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7. Proust: The Music of Memory

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Memory is not inventive.

Marcel Proust, *The Fugitive*¹

“And no one will ever know, not even oneself, the melody that had been pursuing one with its elusive and delectable rhythm.”² Underneath these words, probably written in 1909 and certainly part of a draft of what was to become *À la recherche du temps perdu*, Proust wrote “Finish there.”³ The melody is a missing memory; and memory itself, in Proust, repeatedly appears as a melody. The analogy helps us, I believe, to bring together the more obvious and the more elusive elements of Proust’s view of this subject, so central to his thought and writing, and especially to understand his sense of the role of memory in relation to chance, intelligence, and the power or impotence of the will.

What is the nature of the melody, and under what conditions do we fail to know it? In the quoted sentence the melody is a simile for “the beautiful things” we may one day write. They are already “inside us,” and whether or not we find an external shape for them is up to us. Gifted people remember such melodies vaguely, they are “obsessed by this blurred memory of truths they have never known,” but if they fail to act on their obsession they are only gifted, “they do not have talent.” “Talent,” Proust says, “is like a sort of memory which will enable them finally to bring this indistinct music closer to them, to hear it clearly, to note it down, to reproduce it, to sing it.” He adds that talent, like memory, weakens with time and that there comes a moment “when the mental muscle which brings both internal and external memories closer no longer has any strength left. In some this age lasts a whole life, from lack of exercise or a too quick self-satisfaction. And no one will ever know . . .”⁴

What “finish there” means, perhaps, is that the book will be done by the time these words find their final place, the melody recovered and reproduced in full, but the story will end not on a note of triumph but on a reminder of how easily it could all have come to nothing, to less than the memory of a vanished tune. Proust was hoping, justifiably as it happened, that his talent would serve him long enough, but he was afraid of his frivolity, or what he called his mundanity, his worldliness. And characteristically, he wanted to turn this doubt itself into his material. “I need to show,” he wrote in a note that appears just above the long simile of the melody, “that when I am worldly I attach too much importance to the danger of worldliness, when my memory grows weak too much importance to the act of reconstruction.” The world is a danger and memory is endangered, but both are what we might call contextual fictions, enhanced by immediate pressures and preoccupations.

Proust uses two words for memory—*souvenir* to mean what is remembered and *mémoire* the capacity to remember—and the most difficult and interesting ideas in the passage about the melody are those of permanent forgetting, for the duration of “a whole life,” and of remembering what we never knew in the first place. The lost tune is lost time and talent is the long labor of putting together what we didn’t know we knew. Much of Proust’s mature theory of memory is here, but a famous key element appears to be missing. What about the concept of involuntary memory? Doesn’t Proust believe that conscious and willed attempts at remembering are precisely a form of losing life and time rather than finding them?

In a famous passage of *À la recherche du temps perdu*, Proust’s narrator says the flowers he now sees for the first time do not seem to him to be real flowers (*de vraies fleurs*). This may be, he speculates, because “reality is formed only in the memory” or because “the faith which creates” has dried up in him.⁵ The language and the logic suggest a radical subjectivity, a version of the philosophical skepticism that doubts the existence of the world outside the mind, and indeed the narrator courts these associations because of the coloring they provide and because the element of subjectivity is essential to him. But his claim is not a skeptical one.

He is not saying the flowers are not real in the accepted sense. He is saying they don’t feel real to him, that they do not provoke the full range of perceptual and imaginative experience that is supposed to result from the encounter of an actual person with an actual world, something that goes far beyond the intellectual acknowledgement that the realm of phenomena exists. This form of reality, he suggests, is mostly lost for the modern self, preserved if at all only in memory, and was probably always dependent on the mind’s ability to collaborate with the world, to imagine for itself what is already there. This is the implication of his use of the term *faith*.

What the narrator calls involuntary memory is always a recovery of reality in this sense. He argues that this rescue produces a vivid, initially inexplicable happiness, a delivery from time that is also a revelation of the essence of time; but he also offers details of

powerful instances where the rescue causes intense or protracted pain or a helpless, scarcely nameable distress. The difference between the argued cases and the unargued ones is left for us to resolve, and this is why Proust can insist on the absolute centrality of involuntary memory to his novel while one of his most subtle and distinguished critics can say the work “finally depends on a memory that is in no way the involuntary memory.”⁶ Or rather, this is why they can both be right. This essay seeks to place Proust’s theory of memory at the meeting point of these apparently conflicting assertions.

Beyond Recall

Most readers and critics have taken Proust’s word for the nature of involuntary memory, and the role it plays in his work,⁷ but there have been interesting and sympathetic resistances to his claims: chiefly because the claims are thought to undervalue the elements of will, choice, and work in Proust’s achievement,⁸ but also because the phenomenon of involuntary memory itself, while familiar and observable enough, is “oddly inert and unhelpful” as a guiding idea,⁹ is more like forgetting than remembering,¹⁰ or is not really a phenomenon of memory at all.¹¹

Proust certainly came to feel that involuntary memory was the key theoretical element in his novel, and his chief claim to conceptual originality. In a 1913 letter he asserts very firmly that Bergson doesn’t distinguish between the two modes of memory, although it has been suggested Proust was wrong about this.¹² For Proust, involuntary memory “is the only true one, since voluntary memory, the memory of the intelligence and the eyes, yields us only imprecise facsimiles of the past.”¹³ We don’t recall the past, he says, until we stumble into a sensation, catch an old scent or the sight of an old glove. The old scent reminds us that life is beautiful, and we are enchanted; the old glove reminds us that we still love those who are dead, and we burst into tears. In both cases we have regained a reality we thought we had lost. Proust uses much the same terms in an interview from the same year, and adds that he believes “an artist should scarcely turn to anything except involuntary memories for his or her basic material.”¹⁴ It’s hard to tell how large a reservation lurks in that “scarcely,” what other forms of memory may be useful, or what else apart from memory. The artist should behave in this way first because the involuntary nature of such experiences is a proof of their authenticity, and second because these instants of resurrection “bring things back in an exact dose of memory and forgetting.”¹⁵ They bring back, we might say, forgottenness as well as what was forgotten.

In what is perhaps his earliest attempt at an evocation of an involuntary memory, in a draft fragment intended for his novel *Jean Santeuil*, Proust writes literally of the melody that later becomes figurative. His hero, listening to a pianist playing a waltz, feels a memory stirring inside him, probably “some forgotten melody” that contained the same musical phrase or the same chord. The melody struggles “in the depths of forgetfulness,” seeks

to “return to life, to be heard and recognized,” but Jean can’t revive it. Then he realizes that it is not the phrase or the chord, not the music at all, that has half-caught his consciousness, it is the sound of the piano itself, which recalls that of his grandfather, who long ago used to play every evening when the boy dined with him. Jean has never thought of the sound since, the narrator says, and never would have thought of it without the accident of the recent pianist’s touch. “And the photograph of all that had taken its place in the archives of his memory, archives so vast that he would never look at most of them, unless a chance event were to open them again.”¹⁶

The metaphor of the photograph of sound is curious, as if to be remembered is to be seen, and the vast archives already suggest that memory itself is a form of forgetting. But there is no suggestion yet that the archives can’t be opened, that there is any impediment in them apart from their size, and certainly no suggestion that conscious attempts at storage will destroy the stored material. However, the narrator of the novel does speak elsewhere of “disinterested memory,” that is, a memory unengaged in the practical business of getting through the day. We do not perceive reality as we live it, the narrator says, but we find it again as long as we do not look for it, “in the sudden recall of a gust of wind, of a smell of fire, of a low, flat, sunny sky, close to rain, above the roofs.”¹⁷

The intervention of chance, or the slackening of the concentrated will, is essential in both passages. “Disinterested” actually means “involuntary” in this lexicon. What gets in the way of memory is trying or needing to remember, just as what blots out life and reality is living itself, the daily pragmatism of survival.

There is a curious passage in *À la recherche du temps perdu* where the narrator reports a supposed opinion of Bergson’s, represented by an equally supposed Norwegian philosopher. The question is the influence of drugs on memory. Very slight, the fictional Bergson says, at least as far the “solid memory of our everyday lives” is concerned. He does have a friend, though, a professor of ancient history, who finds it hard to remember Greek quotations if he has taken a sleeping pill the night before. The narrator thinks the effect of drugs on memory is exactly the reverse. He doesn’t lose his grasp of Baudelaire’s poetry, he says, or of the philosophy of Porphyry or Plotinus, he loses precisely his sense of everyday life, his “capacity to act in minor matters, in everything that calls for action if we are to repossess it just in time.”¹⁸

It’s hard to know what’s at stake in this (imaginary) argument, but it is clearly connected to Proust’s investment in the idea of involuntary memory and to his claim that Bergson doesn’t sufficiently distinguish it from memory in its other forms. Drugs, like chance, invade and alter the world of practical intentions. They inhibit, in the view of Proust’s narrator, only what is immediately useful, leaving everything else as it was. So the implied reproach to Bergson rests on his presumed acceptance of the undivided solidity of memory, as if the virtue of memory lay in what it makes available to us rather than what it hides, as if were not obvious that the most interesting regions of those vast archives conjured up in *Jean Santeuil* are those we can never plan to visit.

The Norwegian philosopher is further reported as saying that Bergson believes “we possess all our memories, if not the faculty of recalling them.” “But what is a memory that we cannot recall?” the narrator pretends to ask. “We do not recall our memories of the last thirty years,” he goes on to answer, “but we are totally steeped in them.” And from here he moves into a mischievous fantasy, a comic critique of his own theory as much as of Bergson’s. If I have within me such a mass of my own memories I can’t summon up, the narrator argues, who is to say this invisible fund doesn’t contain other lives I can’t remember either, my life as another man, for example, or even on another planet? “The same oblivion effaces everything.”¹⁹

We don’t need to pursue this entertaining game any further, but it’s worth pausing over Proust’s narrator’s use of the words *call* and *recall*: *appeler* and *rappeler*. These are very ordinary terms, and in *Jean Santeuil* Proust uses *rappel* simply to mean memory. But we can see a particular precision in the language of the later novel and in the letter I quoted, where Proust speaks of our failure to register how beautiful life is or how much we love our cherished dead. It’s not that we don’t remember, it’s that we can’t recall. Significant memories don’t come when they are called, and we couldn’t call them anyway, because we don’t know of their existence until they suddenly arrive. We happen on them; they happen to us.

Against Intelligence

Proust’s arguments about memory are never fully separable from his quarrel with the intelligence, by which he seems to mean the whole range of intentional, functional thought. “Every day I attach less value to the intelligence,” the projected preface to *Contre Sainte-Beuve* begins. And in other drafts, “Every day I grant less value to the intelligence,” and “Although every day I attach less value to criticism, and even, if I must say it, to the intelligence.”²⁰

And yet only the intelligence can help us to understand what it is failing to do: “It is to the intelligence that we must look all the same to establish the inferiority of the intelligence . . . It may hold only second place in the hierarchy of values but only it is capable of proclaiming that instinct has to occupy the first.”²¹ The same argument is developed more subtly and more fully in the later pages of *À la recherche du temps perdu*. The narrator is entertaining two hypotheses about Albertine’s having left him: one nightmarish and true (she has gone for good), the other plausible, consolatory, and wrong (she is only pretending, she will come back if he offers to marry her, or buy her a yacht or a Rolls Royce). The second hypothesis is that of the ingenious intelligence.

But . . . the fact that the intelligence is not the most subtle, powerful and appropriate instrument for grasping the truth is only one more reason in favour of starting with

the intelligence rather than with the intuitions of the unconscious or with unquestioning faith in our premonitions. It is life which little by little, case by case, allows us to realize that what is most important for our hearts or our minds is taught us not by reason but by other powers. And then it is the intelligence itself, which, recognizing their superiority, uses its reasoning in order to abdicate in their favour, and accepts the role of collaborator and servant. Experimental faith.²²

This is a very curious passage, pointing in several directions at once. It lacks the programmatic hostility to the intelligence of the preface to *Contre Sainte-Beuve*, and it certainly makes no easy plea for instinct—"intuitions" and "premonitions" seem the riskiest or most disreputable recourse of all. There is a deep pragmatism in the concepts of "life," "case" and the "experimental." We learn as we go, and we "realize" what we have learned. But "other powers," "servant," "faith," and above all "abdicate" suggest a quite different, almost groveling relationship to the irrational. "Collaborator" is strangely placed too, even if we succeed in ridding it of all its later French nuances. Is it possible to be a collaborator and a servant? Couldn't the master always crack the whip, and wouldn't a commanded collaboration just be another form of service? More positively, Proust's narrator can be read as saying that those other powers are still powers of our own mind, and perhaps not purely irrational; that learning to distrust the intelligence is the beginning of wisdom, since the intelligence so often thinks its mission is to keep the truth from us, and ingenuity is a proof not of strength but of helplessness. Abdication still seems to take us too far, though.

Intelligence for Proust is the daily life of the mind and at the same time, and for the same reason, the death of memory. And in *Contre Sainte-Beuve* memory and its resurrections (Proust's term) become the whole case against the intelligence. "What intelligence gives us back under the name of memory is not it."²³ Our past lives are "dead for the intelligence."²⁴ Proust's evidence for these deaths is a series of memory-experiences in which the intelligence supposedly had no part. All but one of these experiences find their way into *À la recherche du temps perdu*, carefully distributed into different areas of the text.

The experience that doesn't survive into the novel concerns the sensation provoked by a piece of green cloth stopping up part of a broken window. Fragments of old perceptions return—"wasps in a shaft of sunlight, a smell of cherries on a table"—but nothing more; not enough for Proust to place the past occasion. "Soon I could no longer see anything, my memory had gone to sleep for good." The failed invitation does however produce in the writer a simile that later taken quite literally becomes the opening scene of his novel, where a man wakes up in the night to wonder where he is: "For a moment I was like one of those sleepers who awake in the night not knowing where they are, and try to orientate their bodies so as to become aware of the place they are in, not knowing

in what bed, in what house, in what corner of the earth or in what year of their lives they are.”²⁵

The other experiences evoked in *Contre Sainte-Beuve* are provoked by a piece of toast, later to become a famous madeleine, dipped in a cup of tea; by some slippery and uneven paving stones; by the sound of a spoon knocking against a plate; and by a line of trees in the countryside. The first experience is placed near the beginning of the novel; the second two, with additions (the texture of a napkin, the noise of a water pipe), close to its climax, at the moment when the narrator is finally able to link his life’s “loveliest and saddest night” with its “most glorious day.”²⁶ The fourth experience, the only full account of a failure of involuntary memory, that is, of a vivid, even haunting solicitation by a memory that the narrator cannot identify, appears in Proust’s second volume, *À l’ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs*. It’s worth pausing over this episode before we look in more detail at memory’s triumphs, because failure in this realm, as I have already noted, is the rule rather than the exception, and Proust wants us to remember this.

“I recognized their shape and their formation,” Proust says of the trees in *Contre Sainte-Beuve*, “and the line they made seemed traced from some mysterious and beloved pattern that trembled in my heart. But more I could not tell.”²⁷ In *À la recherche* the trees, now specifically a cluster of three, appear during a drive the narrator takes with Mme de Villeparisis, a friend of his grandmother’s, in the countryside around Balbec. They are close to a village called Hudimesnil. The narrator wonders, as his author-predecessor did, only rather more elaborately, where he has seen the trees before. Not near Combray, he thinks; and not near the German spa he once visited with his grandmother. Perhaps in some place in his past of which no other trace remains. Perhaps in an old dream, or even a very recent one, “a dream of only the night before, but already so faded that it seemed to derive from much longer ago.” Perhaps he has never seen them, perhaps their hidden meaning only feels like a memory. Perhaps it’s just an effect of déjà vu.

I could not tell. Still coming towards me, they might have been some mythological apparition, a coven of witches, a group of Norns propounding oracles. But I saw them as ghosts from my past, beloved companions from childhood, sometime friends reminding me of shared moments. Like risen shades they seemed to be asking me to take them with me, to bring them back to the realm of the living . . . I watched the trees as they disappeared, waving at me in despair and seeming to say, “Whatever you fail to learn from us today you will never learn. If you let us fall by this wayside where we stood striving to reach you, a whole part of your self which we brought for you will return for ever to nothing.” And it is true that, though the same mode of pleasure and disquiet which I had just experienced once more was to come back to me in later years, though I did attend to it at last one evening—too late, but for ever—I never did find out what it was these particular trees had attempted to convey to me, or where it was that I had once seen them. When the carriage went round a

corner, I lost sight of them somewhere behind me; and when Mme de Villeparisis asked me why I looked so forlorn, I was as sad as though I had just lost a friend or felt something in myself, as though I had broken a promise to a dead man or failed to recognize a god.²⁸

Of course more than memory is at stake here. Hence the extraordinary note of loss and betrayal and squandered chance. What the missed memory stands for, what it is part of, is the whole world of vivid sensation the intelligence cannot hold or store for us. It is the opposite of daily, practical life, it is lived life itself, what Proust's narrator calls "our true life, our reality as we have experienced it, which is often so different from what we believe it to be that we are filled with happiness when some chance event brings the real memory to us."²⁹ "Experienced" means lived but forgotten; preserved in one form of memory because forgotten in the other. And of course the complicated poignancy of "too late, but for ever" should not escape us.

Immortality

When Proust's narrator dips his madeleine into some warm tea, he experiences a "delicious pleasure," a "powerful joy." The "vicissitudes of life" now seem unimportant to him, "its disasters innocuous, its brevity illusory." "I had ceased to feel I was mediocre, contingent, mortal." What has happened? He doesn't know, and indeed says he "had to put off to much later discovering why this memory made me so happy." But he does finally recognize the particular memory. He can "feel the resistance and . . . hear the murmur of the distances travelled." What is stirring in his mind is "the visual memory which is attached to this taste and is trying to follow it to me." "And suddenly the memory appeared. That taste was the taste of the little piece of madeleine which on Sunday mornings at Combray . . . my Aunt Leonie would give me after dipping it in her infusion of tea or lime-blossom."³⁰

The novel doesn't tell us how much later "much later" is in narrative time, but the gap matters because it subtly alters even the initial claim for involuntary memory. "There is a great deal of chance in all this," the narrator says, "and a second sort of chance, that of our death, often does not let us wait very long for the favours of the first."³¹ "All the exertions of our intelligence are useless," he tells us; we can do nothing without the accidental cue that sets the memory in motion. But then understanding the event is something else. We can be inexplicably happy through our luck, but we need the help of the scorned intelligence to know what that happiness means.

And whatever the lapse of story time, we must wait until the last volume of the novel for the narrator to arrive at this knowledge. He has a sequence of new memory experiences, and now pauses over them and puts together his theory about them. His response

to each new event repeats the pattern established with the tea and madeleine—baffled, delighted sensation, patient search for the elusive source, final finding of the connection—but he quickly becomes more expert, because the experience is so swiftly repeated: “three times in a few minutes,” as the narrator himself remarks, with another one following not long after that. “One would have said,” he writes, “that the signs which were, on this day, to bring me out of my despondency and renew my faith in literature, were intent on multiplying themselves.”³² One would. They were. He steps on some uneven paving stones in a Paris courtyard and is transported to St. Mark’s Square in Venice; hears the ring of a spoon against a plate and identifies it with the work of a wheeltapper on a stopped train, a sound not consciously heard at the time of the journey; brushes his lips with a napkin and finds himself back in the hotel by the sea in Balbec, where the texture of the towels was similar; and hears the noise of a water-pipe, which also transports him back to Balbec, this time because the sound evokes that of the horns of passing pleasure boats. The narrator’s key phrase, the fairy godmother of his syntax, is “at the moment when” (*au moment où*): “at the moment” when he steps on the stones, “at the moment” when he tastes the madeleine, “at the very moment” when the second memory-event occurs. The “moment” is always the last possible moment, the moment the magic was waiting for:

But sometimes it is at the moment when everything seems to be lost that the indication arrives that may save us; one has knocked on all the doors which lead nowhere, and then, unwittingly, one pushes against the only one through which one may enter and for which one would have searched in vain for a hundred years, and it opens.³³

Of course the fairy-tale result is not inevitable, we have seen that Proust insists on the risks of failure. The person trying the doors cannot know that one of them will open. But the person who has found an open door cannot return to the exact condition of the potential failure. “There is a great deal of chance in all this,” but not now, not when the story is over and ready to be told.

And of course the exploration of the memory experience, the complex redemptive theory the narrator develops, has very little chance about it. “The only way to continue to appreciate [the experiences] was to try to understand them more completely.”³⁴ We don’t need to follow his argument in great detail, since it soon leaves the question of memory behind, but it is worth noting that Proust’s narrator insists that the cases are all the same (“The happiness that I had just experienced was indeed just like that I had felt when eating the madeleine”³⁵) and that he picks up the image of “beautiful ideas” as “tunes in music which come back to us without our ever having heard them, and which we do our best to listen to and to transcribe.”³⁶ His solution to “the riddle of happiness” is that the collision of times, the meeting of past and present in a sensation that belongs to both, reveal the continuing existence of an extra-temporal self, a creature who is fully

alive both now and then. “One minute freed from the order of time has recreated in us, in order to feel it, the man freed from the order of time.”³⁷ This is why he no longer feels “mediocre, contingent, mortal.” But a minute freed from time is itself still a minute, still countable as time, and Proust doesn’t fail to notice this. “Fragments of existence” may escape temporality, but only briefly: “the contemplation of them, while a contemplation of eternity, was itself fugitive.”³⁸ And the narrator’s long meditation on time and the self and the novel he is about to write ends with a startling reappearance of the historical world in which no one is recognizable because everyone has aged so much. He calls this “a dramatic turn of events . . . which seemed to raise the gravest of objections to my undertaking,”³⁹ and in this sense *À la recherche* ends precisely as the early draft did, by floating the chance of failure. The narrator is not sure that he will have continuing strength to keep the past “attached” to him.⁴⁰ Time regained in one dimension may always run out in another.

Time and Sorrow

The narrator of *À la recherche* has one more memory experience to report to us before he ends his meditations and returns to the party. It is rather different from the others, and he recognizes this fact, but only to devise a brilliant denial of this difference. There is no flood of happiness in this case, only a sense of disturbance and intrusion, a “painful impression” that strikes him “unpleasantly.”⁴¹ He is in his host’s library and has opened a book, the novel *François le Champi*, by George Sand, the very book, as it happens, that his mother read to him on the night he describes as the loveliest and saddest of his life, when after many refusals to come and kiss him goodnight she relented, with his father’s encouragement, and stayed with him into the bargain. This book is not a trivial if magic-working trigger like the others, but an instance that has alternately been brooded on and repressed. Like the other cues, it resurrects a former self, but that self is a stranger:

For a moment I had angrily wondered who the stranger was who had just upset me. But the stranger was myself, it was the child I was then, whom the book had just brought back to life within me, knowing nothing of me except this child.⁴²

It is true that here, as in the other instances, a vivid reality is restored, but it’s hard to imagine that pain and happiness are equally welcome, and more importantly, the narrator’s whole argument about the authenticity of first impressions now goes out the window, since this first impression has to be corrected if it is to carry the meaning he wants. It’s not just that the intelligence has to go to work on the impression, which is the general argument in this context. The intelligence now has to correct the impression, invert its meaning. The narrator’s logical agility is extraordinary—the impression caused by the

book “seemed to have too little in common with my current thoughts, until I realized a moment later, with an emotion that brought tears to my eyes, how much in accord with them this impression actually was”—and he invents a wonderful analogy.

In a room where somebody had died, the undertaker’s men are getting ready to bring down the coffin, while the son of a man who has done his country some service shakes hands with the last friends as they file out; if a fanfare suddenly sounds beneath the windows, he is horrified and thinks that some mockery is being made of his grief. At this, although he has until then remained in control of himself, he can suddenly no longer restrain his tears; because he has just realized that what he is hearing is the band of a regiment that is sharing his mourning and paying its last respects to his father’s mortal remains.⁴³

The narrator is right, of course: resurrection, like respect, can take many forms. But not right enough for his own case: noise can’t sound like silence.

The narrator seems happy enough with his sleight of mind here, but I think Proust the novelist expects us to remember other involuntary memory experiences in the narrative, other instances where the past came rushing back in a flood of pain, and indeed bringing far more pain than this easily convertible unpleasantness. The most significant of these events is so central to the novel—it appears in a section called “intermittences of the heart,” which at one point was Proust’s title for the whole work—that I think we have to believe that the narrator is unconsciously willing himself not to remember it as he celebrates his final epiphanies and assimilates the new encounter with *François le Champi* to them. Perhaps involuntary forgetting is just as important as involuntary memory.

Returning to Balbec a year or so after his grandmother’s death, the narrator bends down to take off his shoes, and is abruptly “filled with an unknown, divine presence.” “I was shaken by sobs, tears streamed from my eyes.”⁴⁴ He is suddenly, fully remembering his grandmother, as distinct from intentionally seeking to recall her, and in doing so he becomes the self he was when they visited Balbec together. “It was only at this instant,” the narrator writes, “that I learned that she was dead.” Really dead because magically alive again. He had spoken and thought of her often since her passing, he says, “but beneath the words and thoughts . . . there had never been anything that might resemble my grandmother.” “For to the disturbances of memory are linked the intermittences of the heart.” And if our old joys and sorrows live within us,

it is for most of the time in an unknown domain where they are of no service to us and where even the most ordinary of them are repressed by memories of a different order, which exclude all simultaneity with them in our consciousness.⁴⁵

We are back in the archives Proust mapped out for us in *Jean Santeuil*. But now the size of the archive is less important than our erratic access to it, and than the uncertainty of

the resurrection's result. Involuntary memory returns a lost past to us, and in the narrator's most optimistic reading must produce joy—precisely because the lost is found, and independently of the affective content of what was lost. But it may also return the lost past to us as lost, and this is what happens with the narrator's grandmother. He struggles vainly with what he describes as both a “strange contradiction” and a “painful synthesis” between “survival and nothingness”: “On meeting her again, I realized I had lost her for ever.”⁴⁶ His grandmother is more alive than she was a moment ago, as alive as she had ever been; and by the same token deader than she had been too, given over to “a nothingness that had . . . made of my grandmother, at the moment when I had found her again as in a mirror, a mere stranger whom chance had led to spend a few years with me. . . . I clung to these sorrows . . . with all my strength. . . . I felt that I truly remembered her only through sorrow.”⁴⁷

Can we reconcile these memory-stories, telling of irrefutable joy and undiluted sorrow? In part we can. If loss of reality, the failure of all experience, is the worst thing in the world, then the return of reality, even the most painful, will be some kind of victory, a come-back from death-in-life. And in part we shouldn't try too hard, because the hesitation between contradiction and synthesis is important, and because we are after all reading a novel. In that novel both character and author need (and find) a resolution in the triumphant sequence of memory experiences near the end. The narrator certainly recognizes, as we have seen, that he might not have stumbled on these experiences; cannot afford to remember, it seems, how difficult such experiences are when turned toward loss of a loved one rather than finding of a self—or more precisely, toward finding of a self full of loss. And the novel stylizes this story by separating its elements. The story of the madeleine and the story of the grandmother look as if they are in distant dialogue: each is what the other forgets. But beyond the needs of the novel and in the larger argument about memory, the stories don't need to belong to the same register. They can be different, but not opposed. It would be enough, in such a perspective, for the pain of the living past to be real but not the only possibility for that past's return to reality. In the “strong” philosophy of the novel the powerful joy of involuntary memory becomes a not wholly successful denial of time and sorrow. More modestly we could take it as the perceptible proof that time and sorrow, while undeniable, are not everything.

Noise

Of course the celebrations of involuntary memory, in whatever form and with whatever emotional results, remain part of the narrator's, and indeed Proust's own, war on the intelligence. It's not just that the intelligence can't resurrect memories for us, it's that memories reside “only in objects in which the intelligence has not sought to embody them.”

The moment you have been living will not find asylum in the objects to which you have sought consciously to connect it. What is more, if some other thing is able to resurrect them, when they are resurrected with it, they will have been stripped of all their poetry.⁴⁸

This is quite categorical, and very extreme. We cannot remember anything, in the ordinary sense of “remember.” To seek to remember the past is totally to destroy it—or if you prefer, to make it purely the past, nothing but the past, no longer a candidate for anything but the most abstract and unfelt of resurrections.

What Proust is doing here and what he makes his narrator consistently do in *À la recherche* is to remove everything that matters from the realm of reason and mastery and to deliver it to pure chance. The resurrection of his lost summers—which were not those summers, he says, when he merely thought of them—“depended, like all resurrections, on simple chance.”⁴⁹ Like all resurrections. In the novel the repetition of the thought of death as a form of chance that can always arrive too soon sends us back to the notional ending found in the draft: “And no one will ever know, not even oneself . . .” I think the idea of the abdication of reason also hovers here, and makes a new kind of sense in this context. Proust is insisting on the role of chance as a way of magically flattering chance itself, as if he were making an offering to a capricious Greek god. He is underselling intelligence and overselling fortune. Or rather, since no one can know the proper price of either, he is trying to avoid all risk of intellectual hubris.

But there is another form of remembering in *À la recherche*, and I should like to evoke it as an epilogue, because it is different both from voluntary and from involuntary memory, or perhaps partakes of each. This is the remembering that in one sense informs the whole novel, gives it much of its page-by-page substance while the rescues of involuntary memory provide its ultimate plot. In *Du côté de chez Swann*, the narrator inserts a later reflection into the story of the goodnight kiss. Of course the whole narrative, as distinct from what is narrated, belongs to this later time, but this passage makes the time lag clear, indeed is about the time lag, and about how time has passed and not passed. The reflection appears just after the father has suggested the mother spend the night with the boy, and just before the mother offers her “official” recognition that the child’s problem is “regarded no longer as a punishable offence but as an involuntary ailment.”

This was many years ago. The staircase wall on which I saw the rising glimmer of his candle has long since ceased to exist. In me, too, many things have been destroyed that I thought were bound to last forever . . . It was a very long time ago, too, that my father ceased to be able to say to Mama: “Go with the boy.” The possibility of such hours will never be reborn for me. But for a little while now, I have begun to hear again very clearly, if I take care to listen, the sobs I was strong enough to contain in front of my father and that did not burst out until I found myself alone again with

Mama. They have never really stopped; and it is only because life is quieting down around me more and more now that I can hear them again, like those convent bells covered so well by the clamour of the town during the day that one would think they had ceased altogether but which begin sounding again in the silence of the evening.⁵⁰

The house is gone, the parents are gone, much of the inner life of narrator has been destroyed, but the sobs have never stopped. This claim is hyperbolic and metaphorical, but clearly and movingly suggests the persistence of memory. In this view our memories are much closer to us than Bergson's permanent but elusive possessions or Proust's own dramatically buried treasures. What conceals the past from us is neither the vastness of the archive nor the workings of chance, neither the mischievous intelligence nor the eagerly misapplied will, but daily distraction, "the clamour of the town," the sheer noise of getting on with life.