

## INTRODUCTION

### *Philosophy and Fiction (Nobody's Madeleine)*

Houses, roads, avenues are as fugitive, alas, as the years.

—The narrator, in *Swann's Way*

That moment from long ago still adhered to me and I could still find it again, could retrace my steps to it, merely by descending to a greater depth within myself.

—The narrator, in *Time Regained*

Only at the end of the book . . . will my position be revealed. The one I put forward at the end of the first volume, in that excursus on the Bois de Boulogne . . . , is the *opposite* of my conclusion. It is just a step . . . on the way to the most objective and optimistic of conclusions. If someone were to infer from this that my attitude is a disenchanting skepticism, it would be exactly as though a spectator, having seen the end of the first act of *Parsifal* . . . , imagined Wagner to be saying that purity of heart leads nowhere. . . .

I did not want to analyze this evolution of a belief system abstractly, but rather to recreate it, to bring it to life. I am therefore obliged to depict errors, without feeling com-

pelled to say that I consider them to be errors; too bad for me if the reader believes I take them for the truth.

—Marcel Proust, to Jacques Rivière (February 1914)

## PART I: PHILOSOPHY

### 1. “Untenable, Unoriginal, and Uninteresting”

From one point of view, *In Search of Lost Time* has all the endorsement it requires. It has long established itself as a classic, ranking alongside Joyce’s *Ulysses* and Beckett’s *Endgame* as a tour de force of modernist craftsmanship. It is taught not only at universities but in some high schools besides; it has inspired theatre, film, and even comic strip adaptations; it has been pillaged for advice on improved quality of life; many a pilgrimage (which doubtless has Proust turning in his grave) is made to “Combray,” Cabourg, and Caen; and lovers of Proust, as many of us know from personal experience, are regularly presented with baskets of madeleines, if not with entire cookbooks based on the voluminous novel. From another point of view, though, and however surprising it might sound, Proust’s *Recherche* stands today in need of rehabilitation. For what has been somewhat lost from sight, or what has perhaps never been fully appreciated, is the profound philosophical significance of a text that is, after all, only a fiction. In addition to constituting a brilliant reworking of the novelistic form, it also has a substantial contribution to make to philosophy; the formal innovation, which seems at first to undermine the conceptual impact, turns out to bolster it in intriguing and powerful ways.

It is worth the effort to reconstruct in detail the arguments Proust makes, based both on what his narrator says and (more interestingly) on what the latter *fails* to say, about the operations of the mind: the types of distortion it imposes on experience; the illusions it requires and knows how to sustain; the dispersions to which it is subject, both simultaneous (when, say, reason combats a particular desire) and sequential (when that desire gives way, in time, to another); and the strategies it possesses, finally, for putting itself back together. Some extremely important work has already been done in this domain (one thinks, for instance, of Leo Bersani’s *Marcel Proust: The Fictions of Life and Art* and of Georges Poulet’s *L’espace proustien*). But large gaps remain, owing to the prevalence of critics who believe, and in some cases set out to demonstrate, that Proust’s philosophy is untenable, unoriginal, or uninteresting.

For the Otherwise-Interested, the core of the novel resides in the insight it offers into the mind of its writer (Maar), in its treatment of homosexuality

(Sedgwick), in its Balzacian/Saint-Simonian dissection of contemporary social relations (Wolitz), or in its part-cunning, part-accidental play with language (de Man). While the Biographers—those, that is, who wish to translate every event in the novel back into an episode in Proust's life, like inverse alchemists turning gold into lead—may not always come away with usable data, while some “queer theorists” succumb to analogous alchemical enticements, and while the linguistically minded have occasionally been known to let their cynical tendencies get the better of them, still Proust's house does have many mansions, and there is much to be gleaned from looking under the multiple and miscellaneous beds. (Important archaeological discoveries have been made, for example, by Elisabeth Ladenson in *Proust's Lesbianism* and by Antoine Compagnon in *Proust entre deux siècles*.) We should merely be careful to check *all* of the square footage, and to start, if possible, at the front of the house.

We should also avoid the temptation to reduce Proust's position to that of an illustrious philosophical predecessor.<sup>1</sup> When, for example, Gilles Deleuze nonchalantly notes that “Proust is a Platonist” (165), he is doing him something of an injustice.<sup>2</sup> It is true that symphonies and sculptures sometimes appear, in Proust, to fall from a bona fide Beyond (the world of Forms, perhaps). But “appear” is the operative word. We do not read that musical motifs are actually Platonic Ideas, but instead that Swann, the half-hearted aesthete with a palpable “ignorance of music” (S 294–95), “regarded musical motifs as actual ideas, from another world” (S 496; translation modified, emphasis added). Similarly, we do not read that the pleasure Swann derives from Vinteuil's sonata is the pleasure of gaining entry into the *au-delà*, but merely that it is “akin . . . to the pleasure which he would have derived . . . from entering into contact with a world for which we men were not made” (S 336, again my emphasis).<sup>3</sup> Proust's narrator—to whom, following convention, I shall habitually refer as “Marcel”—has something very different to say when he speaks in his own voice on the subject: “art,” he writes, “exteriorises in the colours of the spectrum the intimate composition of those worlds which we call individuals” (C 343). Far from giving access to a single, transcendent realm shared, at moments of ecstasy, by all human beings indiscriminately, compositions and paintings provide a passport to many, infinitely many universes, each consisting in the perspective of the relevant creator. About this view, which is fully endorsed by Proust,<sup>4</sup> there is nothing particularly Platonic.

Nor, for the same reason, is there anything particularly Schopenhauerian or Schellingian about it, however much Anne Henry, who feels that “Vinteuil's score is written by Schopenhauer” (1981: 8), may insist on the connection. Since, on the Proustian approach, an artwork conveys nothing more nor less than the perspective of its maker, what we perceive in it is not the gleam of Platonic Ideas, not the “teleological fulfillment of nature which makes use

of the creator's person in order to become visible to itself" (ibid. 279), and not the metaphysical Will either.<sup>5</sup> The sole and only reference to "la Volonté en soi" in the *Recherche* is couched in negative terms (I:524/BG 146), and elsewhere *volonté* tends to designate a faculty within the individual, indeed a faculty far too practical—"toiling incessantly . . . to ensure that the self may never lack what is needed" (BG 614)—to be what Schopenhauer has in mind. It is true that Marcel's views on love often have a pessimistic flavor: just as *The World as Will and Representation* states that "the nature of man consists in the fact that his will strives, is satisfied, strives anew, and so on and on," and that "the non-appearance of satisfaction is suffering; the empty longing for a new desire is languor, boredom" (I:52), so Marcel laments that "there can be no peace of mind in love, since what one has obtained is never anything but a new starting-point for further desires" (BG 213) and that "my life with Albertine was on the one hand, when I was not jealous, nothing but boredom, and on the other hand, when I was jealous, nothing but pain" (C 530). But whereas for Schopenhauer the appropriate response is clear-sighted resignation, for Marcel (and for Proust)<sup>6</sup> it is self-deception. (I return to the topic of necessary illusions in chapter 2.) As Duncan Large convincingly speculates (24), Proust ends up in a position very similar to Nietzsche's simply by reacting in the same way against Schopenhauer, while knowing almost nothing of Nietzsche's work.

"To Schopenhauerian principles," writes Henry, "Proust accords . . . an axiomatic immunity"; "Proust . . . follows Schopenhauer's descriptions step by step" (2000: 56, 1981: 49). Such emphatic statements, and even the more moderate claims of Samuel Beckett (19, 91–93), should come as a bit of a surprise. For Proust is no Western Buddhist—"this subjective idealism," he complains at one point, "is a little boring" (EA 332)—and neither is his character, at least not for long. The beautiful picture Marcel inherits from Bergotte, all that talk of the "vain dream of life" and the "inexhaustible torrent of fair forms," is already abandoned by the time he reaches college, where "the metaphysicians to whom I was actually to become attached . . . would resemble him in nothing" (S 134). What is more, Bergotte himself, whose "language had in it something down-to-earth . . . which disappointed those who expected to hear him speak only of the 'eternal torrent of forms'" (BG 171), appears less than fully committed to his own theory. Not only, then, does Proust find subjective idealism unfounded and dull, but he also implicitly accuses its advocates of hypocrisy. Chief among them Schopenhauer, notorious for the lavishness of his meals: "I knew, of course, that idealism, even subjective idealism, did not prevent great philosophers from still having hearty appetites," says Marcel (GW 273), with a knowing wink in the direction of Frankfurt.

If, such evidence notwithstanding, Henry continues to view Proust's novel as "the most literal translation" of *The World as Will and Representa-*

tion (1989: 24), it is because her motivation is polemical, her aim to correct (indeed to abolish) “the previous hermeneutic tradition which contented itself with admiring [the *Recherche* as] the product of brilliant intentions” (1981: 45). In her opinion, Proust’s writings not only accord on every single point and down to the finest detail with a given philosophical system but are even *generated* from that system (96), each character or event representing one of its aspects, in a vast and slavishly accurate allegory. Proust’s sole contribution consists in fictionalizing the ideas he has lifted “faithfully” (53) and “point by point” (68) from previous thinkers. As Henry puts it, “his stroke of genius was that he managed to extract a coherent novelistic situation from a system of aesthetics, scrupulously transforming its every illustrative clause into a dramatic structure” (1981: 258); “the originality of the *Recherche* resides in the ingenious exploitation of these [Schopenhauerian] propositions” (2000: 61).<sup>7</sup>

Henry’s spirit of polemicism is shared, *mutatis mutandis*, by Jonathan Dancy, whose stated ambition, in the sardonically titled “New Truths in Proust?,” is to prove that all of Proust’s insights can be subsumed under, and indeed surpassed by, David Hume’s “momentary theory” of selfhood. (In chapter 3, I shall set out Proust’s complicated response to Hume, and explain its cogency.) And Henry’s idea that the *Recherche* does no more than dramatize arguments and propositions is shared by Richard Chessick, who sees it as “an artistic illustration of [Henri] Bergson’s philosophy” (19).<sup>8</sup> To be sure, when it comes to Bergson (as opposed to Plato or Schopenhauer), one can fully understand why scholars like Chessick (and Curtius) would wish to press the connection. Proust heard Bergson speak at the Collège de France in 1900 and had read and annotated *Matière et mémoire* by 1911.<sup>9</sup> Like Proust, Bergson holds that our memories remain stored within us indefinitely, albeit unconsciously, and are in principle all available at once: as Roger Shattuck points out (144), the famous early line from the *Recherche*, “when a man is asleep, he has in a circle around him the chain of the hours, the sequence of the years, the order of the heavenly bodies” (S 4), is strikingly reminiscent of Bergson’s claim that “a human being who *dreamed* his life . . . would probably thus keep constantly in sight the infinite multitude of details of his past history.”<sup>10</sup> And though Proust himself vehemently denies it, Bergson shares with him a belief that some of the memories return unbidden—“involuntarily” (Proust), “spontaneously” (Bergson)—in a procedure during which “a multitude of events contiguous to the memory trace immediately attach themselves to the [present] perception.”<sup>11</sup>

Still, matters are not so straightforward when it comes to temporality. On the one hand, Proust would probably agree with Bergson that the conscious mind distorts reality by taking “snapshots” of it (*Creative Evolution* 306), artificially arresting the movement brought about by duration. “Although we know that the years pass,” writes Marcel, “the manner in which—by means

of a sort of snapshot—we take cognisance of this moving universe whirled along by Time, has the contrary effect of immobilising it” (TR 402). On the other hand, the narrator is referring here to changes that take place over long periods (“years”), not to a flux that happens in the moment, that indeed vitiates the very notion of a “moment.” If “we always see as young the men and women whom we have known young” (ibid.), the problem is not that we took a mental photograph of them long ago, but rather that we have not taken another more recently; our freeze-frames are just *outdated*, not *inaccurate*. Whereas for Bergson time merely *appears* (erroneously) to consist in a succession of isolated instants, for Proust time really *is* a succession of isolated instants. And an important corollary, which I will discuss at length in chapter 3, is that the Self really *is* an accumulation of discrete states.<sup>12</sup>

In short, there *are* “new truths in Proust.” His novel is not just a fictionalized *Creative Evolution*, a dramatized *World as Will and Representation*, a storybook *System of Transcendental Idealism*, or a *Phaedrus* with a little less dialogue. There are indeed echoes of Bergson, of Leibniz, and, we now know thanks to Anne Henry’s painstaking research, of one Gabriel Séailles in the *Recherche*. But Proust is, to repeat, closer to Nietzsche—whose work he barely knew—than to any other philosopher, and Alexander Nehamas and (more recently) Duncan Large have helped immeasurably to make Proust’s actual commitments perceptible. What we might wish to add to Nehamas’s account is the fact that Proust sometimes goes *beyond* the Nietzschean schema, in ways I specify in chapter 3; and what we might want to subtract from Large’s is the notion that Proust ultimately fails to create a workable position.

Large is not alone in his view. Instead a fairly sizeable group of scholars (whom, with due apologies to Eliot Ness, we might dub *The Untenables*) have assigned themselves the mission of putting Proust in the dock, no matter what the charges. For Vincent Descombes, the perspectivist understanding of art I described above cannot hold, because (in the view of Wittgensteinians like himself) prelinguistic mental contents do not exist; for Martha Nussbaum, the inaccessibility of other minds is an intolerable, almost immoral doctrine, which she ascribes to Proust’s personal foibles; for Duncan Large, the *Recherche* represents an abortive bid on Proust’s part to fashion his own life; and for David Ellison, it is “a work that presents itself, *stricto sensu*, as unreadable” (1984: 176).<sup>13</sup> I shall address the criticisms of Ellison, Large, and Nussbaum in the remainder of this introduction, and those of Descombes and Paul de Man (Ellison’s deconstructionist precursor) in chapter 1. It is one of the primary aims of my book to show that if we employ the principle of charity rather than the hermeneutics of suspicion, we can in fact extract a consistent, powerful, and original philosophical system from *A la recherche du temps perdu*.

## 2. A Philosophy of Mind in the Moralistic Tradition

If we wish, then, to start at the front of the many-roomed house that is Proust's novel, we need to think philosophically and literarily more than sociologically and linguistically. Proust himself clearly thought of his novel as dealing primarily with philosophical issues. While titles of the individual volumes occasionally gesture in the direction of class structure (*Le côté des Guermantes*) or identity politics (*Sodome et Gomorrhe*), the unifying header, *A la recherche du temps perdu*, presents the work as a reflection on broader questions. So, too, most of the other possibilities Proust entertained, such as *Les intermittences du coeur*, *Les intermittences du passé*, *Les stalactites du passé*, *L'espérance du passé*, *Le visiteur du passé*, *Le voyageur dans le passé*, *Les reflets du passé*, *Les reflets du temps*, and *Les miroirs du rêve* (Corr. 11:151, 12:231), display a preoccupation with temporality (lost time, sedimented time, time regained) and with subjectivity. What is more, the former is easily subsumable under the latter: time here means memory, and memory is of course subject to the vicissitudes of human consciousness, flowing freely when unbidden, ebbing as soon as summoned. In fact, all of the novel's major motifs—time, love, art, interpretation, knowledge, personal identity—are but special cases or illustrations of *a general theory about minds and their relations with the world*, about the illusions they entertain, the types of fragmentation they experience, the subtle consistencies they manifest, and (above all) the range of faculties they deploy.

In as much as he is fascinated by the interplay of such faculties, and in as much as he borrows terminology from La Rochefoucauld and company, we could call Proust a *philosopher of mind in the moralistic tradition*.<sup>14</sup> “I attempt in my novels to place myself within their school,” he writes (EA 282), referring to the seventeenth-century French *moralistes*; and sure enough, some of the maxims in the *Recherche*, whether reducing virtue to hidden vice (“nobility is often no more than the inner aspect which our egotistical feelings assume when we have not yet named and classified them” [BG 87]) or parsing self-esteem into vanity, conceit and concern with appearances (“I was extremely sensitive to the opinion of others. Not that this kind of unconfessed self-esteem [*amour-propre*] has anything to do with vanity or conceit” [BG 590–91]), could easily have been written by La Rochefoucauld. For the most part, however, the influence is more discreet and less direct, taking the form of a vocabulary for, and an interest in the quirks and paradoxes associated with, the mechanics of deliberation and action.

First paradox: *all significant cognition depends more on intuition than on intellect*. Those objective facts that intellect is able to cull are not “what is most important to our hearts or to our minds,” since objective facts are, by definition, external to “the domain of what is for each one of us the sole real-

ity, [namely,] the domain of his own sensibility” (TR 284). The only type of knowledge we care about, the only kind that can transform our life, is knowledge of subjective “truths,” and such knowledge is granted by intuition.<sup>15</sup> Hence, for reasons set out in chapter 1, our intuition not only precedes but also *supersedes* the workings of our intelligence. And there is, in addition, a corollary: *it is rational not to be too rational*. “It is life that, little by little, case by case, enables us to observe that what is most important to our hearts or to our minds is taught us not by reasoning but by other powers,” contends Marcel. “And then it is the intelligence itself which, acknowledging their superiority, abdicates to them through reasoning” (F 569).<sup>16</sup> Or, as the *Contre Sainte-Beuve* would have it, “if intellect ranks only second in the hierarchy of virtues, intellect alone is able to proclaim that the first place must be given to instinct” (BSB 21).

Conversely, the second paradox: *in certain contexts, intellect keeps us ignorant*. Although the intellect manages perfectly well under ordinary circumstances—identifying an acquaintance after a gap of many years (BG 550–51, TR 337), deciphering an impressionist painting (BG 569), mapping a complicated piece of music (C 501–2)—it is easily corrupted by desire (SG 705, F 824); when an emotional investment is at stake, it does not so much reason as *rationalize*, constructing endless “pretexts” (TR 275) for doing what we already wanted to do and believing what we had already decided to believe. Inexhaustibly creative (C 21), maintaining close contacts to (perhaps being synonymous with?) the imaginative faculty, intellect roams unconstrained, has an answer for everything, and produces systems of perfect internal coherence, arguments that are so palpably *valid* it is hard to remember that they may not be *sound*. “The ideas formed by the pure intelligence have no more than a logical, a possible truth,” Marcel reminds us. “Not that the ideas which we form for ourselves cannot be correct in logic; that they may well be, but we cannot know whether they are true” (TR 275).<sup>17</sup>

Thus we are wrong in conceiving of the intellect as “a means, of no importance in itself, of trying to attain to certain external verities” (BG 199): the way it functions, the very feature that guarantees its success in reaching some of those “external verities,” is the same feature that prevents it from ever gaining an accurate assessment of *inner* verities, whether they concern our bodily condition (TR 352), our feelings (F 564), or our needs (BG 614). Data does not travel to consciousness through a pure, clear conduit “of no importance in itself,” but rather through a *machine*, an apparatus that processes the raw material, sometimes beyond recognition. What is more, we are *happy* that intellect prevents us from learning the (objective) truth. For as the third paradox states, *intellect is essential to love*. At least, intellect is essential to the *continuation* of love, once jealousy has set in. From the moment that intuition, which had previously spent its time telling us how attractive the other person is, begins telling us how untrustworthy she is, and how little



she differs in herself from her peers,<sup>18</sup> the only thing that can save us from its relentless, nagging skepticism is the “on the whole optimistic” intelligence (BG 278). Chapter 2 will explain how both of these paradoxes operate.

As for the *birth* of love, that—less surprisingly—falls within the purview of sensibility and imagination, working in tandem. While sensibility intuits that a given person is a token of one’s affectional “type” (Albertine, for example, belongs to the class “elusive women”), imagination “makes us extract from a woman so special a notion of individuality that she appears to us unique in herself and predestined and necessary for us” (F 677). What is perhaps more surprising is that the overvaluation, which necessarily carries with it such enduring and devastating consequences for our emotional life, is, for all that, devoutly to be wished: “whatever the inevitable disappointments that it must bring in its train, this movement toward what we have only glimpsed, what we have been free to dwell upon and imagine at our leisure, this movement is the only one that is wholesome for the senses, that whets the appetite” (BG 620). Love, which gives us not only pleasure but also insight into who we are, subsists on illusion.

Most remarkable of all is the role imagination has to play in personhood, so remarkable that it is worthy of being considered a fourth paradox: *in order to become who we are, we must believe we are something else*. For reasons I will spell out in detail in chapter 3, self-fashioning involves a delicate mixture of clear-sightedness and creativity, and can even involve a simultaneous awareness of the illusion under which we are laboring. (Fifth paradox: *I know it is false, but I believe it anyway*.) If, then, readers of the *Recherche* can rightly say that there is philosophy in the fiction, they should be careful to add that there is, in addition, *fiction in the philosophy*. Indeed, it is precisely because it recognizes the crucial importance of fantasy in the process of self-fashioning, while at the same time tackling traditional philosophical questions with traditional philosophical arguments, that the *Recherche* constitutes such a paradigm case of a literary philosophy—not just a philosophy *in* literature but a philosophy *of* literature, a painstaking presentation of the role fiction has to play in the formation of a successful human life.

### 3. Intellect and Intuition

Imagination, then, occupies a commanding position in the Proustian geography of the mind. An equally strategic site is held by the will: just as the heart, in Pascal’s schema, “has reasons of which reason knows nothing” (146), so here the conative faculty seems to command its own type of understanding, a preternatural awareness of how the needs of the organism as a whole can best be served. It knows when we should follow our instinct, ignoring the dismissive claims intellect makes about the value of pleasures that are assured (BG 614–15), and it knows when we should follow our intellect, ignoring the

urgent demands of instinct that we make life as painful for ourselves as possible (for which antithetical impulses, see chapter 2). Still, both imagination and *volonté* are remote outcrops in the landscape compared to the imposing masses of intellect (also known as reason) and intuition (also known, here, as instinct, sensibility, and unconscious mind).<sup>19</sup> So imposing are they, in fact, that one could almost call the novel as a whole an extended meditation on the interplay between the intuition and the intellect, on their conjunctions, collisions, and occasional collusions.

The previous section showed how intellect and intuition can function autonomously, giving us, respectively, knowledge of the world and knowledge of oneself, and further how they can come into conflict, conjuring up optimistic and pessimistic “hypotheses” (again respectively) about the inner lives of other people. Now from time to time, intellect and intuition may also go hand in hand. Famously, they conspire to bring about the phenomenon of involuntary memory: it is only because “voluntary memory, the memory of the intellect” (S 59) has intervened, discarding from our mnemonic record anything it cannot use “for its own rational purposes” (TR 260), that involuntary memory, housed in *sensibilité* (SG 590), can do its work. Hence

what best reminds us of a person is precisely what we had forgotten (*because it was of no importance*, and we therefore left it in full possession of its strength). That is why the better part of our memories exists outside us, in a blatter of rain, in the smell of an unaired room or of the first crackling brushwood fire in a cold grate: wherever, in short, we happen upon what our mind [*notre intelligence*], *having no use for it*, had rejected. . . . Outside us? Within us, rather, but hidden from our eyes in an oblivion more or less prolonged. *It is thanks to this oblivion alone* that we can from time to time recover the person that we were, place ourselves in relation to things as he was placed, suffer anew because we are no longer ourselves but he, and because he loved what now leaves us indifferent. (BG 300–301; my emphasis)

Actually, intellect controls the process at both ends, first sealing the memory in an “airtight compartment” (S 190) where its vitality is safe from the degradations of habit, and then, once the sensory image has drifted from the dark warehouse of recollections into the light of consciousness, inspecting it, subjecting it to analysis—“developing” it, as Proust’s narrator would say (TR 299)—so as to bring out its nature and significance. The production of art is an analogous process: starting with impressions (subjective appropriations of sensory input), the artist then transforms these into “équivalents d’intelligence” (IV:621/TR 525). The detour via intuition allows the artist to convey to others something of his or her “world,” his or her true (intui-

tive, perspectival) self, as opposed to that everyday, social, conversational self of which the intellect takes indolent charge.<sup>20</sup> For in Proust the true self is not only hidden, as with the *moralistes*, but also too individual to be captured in direct language. What is more, since the true self is hidden even from its *owner*, artistic expression is the only route to authentic introspection, the only avenue along which “we are free to advance . . . towards a goal of truth” (BG 664). Art “alone expresses for others *and renders visible to ourselves* that life of ours which cannot effectually observe itself,” concludes Marcel (TR 300; my emphasis).

The emphasis on art as royal road to subjective insight should, however, put us on notice, cautioning us not to overlook the artistry of the *Recherche*. The novel’s literary aspects may, first of all, reinforce the philosophical framework in subtle ways. And indeed, in perfect conformity with the theory of style I briefly sketched above, Marcel’s deepest nature is designed to be partially invisible to him but at the same time visible to *us*, thanks to his inadvertent use of imagery. As I shall explain in chapter 1, the persistence of metonymic metaphors—metaphors chosen on the basis of spatial propinquity, rather than that of conceptual appropriateness—reveals something about him that he does not know about himself, namely that he continues at an unconscious level to be susceptible to the myth of aura, to the fantasy that every place has a distinct and unitary essence. Similarly, the juxtaposition within the same text of two types of maxim, one set holding good for all of humanity, the other only for Marcel, confirms the disjunction between subjective and objective types of “truth.” (I explore maxims in detail below, and examine a wide range of formal devices, together with their appropriateness to the picture of selfhood and epistemology, in the coda.)

Secondly, however, we should be ready for the literary and philosophical elements to part company. The *Recherche*, which was initially conceived as a pair of independent texts, “the story of a morning” and a separate “essay,”<sup>21</sup> remains at the mercy of their mutual interference. Theory threatens to submerge narrative, as when plot is put on hold, in the final volume, for a fifty-page excursus on aesthetics; and while many Proust scholars (including Luc Fraisse, Justin O’Brien, and Alain de Botton) may turn a blind eye to it, fiction takes its revenge by periodically undermining the (surface-level) philosophy. Of the various statements Marcel makes, some must be discarded, as conveying nothing more than the perspective of a fictional character (so that studies which merely synthesize collections of such statements cannot be accurate representations of the novel), and yet at the same time *some* must be preserved and taken entirely seriously (so that suspicious hermeneuts are misguided in claiming, as they frequently do, that the *Recherche* seeks only to show the impossibility of all stable belief). What is needed, therefore, is an account that combines the literary-critical circumspection of a Malcolm Bowie or a Gérard Genette with a careful—and charitable—attention to the

detail of philosophical views both stated and implied. It is this need that the present study, within the limits of its capabilities, endeavors to fill.

## PART 2: LITERATURE

### 1. Biography

*The Madeleine Proust Never Ate* While the philosophical program underlying the *Recherche* rewards patient reconstruction, as I have argued above, it would nonetheless be rash to attempt such reconstruction merely on the basis of Marcel's explicit assertions. For one thing, Proust cannot possibly hold all of the views in question, since they do not always cohere internally: Proust cannot mean *both* what Marcel says at the end of the first volume *and* what Marcel says at the end of the last volume, the two statements—lost time cannot be regained, lost time can be regained—standing in direct conflict.<sup>22</sup> Nor, further, do Marcel's views always correspond to Marcel's *practice*, or to the events he so carefully describes (Marcel's apparently universal theories of love, for example, often apply only to himself). Finally, there may be aspects of Proust's project that simply outstrip the character, leaving him incapable of formulating them, much less of putting them into effect. In short, if we really wish to understand what Proust is trying to say and to do in and with his novel, we must strenuously resist the temptation to take Marcel as his entirely reliable mouthpiece.

The temptation is admittedly great. Proust agrees with much, indeed perhaps most, of what his narrator says over the course of the *Recherche*. And just as the beliefs frequently overlap, so too do Marcel's *experiences* bear marked similarities to those of Proust. Both are nervous, sickly aspiring writers, yoked to the mother's apron strings, fascinated by society life; both travel to Venice; both translate Ruskin; and so on and so on. But the novel is not simply a glorified autobiography, and it *matters* that it be not. To take a famous example, we cannot say with any great conviction that Proust ever had an epiphanic encounter with a madeleine. In an earlier draft of the novel, known as *Contre Sainte-Beuve*, what the narrator dips in tea to such ecstatic effect is not a madeleine but instead a humble piece of toast (BSB 17). When, therefore, we hear it said—as we so often do—that “the taste of a madeleine brought to life a lost era of his childhood,” we should understand the “his” as pertaining to Marcel, and not to Proust: here of all places, we need to be careful with our pronouns.<sup>23</sup>

Proust's two main English-language biographers, George Painter and Ronald Hayman, are at least somewhat careful with theirs, refusing to attribute the madeleine experience to the author. Yet all they do is repeat the