Contents

CHAPTER ONE

Mad Belief

À LA RECHERCHE DU TEMPS PERDU is so constructed as to invite an argument about it to begin where it itself ends (more precisely, with that portion of the last volume occupied by the narrator's lengthy meditation on the nature of the literary vocation, the section Proust baptized as "L'Adoration perpétuelle"). This would not, however, be simply to recapitulate its own internal movement on the plausible (though contested) inference that at the end the narrator is set to embark on the writing of the novel we have just read. Nor would, or should, it be to begin at the end in the "external" sense implied by the fact that the main ideas informing the terminal meditation were there at an early stage of Proust's writing life, prior to the composition of *À la recherche* in the "essayistic" forms subsequently gathered together and published under the title *Contre Sainte-Beuve*. As Vincent Descombes explains, this would be to ignore the reasons why Proust, while proleptically hinting at them throughout, deferred the fully developed statement of these ideas until late in the novel; it was to ensure that the relation between *Contre Sainte-Beuve* and *À la recherche* would not produce a reading of the latter as just a transposition of the former.[1] On the contrary, it was to ensure that the work would be read for what it is: a novel, family member, however errant, of a genre based on a narrative through-movement and irreducible to mere derivative illustration of a schematic a priori. To begin at the end has therefore little to do with the order in which Proust wrote certain things. It is rather—banal though the remark may seem—because of a commitment built into the type of critical reading the following pages instantiate. An argued account of *À la recherche* will be, among other things, an attempt to persuade. Other kinds of less pointed account are, of course, possible, for example, commentary as pure description, or as a kind of impressionistic patchwork, or as a quasi-symbolist tone poem, forms of commentary with which the Proustian critical archive is amply stocked, the last two modes favored in particular by the Proust-cult, historically dominated by the swooning tendencies of that unhappily influential coterie bent on construing *À la recherche* as a storehouse of delicate epiphanies laced with a strong dose of class-bound aestheticism. Since Proust's own text offers the best

[1]Vincent Descombes, *Proust: Philosophy of the Novel* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1992), 5–7.

diagnosis, part analytical, part symptomatic, of what is wrong with this construal of him as a purveyor of high-grade cultural narcotics, it is as well to have done with it once and for all.

The rationale for the approach adopted here is that there is also something *in* the work itself that seeks to persuade (marching under the banner of such terms as "truth," a term without which the whole edifice of *À la recherche* would collapse). Naturally, this does not mean that the persuasive ambitions of the account and those of the work are substantively identical, such that the former merely replicates the latter, albeit in a different idiom. What it means is that there is a match of ambitions in a purely formal sense. One might want to claim that this mischaracterizes *À la recherche*, that it is an enterprise geared not to persuasion but to another set of objectives and thus another kind of writing altogether. If that is so, then the proposed account self-defeatingly loses its point. In this scenario, the only thing coherently on offer would be to recommend reading the book, the rest being silence. However, if we can reasonably debate whether Proust's novel in general conforms to this characterization, one place where its aims are indisputably rhetorical in the sense of addressing its reader with persuasive intent is the metatextual sequence of *Le Temps retrouvé*, so often taken as housing the coda to the work as a whole. Indeed, the discourse of this sequence operates as a high-octane persuasive machine, firing on all pistons to convince us of everything that is entailed by the startling claim (in Ian Patterson's translation) from *Le Temps retrouvé*: "Real life, life finally uncovered and clarified, the only life in consequence lived to the full, is literature" (189). This is not quite what Proust wrote: "La vraie vie, la vie enfin découverte et éclaircie, la seule vie par conséquent pleinement vécue, c'est la littérature" (*À la recherche du temps perdu [ARTP]*, 4:474); while the translation makes perfect sense of the original, it is at the cost of substituting the word "real" for "true" (*la vraie vie*). While the expression "true life" falls awkwardly on English ears (as awkwardly as "true love," a concept utterly alien to Proust's world), it matters that we do not lose sight of the original French here. Combining the two versions gives us a set of propositions that bring together three very grand items from the Proustian lexicon: the "true," the "real," and the "lived."

Truth, reality, life: we shall have occasion to return to the crucial place of these terms in the novel (in the strong sense of being crux-terms, load-bearing at key junctures of the novel's articulation of its own aesthetic), along with the dense equations they sustain (to the point where "real," "true," and "lived" become virtually interchangeable). But since in its bald form the proposition is especially congenial to the swooners, let me begin irreverently, with a provocative question framed by a Proustian *plaisanterie*. There is a tongue-in-cheek joke slyly embedded in one of the

many long stretches of narrative devoted to the Guermantes salon and their ilk: "I should never finish if I were to enumerate all the salons" (*Sodome et Gomorrhe* [*SG*], 144). The easy, and presumably intended, target is what is contemptuously referred to in the text as the "society novelist" (subspecies of that despised category, the "realist" writer), whose literary watchword is "I am observing" (*Du côté de chez Swann* [*S*], 329). But given that Proust himself makes a fair fist of exhaustively rendering all the minutiae of salon life, it is doubtless with not only a sigh of relief but also a raised eyebrow that we might find ourselves endorsing the self-denying ordinance, were it not for our sensing that the joke is in fact self-directed ("I am fully aware of my more manic writing habits and how they can tax the patience of even the most indulgent readers"). But what of the earnest longueurs of the coda in *Le Temps retrouvé*? No jokes of this type here. Am I alone (I doubt it) in the view that much of the prolonged meditation on the literary vocation and the redemptive conception of "literature" is simply wearing?

This is not because I am not persuaded by many of these claims (though, along with many others, I am not).[2] That, under the conditions that govern the functioning of involuntary memory, certain dead parts of ourselves can be brought back to life ("resurrected") is good news, but scarcely the Good News of promised salvation, and, as a formula for the only life worth living ("life . . . lived to the full"), it is a somewhat exiguous version of the good life. Here we might find ourselves in sympathy with William Empson's sardonic take on the great Proustian saga of remembrance and redemption: "you remember [how Empson must have savored using that talismanic Proustian verb!] how Proust, at the end of that great novel, having convinced the reader with the full sophistication of his genius that he is going to produce an apocalypse, brings out with pathetic faith, as a fact of absolute value, that sometimes when you are living in one place you are reminded of living in another place, and this, since you are now apparently living in two places, means that you are outside time, in the only state of beatitude he can imagine."[3] Empson is in no doubt that Proust is out to persuade us of something ("having convinced the reader") and there is equally no doubt on his part as to the confusion of "sophistication" with a form of sophistry. But, while it would be disingenuous to deny that my own (far less withering) parti pris will exert some pressure on the arguments I wish to make, it is not the principal cause of a degree of weariness with these pages. Nor is it because the sequence in question is relentlessly cast in a "subjectivist,"

[2]They are listed by Richard Terdiman in *Present Past: Modernity and the Memory Crisis* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), 153.

[3]William Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (London: New Directions, 1953), 131.

theoretical idiom stamped by period tastes and tendencies unlikely to hold our attention for long today. We can, of course, approach many of the assumptions and assertions of the *Recherche* historically, in terms of that episteme of Proust's age dominated by the array of idealist idioms in circulation, some of which came Proust's way in his lycée philosophy class. But while interesting in its own terms, this sort of historical and biographical information will not take the concerns of the present book very far. In any case, as we shall see, the explicit quotation of these idioms in the novel itself suggests that, once in the mouths of his characters, they become suitably eligible candidates for inclusion in a Proustian version of Flaubert's *Dictionnaire des idées reçues*.

Dissatisfaction with the sequence in question may be said to derive from a property internal to it, namely, the fact that it is compulsively repetitive. "For nothing is ever repeated exactly," opines the narrator in *La Fugitive* ([*F*], 465), but the validity of the proposition is put under some strain by the disquisitions of *Le Temps retrouvé*. The same point is made over and over again: there is a world, a "reality," apart from our everyday world; it lies deep within us and is manifested as certain kinds of impressions, sensations, and memories, which it is the task of the work to express or "translate." Since the repetition of the point is not invariably or even mostly a progressive deepening of it, we must ask what it is that motivates these reprises. It is certainly not because Proust is insistently dogmatic (he is the least dogmatic of writers). Perhaps it betrays the precise opposite of self-assurance, an uncertainty as to the security of his own doctrines; Proust repeats because he is trying to convince not only his reader but also himself. But who is "himself" here? It will doubtless have been noticed that I have already started shifting between "narrator" and "Proust," thus opening a can of worms familiar to narrative theory; we will have to delve deeper into that can in due course. For now, let us simply countenance the possibility, as a working hypothesis, that the discursive machine of *Le Temps retrouvé* is itself working overtime to shore up a belief that defies rationality, a "mad belief," vital to sustaining "life," perhaps, but doing so as a pure fiction, somewhat in the spirit, if not the manner, of Nietzsche's life-protecting fictions (in the *Recherche* Saint-Loup is an enthusiastic reader of Nietzsche), a spellbinding illusion, but illusory nonetheless (in connection with art Proust will come to call it an "optical illusion").

II

Proust's novel begins, dramatically, with a hallucination, although in the context of an entirely commonplace experience. The narrator recalls a time when, drifting in and out of sleep (the so-called hypnagogic state),

he has imagined himself while sleeping to have been the "subject" of the bedtime book he has been reading (probably Mignet's *Rivalité de François 1er et Charles Quint*). The experience is described, appositely, as "having taken a rather peculiar turn." First, the imagining is not a dream-induced evocation of the world of Mignet's book; rather, the narrator himself has become that world ("it seemed to me that I was myself what the book was talking about"). Second, it is not clear what it is that he has notionally "become." Commonsensically, we might posit one or more of the characters (perhaps François 1er, given the echo of the name in *François le Champi*, the bedtime novel by George Sand read by the narrator's mother). But no such restriction on the "subject" of the book applies. What the narrator actually says is that he has "become" everything (characters, settings, a building, a musical piece): "it seemed to me that I was myself what the book was talking about: a church, a quartet, the rivalry of François 1er and Charles V" (*S*, 7). This is prima facie unintelligible. It is true that in *Le Temps retrouvé* the narrator compares the self to a "book" ("the interior book of unknown signs"), but this is intended as a metaphor with a strictly semiotic import (the self as a collection of signs soliciting interpretation or "decipherment"). The opening moment is not metaphorical in this way; it is baldly literal. In what known or knowable worlds (including the more permissive worlds constructed by the dream-work) can one experience oneself as a building? There will be much more in *À la recherche* about the strange alternative domains opened up to us by sleep and dreaming, and much value is attached to them, as a counter to the dully habit-bound world of everyday conscious life.[4] But, while here seminaturalized as an effect of the dreaming self, if these projections were carried over into the waking life, they would surely qualify as examples of the deranged. And if it is felt that this is to drag a deranged red herring across Proust's "argument," let us recall that the question is raised by the narrator himself in one of several other explorations of sleep where a loss of the sense of the "reality of the common objects that surround me" induces, as it had for Descartes, an alarm over the dividing line between dream and cognition: "I was alarmed to think, however, that this dream had had the clarity of a cognition. Could cognition, by the same token, have the unreality of a dream?" (*SG*, 381).

There are lots of crazed or semicrazed beliefs in the *Recherche*. The narrator, for example, highlights our attachment to friendship and "society" (in the somewhat quaint sense of the latter term) as a mental

[4]In *La Prisonnière* the narrator claims that sleep provides the best stories: "I was still enjoying the last remains of sleep, that is to say, the only originality, the only novelty which exists in the telling of stories, since all waking narratives, even those embellished by literature, lack the mysterious incongruities which are the true source of beauty" (110). But if this is the standard by which we are to judge Proust's novel, it fails.

aberration (*douce folie*), which "in our heart of hearts we know is like the wanderings of a madman who believes the furniture is alive and talks to it" (*Le Temps retrouvé* [*T*], 184). This, however, is but Proustian small change, a predictable flourish in the sustained and unbending exposure of the worthlessness of our immersion in the social world. As for the invocations of madness in connection with the certifiable condition of sexual jealousy, these are simply too numerous to mention. But things may start to look unnervingly different when the view in question implicates more sensitive areas, those that the narrator ostensibly values rather than those that he despises or rejects. The man who self-deludingly believes in friendship may resemble the lunatic who converses with his furniture, but that is not so far removed from the young narrator's defamiliarized encounter with the items of furniture in his room as if they were hostile agents bent on malevolent purpose (*À l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs* [*JF*], 245–46). However painfully disturbing, defamiliarization for Proust is, after all, the necessary condition of escaping the deadening tyranny of Habit, and it is thus at the very least something of a complication to find the subject of this emancipating experience aligned in some important way with the image of the madman who hallucinates his furniture as animate and speech-endowed (*S*, 12).

And what of the pressure of cognitive mishap in the one area where prima facie it could exert no conceivable pressure at all, the hallowed theme of Resurrection? Diana Knight has drawn our attention to the fact that the echo toward the end of *Sodome et Gomorrhe* of the "intermittences" episode (in which the narrator's delayed grief over his grandmother's death bursts upon him as a kind of "resurrection" of the dead) takes the form of a "hallucination."[5] This is the moment in the Balbec hotel when he "sees" his grandmother in his mother "as in one of those apparitions" (520). There is, of course, a causal explanation: the mother, caught unawares, her hair in disarray, reveals the gray streaks that are normally concealed. For a split second, his mother actually appears as his grandmother, and moreover does so by way of the biological fatalism that informs Proust's treatment of the saga of the generations and the theme of "heredity," whereby we come more and more to physically resemble our parents and ancestors. But these explanatory moves, while part of the point, miss the main point: in its initial occurrence, as distinct from its post facto clarification, the experience has the force of an "optical illusion" that is truly hallucinatory. Might we then find ourselves claiming something similar of the most privileged of the privileged moments, those on which in *Le Temps retrouvé* the narrator stakes all, as

[5] "The Proustian hallucination of the grandmother's resurrection at sunrise." "The Woman without a Shadow," in *Writing the Image after Roland Barthes*, ed. Jean-Michel Rabaté (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997), 139.

precisely moments when spontaneous recollection crosses over into the illusion of something that is immediately present to vision (not Combray, Balbec, or Venice recalled, but Combray, Balbec, and Venice "there" before him, literally a resurrection, the return of the past as the deluded witnessing of a kind of "ghost")? Is there not another ghost at this feast of perceptual delights and redemptive meaning, a scene haunted by the specter of reasonable doubt? It is, of course, supposed to be the exact opposite: of the decisive epiphanies in *Le Temps retrouvé*, the narrator claims that they banish "all intellectual doubt" and bring "a joy akin to certainty" (175–76). This is what epiphany does in the ecstatic instant of its occurrence. But the moment is one thing; the totality of the narrative and the multifariousness of its voices another. Earlier I said that the naturalizing explanation of the mother/grandmother confusion, while part of the point, misses the essential point, but this requires some adjustment. That it is there at all tells us that at moments such as these Proust often has two voices speaking in counterpoint, one of them anxious to temper the intensities of the other by reference to that most prosaic of orders—the facts of the matter.

We will encounter this correcting and contextualizing voice on many occasions throughout the course of this book, most importantly, in connection with the initiatory, aesthetic education the narrator will receive from the painter Elstir. On the other hand, we should not overlook that altogether more upbeat and engaging summary of the potential of mad belief provided by the baron de Charlus. When ("slipping his arm into mine") he and the narrator stroll down the boulevard after leaving one of the Guermantes soirees, Charlus regales his young companion with a curious little story:

> "You know the story of the man who believed he had the Princess of China shut up in a bottle. It was a mad belief. He was cured of it. But as soon as he ceased to be mad, he became stupid. There are some sicknesses we must not seek to cure because they are our only protection from others that are more serious." (*Le Côté de Guermantes* [*CG*], 287)

This perverse recommendation of a most unusual version of therapeutic good sense may also be intended as an homage to Balzac (Charlus is Balzac's greatest fan in the *Recherche*), in particular as an echo of that moment in the concluding scene of *Illusions perdues* that so entranced both Proust and Oscar Wilde. Like Charlus slipping his arm into that of the narrator, Vautrin too seeks to charm and seduce his young protégé-to-be, Lucien de Rubempré, partly by means of an equally exotic tale, the story of a young diplomat with an unconquerable and career-destroying passion for devouring paper (including diplomatic treaties). Vautrin's narrative *curioso* is generally interpreted as a self-interested

illustration of the irresistibility of "vice," and Charlus's can be read along the same lines. He certainly has plenty of mad—and dangerous—beliefs of his own with which to sustain himself, even if nothing in the end can halt his ineluctable progress to the condition of aphasic derelict.[6] But he also has another, more robustly sane bulwark against both stupidity and danger: "I have always respected those who defend grammar and logic. We realize, fifty years later, that they averted serious dangers" (*T*, 106).[7] There is, of course, an element of snobbery in this old-school defense of the virtues of clarity in thought and expression, an equivalent of which is to be found in the narrator's exasperation at the syntactic mistakes of the letter sent to him by the uneducated Aimé (dispatched on a mission to discover the truth of Albertine's suspected lesbian proclivities). Yet we should not forget that Charlus is billed as one of the most "intelligent" of the novel's characters, often—for reasons to be examined later—an ambiguous compliment in Proust, but here bestowed without a trace of equivocation. He is also billed—the Proustian accolade par excellence—as someone who could have been a "writer," the narrator lamenting the absence of the works that might have been. But if we don't have the works, we are given some idea of the putative writerly talents that would have nourished them; consistent with the attachment to the rigor of grammar and logic, they include a respect for the differentiating exactness of naming things correctly ("I am somewhat sensitive to names . . . Do you like names?" *SG*, 401) along with a corresponding view of the importance of "distinctions" (where this means less the social than the analytical kind, based on an understanding of the world as a place in which everything is either "p" or "not-p"): "he could have done us all a great service in writing, for not only could he make the finest distinctions, but when he distinguished a thing he always knew its name" (*La Prisonnière* [*P*], 190).

While contextually exotic, it should nevertheless come as no great surprise to find Charlus's pronunciamento on the value of grammar and logic making an appearance as epigraph in a work of philosophy bearing the title *Truth and Truthfulness* (by Bernard Williams). Truth and truthfulness, while close kin, are not the same. Truth, according to Williams, is a property of descriptions and representations of the world, whose prime criterion is "accuracy." Truthfulness designates the virtue of "sincerity," an intentional and humanly valued disposition to telling the truth as one

[6] "I came to the conclusion . . . that M de Charlus must be a trifle mad" is one of the narrator's great understatements (*CG*, 378).

[7] Even in the hugely deranged brothel scene of *Le Temps retrouvé*, Charlus evinces a respect for truth (namely, the truth of who is actually beating him, a grotesque travesty of the sadistic brute the sexual fantasy demands). *T*, 125.

sees it even if, by the "accuracy" test, it turns out to be false.[8] Both values matter hugely to Proust; both are problematic. There is, for example, one substantial impediment to Proust making a claim on truthfulness: his assertion that most of the time we lie, not only to others but also—indeed, above all—to ourselves (*SG*, 276) and yet that the practice of lying is what propels us along the road of "discovery"; lying and being lied to are the fertile spawners of curiosity, of the epistemophiliac will to know (*SG*, 198). Naturally, this is a logically opaque (as well as an ethically dubious) assertion. Is it an exception to the rule it enunciates (telling the truth about the truth-revealing possibilities of lying), or is it itself an instance of the rule? If the latter, we are left stranded (for the first time, there are others still to come) in the quicksands of the Cretan Liar Paradox. Even if we skirt the quicksands, it does not follow that lies cannot be bearers or disclosers of truth, as will be clear to anyone familiar with, say, Nietzsche's naturalistic anatomy of the moral life or Freud's psychoanalysis of the fables we tell to make sense of ourselves. What, however, is certain is that such a view of truth-telling is incompatible with "sincerity" as normally understood. But in many ways these are finicky quibbles; as Malcolm Bowie pointed out, Proust's bravura statement about lying is inconsistent with other statements in the text, such that we should perhaps not get too excited by it.[9] Generally speaking, it would be simply bizarre to construe Proust's address to his readers as one extended and intended exercise in sheer mendacity; by and large, there is no good reason to question his sincerity-credentials (susceptibility to self-deceiving rationalization is another matter).

But how do things stand relative to the principle of "accuracy"? In connection with most of the "stuff" of *À la recherche*, from the description of things to the presentation of characters, it would be fatuously irrelevant to say that these are in some sense "inaccurate." What could the term conceivably mean in these fictional contexts? But when it comes to, say, the narrator seeing a wall as a street, or land as sea (an axial example for the whole argument of this book), if here we are to reach for the principle of accuracy, we are going to have ask the question—accurate of what? An account that is an accurate reflection of a perception of the world is not necessarily an accurate reflection of the world, insofar as the experience or perception can embody an illusory or false representation. This distinction, elementary in itself, is going to take us very far in our inquiries.

[8]Bernard Williams, *Truth and Truthfulness: An Essay in Genealogy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 44–45.

[9]Malcolm Bowie, *Freud, Proust, and Lacan: Theory as Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 48.

III

The question of "truth"—what, in the abandon with which he uses the term, Proust variously and often bewilderingly understood by it—is fundamental to the following pages, under the general umbrella of a version of philosophical "skepticism" (Charlus is also a great skeptic, especially in his withering denunciation of the patriotic nonsense induced by war fever). There are several very familiar senses in which Proust can be described as a skeptic, most obviously that centered on his doubts as to the "knowability" of other people. More generally, the notion of "literary" skepticism sketched by Graham Bradshaw in connection with Shakespeare might, suitably adapted, be applicable to Proust. Literary skepticism signifies double seeing, ambiguity, differential point of view, not just as a "position" but as a device—in Shakespeare's case, a dramatic device in the service of the generic and structural requirements of what Bradshaw calls "dramatic thinking," a perspectival mode in which a dramatic speech is relativized not simply to a point of view (that of the speaking character) but also to its place in the temporal unfolding of the play.[10] In *La Prisonnière* there is a programmatic statement, rising to a magnificent crescendo in one of Proust's most resonant and cherished metaphors, that we could, roughly, interpret as the narrative equivalent of Bradshaw's gloss, with a modernist add-on (since Proust himself proposes it) for painting and music: "The only true voyage . . . would be . . . to see the universe through the eyes of another, of a hundred others, to see the hundred universes that each of them sees, that each of them is; and this we can do with an Elstir, with a Vinteuil; with men like these we really do fly from star to star" (236–37).

This is Proust at his most genuinely appealing, and only the churlishly flat-footed would look askance at his star-spangled celebration of the plurality of universes and its artistic promise. But where this travels over to the respects in which Proust has been associated, even in its informal and diluted guises, with *philosophical* skepticism, we enter more contestable territory. Few of these associations are my concern here in any central way, and some are of no concern at all. One reason for this derives from the portrait of Swann:

> For Swann was reaching an age at which one's philosophy—encouraged by the current philosophy of the day, and also by that of the circle in which Swann had spent so much of his life, that of the social set attached to the Princesse des Laumes, where it was agreed that intelligence was in direct ratio to scepticism and nothing was real and incontestable except the individual tastes of each person—is no longer that of youth, but a positive, almost medical philosophy,

[10] Graham Bradshaw, *Shakespeare's Scepticism* (Brighton: Palgrave Macmillan, 1987).

> the philosophy of men who, exteriorizing the objects of their aspirations, try to derive from the years that have already elapsed a stable residue of habits and passions they can regard as characteristic and permanent and which they will deliberately make it their primary concern that the kind of life they adopt may satisfy. (*S*, 282)

Anyone tempted to read Proust through the lens of skepticism is likely to find their wish decisively inhibited by this deft take on the surrender of the intellect, cognate with Swann's "ironic" mode of speaking as if all of his utterances were made in quotation marks, the manner that so baffles and irritates the young narrator. And there is stronger stuff still to encourage that inhibition. Apart from the flirtation of the spiritually jaded Swann with philosophical fashion, as little more than a cover for middle-aged abdication of the challenge of thought and judgment, there is the bracing view in praise of skepticism enunciated by the ineffable Cottard: "The wise man is of necessity a sceptic . . . when all's said and done, Socrates isn't so extraordinary. They're people who had nothing to do, who spent their whole day walking about logic-chopping" (*P*, 445). And in the Verdurin circle to which both Swann (briefly) and Cottard (permanently) belong, there is, according to another member of the circle (the Princesse Sherbatoff), a living incarnation of the skeptical mind, the pedant Brichot: "with the professor, the mordant irony of the complete sceptic never loses its rights" (*P*, 445), while Brichot in turn has his own model or ideal, "our gentle master of exquisite scepticism," Anatole France (*T*, 100).

Since, on the question of skepticism, or indeed anything else, the doctor, the professor, and the princess are not natural Proust company, we would perhaps do well to sidestep the pitfalls of formal definition and take our cue from Nietzsche's sprightly remark in *The Gay Science*: "I approve of any form of scepticism to which I can reply 'let's try it.'"[11] Trying it (some might say trying it on) is the experimental drift of this book. But, within this liberally pragmatic frame, let us set the stage with two preliminary clarifications, the first to do with the nature of Proustian skepticism, the second to do with its object. For the first of these clarifications, I want to draw briefly (and lightly) on the distinction in philosophy between radical skepticism and mitigated (or, as it is sometimes alternatively called, constructive) skepticism.[12] Radical skepticism is the project that turns on the notoriously self-defeating proposition "I

[11] Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 62.

[12] The term "mitigated" skepticism derives from Hume, who contrasts it with "excessive" skepticism. Christopher Hookway, *Scepticism* (London: Routledge, 1998); Neil Gascoigne, *Scepticism* (London: McGill Queens University Press, 2002).

know nothing," and generally ends by skirting, when not enthusiastically entering, the zones of relativism and solipsism. There are, of course, accounts of Proust that align him with both relativism and solipsism, but to my mind these versions are both unpersuasive and uninteresting if taken to mean that Proust's novel is best understood in these terms or something very like them (quite why, I shall explain in due course).[13] Mitigated or constructive skepticism is a very different matter, insofar as it avoids the traps of relativism and solipsism by holding fast to some standard of rationality from which to express and organize doubts as to certain descriptions of reality. It is this variety of skepticism that I shall bring to bear on the Proustian enterprise or, more precisely (and, I hope, more interestingly), maintain that Proust himself, in certain moods, brings to bear on his own enterprise. On the face of it, this will sound provocative or, more bluntly, just plain silly. The writer who conspicuously devalues acts of rational intellection (what his narrator calls "intelligence"), and who constantly opposes intuition to reason, will hardly seem a promising candidate for annexation to the camp of the classically skeptical rationalist. This indeed is why I draw on this source but lightly, and do so broadly for one reason only: to put in place a mode of skeptical inquiry that keeps intact the distinction between truth and error, the form of skepticism that serves the cause of truth in its campaign against error.[14]

The second clarification concerns the object of Proust's skepticism. This takes us into equally tricky and controversial areas. I do not mean here what is normally taken as the object or objects of skeptical critique in Proust: those thematic categories of *À la recherche* that go under the headings of love, friendship, society, travel, and so forth, the values and practices that link us to the world (in the worldly sense of world) and that the narrator renounces in the discovery of and self-dedication to the artistic vocation. By the object of skepticism, I mean not the former but

[13] If Proust's novel enters the solipsist's world at all, it is psychologically and morally rather than philosophically. In his study of Nabokov, Michael Wood writes that "the solipsist resembles one, and only one, other human type—the torturer." *The Magician's Doubts: Nabokov and the Risks of Fiction* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1995), 234. Proust's narrator is never closer to the solipsist than when torturing his "prisoner," Albertine, not least by virtue of the fact that, while his own mental pain is everywhere on display in *La Prisonnière*, that of the actual victim of "incarceration" is scarcely seen, one of the purposes of first-person narration being to obliterate it.

[14] It is one of the functions of what Benjamin calls "commentary" in the *Recherche* (as one of the components of a hybrid generic form that makes of it a "special case of literature"). Walter Benjamin, "The Image of Proust," in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (London: Pimlico, 1999), 197. Benjamin also speaks of "the tested scepticism with which he approached things" (interpreted as an antidote to "the self-satisfied inwardness of Romanticism"). Benjamin cites Rivière's remark that "Proust approaches experience . . . without the slightest tendency to console" (himself adding that "[n]othing is truer than that"). Ibid., 208.

the latter, the very thing that is opposed to these categories, namely, the artistic vocation itself or a certain version of it, the version over which the Proustian coterie has swooned for so long. This is not to suggest that we should stop taking seriously Proust's view of the aesthetic solution to the problem of living, or, more pertinently, ascribe to Proust the intention of inviting us not to take it seriously. That would be perverse to a degree, and in the continuing flux of commentary, we can still encounter strong versions of the aesthetic solution, for instance, the terms on which Alexander Nehamas juxtaposes the idea of life as a work of art with Nietzsche's bracing, existential stylistics based on the twin notions of self-overcoming and the eternal recurrence.[15]

The target here is rather the weak or weak-kneed varieties of this reading of Proust. In many ways this is an easy target (what self-respecting reader would now wish to congregate with the erstwhile worshippers?), and has been hit many times before. The most telling include the critical reflections of Leo Bersani and Paul de Man.[16] Bersani encouraged us to question the redemptive or reparative aspect of Proust's view of artistic "symbolization," largely from the point of view of a neo-Lacanian psychoanalysis prioritizing "perishable experience" over "the essentializing inventions of art." In a very different intellectual register, de Man also urged us down the skeptical road, and for the purposes of my argument, de Man is, as we shall see on various occasions, a more complex reference, though on the whole I will want to maintain that in terms of the radical skepticism/mitigated skepticism distinction, de Man situates himself more on the side of the former, albeit on a very special set of terms (deconstruction). Were he still with us, I don't think he would take kindly to being described as a rationalist skeptic.

The swooners thus find themselves beleaguered. But if they have become an object of ridicule by virtue of having so often been ridiculous, they are not solely to blame for having confused daintiness with spirituality and narcissism with criticism. It is no accident that of all the great early modern writers, it is to Proust that they have gone as to a shrine (not even the more overtly religious Eliot has been revered in the same way). Proust's doctrine, if that is what it can be called, and its attempted instantiation in the *Recherche* rest on a paradox—a proclaimed renunciation of the world that remains in and of the world. The means for the accomplishment of this paradoxical task Proust variously called "art"

[15] Alexander Nehamas, *Nietzsche: Life as Literature* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1985), 167–68.

[16] Leo Bersani, *Marcel Proust: The Fictions of Life and of Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969) and *The Culture of Redemption* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990); Paul de Man, "Reading (Proust)," in *Allegories of Reading* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 57–78.

or "literature" or "beauty." An ascesis was to be achieved through the aesthetic, where the latter entails not just the specialized meaning of the Beautiful but the full spectrum of *aesthesis*, the sphere of sense-based experiences and intuitions prior to or "below" rational cognition. This was a difficult, if not impossible, project, an ascesis that isn't one, shadowed by idolatry and bad faith. It is no surprise, therefore, that Proust acquired a swooning readership, especially from an age and a social world in which wrought sensitivity and jaded appetite were often indistinguishable, in which the beauty-merchants (collectors, connoisseurs, dealers) hawked their wares around the marketplace, the whole business backed by the discreet rustle of banknotes and share certificates (one of Proust's gags has share certificates as art objects).[17] On the other hand, since Proust took both his master, Ruskin, and himself to task for confusing the aesthetic and the spiritual, we must not only listen to an alternative, more taxing, and self-critical Proustian voice but begin by actually identifying and locating it.

In the de Manian view this other voice is anonymous; it belongs to something called the "text" and is in fact less a distinctive voice, in the sense of attributable to a determinate speaker, than a textual force, a power to counter the declared ambitions of the text's author, as a reflection of how language itself works irrespective of the intentions of any particular user. I take a different view, at least of the intentions of Marcel Proust. If they may not always be precisely determinable (crucially, what Proust intentionally determined as the relation between himself and his narrator), they matter. But the plural also matters, that is, the form in which they matter is indeed double, which generates the novel as home to two warring voices, albeit unequally pitched: the celebratory and the skeptical.[18] The former is noisy and insistent, laden with persuasive energy and confident of its message; the other is low-key, intermittent, oblique, a sotto voce emanation from the margins, and often audible only in the tones of ironic indirection. Nevertheless, although quiet, that voice is there to be heard. It would, of course, make no sense whatsoever to suggest that Proust asks us to take no heed of his version of the "aesthetic solution," and that is most certainly not the claim of this book. It would, however, be most unlikely to detain anyone other than the light-headed

[17] M. de Norpois "did not hesitate to congratulate my father on the 'composition' of his portfolio, 'very stylish, very neat, very handsome.' It sounded as though he endowed the difference between the market values of shares, and even the shares themselves, with something like aesthetic merit" (*JF*, 28).

[18] Bowie was closer to the multivocal structure of the *Recherche* when, in connection with a different set of interests, he spoke of "certain neglected voices" within "the contrapuntal texture of Proustian argument." "Proust, Jealousy, Knowledge," in *Freud, Proust, and Lacan*, 59.

admirer for very long if it were offered solely from within the cocooned complacency of unquestioned belief (the stance of the pure Aesthete). If it speaks to us and moves us, it is because, while believing in it, to the point of sacrificing the entirety of a creative life to it, Proust himself is aware of the frailty of the belief, along with his gleefully comic understanding that it is in some ways completely mad.

Arguably, Proust's great achievement was to have kept those beliefs alive under the pressure of that understanding, but we do him no favors if we choose simply to ignore the pressure.[19] Proust was a secular writer, not a religious one (a question I consider at some length in chapter 4), and much of the point of his message of "redemption" through art is that, thrown into a wholly secular world, it has to acknowledge its own vulnerabilities and take its chances with those who do not think and feel in the same way. This must include the thought that, on occasion, Proust himself was among those who do not think and feel in the same way. Anyone disinclined to accept that Proust explicitly voices doubt in connection with his deepest beliefs should pause over a passage in what, along with the madeleine episode, is the most ecstatic moment in the entire novel. Indeed, as the narrator reflects on the unsuspected realms of "redemptive" imagination into which he has been swept by the Vinteuil septet, he is reminded of what happened to him on tasting the madeleine, but in terms of a worried thought the reader might not have predicted:

> I began to doubt once more, I said to myself that after all it might be that, even though Vinteuil's phrases seemed to me to be the expression of certain states of the soul—analogous to the one I had experienced on tasting the madeleine soaked in tea—nothing proved that the vagueness of these states was a sign of their profundity, rather than of our inability, so far, to analyze them: there would therefore be nothing more real in them than in others. (*P*, 352)

He does not dwell on the thought and its potential implications. It is mentioned and then shunted to one side; and the caveat "so far" is entered by Proust in the knowledge that at the revelatory end of his novel

[19]Vincent Descombes summarizes on the model of a "trial" undergone by the narrator that consists "in the choice between the destiny of a 'doubter' and the destiny of a man of 'faith,'." *Proust: Philosophy of the Novel*, 128. The standard view, of course, has Swann, the failed dilettante, as the doubter and the narrator, the artist-to-be, as the "man of faith." Bersani, however, radically equivocated the doubt/faith distinction, with the argument that Proust's project—the redemptive premise of its aesthetic—is umbilically joined to the recognition of its own impossibility: "Proust's novel is constantly raising doubts about its own status as a vehicle of those essences that, according to Proust, become visible in great art . . . Proust's novel defeats its redemptive project . . . only by failing to provide us with any reason for its own existence; its greatness, in short, is inseparable from the impossibility of its ever having been written." "Death and Literary Authority," in *A New History of French Literature*, ed. Denis Hollier (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989), 866–67.

in the Guermantes library, it will have evaporated. It is not a repudiation; that is not how Proustian doubt works. But however contained and short-lived, the doubting voice has spoken, not just as early hesitation reflecting the lack of self-confidence yet to be acquired but also relatively late in the day (in *La Prisonnière*), and it cannot ever be wholly banished from our reading consciousness, even after we have passed from the anxiety-charged world of *La Prisonnière* into the revelatory one of *Le Temps retrouvé*. And between the two, in *La Fugitive*, there are these throwaway lines on the subject of novels and what it means to read them:

> And sometimes reading a rather sad novel carried me suddenly backwards, for some novels are like a period of great mourning which abolishes habit and puts us once more in touch with the reality of life, but for a few hours only, as does a nightmare, for the force of habit, the oblivion that it procures and the gaiety that it restores as the brain is unable to resist them and re-establish the truth, are infinitely stronger than even the most hypnotic suggestions of a beautiful book, which, like all suggestions, have a very fleeting effect. (526)

The case made here is self-restricting; it applies only to "some novels," which do not necessarily include Proust's, and, however both "sad" and "beautiful" the latter is, the function of whiling away the odd hour ("for a few hours") in a variety of induced hypnosis does not plausibly describe either Proust's aims or our experience of reading him. On the other hand, since "mourning" is one of his deepest themes, and liberation from Habit certainly a major aim, the passage cuts closer to the Proustian bone than one might think at first sight: if the "liberation" is but a "fleeting effect," then it is hard to see how transience converts to transcendence.

IV

Passing remarks do not an entire argument make. The challenge is to take one-off moments such as these and place them in the broader context of the diverse forms and terms in which the skeptical voice can be intermittently yet persistently heard. That is what this book is about, its own argument centered on the spectacle of Proust arguing with himself. A first step here might be a backward one, into Proust's unsteady relation with the work of Ruskin. Proust famously bit the hand that fed him (the Master as source of "nourishment" is fundamental to Proust's imagining of the role of the significant predecessor), when, politely but devastatingly, he accused Ruskin of the vice Ruskin himself had denounced. Proust quotes what Ruskin had written on the "deadly function of art in its ministry to what . . . is truly, and in the deep sense, to be called idolatry," further described as "some dear and sad fantasy which we have

made for ourselves."[20] Proust took full note of this admonition in more or less single-handedly resisting the uncritical French tendency, reflected in the titles chosen by his translators (*L'Esthétique anglaise*, *La Religion de la beauté*), to posit Ruskin as the aesthete's aesthete (33). Yet by the time he came to write the "Post-Scriptum" to the preface of his own translation of the *Bible of Amiens*, Proust maintained that unconsciously and against his better self, Ruskin had fallen into the idolatrous trap: "The doctrines he professed were moral doctrines, and yet he chose them for their beauty. And since he did not wish to present them as beautiful but as true, he was forced to deceive himself about the nature of the reasons that made him adopt them" (51). This is strong language from the rebellious disciple, but its strength is also an index of how deep the problem of idolatry runs. Ruskin's alleged self-deception did not stem from a mere contingent defect of Ruskin's mind, but reflected "an infirmity essential to the human mind" (54), and as such also implicated the disciple in the same web of self-deceiving blindness or "insincerity." Proust does not criticize Ruskin from the assumption of his own moral or spiritual superiority, as if claiming exemption from the condition he diagnoses. On the contrary, while stopping short of a full mea culpa, he goes out of his way to confess his own complicity, most notably in connection with the reading of a page of Ruskin in that place of glorious error and bedazzlement, the Saint Mark's baptistery (53–54).[21]

The tensions and ambivalences wound into Proust's circling around Ruskin furnish an indispensable prolegomenon to the central questions of *À la recherche*. His narrator may come close to conflating the spiritual and the aesthetic, such that the negative lesson of Ruskin—the warning issued by Ruskin and the warning about Ruskin issued by Proust—is forgotten or even nonchalantly disregarded.[22] But Proust never forgets it.

[20] Marcel Proust, *On Reading Ruskin: Prefaces to "La Bible d'Amiens" and "Sésame et les lys,"* trans. and ed. Jean Autret, William Burford, and Phillip J. Wolfe; introd. Richard Macksey (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), 50. Further references in this chapter are to this edition with page numbers given parenthetically in the main body of the text.

[21] I discuss this in chapter 4.

[22] Consider, for example, the narrator's flippant mockery of Nietzsche's ascetic renunciation of the seductions of Wagner: "I could admire the master of Bayreuth without any of the scruples of those who, like Nietzsche, feel that duty requires them to flee, both in art and in life, from any beauty which appeals to them, who tear themselves away from *Tristan* as they renounce *Parsifal*, and by a spiritual ascesis, piling mortification upon mortification, follow the bloodiest path of suffering until they raise themselves to the pure knowledge and perfect adoration of *The Longjumeau Postilion*" (*P*, 142). *The Longjumeau Postilion* was a light opera by Adam and figures nowhere in Nietzsche. The example that Nietzsche gave as an antidote to Wagner was, of course, Bizet. The narrator's tendentious replacement of Bizet by Adam's commercial bauble is evidently not a move endorsed by Proust. The example is discussed by Antoine Compagnon, *Proust Between Two Centuries* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 37.

His novel does not simply proffer the aesthetic solution to the problem of living but also enacts a struggle with the solution as a problem in its own right. There can be no question but that Proust wanted to endorse it by transforming it, to save "salvation," as it were, in terms that would rescue it from those versions steeped in idolatry. The whole of the narrator's evolution is directed to that outcome. But Proust also knew that what he most wanted, while he wanted it very badly, he perhaps could never have it in a form completely immune from contamination by the idolatrous. Proust thus invites us to read him according to the rule enunciated for his own reading of Ruskin's *Bible of Amiens*: never in a manner "allowing us to believe without enquiry and to admire on faith" (55). It also became the rule for his reading of Ruskin on the topic of reading. In the preface to his translation of *Sesame and Lilies*, Proust situates the general issue of idolatry specifically in a disagreement with Ruskin on the purposes of reading. Ruskin's error, according to Proust, was to have positioned the Book as a "motionless idol" and its ideal reading as an act of "fetishistic respect" (120). This applies a fortiori to a whole class of Proust's readers, receiving and worshipping in ignorance or disregard of Proust's claim that "[r]eading is at the threshold of spiritual life; it can introduce us to it; it does not constitute it" (116).

The following chapters are about Proust's attempt to apply his rule to his own creation, as an argument, often reluctant, uncertain, and stumbling, with and against himself, in particular, his lucid refusal to take on "faith" and hence protect from "enquiry" what in other moods and enthusiasms he most cherished, namely, his own mad belief in the resurrecting, transfiguring, and redeeming powers of art. Believing literally that you have the Princess of China physically trapped in a bottle is not the same thing as the metaphorically articulated belief that you have the secret meaning of the lived life captured aesthetically in a "vessel" or a "vase" (the latter one of the most cited of Proust's metaphors for his metaphorical art). But perhaps they are not that far apart. Consider, for example, the extraordinary saga of Albertine's breast, where the "question" of metaphor is absolutely center stage. The occasion involves less what we would formally call a "belief," more a state of mind invoking a structure of belief situated on shores that reason could never dream of reaching. As one of the maddest episodes of Proustian imagining, it is of particular note for three reasons. First, it enacts a wanton unraveling of cognitive grip, embraced with the careless insouciance that is uniquely the privilege of the lunatic; second, the correcting skeptical voice is given to a figure imagined as a "philosopher," embodiment of the principle of pragmatic right reason; third, it implicates the basic procedures of Proust's art in ways both direct and fundamental. Here, in *À l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs*, is what happens (there are many others that we will consider

further down the line) as the narrator, flushed with desire, contemplates the body of Albertine abed:

> The sight of her naked throat and her excessively pink cheeks had so intoxicated me (that is, had so transferred reality from the world of nature into the deluge of my own sensations, which I could barely contain) as to have upset the balance between the tumultuous and indestructible immensity of the life surging through me and the paltry life of the universe. The sea, which through the window could be seen beside the valley, the swelling breasts of the closest of the Maineville cliffs, the sky where the moon had not yet reached the zenith, all of this seemed to lie as light as feathers between my eyelids, at rest upon eyeballs in which I felt the pupils had expanded and become strong enough, and ready, to hold much heavier burdens, all the mountains in the world, on their delicate surface. Even the whole sphere of the horizon did not suffice to fill their orbits. Any impingement of the natural world upon my consciousness, however mighty, would have seemed insubstantial to me; a gust of air off the sea would have seemed short-winded for the vast breaths filling my breast. I leaned over to kiss Albertine. Had death chosen that instant to strike me down, it would have been a matter of indifference to me, or rather it would have seemed impossible, for life did not reside somewhere outside me; all of life was contained within me. A pitying smile would have been my only response, had a philosopher put the view that, however remote it might be now, a day was bound to come when I would die, that the everlasting forces of nature would outlive me, those forces with their divine tread grinding me like a grain of dust, that after my own extinction there would continue to be swelling-breasted cliffs, a sea, a sky and moonlight! How could such a thing be possible? How could the world outlive me, given that I was not a mere speck lost in it—it was wholly contained within me, and it came nowhere near filling me, since, somewhere among so much unoccupied space, where other vast treasures could have been stored, I could casually toss the sky, the sea and the cliffs! (508–9)

The narrative supplies a perfectly "normal" explanatory context for this remarkable extravaganza. It is, after all, well known that sexual arousal can have a peculiar effect on our sanity. But this platitude will not suffice. The relation between sexuality and the pursuit of knowledge in the *Recherche* is an unusually intimate one, and often takes the form of positing the desiring mind as the mind at its most cognitively alert and curious.[23] But it's frankly a bit of a stretch matching this cheery epistemological view to what actually takes place in the passage. The sexually excited narrator may well be disposed to leave the "philosopher"

[23]The most eloquent spokesman for this view is Malcolm Bowie, who comments on the passage in precisely these terms in *Proust Among the Stars* (London: HarperCollins, 1998), 219.

stranded on the other shore as he gaily turns "perspective" upside down and inside out, but there is no reason why we should. Or, indeed, to think that Proust does; if anything, Proust's implied position here is that of the skeptical ironist on the side of the philosopher's rational claims, wryly contemplating his narrator orbiting in the ecstasy of a solipsist *dérive*. However, there is a further complication that concerns less the content of the narrator's desiring relation to reality than Proust's writing of it, the terms of his art, crucially, the work of metaphor and syntax. Mountains implicitly represented as breasts need not detain us for long; Proust would have inherited this sort of thing from the legacy of anthropomorphic metaphor (in Lamartine, for example, though in "Le Vallon" it is the cleft of the valley rather than the mountain peaks that is associated with the idea of a welcoming woman's breast). But when conventional trope joins with the "swelling" syntax of Proust's elaborate periods to metamorphose the entire world, dissolving it into a soliloquy made from a heady mix of sex and solipsism, we are entitled to wonder whether this is a case of language gone on holiday with no intention of returning (the emotional geography of the obvious predecessor, Baudelaire's metamorphic translations of woman's breast and tropical landscape in "Parfum exotique," are, rhetorically speaking, decorously modest by comparison). It is not just the pressure of sexual appetite that can disarrange the cognitive map of the world but also the pleasures of metaphor-making underpinned by oceanic sentence structures; the manic reordering of reality is driven more by the tumescence of the writing than that of its narrating subject.

In a moment of reckless euphoria, Proust recovered something of the megalomania of the romantics, when in the preface to *La Bible d'Amiens* he wrote of Ruskin in terms of the relation between "belief" and the sovereign rights of "genius": "Whether some of these conceptions of his supernatural aesthetics be false is a matter which, in our opinion, is of no importance at all. All those who have any understanding of the laws governing the development of genius know that its force is measured more by the force of its beliefs than by what may be satisfying to common sense in the object of those beliefs" (36). It was probably just about possible still to get away with this sort of thing ("in our opinion") in the early twentieth century, but only so far. Beyond its social function as a polite substitute for a more egocentric "my," the likely reach of the plural possessive pronoun was strictly limited. And even as a wildly affirmed personal opinion, already by the time of the "Post-Scriptum" to his preface, we find Proust rebuking himself for a gesture of such flagrant hubris (55). From there to making Proust into an apostle of rational common sense is, of course, another matter altogether, although the affection bestowed in the novel on the practical wisdom of grandmother, mother,

and Françoise may give us pause for thought. There are far grander models for the role of skeptic standing as watchman at the portals of the Proustian aesthetic epiphany. The grandest by far within Proust's tradition would be the father of the modern skeptical *reductio*, Descartes, a figure about whom Proust has interesting, if largely scattered, things to say, but whose sole mention in the *Recherche* is in connection with the socially shared intuitions of common sense ("the most common thing in the world," *P*, 319).[24] But since the swelling and (verbally) swollen erotic fantasia around Albertine's body sweeps the artistic imagination across the oceans of the world, let us in conclusion turn to a humbler figure with practical knowledge of the oceans, a seafaring man whom Proust encounters in the pages of Ruskin as the perfect incarnation of the commonsensical view of things.

This is Turner's naval officer, the gentleman who objects to the painter's depiction of ships without their portholes, and to whom Turner explains his artistic purposes. Proust came across Ruskin's account of this exchange in *Eagle's Nest*, and, more important, saw fit to reproduce it in the preface to the *Bible of Amiens*. It is quoted in the context of Proust's discussion of the vantage point from which to see and—in the case of Ruskin's engraving—draw the cathedral of Amiens:

> Turner, in his early life, was sometimes good-natured, and would show people what he was about. He was one day making a drawing of Plymouth harbour, with some ships at a distance of a mile or two, seen against the light. Having shown this drawing to a naval officer, the naval officer observed with surprise, and objected with very justifiable indignation, that the ships of the line had no port-holes. "No," said Turner, "certainly not. If you will walk to Mount Edgecombe, and look at the ships against the sunset, you will find that you can't see the port-holes." "Well, but," said the naval officer, still indignant, "you know the port-holes are there." "Yes," said Turner, "I know that well enough, but my business is to draw what I see, and not what I know is there." (41–42)

Wheeling this representative of robustly empirical English common sense onto the stage alongside René Descartes will hardly seem a productive move, and one most unlikely to command the intellectual sympathy, let alone the active support, of Proust. The "good-natured" Turner is courteously helpful to his companion, but it is clear that for both Ruskin

[24]The definitive, if controversial, study of the Proust-Descartes relation remains Maurice Müller's, with the imposing title *De Descartes à Marcel Proust: Essais sur la théorie des essences, le positivisme et les méthodes dialectique et reflexive* (Neufchâtel: La Baconniere, 1947). For further sources and suggestions, see Claudia Brodsky, "Remembering Swann," in *The Imposition of Form: Studies in Narrative Representation and Knowledge* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), 273.

and Proust the officer is a bit of a fool, an agreeable philistine.[25] However respectfully his inquiries and objections are treated, he is there as a mildly comic foil to a "perspectivist" aesthetic manifesto, which Proust summarizes as the principle of "distance arranging, in the deceitful but happy manner of the artist" (42). This is the aesthetic that will be imported lock, stock, and barrel into the Elstir section of *À l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs*, precisely in terms of the distinction between depicting not what you know but what you see "from a distance." Yet even as Proust summarizes what he takes to be the thought of Turner and Ruskin, the phrasing flashes a warning light. Neither Turner nor Ruskin uses the term "deceitful" (*mensongère*). Pleasing or exciting the eye (after the happy manner of the artist) is one thing, casting that enterprise as a deception of the eye belongs in a very different conceptual and moral register. It is the epistemological worm in the rose and raises all kinds of important questions: What is it that Turner draws—is it a ship or that curiously impossible thing, a ship that isn't one (a ship without portholes), or, arguably, a wholly new object for which a new name would be required; and what relation of reference, if any, to the world might this new object and name sustain? These will be urgent questions for us in connection with Elstir's painterly ideas and their influence on the artistic thinking of the narrator (Charlus's way with things, distinctions, and names, under the guiding aegis of grammar and logic, finds something of its point here). We might also take note here of another sailors' tale, in both its setting and its content the perfect foil to the celebrated aesthetic of the "mirage." Proust took special note of a passage in the preface by Robert de la Sizeranne to Mathilde Crémieux's translation of *The Stones of Venice*. It is the passage where La Sizeranne reports and comments on the collapse of the campanile of Saint Mark's in 1902 (two years after Proust's own visit to Venice) and the consternation of the sailors, arriving from Trieste in the early morning light, who think they are hallucinating the absence of the great landmark that not only guides safely into the Venetian harbor but summarizes the very essence of "Venice." Proust remarks in particular on how the seafarers "believe themselves the plaything of a mirage," and this is clearly not intended as an instance of the perceptually exciting and mind-expanding "mirage" of Elstir's painting; it is vision as unhappy and potentially catastrophic disorientation.[26]

[25] On the other hand, recall Proust writing to Marie Nordlinger in 1905 in defense of Whistler as "the painter of the rooms with the rose-strewn curtains and, above all, the sails at night belonging to Messrs Vanderbilt and Freer," but then adds, "why does one see only the sail and not the boat?" *Corr.*, 5:261.

[26] *Corr.*, 21:613; see Nathalie Mauriac Dyer, "Genesis of Proust's 'Ruine de Venise,'" in *Proust in Perspective: Visions and Revisions*, ed. Armine Kotin Mortimer and Katherine Kolb (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2002), 76–77.

But this is to anticipate what lies some way off. In the meantime, perhaps we might provisionally give the naval officer a bigger part in the relevant argument, as the awkwardly disruptive agent provocateur who provides the ideal antidote to the suffocating grip of hushed reverence. Let us then elect him an honorary member of Proust's society of ghosts, returning from the dead to accompany Proust's narrator, Proust himself, and us, his readers, on a walk through *À la recherche* armed with his impatiently doubtful air and his impertinently obvious questions. For Turner's answer, while entirely satisfactory on its own terms, indeed underlying and explaining the creation of some of the greatest effects of modern painting, is also incomplete. What is the meaning and the value of painting what you see rather than what you know, or, more exactly, painting what you see in the knowledge that this isn't what you know? Although these questions can come out as ponderously idiotic ("what, no portholes?"), they can also be all too airily dismissed. Incongruous though it may seem, in his sturdily naive way, the ghost of Turner's navy man may help us in confronting a blind spot in the settled reception of the canonical masters of impressionist and modern art, a celebration that sweeps to one side a whole problematic centered on an uneasy relation between vision, knowledge, and truth. Turner's friend may have missed the point about Turner's painting; he nevertheless succeeds in making a point about its point.

V

These are also possible questions for Proust's conception of literature. In the preface to his translation of *Sesame and Lilies*, Proust calls reading "the inciter whose magical keys open to our innermost selves the doors of abodes into which we would not have known how to penetrate" (118). But he is then quick to add that the risk of idolatry resides in substituting the incitement for the necessary work of the mind itself in the search for truth, confusing the turn of the key with what lies behind the door, as if a necessary condition of access were also a sufficient condition. The key is "magical" (the term is Proust's), and the magic is potent. But magic also traffics in illusions, and magicians are notoriously tricksters. At his most severe Proust refers to "the kind of trickery that a page of Ruskin's was for each one of us" (51). But, once again, it is a case of the pot calling the kettle black, and, more important, of Proust's awareness that this is so. As a first marker of Proust's skeptical lucidity, we might as well go straight into the lions' den, that place sacred to the Proust worshippers, and *the* scene of key-turning and door-opening magic in the novel. Would it be mindlessly foolish to represent the madeleine episode as, at one level, in

conflict with the other level of manifest seriousness, a sort of hoax, and to guide a rereading of it in part under the auspices of one of the finest Proust cartoons (of which there are hundreds, no high-cultural writer more amenable than Proust to pop-cultural appropriation, a phenomenon worth investigating in its own right)? The cartoon in question has the invalid Proust propped up in a hospital bed as an employee comes into his room doing his rounds with the food tray. The caption: "I'm out of madeleines, how about a prune Danish?"[27] Along with two other, equally implausible candidates (whom we shall encounter later),[28] this makes of the cartoonist one of Proust's best ever critics, grasping the essential in a single, condensed, and irreverent moment of representation. In connection with Proustian pastry worship, it humorously captures what Proust himself tells us over and over again, and most notably in the passage on the "magic" of reading: that it is a source of great "danger" to the mind when "truth no longer appears to us as an ideal we can realize only through the intimate progress of our thought and the effort of our heart, but as a material thing, deposited between the leaves of books" (118).

But there is more negative freight to the madeleine episode than just the risk of fetishizing the catalyst as the thing-in-itself. For what cannier instance of narrative trickery than that anthology piece wherein a whole "world" and a whole past are, as if by a miracle, conjured out of a cake and a cup of tea to become this most substantial expanse of recollecting narrative in the modernist repertoire. The Ur-version has the cake as toast (*pain grillé*) and the early drafts of *À la recherche* have a "biscuit," but these are minor variations on the theme of pure contingency (Danish pastry would do just as well).[29] And if it has to be a madeleine rather than toast or biscuit because of the psychologically and affectively complex associations of the common noun with a suite of proper names—the sinner saint, Mary Magdalene, Madeleine Blanchet (the adoptive mother who ends by quasi-incestuously marrying her adoptive son in George Sand's *François le Champi*), Madeleine de Villeparisis, member of the aristocratic Guermantes family and mother of Saint-Loup who marries Swann's daughter, Gilberte, thus joining biologically and socially the two ways of the childhood walks in Combray—there is also the hilariously contingent element that is generally overlooked: the nineteenth-century

[27] "Proust orders from the cart," in Emily Eells, "Proust à l'Américaine," in *La Réception de Proust à l'étranger*, ed. Mireille Naturel (Illiers-Combray, France: Institut Marcel Proust International, 2002). For other cartoon treatments of the madeleine, see Margaret Gray, *Postmodern Proust* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992), 161–64.

[28] They are both characters in the novel, the Prince de Foix and Dr. Cottard.

[29] *Against Sainte-Beuve and Other Essays*, ed. John Sturrock (London: Penguin Books Ltd., 1988), 3. *Esquisse* 13 has "biscotte," but in 14 it is "Madeleine" (with a capital "M"); *ARTP*, 4:695–99.

derivation of the common noun from the name of its creator, the much-appreciated pastry cook, one Madeleine Paulmier. The coup de grâce, as it were, is the distant and preposterous echo of the madeleine in Madame Verdurin's croissants, while in the Goncourt pastiche in *Le Temps retrouvé* Proust tramples all over the aura of Madeleine as proper name when he has the Goncourts claim that Madame Verdurin is the model for Madeleine, the ethereal heroine of Fromentin's novel *Dominique* (*T*, 15).[30]

So much baked into a cake, we might be tempted to say, a thought massively reinforced when we also add the truly extraordinary narrative-generating powers of the madeleine episode. In *Contre Sainte-Beuve* its capacity—albeit in this context as mere toast—to trigger involuntary memory is compared to the operations of "magic." But it is also here that the commonsense interjections of our naval officer would prove more than reasonable, backed, perhaps, by the demystifying comments of William Empson. If we ask, "What's in a pastry?," the answer has to be: only what the artist-magician puts into it. The "world" that emerges from the tasting of cake and tea is entirely an effect of artifice and craft. No one in what we must persist in calling "real life" would be able to both recall and narrate so much on the basis of a single afternoon's refreshments, however evocative. Proust is simply playing the fictional game in accordance with conventions we willingly accept, along with admiring the remarkable effects they can produce. But it is another step altogether to mask the artifice and dress up the game as offering the miracle of "resurrection" and the royal road to salvation in the domain of the "extra-temporal." That is magical thinking writ large. We shall see far more of it in succeeding chapters.

Is this why after "Combray" Proust switched immediately and anomalously to a third-person narrative for the telling of Swann's story? This has always been a source of puzzlement. No one takes seriously the pathetic efforts to naturalize the telling (as a story "someone"—possibly Swann himself—imparted to the narrator; not even Swann, let alone a third party, could have told it the way it is written). The actual teller is, of course, the author of the fiction, Marcel Proust. In what is the one genuinely persuasive explanation of this perplexing shift from first to third person, Claudia Brodsky maintains that this is Proust's oblique way of stripping the fictional game of its self-naturalizing mask and exposing the box of tricks that makes the game possible, just as in the *Recherche*, while Vinteuil's music transports, the cellist performing it at the Verdurins' is shown

[30]The multiple sources and associations of the name "Madeleine" are listed and discussed by Julia Kristeva in *Time and Sense: Proust and the Experience of Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 5–18. I discuss the significance of Madame Verdurin's croissants in chapter 2.

plying his trade as if peeling a cabbage (the analogy is Proust's).[31] Narrative is not a product of "miracles" or "revelations"; and while Art, like magic, is a wonderful thing, it is something cooked up in the all-too-human kitchen of meaning, where no one recipe has the status of divine script.

The best cooks work their recipes; they are improvisers and revisers. As a writer, Proust was one of the greatest revisers of all time, as anyone can attest who has spent even a modicum of time in the tangled world of manuscript, typescript, and proof, from which the so-called definitive editions of *À la recherche du temps perdu* have emerged. Revision was not just tinkering and refining but fundamental to Proust's entire conception. Since we have begun with the ending—the uncertain status of the "propositions" of *Le Temps retrouvé*—let us stop off there one more time, at the end of the ending, the novel's magnificent last sentence. It is a statement of what will be the core subject matter of the narrator's "book": the giantlike, monstrous, and unmeasurable dimensions of our existence "in Time." The sentence we all now read is the sentence that appears in the first posthumous edition of *Le Temps retrouvé*, and is a distillation from a plethora of manuscript ingredients suggestive of a writer less in possession of a recipe than in search of one. In a very remarkable analysis, Kristeva takes us back into the thicket of the manuscript *Cahiers*, a full page and a half of scribbles, fragments, erasures, changes, and additions, after which he appended the word *Fin* (underlined).[32] Although, as Kristeva notes, in neither manuscript nor published text does the word "death" appear, she rightly contextualizes the material by projecting it into the imagining of a sort of deathbed scene. On the one hand, there is the dying Proust making the final touches to his life's work; on the other hand, there is his narrator's anxiety as to whether, after so much wasted time, enough time remains to execute the literary project announced in the closing pages. The project was specified in a fragment subsequently struck out by Proust: the task for which there is hopefully enough time left is, in rough translation, "to effect all the required changes in the transcription of a universe and many others, the necessity of which, if one wishes to understand reality, will have been made plain in the course of this narrative [*récit*]," a formulation further elaborated in a fragment also dropped: "in the misleading transcription of a universe that needed to be reworked in its entirety." The invocation, at the very end of the novel, of the necessity of a complete retranscription of the universe deceptively transcribed in the novel we have just read ("in the course of this narrative") is mind-boggling, but we catch its tantalizing drift only if we put the right question to it.

[31] Brodsky, "Remembering Swann," 269–73.
[32] Kristeva, *Time and Sense*, 292–304.

Kristeva pertinently asks of the envisaged changes "which changes?"; changes to what? But she fails to ask the even more important question "whose changes?"; the narrator's or the author's? Here is the first of our several encounters with the issue of the narrator-author relation in the *Recherche*. Kristeva behaves as if the question is or would be the same for both. But on the face of it this cannot be, or rather simultaneously cannot be and has to be. The temporality of the manuscript passage is marked by an indeterminate "aujourd'hui," most probably a generalized "today," the Now of whatever time is left. But otherwise the timescales of narrator and author diverge radically. For the *narrator* the correction of the "misleading transcription" is yet to come; the time of his work is the time of a beginning ("should I begin" is also in the manuscript). For Proust the *author*, however, it is the time of ends and endings, both his and his book's. The question "whose changes?"—the author's or the narrator's—thus decisively affects how we might answer the question "which changes?" For the novice writer that is the narrator, they can be only changes to the error-saturated autobiography (*récit*) that precedes his definitive discovery of the artistic vocation, the changes that will interpret and sustain the retrospective transformation of the meaning of a life as *Bildungsroman* passes over into *Künstlerroman*. In this context, the sense and reference of the discarded fragment are clear: the "misleading transcription" is another way of designating the *vanitas vanitatum* of worldly experience, whose correction will be the task of "literature"; through the book he will write, the narrator will remake the world anew "in its entirety." But since Proust has already written *his* book, bringing it now to its moment of closure and hence to last thoughts, the potential scope of those thoughts is far more radical. For us, the actual thought processes of the fading Marcel Proust can only be an object of idle speculation, but the *Cahiers* suggest they were very much reflections "on the continuation of his novel" in the perspective of an endless revision.[33] The question is not how to conclude, but whether to conclude at all.[34] An interpretation of the manuscript gropings that is tied solely to the temporal perspective of the narrator secures, perhaps a trifle smugly, the cardinal opposition of the worldly (deceptive, fallen) and the artistic (truth-telling, redemptive). Yet when brought to bear on the temporal location of its author, this opposition is blurred. Just as the *Cahiers* are the author's, not the narrator's, private notebook, so the fictional *récit*, whose course is now being brought to an end, is his *récit*, and must therefore include its celebratory

[33] See chapter 8.

[34] A few months before he died, Proust wrote to Gaston Gallimard: "I have so many books to offer you which, if I die before then, will never appear—*A la recherché du temps perdu* has hardly begun." *Corr*., 21:56. The letter is cited by Christine Cano, in her brilliant essay, "Death as Editor," in *Proust in Perspective*, ed. Mortimer and Kolb, 46.

finale, as well as its extended *vanitas*. If the "changes" envisaged are to be to a narrative "universe" conceived in its "entirety," this must logically implicate the terms of the proposed aesthetic reordering of that universe as themselves candidates for potentially indefinite revision.

In other words, two quite different futures are being imagined here, in two distinct, syntactic registers. The narrator's reflections in the published version are about writing and what it might ultimately accomplish, gathered in a fully coherent sentence to articulate what, viewed under a certain aspect, is an improbable claim (tendentiously pushing my luck, I have called it a mad belief). Proust's thoughts, scattered and incomplete, are thoughts directed to a future of *re*writing, going back to the beginning and starting all over again. We can never know what these other Proustian universes, these other possible worlds, might have looked like; they belong in the tantalizing yet futile domain of an empty counterfactual. The experimental shots at composing the concluding sentence are opaque, physically opaque (the jungle of Proust's handwriting), syntactically broken, semantically and referentially obscure. Above all, they are caught in a flux of scratched and scratched-out formulations, thoughts, and phrases sketched and dumped, as, before appearing to settle on what subsequent editors have decided was the final version, Proust determinedly carried on not only altering his text but also making changes to the very idea of change-making. The principal theme of the changes is change itself, what is to be their precise object, focus, and, thus, meaning. Kristeva is right to say that there is a degree of arbitrariness to the later editorial decisions (for example, in order to make the final sentence coherent, they involve restoring bits that Proust excised).[35] This is also why entering the manuscript thicket at this precise point is so potentially revealing of a Proust who has in fact made up his mind about nothing, including the proclaimed belief in art. The scratchings are the scratchings of a (semilegible) pen and the scratchings-out the index of a mind still on the move, inside the paradox of the work that Blanchot called "a finished-unfinished work" (*une œuvre achevée-inachevée*).[36] But to my mind, they also evoke a scratching of the head in the way the skeptic sometimes scratches his head as he experiences puzzlement, asks questions, and entertains doubts, once more reopening to critical inspection what he had thought was a closed book and headed safely for the enchanted realm of the stars.

[35] Cano comments on "the long struggle to assert the literary against the editorial," in "Death as Editor," 46.

[36] Maurice Blanchot, *Le Livre à venir* (Paris: Gallimard, 1959), 36.

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