collective sensation encapsulated within the syllables that pronounce *Gilberte*.

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<sup>17</sup> *Swann's Way*, p. 198-199.

<sup>18</sup> This idea is further explored in the section *Punctum and the Ordinary*, p. 16.

<sup>19</sup> *Swann's Way*, p. 196: "And these flowers had chosen precisely one of those colors of some edible and delicious thing."

In this manner, Marcel attempts to perform an act of translation wherein the name Gilberte becomes endowed with the experience and pain that is exquisite to himself, a name that would otherwise be considered commonplace to those already acquainted with her. He observes that within Gilberte is an unknown and impenetrable world, and as such, this attempt at translation is essentially an attempt at understanding, penetrating and obliterating the distinctions that prevent him from knowing her. The task of the writer is to replace the opaque with the transparent. But Marcel's understanding of 'love' at this point assumes a certain violence, and so his perception of penetrating into the unknown world is by means of drilling insults; destruction as opposed to replacement. He regrets that he did not return to Gilberte the same anguish that she aroused in him, wishing that he had responded to her by saying 'I think you're hideous, grotesque; how I loathe you!'<sup>20</sup> When really, we discover later that the best method of understanding or 'translating' phenomena is rather through finding a metaphoric equivalent that would subsequently liberate the ordinary to a subject of aesthetic merit. But in order to arrive to this position, Marcel must first learn how to read and respond to what Deleuze would call the 'signs of art'.

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid, p. 200.

## 8. Punctum and the Ordinary

In *Camera Lucida*, Barthes coins the term *punctum*. The *punctum* is something extraordinary within the ordinary. As he describes it in the context of photography, it is a feature that is not intended by the photographer and its existence depends entirely on the subjective experience of the viewer. It is an apparently irrelevant detail in a photograph which however becomes essential as soon as it is noticed, and when it is noticed, a *punctum* is like an arrow that pierces the viewer. This sensation of the ‘prick’ is one that is possible only because it is unexpected, similar to how the sensations that follow involuntary memories are possible precisely because they are involuntary. That being said however, experiencing the phenomenon of the ‘prick’ is in and of itself just an aching pain in the heart if the intellect does not follow through to examine why it is that a specific image had such an effect. There is a relationship between language and sensation that must to a certain extent harmonize in order to extract truths from the experience. This is why the path of love is intrinsically tied with the path of becoming a writer, as it is the mutual understanding between sensation and language that produces writing. The *punctum* is important because it is arguably what sets Marcel on the path of love, which as we have discussed, is synonymous to the path of jealousy, which of course, inadvertently places him on the search for truth through the means of writing. In short, the *punctum* is what makes the writer, as it is an allusion to an aesthetic particularity that calls for explanation, although there is evidence too that it kills the writer; Bergotte literally passes away after noticing a little patch of yellow wall on a Vermeer painting,<sup>21</sup> and there are instances in which Swann feels a perplexing question come to

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<sup>21</sup> *The Captive*, p. 245. “He repeated to himself: “Little patch of yellow wall, with a sloping roof, little patch of yellow wall.” Meanwhile he sank down on to a circular settee; whereupon he suddenly ceased to think that his life was in jeopardy and, reverting to his natural optimism, told himself: “Its nothing, merely a touch of indigestion from those potatoes, which were under-cooked.” A fresh attack struck him down; he rolled from the settee to the floor, as visitors and attendants came hurrying to his assistance. He was dead.”



mind, but intentionally decides to ignore it - Swann too, is unable to outlive the novel.<sup>22</sup> The *punctum* can thus also be read as a threat, a reminder that there is a deadline to the assignment it is alluding to. Nevertheless, it is a sign that inspires action (which Marcel generally lacks) through violence.

I noted earlier that Gilberte's 'indelicate gesture' has the effect of a *punctum* as it strikes Marcel and impels him to take action, but it cannot by Barthes' definition be considered one, as this gesture is one that is intentionally placed.<sup>23</sup> On the other hand, of the scenes we have explored so far, Marcel's experience with the hawthorn hedges would be an adequate fit to the definition of this term. There is nothing more ordinary and seemingly irrelevant than noticing hawthorns amid a park filled with a plethora of other different species. Yet this otherwise standard experience pricks the narrator and he is desperate to figure out why. He attempts to attribute language to sensation, but is only able to utter the words 'The Sea!'. Bergotte reacts no differently in a similar situation in which he is struck by an undeniably ordinary patch of yellow wall on a Vermeer painting through which he faced with a literary and theoretical dead end. The only language he could muster up is 'little patch of yellow wall, with a sloping roof, little patch of yellow wall', which is the equivalent of using a word in its own definition, a fundamental deprivation of a metaphorical equivalent whose presence would help define and attest to an understanding and mastery of a particular sensation.

In addition to the characteristically 'normal' circumstances through which the *puncta* appear, there seems to be a relationship between the ordinary and the aesthetic in other areas of Proust as well. Swann is described as a man of great tastes, yet the connections he makes between

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<sup>22</sup> See appendix 6: Every Punctum Ignored in Swann's Way by Swann, pg. 47.

<sup>23</sup> *Camera Lucida*, Roland Barthes, p. 47. "Certain details may "prick" me. If they do not, it is doubtless because the photographer has put them there intentionally."

art and society mainly concern people whose social class one would not normally associate as being particularly aesthetic but rather alarmingly common; he sees a Botticelli in Odette, a Rizzo in his coachman and a Giotto in a kitchen maid. Similarly, Marcel's infatuation with Albertine comes as a surprise to Saint-Loup, who, after seeing her for the first time, questions our narrator's tastes. Sadism, a large and prominent theme in Proust, can adequately be symbolized by asparagus via Françoise's cruel treatment of the allergic (and pregnant) maid who prepares them. While we are on the topic of vegetables, the death of the author Bergotte, an enormously symbolic and significant scene, can very well be attributed to undercooked potatoes. And of course, we learn that a cup of tea, some uneven paving stones, a starchy towel, spoon and book come to be the catalysts of the most quintessential Proustian moments. This is suggesting more and more, the significance of the quotidian on the journey of becoming a writer.

## 9. Becoming and Subjectivity

Ilai Rowner defines the term *event* as consisting of ‘any irregular occurrence, real or fictional, that has effectively and obviously come about. At the same time, it is in the very substance of the *event* to comprise an unknown element that is imperceptible and inappropriable.’<sup>24</sup> To situate this term in relation to the concept of *punctum*, it may to an extent be perceived as a different label describing the same phenomenon. Like the *punctum*, the *event* consists of a sign’s unexpected and violent appearance. It is a calling for action, one that must be expressed through a form of art.

A sign that unexpectedly appears or a blow that suddenly hits – it is through violent disturbance, astonishing irruption and disruption, or confusion between image and reality that the event incessantly acts on the literary work as a call for absolute creation in which the reverberation of writing and reading must obstinately persist.<sup>25</sup>

As such, Swann is the ignorer of the *event*, consequently also making him its destroyer. He makes a habit of turning a blind eye to these disturbances that present themselves to him and chooses repeatedly not to embark upon the pursuit of any form of creation.<sup>26</sup> For Marcel on the other hand, the ‘completion’ of the *Search* (or at least the fact that it has a beginning and an end), is proof that the *event*, or *events* for that matter, occurred to the narrator, and that he did not ignore the vital signs brought about by the *puncta* leading him to write it.<sup>27</sup>

Although one may consider Marcel’s decision to begin writing his novel as the main and defining *event* of the *Search*, it is in actuality just another *event* that make up the more expansive rhizome of *events*. For our purposes however, Marcel becoming a writer is quite a considerable

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<sup>24</sup> *The Event*, Ilai Rowner, p. 1.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid. p. 3: “A sign that unexpectedly appears or a blow that suddenly hits – it is through violent disturbance, astonishing irruption and disruption, or confusion between image and reality that the event incessantly acts on the literary work as a call for absolute creation in which the reverberation of writing and reading must obstinately persist.”

<sup>26</sup> See appendix 6: Every Punctum Ignored in Swann’s Way via Swann, p. 47.

<sup>27</sup> But here we should realize that we are potentially making the fatal mistake of considering Marcel and Proust interchangeably. This notion concerning the relationship between the author and his narrator is further explored in appendix 2: Narcissus and the Pond, p. 43.

occurrence. As it is inherently a call for creation, this *event* does not imply a stagnant state of *being* but rather inspires the active process of *becoming*. Marcel *becomes* a writer, and this *becoming*, contrary to our commonsensical beliefs, does not imply a transition into *being*, in fact, it is trying to avoid precisely that.<sup>28</sup> *Being* always runs the tragic course towards *was*, but the perpetual state of *becoming* promises posterity so long as there is an audience to witness its motions. If we as readers however, like Swann, choose to ignore the *becoming*, then even the perpetual can slip into oblivion. The artistic calling is a frail and precious one that requires the cooperation between a minimum of two parties, that of the writer and the reader, the artist and viewer, composer and listener, in order to successfully function.

Writing the book is only a first step in the process; the reception of its printed text further propels the *becoming* movement. As such, there is an added element of writing that we have not yet discussed at length, subjectivity. When he decides to become a writer, Marcel views his upcoming book as being *his* book, with its contents subjective to his own experiences, yet at the same time, he says that it would be inaccurate to call the readers of his book as being *his* readers, but rather the readers of their own selves. Between the writer, the work and the reader, distinction is established, abolished and reestablished, consequently injecting subjectivity to both ends of the text. In a sense, it is this ambiguity in art that Marcel is inspired by and what he strives for in his own work. The narrator is intrigued by Elstir's landscapes because he is unsure if he is looking at the land or the sea, and the portrait of Miss Sacripant (Odette) is striking because of the uncertainty as to if the subject is a man or a woman. The ambiguity in art has the potential to escape the inevitable certainty that exists in photography.<sup>29</sup> The subject of a photograph is always either dead

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<sup>28</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, as is quoted by Alexander Nehamas in *Nietzsche, Life as Literature*, p. 170, "Being and becoming, according to Nietzsche, are not at all related as we commonly suppose. "Becoming," he writes, "must be explained without recourse to final intensions ... Becoming does not aim at a final state, does not flow into 'being'."

<sup>29</sup> Marcel's grandmother too has a preference for art over photographs, see appendix 3, Art over Photography p. 44.

or going to die,<sup>30</sup> but the *becoming* in literature evades this fatalistic assumption; with each reading the dead comes back to life, and if a character is going to die, it is only so that he may live once again. This process is not aimed at immortality, as this would imply a state of *being*, but rather it is pointed at an insured posterity. Proust's masterpiece is a temporal heist, where Marcel's search for lost time is ransomed by the same currency; our time and energy invested in this book sponsors the narrator's journey.

The search for lost time is inherently a mnemonic expedition. We have established to an extent that this search cannot be tackled by flipping through old photographs as the certainty and accuracy of what is captured through photography is not an accurate depiction of how our memories really function. Part of the beauty of memory lies in the misattribution and blurred distinctions of experience. A sentence in passing describing how Marcel misremembers the color of the Duchess de Guermantes' eyes is a perfect example of this quintessential quirk. The same can be demonstrated through our own reading of the *Search*, we too, are guilty of forgetting and misremembering certain scenes and details. Additionally, are not the famous moments in which Marcel is at raptures by dunking a madeleine in tea, tripping over uneven paving stones, or feeling a familiar starch on a towel fundamentally a result of misattribution? The only way to 'search' for, or understand the pivotal moments of a person's life it seems, is arguably through art, or more specifically, through writing. The perfection in photography's incarceration of the subject fails to capture the innate looseness of phenomena, whereas the ambiguity of painting or writing leaves more space for fidgeting between distinctions. But of course, for our purposes concerning writing, one must also recognize the dangers in that an excess of open-endedness in language can run the risk of words losing meaning through slippage, and on the other hand, a lack of variability in

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<sup>30</sup> *Camera Lucida*, p. 96: "The *punctum* is: *he is going to die*. I read at the same time: This will be and this has been; I observe with horror an anterior future of which death is the stake."

language could potentially root and strain words, rendering them too rigid. Marcel learns from personal experience the hazards of both ends.

## 10. The Slipperiness of Language

During a scene in which the narrator's father asks Legrandin whether or not he has friends in Balbec in order to secure a point of contact for his mother-in-law and son, Legrandin does everything he can to answer without giving away any information:

“Have you friends, then, in the neighborhood, since you know Balbec so well?”

In a final and desperate effort, Legrandin's smiling gaze struggled to the extreme limits of tenderness, vagueness, candor and abstraction; but, feeling no doubt that there was nothing left for it now but to answer, he said to us: “I have friends wherever there are clusters of trees, stricken but not defeated, which have come together with touching perseverance to offer a common supplication to an inclement sky which has no mercy upon them.”

“That is not quite what I meant,” interrupted my father, as obstinate as the trees and as merciless as the sky. “I asked you, in case anything should happen to my mother-in-law and she wanted to feel that she was not all alone there in an out-of-the-way place, whether you knew anyone in the neighborhood.”

“There as elsewhere, I know everyone and I know no one,” replied Legrandin, who did not give in so easily. “The places I know well, the people very slightly. But the places themselves seem like people, rare and wonderful people, of a delicate quality easily disillusioned by life.”<sup>31</sup>

In order to successfully execute this linguistic maneuver, Legrandin defers the meaning of the question in order to justify his abstracted response. Thus, he speaks without saying anything.

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<sup>31</sup> *Swann's Way*, p. 184.

## 11. The Rootedness of Names

Through Legrandin, Marcel learns the risk of language malfunctioning (albeit intentionally) due to the possibility of its infinite deferment, but he also goes through a phase in which he faces the inverse of this problem, the notion that meaning is rooted within the signifying word or name itself.

Bayeux, so lofty in its noble coronet of russet lacework, whose pinnacle was illumined by the old gold of its second syllable; Vitré, whose acute accent barred its ancient glass with wooden lozenges; gentle Lamballe, whose whiteness ranged from egg-shell yellow to pearl grey; Coutances, a Norman cathedral which its final consonants, rich and yellowing, crowned with a tower of butter; Lannion with the rumbling noise, in the silence of its village street, of a coach with a fly buzzing after it; Questambert, Pontorson, ridiculous and naïve, white feathers and yellow beaks strewn along the road to those well-watered and poetic spots; Benodet, a name scarcely moored that the river seemed to be striving to drag down into the tangle of its algae; Pont-Aven, pink-white flash of the wing of a lightly posed coif, tremulously reflected in the greenish waters of a canal; Quimperlé, more firmly anchored, ever since the Middle Ages, among its babbling rivulets threading their pearls in a grey iridescence like the pattern made, through the cobwebs on a church window, by rays of sunlight changed into blunted points of tarnished silver.<sup>32</sup>

Between the extremes of the potential slipperiness of speech and rootedness of words, how can Marcel determine an optimum neutral in order to convey meaning through language?

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid, p. 553



## 12. Venice!

Not long after his rant on names, Marcel and his family plan a trip to Venice. When his father suggests to the narrator that he best pack a thick coat in case the winds are especially cold at the Grand Canal, this tiny logistic inspires in him a sort of ecstasy, as though the planning behind the trip prior to this statement did not actually confirm that he was going to travel. To the narrator, *Venice from the 20<sup>th</sup> to the 29<sup>th</sup>, and Florence on Easter morning*<sup>33</sup> is just hypothetical talk of a certain place in a set time, but when the winter coat, specifically *his* winter coat, is involved, then the trip is no longer just a possibility but rather a pending actuality. When his father makes this suggestion, Marcel's coat and consequently he with it, suddenly and officially reserve a spot in *that* specific place at *that* specific time. *Venice from the 20<sup>th</sup> to the 29<sup>th</sup>, and Florence on Easter morning* becomes a reality, suggesting that the 'optimum neutral' may be found by the subjective intervention through which meaning is instilled in language. This confirmation (of the trip) gets him so excited that he immediately falls ill.

“It must be pretty cold, still, on the Grand Canal; you'd do well, just in case, to pack your winter greatcoat and your thick suit.” At these words I was raised to a sort of ecstasy; I felt myself – something I had until then deemed impossible – to be penetrating indeed between those “rocks of amethyst, like a reef in the Indian Ocean”; [...] of the air in my own room which surrounded me, I replaced it by an equal quantity of Venetian air, that marine atmosphere, indescribable and peculiar as the atmosphere of dreams, which my imagination had secreted in the name of Venice; I felt myself undergoing a miraculous disincarnation, which was at once accompanied by that vague desire to vomit which one feels when one has developed a very sore throat;<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid, p. 558

<sup>34</sup> Ibid, p. 559.

The doctor thus declares that Marcel is to keep away from Florence and Venice as well as abstain from anything else that might excite him. As a result, his dream vacation to Italy is replaced by daily trips to the Champs-Élysées.

### 13. Gilberte in Paris

My parents had to be content with sending me every day to the Champs-Élysées, in the custody of a person who would see that I did not tire myself; this person being none other than Françoise. [...] Going to the Champs-Élysées I found unendurable. If only Bergotte had described the place in one of his books, I should no doubt have longed to get to know it, like so many things else of which a simulacrum had first found its way into my imagination. This breathed life into them, gave them a personality, and I sought then to rediscover them in reality; but in this public garden there was nothing that attached itself to my dreams.<sup>35</sup>

Before this specific point in the novel, Marcel was convinced that the quintessence of a place can be encapsulated within its name. Following his passionate and exegetical rant in which he insists on the rootedness of language that defines places such as Bayeux, Vitré, Lamballe, Coutances and so forth,<sup>36</sup> we have here an instance describing Marcel's dull experience of the Champs-Élysées due to his ignorance of artistic references associated with the name. However, the absence of exegesis<sup>37</sup> invites eisegesis<sup>38</sup>, and so his perception of language's fixedness unwillingly meets the potential of its openness and deferment, as though the notion of cratyism from Plato's dialogue is forcefully and paradoxically matched with Derrida's *différance*, and an opportunity reveals itself in that the narrator is given the name Champs-Élysées as though it were a blank slate on which he could assign his own personal meaning, draw out his own simulacrum. However, the narrator believes that it is meaningless to attempt to experience the Champs-Élysées without a prior representation on which he could ground his own rediscovery, that 'in this public garden there was nothing that attached itself to [his] dreams'. As this Marcel is the same Marcel who believes that the dim coolness of his room is able to provide him with a full panorama of the summer which a

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid, p. 560.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid, p. 553.

<sup>37</sup> "to lead out of" – concerned with discovering the true meaning of text.

<sup>38</sup> "to lead into" – subjective, non-analytic reading, up to interpreter.

walk outside would have only offered him piecemeal,<sup>39</sup> he feels that an exposure to the exterior world is somehow ‘in the way’ of literature, when actually it is the accumulated experiences that he gathers as a result of this exposure that leads him directly to literature, although not as a reader, but a writer. As unfavorable as the circumstances may seem to Marcel, his trip to Venice being cancelled and the Champs-Élysées lacking (pre-established) aesthetic merit, there is actually an opportunity being presented to him directed towards his goal of becoming a writer. A place that is not yet described is the perfect calling for a writer to describe it, but of course, he is oblivious to this sign. However, the sentence describing this ignored sign is followed by the notorious Proustian ‘One day’, and the readers are thus given the cue that the assumptions we have just made are about to be completely contradicted, and in this case, the intruder leading this contradiction is none other than Gilberte.

One day, as I was bored with our usual place beside the roundabout, Françoise had taken me for an excursion [...] While I waited for her I was pacing the broad lawn of meagre, close-cropped, sunbaked grass, dominated, at its far end, by a statue rising from a fountain, in front of which a little girl with reddish hair was playing battledore and shuttlecock, when from the path another little girl, who was putting on her coat and covering up her racquet, called out sharply: ‘Good-bye, Gilberte, I’m going home now; don’t forget we’re coming to you this evening, after dinner.’<sup>40</sup>

Once again, in a roundabout fashion, the name Gilberte reenters Marcel’s life, and for the wrong reasons, he is placed back onto the right track. Just as his father’s suggestion of packing a winter coat confirms Marcel’s trip to Venice, this little remark made by the girl to Gilberte validates their pending rendezvous. The problem then of course, is the fact that Marcel is not invited. Instead, he witnesses another access with ease, the unknown realm of Gilberte which to him has always been conceived as impenetrable. This second encounter with Gilberte is what officially initiates for the

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<sup>39</sup> *Swann’s Way*, p. 114, see appendix 4, Inside/Outside p. 45.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid*, p. 560, immediately following the first block quotation used in this section.

narrator what Deleuze would call the lover's apprenticeship, one that is fueled by jealousy: Swann suffers from this malady for over 200 pages, and Marcel's immediate envy towards the friend who greets Gilberte goodbye upon his first sight of her in Paris is undoubtedly a screaming symptom of the same disease. Taking into account the prototype through which love is presented in *Swann in Love*,<sup>41</sup> the reader can only hope that Marcel will not undertake this task following the example of Swann – that is to say, in the wake of an artistic calling, he must avoid the temptation of idleness<sup>42</sup> and instead work vigorously towards deciphering the signs, with the undertone being that love is not the answer. But of course, to a person in love, it is the only answer. The overlaying question that we established in the beginning of this project remains the same: how can Marcel (or Swann) capture the object of his desire? To reiterate my claims, Swann tries to arrest the essence of Odette through imagining her as a painting, and Marcel's approach is to engulf through literature. For Swann, the object of desire is Odette. For Marcel, after his infatuation with Gilberte, it is Albertine. Let us begin by discussing Swann's affairs.

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<sup>41</sup> See appendix 5: Dr. Swann's 12 Steps to a Fulfilling Love Life, p. 46.

<sup>42</sup> When confronted with a problem that is particularly heavy, Swann applies his gesture of taking off his glasses and wiping them, and his problems, like the fog on his monocles, disappear. See appendix 6: Every Punctum Ignored in Swann's Way via Swann, p. 47.

#### 14. Odette as a Painting

In the beginning of *Swann in Love*, Odette is introduced to Swann at a theatre by a mutual friend. She does not strike him as being ‘devoid of beauty’, but he remarks that the type of beauty she possesses is not one that arouses desire in him. In fact, he associates her aesthetically lacking features as being rather physically repulsive.<sup>43</sup> Nonetheless, they make each other’s acquaintance and begin frequenting visits. Swann has a habit of forming a picture of Odette whenever he is about to meet her, ‘a necessity’ as he puts it, in order to find any beauty in her face, concentrating only on the features that he admires. A deficiency in this mental priming positively correlates with a deficiency in attraction. As such, one could imagine that it is Odette that initially chases Swann. While she conveys a great interest in his character and ‘intellectual pursuits’, Swann is not interested and merely considers her as one of his diversions. It is not until one day when he decides to visit her house in order to show her an engraving that she suddenly becomes desirable to him. As she is not feeling very well, Swann is received in a dressing-gown which resembles a cloak of olden days. The manner in which Odette slightly bends a knee to lean over and examine the picture he has brought for her to see, in addition to her tired and sullen eyes which she did not care to disguise in the comfort of her home, suddenly strikes Swann as her pose resembles the figure of Jethro’s daughter, Zipporah.

It was with an unusual intensity of pleasure, a pleasure destined to have a lasting effect upon him, that Swann remarked Odette’s resemblance to the Zipporah of that Allesandro de Mariano to whom people more willingly give his popular surname, Botticelli. [...] He no longer based his estimate of the merit of Odette’s face on the doubtful quality of her cheeks and the purely fleshy softness which he supposed would greet his lips there should he ever hazard a kiss, but regarded it rather as a skein of beautiful, delicate lines which his eyes unraveled, following their curves and convolutions, relating the rhythm of the neck to

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<sup>43</sup> *Swann’s Way*, p. 277.

the effusion of the hair and the droop of the eyelids as though in a portrait of her in which her type was made clearly intelligible.<sup>44</sup>

Odette is fantasized once she is seen as a painting and Swann as we know, has the spirit of a collector. So when this connection is made between a Botticelli and Odette, it is not long until he feels the urge to possess her,<sup>45</sup> to add her to his collection.

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid, p. 316.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid, p. 327, Swann feels “an absurd, irrational need which the laws of this world make it impossible to satisfy and difficult to assuage – the insensate, agonizing need to possess exclusively.”

## 15. An Ideal Love

At this point in their story, the affection between Odette and Swann is more or less a silent but reciprocal affair. One evening, Swann arrives rather late to the Verdurins' home in order to escort Odette only to find that she has already left. Upon noticing Swann's agitated face in light of this discovery, M. Verdurin, Dr Cottard and Mme Verdurin suspect that his physiognomy indicates, in the words of Cottard, that Swann is 'on a friendly footing' with Odette, that she has given him the 'go-ahead'. Mme Verdurin dispels this theory, saying:

“She would have told me,” [...] “I may say that she tells me everything. As she has no one else at present, I told her that she ought to sleep with him. She makes out that she can't, that she did in fact have a crush on him at first, but he's always shy with her, and that makes her shy with him. Besides, she doesn't care for him in that way, she says; it's an ideal love, she's afraid of rubbing the bloom off – but how should I know? And yet it's just what she needs.”<sup>46</sup>

Through this dialogue, three points are particularly prominent. '[Odette] has no one else at present' suggests that this may not be the case in the future, as is confirmed by Forcheville's appearance, nor does it clear her of her associations in the past, as is portrayed through Swann's continuous inquiries regarding her potential affairs of Gomorrah. Secondly, 'it's an ideal love' is a rather gloomy statement in this context as it seems to indicate that love only exists before it is acted upon, for neither Swann nor Odette has officially confessed to one or the other at the moment of this claim. Lastly, 'she's afraid of rubbing the bloom off' is particularly devastating because we know that Swann quite literally performs this indicated fear. Just eight pages after this statement, Swann is in a carriage with Odette in which he asks if he could brush off the pollen on her dress spilt by

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid, p. 321.



the cattleyas that she had been holding in her hands.<sup>47</sup> Literally and symbolically, Swann rubs the bloom off of an ‘ideal love’ that he didn’t realize he had. This action is the catalyst to their first kiss, a scene that marks the beginning of Swann’s undoing.

He ran his other hand upwards along Odette’s cheek she gazed at him fixedly, with that languishing and solemn air which marks the women of the Florentine master in whose faces he had found a resemblance with hers swimming at the brink of the eyelids, her brilliant eyes, wide and slender like theirs, seemed on the verge of welling out like two great tears. She bent her neck, as all their necks may be seen to bend, in the pagan scenes as well as in the religious pictures. [...] He had wanted to leave time for his mind to catch up with him, to recognize the dream which it had so long cherished and to assist at its realization, like a relative invited as a spectator when a prize is given to a child of whom she has been especially fond. Perhaps, too, he was fixing upon the face of an Odette not yet possessed, nor even kissed by him, which he was seeing for the last time, the comprehensive gaze with which, on the day of his departure, a traveler hopes to bear away with him in memory a landscape he is leaving for ever.<sup>48</sup>

It appears that if love really does exist and is obtainable, then by Swann’s method, the duration of the object of desire’s captivity cannot last any longer than is described in this above passage. In order to perfectly aestheticize the otherwise repulsive Odette, Swann carefully choreographs the perfect image, hushing her and dusting the pollen off her dress. In this manner, Odette is the subject of the perfect painting, one that cannot be replicated or possessed and that is put on display only for a limited amount of time. Overall, it would seem that Swann’s attempt at capture fails; he is unable to retain the ever-elusive Odette as the freshness of this first time deteriorates with each subsequent recurrence. Perhaps the lack of language in Swann’s approach (as he does not allow Odette to speak) indicates a symbolic advantage in Marcel’s literary path. In fact, we may be surprised to find that the outcome we have just established could have been predicted much earlier if only Swann listened closely to what Odette had to say.

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid, p. 329.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid, p. 330-331.

## 17. Subjective Language I: Toujours Libre

The following is a conversation that occurs between Swann and Odette in the beginning stages of their acquaintance.

“I know what women are; you must have a whole heap of things to do, and never any time to spare.”

“I? Why, I never have anything to do. I’m always free, and I always will be free if you want me. At whatever hour of the day or night it may suit you to see me, just send for me, and I shall be only too delighted to come. Will you do that?”<sup>49</sup>

Odette tells Swann that for him, she is always free, and she always will be free. As ambiguous as she is in character,<sup>50</sup> so is she in speech. ‘I always will be free’ can be read as ‘I am impossible to possess’, a rather unfortunate foreshadowing statement.

Later on, when Swann unknowingly leaves his cigarette-case in Odette’s house, she writes to him: “If only you had also forgotten your heart! I should never have let you have that back.”<sup>51</sup> Like in the first statement, Odette is being sincere with her words here as well, but if we examine the scene retrospectively, this message also seems to read: “If only you had fallen in love with me then!” with a connotation that he has missed his chance. The tragedy of course, is that Swann falls head over heels for Odette right after this scene, when she suddenly strikes him as a Botticelli. Such is the poor timing of Swann, who falls in love just one forgotten cigarette-case too late.

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<sup>49</sup> *Swann’s Way*, p. 280.

<sup>50</sup> A reference too, to her openness in sexuality.

<sup>51</sup> *Swann’s Way*, p. 314.

## 18. Subjective Language II: Je vous aime bien

Considering how revealing Odette's earlier linguistic exchanges with Swann were in the previous section, perhaps it would make for a good transition if we could extract some details of significance concerning Albertine through examining a key interaction that she has with Marcel. When Albertine first appears in the *Search*, she is an unknown girl amongst a 'band' of girls pushing a bicycle across the beach at Balbec. Marcel remarks that while 'each was of a type absolutely different from the others, [all of the girls in the band] had beauty'.<sup>52</sup> Having not yet individualized any of the girls, the narrator falls in love with the entire flock. Even after making their acquaintance, he is unable to single out a girl whom he is particularly fond of. That is, until the fateful day in which they are all out on a picnic, and Albertine asks if someone has a pencil.

Now and then a pretty attention from one or another of them would stir in me vibrations which dissipated for a time my desire for the rest. Thus one day Albertine suddenly asked: "Who has a pencil?" Andrée provided one, Rosemonde the paper. Albertine warned them: "Now, young ladies, I forbid you to look at what I write." After carefully tracing each letter, supporting the paper on her knee, she passed it to me, saying: "Take care no one sees." Whereupon I unfolded it and read her message, which was: "I like you."<sup>53</sup>

This act is undoubtedly the deciding factor that individualizes Albertine from the band of girls, and Marcel decides within the next five pages the answer to the question that has been bothering him for the previous one hundred and sixty-eight; he makes a final decision and says to himself: 'it is with [Albertine] that I would have my romance.'<sup>54</sup> Although this scene establishes Albertine's 'singularity' through what is seemingly a direct and personal confession to Marcel, strangely enough, the way in which this message is manifested suggests ambiguity and plurality. The making

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<sup>52</sup> *Within a Budding Grove*, p. 505.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid*, p. 669-670.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid*, p. 675.

of the note is a collective enterprise, Rosemonde provides the paper, and Andrée the pencil. On top of that, the message contained within the note, which reads 'I like you', or in French, 'je vous aime', maintains an unexplained distinction as to who this 'you' is, or if this 'vous' is a singular or plural reference. Although it is evident in the context that this note is directed at Marcel, one cannot help but suspect or theorize that this 'je vous aime' is a circuitous confession to her female friends who are present at the scene as well. This already introduces from the get-go two huge problems that Marcel faces concerning Albertine, the ambiguity of her character, and related to this, her 'potential' lesbianism.

## 19. Albertine as a Multiplicity

The individualization of Albertine ironically has the reader realize that she is in fact a multiplicity. As he invests more time in her, Marcel notices that on some days, ‘thin, with a grey complexion, a sullen air, a violet transparency slanting across her eyes such as we notice sometimes on the sea, she seemed to be feeling the sorrows of exile. On other days her face, smoother and glossier, drew one’s desires on to its varnished surface and prevented them from going further. [...] At other times, happiness bathed those cheeks with a radiance so mobile that the skin, grown fluid and vague, gave passage to a sort of subcutaneous glaze which made it appear to be of another color but not of another substance than the eyes’.<sup>55</sup> The sporadic succession of Albertines is so diverse that the narrator himself develops a habit of becoming a different person according to the particular Albertine that is present. Depending on which Albertine is on stage, Marcel is ‘a jealous, an indifferent, a voluptuous, a melancholy, a frenzied person.’<sup>56</sup> How then, can he ‘possess’ Albertine, who is never the same person at any two given points, who cannot adequately be contained in one name?

It is only when Albertine is asleep that she strips off, ‘one after another, the different human personalities with which she had deceived’ Marcel since the day they met.<sup>57</sup> At moments like this, there is what the narrator terms ‘a possibility of love’.<sup>58</sup> He receives immense pleasure from the ownership he thinks he has over what appears to be a submissive Albertine, and he is at raptures riding the rhythmic waves of her breathing.<sup>59</sup> But of course, the duration of absolute captivity, should this even be possible, is always limited. The joys of watching Albertine sleep are interrupted

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid, p. 718-719.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid, p. 720.

<sup>57</sup> *The Captive*, p. 84-85.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid, p. 84.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid, p. 143, an experience similarly expressed in *The Flowers of Evil*, Charles Baudelaire – *The Head of Hair/La Chevelure*.

by the questions roused by her drowsy murmurs. Marcel realizes that even in her sleeping state, ‘many names of people, borne on the stream of memory, must be revolving’.<sup>60</sup> There is an instance in which she mistakenly and tenderly addresses the narrator as ‘Andrée’, and so his jealousy is unable to rest even when Albertine is lying right in front of him, vulnerable and unconscious. As uncatchable as she is in the waking life, the object of Marcel’s desire roams just as freely in the realm of dreams. He confesses in the beginning of *The Captive*, ‘my suffering, had I thought about it, could end only with Albertine’s life or with my own.’<sup>61</sup>

In *The Fugitive*, Albertine perishes after falling off a horse, and we learn that Marcel’s assumption was wrong. Even death is unable to confine the free spirit of Albertine, who persists through the memories of her lover: ‘There, she had never been more alive’.<sup>62</sup> In order to end his suffering, the narrator must forget not one, but innumerable moments that constitute innumerable Albertines.<sup>63</sup> It would appear that in both the cases of Swann and Marcel, the object of desire is unobtainable. Albertine is ambiguous and ever-fleeting through her lies, her lesbianism, in her sleep, and even after her death.

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid, p. 143.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid, p. 20.

<sup>62</sup> *The Fugitive*, p. 644: “For the death of Albertine to have been able to eliminate my suffering, the shock of the fall would have had to kill her not only in Touraine but in myself. There, she had never been more alive.”

<sup>63</sup> Ibid, p. 645: “When I had succeeded in bearing the grief of losing this Albertine, I must begin again with another, with a hundred others.”

## 20. Reality as Ambiguous

We have established to a certain extent that the object of desire, on top of being seemingly intangible, is also stubbornly ambiguous.<sup>64</sup> Marcel notices however, that this ambiguity is not only applicable to the women he is after, but also to the general experience of reality itself.

Sometimes, at my window in the hotel at Balbec, in the morning when Françoise undid the blankets that shut out the light, or in the evening when I was waiting until it was time to go out with Saint-Loup, I had been led by some effect of sunlight to mistake what was only a darker stretch of sea for a distant coastline, or to gaze delightedly at a belt of liquid azure without knowing whether it belonged to sea or sky. But presently my reason would reestablish between the elements the distinction which my first impression had abolished. In the same way from my bedroom in Paris I would sometimes hear a dispute, almost a riot, in the street below, until I had traced back its cause – a carriage for instance that was rattling towards me – that noise from which I now eliminated the shrill and discordant vociferations which my ear had really heard but which my reason knew that wheels did not produce.<sup>65</sup>

While these moments of visual disorientation between sea or sky or the misattribution of the sounds of a carriage to that of a riot are instances that Marcel describes as delightful, they are nonetheless momentary, as reason would soon reestablish the distinctions that were at first abolished. But in Elstir's studio, Marcel realizes that there is a way which allows for these distinctions to be permanently eradicated, and this is through the means of art.

But the rare moments in which we see nature as she is, poetically, were those from which Elstir's work was created. One of the metaphors that occurred most frequently in the seascapes which surrounded him here was precisely that which, comparing land with sea, suppressed all demarcation between them. [...] It was, for instance, for a metaphor of this sort – in a picture of the harbor of Carquethuit, a picture which he had finished only a few days earlier and which I stood looking at for a long time – that Elstir had prepared the mind of the spectator by employing, for the little town, only marine terms, and urban terms for the sea.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Albertine is introduced as a 'band of girls', and even after she is 'individualized' by Marcel, he finds that she is not a singular being but rather a succession of beings.

<sup>65</sup> *Within a Budding Grove*, p. 566.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid*, p. 567.

If one were to look at the world ‘naturally’, or rather, ‘poetically’, a blended experience like that of confusing the sky for the sea should not be viewed as a failure to distinguish two singularities but rather as an opportunity to create art through which the demarcations between them could be erased. As poetry is to metaphor, the narrator relates art to metamorphosis, and if it is the fixedness of language that attempts to categorize and identify individual experiences, it is through metaphor and art that names and labels are stripped away and experience is freed from the rooted implications of reason. Elstir’s urban-marine chiasmus captures perfectly the uncertainty of our senses and the unreliability of our perceptions. Through comparison, distinction is erased and a certain essence is revealed.



## 21. Metaphor and the Book to Come

[The writer] can describe a scene by describing one after another the innumerable objects which at a given moment were present at a particular place, but truth will be attained by him only when he takes two different objects, states the connection between them – a connection analogous in the world of art to the unique connection which in the world of science is provided by the law of causality – and encloses them in the necessary links of a well-wrought style; truth – and life too – can be attained by us only when, by comparing a quality common to two sensations, we succeed in extracting their common essence and in reuniting them to each other, liberated from the contingencies of time, within a metaphor.<sup>67</sup>

The metaphor is a means of redemption. On its basic level, it has the ability to elevate the ordinary to the realm of art, as is the case when young Marcel perceives the hawthorn bushes in Swann's park as analogous to the experience of a chapel. On a supernatural level, it has the ability to obliterate chronology via involuntary memory. It is the return of a past experience provoked through a present signifier, the morsel of cake that summons Combray and the wobble that takes the narrator back to Venice. The metaphor is a fragment that inspires totality, and Marcel's ability to perceive and create metaphors is arguably what allows him to encapsulate and consequently liberate his whole world through literature.

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<sup>67</sup> *Time Regained*, p. 290.

## Appendix 1. A Proustian Bouquet

If the world of Proust is but an elaborate garden and the reader, like a florist, is given the task of picking an arrangement that would best symbolize the experience of love, he would hold in his hand a bouquet of hawthorns, chrysanthemums, cattleyas and other rare orchids of the like (and perhaps too a bee hovering above the orchids to complete the image). The hawthorns mark Marcel's first encounter with Gilberte and it is what later reminds him of Combray, the chrysanthemum in Swann's drawer preserves the memories of when Odette was infatuated by him, 'Cattleyas' become the secret passcode for sexual intercourse, and the large and mysterious theme of homosexuality in the *Search* is to an extent encapsulated in the scene between Charlus and Jupien in which Marcel compares their interactions to that of an orchid and a bee.

## Appendix 2. Narcissus and the Pond

In every retelling of the story of Narcissus, our hero encounters the same dilemma: upon seeing his own reflection on the water (although that is not to say he recognizes his own reflection), Narcissus falls madly in love. But of course, any physical attempt made at capturing the object of his desire is bound to fail. The gentlest touch muddles the image, and a full embrace would shatter it completely. In Proust, we are presented with a similar dilemma: the desired is seemingly ever-fleeting and impossible to possess, and to further develop this mythical analogy, contrary to Narcissus' hopeless condition, there is a recognition of the face in the pond. Such is the relationship between Proust and the narrator. There is an acknowledgement of the latter by the former as well as a desire for unification, as is suggested by the attribution of the name Marcel to the narrator. However, this is done so in an elusive, circuitous manner: "Then she [Albertine] would find her tongue and say: "My –" or "My darling –" followed by my Christian name, which, if we give the narrator the same name as the author of this book, would be "My Marcel," or "My darling Marcel."<sup>68</sup> as though to claim this name without the hypothetical framing would be to dissipate the reflection on the face of the water.

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<sup>68</sup> *The Captive*, p. 91

### Appendix 3. Art over Photography

She would have liked me to have in my room photographs of ancient buildings or beautiful places. But at the moment of buying them, and for all that the subject of the picture had an aesthetic value, she would find that vulgarity and utility had too prominent a part in them, through the mechanical nature of their reproduction by photography. She attempted by a subterfuge, if not to eliminate altogether this commercial banality, at least to minimize it, to supplant it to a certain extent with what was art still, to introduce, as it were, several “thicknesses” of art: instead of photographs of Chartres Cathedral, of the Fountains of Saint-Cloud, or of Vesuvius, she would inquire of Swann whether some great painter had not depicted them, and preferred to give me photographs of “Chartres Cathedral” after Corot, of “Vesuvius” after Turner, which were a stage higher in the scale of art.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> *Swann's Way*, p. 53-54.

#### Appendix 4. Inside/Outside

This scene is extracted from when Marcel felt that going outside was ‘in the way’ of literature. Even when his grandmother begs him to go outside, he finds a way to remain ‘inside’.

This dim coolness of my room was to the broad daylight of the street what the shadow is to the sunbeam, that is to say equally luminous, and presented to my imagination the entire panorama of summer, which my senses, if I had been out walking, could have tasted and enjoyed only piecemeal; and so it was quite in harmony with my state of repose which (thanks to the enlivening adventures related in my books) sustained, like a hand reposing motionless in a stream of running water, the shock and animation of a torrent of activity.

But my grandmother, even if the weather, after growing too hot, had broken, and a storm, or just a shower, had burst over us, would come up and beg me to go outside. And as I did not wish to interrupt my reading, I would go on with it *in* the garden, *under* the chestnut tree, *in* a *hooded* chair of wicker and canvas in the depths of which I used to sit and feel that I was *hidden* from the eyes of anyone who might be coming to call upon the family.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid, p. 114-115, my emphasis.

## Appendix 5. Dr. Swann's 10 Steps to a Fulfilling Love Life

1 – Find a woman of interest, preferably the converse of the type which your senses demand.

2 – Imagine her as a Botticelli.

3 – Establish a secret 'lover's language' to discuss intimate affairs, even in the presence of your coachman. I find that a floral theme is both discreet and aesthetic. My Odette for instance, is particularly fond of 'cattleyas'.

4 – Fall madly and deeply in love.

5 – Invest in a nice pair of glasses. If relationship problems are troubling you, or you feel spontaneous pangs of regret telling you that you are wasting your talents, simply imagine the little specks of dust or the slight fog on the glasses as a metaphor for your own life issues, take them off and wipe them, your state is then as clean as your spectacles.

6 – If this wiping method does not work, try reimagining your love as a Botticelli.

7 – Ask her if she had an affair with Mme Verdurin.

8 – Allow her presence to continue sowing in your heart alternate seeds of love and suspicion.

9 – Slowly come to a realization or rather, simply remember that this woman is in fact, the converse of the type which your senses demand. Think to yourself: "To think that I've wasted years of my life, that I've longed to die, that I've experienced my greatest love, for a woman who didn't appeal to me, who wasn't even my type!"

10 – Marry her.

## Appendix 6. Every Punctum Ignored in Swann's Way via Swann

Below I have arranged in chronological order, every instance in *Swann's Way* in which Swann feels a perplexing question come to mind, or a sign of art calling upon him in which he responds by his gesture that is, he takes off his glasses and wipes them, and what follows subsequently every time, almost magically, is oblivion. I have distinguished these moments in underline for easier navigation.

1 - "My grandfather, who had not seen him for a long time, hastened to join him at the Swanns' family property on the outskirts of Combray, and managed to entice him for a moment, weeping profusely, out of the death-chamber, so that he should not be present when the body was laid in its coffin. They took a turn or two in the park, where there was a little sunshine. Suddenly M. Swann seized my grandfather by the arm and cried, "Ah, my dear old friend, how fortunate we are to be walking here together on such a charming day! Don't you see how pretty they are, all these trees, my hawthorns, and my new pond, on which you have never congratulated me? You look as solemn as the grave. Don't you feel this little breeze? Ah! Whatever you may say, it's good to be alive all the same, my dear Amédée!" And then, abruptly, the memory of his dead wife returned to him, and probably thinking it too complicated to inquire into how, at such a time, he could have allowed himself to be carried away by an impulse of happiness, he confined himself to a gesture which he habitually employed whenever any perplexing question came into his mind: that is, he passed his hand across his forehead, rubbed his eyes, and wiped his glasses."<sup>71</sup>

2 - "And then, suddenly, he wondered whether that was not precisely what was implied by "keeping" a woman (as if, in fact, that notion of keeping could be derived from elements not at all mysterious or perverse but belonging to the intimate routine of his daily life, such as that thousand-franc note, a familiar and domestic object, torn in places and stuck together again, which his valet, after paying the household accounts and the rent, had locked up in a drawer in the old writing-desk whence he had extracted it to send it, with four others, to Odette) and whether it might not be possible to apply to Odette, since he had known her (for he never suspected for a moment that she could ever have taken money from anyone before him), that title, which he had believed so wholly

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<sup>71</sup> *Swann's Way*, p. 17-18.

inapplicable to her, of “kept woman.” He could not explore the idea further, for a sudden access of that mental lethargy which was, with him, congenital, intermittent and providential, happened at that moment to extinguish every particle of light in his brain, as instantaneously as, at a later period, when electric lighting had been everywhere installed, it become possible to cut off the supply of light from a house. His mind fumbled for a moment in the darkness, he took off his spectacles, wiped the glasses, drew his hand across his eyes, and only saw light again when he found himself face to face with a wholly different idea, to wit, that he must endeavor, in the coming month, to send Odette six or seven thousand francs instead of five because the surprise and pleasure it would cause her.”<sup>72</sup>

3 - “Indeed, it was the sharpness of this pain that had awakened him. Since Odette never gave him any information as to those vastly important matters which took up so much of her time every day (although he had lived long enough to know that such matters are never anything else than pleasure), he could not sustain for any length of time the effort of imagining them; his brain would become a void; then he would draw a finger over his tired eyelids as he might have wiped his glasses, and would cease altogether to think.”<sup>73</sup>

4 - “And Swann could distinguish, standing motionless before that scene of remembered happiness, a wretched figure who filled him with such pity, because he did not at first recognize who it was, that he had to lower his eyes lest anyone should observe that they were filled with tears. It was himself. When he had realized this, his pity ceased; he was jealous, now, of that other self whom she had loved, he was jealous of those men of whom he had so often said, without suffering too much: “Perhaps she loves them,” now that he had exchanged the vague idea of loving, in which there is no love, for the petals of the chrysanthemum and the letterhead of the Maison Dorée, which were full of it. And then, his anguish becoming too intense, he drew his hand across his forehead, let the monocle drop from this eye, and wiped its glass. And doubtless, if he had caught sight of himself at that moment, he would have added, to the collection of those which he had already

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid, p. 380.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid, p. 451-452.



identified, this monocle which he removed like an importunate, worrying thought and from whose misty surface, with his handkerchief, he sought to obliterate his cares.”<sup>74</sup>

5 - “In a word, this anonymous letter proved that he knew a human being capable of the most infamous conduct, but he could see no more reason why that infamy should lurk the unfathomed depths of the character of the man with the warm heart rather than the cold, the artist rather than the bourgeois, the noble rather than the flunkey. What criterion ought one to adopt to judge one’s fellow? After all, there was not a single person he knew who might not, in certain circumstances, prove capable of a shameful action. Must he then cease to see them all? His mind grew clouded; he drew his hands two or three times across his brow, wiped his glasses with his handkerchief, and remembering that, after all, men as good as himself frequented the society of M. de Charlus, the Prince des Laumes and the rest, he persuaded himself that this meant, if not that they were incapable of infamy, at least it was a necessity in human life, to which everyone must submit, to frequent the society of people who were perhaps not incapable of such actions. And he continued to shake hands with all the friends whom he had suspected, with the purely formal reservation that each one of them had possibly sought to drive him to despair.”<sup>75</sup>

6 - “But, as a rule, with this particular period of his life from which he was emerging, when he made an effort, if not to remain in it, at least to obtain a clear view of it while he still could, he discovered that already it was too late; he would have liked to glimpse, as though it were a landscape that was about to disappear, that love from which he had departed; but it is so difficult to enter into a state of duality and to present to oneself the lifelike spectacle of a feeling one has ceased to possess, that very soon, the clouds gathering in his brain, he could see nothing at all, abandoned with attempt, took the glasses from his nose and wiped them, and he told himself that he would do better to rest for a little, that there would be time enough later on, and settled back into his corner with the incuriosity, the torpor of the drowsy traveler who pulls his hat down over his eyes to get some sleep in the railway-carriage that is drawing him, he feels, faster and faster

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid, p. 493.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid, p. 510.

out of the country in which he has lived for so long and which he had vowed not to allow to slip away from him without looking out to bid it a last farewell.”<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid, p. 537-538.

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