

Chapter 4

In Search of Lost Time

<i>Swann's Way</i>	44
<i>Within a Budding Grove</i>	53
<i>The Guermantes Way</i>	61
<i>Sodom and Gomorrah</i>	70
<i>The Captive</i>	78
<i>The Fugitive</i>	86
<i>Time Regained</i>	95

Swann's Way

'Combray I' plunges us into the Narrator's reflections, looking back at his life, on sleep and consciousness, time, memory and identity. Then the focus shifts to the narrow segment of his childhood he can voluntarily recall, the period when his only consolation during the trauma of going to bed was his mother's kiss, often denied him when his parents had guests. Many years later, tasting a *madeleine* dipped in lime-blossom tea, the memory of the rest of his childhood in provincial Combray is suddenly restored to him. 'Combray II' tells of this life: we learn about the Narrator's family, their servant Françoise, their friend Charles Swann; we also glimpse the aristocratic Guermantes family and the Narrator's first indications of wanting to become an artist. 'Swann in Love', an interpolated tale told in the third person, moves back beyond the Narrator's childhood to recount Swann's troubled love affair with Odette de Crécy, one of the little clan of 'faithfuls' at the home of the Verdurins, a socially ambitious bourgeois couple. Swann also moves in the highest circles of society and we encounter some of the prominent figures at a *soirée* he attends, held by the Marquise de Sainte-Euverte. The final section, 'Place-names: The Name', begins with a discussion of the evocative power of place-names, before turning back to the time when the Narrator would play in the 'Champs-Élysées' with Swann's daughter Gilberte (first met in Combray). The Narrator loves Gilberte but soon she disappears, leaving him bereft. The volume closes with

a passage, narrated from a much later point in time, reflecting on the irrevocable changes that have occurred in the Bois de Boulogne since that distant period of the Narrator's childhood. He sombrely acknowledges the unrelenting advance of time and the impossibility of holding on to, or voluntarily recreating, the past.

'Longtemps, je me suis couché de bonne heure' [For a long time I would go to bed early] (SW, 1; 13): thus with a phrase both awkward and banal we are drawn into Proust's novel. 'Longtemps', the adverb of duration that opens the French text does so with a backward glance towards a distant past. The verb that follows it, however, in the perfect tense, suggests a short-lived or one-off completed action with a closer relation to the present than 'longtemps' would normally suppose. No sooner do we start to wonder from where in time this voice speaks to us than it begins to ask similar questions about who, what and where it is. And from the seemingly childish admission of regular early nights we shift swiftly to the reflections of a reader of works on churches, chamber music and sixteenth-century history, unsure of his own position yet adept at drawing analogies to illustrate his uncertainty.

As this reading of the novel's opening paragraph shows at a micro-textual level and the summary of the volume above shows at a macro-textual one, *Swann's Way* has a challenging, non-linear structure. The slew of memories and reflections upon which we are cast adrift, however, in the first few pages, serves a vital purpose: we share the Narrator's uncertainty, like him we struggle to find our bearings. Announcing at the end of the opening pages that he 'used to spend the greater part of the night recalling [his] life in the old days at Combray ..., at Balbec, Paris, Doncières, Venice' (SW, 8; 17), the Narrator is attributing names to the places in which the rooms he has been describing can be found: we have been given a brisk tour of the primary locations of the novel to come, rather like the rapid succession of inter-cut vignettes we are presented with in a movie trailer.

After this unsettling swirl, we return to the Narrator's early childhood at Combray when the dread of bedtime was his primary fixation. His family seek to distract him with a magic lantern, a projector perched atop a lamp whose light casts images from slides on to his bedroom walls. This is the Narrator's first experience of the transformative and moral aspects of storytelling: the lantern brings lively colour and movement to his room's normally unremarkable walls; the story that flows across them is that of Geneviève de Brabant (a distant relative, we later learn, of Mme de Guermantes), sought out and abducted by the wicked Golo, whose crimes drive the sensitive young Narrator 'to a more than ordinarily scrupulous examination of [his] own conscience' (SW, 10; 18).

On the evenings when Charles Swann came to visit, the Narrator's mother's kiss would be withheld, leaving him inconsolable in his room, tortured by the sounds of his parents' conversation with Swann, 'the unwitting author of [his] sufferings' (SW, 50; 43). Thus Swann is introduced as a barrier to the Narrator's happiness. He is, of course, far more (Samuel Beckett described Swann as 'the corner-stone of the entire structure'¹), but when we later learn quite how much Swann's own existence was blighted by despair relating to his love affair with Odette, it seems apt that his first role should be as a harbinger of suffering.

Because Swann's father during his lifetime was fond of the Narrator's grandfather, Swann still visits the family at Combray. Swann *père* was a stockbroker; Swann *fils*, however, is 'one of the most distinguished members of the Jockey Club, a particular friend of the Comte de Paris and of the Prince of Wales, and one of the men most sought after in the aristocratic world of the Faubourg Saint-Germain' (SW, 16; 22). He is discreet about his sparkling social connections, far-removed from the horizons of the Narrator's great aunts, but they suspect nothing since, as the Narrator puts it 'middle-class people in those days took what was almost a Hindu view of society, which they held to consist of sharply defined castes ... from which nothing ... could extract you and translate you to a superior caste' (SW, 16; 22–3). As the novel develops, individuals of almost every social station voice suspicion of *arrivistes*, and events show that marriage can elevate individuals to a new social circle but cannot guarantee their acceptance. At the same time, however, the *Search* tells of many movements up and down the social ladder that contradict any notion of rigidly governed social boundaries. Odette (whose marriage to Swann attracts disapproval from the Narrator's bourgeois family and Swann's aristocratic acquaintances alike), Bloch, the Verdurins and the Narrator, amongst others, ultimately far surpass their class origins. Their mobility reflects the shifting social morphology of the Third Republic.

A key episode of 'Combray I' is the account of the night the Narrator's mother stays in his room. Desperate for one more kiss, he waits for Swann's departure then throws himself at his mother when she comes upstairs. As he waits, his heart beats 'with terror and joy' (SW, 40; 37) and the tension between these emotions underpins the scene that follows. Everything he had hoped for – his mother's presence, her soothing voice, her kiss – is granted him, yet he cannot be fully happy for he realizes that the episode is unrepeatable. These complex moments combining fear, partially satisfied yearnings, enlightenment and disappointment provide vital lessons about temporality and desire, which shape his subsequent psychological development. The novel the mother reads to her agitated son brings an additional twist: George Sand's *François le Champi* (1848) is the tale of a foundling brought up by a miller and his kindly wife,

Madeleine; eventually hounded from the house by the cruel miller, François returns after the death of the latter and marries his adoptive mother. With this oedipal tale, inset in a scene that already suggests the transgression of conventional mother–son relations, the Narrator receives an ambiguous initiation into literature: he daydreams, his mother skips the love scenes, so his understanding is incomplete, it is a sensory *impression*, filtered through the calming sounds of his mother's voice. In *Time Regained* (TR, 239–40; 2275–6) the Narrator enjoys moments of delight upon encountering a copy of the same book in the Prince de Guermantes' library that stem not from memories stirred up by the text but from a sensory appreciation of the object itself.

Such was the trauma of his bedtimes and the emotional magnitude of the night just discussed that the adult Narrator feels 'as though all Combray had consisted of but two floors joined by a slender staircase, and as though there had been no time there but seven o' clock at night' (SW, 50; 44). Until, that is, his contingent encounter much later in life with a *madeleine* dipped in lime-blossom tea, an experience which stirs within him a sudden rush of 'exquisite pleasure' (SW, 51; 45). Just as forgotten words or names stubbornly refuse to reveal themselves to us when we will them to appear, taking more tea and cake provides no further insight: voluntary physical action is useless, as are his attempts to remember the movements of his mind at the moment he was overwhelmed. Slowly, something rising from a great depth starts or quivers within him (the French verb is '*tressaillir*'). Then the memory appears: his Aunt Léonie used to give him morsels of tea-soaked *madeleine* on Sunday mornings in Combray. The sight of the cakes was not sufficient to resurrect his past: this requires the more complex sensation of taste. 'When from a long-distant past nothing subsists,' the Narrator explains,

after the people are dead, after the things are broken and scattered, taste and smell alone, more fragile but more enduring, more immaterial, more persistent, more faithful, remain poised a long time, like souls, remembering, waiting, hoping, amid the ruins of all the rest; and bear unflinchingly, upon the tiny and almost impalpable drop of their essence, the immense structure of recollection [*'l'édifice immense du souvenir'*]. (SW, 54, trans. mod.; 46)

And so memories of the rest of his childhood pour forth into the Narrator's mind, yielding the crucial realization through his body that his present does bear a relation of continuity to his past, that he is the same person in the *now* of narration as in the *then* of the events he remembers.

Readers are well advised to linger over these pages, since echoes and transposed fragments of the episode are to be found dispersed throughout the novel. A detailed familiarity with key moments such as this permits us better

to recognize and appreciate the novel's constant through-flow of motifs and memories, the subtle allusions that bind disparate parts of the text together.

The church has a dominant position in the Combray topography and a vital symbolic role in the novel: the building is not just the centre of the provincial community, it is a place where past and present time intermingle. The Counts of Brabant lie buried beneath the flagstones and in the family chapel above them sit their ancestors, the present-day Guermantes, bathed in light filtering through the stained-glass windows that represent their forebears. This sense of duration and continuity makes the church for the Narrator 'an edifice occupying, so to speak, a four-dimensional space – the name of the fourth being Time' (SW, 71; 57). In the original text we catch an echo here between the 'edifice occupant ... un espace à quatre dimensions' and the 'édifice immense du souvenir' said to be founded on the sensation of taste in the *madeleine* scene quoted above. The right trigger permits the revelation of the edifice built within us by our past experience; the church is a tangible structure whose 'fourth dimension' offers a way of understanding how time can be embodied. When in *Time Regained* the Narrator comes to the realization that he can write, a cathedral features among the analogies he draws on to suggest how his novel will be constructed (TR, 432; 2390)

'Combray II' chronicles the habits and customs of the Narrator's family and their acquaintances. Aunt Léonie is an aged hypochondriac who no longer leaves her bedroom, from whose window she obsessively comments on what she sees, her limited perspective supplemented by reports from the outside provided by Françoise. Her existence is determined entirely by Habit, the daily and weekly routines on whose rhythm her life depends. Françoise has been in Léonie's service for many years and the Narrator's image of her 'framed in the small doorway ... like the statue of a saint in her niche' (SW, 61; 51) is in keeping with the (albeit superficial) religiosity of her mistress and communicates the child Narrator's view of Françoise as a paragon of virtue.

The scales fall from his eyes, however, when he witnesses her engaged in the less than saintly business of killing a recalcitrant chicken for the family table, her exertions accompanied by cries of 'Filthy creature!' Thus disabused of the illusion that a person might have a single, indivisible character, the Narrator begins to realize that Françoise's virtues 'concealed many of these kitchen tragedies, just as history reveals to us that the reigns of the kings and queens ... portrayed as kneeling with their hands joined in prayer in the windows of churches were stained by oppression and bloodshed' (SW, 145; 104). The image here is characteristically democratic: servants and sovereigns are as morally fallible as each other, an insight to which the Narrator returns elsewhere in the *Search*.

The 'Combray' sections of *Swann's Way*, then, combine fond reflection on old habits with, as so often in childhood, a recurring pattern of illusions being displaced by unexpected discoveries. Family conventions and common-places – Léonie's habits and her feud with Eulalie; the father's barometer readings; walks on the Guermantes Way when the weather is fine; lunching early on a Saturday – are sociological studies as well as valuable lessons in how our experience of time and space is far from constant or uniform.

Discoveries and part-revelations abound: an unannounced visit to his Uncle Adolphe acquaints the Narrator with the bewitching 'lady in pink' (SW, 92–3; 71), subsequently revealed to be Odette de Crécy (later Mme Swann), a meeting which causes a rift in the family. Legrandin's highly variable attitude to the Narrator's family, depending on whose company he is in, reveals his snobbery, a vice against which he disingenuously rails. Homosexuality and sadism are revealed at Montjouvain when the Narrator voyeuristically witnesses Mlle Vinteuil, the daughter of the old piano teacher, with her lover. And Mme de Guermantes, whose beauty and mystique the Narrator had woven in his mind around the syllables of her name, is revealed, after great anticipation, to be no more other-worldly than 'the wives of doctors and tradesmen', as the 'fiery little spot at the corner of her nose' deflatingly attests (SW, 210; 144).

These scenes introduce many of the novel's central characters and themes, which develop at different rates as the novel progresses. Questions of class distinctions, snobbery and social aspiration are further explored in 'Swann in Love' and given their fullest treatment in *The Guermantes Way*. The Montjouvain scene prepares the ground for the preponderant role that homosexuality will play in *Sodom and Gomorrah*, *The Captive* and *The Fugitive*. The intractable laws of attraction and desire that are sketched for us in action with the Narrator's sudden infatuation with the 'lady in pink' find an echo when, through the hedge at Tansonville, he first sets eyes on Gilberte Swann and 'falls in love' with her (SW, 169–70; 119); not until much later do we learn that the objects of desire in these scenes are in fact mother and daughter.

The lesson of reality not measuring up to the Narrator's anticipations, learnt on his first encounter with Mme de Guermantes, is repeatedly replayed with variations throughout the *Search* (in *Within a Budding Grove*, for example, with the Narrator's first, long-awaited trip to the theatre and when he first meets Bergotte after long admiring his books). 'Combray' yields much more than disappointment, however: many happy, instructive hours are spent reading; the joy of contemplating the flowering hawthorns is not something the Narrator fully understands, but it sharpens his alertness to the interaction of the senses and the remarkable complexity of the simplest of natural phenomena. His inability to articulate the pleasure he draws from his engagement

with nature when out walking illuminates for him the 'discordance between our impressions and their habitual expression' (SW, 185–6; 129). The consequent realization that he must therefore 'endeavour to see more clearly into the sources of [his] rapture' (SW, 186; 129) effectively formulates the Narrator's central goal in the novel. We witness his earliest attempt at fulfilling it in the prose fragment composed after travelling in Doctor Percepied's carriage and experiencing the shifting perspectives on the bell towers of the Martinville and Vieuxvicq churches afforded him by the winding road and his elevated position next to the coachman. Through the use of metaphor and analogy he seeks to account for the mysterious pleasure of his experience but his natural indolence and lack of self-belief mean that after this isolated moment his career as a writer stalls.

'Swann in Love' tells of Swann's affair with Odette de Crécy. We meet the 'little clan' of regulars at the house of M. and Mme Verdurin, whose climb up the social ladder is an important strand of the novel's subsequent development. Odette does not move in the same exalted circles as Swann, nor is she his intellectual equal. *Chez Verdurin*, however, when they are together, Vinteuil's sonata for piano and violin is played, a piece of music which had enraptured Swann a year before, at the heart of which is a little phrase of five notes that, heard again, quite bewitches him, offering 'the possibility of a sort of rejuvenation' (SW, 252; 174). Swann's relation with Odette is coloured by the aesthetic promise of the rediscovered sonata and the little phrase becomes a metaphor for their love. Despite the vulgarity of the company *chez Verdurin*, Swann's attachment to Odette grows. He sees in her a likeness to Botticelli's portrait of Zipporah and keeps a reproduction of the work on his desk. Focused on these substitute figures, the sonata and the portrait, Swann's feelings for Odette develop to the point of obsession. He arrives one night at the Verdurins' after she has left and, desperate to see her, departs on a manic chase around Paris. The Narrator explains that such a rush of 'feverish agitation' is all it takes to convert an infatuation into something much longer lasting: love.

It is not even necessary for that person [who provoked the agitation] to have attracted us, up till then, more than or even as much as others. All that was needed was that our predilection should become exclusive. And that condition is fulfilled when ... the quest for the pleasures we enjoyed in his or her company is suddenly replaced by an anxious, torturing need, whose object is the person alone, an absurd, irrational need which the laws of this world make it impossible to satisfy and difficult to assuage – the insensate, agonising need to possess exclusively. (SW, 277–8; 190)

This passage merits quotation in full for in expressing the conundrum facing Swann it also encapsulates the Narrator's dilemma in his later relation with Albertine and, in a nutshell, Proust's painful conception of love.

The Verdurins soon tire of Swann, deemed a bore because of his connections to high society (to which they have no access); they seek to make a match between Odette and the Comte de Forcheville, the dim-witted brother-in-law of Saniette, one of their regulars. It becomes harder for Swann to see Odette; her evasiveness and his growing suspicions combine to fuel jealous investigations (knocking on windows in the dark, opening mail addressed to others) that only send him deeper into despair, damaging his mental and physical health. Gradually, through his manipulation of language and imagery, Proust makes 'Swann in Love' a study of desire as pathology; eventually, inevitably, like a cancer, Swann's love becomes 'inoperable' (SW, 371–2; 249).

For a time, however, there seems to be hope: Swann admits to himself Odette's stupidity and the vulgarity of the little clan. He attends a soirée held by Mme de Sainte-Euverte, a glorious set piece of metaphor-driven portraiture and social observation. The company of old acquaintances is salutary: Swann's conversation with the Princesse des Laumes (Mme de Guermites as she was then known; SW, 410–12; 273–5) brilliantly captures the confidences, witticisms and familiarity one finds in the repartee of long-acquainted equals; it shows us Swann back in his element and highlights a marked contrast with the Verdurin milieu. The remission from his ills is suddenly shattered, however, when Vinteuil's sonata is played and his feelings for Odette flood back through the affective channels opened up by the little phrase. Ruinously he renews his attentions, his inquisitions: has she had lesbian affairs? Two or three times, is the devastating response, the only answer he had not anticipated. But the human capacity for suffering is great and, sponge-like, Swann absorbs yet more. What we consider to be our love or our jealousy, we are told, 'is composed of an infinity of successive loves, of different jealousies, each of which is ephemeral, although by their uninterrupted multiplicity they give us the impression of continuity, the illusion of unity' (SW, 448; 297). This multiplicity, one of many Proust identifies at the heart of human affairs, is one with which the Narrator has to reconcile himself after Albertine's death in *The Fugitive*.

While for Swann it is too late ('Swann in Love' concludes with his painful realization that he has wasted years of his life on a woman who 'was not his type'), we might hope that the story's many lessons – regarding truth and morality, fidelity, jealousy, possessiveness and the possibility of satisfaction – would

stand the Narrator in good stead in his own amorous adventures. In the later volumes, however, we realize time and again that the Narrator's anxieties, his suffering and distress have a flavour of familiarity: we have seen them in blueprint in the pages of 'Swann in Love'.

'Place-names: The Name' closes *Swann's Way*. The Narrator considers the distinctions between our experience of a place and the anticipations we have of it, which are often tied closely to the evocative power of place-names, words with enormous associative potential, particularly for a mind like the Narrator's.² Balbec is a place he longs to visit as a child, spurred by tales from Legrandin and Swann of its rugged beauty and Norman Gothic church. A promised vacation in Italy fills his mind with images relating to the names of Florence and Venice, Parma and Pisa, but ill health prohibits him from going and the journeys, and experiences of these places, remain confined to Stevenson's 'pleasant land of counterpane'. The narrowing of experiential possibilities imposed by the Narrator's ill health serves to swell his fascination with language, the signs that stand for unknown worlds, and his capacity for detailed scrutiny of whatever scraps of experience his condition affords him.

He does not travel to Italy, but whilst in Paris he plays in the Champs-Élysées with Gilberte, his dream of friendship born in the glimpse through the Tansonville hedge now fulfilled. Odette, now Swann's wife and Gilberte's mother, is much admired in the Champs-Élysées and the Bois de Boulogne, where the Narrator drags Françoise in order to catch a glimpse of Mme Swann's elegance as she strolls among the trees.

The closing pages of *Swann's Way* come to us from a much later chronological perspective. The Narrator speaks of leaving the 'closed room' he inhabits in Paris to go to Trianon via the Bois de Boulogne. Thus he brings into immediate proximity in the text two experiences of the same location at quite distinct periods of time – his early childhood and his adult life. The child, infatuated with the beauty and allure of his friend's mother, saw the Bois as a sort of enchanted garden; now the adult's sentiments and shift in pace introduce a tone reminiscent of Chet Baker's gentle melancholy: the thrill is gone. Motorcars have replaced carriages, women are no longer elegant but 'dreadful creatures' who 'hobble by beneath hats on which have been heaped the spoils of aviary or kitchen garden' (SW, 511; 341). The experience of the *madeleine* might have been able to revive the memories of part of his past, but the Narrator's painful realization in the final pages of *Swann's Way* is that it is fruitless actively to seek in reality the images of the mind, since reality constantly evolves; if our memories have a powerful, positive sheen this is precisely because they are *mental* constructs and not realities in themselves.

Within a Budding Grove

In 'Mme Swann at Home', Part One of *Within a Budding Grove*, Odette takes centre stage. Time has passed. The erotic aspect of the Narrator's relation with Gilberte matures. He frequents the Swann household, meeting the writer Bergotte, whose works in part introduced him to literature in Combray. The role of art develops in importance, held always in tension with social interaction and expectations: the Narrator makes his long-awaited trip to see the actress Berma perform but is overwhelmed and disappointed; and Bergotte's appearance and persona seem out of keeping with his writings. Norpois, the diplomat, a colleague of the Narrator's father, encourages the prospect of a literary career for the Narrator, but he repeatedly procrastinates. He visits a brothel with his friend Bloch. He renounces his relations with Gilberte but sees her out walking with a young man and is troubled by his emotional response. In Part Two, 'Place-names: The Place', he travels to Balbec with his grandmother and Françoise, with a view to improving his health. His excessive anticipations mean that the reality of Balbec is at first a disappointment. He becomes familiar with the intellectual aristocrat Robert de Saint-Loup and his uncle, the enigmatic Baron de Charlus. The Narrator and Saint-Loup meet the painter, Elstir, a key tutelary figure, whose studio resembles a laboratory for a new creation of the world. Elstir introduces the Narrator to the band of young girls who add an unprecedented new dimension to his existence. Amongst them is Albertine Simonet, upon whom his scattered attentions ultimately converge. Balbec offers seemingly unlimited opportunities for exploration and discovery – sociological, intellectual, sexual – but Albertine refuses his kiss, the season ends, the holiday-makers must part. He returns to Paris wiser to the world, charged with yet more curiosity, but little closer to fulfilling his vocation.

The French title *A l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs* has a strangeness (how can young girls be 'in flower' and who or what could be 'in their shadow?') which is rather diluted in the English *Within a Budding Grove*.³ Both titles, however, suggest organic growth and, perhaps more than any other, this volume gives a sense of genuine forward movement as we follow the Narrator's maturation in love and in matters of art and society. The part-revelations of *Swann's Way* filled him with a desire to 'see more clearly into the sources of [his] rapture' (SW, 186; 129), and in *Within a Budding Grove* there are further moments of fleeting exaltation which pique his sensibilities yet at this stage remain opaque: there is the 'cool, fusty smell' in the little pavilion in the Champs-Élysées (BG, 74; JF, 393); first hearing Vinteuil's sonata (BG, 118–22; JF, 422–5); seeing the sunrise from the train approaching Balbec (BG, 268; JF, 520–1); and the sight of a stand of

trees at Hudimesnil (*BG*, 345; *JF*, 568). These experiences provide happiness and confusion in roughly equal measure: the Narrator's analysis of them is never satisfactorily completed since his roving attentions tend to stray elsewhere. This is characteristic of *Within a Budding Grove*, particularly Part Two, where his observational and analytic energies are frequently channelled towards the things and people of the world around him, rather than inwards to his own mind and memory, as at the start and end of *Swann's Way*. By contrast to the first volume of the novel, *Within a Budding Grove* is a largely linear narrative of discovery, albeit with proleptic signposts here and there pointing towards later volumes.

The opening to Part One offers insight into the subjectivity of perception, the nature of identity and the effects of the passage of time. In 'Combray', Swann was described as discreet about his social connections and well informed about art; now, to the Narrator's father's mind, he is 'a vulgar show-off', while Cottard, the awkward, unassured doctor of 'Swann in Love', is deemed an 'eminent' guest (*BG*, 1; *JF*, 347), now a professor, revered by colleagues and patients alike. The changes in both men illustrate that identity is fluid and shifting, or, to put it differently, that each of us has several identities that are manifest at different times and under different circumstances.

Norpois's role is double-edged: the old diplomat persuades the Narrator's sceptical father that a literary career is not necessarily a bad thing for his son yet he also deflates the would-be writer, first by remaining silent upon reading the Martinville vignette, then, at the mention of Bergotte, tearing into him, identifying his writings' 'bad influence' on the Narrator's piece, describing them as (amongst other things) 'flaccid' and 'altogether lacking in virility' (*BG*, 51–2; *JF*, 379). Norpois's remarks persuade the Narrator of his 'intellectual nullity' (*BG*, 53; *JF*, 380) and his father's capitulation makes him suddenly 'conscious of [himself] in Time' (*BG*, 63; *JF*, 386): he realizes that he is subject to the laws of Time and therefore already on the road towards old age and death which, with all hope of an artistic vocation now crushed, looks barren and unforgiving. For all that, he still delights in playing with Gilberte in the Champs-Élysées. This leads to a brief, erotic encounter, in which his physical pleasure culminates so suddenly that he laments, characteristically, that it took 'a form which I could not even pause for a moment to analyse' (*BG*, 76; *JF*, 395). Soon choking fits, much to his distress, prevent him from seeing Gilberte for an extended period, then one day an unexpected letter arrives from her, inviting him to tea. His love is redoubled and he starts to frequent the Swann residence, something previously possible only in the realm of his imagination.

As well as recounting his interactions with Gilberte, the Narrator also casts light on her mother's rapidly developing salon, so different from the "official world" to which her husband used to belong: 'like a kaleidoscope', the Narrator

remarks, 'which is every now and then given a turn, society arranges successively in different orders elements which one would have supposed immutable, and composes a new pattern.' 'These new arrangements,' he continues,

are produced by what a philosopher would call a 'change of criterion.' The Dreyfus case brought about another, at a period rather later than that in which I began to go to Mme Swann's, and the kaleidoscope once more reversed its coloured lozenges. Everything Jewish, even the elegant lady herself, went down, and various obscure nationalists rose to take its place. If instead of the Dreyfus case there had come a war with Germany, the pattern of the kaleidoscope would have taken a turn in the other direction. (*BG*, 103; *JF*, 412)

This optical instrument is one of many incorporated into the *Search*, which is so concerned with perception, vision and insight. In referring to the Dreyfus case the Narrator anticipates one of the major themes of *The Guermantes Way* and the final, speculative sentence is a chilling prolepsis: a war with Germany did of course come, and its impact on society and individuals' prejudices is explored in *Time Regained*.

One day, *chez Swann*, the Narrator hears Odette play Vinteuil's sonata and the reflection this prompts, in effect a short essay on the reception and understanding of complex works of art, is a good example of the generic hybridity of Proust's novel. Here, as a little later when, upon meeting Bergotte, the Narrator offers a similar, sustained discussion of style in the novel, we find at work Proust's irrepressible urge to sound the depths of any experience, particularly aesthetic ones. Upon examination, such passages often reveal themselves to be reflexively instructive, offering insight into the act we carry out as we read the *Search*. 'Since I was able to enjoy everything that this sonata had to give me only in a succession of hearings,' the Narrator confides, 'I never possessed it in its entirety: it was like life itself' [*elle ressemblait à la vie*] (*BG*, 119; *JF*, 423); or, one might suggest, like Proust's novel. At the key moment of exaltation before the trees at Hudimesnil, whose allure he cannot quite comprehend, a similar formulation is used: Mme de Villeparisis' carriage moves off, 'bearing me away from what alone I believed to be true, what would have made me truly happy; it [the carriage] was like my life' [*elle ressemblait à ma vie*] (*BG*, 345; *JF*, 569). The echo between these images highlights the underlying connections between the experiences being discussed: the beauties of art and of the natural world cannot be comprehensively known and, as time rushes on, carrying us relentlessly forward, we cannot comfortably apprehend and categorize all that we see and feel. These are the conditions that provoke the Narrator's frustration during his first trip to the theatre, where the words spoken on stage cannot be lingered over like those of a written text (*BG*, 23; *JF*, 361).

In 'Mme Swann at Home', as well as seeking knowledge of art and nature the Narrator must also come to terms with the vicissitudes of love. Gilberte eventually tires of him and when she chooses a dance lesson over his company he decides to effect an immediate separation, despite his love being unaltered, and his continued assiduity at Odette's salon. This section tracks the suffering felt in the absence of a loved one, as well as the painful self-scrutiny that any break-up inevitably provokes. The Narrator's turmoil recalls Swann's earlier in the novel and prepares the ground for his later relation with Albertine. When we are in love, he states, love cannot be contained within us:

It radiates towards the loved one, finds there a surface which arrests it, forcing it to return to its starting-point, and it is this repercussion of our own feeling which we call the other's feelings and which charms us more than than on its outward journey because we do not recognise it as having originated in ourselves. (*BG*, 214; *JF*, 482–3)

This conception of love is constructed by the Narrator in the depths of his despair. It shatters the romantic conception of love as mutual admiration and understanding but, as Proust illustrates elsewhere in the novel, in love very often we see, hear and understand *what we want to*, and not what is apparent to disinterested onlookers.

When the Narrator meets Elstir, he learns a great deal about perspective and our habitual modes of perception. This does not teach him how to be happy in love but it gives the reader a greater sense of how, pessimistic as it may be, many aspects of the conception of love described above are in fact active in our daily existence. Getting to grips with Elstir's paintings requires a rethinking of what we take for granted in our field of vision; so doing offers a new version of the world, shows us that if we make the slightest adjustment in our apprehension of things they can appear to us comprehensively changed. 'We do not receive wisdom,' Elstir remarks, 'we must discover it for ourselves, after a journey that no one else can take for us, which no one can spare us, for wisdom is the point of view from which we look at the world' (*BG*, 513, trans. mod.; *JF*, 678). Elstir's advice holds true well beyond the sphere of painting, and when the Narrator feels ready finally to embark upon his work in *Time Regained*, the tenor of his remarks in the Guermentes' library is in keeping with Elstir's words here.

Towards the close of 'Mme Swann at Home', the Narrator makes a sudden, spontaneous decision to see Gilberte again. On his way to her house, however, from his carriage he sees her out strolling with a young man. When he arrives *chez Swann*, pretending not to have seen Gilberte, he is told by Odette that she is out for a walk 'with one of her girl friends' (*BG*, 231; *JF*, 494). In his mind he and Gilberte were already reunited, as if they had never been apart, but, as so

often in the *Search*, this chance event has a far greater impact than any carefully planned encounter: by all appearances Gilberte has a new love and this sends the Narrator crashing back into despair. Much later, in *Time Regained*, Gilberte explains that she was walking with the actress, Léa, who was dressed as a man. In the intervening volumes we see how much the Narrator suffers through his fear of the great unknown that lesbian love represents for him; although he does suffer as a result of what he sees, we might say in retrospect that his ignorance of the identity of Gilberte's companion in fact prevented him from the excessive turmoil such knowledge would doubtless have provoked. For all his desperation, his analysis of love is extremely lucid, often focusing on the way time – that element over which we have no control – is frequently the determining factor in our frustrations:

time is the very thing that we are least willing to allow, for our suffering is acute and we are anxious to see it brought to an end. And then, too, the time which the other heart will need in order to change will have been spent by our own heart in changing itself too, so that when the goal we had set ourselves becomes attainable it will have ceased to be our goal. (*BG*, 237; *JF*, 497)

So try as we might to improve our outlook or our mental wellbeing, the Narrator seems to be saying, even our best-intentioned efforts are futile. Suffering in love is a painful business but as the comments above illustrate, with suffering, a 'journey from which no one can spare us', to use Elstir's words, comes wisdom.

Part One concludes with Odette and the attention she attracts as she walks in the Avenue du Bois. The Narrator delights in the apparent symbiosis of the seasons and her clothes, the beauty and elegance of her garments (whose traits of style his older self finds sorely lacking in the women he sees on his return to the Bois years later, the temporal perspective from which *Swann's Way* draws to its close). In the warm spring air, Odette removes her jacket; the Narrator folds it over his arm:

I would see, and would lengthily gaze at ... a lining of mauve satinette which, ordinarily concealed from every eye, was yet just as delicately fashioned as the outer parts, like those Gothic carvings on a cathedral, hidden on the inside of a balustrade eighty feet from the ground, as perfect as the bas-reliefs over the main porch, and yet never seen by any living man until, happening to pass that way upon his travels, an artist obtains leave to climb up there among them. (*BG*, 248; *JF*, 504–5)

The cathedral, Proust's structural paradigm par excellence, appears here growing in all its stony solidity from the unlikely source of a 'mauve satinette' lining. Bringing together different forms of artisanship (as he did in *Swann's Way*,

comparing Françoise's efforts with cuts of beef to Michelangelo's labours with blocks of marble), Proust encourages readers to think on different levels at once, to consider the small scale and the soaring and to see what they share. When we encounter such images (and there are many) in the *Search*, and pause to trace their logic and interconnections, our actions are analogous to those of the Narrator and the artist in the image he creates. 'I should construct my book,' the Narrator remarks in the closing stages of the novel, 'I dare not say ambitiously like a cathedral, but quite simply like a dress' (*TR*, 432; 2390); the cathedral image just examined nuances this apparent modesty. Structural beauty in nature is also celebrated in *Within a Budding Grove*, when a 'gigantic fish' the Narrator is served is described as being constructed 'like a polychrome cathedral of the deep' (*BG*, 315–16; *JF*, 551).

'Place-names: The Place' begins with a bold chronological gear-change: we jump forward two years to a point when the Narrator, having 'arrived at a state of almost complete indifference to Gilberte' (*BG*, 253; *JF*, 511), travels to Balbec. In the place-name we hear the first syllable of *Albertine's* name, whose life, thereafter, is ineradicably linked to his own. The trip is an important step in the Narrator's personal development as it is his first extended absence from his mother. He is accompanied, however, by Françoise and his grandmother, whose knocks on the partition wall between their rooms reassure him of her presence when he is alone and coming to terms with their new circumstances at the Grand Hotel. On the train approaching Balbec the Narrator has a highly instructive experience; as the sun rises, a pink colour fills the sky:

It brightened; the sky turned to a glowing pink which I strove, glueing my eyes to the window, to see more clearly, for I felt that it was related somehow to the most intimate life of Nature, but, the course of the line altering, the train turned, the morning scene gave place in the frame of the window to a nocturnal village ... beneath a firmament still spangled with all its stars, and I was lamenting the loss of my strip of pink sky when I caught sight of it anew, but red this time, in the opposite window which it left at a second bend in the line; so that I spent my time running from one window to the other to reassemble, to collect on a single canvas the intermittent, antipodean fragments of my fine, scarlet, ever-changing morning, and to obtain a comprehensive view and a continuous picture of it. (*BG*, 268; *JF*, 520–1)

This powerfully visual entry into Balbec announces the painterly preoccupations developed there. The scene memorably illustrates how we can experience time seemingly moving at different speeds at once. The train travels at one speed on a roughly horizontal axis while on a vertical axis, at a different speed, the rising sun performs its daily spectacle of turning darkness into light. Into

this scene Proust introduces the movement of his ever-curious Narrator dashing back and forth, trying once again, quite literally, to 'see more clearly into the sources of his rapture'. One single, capacious sentence gathers this all in, just as the Narrator in that very sentence – and over the longer duration of the novel itself – seeks to piece together fragmentary impressions into a 'comprehensive' and 'continuous' view.

Raptures of this sort are balanced by disappointments of a kind with which we are now familiar: the Balbec church does not cling to a cliff, battered by squalls and sea spray as the Narrator had imagined, but, situated inland at Balbec-en-Terre, is found among the unpoetic surroundings of a savings bank and the omnibus office (*BG*, 274; *JF*, 524). Blinkered by this discovery (the shock of the real, we might say), he gazes with indifference on the statuary so long anticipated; it is not until Elstir explains its accomplishments ('it's the finest illustrated Bible that the people have ever had'; *BG*, 485; *JF*, 660) that the Narrator realizes what his preoccupations had prevented him from registering.

Balbec provides a microcosm of French society for the Narrator's analysis and exploration. At the head of the social hierarchy is Mme de Villeparisis, an old acquaintance of the Narrator's grandmother whom they meet unexpectedly. Her parents entertained Balzac, Hugo, Chopin and Liszt, amongst others, on which resolutely Sainte-Beuve-ian grounds she judges them as artists; her family are Guermantes who now become a step closer in accessibility for the Narrator. When he first encounters Robert de Saint-Loup, Mme de Villeparisis's nephew, who becomes his closest friend and ally, the description of him, like that of his uncle, Charlus, includes details of attitude, appearance and dress that point towards an ambiguous gender identity which develops throughout the remainder of the novel. When Charlus first appears, before his introduction to the Narrator, his gait and gestures lead the Narrator to take him for 'a hotel crook', 'a thief' and 'a lunatic' (*BG*, 383–4; *JF*, 594), terms of comparison which, by association, place the baron revealingly and unexpectedly from the outset in the company of some of the least desirable members of society.

When Bloch, holidaying at Balbec, reveals that one might do more than merely dream about the girls and young women they see, the Narrator's excited response ranges characteristically from the corporeal to the metaphysical to the cosmic: 'from the day on which I had first known that their cheeks could be kissed, I had become curious about their souls. And the universe had appeared to me more interesting' (*BG*, 336; *JF*, 564). The Narrator becomes absorbed in the actions of the little band of girls who roam the resort. A certain dynamism and vitality bind them together; they move differently and at

a different pace to most of the sedentary holidaymakers. Proust's images for the girls, too many to enumerate here, are drawn from many domains, but the majority relate to the seaside and to nature, the environments in which the girls move. Accordingly we might note that Proust's images are often metonymic in nature, which is to say they are motivated by and drawn from the specific context in which they appear.

Part of the girls' initial allure derives from the Narrator's temporary inability to establish any demarcation between them. Out of 'the continuous transmutation of a fluid, collective and mobile beauty' (*BG*, 428; *JF*, 623), however, emerges Albertine, but she shares the group's polymorphousness: the Narrator struggles repeatedly to recall the position of her beauty spot when visualizing her after she has left him alone and, as their relation develops, his jealousy is continually spurred by the impossibility of his knowing, let alone controlling, her multiple selves.

The Narrator's knowledge of art and artistic method develops in parallel with his affections for the band of girls. He realizes, though, that his thoughts of them are often, in fact, thoughts of 'the mountainous blue undulations of the sea', concluding that 'the most exclusive love for a person is always a love for something else' (*BG*, 476–7; *JF*, 655). Soon afterwards, examining Elstir's paintings, he realizes that 'the charm of each of them lay in a sort of metamorphosis of the objects represented, analogous to what in poetry we call metaphor, and that, if God the Father had created things by naming them, it was by taking away their names or giving them other names that Elstir created them anew' (*BG*, 479; *JF*, 656). These examples suggest that an art like Elstir's, as exemplified in his painting of the Carquethuit harbour (*BG*, 480–1; *JF*, 657), is aesthetically successful because its method in fact mirrors the workings of the human heart, whose indirections we stand to understand better thanks to our contemplation of art.

Under Elstir's tutelage the Narrator's vision of the world around him gains greater depth. When he realizes that Elstir's portrait of a young woman dressed as a man, entitled *Miss Sacripant, Oct 1872*, depicts a youthful Odette, and subsequently that the wise painter of Balbec was therefore the vulgar 'Monsieur Biche' of 'Swann in Love', another perspective on the plurality of identity becomes apparent, which gradually colours the Narrator's developing familiarity with Albertine. He feels surprised by her use of language, which suggests 'a degree of civilisation and culture' he never imagined the 'bacchante with the bicycle, the orgiastic muse of the golf-course' to have before they became acquainted, a point that highlights the inevitable 'optical errors' of our first impressions (*BG*, 524; *JF*, 685). Albertine's facial expressions and the words she utters seem so complex a proposition that the Narrator metaphorically

casts himself in the role of the schoolboy translator ‘faced by the difficulties of a piece of Greek prose’ (BG, 534; JF, 691). Albertine’s lure of the unknown (in terms of language, appearance, background, tastes) is extremely powerful for the Narrator. Eventually she expresses her liking for him in a note that is neither equivocal nor gushing – ‘Je vous aime bien,’ she writes [I do like you] (BG, 567, trans. mod.; JF, 715). With this, the Narrator’s mind is set spinning and when Albertine, spending a night at the Grand Hotel in order to catch an early train next morning, asks him to spend the evening with her, he interprets this as an invitation to further intimacy. His assumption, however, is misplaced, and when his joy is at its peak (‘Death might have struck me down,’ he remarks, ‘and it would have seemed to me a trivial, or rather an impossible thing’) he attempts to kiss Albertine, only for her, with a good measure of deflating humour, to evade his advances by pulling on the service bell ‘with all her might’ (BG, 593–4; JF, 729). This refusal is key in cementing the Narrator’s love, which hitherto he had not thought to be founded on the desire for physical possession. Now apparent proof of Albertine’s virtue makes her all the more desirable.

There is much that is alluring in the life that the Narrator tastes at Balbec but for all his discoveries, the closing note is one of disillusion, again – characteristically – relating to the passage of time. He came to Balbec expecting storm clouds and swathes of mist; the weather, in fact, has been uniformly fine, so as Françoise opens the curtains on the last of the summer sunshine, the scene thus revealed communicates not hope but a sense of stagnation for the Narrator. Albertine, however, like so many of the individuals we meet in the *Search*, is multiple and mobile; and her story has only just begun.

The Guermites Way

Part One

The Narrator’s family have moved to an apartment adjoining the Guermites’ Paris residence. Gradually the Narrator is disabused of the illusions he had woven around the name ‘Guermites’ in his mind, but still he becomes fixated on the Duchesse. A trip to the Opéra to see Berma again offers an opportunity to reappraise her performance; Proust provides an extraordinary metaphorical account of the denizens of the faubourg Saint-Germain in their boxes, like water deities in enchanted grottoes. The Narrator seeks to gain access to the Duchesse through Saint-Loup, visiting him at his barracks at Doncières. Male companionship, class distinctions and military strategy are discussed at length. He returns to Paris to find his grandmother changed through illness.

Saint-Loup introduces him to his mistress, Rachel, who, unbeknownst to Robert, the Narrator has previously encountered in a brothel with Bloch. Saint-Loup's violent response to Rachel's flirting with a dancer suggests, in an echo of Swann's relation with Odette, that love is impossible without jealousy. The long account of a *matinée chez Mme de Villeparisis* follows: complex social dynamics are observed, there is much talk of Dreyfus; prejudices and rifts provide tension and humour in equal measure. Charlus offers to serve as a mentor for the Narrator but his motives are ambiguous. Part One closes with the Narrator's grandmother suffering a stroke.

Part Two

Chapter One details the grandmother's illness and death. In the much longer Chapter Two Saint-Loup breaks with Rachel; Albertine visits the Narrator; and a greatly anticipated amorous assignation with Mme de Stermaria falls through. He is finally invited to dinner by the Duchesse de Guermantes, an event narrated at exhaustive length. The same evening he visits Charlus who harangues him for neglecting to respond to his offer of guidance and allegedly speaking ill of him. Charlus rants, mocking the Narrator's ignorance of manners, aesthetics, society; he returns home quite bewildered. An invitation from the Princesse de Guermantes causes delight and disbelief. The volume ends with Swann announcing his terminal illness to the Duc and Duchesse, who unthinkingly fob him off, more concerned about the colour of the Duchesse's shoes than the ominous pallor about their old friend's cheeks.

The Guermantes Way, as Malcolm Bowie has neatly summarized, 'is the story of a youthful infatuation with superior people told by the scathing critic of human vanity that the youth concerned has now become'.⁴ This combination of wide-eyed wonder and cutting critique brings insight, humour and irony. The social set-pieces are wrought in luxuriant yet purposeful prose, laced through with wit and studded with observations of the human animal that, for all their great length, make for extremely memorable reading.

A reflection on names – a familiar theme by now – begins the volume, picking up the Narrator's concerns with structure, duration and longevity. The Guermantes name can be traced back beyond the time of the construction of France's great cathedrals in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries (*G*, 6; 756); the family it represents thus by association has an enduring historicity and something, perhaps, of the four-dimensionality discerned in the Combray church. Readers should recall that before the war *The Guermantes Way* had been envisaged as the second of the *Search's* three projected volumes. This might explain

why surprisingly Françoise is described as already having 'snow-white hair' and being 'in her old age' (G, 10; 758–9). Her remarkable resilience, still being at the Narrator's side in *his* old age in *Time Regained*, would be less incongruous had *Sodom and Gomorrah* and the Albertine volumes not made us quite so aware of the many intervening years between the family's change of address in *The Guermantes Way* and the Narrator's revelations in the novel's final volume.

While much of *The Guermantes Way* is dedicated to the interactions of the aristocracy, through the conversations of Françoise and the Guermantes' domestic staff and the exposure we receive to the *demi-monde* to which Robert's mistress Rachel belongs, Proust's critical eye takes in a social panorama reaching well beyond the faubourg Saint-Germain. The threshold to this magical world, so long experienced by the Narrator only in his mind, takes material form in the Guermantes' rather shabby doormat (G, 26; 769). Undeterred by this unexpected reality, the Narrator is soon waiting outside each morning to catch a glimpse of Mme de Guermantes, as he did at the end of *Within a Budding Grove* for Mme Swann. And just as he realized that his love for Albertine was for a multitude of disparate figures who made up the girl of that name, so with Mme de Guermantes he realizes that he loves not any single one of her various manifestations, seen at different times and in different weathers, but rather 'the invisible person who set all this outward show in motion' (G, 65; 794). This suggests that his love is in fact for his *idea* or idealized construction of the woman and not the Duchesse herself.

He is able to come to this reasoned conclusion thanks, in part, to the lesson learned on his second trip to see Berma. He explains:

We feel in one world, we think, we give names to things in another; between the two we can establish a certain correspondence, but not bridge the gap ... The difference which exists between a person or a work of art that are markedly individual and the idea of beauty exists just as much between what they make us feel and the idea of love or of admiration. Wherefore we fail to recognise them. (G, 49; 784)

The Narrator acknowledges here the disjunction between sensation – our body's experience of the impressions made on us by the outside world – and the workings of the intellect that seeks to rationalize and categorize them. We encountered this tension in *Swann's Way* when the Narrator outlined the distinctions between voluntary and involuntary memory (SW, 50–5; 44–7); progressively we recognize that it is a driving force in much of the Narrator's speculative thinking.

When he makes a trip to the garrison town of Doncières to visit Saint-Loup, with remarkable attention to the experience of sound, he anatomizes

the process of acquainting oneself with unfamiliar surroundings as he waits in Saint-Loup's room. Staying in the hotel in the town subsequently gives rise to an extended reflection on sleep, its strangeness, its different varieties (G, 89–96; 810–14); these pages recall and develop the musings of the 'Combray' overture, adding further nuance to the Narrator's always ongoing analysis of the nature of consciousness.

In the societal scenes later in the volume there is much emphasis on the vacuity of worldly interaction. At Doncières, however, when a companion suggests that in a military historian's narrative 'the most trivial happenings ... are only the outward signs of an idea which has to be elucidated and which often conceals other ideas, like a palimpsest' (G, 119; 829), Saint-Loup reveals his intellect, holding forth with great verve on military history and strategy. The palimpsest, a manuscript that has been erased and overwritten, but on which the earlier text can still be discerned, is a useful figure to keep in mind, since repeatedly in the *Search* we encounter scenarios which seem to bear the marks of episodes we have already read. Indeed, after Saint-Loup's impromptu seminar, the Narrator describes how he suffers from not seeing Mme de Guermantes (G, 131; 837–8) in terms that recall the pages exploring the suffering he felt during his separation from Gilberte in the previous volume. This is not the final layer of the Proustian palimpsest, however: *The Fugitive* details at length his extensive suffering following Albertine's disappearance.

He speaks with his grandmother by telephone for the first time from Doncières: technology isolates her voice from the visual support that usually accompanies it; as a result, rather than being comforted, the Narrator detects a sadness and fragility he had never previously discerned in her voice. His return to Paris painfully brings presence, absence and suffering into conjunction: returning unannounced and entering the room where his grandmother sits is to be 'the spectator of [his] own absence' (G, 155; 853). He remarks that 'we never see the people who are dear to us save in ... the perpetual motion of our incessant love for them, which, before allowing the images that their faces present to reach us, seizes them in its vortex and flings them back upon the idea that we have always had of them' (G, 156; 853). Until, that is, a chance event prevents our intelligence from deceiving us and we see reality for what it is. Revealed momentarily to the Narrator, then, 'sitting on the sofa ... red-faced, heavy and vulgar, sick, daydreaming ... [was] an overburdened old woman whom [he] did not know' (G, 157; 854). This episode illustrates how we protect ourselves from what we do not wish to confront – above all, death – and how chance occurrences can gain great significance in forcing us to face up to reality.

Before the Villeparisis matinée, the Narrator lunches and visits the theatre with Saint-Loup and Rachel. Relativism and point of view are seen again to be key in affairs of the heart: Saint-Loup first encountered Rachel performing on stage and he remains, in part, enraptured by this version of her. Like Swann with Odette (also a sometime actress: the palimpsest again), he lavishes vast sums of money on his mistress, a situation all the more pitiful for the reader, knowing (as Saint-Loup does not) that when the Narrator saw her in the brothel she could be anyone's for twenty francs. At the theatre Robert vents his frustration at his inability to control Rachel by slapping a journalist for failing to extinguish a cigar. Moments later in the street a man propositions Saint-Loup. The cascade of punches he unleashes on the man is defamiliarized in the Narrator's description, whose rendering of the rapid reconfigurations of forms in space is redolent of cubist and futurist visual art (*G*, 205–6; 885–6). Saint-Loup's violent reaction in the street recalls the story he himself told of Charlus's brutal response to a man who made similar overtures to him (see *BG*, 381; *JF*, 592–3). The parallel between Uncle and nephew, both of whom will be revealed, in due course, to be homosexual, is striking.

In Doncières and Paris, throughout the social spectrum, one topic is seldom far from people's lips: the Dreyfus Affair. Anti-Dreyfusism is the dominant position of the establishment and leading society figures; Saint-Loup's openly expressed *dreyfusard* convictions therefore sit uneasily with his military colleagues and relations alike. Odette, seeking acceptance by the social elite, perversely speaks out against Dreyfus despite her Jewish husband, and, according to the Narrator, having previously assured him of her conviction of Dreyfus's innocence (*G*, 302; 947): those climbing the social ladder must adjust their script according to their audience. Mme de Guermantes leaves as soon as she sees Odette arrive, such is her disinclination to make her acquaintance (*G*, 301–2; 947). For the Narrator, however, seeing Odette again is instructive since he has recently learnt from Charles Morel, the son of his great-uncle's valet, that Odette, besides being the androgynous 'Miss Sacripant', was also the 'lady in pink' who so enraptured him as a boy (see *G*, 304–5; 949–50). Illustrating the grip the Dreyfus case had on the nation, when the Narrator returns home, he finds his family's butler and the Guermantes' butler carrying on effectively the same conversation that Norpois and Bloch had had *chez* Villeparisis. As he puts it, the arguments 'contended on high among the intellectuals ... were fast spreading downwards into the subsoil of popular opinion' (*G*, 340; 973). In society, however, as the Narrator's often biting commentary attests, what parades itself as knowledge, discernment and intelligence is frequently bluff, received opinion and crass ignorance.

As they are leaving, Charlus suggests to the Narrator that they walk together a while (G, 318; 958). He proposes that he might serve as mentor to the young man. Readers will have little doubt about the subtext here, but the Narrator, although a little confused, remains apparently unaware of Charlus's motivations, despite Mme de Villeparisis' unambiguously expressed disapproval of his consorting with Charlus away from her salon (G, 325–6; 963).

At home, his grandmother's health has deteriorated but the fictional Dr du Boulbon, said to be a protégé of Charcot (1825–93), the founder of modern neurology, recognizes the patient's literary spirit and determines through talking to her that her complaint is as much nervous as it is physiological (G, 346–7; 977–8). As we read the doctor's encouraging words ('Submit to being called a neurotic ... Everything we think of as great has come to us from neurotics'), even a superficial knowledge of Proust's own health suggests that this apologia for neurosis is not wholly disinterested: 'we enjoy fine music, beautiful pictures,' continues Boulbon, 'but we do not know what they cost those who wrought them in insomnia, tears, spasmodic laughter, urticaria, asthma, epilepsy, a terror of death which is worse than any of these' (G, 350; 979). Mind and body cannot be decoupled: the sublime aesthetic products of intelligence, such as Proust's book, come at a cost to their creators measurable in the all-too-human terms of suffering and pain.

Boulbon's recommendation of fresh air and walks is followed, only for the Narrator's grandmother to suffer a stroke when accompanying him to the Champs-Élysées. Proust is notorious for his long sentences, but the start of Part Two offers a fine example (and there are a great many in the *Search*) of his under-acknowledged mastery of impact through *brevisitas*: 'She was not yet dead. But I was already alone.' These stark lines (G, 359; 989) intimate once more the Narrator's awareness of how the brain often works at speeds quite distinct from those of the phenomena to which it responds.

Interwoven in Part Two's opening chapter are two intriguing character studies: Bergotte, gravely ill, is nevertheless an assiduous and unassuming visitor during the grandmother's final illness (G, 373–5; 998–9); the Duc de Guermantes, by contrast, appears just once, but his attentiveness to social formalities renders him chronically desensitized to the emotional drama on which he intrudes (G, 387–9; 1007–9). His blundering anticipates the obtuseness with which, in due course, he and the Duchesse greet Swann's news of his terminal illness. Bergotte's visits permit the Narrator a digression on the nature of artistic creation, which illustrates his developing sensibilities. Original artists proceed, he remarks, like oculists performing a treatment: when their work is done, we are asked to look on the world, which 'appears to us entirely different from the old world, but perfectly clear.' And this because the world 'is

not created once and for all, but as often as an original artist comes along' (G, 376, trans. mod.; 1000). When the grandmother dies, the event is described in terms of an artistic process that connects several of the novel's key thematic threads: 'On that funerary bed, death, like a sculptor of the Middle Ages, had laid her down in the form of a young girl' (G, 397, trans. mod.; 1014).

After this tender closure on the permanence of death, Chapter Two opens with that most transient but emotive of things: a change in the weather, which 'is sufficient to create the world and ourselves anew' (G, 398; 1014). The Narrator, in bed, pieces together the world beyond his windows through his apprehensions of sound and colour, and reviews the memories roused by his observations. Saint-Loup, succumbing to family pressure, has split with Rachel and is posted to Morocco; he writes that in Tangier he has met Mme de Stermaria, a young woman in whom the Narrator had expressed an interest at Balbec, now a divorcee and willing to dine with him (G, 400–1; 1015–16). This prospect sets his mind whirring in anticipation of amorous possibilities, whereupon Françoise unexpectedly announces Albertine, who enters, resembling 'an enchantress offering ... a mirror that reflected time' (G, 404; 1018). She seems to embody all that enraptured the Narrator about their spell by the sea, yet at the same time she has matured in appearance, become yet more confident in her language, her movements. Just as the Combray landscape sprang forth from the Narrator's teacup, now he feels that preserved in Albertine are all his impressions of a cherished series of seascapes; 'in kissing her cheeks,' he suggests 'I should be kissing the whole of Balbec beach' (G, 418; 1027).

When the kiss does occur, however, any romance there might have been dies in the detail of the description. But this is no surprise: beforehand he remarks that 'the knowledge that to kiss Albertine's cheeks was ... possible ... was a pleasure perhaps greater even than that of kissing them' (G, 417; 1026), and, sure enough, the stimulus offered by the consideration of his various desires and their potential outcomes is greater than that offered by the rather paltry physical act itself. All the while, however, part of the Narrator's mind remains preoccupied by the possible delights in store with Mme de Stermaria, but these are never tasted: she cries off at the last minute, and the pleasurable, tantalising 'what ifs' of anticipation become the despairing 'if only's' of regret.

Between Albertine's kiss and Mme de Stermaria's no-show there glimmers a rare moment of hope becoming reality: Mme de Guermites invites the Narrator to dinner, something akin to 'making acquaintance with a dream' (G, 433; 1037). After a series of vivid memories he has shortly before the day of the dinner, he remarks proleptically that had he remained alone, the enthusiasm he was experiencing 'might have borne fruit' and saved him 'the detour of many wasted years through which [he] was yet to pass before the invisible

vocation of which this book is the history declared itself' (G, 459; 1053). Even before dining with the Guermites he recognizes that time spent in society is 'temps perdu' – time lost or wasted – for the artist, who requires solitude to achieve his or her goals. Nevertheless, youthful curiosity prevails and he presses onwards to his first dinner *chez* Guermites.

As he ponders their collection of Elstirs, further memories of Balbec emerge, alongside another reflection on perspective and artistic creation (G, 483–7; 1069–72). And just as perspective has its laws, so does society. The Duc rushes to introduce the Narrator to the Princesse de Parme not motivated by graciousness but because form dictates that 'the presence ... of anyone not personally known to a royal personage is an intolerable state of things'. Gradually the Narrator realizes the paradoxical effect of this slavery to etiquette: in society 'it is the surface that becomes essential and profound' (G, 492; 1074). Social players are expected to provide the right lines, respond to the right cues. Mme de Guermites' witticisms are legendary and her quip about Charlus, an inveterate tease ('*taquin*' in French), being 'Taquin le superbe' (a pun on the Roman King 'Tarquinius Superbus', beautifully transmuted in English as 'Teaser Augustus'; G, 537; 1104) is such a hit that 'it would be served up again cold the next day at lunch ... and would reappear under various sauces throughout the week' (G, 538; 1104). Puns and facile anecdotes circulate in the salons, discussed with no less fervour than matters of politics and art, yet most *mondains* set little store by personal judgement, instead proffering conditioned responses which will gain the approval of those listening.

The Narrator comments on being mistaken for someone else, reflects on the 'numberless mistakes ... which accompany one's name in the file which society compiles about one' (G, 575, trans. mod.; 1128), and arrives at the conclusion, anticipating by several decades Jean-Paul Sartre's concept of 'being-for-others', that we are powerless to control the conception of ourselves constructed by those around us. The Narrator, seeking fulfilment beyond the stultifying vanities of society, strikingly describes his time there as 'les heures mondaines où j'habitais mon épiderme' [those hours in which I lived on the surface] (G, 610; 1150), his deeper self quite dormant. After long imagining such parties, first-hand experience underlines merely their 'barren frivolity' (G, 636; 1167).

With a mixture of exhilaration and melancholy he makes his way to his appointment with Charlus, described earlier by Mme de Guermites, in keeping with the ambiguities of his identity thus far revealed, as being 'kind and sweet, [with] a delicacy, a warmth of heart that you don't find as a rule in men' (G, 587; 1135). These traits are scarcely evident, however, as Charlus, with almost uncontrolled emotion, launches a raging verbal assault on the Narrator. His pride is hurt (the Narrator did not write and may have spoken

inappropriately of him) but he will not admit it: 'Do you imagine', he asks 'that the envenomed spittle of five hundred little gentlemen of your type ... would succeed in slobbering so much as the tips of my august toes?' (G, 646; 1173). Charlus's eloquent fury is a joy to read; it draws us closer to his insecurities, further exhibits his erudition, exposes how his character is shaped by his class. Ultimately his rage subsides but he states that their relations are 'cut short ... for all time' (G, 651; 1177), leaving the bemused Narrator to puzzle out why the baron should have prized so highly his reciprocated affections.

The nature of Charlus's designs becomes retrospectively clearer in the opening section of *Sodom and Gomorrah*, but for the remainder of *The Guermites Way* intrigues of gender and desire are placed on hold as a few final layers are peeled from the social onion. When the Narrator receives an invitation from the Princesse de Guermites his insecurities lead him to doubt its authenticity. Fearful of the ignominy of gatecrashing a society soirée he seeks confirmation from the Duc and Duchesse. Gazing over the courtyard, awaiting their return, the Narrator's thoughts turn to artistic matters. He ponders the multiplicity of the vista, recalling Venetian skylines and Dutch townscapes of paintings he has admired. These references are not contingent: they prepare the reader for Bergotte's death scene and the Venetian section of *The Fugitive*; they also underscore how solitude is necessary for the engagement of the Narrator's artistic vision. The Duc and Duchesse appear but have to prepare themselves for a series of evening engagements. Swann arrives, bringing the Duchesse outsized photographs of some rare coins he has recently discovered. The Narrator steals a moment to talk to Swann about the Affair; this permits Proust to remind readers of the positions of various prominent figures, positions which, as *Sodom and Gomorrah* shows, are far from definitively fixed.

The humour of the scene (for example, the Duc's stating that he is happy for the photographs to go in the Duchesse's room where he will not see them, 'oblivious of the revelation he was thus blindly making of the negative character of his conjugal relations'; G, 686; 1200) is tempered by the pathos of Swann's announcement of his illness. This refocuses attention on the theme of mortality, latent since the grandmother's death, now painfully present in the blundering Duc's choice of idioms ('she'll reach the dinner-table quite dead ... I'm dying of hunger'; G, 690; 1203). Proust exhibits here his extraordinary ability to expose human foibles whilst balancing pain with laughter. Mme de Guermites 'could find nothing in the code of conventions' indicating the right course of action between 'two duties as incompatible as getting into a carriage to go out to dinner and showing compassion for a man who was about to die', and so, tellingly, she thinks 'that the best way of settling the conflict would be to deny that any existed' (G, 688; 1202). This ostrich-like response neatly

encapsulates the vision of high society that emerges from *The Guermantes Way*. It is not a snobbish celebration of the old aristocracy; the Narrator may at times be entranced by them, but he also offers an uncompromising critique of the blinkered self-centredness that contributed in large measure to their demise.

Sodom and Gomorrah

Part One

A voyeuristic scene reminiscent of that involving Mlle Vinteuil at Montjouvain in 'Combray' opens the volume: the Narrator observes Charlus and Jupien meeting by chance in the Guermantes' courtyard. After watching Charlus's initial overtures, he eavesdrops on them having sex in Jupien's workshop. Thus enlightened, extrapolating from this episode, the Narrator subsequently discusses the plight of the 'descendants of Sodom', describing the various types of 'invert'.

Part Two

Chapter One begins with an extensive account of the Princesse de Guermantes' reception: Dreyfus is much discussed, as are various individuals' shifts in allegiance. The Narrator receives a late-night visit from Albertine: his behaviour anticipates his later, neurotic possessiveness. Returning to Balbec he experiences the delayed realization that his grandmother is dead. In Chapter Two happiness with Albertine seems possible but is tinged with suspicions, as when Cottard remarks on how she dances with Andrée. Various developments fuel the Narrator's anxieties: Bloch's sister's relation with an actress; M. Nissim Bernard's proclivities; Charlus's first meeting with Charlie Morel, son of Uncle Adolphe's valet. A long sequence narrates an evening party at 'La Raspelière', the residence rented by the Verdurins. Much humour derives from the uneasy interaction between the bourgeois Verdurin 'faithful' and their social superiors: the Cambremers, owners of 'La Raspelière', and Charlus, accompanying his new love, Morel. Chapter Three brings revelations of Morel's vices and further anxiety about Albertine's true nature. After a tiff Charlus informs Morel he will fight a duel, a lie calculated to bring his lover back. And so the relations stumble on from deception to reconciliation, with little sense of enduring happiness or freedom. Loosely connected vignettes relate seaside life and the convivial train journeys of the Verdurin faithful. Tired of her company and strained by his suspicions, the Narrator decides that marrying Albertine would

be madness. In the brief Chapter Four, however, he unexpectedly discovers her long-term acquaintance with Mlle Vinteuil and her friend. This 'proof' of Albertine's lesbianism shatters his decision to break with her. Only suffering remains for him, yet he resolves to return to Paris with her, somehow to keep her from her vice; he informs his mother he must marry Albertine.

Part One provides a study in Proust's remarkable manipulation of context and metaphor. Waiting, overlooking the Guermantes' courtyard, the Narrator reflects on the chance events that must occur in order for certain flowers to be fertilized. He has his eyes on a particular plant and, eventually, a bee does enter his field of vision, but it is soon clear that the tropes relating the vagaries of plant fertilization have a more complex purpose than the illustration of his taste for amateur botany. The Narrator studies Charlus and Jupien in the way a botanist might scrutinize sub-varieties of plants. His initial discovery, afforded by perceiving the baron at ease, thinking himself unobserved, is that he resembles a woman. He then watches this previously unseen version of Charlus approaching Jupien, who 'struck poses with the coquetry that the orchid might have adopted on the providential arrival of the bee' (SG, 5; 1212). Each man recognizes the other's nature and capitalizes on the opportunity offered him by circumstance. The penny drops: 'everything that hitherto had seemed to my mind incoherent, became intelligible, appeared self-evident' (SG, 16–17; 1219). Contemporary attitudes classed homosexuality as a 'vice,' 'a curse,' 'an incurable disease' (SG, 17–18; 1219–20); Proust draws parallels with similar attitudes to Jews at the time, but suggests lyrically that homosexuality, like the vast, proliferating sentence that communicates the point, reaches far and wide, is dispersed through every stratum of society. Charlus is identified as one for whom 'the satisfaction ... of [his] sexual needs depends upon the coincidence of too many conditions, and of conditions too difficult to meet' (SG, 32; 1229). Yet he and Jupien surmount the barriers to their pleasure, a succession of events 'almost of the same order and no less marvellous' than the fecundation of the orchid by the bee. Contrary to society's dominant views, to the observing Narrator 'everything about it seemed to me imbued with beauty' (SG, 33, trans. mod.; 1229). Lesbian relations are not treated until much later; when they are, the Narrator's perspective is quite different: they represent a '*terra incognita*' for the heterosexual male, a profound threat like a rival with 'different weapons' (SG, 597, 603; 1593, 1597).

As Charlus and Jupien's relation makes clear, desire pays little heed to social status; this phenomenon is repeatedly highlighted by Proust, often to comic ends, as evinced by the anecdote relating the Duc de Châtellerauld's encounters with the usher who 'barks' out guests' names upon their arrival at the Princesse de Guermantes' residence (SG, 39–40, 42–3; 1235–6, 1237–8). The Narrator,

much to his relief, is not *persona non grata* at the reception. Desperately trawling his memory for the name of a woman who starts speaking to him leads to an illuminating aside. Flawed memory is key to our appreciating the wonders of recollection, he suggests: ‘infirmity alone makes us take notice and learn, and enables us to analyse mechanisms of which otherwise we should know nothing’ (SG, 60; 1248); these comments might offer us some solace when our memories struggle with the sheer volume of Proust’s novel.

Before seeing him unguarded in the Guermites’ courtyard, the Narrator had taken Charlus’s emphasis on virility and his loathing of effeminacy at face value; at the Princesse’s reception, however, alert now to the role-play that concealing secret identities obliges individuals to undertake, he dismantles false façades, attuned to the different levels of communication that can coexist on the social stage. Progressively he develops his ability to decipher the sign systems of the world in which he moves, which extend well beyond the domain of love and desire.

The guests’ conversations and interactions are revealing on many levels: Vaugoubert, the old ambassador, is a homosexual whose professional obligations have almost wholly blunted his ability to recognize those of his own kind. He and Charlus are intriguing cases of how circumstance and environment can lead to divergent developments in what may have been initially similar characters. The Duc de Guermites, who spoke jovially with Swann at the close of *The Guermites Way*, now, just a few hours later in the real time of the narrative, derides Swann’s *dreyfusard* position as one of ‘ingratitude’ towards the faubourg Saint-Germain which had for so long welcomed him as an equal (SG, 90; 1268). Swann is present but has been whisked off to the bottom of the garden where, rumour has it, the Prince is berating him for his Dreyfusism. In reality the Prince is taking the opportunity to tell his old friend that he *shares* his convictions, as does his wife (although they had each kept their thinking hidden for some time, fearing each other’s disapproval; SG, 120–31; 1288–95). The kaleidoscope, then, is turning.

Interwoven with the socio-political chatter are the often unspoken currents of desire. Charlus’s concentration on the face of the young Comte de Surgis is so profound as to make it resemble ‘some rebus, some riddle, some algebraic problem, of which he must try to penetrate the mystery’ (SG, 103; 1277). Saint-Loup sews seeds of amorous promise for the Narrator, speaking of the ‘stunning women’ one might find in ‘maisons de passe’ (houses of assignation, or brothels), citing as examples the aristocratic ‘Mademoiselle ... d’Orgeville’ and ‘in a different class of goods ... Mme Putbus’s chambermaid’ (SG, 108–9; 1280), both of whom become long-term fixations for the Narrator, although neither is ever met. The Narrator thinks he meets Mlle d’Orgeville in *The Fugitive*, only to

be victim to one of the novel's many cases of mistaken identity (*F*, 643–8; *AD*, 2027–31); later on, seeing the name of Mme Putbus in a hotel register is almost enough to keep him in Venice when he is due to leave (*F*, 748; *AD*, 2096).

The anecdotes and observations of *Sodom and Gomorrah* have much to teach us about desire, how it blinds us, the cruelties into which it pushes us, the insecurities and fears it instills in our minds, regardless of our sexual preferences. Charlus is said to have let a queen die 'rather than miss an appointment with the hair-dresser who was to singe his hair for the benefit of a bus-conductor whom he found prodigiously intimidating' (*SG*, 134; 1297). And the Narrator himself, returning home with the Duc and Duchesse, illustrates the rapid alterations of which desire is disarmingly capable. So close together are he and the Duchesse in the carriage (a proximity he had long only imagined) that she jokes about her accidentally treading on his feet being taken the wrong way, yet this leaves him unmoved for his mind is focused on Mlle d'Orgeville and Mme Putbus's chambermaid (*SG*, 142–3; 1302). As a result the Duchesse, even in toe-trampling proximity, is no longer bewitching; but when she speaks slightingly of Mme Putbus, the Narrator's devotion to these unknown figures suddenly dissolves. Mme de Guermantes invites him to the Princesse de Parme's costume ball, an event he would hitherto have leapt at the opportunity to attend, yet he declines, for the compass of his yearnings has shifted once more: 'I was interested not in the ball but in my rendezvous with Albertine' (*SG*, 144; 1303). Increasingly, from this moment on, Albertine is the primary object of the Narrator's attentions.

He awaits her midnight visit, providing a beautiful assessment of our emotional investment in the process of waiting for people we care about (*SG*, 149–51; 1307–8), before revealing how manipulative he can be in the service of his own satisfaction: spurred by jealousy and suspicion, he persuades Albertine to change her mind when she telephones to inform him she is not coming. Not to have her presence would be to rekindle the horrors of his bedtime trauma in Combray: Albertine's kiss is troublingly compared to his mother's, and now as then we realize the uncompromising tensions of the Narrator's psyche: 'the prospect of having to forgo a simple physical pleasure caused me an intense mental suffering' (*SG*, 149; 1306). Suffering is a keynote of *Sodom and Gomorrah*, a term that is never far away in the Narrator's analyses of love and desire. He arrives at the feeling that with regard to Albertine, 'out of that tangled mass of details of fact and falsehood, I should never unravel the truth: and that it would always be so, unless I were to imprison her (but prisoners escape) until the end' (*SG*, 154, trans. mod.; 1310). Before the shared life with Albertine that this statement adumbrates really begins, however, another form of suffering is experienced: 'the intermittencies of the heart.'

The Narrator travels to Balbec. The section opens in ludic mode with the hotel director's comically flawed French, but soon the tone changes: fatigued, stooping to take off his boots, the Narrator experiences the 'upheaval of [his] entire being' (SG, 179; 1326), a rush of emotion that suddenly recaptures the instant when his grandmother had helped him in a similar moment of physical weakness on their first trip to Balbec (BG, 284; JF, 531). Now, more than a year after her burial, 'because of the anachronism which so often prevents the calendar of facts from corresponding to the calendar of feelings; he finally 'became conscious that she was dead' (SG, 180; 1327). The intermittencies of the heart are negatively inflected involuntary memories that bring not a sense of recuperation but of loss. He feels temporarily reinstated in the adolescent self that, fearful of his new surroundings, arrived at Balbec years before, but the sorrow from which he sought solace in his grandmother's arms is now that of mourning, which he must come to terms with alone. He tortures himself about being cruel to his grandmother when she arranged for a photograph to be taken (Françoise reveals to the Narrator – who is devastated – that his grandmother's apparent coquetry when the photograph was taken was born of a desire to conceal her grave illness and to leave him an image by which he might remember her; SG, 203; 1342); and as he attempts to take stock of an existence without her, at every turn he sees his mother, an eerie embodiment of the grandmother, carrying her handbag, reading her books and wearing her dressing gown. Such accoutrements are not necessary for the similarities to be painfully apparent, however, since, in the Narrator's memorable formulation, 'the dead annex the living who become their replicas and successors, the continuators of their interrupted life' (SG, 195; 1337).

During the Narrator's stay at Balbec we encounter several sparkling examples of Proust's ear for sociolects and idiolects: the lift-boy's crudeness and mistakes, the director's gaffes, Mme de Cambremer's *diminuendo* adjectives and the Guermantes' jargon, all of which add richness to this truly polyphonic novel. It is Albertine's words, however, and her actions that receive the keenest scrutiny. Her company, in the second chapter of Part Two, slowly appeases the intermittencies of the Narrator's heart and reignites his desire for happiness.

One afternoon a broken-down tram results in the Narrator bumping into Cottard at Incarville. In the casino, where they pass the time, a scene unfolds that profoundly alters the Narrator's perception of Albertine. She and her friends are there; Albertine is waltzing with Andrée. The Narrator comments to Cottard how well they dance, whereupon the doctor, ignoring that the Narrator knows the girls, remarks that 'they are certainly keenly roused. It's not sufficiently known that women derive most excitement through their breasts. And theirs, as you see, are touching completely' (SG, 225; 1356). Once

more, a contingent event throws the Narrator into a spin: a man of science identifies in Albertine evidence of the vice he most fears, and hereafter almost every girl he sees becomes his rival.

Subsequently the Narrator's suspicions grow about Albertine's avowals of interest or apathy towards this or that outing or activity. After one exchange of leading questions and evasive answers, he concludes that ultimately he 'had no desire ... to enter upon the terrible path of investigation, of multiform, unending vigilance' (SG, 231; 1360). The irony of this statement is extremely bitter, for this is just what he does: *The Captive* is the narrative of his journey down precisely that path. Moreover, already at this stage he lies, claiming, for instance, that he has long loved Andrée and not Albertine, in order to talk her round to a reconciliatory intimacy he did not have the confidence to seek without the safety net of artfully woven lies. His actions are based upon deep insecurities about whether anyone could actually love him. As ever, he has mental agility in surfeit, but common sense in short supply; he summarizes his position as that of 'those ... whose self-analysis outweighs their self-esteem' (SG, 264; 1381). Characteristically, he pays scant acknowledgement to the pain his actions might inflict on Albertine. Indeed, sympathize periodically with him as we might, admiring his turns of phrase and his nimble mind, just as often in *Sodom and Gomorrah* and *The Captive* we see quite how self-centred, hypocritical and inconsistent he can be. He has no qualms about fantasizing about Mme Putbus's maid, for example, but when he remembers that Saint-Loup mentioned her possible taste for women, he trembles, fearful that she might find Albertine at Balbec and 'corrupt her' (SG, 277; 1390).

Balancing the tensions of jealousy and suspicion, the social scenarios of *Sodom and Gomorrah* are studded with portraiture and anecdotes which send up human vanities, illuminate desire's sway over the individual and repeatedly reveal how, despite the great diversity of humankind, in the grips of passion we very often have much in common. The figure of Mme de Cambremer, 'toothless', frothing at the mouth at the mere thought of Chopin (SG, 239; 1366) is hard to forget; similarly it is difficult to read without smirking the anecdote of the short-sighted M. Nissim Bernard propositioning the wrong rosy-faced twin and receiving a beating that puts him off tomatoes for life (SG, 291–3; 1400–1). Proust's text persistently switches between high and low, drawing a vast array of human experience into its purview.

Charlus, resembling the dandified old man feigning youth with cosmetics in Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice* (1912), meets Morel at Doncières station, a chance encounter reminiscent of that with Jupien at the start of the volume. The relationship between the aristocrat and the valet's son is nurtured then torn apart by the Verdurins. Just as the Prince and the Duc de Guermantes

changed their allegiance during the Affair, so now Mme Verdurin is ‘a sincere Dreyfusard’ (SG, 327; 1423), she whose ‘latent bourgeois anti-Semitism’ had, we were told in *The Guermantes Way*, ‘grown to a positive fury’ (G, 288; 939). The Verdurins are just as capable of insensitivity and cruelty as their titled counterparts: “It’s dreadful”, M. Verdurin responds ‘cheerfully’ to the news of the death of their faithful pianist Dechambre and reports that his ‘morbidly sensitive’ wife ‘almost wept’ when she heard the news (SG, 344; 1434). Saniette is remorselessly mocked for sport, with no concern for the effects on his psyche. Their world is bizarrely binaristic: the fawning faithful are ‘intelligent’; those who do not or will not come, or whose fidelity lapses, are ‘boring’ or ‘stupid’, although just a glance at the frequent occurrences of these terms shows how their conventional meanings have been all but entirely evacuated. The Cambremers tolerate their tenants since the rent provides for the upkeep of their residence at Féterne; their gardener’s attitude, however, depicts in miniature the true relations across the class divide: ‘[he] groaned beneath the Verdurins’ yoke, as though the place were ... occupied by an invading army of roughneck soldiery’ (SG, 365; 1447).

Charlus’s presence among the Verdurin clan provokes some fascinating tensions relating to class and to sexuality. His ‘morals’ are generally overlooked and certainly not discussed in high society; *chez* Verdurin, however, he is less discreet and more notorious. M. Verdurin, seeking to dissimulate his ignorance regarding social protocol, remarks to Charlus that ‘from the first words we exchanged, I realised that you were *one of us!* ... you are *one of us*, it’s as clear as daylight’ (SG, 393; 1464). The construction ‘en être’ (translated in italics) is used to refer to homosexuality throughout the *Search*; Charlus accordingly fears what his blundering host is about to blurt out. Fortunately (laughably), Verdurin is referring to social belonging. Charlus, bristling, corrects the error that he is ‘only a baron’, reeling off his remarkable string of titles, concluding with a characteristically dismissive ‘however, it’s not of the slightest importance’ (SG, 395; 1465).

As the evening draws to its end, Mme Verdurin tries to dissuade the Narrator from accepting a dinner invitation from the Cambremers (‘the place is infested with bores’); in his fudged response he claims to ‘have a young cousin [he] can’t leave by herself’ as a means of excusing his spending time with Albertine (SG, 425; 1484–5), thus contributing his own measure of obfuscation to the swirl of half-truths and lies circulating amongst the faithful. This evening with the Verdurins is the only one narrated in full, but it represents, metonymically we might say, many other such events. This technique of narrating once what was a repeated or customary event has been called ‘iterative narrative’ by Gérard Genette in his important essay ‘Discours du récit’ [Narrative Discourse]. These

hours spent in bourgeois society are no more profitable in artistic terms than those spent *chez* Guermantes. When M. Verdurin comments that the weather seems to have changed as the Narrator prepares to leave, the effect is profound: ‘these words filled me with joy, as though the dormant life, the resurgence of different combinations which they implied in nature, heralded other changes, occurring in my own life, and created fresh possibilities in it’ (SG, 433; 1489). The sudden sentiment of joy here comes from a change in the weather (‘le temps’) but also from stepping outside the social bubble into a new relation with *time*: simply by opening the front door, ‘on sentait qu’un autre “temps” occupait depuis un instant la scène’ (‘one felt that another time/weather had just taken possession of the scene’: Proust’s inverted commas around ‘temps’ draw attention to the polysemous value that cannot quite be captured in translation).

Given that dreams can have the clarity of consciousness, ‘might consciousness have the unreality of a dream?’ So ponders the Narrator at the start of Chapter Three (SG, 445; 1497). The mind’s activity during sleep offers evidence of powerful creative potential the artist must harness in his or her work. The Narrator, however, spends much of his time fearfully testing the potential ‘unreality’ of whatever presents itself to him in his waking hours rather than channelling his creative capacities into a work of art.

Travelling alone while Albertine paints near Balbec, he recognizes that the feelings he has for her he previously felt for Mme de Stermaria and Mme de Guermantes: ‘it was my fate to pursue only phantoms, creatures whose reality existed to a great extent in my imagination.’ He looks around, feels that the trees by the road give him ‘a silent counsel to set myself to work at last, before the hour of eternal rest had yet struck’ (SG, 476; 1517). He cannot follow this counsel, however: Albertine’s spell is too strong. He looks at her, at the face which tantalizes him with the ‘enigma of her intentions’; she is ‘a whole state of soul, a whole future existence that had assumed before my eyes the allegorical and fateful form of a girl’ (SG, 485; 1523). The successful deciphering of this complex symbol will determine the future course of his life.

As their complex relationship unfolds, so alongside it does that of Charlus and Morel, separated by age and class, but bound together by desire, although not necessarily always of a mutual, erotic sort. Charlus, besotted, treats Morel like a ward or protégé, showering him with gifts and proffering advice ranging from the interpretation of Beethoven to the finer distinctions between varieties of pear (SG, 472–4; 1515–16). Morel, on the other hand, always puts himself first and happily deceives others for his own gain. Despite this he feels persecuted and rails against ‘universal treachery’; in short he is ‘a mass of contradictions’ and, like the novel in which he appears, ‘extraordinarily composite’

(SG, 498–9; 1532). The image used by the Narrator to describe Charlus's vulnerability as gradually he becomes an object of derision is full of pathos: he is like a fish unaware of the limits of its aquarium, the spectators beyond the glass and the presence of 'the all-powerful keeper who, at the unforeseen and fatal moment ... will extract it without compunction' (SG, 518; 1544). His various travails that stud the chapter (the fictitious duel; his spying at the Maineville brothel, nearly – unwittingly – discovering Morel with the Prince de Guermantes; Morel's laughable stories of algebra lessons that 'soothe his nerves' until after 2 a.m.) almost make the Narrator's relation with Albertine look conventional. The chapter comes to its close, however, with a steady sense of routine, time and space measured out along the stations of the local railway line, their place-names now demystified by Brichot's etymologies.

In Chapter Four, this calm is shattered by Albertine's disclosure of her intimacy with Mlle Vinteuil and her friend (SG, 596; 1592). The past is not inert, neatly stored away: the memory of Montjouvain rushes painfully back to the Narrator, with Albertine transposed into the scene. His imagination works overtime, leaping from assumption to assumption; in self-preservation mode he adopts the habit he so fears in Albertine: lying. He veils his true emotions in a fabrication about being engaged to a woman, separating from her and fearing that he might commit suicide out of remorse. This keeps Albertine from guessing the reasons for his distress, but gazing at her he realizes that for him all is lost: the words she spoke magically embed her in the 'depths of [his] lacerated heart' before closing it up again, leaving him no idea of how to rid himself of this new suffering at the core of his being (SG, 612; 1602). Keeping her by his side may help limit further damage. Doing so will displease his mother, lukewarm at best about their relationship, but this regret is outweighed by a pathological fear of living without Albertine. So, with a fragile and part-feigned assurance that makes us squirm in our chairs, he announces his desire to marry her.

The Captive

The Captive details the Narrator's cohabitation with Albertine in Paris. His parents are absent with work and family commitments, leaving the couple alone with Françoise. The Narrator repeatedly states that he no longer loves Albertine yet his jealousy binds him to her. One day he almost catches her and Andrée *in flagrante*; the suspicions roused on this and similar occasions torment him. He finds some peace observing Albertine sleeping: unconscious, her ever-dispersed identities and unknowable desires are reeled in; only then does he feel that he

possesses this 'fugitive being'. Gradually he recognizes the futility of trying to control her: contingent events, ill-formed cover stories and half-truths told to conceal earlier lies reveal more to him than years of dedicated investigation ever could. There are many extremely beautiful reflective passages: on changes in the weather, on the cries of street vendors, on sensation and memory. Bergotte dies in a gallery before Vermeer's *View of Delft*. Swann too passes away. Charlus, for the benefit of Morel, invites esteemed guests to attend a recital *chez* Verdurin; the force of art powerfully resurfaces as the Narrator hears for the first time a septet by Vinteuil, posthumously transcribed by his daughter's lover. The rudeness of Charlus and his guests prompts Mme Verdurin to take revenge, using deceitful rumours and slander to turn Morel against Charlus, who is publicly humiliated. The Narrator buys Albertine elaborate gowns by Fortuney; he claims he wants to separate, then argues otherwise. Jealous turmoil, speculative thinking and reflection on music and the structuring of works of art are tightly interwoven. As long as Albertine's possible deceptions occupy the Narrator's mind he is unable to set to work. He longs for Venice and a new start, decides categorically to make a final break with Albertine, only to learn from Françoise that she has packed her things and fled whilst he slept.

The Captive is a disquieting book, full of suspicion, distrust and suffering. At times, however, it promises something beyond this, pulses with beauty and insight that unknit our brows and send us soaring into the heights of artistic revelation. From the outset, the Narrator makes plain his position, referring to 'Albertine ... with whom I was bored, with whom I was indeed clearly conscious that I was not in love' (C, 4; P, 1611). Such statements are frequent in *The Captive*, but not loving Albertine is not the same thing as no longer *needing* her and much of the volume is concerned with the ways in which the Narrator attempts to deal with this need, a need of assurance that her desires are not for other women. In sequestering Albertine, however, he gradually becomes as much a captive as she is, since his jealousy of her unknown habits and past acquaintances is like 'a phobia ... capable of assuming as many forms as the undefined evil that is its cause' (C, 16; P, 1618). The enduring nature of his dilemma can be seen in the reformulations of this situation throughout the volume (jealousy is later described, for example, as 'a demon that cannot be exorcised, but constantly reappears in new incarnations'; C, 110; P, 1679).

In leaving Balbec, the Narrator had hoped he could distance Albertine from temptation. It quickly becomes clear, however, that so fixated is he on her possible infidelities that temptation, to his mind at least, is everywhere. Soon the terms used to describe their relation painfully reflect its growing awkwardness, the impossibility of tenderness or satisfaction: 'our engagement', as he

memorably puts it, 'was assuming the aspect of a criminal trial' (C, 58; P, 1645). His problem is that he has to deal not only with the real manifestations of Albertine's desires, such as the tryst with Andrée that he almost intrudes upon, returning home with a bunch of syringas (C, 54–5; P, 1643–4), but also the host of imagined acts of passion, stolen glances and assignations that his mind tirelessly manufactures. The Narrator's suffering comes from the creative capability of his mind, not yet channelled towards art and thus free to work obsessively to formulate the destructive fables of jealousy. (Symptomatic of this is the striking regularity with which the word 'hypothesis' crops up in this volume.)

Albertine, multiple and mobile in Balbec, is, in Paris to quote just one page, 'caged' and 'cloistered' (C, 69; P, 1653). Her containment intermittently soothes the Narrator's suffering, caused by the thought of her desires being untrammelled; however, it also – crucially – dampens his desire. Excised from the magical maritime context of Balbec, Albertine, the 'glittering actress of the beach', becomes 'the grey captive, reduced to her drab self' (C, 191; P, 1732–3). The Narrator experiences the same phenomenon when he brings to his room a dairymaid who, seen from his window, had piqued his interest: up close, however, 'stripped of all the desires and imaginings that had been aroused in me, [she] was reduced to her mere self' (C, 156; P, 1710). Reality thus overpowers his imagination's illusion until the girl uses an unfamiliar name for a garment she wears and reveals that she rides a bicycle and wears a cap. As these details pile up we realize (even if the Narrator does not – he makes no mention of it) that this girl is not picked at random: she is an Albertine substitute. But, painfully for the Narrator, pretending to seek an address to which he must send the girl on an errand, he notices that at the Trocadéro, where he has sent Albertine in order to avert a meeting he suspects her of planning with Mlle Vinteuil *chez* Verdurin, Léa, the notorious lesbian actress, is playing the lead role in the main attraction (C, 157; P, 1711). This devastating news (did Albertine call his bluff, knowing that Léa was performing?) is rendered more bitter by the name of the play: *Les Fourberies de Nérine* is about the treacheries or deceptions ('*fourberies*') of Nérine, whose name has much in common with Albertine, whose own deceitfulness causes the Narrator such suffering.

For all that he claims no longer to love Albertine, revelations (or what he assumes are revelations) of this sort wreak havoc with the Narrator's state of mind and constantly defer the possibility of his starting to write. Albertine's proximity and his constant involvement in her life become a habit and, as he acknowledges late in the volume, 'in love, it is easier to relinquish a feeling than to give up a habit' (C, 406; P, 1870). The conventional sense of the term 'love', already a little bruised from its handling in 'Swann in Love', takes a battering

in *The Captive* (at one point the Narrator achingly notes 'here I mean by love reciprocal torture'; C, 117; P, 1684). Echoing Swann's experience, the Narrator describes love as 'an incurable malady' (C, 89; P, 1666) before expanding on what he perceives as the primary obstacle to his happiness:

I realised the impossibility which love comes up against. We imagine that it has as its object a being that can be laid down in front of us, enclosed within a body. Alas, it is the extension of that being to all the points in space and time that it has occupied and will occupy. If we do not possess its contact with this or that place, this or that hour, we do not possess that being. But we cannot touch all these points. If only they were indicated to us, we might perhaps contrive to reach out to them. But we grope for them without finding them. Hence mistrust, jealousy, persecutions. We waste time on absurd clues and pass by the truth without suspecting it. (C, 106; P, 1677)

In the simplest of terms, in this final sentence Proust highlights the fallibility that defines so many of our relations. Despite recognizing the impossibility of 'possessing' another person, the Narrator never manages to develop his conception of love beyond these terms, which are a significant limitation to his happiness. Even once Albertine has become 'a burdensome slave' of whom he wishes to rid himself (C, 424; P, 1882), his inability to possess a sure knowledge of where she has been, where, even, her desirous thoughts might have taken her, prevents him from making the decisive split that would grant them both their liberty. And so the tale shuttles back and forth between the *ennui* of intimacy and the fear of losing the 'fugitive being' whose presence is the unique salve to the Narrator's anxiety.

The only time that he experiences unalloyed happiness in Albertine's company is when she is asleep: then all that is flighty and elusive about her is contained, her eyes closed to the world and to temptation. Unable to dissociate positive thoughts of her from the context in which they first met, the Narrator constructs a succession of sea-related metaphors to capture the experience of watching her, ultimately suggesting that he 'embarked upon the tide of Albertine's sleep' (C, 74; P, 1656). He feels that her sleep permits him a sort of holistic possession of her that he cannot have when they talk and he is obliged, as in society, 'to live on the surface of [himself]' (C, 71; P, 1654). Access to the deeper reaches of his self is normally possible only when he is isolated from others. For those who are jealous, however, isolation, as *The Captive* frequently shows, can be as tortuous as the company of the person who provokes their jealousy: even when we are alone, 'associations of ideas, memories, continue to act upon us'. Nevertheless, when Albertine leaves the apartment, the Narrator is 'revivified ... by the exhilarating virtues of solitude' (C, 19; P, 1621): looking

out on to the new day, he somehow reconnects with the latent musicality of his soul, which is set vibrating by the promise of the outside world.

And it is music that repeatedly provides hope beyond the stifling relationship in which the Narrator is trapped. First there is the experience of hearing the street criers below his window, their motley instruments and the tools of their trades offering a sort of “Overture for a Public Holiday” and their intermingled cries forming a sort of secular liturgy, a plainchant intoned by hawkers and pedlars (C, 124–38; P, 1689–99). The parts of the Narrator’s personality that he identifies at the start of the volume as likely to survive all others, ‘a certain philosopher who is happy only when he has discovered between two works of art, between two sensations, a common element’ and the ‘little manikin’ similar to the one in the Combray optician’s window, who responds to changes in the weather (C, 4–5; P, 1611) are active in this scene, predominating for once over his jealous self. Later on, liberated by Albertine’s absence and soothed by the certainty of her return, the Narrator takes the opportunity to apply his thoughts to Vinteuil’s sonata. Within moments he plunges to the heart of his aesthetic concerns (‘was there in art a more profound reality,’ he asks, ‘in which our true personality finds an expression that is not afforded it by the activities of life?’; C, 174; P, 1721). He compares the sonata to Wagner’s *Tristan* and the impact suggests an affirmative answer to the question just posed: he senses an effect deep inside him, an experience of art’s power that is visceral and profound. As so often in the *Search*, the consideration of one art form leads to a reflection on others: in this case the Narrator quickly moves from Vinteuil and Wagner to a mini essay on the late or retrospectively imposed unity of great works of the nineteenth century, drawing examples from Balzac, Hugo and Michelet (see C, 175–8; P, 1723–4).

The major revelation occurs *chez* Verdurin where, despite being in company, the Narrator has an experience that draws together art, creativity, memory and desire. Initially he does not recognize the music being played, then suddenly he finds himself ‘right in the heart of Vinteuil’s sonata’ (C, 281; P, 1790). The piece is his septet, which owes its existence to the patient deciphering of old manuscript scores by Mlle Vinteuil’s lover. The septet is Vinteuil’s masterwork; in its aspects of the sonata the Narrator knows so well are dispersed and threaded through a larger, more complex structure. Proust’s metaphor-laden account of the interpretive, rememorative and sensory processes that take place in the act of listening, simple yet wildly complex under analysis, is a remarkable achievement, a high point of *The Captive* and the *Search* as a whole. The relation the Narrator describes between the septet and Vinteuil’s early work bears an intriguing resemblance to Proust’s own writings: ‘Vinteuil’s sonata ... and his other works as well, had been no more than timid essays, exquisite but very slight,

beside the triumphant and consummate masterpiece' (C, 284; P, 1792). This situation is mirrored in the Narrator's amorous affairs to date, which, he realizes, 'were paving the way' for his love for Albertine. Conspicuous in all these scenes (the street sounds, playing the sonata, listening to the septet) is the word 'joy'. The Narrator's sentiments relating to Albertine are communicated largely in terms of suffering and anxiety, so when the word 'joy' repeatedly surfaces, we are reminded that he *is* capable of happiness, but that the most likely route to achieving it will not be through Albertine.

She is the Narrator's central preoccupation in *The Captive* and key events are often framed by or recounted in relation to developments in their relationship. This is the case with the death of Bergotte, another of the novel's peaks of intensity, where, in the shadow of the uncompromising finality of death, a life lived is weighed up against the achievements of art. Proust avoids sentimentalism and leads us, with poise and humour, between the heady raptures of art and the ineluctable indignities of dying (C, 207–9; P, 1743–4). When newspaper reports of Bergotte's death appear they contradict Albertine's story that the previous evening she had met Bergotte and spoken with him at some length. The Narrator does not suspect a thing at the time 'so artlessly had she described the meeting', for, as he puts it, 'it was not until much later that I discovered her charming skill in lying naturally' (C, 209–10; P, 1744). It is important to note, however, that Albertine is by no means the only liar in the relationship: the Narrator very often lies or says the opposite of what he thinks in order to provoke admissions or revelations from Albertine. The lesson learned, with time, is that truths are always revealed, but seldom when one is actively pursuing them.

Bergotte's death takes a prominent place in the narrative, as we might expect for the writer whose novels comforted the Narrator like the embrace 'of a long-lost father' (SW, 114; 84). As *The Captive* progresses, a number of deaths (such as those of Princesse Sherbatoff and Mme de Villeparisis) are mentioned, dropped parenthetically into conversation by socialites eager not to dwell on the past for fear, perhaps, of having to acknowledge the finite nature of their own existence. Saniette ill-advisedly speaks critically of Morel's performance to M. Verdurin, receives a ferocious dressing-down and is made to leave, whereupon he has a debilitating attack from which he never fully recovers (C, 802–3; P, 1802–3). Subsequently Charlus is humiliated by rumours and insinuations spread spitefully by Mme Verdurin, peeved at the ungracious attitude of his guests and greatly fearful of losing to Charlus and his set Morel, 'her' musician and a valuable asset in her social ascent. This accumulation of unpleasantness, added to the picture of the vulgar Verdurins sketched first in 'Swann in Love' and developed in *Sodom and Gomorrah*, results in an image of the couple as not only crass and self-interested but also cruel and callous.

After the soirée, however, readers are challenged by an account of how the Verdurins actually *helped* Saniette, ruined by gambling, after his stroke. Until his death and unbeknownst to all but Cottard, who told the Narrator the tale at Saniette's funeral, M. Verdurin provided him with an income which he was led to believe had been left to him in Princesse Sherbatoff's will. Suddenly we are faced with an unexpected side to M. Verdurin, with which we are ill prepared to cope. The Narrator reflects that: 'it is as difficult to present a fixed image of a character as of societies and passions. For a character alters no less than they do, and if one tries to take a snapshot of what is relatively immutable in it, one finds it presenting a succession of different aspects ... to the disconcerted lens' (C, 373; P, 1849). The lessons in perspective and point of view, begun with Elstir on the first trip to Balbec in relation to visual art and the physical environment, are still ongoing, now expanding into the social and moral spheres. These comments reveal the Narrator's maturing outlook and prepare us for similar episodes late in *The Fugitive* and in *Time Regained* where Saint-Loup's homosexuality is exposed and Charlus's taste for sado-masochism is discovered.

Before then, at the Verdurin soirée, we see how, as Charlus has aged, aspects of his character, particularly his sexuality, have become more pronounced, almost to the point of caricature. The Narrator says of Charlus that 'he recognized immediately things to which no one would ever have paid attention, and this not only in works of art but in dishes at a dinner-party (and everything else between painting and cooking)' (C, 247; P, 1759), remarks which remind us of the similarity between Charlus and the mature Narrator himself. Indeed, as we learn more about Charlus and Morel's relationship we recognize troubles resembling the Narrator's own. Charlus's concerns about a salacious letter from Léa to Morel that he accidentally opens, however, equally recall Swann's turmoil over Odette's letter to Forcheville in 'Swann in Love'. Proust shows us how love affairs, whatever their nature, tend to take similar paths, stimulate the same emotions and insecurities, and in almost every case we blunder on, happily blinded by our desires to the fate that awaits us. There is a tension, then, between this point and that illustrated by M. Verdurin's unexpected compassion towards Saniette: relations and loves often unfold in the same patterns, yet individuals' characters are unpredictable, endlessly shifting. Proust does not seek to resolve this tension: he delights in observing how life can leave us perplexed or delighted by unforeseeable twists and turns just as often as it can pitch us into despair by taking a course which is familiar but over which we have no control. Drawing our attention to such matters, Proust invites us to revisit our earlier assessments of people and situations, wills us to look more carefully, to judge less quickly.

The closing movement of *The Captive* draws away from the salons and brings us back into the enclosed spaces shared by the Narrator and Albertine. When he arrives home, he pauses to look up at Albertine's window, lit from within: behind the 'parallel bars of gold' formed by the light escaping the slats of the shutters, the Narrator is aware that there lies a treasure, but one 'in exchange for which I had forfeited my freedom, my solitude, my thought'. Proust's language recalls the conceits of the metaphysical poets: these bars have the semantic value of precious metal and carceral confinement; Albertine is enclosed yet the Narrator feels entrapped: 'I seemed to behold the luminous gates', he suggests, 'which were about to close behind me and of which I myself had forged, for an eternal slavery, the inflexible bars of gold' (C, 378; P, 1852). Joy for the Narrator – and for Albertine – is a long way off, and something between them has to give.

His jealous inquisitions resume, provoking lies and unexpected revelations in equal measure. The floodgates yield when Albertine loses her temper and lets slip part of a phrase whose full sense the Narrator, like a frustrated crossword puzzler, takes a long time to piece together. Albertine cries that she wishes he would leave her 'une fois libre pour que j'aïlle me faire casser ...' (P, 1857) [free for once so that I can go and get myself b...] (C, 385, trans. mod.). The expression that the Narrator eventually realizes, with shock and dismay, had been on Albertine's lips is 'me faire casser le pot', an extremely vulgar slang phrase meaning 'to have anal intercourse'. Albertine's language has always been a source of fascination and pleasure for the Narrator; now her words represent a gateway to an abject world whose existence he has suspected, but the reality of which, for reasons of self-preservation, he had not fully countenanced.

This verbal wound for the Narrator is a deep one. His reaction is to suggest that they separate the following day. In the conversation that ensues things deteriorate as Albertine, in a bid to prove a commitment to honesty, admits that she once had a three-week holiday with Léa. The Narrator's metaphor for the impact of this admission is a forceful one: 'I watched a tongue of flame seize and devour in an instant a novel which I had spent millions of minutes in writing' (C, 399; P, 1866). Despite his mental turmoil, when it comes to the moment of action, the Narrator cannot bring himself to split from Albertine: he play-acts a reconciliation and they agree to renounce the plan to separate. Reflecting on this episode, the Narrator's summary of his predicament puts one in mind of the tortuous situational dramas of Samuel Beckett, one of Proust's most sensitive early critics: the Narrator laments 'the impossibility of living together which is the cause of our daily suffering, a suffering preferred by us to that of a separation, which will, however, end by separating us in spite of ourselves' (C, 410; P, 1873).

A preoccupation of the Narrator's since the earliest stages of the *Search* is Venice; repeatedly in *The Captive* he alludes to the fact that Albertine's presence prevents him from fulfilling his dream of visiting the city. He delights in the Fortuny gowns he buys Albertine, whose designs borrow motifs from paintings by Carpaccio and Titian, thus layering the artistry of the contemporary designer with that of the Renaissance painters. The bewitching multiplicity of these garments has its downside, however: the reminders of Venice they provide make the Narrator feel his 'captivity' in Paris all the more sharply.

As the winter gives way to spring his desire for Venice increases, shifts in the weather once more influencing his own mental readiness for change. Before his decision comes, however, there occurs a final positively inflected scene, a last glimmer of hope before we are hauled through the fraught and frantic pages of *The Fugitive*. This scene bears close examination for it offers us once again a model of interpretive practice that we might apply to our reading of the *Search* and beyond. Albertine sits at the pianola and plays pieces of music for the Narrator several times over, knowing from habit that he likes in this way gradually to piece together the disparate lines of the works' structure. Once again we find our keyword: 'She knew and, I think, understood the joy that my mind derived ... from this task of modelling a still shapeless nebula' (C, 425; P, 1883; my emphasis). Like the Narrator in this scene, often the best approach to the *Search* is to apply these principles of careful, repeated appraisal; so doing, in time, the work's internal structuring, cross-currents and echoes become more familiar, more accessible. Listening to Vinteuil in this way affords the Narrator the realization that the joys of great art can approximate to those he felt tasting the *madeleine* or seeing the shifting bell-towers at Martinville: the artist's apprehension of the world, the impression it makes on him or her, is communicated, transposed into art and projected to listeners or viewers through it (C, 426–8; P, 1884–5). Here we have the beginnings of the Narrator's theory of art, which will have its full expression in the library scene in *Time Regained*. For now, however, these pleasures are fleeting and the promise of an artistic vocation unfulfilled, for the Narrator's captive soon becomes a fugitive

The Fugitive

The fraught pages of *The Fugitive* tell of the Narrator's coming to terms with Albertine's disappearance. Each of his many selves must, in turn, adapt to his new circumstances. He constructs and unpicks seemingly endless hypotheses regarding the motivations for her departure and takes solace from bringing young girls to his apartment, a habit that earns him a police summons.

Saint-Loup is sent to scout for Albertine in the Touraine where her aunt has a house. She spots him, however, and writes to the Narrator, claiming to be willing to return provided he cease his underhand tactics. He attempts, unsuccessfully, to call Albertine's bluff and make her return. Eventually he sends her a despairing plea but it crosses with a message from Mme Bontemps informing him of Albertine's death in a riding accident. His jealous enquiries, through Aimé, and his tortuous self-scrutiny and repeated revisiting of their shared past, however, continue well after her death. Gradually his state of mind improves, he begins to notice other women again, in particular one whose allure seems tinged with familiarity: it is Gilberte, bearing Odette's new husband's name, de Forcheville. Hope that an artistic vocation may still be achieved comes when *Le Figaro* publishes an article by the Narrator. A trip to Venice with his mother reawakens him to the joys of art; simultaneously he begins to conceptualize a world without Albertine at its core. He learns of Gilberte's marriage to Saint-Loup and, soon after, through hearsay, of the latter's concealed homosexuality. Time spent with Gilberte at Tansonville and further revelations of Robert's character lead the Narrator to a retrospective reassessment of people and relations long taken for granted.

Albertine's departure poses the Narrator the problem of coming to terms with life on his own. Readers will recall his distress as a child, left without his mother's kiss. The solace derived from Albertine's kiss and her presence was associated with those of the mother in *The Captive*. Now the pain of Albertine's flight, he suggests, brings 'all the anxieties I had felt ever since my childhood ... to amalgamate themselves with it in a homogenous mass that suffocated me' (*F*, 483; *AD*, 1923). This final verb (Proust's French gives 'étouffer') recalls the entrapment of the previous volume but equally serves as a reminder of the respiratory problems from which Proust suffered throughout his life and anticipates the increased use of images of illness and medicine we find in this volume. Even as gradually the Narrator discovered Albertine's lies and infidelities, her presence consoled him. Now in her absence his mind carries on its jealous fabrications without respite. Persuading himself that their separation will be temporary is harder than expected, since 'at every moment there was one more of those innumerable and humble "selves" that compose our personality which was still unaware of Albertine's departure and must be informed of it' (*F*, 490; *AD*, 1927). If this complexity were not enough, there comes the further realization that, like him, she is multiple: even after the death of her physical being she lives on in manifold forms in his memory.

As a result, major themes of *The Fugitive* are suffering, solitude, memory and the multiplicity of human character. Geographically speaking, this volume is wide-ranging, taking in Paris, Venice, Balbec and the Touraine. Nevertheless,

the landscapes to which readers have to become accustomed for long stretches are those of the Narrator's mind. For the most part we are enclosed with the thoughts, vivid and wild, of the Narrator. Coming to terms with Albertine's departure involves rethinking his relation to moments of his past, for after her disappearance (and above all after her death) their relationship exists only in his memories. *The Fugitive*, as a result, might be considered as the archive or memory of the novel up to that point: for the Narrator to be able to move beyond his loss and overcome his anxieties, he must reconsider past incidents, often long distant, and put his past selves (and the multiple Albertines to which they are attached) to rest. Voluntarily and involuntarily, many moments return to the Narrator's mind, sparking his thoughts and challenging our reading memory. He realizes that forgetting, oblivion (the French 'oubli' has both these senses) is what he needs in order to move on; but, just as we cannot voluntarily call to mind all our past experiences, we cannot *will* oblivion to submerge our past: forgetting takes time and before the period of calm which this eventually brings must come pain; and *The Fugitive* has this in abundance.

When Françoise matter-of-factly observes that Albertine's rings, discovered in a drawer, seem to come from the same source (something Albertine had denied), the Narrator's reaction illustrates a recurring concern of *The Fugitive*, the painful interrelation of mind and body. It is not just a mental torment he suffers: 'I might have picked up the wrong bottle of pills and, instead of swallowing a few veronal tablets on a day when I felt that I had drunk too many cups of tea, might have swallowed as many caffeine tablets, and my heart would not have pounded more violently' (*F*, 530; *AD*, 1953). This analogy shows how the force of mental activity, here the thought that Albertine was 'kept' by another person, can assail our vulnerable bodies with little warning. The Narrator's moments of greatest joy arise from the conjunction of his bodily, sensory engagements with the world (with a scent, a flavour, a certain musical signature) and the mental activity they provoke (such as a flood of memories or a rush of happiness then expressed through metaphors for the experience itself). The destabilizing impact of finding these rings is a reminder of the negative and potentially damaging nature of the mind-body relation to which the Narrator is so sensitive. As the volume progresses we encounter many more images of troubled or disturbed interactions between mind and body which remind us how coming to terms with loss is both mental *and* corporeal.

The following comment, made after hearing of Albertine's death, reveals how out of synch the Narrator's emotions are with the events he has just learned about: 'for the death of Albertine to have been able to eliminate my suffering' (that is, the suffering caused by her lies, infidelities and her departure), he

reflects, 'the shock of the fall would have had to kill her not only in Touraine but in myself. There, she had never been more alive' (*F*, 546; *AD*, 1963). He superficially takes cognizance of her death (the phrase 'Albertine was dead' and variants on it occur repeatedly in the pages that follow, as if to show his attempts at acceptance) but he cannot face this reality, let alone mourn her, until his jealous preoccupations are worked through. And they are legion.

Her death makes little initial difference to the Narrator's state of mind: after all, the mental images we have of someone do not differ greatly according to whether that person is alive or dead; it is impossible 'to picture to ourselves anything but life' (*F*, 594; *AD*, 1995). But often these pictures are painfully vivid: when Aimé reports back on Albertine's liaisons with a girl who worked in a bath-house she frequented, his messages are all too detailed and feed yet another round of anguished imaginings, built upon Albertine's phrase 'oh it's too heavenly!' (*F*, 600; *AD*, 1999), uttered in the throes of passion. Additionally, in the course of his daily business, the Narrator's actions provoke involuntary memories of Albertine that offer a curious blend of pleasure (past happiness is relived) and pain (from the realization that the Albertine and the self remembered are no more):

occasionally, as one recovers the remnants of a squandered fortune, I recaptured ['retrouvais'] some of them [happy memories of Albertine] which I had thought to be lost ['perdus']: for instance, tying a scarf behind my neck instead of in front, I remembered a drive which I had never thought of since, during which ... Albertine had arranged my scarf for me in this way after first kissing me. (*F*, 607; *AD*, 2004)

Lost and found, the past as treasure: word and image choices here subtly recall the goals of the *Search*, announced from its title page. Perhaps, the optimistic reader might think, spotting these keywords, there *is* a way out of the labyrinth, a spark of hope beyond the Narrator's lengthy ponderings in the dark.

Approaching the close of Chapter One, he refers to his 'waning love', alludes to the possibility of new amorous adventures; but, predictably, he soon suggests that taking lovers is merely an attempt to fill a vacuum that cannot be filled. He had earlier reflected in an uncompromising (not to say breathtakingly misogynistic) moment that 'there is not a woman in the world the possession of whom is as precious as that of the truths which she reveals to us by causing us to suffer' (*F*, 567; *AD*, 1977). By the end of the chapter, his suffering does seem to have brought him to a point of relative stability and lucidity. His mind, characteristically, is already reaching beyond Albertine to the formulation of a law that might hold for all relations. What is salutary for self-preservation in the short to medium term (he will forget Albertine and be able to get on with his life) is negative in the long run because of the implications it has for emotional

interaction and 'love' more generally: 'it is the tragedy of other people', he summarizes, 'that they are merely showcases for the very perishable collections of one's own mind ... one bases upon them projects which have all the fervour of thought; but thought languishes and memory decays' (*F*, 637; *AD*, 2024). And so, staggering under the heft of this gloomy observation, we pass on to Chapter Two.

'It was not that I did not still love Albertine', he begins, and we wonder whether there will be any end to his vacillations. He realizes that he must make the retrograde journey through the different phases of his love in order to arrive at his 'initial stage of indifference' (*F*, 638; *AD*, 2024), a phrase which recalls the opening lines of 'Place-names: The Place', in *Within a Budding Grove*, where he confidently announced having 'arrived at a state of almost complete indifference to Gilberte' by the time of his first trip to Balbec (*BG*, 253; *JF*, 511). He is aware (and careful, retentive readers will remember) that he has been through this process before: it was his renewed indifference to Gilberte that allowed him to pay heed to the young girls at Balbec in the first place.

Out walking one day he finds himself humming Vinteuil's sonata in which, towards the end, the notes of the little phrase become dispersed. This takes on a new significance: 'aware that, day by day, one element after another of my love was vanishing ... it was my love that, in the scattered notes of the little phrase, I seemed to see disintegrating before my eyes' (*F*, 640; *AD*, 2026). On the same walk he catches sight of a group of young women whom he tries, unsuccessfully, to follow. Seeing them again leaving the Guermites' doorway a few days later, the Narrator is 'set aflame' by the lingering gaze of one of them. A note from the Guermites' concierge reveals her name to be Mlle Deporcheville, which he 'corrects' to 'd'Éporcheville', the young woman of high birth who Saint-Loup had informed him frequented houses of assignation. To confirm he has the right name, he sends a telegram to Saint-Loup, only to receive, after a spell of frantic anticipation, the deflating news that the woman they had spoken of was 'Mlle d'Orgeville', at present out of the country: his excitement has been for nought. A little later, *chez* Guermites, the girl who had caught his gaze asks to be *re-introduced* to the Narrator. The mistaken name was *de Forcheville*, that of Odette's second husband, Swann's old rival, now adopted by Gilberte. The girl whose allure he had keenly felt but who he had not recognized is his childhood friend, now 'one of the richest heiresses in France'. 'Our mistake', states the Narrator, reflecting on the sequence of events and echoing lessons learnt long ago from Elstir's paintings in Balbec, 'lies in supposing that things present themselves as they really are, names as they are written, people as photography and psychology give an unalterable notion of them' (*F*, 656; *AD*, 2036).

Between Saint-Loup's telegram and the discovery of the alluring stranger's identity there intervenes an episode which is a key step on the Narrator's path towards becoming an artist. His article (the piece on the Martinville bell towers we read in *SW*, 217–18; 149–50) appears in a newspaper, *Le Figaro*. Suddenly we enter an extended, detailed consideration of artistic production and consumption. The Narrator seeks to read it as if he were not the author (an impossible task but not one we are surprised to find him attempting). In short he tries to piece together a phenomenology of reading, a philosophical account of the nature of the act itself, similar to the consideration given to the act of listening to music in *The Captive* when the Narrator first hears Vinteuil's septet. Commenting that the beauty of a written text is partly in the author's thoughts and 'fully realized only in the minds of his readers' (*F*, 652; *AD*, 2033), he anticipates an important strand of twentieth-century literary theory, paradigmatically expressed in Roland Barthes' key essay 'The Death of the Author' (1968).⁵ He also comes to the vital realization that writing might free him from his numbing worldly obligations: through writing he might wean himself off hollow social pleasures and find real satisfaction in literature (*F*, 654; *AD*, 2035).

Andrée, questioned at length in the first chapter, is grilled once more; having admitted to same-sex relations but denied they ever took place between her and Albertine during her first questioning, she now admits having previously lied. Her revelations – of the intricacies of the syringa incident; of assignations arranged between Morel and Albertine, where young girls were lured and corrupted by the former, then turned over to the desires of the latter; of liaisons, earlier categorically denied, in the Buttes-Chaumont and elsewhere – are, curiously, not entirely negative for the Narrator. They cause the pain associated with discovering unpalatable truths, but they also afford him the pleasure of seeing his jealous suspicions proved correct after a long spell of uncertainty. Repeatedly *The Fugitive* seems to tell us that the truth always hurts, but it is not without recompense since it tends to lead us towards a better understanding of the greater laws that determine our behaviour.

The process, however, is long and slow, and the world-weary Narrator is able to conclude at the close of Chapter Two only that 'truth and life are very difficult to fathom', a statement whose simplicity of sentiment and syntax contrasts strongly with the convolutions of so much of what we have laboured through to arrive at this point. Sad and exhausted, he embarks upon his long-anticipated journey to Venice with his mother. Finally his indifference towards Albertine seems complete: he explores the enchanted streets and canals of Venice, halfway between land and sea, evocative of Combray and Balbec, a city of art and the near-constant promise of erotic fulfilment. Previously multiplicity of

character, of appearance, of behaviour (for example, the Martinville bell towers; the sea at Balbec; Odette; Charlus; Albertine) has introduced complexity and uncertainty. Now in Venice, multiplicity and mutability seem to be the norm, a source of delight, revelation and beauty. Changes in the tides conceal or reveal unexpected aspects of ancient buildings; as the waters and levels of sunlight shift, the historic city takes on a host of colourings and atmospheres in which the Narrator delights – maritime yet urban, familiar yet strange, exotic, Byzantine, ancient yet vibrantly alive and alluring.

His mother's tenderness, the contemplation of art and architecture, and the promise of the abundant and (he imagines) willing young women of Venice, often metaphorically tied to the art of the city (such as the seventeen-year-old glassware seller whose 'beauty was so noble, so radiant, that it was like acquiring a genuine Titian before leaving the place'; *F*, 735; *AD*, 2087), seem to have displaced Albertine from the Narrator's mind. Then one day a telegram arrives, which reads 'you think me dead, forgive me, I am quite alive, I long to see you, talk about marriage, when do you return? Affectionately. Albertine' (*F*, 736; *AD*, 2088). Although we might expect such news to cause an unprecedented upheaval, it comes at a time when, in his mind, Albertine is now quite dead, so the emotional impact of the news is negligible. He realizes that she was 'no more ... than a bundle of thoughts' and now that those have dissipated like the notes of the little phrase, nothing can reignite his earlier feelings. He feels that this impression confirms the 'total ... death of [his] former self' and a 'complete ... substitution of a new self for that former self' (*F*, 736–7; *AD*, 2088). A genuine sea change seems to have occurred, although careful readers have cause for scepticism: the telegram that seems to announce Albertine's resurrection is far from incontrovertible: the message is tainted by 'corruptions introduced by the Italian clerks' and is 'filled with inaccurately transmitted words' (*F*, 736; *AD*, 2088). Like the handwritten note from the concierge earlier on, this is another example of the Narrator, so ponderous in arriving at conclusions under other circumstances, taking at face value a message whose possible fallibility he would do well to question.

He mentions a 'work on Ruskin' in which he is engaged – further evidence of a turn towards a productive occupation. Immersion in the art of Venice aids his progress in re-establishing himself post-Albertine, but an involuntary memory relating to her threatens his new-found calm when he notices in a Carpaccio painting a figure wearing a garment on which was modelled the Fortuny cloak Albertine wore on their last trip together. This unexpected link to his past restores to the Narrator 'the eyes and the heart of him who had set out that evening with Albertine for Versailles' (*F*, 743; *AD*, 2093). Past time,

we realize once again, is not static or dormant: it is volatile and apt to burst forth into our present should we happen across the right trigger, the existence of which we might be quite unaware. The desire and melancholy the memory instils in him last only a few moments but as he and his mother prepare for their departure from Venice a new problem, a sort of existential inertia, takes hold of him.

With their luggage already dispatched to the station, he sees in a list of guests due to arrive the name of Mme Putbus, the woman whose maid he has longed to meet since being tipped off about her by Saint-Loup (SG, 109–11; 1280–2). He announces he will stay on in Venice; his mother departs, hoping he will join her at the station when he comes to his senses. He eventually does, but first he yields to a crisis which has been waiting to spill over since Albertine's disappearance. Unleashed by the thought of the carnal pleasures with the chambermaid that his departure will make him forgo, feelings of frustration, purposelessness and above all isolation circle round the baleful Narrator, carried on the notes of the hotel singer's rendition of 'O Sole Mio', which seems to pull apart the city around him and his relation to it, leaving him stranded, rudderless.

He finally composes himself and makes it to the station just in time. On the train the Narrator opens a letter he received before leaving the hotel. It is from Gilberte, revealing that the telegram purporting to be from Albertine was in fact from her, the flourishes and embellishments of her handwriting leading 'Gilberte' to be transcribed by telegraph operator as 'Albertine'. The tendency towards error inherent in our interpretive efforts is laid bare here: we rely on the accurate deciphering of written and spoken messages in every sphere of our lives yet our hermeneutics – our art of interpretation – is far from being an exact or reliable science. As the Narrator sums it up: 'we guess as we read, we create; everything starts from an initial error; those that follow (and this applies not only to the reading of letters and telegrams, not only to all reading), extraordinary as they may appear to a person who has not begun at the same place, are all quite natural' (*F*, 754; *AD*, 2099). Proust's novel celebrates the achievements of art and the revelations of memory; crucial passages like this remind us that it also derives great nuance from its exploration of errors and misconstruals, which often prove to be highly valuable for the would-be artist and the reader of the novel alike.

The focus of the final chapter moves away from the Narrator's mental travails and on to the marriages of Saint-Loup to Gilberte and of Legrandin's nephew to Jupien's niece who now bears the noble title 'Mlle d'Oloron', conferred upon her by Charlus, her adoptive guardian. The ironies and absurdities provoked

by such restructurings of the societal landscape are duly noted: because of her title, when Jupien's niece, 'a simple little seamstress', dies from typhoid soon after her wedding, it 'plunges all of the princely families of Europe into mourning' (*F*, 774; *AD*, 2111).

Following the news of Gilberte's marriage come rumours of Saint-Loup's homosexuality (*F*, 762; *AD*, 2104). When he hears a little later that Robert is thought to be keeping mistresses, the Narrator has his own suspicions; Jupien, then Aimé, helps to confirm his hunch: Robert's marriage is one of duty and form, and vitally linked to Gilberte's fortune. She eventually discovers a letter addressed to Robert, signed 'Bobette', who the Narrator discovers to be Morel, on whom Robert spends great sums of Gilberte's money. Her uncertainties regarding the letter replay her father's when faced with Odette's letter to Forcheville; they also recall Charlus faced with the letter from Léa to Morel, which referred to him in the feminine, a gender shift mirrored in the signature 'Bobette'. Proust tightens the screw yet further: Robert is attracted to Morel because he resembles his ex-mistress, Rachel (whose name anagrammatically is found in 'Charlie'). Robert asks Gilberte to dress as a man, leaving one lock of hair free at the front to resemble Morel, a request that recalls Gilberte's mother's transvestism in the *Miss Sacripant* painting, whilst Gilberte, unaware of Robert's preferences, seeks to please him by dressing like Rachel. The patterns of recurrence and return that shape all the novel's relationships reach their apogee in these pages. The Narrator's position in this wretched echo-chamber is one of sadness and disappointment, not because he is judgemental of Saint-Loup's choices but because he has lost a friend: now that men arouse Saint-Loup's desires, they 'no longer inspire his friendship' (*F*, 791; *AD*, 2122).

The Narrator does, however, grow closer to Gilberte. Through her, he renews links to his past in Combray. Spending time together at Tansonville, he discovers that past habits and assumptions had veiled realities quite different from what he had believed to be true as a boy (the source of the Vivonne can be found; the two ways, Guermantes and Swann, can be taken in on the same walk; Gilberte did in fact love him when they played together and desired him again upon seeing him from the Guermantes' porch when he took her for Mlle d'Eporcheville).⁶

The Fugitive tests our readerly resilience as we work through the Narrator's neurotic search for closure on his relationship; it tests our powers of recall and brings back into focus many disparate episodes of the *Search*, drawing together many of its narrative threads. And it shows us how contingency and desire are forces far more influential than the powers of the analytical mind that seeks to account for and contain them.

Time Regained

Amongst the revelations of the Narrator's stay with Gilberte at Tansonville is a strong sense that he lacks literary talent. Ill, he spends years in a sanatorium, visits Paris for a brief spell in 1914 and returns in 1916, but these episodes are not narrated in chronological order. We hear first of his impressions of the city in 1916, fashion trends and the new composition of society. We then return to 1914 and Saint-Loup's and Gilberte's respective, revealing accounts of the impact of the war. Jumping forward again two years, the Narrator strolls with Charlus while the latter expounds his particular, pro-German world view. They part ways; seeking respite the Narrator eventually finds a hotel run, it transpires, by Jupien as a male brothel. He voyeuristically witnesses Charlus chained and flogged by a hired thug. The scene is enfolded in reflections on desire and morality. Saint-Loup is killed in action and soon Morel is arrested for desertion. The Narrator retires once more to a sanatorium, returning to Paris only after the war. Unable to work, he decides to attend a society *matinée*. En route he meets Charlus, a link between different periods of the Narrator's existence but now frail and much deteriorated in health. A succession of involuntary memories suddenly revitalizes moments from his past, which he had thought forever inaccessible. With these fleeting extra-temporal experiences, he realizes that the life he has lived can provide the material for a work of art which might help to acquaint others with their own inner depths. The *matinée* reveals how the social kaleidoscope has turned: Mme Verdurin, by remarriage, has become the *Princesse de Guermantes*; the two ways of Combray are joined in Gilberte and Saint-Loup's daughter. All around are intimations of mortality: old acquaintances are transfigured by age, bodies and memories are damaged by the passage of time, but the Narrator must hold firm: his imperative now is to write.

The final volume opens without fanfare. After further revelations of Saint-Loup's infidelities (to Gilberte's great chagrin he does keep mistresses, although she ignores that it is not for pleasure but to divert attention from his homosexual affair with Morel), we find the Narrator settling down with some bedtime reading on his final night at Tansonville. As so often in the *Search*, a mundane activity proves to be highly revealing. In a recently published volume of the Goncourt journal he reads an account (incorporated in the text and in fact a brilliant pastiche of the journal) of a dinner *chez Verdurin* attended by Edmond de Goncourt in the company of Swann, Cottard, Brichot and others already familiar to us. The journal's effect on the Narrator is profound. When he attended such dinners, he found the guests insipid, the conversation banal. Goncourt's version of events suggests quite the opposite. It makes the Narrator

question his own capacity for observation, the likelihood of his ever being able to write. He had felt that literature was intended to illuminate the deeper truths of the human condition, yet here it is crammed with crockery design, potato salad and chatter about discoloured pearls. If this is literature, thinks the Narrator, either I am not destined for it, or it is not what I had thought. The crux of the matter, as Elstir had announced long before with regard to painting, comes down to vision and perspective. Without fully recognizing the advantages of such an approach, the Narrator notes that when in society, rather than soaking up surface detail *à la* Goncourt, his attention is drawn to how individuals' manners of speaking 'revealed their character or their foibles'. Rather than looking at guests at a dinner party he 'was in fact examining them with X-rays', seeking a knowledge deeper than that afforded by table talk and appearances (*TR*, 33–4; 2147). For now the Narrator feels that 'Goncourt knew how to listen, just as he knew how to see; I did not' (*TR*, 37; 2149). When he finally recognizes and outlines the goals of his own work of literature later on, it becomes clear how his radiographic approach *is* well suited to revealing truths about life, far beyond what Goncourt's writing could ever achieve.

After Tansonville the Narrator mentions the 'long years – in which I had ... completely renounced the project of writing – which I spent far from Paris receiving treatment in a sanatorium' (*TR*, 39–40; 2151). With this the narrative winds forward to his return in 1916. The city is changed by the coming of war and the passage of time; the social ascension of Mme Verdurin and Mme Bontemps, for example, is such that they are described as the 'queens of this wartime Paris' (*TR*, 40; 2151). By 1916 it was already a decade since Dreyfus's pardon and reinstatement in the military: so long, in the memory of the little clan, that Brichot refers to the period of the Affair as "those prehistoric times" (*TR*, 45; 2155). Mme Verdurin now says "Come at 5 o'clock to talk about the war" as she would have said in the past: "Come and talk about the Affair," or ... "Come to hear Morel" (*TR*, 49; 2157). However much they vaunt their sentiments with regard to the war, for these socialites so doing is just another otiose occupation, like playing cards or listening to music. The contrast between the Paris of the wealthy non-combatants and the situation experienced at the front is poignantly underlined when 'a wretched soldier on leave' is described looking into the windows of a packed restaurant, just as the working-class locals gazed into the restaurant at Balbec; the Narrator, reflecting on this man's imminent return to the trenches, imagines him saying to himself "You'd never know there was a war on here" (*TR*, 54; 2160).

The realities of the war, however, do make their way into the narrative. We hear that many of Saint-Loup's contemporaries from Doncières perished at the battle of the Marne and elsewhere (*TR*, 64; 2166). Gilberte writes to the

Narrator in September 1914 telling of her experience of fleeing the raids on Paris for her safety, making it back to Tansonville, only to find herself obliged to billet German troops. Robert, serving at the front, writes around the same time, voicing dislike for the clichés of nationalism but also burgeoning admiration and respect for the men around him and under his command (*TR*, 77; 2175). A second letter from Gilberte in 1916 shows how circumstances can change the way we perceive and recall things. In this letter, forgetting the earlier one, she claims that she originally returned to Tansonville not to escape the dangers of the raids but to save from the advancing German troops the estate that had been so dear to her father. She describes how in the ‘battle of Méséglise’ the places of their childhood became strategic sites in a key military conflict: the hawthorn path was the dividing line between French and German troops who, for over a year, each held half of Combray. The ‘deux côtés’ or two sides that shaped the Narrator’s childhood conception of time and space are absorbed into the narrative of the war and take on a new complexion.

Focus then shifts to Charlus, who the Narrator, out walking, identifies as the shadowy figure he sees following a pair of *zouaves* (infantrymen from Algeria) in the streets at dusk. He now bears little resemblance to the *grand seigneur* we first met in Balbec: shamed and ridiculed *chez* Verdurin in *The Captive*, he still suffers from a universally bad reputation. Morel publishes slanderous articles about him and Mme Verdurin seeks to discredit him any way she can, spreading rumours that (amongst other things) he is a German spy (*TR*, 93; 2184–5). Charlus does have Germanic origins (his mother was Duchess of Bavaria) and he happily makes his pro-German opinions known but, as the Narrator points out, this does not make him immoral, merely unpatriotic in a country where patriotism frequently spills over into blinkered jingoism.

Proust’s portraiture is a constant source of entertainment and insight throughout the *Search*. Mme Verdurin, readers will recall, is captured unflatteringly in *The Captive*, her nose greased with rhino-gomerol to protect her from the impact of Vinteuil’s music (*C*, 271–2; *P*, 1784); in *Time Regained* we have another rather unsavoury snapshot. Despite shortages, to calm her headaches she obtains a spurious prescription from Cottard permitting her to have croissants made for her breakfast. The first of these ‘medicinal’ pastries arrives the morning the newspapers report the sinking of the *Lusitania*, an ocean liner torpedoed by a German U-boat in May 1915, taking over 1,000 lives:

“How horrible!” she said ... But the death of all these drowned people must have been reduced a thousand million times before it impinged upon her, for even as, with her mouth full, she made these distressful observations, the expression which spread over her face, brought there (one must suppose) by the savour of that so precious remedy against

headaches, the croissant, was in fact one of satisfaction and pleasure.
(*TR*, 102; 2190)

Whilst remaining non-judgemental, the single sentence of commentary here gives us all the detail we need to recognize the depth of disingenuousness, self-centredness and moral apathy in Mme Verdurin.

By contrast, on just the following page we read of the 'rare moral qualities' of Charlus (*TR*, 103; 2191), who criticizes at length the biased presentation of the conflict in the newspapers, vital organs of communication in times of war. Charlus shows more compassion and feeling than Mme Verdurin can muster for fellow human beings when he relates to the Narrator the fate of the Combray church. Structurally, thematically and symbolically important as a site of continuity between past and present (*SW*, 68–75; 55–60), it was 'destroyed by the French and the English because it served as an observation post to the Germans'. Charlus laments the destruction of 'all that mixture of art and still-living history' (*TR*, 130; 2207); when Saint-Loup is killed his body is returned and buried at Combray, an addition to the line of illustrious Guermantes whose presence below the ground contributed to the 'four-dimensional' feel of the church when it still stood.

Having parted ways with Charlus (*TR*, 147; 2218), the Narrator walks on, but, fatigued, seeks somewhere to rest before returning home. One establishment in the almost deserted streets shows signs of life: an officer leaves whose face the Narrator does not see but whose gait is very similar to Saint-Loup's. The conversation he overhears of the men sitting in a room near the door offers scant interest until mention is made of someone being tied up and beaten. Keen to satisfy his curiosity and his thirst, he enters 'with the pride of an emissary of justice and the rapture of a poet' (*TR*, 150; 2220).

The hotel, it soon transpires, is a male brothel. The talk of those inside the establishment, mainly working-class men and servicemen on leave, offers a counterbalance to the views of the war we have already encountered from Charlus and Saint-Loup. After taking a room and having a drink, the Narrator creeps upstairs out of curiosity. 'Stifled groans' emanate from the room he finds there. Peering in through a small, fortuitously un-curtained window, he sees the recipient of the blows, 'chained to a bed like Prometheus to his rock': Charlus (*TR*, 154; 2223). He has visible bruising from previous beatings and very real blood runs down his back, but this scene, like many others in the *Search*, is about illusion and desire. Jupien enters – he is the proprietor of the establishment, the Narrator-voyeur discovers – and Charlus hectors him about his assailant, Maurice, who is neither 'sufficiently brutal' nor suitably convincing in his verbal abuse (*TR*, 156; 2224). Jupien offers the services of a man from a slaughter house and, when this individual enters, the Narrator notices

that both men vaguely resemble Morel. Just as the Narrator and Saint-Loup sought satisfaction in the arms of others resembling their lost loves, Charlus seeks a substitute satisfaction at the hands of men who look like his inaccessible object of desire. Maurice and the slaughter-man, however, are in fact a jeweller's assistant and a hotel worker, playing roles under Jupien's direction to fulfil the baron's fantasy. Afterwards, when Charlus performs a sort of inspection of Jupien's employees, it becomes clearer still how far his satisfaction is determined by his imagination: Jupien swears his men are thugs, murderers and pimps, which pleases Charlus, but when one denies he would kill a woman and another says he will share his payment with his parents and his brother at the front, remarks that suggest underlying virtue, Charlus cannot contain his angry disappointment.

There is a commotion at the hotel about a *croix de guerre* that has been found. An air-raid delays the Narrator's return home, but on his arrival he finds that he has missed Saint-Loup, who called in looking for his missing medal: progressively, it seems, the paths of uncle and nephew converge in their pursuit of pleasure, an endeavour which for so many of the novel's characters takes precedence over all other concerns. Before leaving Jupien's hotel the Narrator witnesses an obstreperous client demanding the services of a particular employee for the following day, enraged at the thought that anything might come between him and his pleasure. Soon after, however, we encounter two characters who contrast starkly with this particular pleasure-seeker.

Françoise's cousins made millions as café proprietors before taking retirement; when their nephew dies in the war, leaving behind his own café to run and a young widow, they come out of retirement, getting up at dawn for three years to work through the day for no other reward than seeing their niece kept afloat. When this anecdote is related, Proust's voice intrudes:

In this book where there is not a single incident which is not fictitious, not a single character who is a real person in disguise, in which everything has been invented by me in accordance with the requirements of my theme, I owe it to the credit of my country to say that only the millionaire cousins of Françoise who came out of retirement to help their niece ..., only they are real people who exist. (*TR*, 191; 2246)

Society might have its share of 'vile shirkers' like the arrogant man at Jupien's hotel (we might equally think of croissant-munching Mme Verdurin) but 'they are redeemed', the Narrator argues, by the 'innumerable throng' of selfless, compassionate people like Françoise's cousins the Larivière's whom he puts on a par with the soldiers defending their country (*TR*, 191–2; 2246). This unexpected authorial intercession draws attention to the novel's fictional status and warns readers off interpreting it as a *roman à clefs*; it might, moreover, be seen

as an effort from the author to emphasize his support for the national cause in the wake of criticisms he received as a non-combatant when *Within a Budding Grove* won the Goncourt prize in 1919.

The Narrator retires to another sanatorium and ‘many years’ pass before he returns to post-war Paris by train (*TR*, 202; 2253), a journey we might see as closing the loop begun with the first exultant trip to Balbec that saw him dashing back and forth, trying ‘to obtain ... a continuous picture’ of the shifting skies at sunrise (*BG*, 268; *JF*, 521). His return to Paris, however, is without such promise; from the train he gazes on a sunlit stand of trees but derives no pleasure from their beauty: ‘if ever I thought of myself as a poet,’ he glumly comments, ‘I know now that I am not one’ (*TR*, 202; 2253). He is convinced his life has been for nought. The name of the Princesse de Guermantes on an invitation to a *matinée*, however, reignites for him memories and associations of past times, which convince him to emerge from his seclusion.

Against the void of his recent experiences, on the way to the reception he suddenly feels himself soaring ‘towards the silent heights of memory’: threading the Paris streets he took with Françoise on his way to the Champs-Élysées as a boy, his carriage seems to be transporting him through various layers of his past (*TR*, 206–7; 2255–6). Stopping en route he meets Charlus, white-haired, physically diminished but still lucid. Charlus’s listing of contemporaries who have died underscores a key theme of the novel’s closing movement: ‘every time he uttered it, the word “dead” seemed to fall upon his departed friends like a spadeful of earth each heavier than the last’ (*TR*, 212; 2259). Death sinks us into the earth, inanimate, whilst memory permits us to soar to vertiginous heights; the turbulence we experience between these positions is explored by Proust in the remaining pages of the novel.

Stepping aside to let a carriage pass in the Princesse de Guermantes’ courtyard the Narrator stumbles on some uneven paving stones. This physical sensation disperses his discouragement and gloom, fills him with the same, sudden pulse of happiness provoked by the bell towers at Martinville, the taste of the *madeleine*, the experience of hearing Vinteuil’s septet. He soon recalls having the sensation before in St Mark’s Square in Venice, the memories of which flood back just as had those of Combray with the *madeleine*. In the pages that follow, the Narrator has a succession of further experiences of involuntary memory. A spoon knocking against a plate recalls the sound of a railwayman’s hammer on the wheels of the train in which he sat and observed, unmoved, the row of sunlit trees on his return to Paris; wiping his mouth with a starched napkin brings back the seascape at Balbec that he looked upon, drying his face with a similarly textured towel, on his first morning there; the shrill sound of water in a pipe recalls the pleasure-steamers at Balbec; and discovering a copy

of *François le Champi* in the library reincarnates in him the young boy who first read the book with his mother in Combray. The pages dedicated to working through the many lessons of these experiences are some of the richest and most densely packed in the novel; they repay close attention and re-reading.

When experiencing the past and the present at once, that moment, strictly speaking, is neither: it is situated outside Time. For their fleeting duration these moments offer a sense of eternity – time in its purest, immeasurable state. Impressions are stored up within us, often ‘lost’ in the depths of our memories without our being aware of it. If we happen to encounter the right trigger we can relive the original experience in a very pure form, unadulterated by the deformations our mind can introduce when we seek consciously to store an impression. The Narrator states that ‘the impression is for the writer what experiment is for the scientist, with the difference that in the scientist the work of the intelligence precedes the experiment and in the writer it comes after the impression’ (*TR*, 234; 2273). The writer’s inner store of impressions is a book that he or she alone must learn to decipher before finding a way to transform impressions into expressions – a written form that communicates to the reader.

Merely describing things as the Goncourt journal does cannot perform this task, for ‘it is only *beneath* the surface of [what] such a literature describes that reality has its hidden existence’ (*TR*, 253; 2284; my emphasis). Metaphor is key to accessing this ‘hidden existence’: to interpret a metaphor we must identify an underlying commonality or essence in two things. Through metaphor we get away from mere description and into relationality and interconnection, the pluralities of the world which have fascinated the Narrator throughout the novel.

His experiences can be used to create a work of art which thereby redeems or makes good on the life previously thought worthless. The work in turn offers its readers the opportunity better to recognize life’s riches; it is likened to an optical instrument with which we might ‘read ourselves’ (*TR*, 273–4; 2296–7) and avoid the superficiality that otherwise renders so much of our lives ‘*temps perdu*’. These ideas, and many more that there is not space to consider here, swarm forth from the Narrator’s mind, finally channelled into creative matters beyond jealousy, mourning and illness. If Proust’s theory of literature emerges from these pages in a rather ragged manner, it has every reason to: the suddenness of the Narrator’s epiphanies has provoked a fervent hyperactivity of mind; a neater, more regimented statement from our author-to-be would be out of keeping with the spontaneous rush of the whole episode. We should also note that the editing of *Time Regained* was not finished before Proust’s death, which may account for some of the repetition and inconsistency found in the text.

As he moves into the salons, the tone and focus shift. The guests seem to be masked or disfigured travesties of the old and ageing. But there is no illusion: these are the effects of time on the human body. Time has stooped and silvered individuals who in the Narrator's mind were still in their prime. He is by no means immune but it takes some time for the realization of his own ageing to sink in. These pages offer counterbalance to the euphoria of the triumph over time by which the Narrator was gripped in the library: now frailty and the ultimate threat of death are everywhere in evidence. He feels ready to start his work but also increasingly aware of the limited time he has left to complete it.

At the *matinée* he is confronted with what he terms 'the sensation of Time' (*TR*, 317; 2321), which reveals a disadvantage in the way our memories store up images and impressions: 'nothing is more painful', he summarizes, 'than [the] contrast between the mutability of people and the fixity of memory' (*TR*, 372; 2355). We may be able fleetingly to experience moments outside time but we can do nothing to halt its progress: bodies grow weak, memories grow feeble, details and dates are forgotten, the past becomes '*temps perdu*'. Time, however, is not only destructive:

Life is perpetually weaving fresh threads which link one individual and one event to another, ... these threads are crossed and recrossed, doubled and redoubled to thicken the web, so that between any slightest point of our past and all the others a rich network of memories gives us an almost infinite variety of communicating paths to choose from.
(*TR*, 428; 2388)

If we try diagrammatically to link up even a handful of episodes or characters in the *Search*, the tangle of criss-crossing lines that result – 'transversals', Proust calls them (*TR*, 427; 2387) – vouch for the cogency of these remarks. An art that can incorporate this dense interweave and keep us alert to its nuances has a chance of counteracting the drain of forgetfulness from which everyone comes to suffer, the destructive force of time.

In the closing pages the tempo increases, the focus shifting away from the Narrator's acquaintances on to the business he feels will occupy him until he breathes his last. We are never told that the work we have been reading is that which the Narrator is about to begin writing. Proust's novel is not a closed circle (unlike Ian McEwan's *Atonement* (2001) in which the protagonist reveals herself in the novel's final section as the author of what has come before) and this open-endedness contributes to the urge to start over again that surprises many readers at the end of the book.

Appropriately enough for a work of its scope, the *Search* ends on an image of giants: our store of experience mounts up beneath us as we age, elevating

us until in later life we totter as if on stilts, 'like giants plunged into the years' (*TR*, 451; 2401). Characteristically this image does not aggrandize its author: Proust's focus is on the wonder of the individual, the untold depths each of us has concealed within the meagre confines of our bodies. Our task now, aided immeasurably by Proust's book, is to sound those depths while we still have time