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The Novel Map

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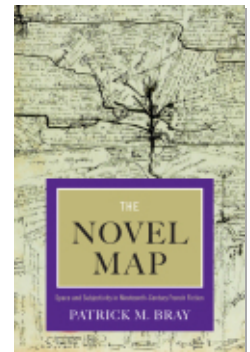
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CHAPTER NINE

The Law of the Land

In Search of Lost Place

At the familiar beginning of *À la recherche du temps perdu* one finds in contradiction to the novel's title, not a search for lost time, but the frantic search for a lost place. The narrator, writing in the ambiguous tense of habit, the imperfect, relates the trouble he has going to sleep and the even greater trouble he has of finding himself again upon waking. The anonymous *je*, who for a long time put himself to bed early, floats in and out of sleep, in and out of consciousness in an unspecified time and place. Improbable identities are assumed and discarded as the reading *je* turned dreamer becomes whatever subject of the book happened to be on the page when consciousness was lost: "Il me semblait que j'étais moi-même ce dont parlait l'ouvrage: une église, un quatuor, la rivalité de François Ier et de Charles Quint" (CS I, 3) ("It seemed to me that I was indeed what the work was talking about: a church, a quartet, the rivalry between François I and Charles V").¹ The subject of any text can manifest itself as the textual subject: *je*'s consciousness is invaded by the image of whatever he is reading, be it a person, a church (reminiscent of Rancière's idea that Victor Hugo was the first to make a building the subject of a novel), or even an abstract concept such as a rivalry. When he first wakes, the images persist in confusing his identity, since the dreamed text has absorbed the narrator's awareness of himself. Even the pronoun varies from *je* to *il* and *on*, as the narrative moves between the particular anonymous first person to the general third person. Just as Nerval began *Aurélia* with a dreaming subject, free from the conditions of time and space, who reformulates the Cartesian experience of doubt into the liberating experience of dream, the opening of Proust's novel explores the liminal space between consciousness and unconsciousness, dream and "reality," perception and illusion.

After the initial description of an identity confused by the textual images of the books he reads, the narrating *je* restates the experience in

general terms, as a law. The second formulation is an ontological theory that displaces the original cause of confusion—reading—onto what is now described simply as deep sleep: “il suffisait que, dans mon lit même, mon sommeil fût profond et détendît entièrement mon esprit” (5) (“it sufficed that, in my very bed, my sleep was profound and entirely relaxed my mind”). The shift from the persistence of textual images to deep sleep implies that the experience of the “dormeur éveillé” (“wakened sleeper”) is a universal human condition, and not one restricted to avid readers; as we will see, however, subjectivity in the *Recherche* is profoundly tied to the reading of literature. On a narrative level, the displacement of reading prepares the way for the separation of the narrating *je* and the narrated, and therefore textual, *je*, since the text will reflect the past of the narrating subject instead of the unfolding of a present in the text, as in Stendhal’s self-discovery in *Vie de Henry Brulard*, or Zola’s in his *dossiers préparatoires*.

The “dormeur éveillé” scene emphasizes the spatial component of identity and memory. The dreamer is able to move freely between different times and different worlds; once he awakens, his power to travel across time and space diminishes and he must remember his location. If the sleep is too deep, the awoken sleeper is faced with the terrifying proposition of not knowing where he is and therefore who he is:

Un homme qui dort, tient en cercle autour de lui le fil des heures, l’ordre des années et des mondes. Il les consulte d’instinct en s’éveillant et y lit en une seconde le point de la terre qu’il occupe, le temps qui s’est écoulé jusqu’à son réveil; mais leurs rangs peuvent se mêler, se rompre . . . Mais il suffisait que, dans mon lit même, mon sommeil fût profond et détendît entièrement mon esprit; alors celui-ci lâchait le plan du lieu où je m’étais endormi, et quand je m’éveillais au milieu de la nuit, comme j’ignorais où je me trouvais, je ne savais même pas au premier instant qui j’étais; j’avais seulement dans sa simplicité première, le sentiment de l’existence comme il peut frémir au fond d’un animal; j’étais plus dénué que l’homme des cavernes; mais alors le souvenir—non encore du lieu où j’étais, mais de quelques-uns de ceux que j’avais habités et où j’aurais pu être—venait à moi comme un secours d’en haut pour me tirer du néant d’où je n’aurais pu sortir tout seul; je passais en une seconde par-dessus des siècles de civilisation, et l’image confusément entrevue de lampes à pétrole, puis de chemises à col rabattu, recomposaient peu à peu les traits originaux de mon moi.² (5–6)

Once again, like Balzac’s *La Peau de chagrin*, Stendhal’s *Vie de Henry Brulard*, and Nerval’s *Aurélia*, Proust’s novel grafts the experience of an

anonymous subject onto the model of Descartes's cogito. The *je* finds itself in a dark bedroom, deprived of any sensation except that of existence itself. For Descartes, the knowledge of existence, proven by the simple act of thought, was sufficient to guarantee being; for Proust's awakened sleeper, mere existence is not enough; it is his essence, here connected to a place, that must be found. Proust's anguished narrator, in the pitch-black darkness of his bedroom, does not even have the dim light of Plato's cave dweller to project an image of his identity onto the wall.

Descartes was granted the assurance of the truth of his perception by the miraculous presence of God to his consciousness; no less miraculous for Proust's *je* is the "salvation from above" of the memory of the bedrooms where he has lived. Memory is not a part of the subject and cannot be accessed at will; the narrator's passing over "centuries of civilization" reinforces the concept of a universal memory of which our personal memory is only a part. The impersonal character of memory suggests that we do not remember ourselves, but only the places where one of our many selves may be found (just as the view of Rome recalled all of Stendhal's life as well as all of Roman history, and as Nerval attempted to regain his childhood memories by returning to the Valois).

The narrator's consciousness uses memory to link identity to place, with the assumption that the subject is contiguous with an unchanging place in the external world (Bersani, 21). Blocks of space-time, in the form of bedrooms, offer the subject a multiplicity of selves from which to choose. The act of taming a hostile room, described here and later in the first scene of the Grand-Hôtel in Balbec, terrifies the narrator not because of the newness of the room, but because one self must cede to another. Habit, a form of inattentive memory, is the process that creates a new self in response to an unfamiliar place; habit renders a place inhabitable by projecting a stability onto place and masking its inevitable movement and change in time. Yet habit creates an illusory stability, since places, and therefore identity, are anything but stable: "Peut-être l'immobilité des choses autour de nous leur est-elle imposée par notre certitude que ce sont elles et non pas d'autres, par l'immobilité de notre pensée en face d'elles" (6) ("Perhaps the immobility of things around us is imposed on them by our certitude that it is these same things and not others, by the immobility of our thought confronting them"). As will be argued in chapter 10, movement and mobility are essential to the understanding of time and identity in the *Recherche*. The miraculous, involuntary memory of the many bedrooms and the attentive memory of intellect required to choose from among them the bedroom of the present counter the immobilizing effect of habit or inattentive memory: "Toujours est-il que, quand je

me réveillais ainsi, mon esprit s'agitant pour chercher, sans y réussir, à savoir où j'étais, tout tournait autour de moi dans l'obscurité, les choses, les pays, les années" (6) ("Still is it that, when I would wake up in this way, my mind casting about, without success, trying to know where I was, everything would turn around me in the darkness: things, countries, years"). The active attention of the mind forces places into movement and reveals time's relation to place and identity.³

The shock created by the search for identity in the bedrooms of the past, while short-lived, has lasting effects. The first effect is a temporary solution to the problem of identity: after a few seconds, certitude has settled in, and a bedroom is chosen. The furniture of the bedroom is put "approximately" in its place, and the present identity of the subject is assured. The last sentence of "Combray" questions the very notion that remembered places are stable. The narrator definitively awakens only to find that the immobility he imposed upon the bedroom furniture was illusory; the light of dawn sets everything in motion as it rectifies the error of the narrator's memory: "La demeure que j'avais rebâtie dans les ténèbres était allée rejoindre les demeures entrevues dans le tourbillon du réveil, mise en fuite par ce pâle signe qu'avait tracé au-dessus des rideaux le doigt levé du jour" (184) ("The dwelling I had rebuilt in the shadows was to join up with the dwellings glimpsed in the whirl of waking, made to flee by this pale sign which the raised finger of daylight had traced above the window curtains"). The end of "Combray" is thus another revelation that places and identity cannot be accurately remembered, but instead must be created.

The narrator's search for place and identity at the beginning of "Combray" leads directly to the active remembering of the events recounted in the text, which flows from the insomnia caused by the disruption of habit. Since the mind of the narrator has already been set in motion, he can no longer fall back to sleep as the memories of past places, selves, and stories unsettle the stability and immobility of the localized self:

Mais j'avais beau savoir que je n'étais pas dans les demeures dont l'ignorance du réveil m'avait en un instant sinon présenté l'image distincte, du moins fait croire la présence possible, le branle était donné à ma mémoire; généralement je ne cherchais pas à me rendormir tout de suite; je passais la plus grande partie de la nuit à me rappeler notre vie d'autrefois, à Combray chez ma grand'tante, à Balbec, à Paris, à Doncières, à Venise, ailleurs encore, à me rappeler les lieux, les personnes que j'y avais connues, ce que j'avais vu d'elles, ce qu'on m'en avait raconté.⁴ (8–9)

The nostalgic reminiscence of Combray, Balbec, Paris, Doncières, and Venice introduces the reader to the dominant places of the novel and lays the foundation for the narrator's identity as it will appear in the text. Like Stendhal's declaration "After so many general remarks, I am going to be born," the Proustian narrator's awakening and reminiscence creates both a *je* that narrates in the present and a narrated or remembered *je* of the past anchored in the text in an autobiographical simulacrum occurring after the agonizing analysis of the self across many times and many places. The *Recherche* will tell the story of how the narrated *je* becomes the narrating *je*, and the two will reunite at the end of *Le Temps retrouvé*.

The memories that directly follow the sleepless night form the basis of "Combray I," which is centered around the famous "goodnight kiss" scene. Despite the vivid recollection of the scene, the narrator is incapable of recalling anything but one distinct place and time of day: "comme si Combray n'avait consisté qu'en deux étages reliés par un mince escalier et comme s'il n'y avait jamais été que sept heures du soir" (43) ("as if Combray had only consisted of two stories joined by a narrow staircase and as if it was only ever seven o'clock in the evening"). The past contained in Combray cannot be remembered in full and is therefore dead to the narrator, as is, by extension, the narrator's past self. Just as a miraculous intervention in the form of the memories of past bedrooms saved the awakened dreamer from his identity crisis, the sensation and ensuing involuntary memory provoked by the madeleine create the greater world of "Combray II," and suggest the possibility of existence beyond death. Though the involuntary memory stimulated by the taste of the madeleine also involves the movement of consciousness, it differs from the initial active remembering of bedrooms in that it is an act of creation:

Je pose la tasse et me tourne vers mon esprit. C'est à lui de trouver la vérité. Mais comment? Grave incertitude, toutes les fois que l'esprit se sent dépassé par lui-même; quand lui, le chercheur, est tout ensemble le pays obscur où il doit chercher et où tout son bagage ne lui sera de rien. Chercher? pas seulement: créer. Il est en face de quelque chose qui n'est pas encore et que seul il peut réaliser, puis faire entrer dans sa lumière.⁵ (45)

Proust's famously long sentences become suddenly terse as the narrator's mind or consciousness (*l'esprit*) grapples with the enigma of the madeleine and searches desperately within the interior space of the self ("le pays obscur") to create a connection between past and present. The present and the past taste of the cake dipped in tea are both found in the

narrator's *moi*, but it is the task of his mind to invent the link between the two that will bridge the vast distance in time that separates the two sensations. As Gérard Genette has shown in "Métonymie chez Proust," the madeleine scene begins with a creation that bridges two times through metaphor, and then continues with an opening up of the place of Combray through metonymy in order to begin the narrative (*Figures III*, 63). After the false start of "Combray I" which introduced the difference in narrating and narrated subject, the madeleine episode, through the vertical axis of time (metaphor) and the horizontal axis of space (metonymy), creates the places of the text and lays the foundation of identity, which will continue until the final revelations of *Le Temps retrouvé*. The narrative, therefore, relies on places, and by extension space, to create identity. Yet how are the places of the *Recherche* inscribed in the space of the text?

Place Names and Name-of-the-Father

Instead of Stendhal's or Sand's visual maps, Nerval's mythical genealogies, or Zola's geometries, Proust's novel uses as its structuring principle the places conjured up in the evocation of a proper name—*le Nom*. The titles of volumes and subsections sufficiently reveal the role of place and name in organizing the *Recherche*: "Combray," "Nom de pays: Le nom," "Nom de pays: Le pays," *Le Côté de Guermantes*, and *Sodome et Gomorrhe*. For Proust, a name is already an essence distinct from, yet inextricably related to, the object it designates. Names hold within their syllables the secret of places, and by pronouncing a name, by exploring the resonance of its sound, the narrator unfolds place and essences contained in it. The names of persons or families, and especially noble families whose names are "toujours des noms de lieux" ("always names of places"), prove to be just as spatial as the names of places.⁶ Proper names have the power to capture an essence, and everything contingent with it, because of the illusion that they refer to only one object, as opposed to common words which designate interchangeable objects (Barthes, "Proust et les noms," 124). Places, likewise, are supposed to be unique and not interchangeable;⁷ yet the very oneness of names and places means that place names are paradoxical. The essence, or place, contained in the name is far greater than that of the "real" place itself, with the result that the two are incompatible. Names, for Proust, are already places, and two places cannot occupy the same space; names are also signs, and every sign indicates the absence of its object (in the words of Mallarmé in "Crise de vers": "Je dis: une fleur! . . . l'absente de tous bouquets"—"I say: a flower! . . . the one

absent from all bouquets”). A place name and the place it designates are inextricably but arbitrarily linked; they form two separate regions that cannot overlap.

The tension between a proper name and its object fuels the novel’s narrative as the young hero first acquires the imagery of names, then experiences the disillusionment of places, and finally discovers the redemption of literary creation. For Roland Barthes, in “Proust et les noms,” the “accident” that allows the passage from Proust’s earlier writing attempts to the *Recherche*, the event that imposes a unifying system to the novel, is the invention of proper names: “L’événement (poétique) qui a ‘lancé’ la *Recherche*, c’est la découverte des Noms” (124–25) (“The (poetic) event that ‘launched’ the *Recherche* is the discovery of Names”). Proper names, as Barthes suggests, are “voluminous signs” that call to be interpreted by the narrator, or “apprentice,” as Barthes names him following Deleuze (125). The work of the novelist is to explore the relationship, not between the object and its form or the sign and its referent, but rather between the signifier and the signified, to explore the depths of signs (133). Barthes is correct in expanding Deleuze’s conception of the Proustian sign to account for the crucial role of proper names, but he fails to account for the spatial dimension of names or their relation to identity as outlined by Proust himself. Toponyms provide the unifying system of the novel by structuring it *spatially*.

“Combray” introduces the narrator, and the reader, to the names of the *Recherche*, and in “Combray” names are received from the father. Of all the narrator’s family members, it is perhaps the father who appears to play one of the smallest roles in the text;⁸ after the episodes of “Combray” he is hardly mentioned at all, in contrast to the mother and the grandmother who continue to dominate the affective life of the narrator.⁹ The father’s minor part in the narrative reduces him to a caricature. He becomes the figure of fatherhood, all the more so because he himself lacks a proper name (conversely, the mother’s lack of a proper name keeps her more intimate, especially since she is often called “Maman,” while the father is only called “Papa” once, presumably after he has died, at the end of *Le Temps retrouvé*). Combray may be a matriarchy led by Tante Léonie that often reveals the father to be ridiculous or arbitrary in his actions, but it is through this very arbitrary domination that he involuntarily teaches his son the power of names.

As the beginning of *Le Côté de Guermantes* declares, “Les Noms [nous offrent] l’image de l’inconnaissable que nous avons versé en eux” (CG II, 310) (“Names [present us] the image of the unknowable that we have poured into them”), and in the sketch of the same episode pub-

lished in the 1954 version of *Contre Sainte-Beuve*, a name is “une urne d’inconnaissable” (272) (“an urn of the unknowable”). A name is only magical for the narrator if he can project onto it, or pour into it, the unknowable. The name of someone or something already known is as banal as a common word. The narrator mocks the grandmother when she claims that her friend Mme de Villeparisis is a Guermantes: “Comment aurais-je pu croire à une communauté d’origine entre deux noms qui étaient entrés en moi, l’une par la porte basse et honteuse de l’expérience, l’autre par la porte d’or de l’imagination?” (*JF II*, 58) (“How could I believe in a communality of origin between two names which had entered my mind, one by the lowly and shameful gate of experience, the other by the golden gate of imagination?”).

The father’s reflex in raising his son is to say “no,” and in so doing, he denies the narrator an immediate experience of the world. Often incapable of leaving the house, the narrator projects onto names his desires for knowledge, for travel, and for sex. In “Combray I,” following the suggestion of the grandfather, the father sends the narrator to bed without the ritual kiss from the mother (*CS I*, 30–36); this denial of motherly affection sets in motion a pattern of desire that is repeated continuously until *Albertine disparue*. The father, against the grandmother’s wishes, forbids the narrator from taking evening walks in the rain, instead asking him to read in his room (*CS I*, 11). He disapproves of the grandmother’s reading choices for the young child (*CS I*, 39). He habitually and arbitrarily breaks the “pacts” that the mother and grandmother make with the narrator, since “il ne se souciait pas des ‘principes’ et qu’il n’y avait pas avec lui de ‘Droit des gens’” (*CS I*, 35) (“he was not concerned with ‘principles’ and there were no such things for him as ‘Rights of Man’”). The father’s persistence in snubbing Swann and his wife only adds to their prestige in the eyes of the narrator; their greater social distance fills the name of Swann with wonder and contributes to the narrator’s budding love for Gilberte (*CS I*, 98 and 142–43). At the end of *Le Côté de chez Swann*, in the section titled “Noms de pays: Le nom,” the narrator dreams of traveling to Balbec or to northern Italy and wonders three separate times whether his parents will allow him to go. When his father, checking the barometer and confirming the weather, finally agrees to a voyage to Italy, the son’s excitement is so great that he falls sick; the doctor, another father figure, especially if we take into account that Proust’s father was a physician, forbids the narrator both to travel to Venice and to go to the theater to see la Berma (*CS I*, 382–86). The desire to know Venice, repeatedly prevented because of Albertine, is not satisfied until *Albertine disparue*. Because of his father, the narrator is unable to experience firsthand

the objects he desires; he therefore maintains the distance between name and place or object needed to transform a name into a place of desire. The father's "negative influence" on the narrator succeeds in nourishing his rich imaginary world and in filling names with the mystique of the unknowable.

The father is instrumental in another key way: he lays out the mental and physical geography for the novel. It is the father who leads the family walks through Combray, and he is a master of the terrain. On moonlit nights, he would lead the family on long walks: "Mon père, par amour de la gloire, nous faisait faire par le calvaire une longue promenade, que le peu d'aptitude de ma mère à s'orienter et à se reconnaître dans son chemin, lui faisait considérer comme la prouesse d'un génie stratégique" (*CS I*, 113) ("My father, out of love of glory, would take us on the ordeal of a long walk, which my mother's ineptitude at orienting herself and recognizing what road she was on made her regard as the feat of a strategic genius"). The family would be so disoriented that the father could lead them directly behind their home without the rest of the family recognizing the back door of the house (114). In the eyes of the narrator, the father controls perspective and mysteriously navigates the space of Combray.

It is the father who teaches the son, inadvertently, that the two "côtés" ("ways") are so opposed that one cannot walk both of them on the same day:

Car il y avait autour de Combray deux "côtés" pour les promenades, et si opposés qu'on ne sortait pas en effet de chez nous par la même porte, quand on voulait aller d'un côté ou de l'autre . . . Comme mon père parlait toujours du côté de Méséglise comme de la plus belle vue de plaine qu'il connût et du côté de Guermantes comme du type de paysage de rivière, je leur donnais, en les concevant ainsi comme deux entités, cette cohésion, cette unité qui n'appartiennent qu'aux créations de notre esprit . . . Cette habitude que nous avons de n'aller jamais vers les deux côtés un même jour, dans une seule promenade, mais une fois du côté de Méséglise, une fois du côté de Guermantes, les enfermait pour ainsi dire loin l'un de l'autre, inconnaissables l'un à l'autre, dans les vases clos et sans communication entre eux, d'après-midi différents.¹⁰ (132–33)

The habitual activity of taking either one "côté" or the other on any given afternoon (an activity presumably dictated by the father) seals each path off from the other definitively, which creates in the mind of the narrator two "vases clos" ("sealed vessels") that can never communicate.¹¹ Because the father would speak about each "côté" in superlatives and,

for the son, in apparently contradictory terms, the narrator conceived of them as absolutes that structured spatial relations and therefore organized mental categories. They are united in the narrator's mind only because they share the same quality as classifying places. People, as well as other places, are defined throughout the rest of the novel in relationship to one or the other "côtés," as shown by the titles of two volumes, *Du côté de chez Swann* and *Le Côté de Guermantes*. The narrative is written as the narrator follows the two divergent paths and explores the world from the two perspectives of Combray.

The father literally and figuratively misleads his son. During the family walks he manipulates space to reveal the view of the home as an unfamiliar place. As the narrator discovers later, the father arbitrarily separates the two "côtés"; thus the narrator's future experience (and consequently the structure of the narrative) is mapped in advance according to the father's conception of Combray's places. The mapping of the novel through Combray manifests the more general paternal role: the production of the symbolic. He imposes on his son, albeit without knowing it, a dichotomy between the symbolic world of names and the world of experience. Jacques Lacan, in "Fonction et champ de la parole et du langage," has described this process in psychoanalysis as the "Nom-du-père" ("Name-of-the-father"): "C'est dans le *nom du père* qu'il nous faut reconnaître le support de la fonction symbolique qui, depuis l'ordre des temps historiques, identifie sa personne à la figure de la loi" (*Écrits I*, 276) ("It is in the *Name-of the-father* that we must recognize the foundation for the symbolic function which, since the beginning of history, identifies its person to the figure of the law"). Lacan argues that the father, or more accurately the already dead symbolic father, establishes himself as the figure of the law through his *nom* (and its homonym *non*). The law the Name-of-the-father founds is that of the symbolic order. The Symbolic, for Lacan, constitutes a structure like language, where a symbol or signifier is not fixed to any one signified (Laplanche and Pontalis, *The Language of Psychoanalysis*, 440).

In the *Recherche*, the father inscribes the law of signifiers, thereby defining the social interactions of his son. Within the narrative, the narrator is constantly defined by the notoriety of his father, and specifically by his father's name. When the narrator first meets Odette, in her incarnation as *la dame en rose*, she recognizes him as the image of his mother, at which point his uncle Adolphe corrects her: "Il ressemble surtout à son père" (CS I, 76) ("He especially resembles his father"). In *À l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs* Mme de Villeparisis is impressed by his last name (JF II, 59). Suspecting that the father of the narrator is traveling with her longtime companion Norpois, she asks him, "Est-ce que vous êtes le

fil du directeur au ministère? . . . Il paraît que votre père est un homme charmant. Il fait un bien beau voyage en ce moment” (61) (“Are you the son of the department head at the ministry? . . . It seems that your father is a charming man. He is having a beautiful trip at the moment”). The other characters in the novel are much more concerned about the father’s status than is the narrator. That the narrator should lack a family name in the text only reinforces the transgression of the written text. The narrator, without a proper name and thus without a proper place in the text, wanders the places of the text whose borders were drawn by the Name-of-the-father.

The law of the Name-of-the-father reigns over the symbolic order, over the names and therefore the places of the text. The father institutes the uniqueness of names and places, legislating identity as a function of the two “côtés.” There is a law of the land, inscribed by the father, that prevents the narrator from moving from one place to another, from re-defining his identity, and from changing or writing his name. Michel de Certeau, in *L’invention du quotidien 1. Arts de faire*, makes a distinction between space and place that elucidates the relationship between space, place, and identity in the novel:

Au départ, entre espace et lieu, je pose une distinction qui limitera un champ. Est un *lieu* l’ordre (quel qu’il soit) selon lequel des éléments sont distribués dans des rapports de coexistence. S’y trouve donc exclue la possibilité, pour deux choses, d’être à la même place. La loi du “propre” y règne: les éléments sont les uns à *côtés* des autres, chacun situé en un endroit “propre” et distinct qu’il définit. Un lieu est donc une configuration instantanée de positions. Il implique une indication de stabilité.¹² (172–73)

Place is defined as an order of distribution of relationships based on juxtaposing objects without superposing them. The stability of places relies on the “loi du ‘propre,’” its uniqueness, in the same manner as proper names. The law of place, the law of the land, stabilizes identity through an ordered classification of signs.

There is thus a fundamental link in the *Recherche* between the system of signs imposed by the father’s law and the system of places that structure the novel. The narrator’s apprenticeship of signs and the revelation of his vocation as writer is, in essence, an apprenticeship in the transgression of the law of places and in the power of literature to create new signs. For Certeau, space is the necessary counterpart to place: “Il y a *espace* dès qu’on prend en considération des vecteurs de direction, des quantités de vitesse et la variable de temps. . . . À la différence du lieu, il n’a donc ni l’univocité ni la stabilité d’un ‘propre.’ En somme, *l’espace est un lieu*

pratiqué” (173)¹³ (“There is *space* as soon as directional vectors, quantities of speed, and the variable of time are taken into consideration. . . . Unlike place, it has neither the univocity nor the stability of the ‘proper.’ In short, *space is a place put into practice*”). Space, in Certeau’s definition, is mobile; it accounts for movement and time with the effect that it disrupts the apparent stability and immobility of place (in a similar way to the movement given to the narrator’s consciousness in his search for a stable identity). Through its multiplicity, its disrespectful disruptions, space disobeys the law of place. Space as practice of place is transgression or “*délinquance*.” All narratives contain a spatial component since they describe an itinerary or a succession of places over time (171); for Certeau, then, narrative itself is delinquent: “Si le délinquant n’existe qu’en se déplaçant, s’il a pour spécificité de vivre non en marge mais dans les interstices des codes qu’il déjoue et déplace, s’il se caractérise par le privilège du *parcours* sur l’*état*, le récit est délinquant” (190) (“If the delinquent only exists by moving around, if he has as his specificity living not at the margins but in the interstices of the codes which he foils and shifts, if he characterizes himself by the privilege of the *path* over the *state*, narrative is delinquent”). The nameless, placeless, narrator, in the interstices of the text, crosses the places of the text and transgresses the law of the land as established by the father. The *Recherche* itself tells the story of how, through his transgression of paternal law, the narrated *je*, defined by the stability of place, is transformed into the narrating *je* of transgressive space and transformative time. He changes from being subject to the text to being the subject of the text. A new conception of subjectivity will emerge as a function of the narrator’s relation to place through the slow apprenticeship of signs and the final discovery of his vocation.

Places Lost, Time Regained

A comprehensive study of the narrator’s disillusionment with place is beyond the scope of this chapter, since the bulk of his apprenticeship of signs, names, and places covers over 2,500 pages, roughly from the end of *Du côté de chez Swann* to the beginning of *Le Temps retrouvé*. However, by focusing on a few key passages, the trajectory of the narrator’s path toward the final revelation of his vocation as writer can be traced. “Nom de pays: le nom” (“Place Names: The Name” or “Name of the Country: The Name”), at the end of *Swann*, expands and theorizes the narrator’s infatuation with the power and place of names; it is there that he develops his love for Gilberte and her name and his obsession with Balbec and

Venice. The logical counterpart to this initiatory section of the *Recherche* is found in the second half of *À l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs*, titled “Nom de pays: le pays” (“Place Names: The Place” or “Name of the Country: The Country”). At Balbec the narrator encounters for the first time the deception of place names and the impossible coexistence of the essence of a name and the experience of place. “Nom de pays: Le pays” sets in motion the forces that unravel the system of names and places that structure the narrator’s world.

The Balbec of his dreams, as detailed in “Nom de pays: Le nom,” is a synthesis of various descriptions given to the narrator by Swann and Legrandin: Balbec has a magnificent beach and a church that is both Romanesque and Norman Gothic, “on dirait de l’art persan” (CS I, 377–78) (“one could say Persian art”). The narrator envisions Gothic architecture mixed with a sea storm (378). Nothing, of course, could be further from the reality he comes across when he arrives there with his grandmother by train. He imagines that certain city names, like Chartres and Bourges, “servent à désigner, par abréviation, leur église principale” (“can designate, as an abbreviation, their principal church”), and therefore that the cities themselves take on in the imagination the same architectural style as the church itself (*JF II*, 19). The name Balbec, by its synthesis of stormy beach and Persian, Gothic, and Romanesque architecture, should radiate onto everything connected to it the uncanny combination of a Norman seascape with an Oriental flair. The first deception happens on the train when the unity of the Balbec name is sectioned into different train stations: Balbec-le-Vieux, Balbec-en-Terre, and Balbec-Plage. The locals are confused when the narrator asks to find a slope where he can view only the church and sea at the same time. Not only is it a sunny day with no storm in sight (in fact, his lasting memories of Balbec will be those of sunny afternoons), but Balbec church is very far from the sea. No view can encompass what turn out to be contradictory elements contained in the false unity of the name Balbec.

The narrator discovers that his synthesis of church and sea was based on a misreading of guidebooks and an inattention to the conversations he had with Swann, Legrandin, and Norpois. Like Nerval’s Oriental voyager, who was misled by an overly enthusiastic reading of guidebooks and ancient texts, the narrator projects meaning onto the letters and syllables of names. He mistook the colorful architectural metaphors of guidebooks for geographical indications:

C’était bien de falaises battues par les flots qu’avait été tirée la pierre de la nef et des tours. Mais cette mer, qu’à cause de cela j’avais imaginée venant

mourir au pied du vitrail, était à plus de cinq lieues de distance, à Balbec-Plage, et à côté de sa coupole, ce clocher que, parce que j'avais lu qu'il était lui-même une âpre falaise normande où s'amassaient les grains, où tournoyaient les oiseaux, je m'étais toujours représenté comme recevant à sa base la dernière écume des vagues soulevées, il se dressait sur une place où était l'embranchement de deux lignes de tramways, en face d'un café qui portait, écrit en lettres d'or, le mot "Billard"; il se détachait sur un fond de maisons aux toits desquelles ne se mêlait aucun mât. Et l'église . . . faisait un avec tout le reste, semblait un accident.¹⁴ (*JF II*, 19)

Materially, Balbec church is built out of the rocks from the sea cliffs. Metaphorically and metonymically, the steeple resembles the cliff out of which it is made. It shares its name with Balbec-Plage, and can therefore assimilate some of the essence of the beach. Around its steeple, seabirds hover. The unity of the church's stones and structure constitutes a place that evokes the sea, and yet the church itself has been displaced. It has apparently been banished to the very landlocked Balbec-en-Terre, where the imaginary church has been "en-terrée" ("buried"). Instead of the steady crash of waves against the rocks, tramways disturb the unity of place by shuttling passengers between places. The gilded letters above the café mock the sanctity of names, as they designate the common game of billiards and not what the narrator considers as the holy and unique name of Balbec. The configuration of the place of Balbec has no meaning as its constituent parts are randomly juxtaposed. Balbec is not the unique manifestation of an essence, but a mere accident.

The narrator vainly attempts to revive the dying image of Balbec church by repeating to himself the uniqueness of place: "C'est ici, c'est l'église de Balbec. Cette place qui a l'air de savoir sa gloire, est le seul lieu du monde qui possède l'église de Balbec" (20) ("It is here, this is Balbec church. This place, which seems to know its glory, is the sole place in the world that possesses Balbec church"). He wants to believe that the statues in front of him at Balbec are somehow more, because unique, than the countless photographs and descriptions that had filled his imagination before his voyage. Instead of being more than the sum of the images it has inspired, the church is much less. The narrator comes to this realization when he grasps that he occupies the same space as the church, that he can measure its statues. He could permanently alter the physical appearance of the site by simply writing his signature over the soot crusted on the stone, disfiguring the unique, and only, statue of the Virgin of Balbec. The essence of eternal beauty incarnated in the statue changes into "une petite vieille de pierre" (21) ("a little old lady made out of stone"). Graf-

fiti operates by crude appropriation through the superimposition of the narrator's name over the statue: the now materialized art object loses its own name, which is replaced by that of the narrator. He leaves the church in dismay, but for the moment at least, blames himself and bad circumstances for his inability to see in the church what he imagines is expressed in its name (21).

While the metaphors found in guidebooks can lead astray the traveler who knows of places only through their names, the narrator learns later during his stay at Balbec that metaphors created by a work of art can free objects of their names and alter our everyday perceptions of them. The work of the painter Elstir, one of a series of artists in the *Recherche*, imposes on the narrator the need to manipulate the perspective of place through metaphor in order to counter the debilitating effects of habit. When the narrator first enters Elstir's studio in Balbec, he is disappointed that the majority of paintings there are only "marines" ("seascapes") inspired by local views. Yet what at first appear to be clichéd paintings of the sea turn out to be unexpected transformations that represent true impressions instead of the constructions of intelligence:

J'y pouvais discerner que le charme de chacune [des marines] consistait en une sorte de métamorphose des choses représentées, analogue à celle qu'en poésie on nomme métaphore et que si Dieu le Père avait créé les choses en les nommant, c'est en leur ôtant leur nom, ou en leur donnant un autre qu'Elstir les recréait. Les noms qui désignent les choses répondent toujours à une notion de l'intelligence, étrangère à nos impressions véritables et qui nous force à éliminer d'elles tout ce qui ne se rapporte pas à cette notion.¹⁵ (*JF II*, 191)

The metaphors expressed by Elstir's paintings are epitomized by his view of the port of Carquethuit where the artist reverses the viewer's intellectual expectations by only using for the town "des termes marins" ("sea terms") and for the sea "des termes urbains" ("urban terms"). Elstir's metaphors teach the narrator that names signify only a concept dictated by intelligence and that truth lies in our impressions. Elstir practices a blasphemous re-creation of the world by removing or changing the names that God *the father* created. Elstir reveals not only that the father's symbolic order is an illusion, he also teaches how to perceive the truth beyond the illusion of space: "Mais les rares moments où l'on voit la nature telle qu'elle est, poétiquement, c'était de ceux-là qu'était faite l'oeuvre d'Elstir" (*JF II*, 192) ("But the rare moments when we see nature as it really is, poetically, Elstir's work was made of those"). The narrator is only able

to put theory into practice after the revelation of his literary vocation. When Julia Kristeva, in *Le Temps sensible*, asserts that “Proust ne cesse de ‘déciffrer,’ mais son monde n’est pas fait de ‘signes.’ En tout cas, ce ne sont pas des signes-mots ni des signes d’idées, encore moins des signifiants ou des signifiés” (307) (“Proust never stops ‘deciphering,’ but his world is not made of ‘signs.’ In any case, not word-signs or signs of ideas, even less signifiers and signifieds”), she works backward from the novel’s conclusion without taking into account how the narrator arrives there. If the world of the narrator (Proust’s world is presumably our world, whereas the world of the narrator is the text) is made up of impressions, as the passage quoted above suggests and as Kristeva argues (252), impressions themselves can only be revealed and communicated by the displacement of signs, by the process of renaming proper to metaphor. Proust’s text never argues that signs do not exist, but rather argues for their continual reformulation through art.

The collapse of the system of places and of names that started with “Nom de pays: Le pays” continues as the narrator discovers the vacuity of aristocratic society, the deterritorialized cities of the plain (since homosexuality is ubiquitous), and the impossibility of sequestering a loved one (in his words “un être de fuite” or “a being of flight”). This slow destruction of places of the novel, and thus of the identity of the narrator, speeds up exponentially at the end of the cyclical novel, in *Albertine disparue* and *Le Temps retrouvé*. The two “côtés” change forever as they too are destroyed and delocalized, not by God the father, but by World War I and the experience of the narrator. After his return from Venice, he learns that Gilberte Swann and Robert de Saint-Loup-en-Bray are engaged. Their marriage indicates a possible link between the two “côtés,” since each represents for the narrator one of the two paths. A few pages from the end of *Albertine disparue* Gilberte, now married, invites the narrator to her home, Tansonville, near Combray, where he has been absent since childhood. The return to Combray leads to a succession of discoveries for the narrator. He and Gilberte take long moonlit walks, not unlike the ones that the narrator’s family would take in his youth, but now the countryside has no effect on him. The actual geographical places no longer have anything in common with his memories of them. Gilberte tells him that they could walk to Guermantes in less than fifteen minutes (*AD IV*, 268). There is thus an end to the Guermantes Way, but it retains the mystery of its name:

C’est comme si elle m’avait dit: “Tournez à gauche, prenez ensuite à votre main droite, et vous toucherez l’intangible, vous atteindrez les inattingibles

[sic] lointains dont on ne connaît jamais sur terre que la direction, que—ce que j’avais cru jadis que je pourrais connaître seulement de Guermantes, et peut-être, en un sens, je ne me trompais pas—le ‘côté.’”¹⁶ (*AD IV*, 268)

The “côté de Guermantes” as well as the name Guermantes first acquired their mystique because the destination of Guermantes was unreachable, the contents of the place, unknowable. The only tangible, attainable aspect of Guermantes was the name and the path, or the “side,” that led to the mysterious place. The narrator maintains that, in a sense, he was correct in believing that he could never reach Guermantes, the place, because it only exists in his imagination as a name, a path, and a family. A reversal has happened, where the importance now lies in experience, in the tangible as opposed to the imaginary. The syntax of the sentence reinforces the narrator’s discovery, since the word “côté” has been removed to the end of the sentence, which indicates that the path is an end in itself.

Gilberte’s next stunning geographical revelation, already prepared by the narrator’s apathy to the places of his childhood, is the fact that the most agreeable way to walk to Guermantes is to take the Méséglise path (“Swann’s way”). The two “côtés” connect in space, as they have already done socially through the marriage of Gilberte (Swann) and Robert (a Guermantes). The discovery of the paths’ unity “boulever[sait] toutes les idées de mon enfance” (*AD IV*, 268) (“shattered all the ideas from my childhood”), as it unravels all the mental geography of Combray inscribed by the father, the mental geography upon which is based the entire novel. Yet Combray and his memories of it are already dead to the narrator, who no longer shows any interest in his past or even life itself. The destruction of the places that structured his world encourages him further in his self-imposed isolation (he will spend most of the war in a “maison de santé”). Gilberte makes one final disclosure that ends both *Albertine disparue* and, in a sense, the errors and wanderings of the narrator: the secret desires that he held for Gilberte at their first meeting were shared, if not surpassed, by Gilberte herself, as she had tried to show him with an indecent gesture (271–72). What he desired so much during his walks in Combray, what he felt to be attainable only in his imagination, had always been possible, indeed would have been realized had it not been for his investment in the imaginary. He had desired only what he thought he could not have (Gilberte, Guermantes, and the power of names detached from places); yet it was the obstacle of the imaginary that obscured the possibility of experience. The structure of places, founded upon the desire for an essence contained in a name, completely collapses through Gilberte’s revelations.

The passages devoted to the First World War in *Le Temps retrouvé* complete the destruction of the system of place set up in “Combray.” History erupts to sweep away the illusion of the permanence of place. Like the “blank” Proust praises in Flaubert’s *L’Éducation sentimentale* which separates Frédéric’s horror at the murder of Dussardier from his return to Paris years later, the narrator abandons society for health reasons for an untold number of years, the minute details of his observations suddenly disappear, his quest to be a writer abandoned. The narrator finds himself in a “maison de santé” (ambiguously “nursing home” or “mental home”) far from the social and political upheavals in Paris brought on by the war. The asylum functions as an absence of place and desire; nowhere does the narrator indicate why he is there, where it is located, or what it looks like. On a strictly narrative level, his stay at the asylum provides a distance, both in time (over many years) and space, from both the social world of Paris and the places of Combray; this distance allows the narrator sufficient perspective to understand the momentous changes in society after the war (Shattuck, 61–64). By severing the link with the past, the war disrupts the effects of habitual memory and permanently transforms the geographical and mental places of the text. Yet the “maison de santé” also marks the complete failure of the narrator to make the names which fill his imagination coincide with the places he occupies. Recovering from what may be a nervous breakdown, he exists nowhere, he writes nothing.

Only the lack of medical personnel during the war forces the narrator to leave the asylum briefly to travel to Paris. He describes a transformed city where the skies above are filled with warplanes and underground in the metro social classes are mixed while seeking shelter. The social hierarchy is shifted by the war, as it had been earlier by the Dreyfus Affair. Mme Verdurin ascends to the top of the social ladder, and Charlus, because of his Germanophilia, loses his prominence.

The war transfigures Combray even more than Paris. In a letter to the narrator, Gilberte describes her experiences at Tansonville in the middle of the fighting: “Vous n’avez pas idée de ce que c’est que cette guerre mon cher ami, et de l’importance qu’y prend une route, un pont, une hauteur” (*TR IV*, 335) (“You have no idea what this war is my dear friend, and the importance that a road, a bridge, an elevated site can take”). The Germans destroyed Méséglise, blew up the bridge over the Vivonne, and fought all along the “côté de Méséglise,” where over 600,000 men died (335). Names are created to reflect military realities: the end of the Méséglise Way becomes infamous as the “côte 307” (“hill 307”). The war performs the same metaphorical transformations as Elstir’s paintings, temporarily imposing a military perspective on the countryside. The Vi-

vonne stream, the place of the narrator's childhood fascination, becomes a strategic battleground that divides Combray into French and German territories. The nostalgic *lieu de mémoire* of childhood is now a national *lieu de mémoire*. Gilberte is correct in emphasizing the new importance of Combray's places, but the war has changed their role. Instead of constituting identity through stability, places during the war become a function of strategy and instability; war transgresses the places of Combray and creates indeterminate identities that change rapidly depending on the location of enemy territory.

Charlus, in a conversation with the narrator, provides another blow to the system of places set up in "Combray": Combray's church, serving as a German observatory, was destroyed by the French and the English troops (*TR IV*, 374). The Combray church, when it first appears in *Du côté de chez Swann*, is described in human terms: it is a "simple citoyenne de Combray" (*CS I*, 62); the steeple looks over the whole town, giving meaning to the affairs of Combray's inhabitants (64). The church is not simply a symbol for the town, but its organizing principle (just as the two "côtés" organize the narrator's world). The Combray church used to stand for the very presence of time incorporated in place:

Un édifice occupant, si l'on peut dire, un espace à quatre dimensions—la quatrième étant celle du Temps—déployant à travers les siècles son vaisseau qui, de travée en travée, de chapelle en chapelle, semblait vaincre et franchir non pas seulement quelques mètres, mais des époques successives d'où il sortait victorieux.¹⁷ (*CS I*, 60)

The church, however, does not survive the modern epoch victorious; its destruction during the war indicates the inability of places or persons to resist the work of time. The church is built in the space of a few meters and is built in time across the centuries, but it is never outside of time nor immune to time's effects. The final sentences of the novel will return to the idea that being is subject to time more than it is to space. However, instead of the "four-dimensional" church which symbolized the people of Combray in a few meters and over many centuries, it is people themselves who occupy a disproportionately greater place in time than they do in space.

After the war is over, after the places and symbols of the narrator's youth have been destroyed, the narrator despairs of ever being capable of writing a novel or even of acting in a meaningful way. The places that formed the basis of his identity have vanished; he no longer believes in the father's symbols that had mapped out his world. Without a preexisting discourse, even an oppositional one, no place exists for the narrator

to inscribe himself in space. He can no longer decide between the magic of names and the disappointing experience of places. The complete rejection of external space, the hollowing out of the narrator himself, coupled with the five successive incidents of involuntary memory before the “bal de têtes” at the Princesse de Guermantes’s lead to the revelation that the narrator’s vocation is to write a novel about time. Instead of the narrator’s inevitably flawed perception of places conforming to the imaginary world formed by evocative place names, instead of looking for truth in deceptively legible external signs, the narrator must look inward toward the space of the unconscious.

For Proust’s narrator, the unconscious is a text composed of signs engraved by the impressions of reality: “Ce livre, le plus pénible de tous à déchiffrer, est aussi le seul que nous ait dicté la réalité, le seul dont l’impression ait été faite en nous par la réalité même” (*TR IV*, 458) (“This book, the most painstaking of all to decipher, is also the only one that reality has dictated to us, the only one whose ‘impression’ was made in us by reality itself”). The unconscious text is to be deciphered with difficulty by the artist, who must search within the self for the truth of external reality.¹⁸ The reading of this text can only be accomplished through an act of creation, through the writing of another text, which would be the translation of the “livre intérieur de signes inconnus” (*TR IV*, 458) (“the interior book of unknown signs”). The composition of a book about time that would translate the “unknown signs” of subjective interiority necessarily reconfigures the paternal signs that founded the law of places. This new book would set the “paternal” places in motion through narrative and would thus create unexpected connections between places and between signs. Instead of the hierarchical law of the land imposed by the narrator’s father, the narrator’s book about time would represent the transformation of signs over time and according to the interpretation of each new reader.

An understanding of the self through a reading of the “inner text” allows the narrator to perceive himself and others as they really are. Art and literature in particular are the only means of making us “sortir de nous” (“leave ourselves”), by transporting us to different places, re-creating the temporal experience of involuntary memory and communicating it to others (474). Only through literature can we perceive our own essence in its relation to time. In this way, real life is, paradoxically, a life of literature: “La vraie vie, la vie enfin découverte et éclaircie, la seule vie par conséquent pleinement vécue, c’est la littérature” (474) (“True life, life finally discovered and understood, the only life consequently fully lived, is literature”).