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Moi et plus que moi : Absence and Presence in À la recherche du temps perdu

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By

Carlie Anglemire

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Carlie Marie Anglemire

We, the thesis committee for the above candidate for the
Master of Arts Degree, hereby recommend
acceptance of this thesis.

Mary C. Rawlinson– Thesis Advisor

Associate Professor

Departments of Philosophy and Comparative Literature

Megan Craig – Second Reader

Assistant Professor

Department of Philosophy

This thesis is accepted by the Graduate School

Lawrence Martin

Dean of the Graduate School

Abstract of the Thesis

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For Marcel Proust's narrator of *À la recherche du temps perdu*, the "*moi et plus-que-moi*," this excess of being of friends, family, and lovers, is an essential element of life that he does not want to escape as long as an exploration of the creative depth of his personal identity is not irrevocably barred. Although he expresses a longing to abscond from others in order to have aesthetically rich experiences and articulates the cynical view that we are mere caricatures of ourselves with friends and in relationships, he also expresses the anxiety of waiting for someone to arrive, the feeling of preponderant loss in death and departure of people such as his grandmother and mother, and the illuminating surprise of the arrival of a friend who gives him something that he could not have given himself. In Alain de Botton's *How Proust Can Change Your Life*, he notes that Proust wanted to help people through a literary engagement, just as his father, who was a famous doctor, had helped the sick. This thesis essay is accordingly an exploration of what a young woman can learn about perplexing human relationships from one of the literary masterpieces of the early twentieth century. How do we form, transform, fathom, and discover self-identity and the multiplicity of facets of the identities of others, and what are the conditions for living expressively? What are the roles of the multitude of people that we encounter throughout our lives, and how can we effectively temper openness to alterity with a carefully formed solitary life apart?

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« À une nouvelle faute de prononciation que commit le baron, la douleur et l'indignation de la duchesse augmentant ensemble, elle dit au baron : « Palamède ! » sur le ton interrogatif et exaspéré des gens trop nerveux qui ne peuvent supporter d'attendre une minute et, si on les fait entrer tout de suite en s'excusant d'achever sa toilette, vous disent non pour s'excuser mais pour accuser : « Mais alors, je vous dérange ! » comme si c'était un crime de la part de celui qu'on dérange. »¹

In Marcel Proust's À la recherche du temps perdu, the narrator articulates an ambivalence toward others which is ultimately irreducibly perplexing and intellectually irresolvable. Throughout the novel, being with others in love and friendship is equivalent to compromising one's personal creative ambitions and living on the surface with only fragile support from exterior surroundings. In the final tome of this set of novels, Le temps retrouvé, Proust expresses the devastating news to which he has alluded all along, that being in relationships, being faithful to social engagements, minding one's manners, and being responsive is not worthwhile compared to the personal accomplishment of the quiet and individually motivated work of excavating the shards of another world uniquely buried in ourselves. However, in contrast to this philosophy of the desirability of isolation stand some of the most powerful moments of the story, in which the narrator describes his profound sense of the loss of his grandmother, the potential loss of his mother, and the felt possibility while waiting for Albertine that she will never come. Also contrary to a doctrine of necessary departure is the feeling of joy

¹ "At a new mistake in pronunciation that the baron committed, the duchess's pain and indignation together increased, and she said to him: 'Palamède!' in the exasperated and interrogative tone of people too nervous, who cannot stand to wait one minute, and if one has them enter right away while excusing themselves as they are not yet fully put together, say to you bitterly, not to excuse themselves, but to accuse: 'Oh but I am disturbing you!' as if it were a crime on the part of the person who one is disturbing." (TR 170)

when a friend such as Saint-Loup arrives in a surprise visit which revivifies and nourishes his friend just when he thought there was nothing more to hope for. As the number of people he can depend on diminishes, as people he has known begin to age and die off more startlingly than ever before, the narrator grows closer to a lower limit from which he claims he has been distracted by the social scene in Paris and elsewhere when on vacation in other parts of France. This leveling toward the bottom is what allows him to finally begin writing; he thought that it was no longer possible, that he had no talent, and from this low-point arises again the perceptive possibility for creation.

What are the roles of others for Proust? Are they more of a hindrance or a part of an indispensable support system? This question also poses itself in the context of the narrator's remarks of regret that he stayed with one person for a length of time, Albertine, rather than, so to speak, collecting the stamps of many women. If every single person is, as Proust writes, multi-faceted to the point of appearing as a quite different individual at each successive meeting, why would we want to jump from person to person rather than accompanying one entity with greater attention, our own self, or ourselves and one other? How can we have continuity of experience without frustrating and constraining ourselves? In Proust's Sur la lecture he writes that reading is meant to revitalize us and bring us back to the world in a healthy way; reading is at times a pleasure and antidote and at other times is boring compared to the flowering field, or subway car, in which we are sitting. This is the opposite of what Proust writes toward the end of Le temps retrouvé, when life as a whole is submitted primarily to the work, rather than work being only one part of constantly establishing and re-establishing possibilities for living in the world.

In Alain de Botton's book How Proust Can Change Your Life, he, with a much-needed sense of humor, pulls readers of Proust out of puzzled despair, arguing that Proust wanted to help his readers as his father, the famous Dr. Adrien Proust, had helped his patients. George D. Painter writes that Sur la lecture is "an essay *against* reading." (MPII 35) Proust describes reading as a limited means toward an end, and as one form of pleasure, rather than being at the center of all life activity. De Botton quotes Proust as saying, "Ah, Céleste, if I could be sure of doing with my books as much as my father did for the sick." (HPCL 14) Then De Botton goes on—after first having noted Dr. Adrien Proust's accomplishments as a major figure who helped to prevent the spread of Cholera—to also cite one of Sr. Proust's books Elements of Hygiene, a delightfully hilarious (although apparently unintentionally so) illustrated guide aimed at teenage girls, about how to live healthier lives by improving their posture while doing needlework, not wearing corsets, and doing silly physical exercises which are depicted both at this part of the text and on the title pages of How Proust Can Change Your Life.

What can a young woman, an aspiring writer, who also recognizes that it may be too late or too early, learn from Proust? What he states directly in philosophical fashion contradicts itself and is just as important as what appears descriptively. There is a discrepancy between what Proust shows us and what he tells us; in addition, there is deep ambiguity in both more direct claims and in descriptive passages when considered alone and when compared and contrasted with one another. What À la recherche du temps perdu offers unequivocally is renewed awareness that the intellect is at a loss; and one of the things Alain de Botton proposes is an indication of how to learn from Proust, put the book down, and continue living anyway.

In spite of the fact that much of À la recherche du temps perdu is set in parties and gatherings with friends and acquaintances, and despite the fact as indicated in George D. Painter's Proust biography that the author, like the narrator, spent much of his time introducing himself into high society and socializing, friendship as Proust defines it primarily hinders us from reaching the apex of our personal development. This bleak view of camaraderie is tempered by moments of clarity about the pleasure and support that peers also offer, but what preponderates is a frustrating sense of the futility of establishing links with people who are either undependable, boring, or distractions from creative goals. The quality of the people at hand is not an issue. Friends of any kind fail to satiate needs that one can only meet in their absence; we are driven to appease the malaise that their presence occasions in us in spite of themselves. It is in Le temps retrouvé that Proust's narrator's denigration of friendship reaches its summit.

He writes:

« Le signe de l'irréalité des autres ne se montre-t-il pas assez, soit dans leur impossibilité à nous satisfaire, comme par exemple les plaisirs mondains qui causent tout au plus le malaise provoqué par l'ingestion d'une nourriture abjecte, l'amitié qui est une simulation puisque, pour quelques raisons morales qu'il le fasse, l'artiste qui renonce à une heure de travail pour une heure de causerie avec un ami sait qu'il sacrifie une réalité pour quelque chose qui n'existe pas... » (TR 182)

The sign of the unreality of others does not show itself enough, that is to say in their impossibility to satisfy us, as for example in the case of worldly pleasures that cause, all the more, the malaise that abject nourishment provokes; friendship is almost a simulation, such that, for whatever moral reasons that he or she does it, the artist who renounces an hour of work for an hour of chatter with a friend knows that he or she sacrifices a reality for something that does not exist....

Friends are compared to food that our body can barely tolerate, and art becomes more palatable than what we would normally call "reality." Present connections with people only simulate the reality of the artwork to which they are subordinate. This sign of the

“unreality” of others and the impossibility of feeling satisfaction with them, however, does not often show itself, Proust writes, because we are wrapped up in relationships and lead ourselves away from what matters, what can only be explored while away from others. If there is little to nothing worthwhile in friendship compared to that which we can discover in creative expression which necessitates more isolation, why do we fail to see the shortcomings of socialization? Why is the realization a subtle rather than an obvious one? Since we retain the memory of feelings of joy while in the intimate presence of others, and not merely the boredom of their company, friendship remains an important part of life. When the perception of the reality of people is reduced to nothing, that is an indication that there is something else calling us which requires an approximation of solitude. That is when it is time to steal away, but not necessarily time to abscond oneself forever. The tension which causes us to oscillate from being with friends to needing to rediscover less conspicuous sources of vitality is likely to persist throughout life, although the character of its manifestation varies as one matures.

The statements made by the narrator of *À la recherche du temps perdu* against friendship begin well before their most powerful culmination in *Le temps retrouvé*, and so does the tempering of this persistently cynical expression with thoughts on the salubrious effects of relationships. One of the most touching moments of the novel is when a friend of the narrator’s, Saint-Loup, arrives unexpectedly at his home in Paris following a romantic disappointment. Mademoiselle Stermeria had not shown up for the date that the narrator had hoped to have with her, and he was left weeping in the drawing room by himself. Saint-Loup’s arrival gives him something at this crucial point that he suspects he could not have given himself. Before Proust articulates the

powerfully positive nature of Saint-Loup's appearance on the scene, he writes a lengthy preface describing this gratitude for others as being in the context of a general distrust of and disinterest in them:

J'en étais arrivé, à Balbec, à trouver le plaisir de jouer avec des jeunes filles moins funeste à la vie spirituelle, à laquelle du moins il reste étranger, que l'amitié dont tout l'effort est de nous faire sacrifier la partie seule réelle et incommunicable (autrement que par le moyen de l'art) de nous-même, à un moi superficiel, qui ne trouve pas comme l'autre de joie en lui-même, mais trouve un attendrissement confus à se sentir soutenu sur des étais extérieurs, hospitalisé dans une individualité étrangère, où, heureux de la protection qu'on lui donne, il fait rayonner son bien-être en approbation et s'émerveille de qualités qu'il appellerait défauts et chercherait à corriger chez soi-même. ...Mais quelle que fut mon opinion sur l'amitié, même pour ne parler que du plaisir qu'elle me procurait, d'une qualité si médiocre qu'elle ressemblait à quelque chose d'intermédiaire entre la fatigue et l'ennui, il n'est breuvage si funeste qui ne puisse à certaines heures devenir précieux et réconfortant en nous apportant le coup de fouet qui nous était nécessaire, la chaleur que nous ne pouvons trouver en nous-même...mais au moment où je ne sentais plus dans mon cœur aucune raison de bonheur, Saint-Loup entrant, ce fut comme une arrivée de bonté, de gaieté, de vie, qui étaient en dehors de moi sans doute, mais s'offraient à moi, ne demandaient qu'à être à moi. (ARTP 1051-1052)

I had began at Balbec to find pleasure in playing with young girls less funereal to the spiritual life, to whom at least it remained foreign, that love whose entire effort amounts to us sacrificing the only real and incommunicable (except through the medium of art) part of ourselves to a superficial "me," who does not find joy in him or herself as in the other, but finds a confused tenderness to feel itself supported by exterior props, harbored hospitably in a foreign individuality, where, happy with the protection that one gives him or her, it makes his or her well-being radiate in approbation and marvel at the qualities that he would call faults and search to correct in himself...But whatever my opinion of friendship, even if I don't speak of the pleasure it procures, of the quality so mediocre that I find it resembles something between fatigue and boredom, there is no beverage so damaging that it could not in certain hours become something precious and comforting in bringing us the boost we needed, the warmth that we cannot find in ourselves...but at that moment when I no longer felt in my heart any reason for happiness, Saint-Loup entered, and it was like an arrival of generosity, of gaiety, of life, which was without a doubt outside of me but offered itself to me, demanding nothing but to be there for me.

Friendship is dubbed mediocre, superficial, and is placed somewhere between fatigue and boredom. The narrator has come to appreciate the presence of young girls who have not yet been fully initiated into a sense that friendship is bereft of truly

communicative possibilities. He sees in them a sort of innocence, because they have not yet begun to be dissatisfied with their social context as the narrator has. However, when the narrator feels hopelessly alone, Saint-Loup brings him the gaiety, generosity, and life force that he says he could not at that moment provide for himself. Saint-Loup's surprise appearance here is parallel to the possibility for finally writing that shows itself in Le temps retrouvé. When the narrator thinks that he has squandered his talent and that there is no chance of making the art that he had spent his life aspiring to complete, this is followed by a keener joy in the perceptive powers and a renewed sense of his potency. A humbled position preceded the birth of his novel. The arrival of the friend is then analogous to the arrival of the work of art, which also comes to some degree unexpectedly, in spite of ourselves. An enduring hope is that the arrival of one type of thing or person will not preclude the arrival of another.

Although the best of friends offer their vitality and attentiveness without demanding recompense, each person is multi-faceted to the extent that we will never fully know either ourselves or others.² The interior of our friends remains sealed off to us

² « *Ce que nous n'avons pas eu à déchiffrer, à éclaircir par notre effort personnel, ce qui était clair avant nous, n'est pas à nous. Ne vient de nous-mêmes que ce que nous tirons de l'obscurité qui est en nous et que ne connaissent pas les autres.* » (TR 187)

That which we had to decode, to clear by through our personal effort, that which was clear before us, does not belong to us. The only thing that comes from us is that which we pull from the obscurity which is in us and which others are not familiar with.

« *Tels étaient les mots que je me disais ; ils étaient le contraire de ma pensée ; c'étaient de purs mots de conversation, comme nous nous en disons dans ces moments où trop agités pour rester seuls avec nous-mêmes nous éprouvons le besoin, à défaut d'autre interlocuteur, de causer avec nous, sans sincérité, comme avec un étranger.* » (ARTP 921)

Such were the words that I told myself; they were the opposite of my thoughts; they were purely words of conversation, such as those we tell ourselves in moments when too agitated to remain alone with ourselves we feel the need, in the absence of another interlocutor, to talk with ourselves, without sincerity, as if with a stranger.

and so resists an intellectual and artistic probing that is more gratifying and is accomplished when one lives in less-constantly populated quarters. Proust describes a moment when Saint-Loup saw him on the street but pretended that he did not recognize him, which manifests Saint-Loup's adeptness at playing multiple roles and duping those who are close to him. He is not conniving, but this moment nonetheless represents the impenetrability of identity and the fact that we are always doomed to rest at some level of the surface in relationships, a surface which can be shattered in more careful work that is not constructed in community. Proust writes of the narrator's realization that Saint-Loup had actually seen and recognized him although he had pretended otherwise:

Evidemment cette fiction qu'il avait adoptée à ce moment-là, de ne pas me reconnaître, avait du lui simplifier beaucoup les choses. Mais j'étais stupéfait qu'il eut su s'y arrêter si rapidement et avant qu'un reflexe eut décelé sa première impression. J'avais déjà remarqué à Balbec que, à côté de cette sincérité naïve de son visage dont la peau laissait voir par transparence le brusque afflux de certaines émotions, son corps avait été admirablement dressé par l'éducation à un certain nombre de dissimulations de bienséance et que, comme un parfait comédien, il pouvait dans sa vie de régiment, dans sa vie mondaine, jouer l'un après l'autre des rôles différents. Dans l'un de ses rôles il m'aimait profondément, il agissait à mon égard presque comme s'il était mon frère ; mon frère, il l'avait été, il l'était redevenu, mais pendant un instant il avait été un autre personnage qui ne me connaissait pas et qui, tenant les rênes, le monocle à l'œil, sans un regard ni un sourire, avait levé la main à la visière de son képi pour me rendre correctement le salut militaire. (ARTP 881)

Evidently this fiction that he adopted at that moment, to not recognize me, simplified things very much for him. But I was stupefied that he knew how to stop himself so rapidly and before a reflex revealed his first impression. I had already remarked at Balbec that, beside his face's naïve sincerity whose skin revealed in its transparency the brusque flux of certain emotions, his body was admirably controlled by a certain number of educated, mindful dissimulations, and that, like a perfect actor, he could in his life in the regiment, in his life in society, play different roles one after another. In one of his roles, he loved me profoundly, he acted toward me almost as if I was his brother; my brother he was, he became once again, but for an instant he was another character who did not recognize me and who, holding the reins, a monocle over the eye, without a look or a smile, rose his hand to the visor of his kepi to properly give me the military salute.

A friend who has helped us along may not always be nearby, and all people undergo changes of their own which complicate the possibility of them being consistently reliable. Because there is not one single source of nourishment that will unfailingly help us to endure all of the variety of life's trials, we must ramify. Constant movement through a variety of contexts is a pre-condition for life; a nation or a family may try to build walls around itself, but the tantalization of flight challenges stability. A friend like Saint-Loup both arrives at the right moment unsolicited and also follows his own adventures, leaving us behind to face the feeling of absence, the richness of an inner life, and the need to again bifurcate in reaching out to engage in the formation of new relationships that will also be both a pleasure and a source of distress. No one person will always have the same function, because no one stands still in time. We are swept away with a multiplicity of demands and are not strictly devoted to one task. The self-control that the narrator observes in Saint-Loup, who was able to acutely manipulate his initial reactions to things in his environment, is evidence of a partially-controlled interest one can apply toward a creative project that will remain when others who are important to us have passed away, absconded themselves, or transformed beyond recognition of who we had once perceived them to be.

Alain de Botton convincingly argues that friendship as Proust described it is not merely inherently disappointing but is rather limited, like everything else that we value.³ We can reveal ourselves more thoroughly and with more gratification in making art, or more generally in creative expression, than we can in chatter. However, one mode of living, an artistic mode, does not necessitate stripping our lives of every facet that does

³ HPCL 112-113

not evidently bear on, for example, writing poems or plays or painting. Can all the complexities of our lived condition enhance one another, rather than only preclude thorough development? Reconciliation of a multiplicity of parts of ourselves is a constantly difficult task in the present state of the world, which often demands of us to serve in many roles which have become estranged from one another. Proust shows us in À la recherche du temps perdu that friendship and socializing were implicitly important enough for the narrator to pass most of his time wound up in *fetes galantes*, and he both tells and shows us that friendship is severely limited in its potential to gratify human intellect and emotion.

Another category of others in Proust's novel is family, the members of the narrator's family having various degrees of presence and absence in his life and mind. The father is surprisingly almost entirely absent from the novels, with only minor appearances in the first couple of works. The most lasting impression of him is in the long walks after lunch or dinner that he would take with his son and wife in Combray. The lack of presence of the father, unlike that of the narrator's grandmother following her death, is not lamented; neither of the narrator's parents have clearly died by the end of the text (which is a divergence from Proust's life, since both of his parents had passed away by the time he wrote À la recherche du temps perdu), and they are almost taken for granted, especially the father. This is a reflection of the relative stability of the narrator's (and Proust's) family; neither Proust nor the narrator ever had to work, since their father provided for them, his parents seem to have a relatively healthy marriage (if the absence of any commentary at all on it can lead to such a presupposition), and there is nothing extremely out of the ordinary that seems to occur to challenge the

foundation of this structure of a core personal life. The fact that the narrator's mother famously refuses for the first time to give him a goodnight kiss and tuck him in one night when his parents are entertaining company is hardly a sign of severe refusal to show love to one's children, despite the lasting impact the narrator claims that this had on him. Although neither Proust nor his narrator repeated the family structure of his childhood by getting married and having children of his own, and although other options for the forms of romantic and love relationships appear in the novel, there is not a thorough undermining of the way that the narrator grew up. The ambivalence that Proust expresses with regard to friendship is not usually apparent when he writes about engaging with family. There is nothing driving him to the position of choosing whether or not to be among those with whom he grew up; he lives with them for his entire life rather than being pushed to the decision of whether or not to take flight and move somewhere far away. The relative constancy of this aspect of his existence may have helped to open him up to his creative possibilities. Everyone needs to find a balance in their own peculiar ways between being anchored and departing. For Proust, leaving his family in a radical way, by traversing a distance, taking up residence in another city or country, was not an objective. His type of variation of their norms took other forms; namely, Proust, although not the narrator, was homosexual, and both the narrator and Proust undertake the writing of the novel, both divergences constituting a kind of escape without travel.

One of the most moving parts of *À la recherche du temps perdu* is when the narrator first begins to deeply sense the loss of his grandmother, about a year after her actual death, while he is on vacation with his mother in Balbec, the seaside resort where he meets the woman who he will end up having a tortuous affair with, Albertine. The

ballast that the narrator has in his mother and grandmother stands in marked contrast with the claim made in *Le temps retrouvé* that there is nothing in other people for us, that we need to explore the possibilities that exist for us in relative isolation. The loss of his grandmother gives rise to an immense anxiety which puts the question of a need for loneliness into relief. Of the degeneration of the narrator's grandmother's health prior to her death, Proust writes:

Je fis asseoir ma grand-mère sur un banc et j'allai chercher un fiacre. Elle, au cœur de qui je me plaçais toujours pour juger la personne la plus insignifiante, elle m'était maintenant fermée, elle était devenue une partie du monde extérieur, et plus qu'à de simples passants, j'étais forcé de lui taire ce que je pensais de son état, de lui taire mon inquiétude. Je n'aurais pu lui en parler avec plus de confiance qu'à une étrangère. Elle venait de me restituer les pensées, les chagrins, que depuis mon enfance je lui avais confiés pour toujours. Elle n'était pas morte encore. J'étais déjà seule. (ARTP 989)

I seated my grandmother on a bench and went to search a fiacre. She, in the heart of whom I always placed myself to judge the most insignificant person, she was now closed to me, she had become a part of the external world, and more than in the case of simple passersby, I was forced to withhold from her what I thought of her state, to withhold the revelation of my disquietude. I would not have been able to speak with her about this with any more trust than I would have with a stranger. She restored to me my thoughts, my chagrins, which since my childhood I had always conferred to her. She was not yet dead. I was already alone.

The narrator has had in his grandmother a confidante up until this point, when suddenly he feels as though he needs to hide his disquietude about her health from her. She becomes a stranger rather than someone who will respond to his knocks on the wall between their bedrooms to let him know that she is there and cares about him. His thoughts and worries are given back to himself rather than dissipated in her reassuring embrace. The fact that he says that he is already alone indicates that we can be "alone" both when we are in the presence of others and when we are more truly hidden away; parts of ourselves are unrevealed and unappeased while with acquaintances and caretakers alike, and we must uncover these more profound aspects of our character

which come to show themselves through challenging but rewarding work that no one else can perform for us. When we accomplish such work, we are more truly in relation than when we are when conversing with someone who cannot hear us and to whom we also cannot respond, whether because of a lack of attention, a lack of adequate patience, or due to other types of blockage which are sometimes inevitable. A dearth of mutual understanding cannot always be enduringly resolved, and in these cases, the options seem to be misery, anger, flight, distraction from what is at hand, perhaps a brutal or sardonic form of a sense of humor, or a combination of all of these.

There is a reversal when Proust's grandmother can no longer care for him and when he must begin caring for her. At first, he does not seem to know how to effect the transition and pushes her to be as mobile as she used to be, encouraging her to leave the house to go to the park with him as she used to. Once they get there, he realizes the gravity of her state and begins to intimate the anguish of the inevitable loss of her presence in his life. This is when he seats her on the park bench and goes to search a carriage to bring her to consult with a doctor, a man who offers an overwhelmingly discouraging diagnosis of her condition. The narrator resists a realization that she is nearing the end of her life until her fading image finally turns into a haunting memory of what he will never again be able to find support in. Proust writes of the first time that the narrator knows that his grandmother will never return to life:

L'être qui venait à mon secours, qui me sauvait de la sécheresse de l'âme, c'était celui qui, plusieurs années auparavant, dans un moment de détresse et de solitude identiques, dans un moment où je n'avais plus rien de moi, était entré, et qui m'avait rendu à moi-même, car il était moi et plus que moi (le contenant qui est plus que le contenu et me l'apportait). Je venais d'apercevoir, dans ma mémoire, penché sur ma fatigue, le visage tendre, préoccupé et déçu de ma grand-mère, telle qu'elle avait été ce premier soir d'arrivée ; le visage de ma grand-mère, non pas de celle que je m'étais étonné et reproché de si peu

regretter et qui n'avait d'elle que le nom, mais de ma grand-mère véritable dont, pour la première fois depuis les Champs-Élysées où elle avait eu son attaque, je retrouvais dans un souvenir involontaire et complet la réalité vivante. (ARTP 1327)

The being who came to my rescue, who saved me from the spirit's shriveling, was the person whom, several years before, in a moment of distress and identical solitude, in a moment when I had nothing left of myself, had entered and given me back to myself, because she was me and more than me (the container which is more than the contained and brought myself back to me). I had just perceived, in memory, bent over my fatigue, the tender face of my grandmother, not that which I had been surprised and reproached to miss so little and which had nothing of her but her name, but my true grandmother whose complete living reality I rediscovered in involuntary memory for the first time since the attack that she had had at the Champs-Élysées.

In involuntary memory, the narrator rediscovers the living reality of his grandmother, the person who he says was both *moi et plus que moi*, "me and more than me." After this reanimation of her in mind, he delves into a period where he does not leave his bedroom and does not find anyone else appealing; he lives with a ghost and has no interest in anything but what he can no longer have. This is a poignant description of the loss of a loved one; there is always, at any given moment, an unbelievable amount of choices available to us, a plethora of possible routes to take to regenerate and nourish ourselves and others, but during some periods of our lives we also get stuck in the particular losses which shape and redefine our character.

This is contrary to the spirit of Henri Bergson's assertion in *The Possible and the Real* that we should not strictly see absence in our lives but always only see possibilities for embracing the new with adeptness. Although it is healthy to try to work ourselves out of seemingly disastrous, bereft states of being, his remarks are seemingly insensitive to the reality of mourning and the complexities of climbing the social and economic ladder. Alain de Botton evokes a similar sense of overwhelming possibilities for healing through engaging in an intelligent way with Proust's novel but also borders on being unnerving

when exhibiting what may be unfamiliarity with what surpassing the milieu in which one grew up entails. (HPCL 137-139) He writes that something we should learn from Proust is to find beauty in the ordinary environments in which we live rather than associating quality of life with castles and the lifestyles of the wealthy. The point that richness of experience lies in an ability to see the aesthetic significance of anywhere that we happen to be is well-taken, and the vast, elusive supply of monetary capital that many people chase for a lifetime with varying degrees of success would end up being empty of the pleasures of the imagination and intellect; however, what is unnerving is that de Botton does not concede that some people do not find beauty in their surroundings because of the real strains that the present-day economy puts on relationships with oneself and with others. We do not only need to be able to see what is lofty in the lowest ranks of life; we need to make intelligent and creative choices to change our environments. Recognizing that one feels the absence of something in a way that at times is sensed as verging on the unbearable is not to be immediately replaced by a mode of action; the lapse when we feel discontinuity with our environments ought to be heeded and considered with future ends to be pursued in mind. The fact that Proust never had a job, as his father was a wealthy and famous doctor, is an example of how having a solid foundation of money without having to work long hours every week can help an artist to create. It also could have been easy for Proust to fall into a dilettante lifestyle, and it is instructive and exemplary that his life had a profoundly spiritual purpose. American millionaires with meaninglessly vapid lifestyles could learn from Proust as much as the poor that Alain de Botton appeals to. I would reaffirm de Botton's

points while also taking them further by arguing that a challenging of the status quo also needs to continue to be carried out as far as possible.

Of the phenomenon of people losing faith in others and taking refuge in material wealth rather than in relationships which inevitably fall apart, Proust writes incisively:

...qu'ayant perdu toute confiance dans le crédit d'aucun peuple, ils se refugiaient vers cette richesse palpable, et faisaient ainsi montrer la de Beers de mille francs. (TR 161)

...having lost all trust in the credit of any people, they take refuge in this palpable richness, and as such show off the “de Beers” of a thousand *francs*.

Alain de Botton's statement about the impoverished spirit of the wealthy and the potential richness of aesthetic experience in poor living conditions is reinforced by Proust's critique of the search for satisfaction in things such as jewelry. I agree with this critique whole-heartedly, but I am worried about the effect of this advice on young and largely unsupported women who must be concerned with establishing themselves financially in order to be free to explore their creativity (which Virginia Woolf encourages us to be attentive about in A Room of One's Own, although the way she is able to resolve this problem is eventually through an inheritance from her aunt). I think that both Proust and de Botton are ignorant to the pressures and constraints of this reality. However, during the time when the narrator of À la recherche du temps perdu mourns his grandmother's death deeply, he confronts the loss of what money cannot buy. The fact that he is well-supported does not shelter him from life's real losses, although it does help to open him up to exploring his intangible possibilities by shielding him from the random madness of capitalistic economy that one can get lost in.

The narrator's attachment to the grandmother who he loses is passionate, unlike his feelings for the friends and acquaintances that he nonetheless spends most of the

novel writing about. He knows that he will never find the gratification with friends that he has with his family; this may even be a source of his ambivalence—he has such strong support from his mother and grandmother that no one else can live up to them.⁴ One interpretation of why ambivalence towards others in general would be so deeply seated is that one's home life has been so exceedingly torn that the basis for having trust in a cultivation of relationships in general is destroyed. In the case of Proust's narrator, however, it is more likely that friends who come and go and have their own priorities are minor characters compared with the more intimate relationships he has with the matriarchs of his family. Of his deeply personal recognition with his grandmother and the subsequent loss of her, the narrator says:

Elle était ma grand-mère et j'étais son petit-fils. Les expressions de son visage semblaient écrites dans une langue qui n'était que pour moi ; elle était tout dans ma vie, les autres n'existaient que relativement à elle, au jugement qu'elle me donnerait sur eux ; mais non, nos rapports ont été trop fugitifs pour n'avoir pas été accidentels. Elle ne me connaît plus, je ne la reverrai jamais. Nous n'avions pas été créés uniquement l'un pour l'autre, c'était une étrangère. (SG 172)

She was my grandmother, and I was her grandson. Her facial expressions seemed written in a language what was only for me; she was everything in my life, others only existed relative to her, to the judgment that she gave to them; but no, our rapports were too fleeting to not have been accidental. She no longer knew me, I would never see her again. We had not been created uniquely for each other—she was a stranger.

Even strong relationships fall apart in death. The narrator writes that he and his grandmother had a language all to themselves and that everything in his life was relative to her, referred to her as the center. Following her death and this period at Balbec when he first feels the gravity of her absence, he tempers his emotional attachment with the devastating concession that they were in fact nothing than

⁴ Although George D. Painter emphasizes that Proust's mother was constantly giving him love and then taking it away especially when he was healthy and did not need the special attention of a man consumed by his asthmatic and hypochondriac conditions, she is nonetheless apparently relatively devoted to him and unfailingly present until she dies, when he is in his thirties.

strangers, that their connection was fugitive and accidental. His expression of this sentiment is grounded in sorrow. A more measured response to her death after more time had passed might have been that they were not strangers while they had each other, that they did have a fulfilling connection, and that although no one can be depended on to outlive us or otherwise be reliably around, we can construct significant bridges between one another for variously limited amounts of time.⁵ The narrator's reaction to his grandmother's death is at least an indication that he wants to be among others, does not want to be left entirely to himself but would prefer to have recognition in and with other people. Even if Proust tells us more directly that all people are eventually strangers whose intimate parts will become divorced, he shows us a need for close relationships and a resistance to the severing of ties.

The character of the end of the trip to Venice that the narrator takes with his mother after Albertine's death reveals both a desire to be more strictly on his own and a need to be in the presence of loved ones. When Albertine was still alive, the narrator dreamed of one day going to Venice, but without her; he wanted to go alone, because he did not think that he would be able to appreciate the beauty of the city unless he was

⁵ « *Malgré cela il faut se rappeler que l'opinion que nous avons les uns des autres, les rapports d'amitié, de famille, n'ont rien de fixe qu'en apparence, mais sont aussi éternellement mobiles que la mer. De là tant de bruits de divorce entre des époux qui semblaient si parfaitement unis et qui, bientôt après, parlent tendrement l'un de l'autre ; tant d'infamies dites par un ami dont nous le croyions inséparable et avec qui nous le trouverons réconcilié avant que nous ayons eu le temps de revenir de notre surprise ; tant de renversements d'alliances en si peu de temps, entre les peuples.* » (ARTP 952)

In spite of that it was necessary to remind one another that the opinion that we have of the rapports of friendship, of family, are only fixed in appearance, but have also been eternally mobile like the sea. Hence such noise of divorce between married couples who seemed so perfectly united and who, soon after, speak tenderly of one another; such infamy spoken by a friend from whom we believed ourselves inseparable and with whom we will find ourselves reconciled before we have had the time to recover from our surprise; such is the reversal of alliances in such little time between people.

unaccompanied. Of the inability to have aesthetic experiences when occupied with others who are tagging along, the narrator says:

Je la faisais arrêter au sortir de Quetteholme et je disais au revoir à Albertine. Car elle m'avait effrayé en me disant de cette église comme d'autres monuments, de certains tableaux : « Quel plaisir ce serait de voir cela avec vous ! » Ce plaisir-là je ne me sentais pas capable de le donner. Je n'en ressentais devant les belles choses que si j'étais seul, ou feignais de l'être et me taisais. (ARTP 1504)

I made it stop upon leaving Quetteholme, and I said goodbye to Albertine. She had frightened me by saying of this church, as of other monuments and of certain paintings: "What a pleasure it would be to see that with you!" This pleasure, I hardly felt myself capable of giving. I only felt it before the most beautiful of things if I was alone, or if I pretended to be alone and kept quiet.

While with Albertine, the narrator finds that he can only feign interest about that which would contrarily move him profoundly if he were in solitude. Albertine wants to share the experience of being in old churches and other monumental historic structures with him, but he can only achieve a sincere silence when in these situations. Anything more would end up constituting a leveling or flattening of the sensation that he could only meaningfully express in the amplitude of his poetic prose.

When the narrator does finally make the trip to Venice, it is with his mother; and although he manages to threaten to stay behind when his mother decides that it is time for them to leave, he discovers, while briefly alone, in the place of a burgeoning of aesthetic feeling and the possibility for creative work, a terrible sense of paralysis and anxiety. Proust describes the moments when the narrator is in his hotel by himself after his mother has left for the train station and feels a sense of solitude that will drive him not further away from his family but instead back toward it:

Et quand fut venue l'heure où, suivie de toutes mes affaires, elle partit pour la gare, je me fis porter une consommation sur la terrasse, devant le canal, et m'y installai, regardant se coucher le soleil tandis que sur une barque arrêtée en face

de l'hôtel un musicien chantait Sole mio. Le soleil continuait de descendre. Ma mère ne devait pas être loin de la gare. Bientôt elle serait partie, je resterais seul à Venise, seul avec la tristesse de la savoir peinée par moi, et sans sa présence pour me consoler. L'heure du train approchait. Ma solitude irrévocable était si prochaine qu'elle me semblait déjà commencée et totale. Car je me sentais seul. Les choses m'étaient devenues étrangères, je n'avais plus assez de calme pour sortir de mon cœur palpitant et introduire en elles quelque stabilité. (AD 232)

And when the hour arrived when she left for the station, followed by all of my belongings, I had a drink on the terrace overlooking the canal, settled in, and watched the sunset, while on a small boat stopped in front of the hotel a musician sang *Sole mio*. The sun continued to descend. My mother must not have been far from the station. Soon she would depart, I would be alone in Venice, alone with the sadness of knowing that she had been pained by me, and without her presence to console me. The hour of the train approached. My irrevocable solitude was so close that it already seemed arrived and total. Because I felt alone. Things had become foreign to me, I was no longer calm enough to escape from my palpitating heart and to introduce into it some stability.

The narrator could not resolve to start singing his own (literary) version of *Sole mio*; instead he rushes to the train to console, and to be consoled by, his mother. Proust writes of swinging out of this suspension between staying alone and leaving to be with another:

Mais enfin, d'autres plus obscurs que ceux d'où s'élançait la comète qu'on peut prédire — grâce à l'insoupçonnable puissance défensive de l'habitude invétérée, grâce aux réserves cachées que par une impulsion subite elle jette au dernier moment dans la mêlée—, mon action surgit enfin : je pris mes jambes à mon cou et j'arrivai, les portières déjà fermées, mais à temps pour retrouver ma mère rouge d'émotion, se retenant pour ne pas pleurer, car elle croyait que je ne viendrais plus. (AD 234-235)

But finally, from dens more obscure than those from which comets that one can predict rush forward—due to the unsuspected defensive power of inveterate habit, due to the hidden reserves that by a sudden impulsion it threw into the mix at the last moment—my action finally arose: I ran as fast as I could, and when I arrived, the doors were already closed, but I was in time to find my mother red with emotion, holding herself together so as not to cry, because she no longer believed that I would come.

What Proust calls inveterate habit ends up gathering its resources to propel him to run to the train station and board. He had not yet arrived at the point of needing to shed ingrained habits to fulfill his creative purpose, and even when he does finally get to work

in Le temps retrouvé, it does not necessitate fleeing his family. He expresses the call to abandon mingling so much with friends and acquaintances at parties in order to accomplish his work but does not express the longing to effect the same sort of break with his parents. He stays rather close to them and to the comforts that they can afford to provide for him. That Proust's parents had died by the time he had written À la recherche du temps perdu, however, shows that the balance between being with others and being more independent was reversed. In the novel, the narrator still has his parents, although toward the end he fails to say much about them and what role they have in his life; but he rejects the value of friendship. In George D. Painter's biography, Painter emphasizes that while Proust was writing À la recherche du temps perdu, he contrarily had as a source of support his friends but was no longer in the presence of his parents, who were deceased. In both cases, that of Proust and of his narrator, the writer is not completely self-sufficient. The task that confronts people is to find ways of existing creatively with others; the possibility of utter isolation does not arise.

Breaking away from one's social context to some degree by changing the character of relations with others, if not annihilating all relation, is not enough to effectively produce art. There are plenty of traps that threaten to stifle creative expression, but once one is freer from tangles that have formed in social networks, the work does not unwind itself; there is effort required to get out of exceedingly challenging situations in which we find ourselves and then there is further effort which needs to be tapped into in order to rise to one's tasks in the absence of such hindrances. Of the narrator's surprise that he is no better able to write when Albertine is around than after she has passed away, Proust writes:

Cette Venise où j'avais cru que sa présence me serait importune (sans doute parce que je sentais confusément qu'elle m'y serait nécessaire), maintenant qu'Albertine n'était plus, j'aimais mieux n'y pas aller. Albertine m'avait semblé un obstacle interposé entre moi et toutes choses, parce qu'elle était pour moi leur contenant et que c'est d'elle, comme d'un vase, que je pouvais les recevoir. Maintenant que ce vase était détruit, je ne me sentais plus le courage de les saisir, il n'y en avait plus une seule dont je ne me détournasse, abattu, préférant n'y pas goûter. De sorte que ma séparation d'avec elle n'ouvrait nullement pour moi le champ des plaisirs possibles que j'avais cru m'être fermé par sa présence. D'ailleurs l'obstacle que sa présence avait peut-être été en effet pour moi à voyager, à jouir de la vie, m'avait seulement, comme il arrive toujours, masqué les autres obstacles, qui reparaissent intacts maintenant que celui-là avait disparu. C'est de cette façon qu'autrefois quand quelque visite aimable m'empêchait de travailler, si le lendemain je restais seul je ne travaillais pas davantage. (AD 65)

This Venice where I had believed that her presence would be importunate to me (without a doubt because I confusedly felt that I would need her there)—now that Albertine was no longer, I preferred not to go. Albertine had seemed an obstacle interposed between me and everything, because she was for me a container, and it was from her, as from a vase, that I could receive all else. Now that this vase was destroyed, I no longer felt I had the courage to get a hold of these things, there was no longer a single thing which I did not turn away from, defeated, preferring not to get a taste. As such, my separation from her did not at all open up the field of possible pleasures that I had believed were closed to me by her presence. Besides, the obstacle that her presence had perhaps in fact been for me to travel, to enjoy life, had only, as it always occurs, masked the other obstacles which reappeared intact now that she had disappeared. It is in this way that at other times when some pleasant visit prevented me from working, if the next day I remained alone, I did not work then either.

Although the narrator says in other parts of the novel that being in contact with others does prevent him from working (for example, in *Le temps retrouvé*, he says that responding to a letter from a friend or acquaintance pulls him so much out of the mood in which he can write that it sets him back eight days—he cannot write creatively for several days after engaging with someone in a less creative way), here he emphasizes the lack of effect that someone's presence or absence has on his work and life. When Albertine was alive, he felt he was prevented from indulging in pleasures including travel, artistic expression, and liaisons with other women, but once she has died, he similarly struggles with embracing life's possibilities. Albertine was a scapegoat for

whatever else it was in him and in his environment that was blocking a more full involvement in what caused him joy. People can sometimes be a source of genuine distraction from personal goals and at other times offer us a glimpse of a spark of life that we had grown distant from while we were more strictly alone; but then whether we are surrounded by loving and troubling others or are more isolated, we will confront blockage in our individual vessels which can be apparent whatever the scenario happens to be. The point is not that the presence of others is not of importance; there is a more private negotiation which can take a long time to work out, and there is also a negotiation of relations between entities, compromises and sharing between a multiplicity of private spheres, private spheres which are also influenced by a more public domain.

The narrator does not write of the death of his mother, but does at one point revealingly describe the effect that a certain painting has on him; it is of a window that reminds him of his mother looking out of a window at their hotel in Venice. The window becomes a symbol for her during this moment, something through which we see parts of the world, as we may, depending on one's personal context, to some extent adopt her perspective and go where she goes. We also move through her as through a threshold, past a frame demarcating the limits of one place and toward a fuller immersion in what we glimpse of what lies beyond. Proust writes:

...et si depuis, chaque fois que je vois le moulage de cette fenêtre dans un musée, je suis obligé de retenir mes larmes, c'est tout simplement parce qu'elle me dit la chose qui peut le plus me toucher : « Je me rappelle très bien de votre mère. » (AD 206)

And if since, each time that I see the scaffolding of this window in a museum, I am obligated to hold back my tears, it is simply because it tells me the thing that can touch me the most: "I remember your mother very well."

The narrator is torn between wanting to depart alone—to leave his father land and mother tongue, to leave his girlfriend and see a different part of the world—and wanting to have a goodnight kiss and be eased into sleep by this ritual of tucking him in at night, having a private moment with someone before entering that unconscious state.

Ultimately he stays physically close to home, and when he travels it tends to be with his family. He departs in ways that are not physical, but he cannot resolve to effect a more total distancing from these women who he is drawn to: his mother, his grandmother, and Albertine. It is only when they die that they are irreparably parted, and these deaths throw him back on himself. He finally is left with his own struggles with language, perception, and memory when there is no longer an illusion of being able to hold these women fast. Everyone who is dear to him escapes his grasp, the obstacles and pleasures he has in others do not constitute everything that matters to him, since he has a broader creative purpose, and although he rushes to meet the one he loves and despises at the train station, to board before it departs, eventually they will be forced into separate cars forever. He falls off the window sill and into the work.

People appear in *À la recherche du temps perdu* as both having multiply constituted identities and as having particularities which draw us to one or another more specifically. Albertine is accordingly described as a Hydra with several heads, someone who the narrator sees as an entirely different person almost every time he sees her. He also suspects that she leads a double life which he will never have access to or be able to understand. The narrator says that in retrospect, he should have collected women like stamps rather than having one of them stick to him as to an envelope. The description of women as having a rich multiplicity of identity contrasts with the statement

that being with one of them alone constitutes a compromise of variety and suggests that there is a limiting seal to people which the narrator finds disagreeable. He does not want to remain within the orbit of another, even if it is full of things to explore, but he cannot resolve to flee definitively either. Of Albertine's personality, Proust writes:

Bref, de même qu'à Balbec, Albertine m'avait souvent paru différente, maintenant, comme si, en accélérant prodigieusement la rapidité des changements de perspective et des changements de coloration que nous offre une personne dans nos diverses rencontres avec elle, j'avais voulu les faire tenir toutes en quelques secondes pour recréer expérimentalement le phénomène qui diversifie l'individualité d'un être et tirer les unes des autres, come d'un étui, toutes les possibilités qu'il enferme, dans ce court trajet de mes lèvres vers sa joue, c'est dix Albertines que je vis cette seule jeune fille étant comme une déesse à plusieurs têtes, celle que j'avais vue en dernier, si je tentais de m'approcher d'elle, faisait place à une autre. (ARTP 1029)

In short, as at Balbec, Albertine seemed to me so suddenly different, now, as if, in prodigiously accelerating the rapidity of changes of perspective and of changes of coloring that one person offers us in our diverse meetings with her, I had wanted to make them hold together in a few seconds to experimentally recreate the phenomenon that diversifies the individuality of a being and pull one from another, as from a case, all of the possibilities that it closed in itself; in this short trajectory of my lips toward her cheek, it is ten Albertines that I saw in this one young girl like a deity with several heads, the last one I saw, if I tried to approach her, gave way to another.

If Albertine was like a vase, as noted earlier, or a case, as described here, containing a wealth of possibilities, the narrator eventually grew tired of the design of the structure but still found himself helplessly attached to it. When he had a crush on the girl Gilberte, in his childhood, he forced himself after awhile to part from her, refusing to cling to someone who he thought did not reciprocate his feelings. With Albertine, he enters a field that he has more misgivings about leaving; he is caught in the tangles of string bound in the case and fascinated by the play of difference. Eventually the play itself begins being more strictly a boring repetition, and he wants to seek other patterns of a play of difference in other women, but Albertine dies before it is clear whether or not they will be able to part from one another.

The collecting of stamps from a variety of women that the narrator wishes he had done is something that is in a sense understandable and is in another sense unpalatable given the recognition that he has of the reality of possibilities for entering more deeply into the difference of simply one other romantically. The image of women as stamps to collect offends the complexity of our existence and reduces us to objects that leave a uniform mark. The stamps may be slightly different, but they are formed in advance and do not have much potential for varying, except in decay or by being dipped in variously colored inks. Postage stamps have even less potential for variation; they are mass produced so that there are many of one kind. Becoming acquainted with a range of difference would from this state of mind require going from kind to kind rather than making a longer journey with one person who in herself embodies a range and who also changes over time in both surprising and predictable ways. Proust offers the contradictory insight that people are both of a type and are infinitely complex, so that one person can be viewed in a variety of ways depending on who is seeing such a person and then on successive meetings in which one appears as radically different to the same perceiver at any given moment.⁶ The idea that reconciles this contradiction may be that the type that one is depends on the tendencies that one has; we see glimpses of more complexity and recognize each other as similar despite our differences both on a daily basis and also more profoundly in exceptional moments. There is also potential, however limited, for the changing of tendencies. Overall, it is important to see in ourselves and in others both recurring patterns and times when we

⁶ « *Mais c'est justement ce qui fait qu'un être est tant d'êtres différents selon les personnes qui le jugent, en dehors même des différences de jugement.* » (TR 46)

veer from our everyday norms and become more congruent with principles of life that may often remain foreign to quotidian demands putting strains on our spirit.

Of the lament that he did not collect women like stamps because of being wrapped up in Albertine, the narrator says:

Certes, il est plus raisonnable de sacrifier sa vie aux femmes qu'aux timbres-poste, aux vieilles tabatières, même aux tableaux et aux statues. Seulement, l'exemple des autres collections devrait nous avertir de changer, de n'avoir pas une seule femme, mais beaucoup. Ces mélanges charmants qu'une jeune fille fait avec une plage, avec la chevelure tressée d'une statue d'église, avec une estampe, avec tout ce à cause de quoi on aime en l'une d'elles, chaque fois qu'elle entre, un tableau charmant, ces mélanges ne sont pas très stables. Vivez tout à fait avec la femme, et vous ne verrez plus rien de ce qui vous l'a fait aimer ; certes les deux éléments désunis, la jalousie peut à nouveau les rejoindre....Et je dois seulement ici regretter de n'être pas resté assez sage pour avoir eu simplement ma collection de femmes comme on a de lorgnettes anciennes, jamais assez nombreuses derrière la vitrine où toujours une place vide attend une lorgnette nouvelle et plus rare. (ARTP 1019)

Certainly, it is more reasonable to sacrifice one's life to women than to postage stamps, to old snuff boxes, even to paintings and statues. Only, the example of other collections must warn us that we should change, to not have one woman alone, but many. These charming mélanges that a young woman makes with a beach, with her hair braided like a church statue's, with an image, with all that causes us to love one of them, each time that she enters, a charming painting, these mélanges are not very stable. Live completely with a woman, and you will no longer see anything of what made you love her; certainly, these two disunited elements, jealousy can cause them to rejoin anew...And I must only regret here that I did not remain wise enough to have simply my collection of women as one has a collection of old opera glasses, never numerous enough behind the glass where there is always an empty space waiting for a new and rarer pair.

The comparison of women to sets of opera glasses reveals that the narrator wants to see through women; he wants to expand his perceptive abilities and thinks that trying on all of these glasses will help him to get a sharper view of the distant stage. He is here not attached to people and objects themselves but to the multiplicity of sensations that they occasion. What would these women feel about being used and piled up like paintings, opera glasses, or sets of postage stamps that no longer function as enablers of the transport of letters or packages? It is strange that the narrator never examines his

own childhood structure in this context. What if his father had espoused the idea that he should not stay with one woman (the narrator's mother) but should instead rush from one to another? It never seems to occur to the narrator, at any point in this interminable work, what the circumstances of his life would have been if his own parents had not been united in providing sustained support for him. When he is with Albertine, there is also oddly never an exploration of, or even a conversation centered on, the possibility of them having children. The presence of children in the story would probably have drastically affected the possibility of Proust credibly putting forth such views about the desirability of moving from woman to woman rather than cultivating a more stable life with one person; so, he leaves out this possibility altogether rather than letting this complication intervene.

Aside from the reason of wanting to explore the broader context of the world which offers opportunities for a swarm of sensations, another reason for being dissatisfied when perched on the window ledge is that we fail to see the richness of where we already are. We fail to confront the places we inhabit with sensitivity, because we are dulled by clichés, by tradition and habit, and by our own ideas of what a thing or who a person is. Our biases stifle our senses, and we rarely fathom the heart of our dwelling places, instead rushing from one spot to another with varying degrees of intensity. The narrator claims that in love, we never see the object of our affection as he or she is but instead butt against the confines of our own conceptions of who another person is. He says:

C'est la terrible tromperie de l'amour qu'il commence par nous faire jouer avec une femme non du monde extérieure, mais avec une poupée intérieure à notre cerveau, la seule d'ailleurs que nous ayons toujours à notre disposition, la seule

que nous posséderons, que l'arbitraire du souvenir, presque aussi absolu que celui de l'imagination, peut avoir faite aussi différente de la femme réelle que du Balbec réel avait été pour moi le Balbec rêvé ; création factice à laquelle peu à peu, pour notre souffrance, nous forcerons la femme réelle à ressembler. (ARTP 1033)

It is the terrible deception of love that it begins by making us play with a woman not of the exterior world, but with a doll inside our brain, the only one, besides, that we have always at our disposition, the only one we possess, which the arbitrariness of memory, almost as absolute as that of the imagination, could have made as different from the real woman as the real Balbec was for me compared to the Balbec of my dreams; an artificial creation which, little by little, in our suffering, we force the real woman to resemble.

This passage suggests that if the narrator was ultimately dissatisfied with Albertine, it was partly because she resisted conforming to the image of the woman he had in mind as his ideal. At times, the difference between the real woman and the fantasy of her is stimulating for him, and at other times it is perplexing and frustrating, because it indicates that she is beyond his control. She has a life beyond the confines of his mind, beyond their relationship with one another. If we never love another person but only love an image of people, an ideal that we see embodied, or an association of elements which we admire as imagined in another, then it would not matter who we were with. The beloved would merely need to meet a minimum requirement of not severely conflicting with our preconceived ideas of what we desire in a partner. The narrator would be to blame for not producing a more satisfying image to project onto Albertine, one that could conform to the various contours of her real existence. The doll fashioned in mind would simply have to be re-fashioned again and again, but still with the assumption that it is in possession. The failure would not be on the part of Albertine but on the part of the lover's imagination and memory. However, the idea that the objects of our love are arbitrary conflicts with felt attraction to any given person in particular, with the reality of pain in loss, and with anxiety in waiting for one's beloved to arrive. We do

not strictly love an idea of another; loss of the irreducible presence of others themselves, in their particularity, is lamented. Proust describes the irreplaceable character of others when he writes:

Dans l'attente, on souffre tant de l'absence de ce qu'on désire qu'on ne peut supporter une autre présence. (ARTP 1307)

In waiting, one suffers so much from the absence of that which one desires that one cannot stand the presence of another.

Over time, what or who we once desired loses its vibrant presence in memory, but we can also carry losses with us which arise afresh and sharply at different times in our life in spite of the fact that we had thought the departed were no longer with us.

One of the many beautiful scenes in *À la recherche du temps perdu* is when the narrator is waiting for Albertine one night and fears that she will never come. It is early in their relationship, well before they live together, and his anxiety in his bedroom alone waiting for the sound of the ringing telephone is palpable. This is another example of the contrast between what Proust describes as the necessity of an artist to be alone to fulfill his or her creative purpose and the need for others to call on us when we do finally achieve a semblance of the afore desired isolation. There is seemingly no resolution in this play of embracing and rejecting otherness with their accompanying forces. There is not simply one trajectory but there are several identities that we come across and which also undergo change, merging with other lines of development. Of this instance when the narrator awaits Albertine, Proust writes:

Et je recommençai à écouter, à souffrir ; quand nous attendons, de l'oreille qui recueille les bruits à l'esprit qui les dépouille et les analyse, et de l'esprit au cœur à qui il transmet ses résultats, le double trajet est si rapide que nous ne pouvons même pas percevoir sa durée, et qu'il semble que nous écoutions directement avec notre cœur. J'étais torturé par l'incessante reprise du désir toujours plus anxieux, et jamais accompli, d'un bruit d'appel ; arrivé au point culminant d'une

ascension tourmentée dans les spirales de mon angoisse solitaire, du fond du Paris populeux et nocturne approché soudain de moi, à côté de ma bibliothèque, j'entendis tout à coup, mécanique et sublime, comme dans Tristan l'écharpe agitée ou le chalumeau du pâtre, le bruit de toupie du téléphone. Je m'élançais, c'était Albertine... Une partie de moi à laquelle l'autre voulait se rejoindre était en Albertine. Il fallait qu'elle vint, mais je ne lui dis pas d'abord ; comme nous étions en communication, je me dis que je pourrais toujours l'obliger à la dernière seconde soit à venir chez moi, soit à me laisser courir chez elle. (ARTP 1308)

And I started to listen, to suffer; when we wait, from the ear that collects noises to the spirit that sorts through and analyzes them, and from the spirit to the heart to which it transmits its results, the double trajectory is so rapid that we cannot even perceive its duration, and it seems that we listen directly with our heart. I was tortured by the incessant resumption of desire, always more anxious and never accomplished, of the noise of the call; arrived at the culminating point of a tormented ascension in the spirals of my solitary anguish, from the depths of Paris, populated and nocturnal, suddenly approached me, near my library—I heard all of a sudden, mechanic and sublime, like in Tristan the agitated scarf or the shepherd's pipe, the sound of the spinning top of the telephone. I rushed forward, it was Albertine.... A part of me that wanted to rejoin its other part was in Albertine. I needed her to come, but I did not tell her at first; as we were connected over the phone, I told myself that I could always demand of her at the last second that she come to my place, or that she let me run to her.

The way that the narrator ends up expressing, or failing to express, himself to Albertine once she calls is separated by a desert of difference from the emotions he has while waiting for her to get in touch with him, but the anxiety of being without her is here more important than the failure to communicate once they are in contact. Given the irrevocable call in us toward others, we learn with varying degrees of success in each case of potential for connection to rise to the task of then being with those who we encounter. The longing that we have for another is at times brilliantly rewarded by a beautiful joy in such another's company and at times is disappointed by a seeming lack of possibility for reconciliation of parts foreign to one another. In either case, the sense of wanting to be with someone or something who is not present, and who perhaps never will be, is an essential part of being in the world.

After repeatedly losing loved ones, or continually engaging in relationships that meet a dead end, we can become dulled to possibilities for renewal with a new partner. There are strings of losses which are so great that an individual's senses can be deadened, depending on his or her particular creative capacity for enduring fluctuations. We are not all born to the same challenges, and we similarly do not all have the same tools for recovery. Of the devastating result of a loss of hope that can occur at some point in life after much suffering, Proust writes:

On peut quelque fois retrouver un être, mais non abolir le temps. Tout cela jusqu'au jour imprévu et triste comme une nuit d'hiver, où trouver vous effraierait même. Car on ne se sent plus assez d'attraits pour plaire, ni de force pour aimer. Non pas bien entendu qu'on soit, au sens propre du mot, impuissant. Et quant à aimer, on aimerait plus que jamais. Mais on sent que c'est une trop grande entreprise pour le peu de forces qu'on garde. (SG 276)

One can sometimes rediscover a being, but one cannot abolish time. All until the unexpected and sad day, like a winter's night, when even to find would frighten you. Because one no longer feels that one has enough attributes to please, nor force to love. Not that one would be, in the proper sense of the word, impotent. And as for loving, one would never love again, but senses that it is too large of an undertaking for the little force still retained.

This draining of forces after great disappointments is reflected in another aspect of the novel, when Proust describes the way his mother is never the same after the death of her own mother. George D. Painter also writes of Proust not realizing that his mother had changed so much since the death of his grandmother until he heard her voice on the phone, completely transformed with inefaceable grief (MP 197).⁷ After Albertine's death, the narrator experiences a fading of her, as of his grandmother, from memory, but he never involves himself in another love affair of the same magnitude. He has some trysts with women that he does not write much about, and eventually he finally

⁷ The narrator also writes that his mother was never the same person after her mother died. She adopted her mother's mannerisms and tastes, spoke of what her opinion on current events would have been, and carries an indissoluble sadness with her.

gets to the work that presents itself whether or not love does. Proust's narrator is someone who loses faith in the constancy of people but maintains confidence in the value of a sensuous and creative life.

For Proust, "lost paradises" are the only real paradises; if we have something without suspecting what it would be like to lose it, we do not feel its real value and instead take it for granted. In loss, we feel the weight of what we once had but did not appreciate as deeply. Putting ourselves in positions where we experience a loss of control is just as important as finding means of reassuring and maintaining ourselves, means of ballasting ourselves in the face of challenges that threaten to break us down beyond repair. The narrator's shaken faith in others does not result in a complete hopelessness; at the end of the novel, he still wants to write for others. He wants us to read ourselves in his novel, not merely read him as an incomprehensible entity with whom we cannot connect. His desire for connectivity has simply gone underground and been channeled toward the expressive possibilities of the written word. Of lost paradises which we can rediscover in memory and solitary work Proust writes:

Oui, si le souvenir, grâce à l'oubli, n'a pas pu contracter aucun lien, jeter aucun chaînon entre lui et la minute présente, s'il est resté à sa place, à sa date, s'il a gardé ses distances, son isolement dans le creux d'une vallée ou à la pointe d'un sommet, il nous fait tout d'un coup respirer un air nouveau, précisément parce que c'est un air qu'on a respiré autrefois, cet air plus pur que les poètes ont vainement essayé de faire régner dans le paradis et qui ne pourrait donner cette sensation profonde de renouvellement que s'il avait été respiré déjà, car les vrais paradis sont les paradis qu'on a perdus. (TR 177)

Yes, if memory, due to forgetfulness, could not contract any line, could not throw any chain between it and the present minute, if it stayed in its place, at its time, if it kept its distance, its isolation in the hollow of a valley or at the point of a summit, it made us all of a sudden breathe in new air, precisely because it is an air that one breathed at another time, this air purer than that which the poets vainly tried to have reign in paradise and which would not have been able to give this profound sensation of renewal unless it had already been breathed, because true paradises are those that one has lost.

The paradise of aesthetic feeling that an artist or any human being searches is inextricably grounded in the memory of losses that resurge again and again, reminding us of the value of lives that are often not fathomed with sensitivity in our everyday bustle. Although memories of the deceased could have a tendency to make us morose if we focus solely on the inevitable demise of all that is in existence, involuntary reminders of past joys have a revivifying effect. When we are not at the height of a period of intense pleasure, or at least in a comfortably genial situation, it is important to cultivate a capacity for being open to recalling that we may again find ourselves in the presence of nourishing aspects of life, rather than being exclusively caught in a depressing denouement.

Moments when what is unraveling unravels itself once again, although not in exactly the same way as it has before, are partially involuntary. We make an effort to effectively exist in the world in a healthy way, but we also depend on surprises to pull us out of destructive vortexes. These unanticipated forces can be elements internal to ourselves that we had forgotten about or never previously discovered, and these unknowns can also be things we run into in spite of ourselves. Of the eminence of exceptional gifts that come when we are nearing the end of our rope, Proust writes:

Mais c'est quelquefois au moment où tout nous semble perdu que l'avertissement arrive qui peut nous sauver, on a frappé à toutes les portes qui ne donnent sur rien, et la seule par où on peut entrer et qu'on aurait cherchée en vain pendant cent ans, on y heurte sans le savoir, et elle s'ouvre. (TR 173)

But it is sometimes at the moment when everything seems lost to us that the signal comes that can save us; one has knocked on all the doors that open on nothing, and the only one that one can enter and for which one searches in vain for a hundred years, one collides with without knowing it, and it opens.

Sometimes we have to hit what feels like a bottom, or feel our lives as they were bottoming out, in order to be in the situation where we need to figure out how to build ourselves back up again in a more gratifying and healthy way. When we are bored with images in our surrounding spaces and with the people who occupy these environments, they seem empty to us, not full of the life that they actually have and which we fail to tap into due to an impoverished spirit that needs to be both jarred and nourished to find hidden resources to reconstruct itself. Even if we recognize that we need to find sources of inspiration and support to reinvent ourselves, such sites that make lasting change possible evade us wherever we look, instead popping up at unanticipated times in the guise of something that we may not initially recognize as worth taking the time to listen to.

In novels such as *À la recherche du temps perdu*, we may come across some of the surprises that can renew our vitality, but all books and written expression in general are limited in their potential range of effect on living subjects. Books and art more broadly are part of life but do not contain all of the solutions to our spiritual and intellectual problems; it is a task of the contemporary world to continue to find a place for quality literature and art without worshipping them at the cost of a variety of sources of instruction and joy. An objective of avid readers and writers would then be to find a balance between living for the work that gives us pleasure and purpose and living for a fuller life itself, with creative work as only one part of a larger context. Proust vacillates between these dual priorities, but even in *Le temps retrouvé*, when the creation of the work at the expense of other facets of life takes precedence, he writes:

...mais je pouvais tout aussi bien en conclure que la lecture au contraire nous apprend à relever la valeur de la vie, valeur que nous n'avons pas su apprécier et dont nous nous rendons compte seulement par le livre combien elle était grande. (TR 26)

...but I could just as well have concluded that reading, to the contrary, teaches us to re-elevate the value of life, the value that we would not have known to appreciate and of whose grandeur we take account only due to books.

The priority here is not literary culture or engagement with a masterpiece but is with the life that books help us to reassess and revalue. Books have a key function, but their function should not become an end in itself. If we become bibliophiles, our identities flatten, and we realize that what was meant to be one source of a salubrious lifestyle has been overvalued to the point of bringing us back to disempowerment. In *Sur la lecture*, Proust elicits a similar warning against putting too much weight on the literature that influences us. His initial concern is, however, with why we begin engaging with the project of entering into a novel. He writes of what someone with a defeated spirit needs:

Ce qu'il faut, donc, c'est une intervention qui, tout en venant d'un autre, se produise au fond de nous-mêmes, c'est bien l'impulsion d'un autre esprit, mais reçue au sein de la solitude. Or nous avons vu que c'était précisément là la définition de la lecture, et qu'à la lecture seule elle convenait. La seule discipline qui puisse exercer une influence favorable sur de tels esprits, c'est donc la lecture : ce qu'il fallait démontrer, comme disent les géomètres. Mais, là encore, la lecture n'agit qu'à la façon d'une incitation qui ne peut en rien se substituer à notre activité personnelle ; elle se contente de nous en rendre l'usage, comme, dans les affections nerveuses auxquelles nous faisons allusion tout à l'heure, le psychopathe ne fait que restituer au malade la volonté de se servir de son estomac, de ses jambes, de son cerveau, restés intacts. (SL 36-37)

What is therefore needed is an intervention which, while coming from another, is produced in the heart of oneself; it is the impulsion of another spirit but received in solitude. However, we have seen that this is precisely the definition of reading, and that reading alone conformed to this description. The only discipline that can exert a favorable influence on such spirits is therefore reading: that which one must demonstrate, as geometers say. But, here again, reading is only a manner of incitation which cannot substitute for our personal activity; it is happy to be useful to us, as, in nervous conditions to which we have just alluded, a psychotherapist only restores to us the will to make use of our stomachs, our legs, our brain, which remain intact.

As Alain de Botton writes in How Proust Can Change Your Life, Proust wanted to be a doctor like his father, but with the goal of healing illnesses of the human spirit rather than of the body. There are many jobs which are aimed at fixing things that are broken: people such as my own father spend a lifetime repairing cash registers (and other equipment) but never reap the profits that these machines symbolize, and others like my mother—who was an occupational therapist specializing on the area from the fingertips to the elbow before she died of an accident from which there was no recovery—help the body to heal from accidents so that it can get back to work. Reading and writing literature aims at another kind of healing which technical work on machines and work on mechanical parts of living organisms cannot reach. Engagement with thoughtfully developed texts such as À la recherche du temps perdu is an essential part of a vaster experience of living which should not subordinate itself to one of its modes of reparation.

How could Proust have changed my life since I began reading him while teaching English in elementary schools in Ajaccio, Corsica almost two years ago? The first bookseller who I went to looking for it on the *Cours Napoleon* warned me against reading À la recherche du temps perdu, apparently because of the long undertaking and commitment it requires to get through it. Now that I have finished a first reading of the novel after buying a copy of it from another bookseller (having been offended by the first one), what did I learn from Proust; where did he lead me other than further into seemingly incomprehensible, irresolvable sets of problems inherent to human relationships? We are constrained with people but miss them when they are gone. We want to break away, but once we do, we are still disappointed. Nonetheless, I glean,

with Alain de Botton's help, a rather positive lesson from the text, even if I do not know how to apply it to my life. This is ultimately part of what I gratefully imagine I accept from Proust like a 200% tip that he slips me as he leaves the restaurant shivering⁸: *Write more and better! Excavate the scintillating fragments fossilizing somewhere in your mind, and unearth what will let itself be brought out of the shadows! Make friends, deepen relationships when you can and need to, persist in exposing yourself to new people, places, and things and valuing their particularities! They will not be enough in themselves, but they are a part of the whole. Enrich all the parts of your life that can be cultivated without killing you! Be attentive to the spirit and the body! Lower your voice, listen, remember, and amplify!* In other words—things that I learn over and over again and know in theory but have trouble putting into practice.

⁸ (HPCL 106 and 58-59)

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Works Cited Abbreviation Key

- AD: Albertine Disparue
- ARTP: À la recherche du temps perdu
- HPCL: How Proust Can Change Your Life
- MP: Marcel Proust: A Biography, Volume I
- MPII: Marcel Proust: A Biography, Volume II
- SG: Sodome et Gomorrhe
- SL: Sur la lecture
- TR: Le temps retrouvé