CHAPTER 2

The Impossible Possible Philosophers’ Man

The impossible possible philosophers’ man,
The man who has had the time to think enough,
The central man, the human globe, responsive
As a mirror with a voice, the man of glass
Who in a million diamonds sums us up.
—Wallace Stevens, “Asides on the Oboe”

Hypocrite lecteur, – mon semblable, – mon frère
—Charles Baudelaire, “Au Lecteur”

To be “modern,” Hugo von Hofmannsthal wrote in 1893, meant discovering a balance between seemingly oppositional energies: analysis and fantasy. “Modern,” he explained, “is the dissection of a mood, a sigh, a scruple; and the modern is the instinctive, almost somnambulistic surrender to every revelation of beauty, to a harmony of colours, to a glittering melody, to a wondrous analogy” (Bradbury and McFarlane 1991, 71). If this sounds like as clear a summary of *A la recherche* as we could wish, its origins need to be traced back to New England and to Ralph Waldo Emerson.

Emerson is an elusive presence in Proust’s writing. We might express surprise that he appears there at all. For if Emerson was a clarion call declaring America’s literary independence from the Old World, an iconoclast who would smash “the sepulchres of the fathers,” and a voice in the Concord wilderness rousing his fellow countrymen and women to demand, “Why should not we have a poetry and philosophy of insight and not tradition” (*EL*, 7), what earthly use could a neurotic young man
growing up in the hothouse atmosphere of Paris, the seeming antithesis of everything for which Emerson’s robust New England pragmaticism stood, make of such a manifesto?

The differences between the two men seem overwhelming: “optimism versus disenchantment, moralism versus art for art’s sake, transcendentalism versus impressionism” (Virtanen 1977, 123). If such binaries suggest the advantages lay all on Emerson’s side, it did not necessarily appear so at the time. Henry James for one commented on Emerson’s life lacking “color,” that it gave the reader an “impression of paleness.” More damning in comparison with a work as singularly teeming as *A la recherche* (not to mention James’s own fictions), it was a life “curiously devoid of complexity … passions, alternations, affairs, adventures.” In place of amazement, it offered a “terrible paucity of alternatives … the bribes and lures, the beguilements and prizes were few.” And while Marcel’s world is almost fatally divided between the ways by Swann and the Guermantes, Emerson’s New England proved nothing more than “a clue without a labyrinth.”¹

While critics have for some time acknowledged Proust’s debt to Emerson, this has not always been the case. And even when acknowledged, the full extent of the influence has yet to be clearly appraised. At one extreme we have André Maurois’ *The World of Marcel Proust* (1960). Little more than a coffee-table book that celebrates the lives of Proust’s aristocratic friends, Maurois had clearly read Proust’s letter to his friend Robert de Billy in which he emphasized the importance to him of a number of British and American writers, and yet no mention is made of Proust listing Emerson among them. Maurois’ anti-Americanism is hardly unique among French writers and critics. Even so, J.M.Cocking’s assessment that this is tantamount to an “anglophobe” conspiracy among such writers as Maurice Bardèche who “pour scorn on critics who attach

¹ James 1987, 209, 210, 216, 214. Despite all that he says about Emerson, James himself persisted in depicting Americans, women in particular, as fundamentally innocent and naive in comparison to the arch seductresses that were her European cousins. As Leslie A. Fiedler comments: “No Nice American Girl could in James be guilty of adultery, which remained for him the European … sin [and he] assumes a fundamental and ineradicable distinction between females born not to know evil and those born to endure the effects” (Fiedler 1967, 287, 288). Given Fiedler’s comments, it is fascinating to discover in *La Prisonnière* Proust drawing an analogy between pre-Columban America and the survival within us of “Une bonté partielle” [a partial goodness] (1849; V:302).
importance to Emerson and Ruskin” (1982, xvii–xix) is hardly confined to
the Francophile world. If we read Walter A. Strauss, for example, though
he too cites Proust’s letter to de Billy he also limits his discussion to Eliot,
Hardy, and Stevenson (1957, 171–172). Similarly, American-based academics,
such as Germaine Brée and George Stambolian, while convinced that there
is a connection between Proust and Emerson, remain less confident that it
outlasted the artistic growing pains that characterized Jean Santeuil. Both
admit the importance of Emerson’s Representative Men (1850), particularly
with regard to the central role Proust’s fiction affords the artist (Stambolian
1972, 137; Brée 1967, 49). “Proust,” Brée writes, “like Emerson, seems to
have thought of humanity as one man slowly coming into being through
millions of individuals, a man whose essential and distinct being is non-
material, a being that he designates as ‘esprit’ and that Emerson spoke of
as the ‘oversoul.’” The significance of this, she adds, is that it opened up
“new paths in French literature, very Emersonian ones” (Brée 1967, 69–70).

Pierre-Edmond Roberts, meanwhile, while giving Emerson sustained
credit for influencing Proust, contrasts Emerson’s purely philosophical
contribution to A la recherche with the more dynamic impact of his reading
Ruskin (1976, 7). This is a false distinction to make. As we will see with
regard to Proust’s appreciation of the Gothic – an aspect of his art that has
traditionally been ascribed to the tutelage of Ruskin – Emerson’s influence
makes itself felt in any number of key ways.

Cocking’s assessment must now be further tempered by the acknowl-
edgment given Emerson by Jean-Yves Tadié, Proust’s inspired biographer
and the editor of the four-volume Pléiade edition of A la recherche. It is
to Tadié that we owe the most telling proof of Emerson’s life-long hold
over Proust’s imagination: that on the night he died, Proust jotted down
from memory a misquotation of Emerson’s “There’s nothing so frivolous
as dying” (2000, 777). Despite this, Tadié’s necessarily brief but probing
analysis of Proust’s reading of Emerson comes to the conclusion that his
infatuation with Emerson was strongest while still a young man. By 1902,
Tadié informs us, Proust was confident enough to criticize Emerson and
his mentor Carlyle for failing to “differentiate sufficiently deeply the various
forms of translating reality” (2000, 345). Much the same, however, might
be said for Proust’s “apprenticeship” to Ruskin, the importance of whom
could only be fully absorbed, as Richard Macksey points out, when, like so
many of his characters, Proust had gone through “all the successive stages
of infatuation, discipleship, and disillusion” (ORR, xvii). More important,
Macksey continues, are those subtle references to Ruskin which “constitute
an important pattern in the fabric of [A la recherche]." Precisely the same
can be said for Emerson.

Where I find myself departing from Tadie, not to mention Stambolian
and Brée, is in arguing that Emerson remained an influence on Proust’s
writing long past the years of his literary apprenticeship. I should begin
by acknowledging that this conviction is hardly helped by Proust’s own
failure to signpost any such debt. Emerson is mentioned only once in A la
recherche, and then in such terms as to constitute more a red herring than a
point of any obvious significance. But with a similar attention to the woof
and weave of Proust’s novel as Macksey affords Ruskin, we are better able
to discern the full extent of Emerson’s textual presence.

Proust’s early reading of Emerson marks him out as a product of the
literary tastes and fashions of his time. Emerson’s writings had a profound
effect on the work of the Symbolists, not least through the advocacy of
Maurice Maeterlinck, who wrote an influential preface to a collection of
seven of Emerson’s essays published in French in 1894. Maeterlinck called
Emerson “the good, early morning shepherd of the pale green fields of a new
optimism,” and in turn he became known as “a Belgian Emerson.” Whether
Emerson imagined his advocacy of self-reliance and individualism appealing
to a writer such as J. K. Huysmans, however, is another matter entirely. But as
Havelock Ellis wrote in 1931, Emerson was regarded as a decadent precisely
because an age of individualism “is usually an age of artistic decadence”
(Ellis 1969, xv). It was in France, Ellis says, beginning with Baudelaire, that
such a message was heard and responded to most immediately. As early as
1863 and his defense of Delacroix as the first great artist of modernité, we
find Baudelaire turning to Emerson as a recognized authority:

“‘The hero is he who is immovably centered,’ says the transatlantic
moralist, Emerson, who, in spite of reputation as the leader of the
wearisome Bostonian school, has nevertheless a certain flavor of
Seneca about him, which effectively stimulates meditation ... But
this maxim, which the leader of American Transcendentalism applies
to the conduct of life and the sphere of business, can equally well be
applied to the sphere of poetry and art. (1964d, 53)

Cited in Halls 1966, 42. Proust’s early admiration for Maeterlinck is well
known. Maeterlinck was the subject of one of his dazzling pastiches, and it is
Debussy’s operatic version of Pelléas et Mélisande that Marcel, ill in bed, listens to
repeatedly on the theaterphone.
We know that the teenage Proust was familiar with Emerson in Émile Montégut’s translation of *Essais de philosophie américaine* (1851). Later, as I discuss below, he would read and make notes on *Sept essais d’Emerson* (1894) translated by I. Will with its preface by Maeterlinck. What is more, Proust was keen that others share his passion. Writing to Daniel Halévy in 1888, Proust set his schoolfriend a precocious and forbidding reading list that included some twenty-four authors ancient and modern, among them Emerson. *Les Plaisirs et les jours* (1896), meanwhile, made accessible to a wider audience this enthusiasm. Among the epigraphs that Proust scattered liberally throughout his first published book, no author appears more regularly than Emerson. The collection is framed by quotations from both books of *Essays*: the first story, “La Mort de Baldassare Silvande, Vicomte de Sylvanie,” is headed by a quotation from *Nature*; while the third and final sections of “La Fin de la Jalousie” begin, appropriately enough given Proust’s lifelong elision of the two emotions, with a passage from “Love.” In between come quotations taken from “History” (“Fragments de comédie italienne”) and “The Poet” (“Les Regrets, rêveries couleur du temps”).

In a letter to Reynaldo Hahn from 1895, Proust refers to his having spent a day in bed reading Emerson’s *Essays* “avec ivresse” [with intoxication] (Corr. I:363–364; SL I:87–88). A similar state informs his depiction in the unfinished *Jean Santeuil* of the eponymous hero’s adolescent love affair with books. “Déjà du reste quand nous étions petits,” Proust writes about the young Jean (and by inference all budding writers), “il y avait un certain livre que nous prenions sous notre bras quand on allait au parc et que nous lisions avec amour, qu’aucun autre n’aurait remplacé” [When we were young there was always one especial which we carried with us to the Park, and read with a passion which no other book could ever quite supplant] (JS, 367–368; JS English, 377). It is an experience which Proust goes on to describe in strikingly sensuous terms:

Son charme de corps ne faisait qu’un avec l’histoire que nous aimions et le plaisir qu’il nous donnait, quand par une chaude après-midi, dans la charmeille du parc, nous cachant aux regards pour ne pas être interrompus, ou par une matinée pluvieuse, en attendant le déjeuner

3 The collection was comprised of “Confiance en soi-même,” “Compensation,” “Lois de l’esprit,” “le Poète,” “Caractère,” “L’Ame Suprême,” and “Fatalité.”

4 See the online Proust–Kolb Archive for Research at www.library.uiuc.edu/kolbp (accessed July 19, 2006).
près du feu de la salle à manger, gêné par la cuisinière qui sous prétexte de nous mieux installer nous dérangeait, nous étions assis le tenant à la main, et, regardant ses pages, nous ne le séparions pas de la douceur de ses minces feuilllets, de leur fine odeur.[]

[Its physical enchantment was one with the story that we loved, with the pleasure it gave us when in the shady arbors of the Park, hidden away so as not to be interrupted, or on rainy days waiting for lunch beside the fire in the dining-room, bothered by the cook who, with the excuse of making us more comfortable, kept on constantly disturbing us, holding it in our hands and looking at its pages, we never, in our mind, separated its contents from the softness of its thin pages, from its lovely smell.] (JS, 368; JS English, 377)

Exacting and excluding, reading occupies a mental and emotional space that will reappear in *A la recherche* as the obsessive and secretive love affairs of Swann, Marcel, Charlus, Albertine, and any number of other characters. Books are more trustworthy than friendship, the pleasures of the text more accessible than those of the sexual, the word more physically present than the body. As with Marcel’s retreat at Combray to a little room that smelled of orris-root and was perfumed by a wild blackcurrant bush, a room in which take place “à toutes celles de mes occupations qui réclamaient une inviolable solitude: la lecture, la rêverie, les larmes et la volupté” [all those occupations of mine that demanded an inviolable solitude: reading, reverie, tears and sensuous pleasure] (20; I:16), there is something onanistic about Proust’s evocation of reading. Indeed, this rudimentary “self-reliance” shares a good deal with what Genet says about masturbation being the “gesture of solitude that makes you sufficient unto yourself,” allowing us to possess “intimately others who serve your pleasure without their suspecting it” (1964, 105). With Genet our guide, we cannot fail to be reminded of Marcel’s fatal need to identify with Albertine – both in the mutual masturbation that comprises their love life and, as I discuss in the following chapter, his overwhelming need to penetrate the secrets of her body and see through to those memories which he longs to transcribe and incorporate into his own long-deliberated but much-postponed novel.

If such intensity and isolation are to last, much else must be sacrificed. As Eve Sedgwick comments: “The reading practice founded on such basic demands and intuitions [must necessarily] run against the grain of the most patent available formulae for young people’s reading and life – against the
grain, often, of the most accessible voices even in the texts themselves” (1994, 3). What must replace the “sanctity” of the one prized book of childhood is a kind of promiscuity (Sedgwick talks about “becoming a perverse reader”) which allows the adult reader to pursue textual pleasure like the flâneur hoping to come across the unexpected in previously unremarked places. Thus it is that Proust imagines Jean’s widening sense of himself in terms of his accidentally discovering some hitherto unread pages of Emerson in manuscript or published in a newspaper (JS, 368; JS English, 377).

Emerson is referred to a second time in Jean Santeuil, again in the context of a species of pleasure that is involuntary and intimate but which also establishes a tension between estrangement and communion:

Si vous trouviez dans la chambre de votre aubergiste, dans une province éloignée, les poésies d’Alfred de Vigny, les Essais d’Emerson et Le Rouge et le Noir, ne vous sentiriez-vous pas comme en présence d’un ami plein de vous-même, avec qui vous auriez envie de converser?

[If you found in your inn-keeper’s room, in a remote part of the country, the poems of Alfred de Vigny, Emerson’s Essays, and Le Rouge et le Noir [sic], would you not feel that you were in the presence of a kindred spirit with whom it would be delightful to have a talk?] (JS, 556; JS English, 447)

We can already see delineating themselves a number of associations which were to remain a significant part of Proust’s interest in Emerson: the need for a sustaining friendship, allied to the fear that any such intimacy might overwhelm him and leave him vulnerable.

From Jean Santeuil onward the Emersonian trail appears to go cold. Perhaps Proust felt that readers would associate Emerson too closely with Les Plaisirs et les jours, a book which enjoyed at best a lukewarm reception and at worst contributed to Proust’s reputation as a dilettante. By the time we come to A la recherche, Emerson seems all but absent as an influence. The single reference to him occurs while Marcel is talking with the Baron de Charlus about a luncheon that he, Marcel, has had with Robert de Saint-Loup, Charlus’s nephew, and with Rachel, an actress and Saint-Loup’s mistress. The luncheon exposes Marcel to Saint-Loup’s sexual jealousy at the attention Rachel attracts from other men. While
begging her to stop making an exhibition of herself, Robert receives a note saying that he is wanted by a man who would like to speak with him at his carriage door. He refuses, believing the message to be a ploy to remove him from the room while Rachel arranges an assignation. The man, however, is Charlus, and Saint-Loup has to make excuses in order to avoid meeting his uncle (875; III:165). Having sent Marcel off to warn the restaurant owner that he is not to be further disturbed, Saint-Loup and Rachel retire to a private room, where Marcel later joins them. From believing himself to have wasted the first afternoon of spring sitting in a restaurant, Marcel, as the effects of the champagne kick in, becomes more amenable to the pleasures to be had from “chose gracieuse et qu’on ne peut payer trop cher, une rose, une cigarette parfumée, une coupe de champagne” [gracious things which cannot be bought too dear – a rose, a scented cigarette, a glass of champagne]. It is these, he believes, that will redeem “ces heures d’ennui” [these hours of boredom] (876; III:167).

Drunk, Marcel experiences a rare moment of companionship and camaraderie, only for it to be subsumed in a more disquieting vision:

Le cabinet où se trouvait Saint-Loup était petit, mais la glace unique qui le décorait était de telle sorte qu’elle semblait en réfléchir une trentaine d’autres, le long d’une perspective infinie; et l’ampoule électrique placée au sommet du cadre devait le soir, quand elle était allumée, suivie de la procession d’une trentaine de reflets pareils à elle-même, donner au buveur, même solitaire, l’idée que l’espace autour de lui se multipliait en même temps que ses sensations exaltées par l’ivresse et qu’enfermé seul dans ce petit réduit, il régnait pourtant sur quelque chose de bien plus étendu en sa courbe indéfinie et lumineuse, qu’un allée du « Jardin de Paris ». Or, étant alors à ce moment-là ce buveur, tout d’un coup, le cherchant dans la glace, je l’aperçus, hideux, inconnu, qui me regardait. La joie de l’ivresse était plus forte que le dégoût; par gaieté ou bravade, je lui souris et en même temps il me souriait. Et je me sentais tellement sous l’empire éphémère et puissant de la minute où les sensations sont si fortes que je ne sais si ma seule tristesse ne fut pas de penser que le moi affreux que je venais d’apercevoir était peut-être à son dernier jour et que je ne rencontrerais plus jamais cet étranger dans le cours de ma vie.
Saint-Loup’s private dining-room was small, but the single mirror which hung in it was of such a kind that it seemed to reflect thirty others, in an endless progression; and, when it was lit at night and followed by the procession of thirty or more reflections of itself, the light bulb placed at the top of the mirror-frame must have given the drinker, even when alone, the impression that the surrounding space was multiplying itself along with his own sensations, heightened by drink, and that, shut up by himself in this tiny room, he was nevertheless reigning over something far more extensive in its indefinite luminous curve than a walkway in the Jardin de Paris. And, at that moment, I was the drinker in question: suddenly, as I looked for him in the mirror, I saw him, a hideous stranger, staring back at me. The joy of intoxication was stronger than my disgust; out of gaiety or bravado, I smiled at him and found that my smile was simultaneously returned. And I felt myself to be so much more under the ephemeral and powerful sway of this minute’s intense sensation, that it is not clear to me whether the only disquieting element of the experience was not the thought that the hideous self I had just glimpsed was perhaps about to breathe his last, and that I should never meet this stranger again in my lifetime.] (877; III:168)

It is therefore with the greatest possible sense of irony that when Marcel is later challenged by Charlus over his part in the debauch-cum-luncheon, the Narrator comments, “J’aurais voulu répondre qu’au déjeuner avilissant on n’avait parlé que d’Emerson, d’Ibsen, de Tolstoï” [I should have liked to reply that this degrading lunch-party had been entirely given over to a discussion of Emerson, Ibsen, and Tolstoy] (959; III:274). Emerson functions here as a cipher for a morality so alien to the circles frequented by Marcel that it is literally unspeakable. This is made the more apparent and grotesque if we juxtapose Proust’s own “intoxicated” reading of Emerson as a young man with Marcel’s hall-of-mirrors-like glimpse of himself as a drunk, dying stranger. What he encounters is less “kindred spirit” than “Hypocrite lecteur.” The Emerson of Proust’s youth, the Emerson who seemed to offer a halfway-house between longed-for companionship and the necessity of isolation, would appear unable to exist in the world that Marcel finds himself in, which, to paraphrase Henry James, is irreducibly complex and passionate.

While this remains the only explicit reference to Emerson in A la recherche, with a knowledge of the passage from Jean Santeuil discussed
earlier we recognize Emerson’s presence behind an otherwise unremarkable passage in which the Narrator reflects on the pleasures of conversing with Oriane de Guermantes:

Pour toutes ces raisons, les causeries avec la duchesse ressemblaient à ces connaissances qu’on puise dans une bibliothèque de château, surannée, incomplète, incapable de former une intelligence, dépourvue de presque tout ce que nous aimons, mais nous offrant parfois quelque renseignement curieux, voire la citation d’une belle page que nous ne connaissions pas, et dont nous sommes heureux dans la suite de nous rappeler que nous en devons la connaissance à une magnifique demeure seigneuriale. Nous sommes alors, pour avoir trouvé la préface de Balzac à *La Chartreuse* ou des lettres inédites de Joubert, tentés de nous exagérer le prix de la vie que nous y avons menée et dont nous oublions, pour cette aubaine d’un soir, la frivolité stérile.

[For all these reasons, talk with the Duchesse was like the discoveries we make in the library of a country house, outdated, incomplete, incapable of forming a mind, devoid of almost everything we value, but occasionally offering us some curious piece of information, or even a quotation from a fine passage that was unknown to us and which subsequently we are happy to remember as something we were introduced to because of a stay in a splendid stately home. And because we have discovered Balzac's preface to the *Chartreuse* or some unpublished letters of Joubert, we are then tempted to exaggerate the value of our stay there, the barren frivolity of which we forget in the light of a single evening’s happy discovery.] (1167; III:550)

Read alongside Jean Santeuil’s espousal of the simple but profound pleasures of reading in a newspaper an unpublished passage from Emerson, or discovering in some off-the-beaten-track hotel room a copy of the *Essays* and feeling oneself in the presence of “un ami plein de vous-même,” it is impossible not to see in the transposition of authors and the transference to an aristocratic library stuffed full of rare and valuable literary relics a profound diminishment of the delights and possibilities of literature. That this happens at a stage in the novel when Marcel is becoming disillusioned with society and with his own social ambition is fitting. Far from signaling, as Tadié and others assert, Emerson’s declining influence on the mature Proust, we might instead argue that he continued to be so important to
Proust that his being “sacrificed” on the altar of Marcel’s snobbery struck a deep personal chord. Furthermore, by replacing Emerson’s name with that of Joubert (who wrote little and published nothing), it may be that Proust was enacting one of his own greatest anxieties: that the writing of his novel would, like the work of George Eliot’s Casaubon, who devoted his entire life to “an insignificant and absurd study,” prove a failure. He was to hint at as much in a letter to Jacques Copeau from 1913, commenting that he feared Emerson’s letters should come to be better known and thought of than his *Essays* (*Corr.* XII: 156–159; *SL* III:171–172).

There is one further place to which we can look for evidence of Proust’s continued engagement with Emerson. In November 1908 Proust began concerted work on *Contre Sainte-Beuve*. A mixture of prose fiction, autobiography, and critical essay, it proved to be the breakthrough that allowed him to find the narrative voice and structure that was to become *A la recherche du temps perdu*. In a letter to Mme Strauss dated November 6, 1908, Proust wrote that it was necessary for the writer to evolve a style which, rather than conforming to the precepts of classical French, “porter la marque de notre choix, de notre goût, de notre incertitude, de notre désir, et de notre faiblesses” [bears the imprint of our choice, our taste, our uncertainty, our desire and our weakness]. Only then could he claim to write “beautifully.” As regards grammar and syntax, “Hélas ... il n’y a pas de certitudes, même grammaticales” [Alas ... there are no certainties, even grammatical ones]; while “Cette idée qu’il y a une langue française, existant en dehors des écrivains, et qu’on protège, est inouïe. Chaque écrivain est obligé de se faire sa langue, comme chaque violoniste est obligé de se faire son « son »” [This idea that there is a French language which exists independently of the writers who use it, and which must be protected, is preposterous. Every writer is obliged to create his own language, as every violinist is obliged to create his own “tone”] (*Corr.* VIII:276–278; *SL* II:408–409).

There are shades here of Emerson’s requirement that we overturn “the sepulchres of the fathers.” And while I am not suggesting that Proust’s style is modeled in any definite way on Emerson, still there are parallels between a manifesto that threatens to unsettle the governance of grammar and syntax and aspects of the reading he was engaged in and copying down in the notebook that has come to be known as *Le Carnet de 1908*. It is here that we find further evidence of what was fast becoming a longstanding engagement with Emerson as a reader and, increasingly, a writer growing in assurance and confidence.
Le Carnet comprises notes from 1908–09, two fragments from 1910 and one from 1912. It consists of three different sorts of notes: those concerning the work-in-progress that was to become Contre Sainte-Beuve; drafts of “finished” blocks of text (ranging from a sentence or two to complete paragraphs); and Proust’s reading notes. Included among the latter are a number of references to Emerson, not as in Les Plaisirs et les jours taken from Émile Montégut’s Essais de philosophie américaine but from the recently published Ralph Waldo Emerson. Sa vie et son œuvre (1907) by Marie Dugard. Dugard’s is a critical biography and so the notes Proust takes are often abbreviations – amounting in most cases to rewritings – of Dugard’s translations. Drawn predominantly from the Essays (“Self-Reliance,” “Circles,” “Nominalist and Realist,” “Friendship,” and “Spiritual Laws”), there are also references to one of Emerson’s poems (“Give All to Love”), his correspondence with Carlyle, and to Emerson’s last original publication, Society and Solitude (which might itself easily serve as an alternative title to A la recherche).

If Proust was now reading Emerson as a “kindred spirit,” then it is one who speaks of and for isolation as a necessary part of creativity. Proust’s letter to Mme Strauss may have been bullish about the challenge of forging his own distinctive literary voice; however, there is evidence in Le Carnet of the sacrifices this would entail. Thus from “Friendship” we find Proust noting: “Je sens que je pleurerais mes dieux évanouis” (C 1908, 84), his version of Dugard’s “je sais bien qu’alors je pleurerais toujours l’évanouissement de mes dieux” (1907, 84), which is in turn a translation of Emerson’s “I know well I shall mourn always the vanishing of my mighty gods” (EL, 354). Similar sentiments are echoed by two lines from Emerson’s poem “Give All to Love,” “When half-gods go, / The gods arrive” (SPP, 444), which Proust transcribes as “Q’d les demi-dieux s’en vont les dieux arrivent” (C 1908, 84). A suggestion as to who these gods might be is hinted at in what Proust takes from “Self-Reliance”: “je quitte femme frère, j’espère que c’est mieux qu’une fantaisie” (C 1908, 84), a significantly altered version of Dugard’s “Quand mon génie m’appelle, j’évite père et mère, femme et frère. Je voudrais écrire sur le linteau du montant de ma porte:

5 Proust bought a French translation of Carlyle’s Heroes and Hero-Worship to read when he traveled to Brittany with Reynaldo Hahn in 1895. The holiday was notable for a number of reasons, not least the friendship that sprang up between Proust, Hahn, and the American painter, Thomas Harrison. The meeting, as I discuss in Chapter 5, later formed the basis of Marcel’s “hero worship” of Elstir.
Fantaisie. J’espère que, en dernière analyse, c’est quelque chose de mieux qu’une fantaisie, mais on ne peut passer sa vie en explication” (1907, 84). While Emerson declared himself willing to “shun father and mother and wife and brother, when my genius calls me. I would write on the lintels of the door post, Whim” (EL, 262), Proust tailors it to his own character and situation: both his parents were dead, he will not marry, and his only sibling will be excised from the pages of the novel he is preparing to write. In his imagination at least, Proust was preparing to become not only an orphan but an only child.

It is interesting to read this aspect of both Proust and Emerson in light of the kind of wish-fulfillment that Leslie A. Fiedler regards as a distinguishing aspect of American fiction, the hero of which must metaphorically be killed and reborn: “A new birth implies a new family, a wifeless and motherless one, in which the good companion is the spouse and nurse, the redeemed male the lover and child, each his own progenitor and offspring” (1967, 333). Marcel, we remember, returns to Paris in Le Temps retrouvé after a long spell in a sanatorium. He then settles down to begin work on his novel – the hero of which will be himself – not within the confines of a family but alone with his faithful “nurse,” Françoise. Something of this is anticipated in the elliptical reference to Society and Solitude from which Proust notes just four words: “Le trépied de verre” (C1908, 84). Read in full, we can see that Proust was responding to Emerson’s description of the retreat from the world that is necessary if the word is to survive let alone flourish:

To the culture of the world an Archimedes, a Newton is indispensable; so she guards them by a certain aridity. If these had been good fellows, fond of dancing, port and clubs, we should have had no Theory of the Sphere and no Principia. They had that necessity of isolation which genius feels. Each must stand on his glass tripod if he would keep his electricity. (PE, 389; my italics)

As well as family ties, friendship is also to be doubted. This much is apparent if we return Proust’s “Vendre le trône des anges. Chaque heure d’entretien nous coûte un état céleste” (C1908, 84) to the context of Dugard’s fuller extract from “Circles”:

Comme je me promenais dans le bois et songeais à mes amis, je me
I thought, as I walked in the woods and mused on my friends, why should I play with them this game of idolatry? I know and see too well, when not voluntarily blind, the speedy limits of persons called high and worthy. Rich, noble, and great, they are by the liberality of our speech; but truth is sad. O blessed spirit, whom I forsake for these, they are not thee! Every personal consideration that we allow costs us heavenly state. We sell the thrones of angels for a short and turbulent pleasure. (EL, 406)

Emerson’s famous rejection of binding social ties in “Self-Reliance” was prompted by his reported response to being asked by “an angry bigot” to support Abolition: “Go love thy infant; love thy wood chopper: be good-natured and modest: have that grace, and never tarnish your hard uncharitable ambition with this incredible tenderness for black folk a thousand miles off. Thy love afar is spite at home.” “Goodness,” Emerson goes on to say, “must have some edge to it, – else it is none. The doctrine of hatred must be preached as the counteraction to the doctrine of love when that pules and whines” (EL, 262). It is a deliberately provocative tone. Similarly the retort reported by Dugard (1907, 68), and noted in Le Carnet, on another occasion when Emerson’s support for the anti-slavery movement was solicited: “J’ai mes propres prisonniers à délivrer” (C 1908, 84).

Emerson meant his essays to provide the kind of reading that challenged assumptions. That Proust was prepared to take him at his word is vouchsafed by his paraphrasing Emerson’s comment on reading in “Nominalist and Realist”: “I find the most pleasure in reading a book in a manner least flattering to the author. I read Proclus, and sometimes Plato, as I might read a dictionary, for a mechanical help to the fancy and the imagination” (EL, 579) [Je lis les écrivains Proclus etc. d’une manière qui n’est pas guère flatteuse pour eux, comme dictionnaires (C 1908, 84)]. Writing, however, was a different, more recalcitrant matter. As Emerson confessed in a letter
to Carlyle from February 1844:

You sometimes charge me with I know not what sky-blue, sky-void idealism. As far as it is a partiality, I fear I may be more deeply infected than you think me. I have very joyful dreams which I cannot bring to paper, much less to any approach to practice, and I blame myself not at all for my reveries, but that they have not yet got possession of my house and barn.

This too Proust notes, again in an abbreviated and as a result more gnomic form: “Si je me fais des reproches ce n’est pas de rêver c’est que mes rêves n’ont pas encore pris mes granges et ma maison” (C 1908, 84).

At the time when Proust was filled with a sense of both confidence and ambition, he went back to reading Emerson. That this wasn’t appreciated until Philip Kolb’s edition of Le Carnet de 1908 was published in 1976 goes some way to explaining the lack of attention that has been given to Emerson’s influence on Proust at this stage in his life. And while it might be argued that in abandoning Contre Sainte-Beuve for A la recherche Proust left the essay form – and therefore Emerson – behind, this is to ignore the fact that the great innovation that allowed Proust to write his novel was the device of what Walter Strauss calls the novel’s “Double I” (1957, 10): a central character who as well as subjectively experiencing events the significance of which remain hidden from him is also able to maturely narrate and reflect on the meaning of the same events in a philosophical-aesthetic-moral vein recognizably drawn from Emerson.

In the rest of this chapter, then, I want to pursue these aspects of Emerson’s philosophical and aesthetic provocations, showing how they continued to play a decisive role in A la recherche. Most obvious from the evidence of Le Carnet is the influence of Emerson’s writings on friendship and self-reliance. This in turn admits to a reading of the interaction between society and the individual that forms so important a part of Marcel’s life and Proust’s theory of sexual “inversion.” The latter also shows the

Proust disliked the term homosexualité. And though he uses it in his correspondence, in A la recherche he borrowed from nineteenth-century sexology the theory of “inversion.” Put at its simplest (and Proust goes to some lengths, as I discuss below, to show how complicated is the matter), un inverti (always in the novel male) is a man who desires men because he is himself “really” feminine. The homosexual, Proust said, is what an invert calls himself, attempting to rationalize and normalize his self-image of masculinity (“Un homosexuel, ce serait ce que prétend être, ce que de bonne foi s’imagine être, un inverti,” Esquisse IV:3: 955).
influence of Emerson, particularly in Proust’s analysis and classification of inversion through reference to the discipline of natural history. Less apparent, though as I aim to show none the less important, are the two references Proust noted to the vanishing of the gods, which guide us to an understanding of Proust’s complex use of metaphor in the novel, a device which, appropriating Emerson, Proust likens to a god renaming the world. Finally, I will consider Emerson’s contribution to Proust’s formulation of mémoire involontaire. For if we reread those essays by Emerson that Proust refers to in Le Carnet and elsewhere alongside A la recherche, the parallels between the two writers become irresistible.

**Bios(s)pheres**

In October 1832, at the age of twenty-nine, Emerson resigned his ministry from the Unitarian Second Church in Boston. “I have sometimes thought,” he wrote in a letter that anticipates the opening words of Nature, “that, in order to be a good minister, it was necessary to leave the ministry. The profession is antiquated. In an altered age, we worship in the dead forms of our forefathers” (SPP, 516–517). In October that year, and in search of a renewed sense of vocation, he sailed from Boston for the Old World in a ship laden with a cargo of logwood, mahogany, tobacco, sugar, coffee, beeswax, and cheese.

Emerson’s journal entries for the crossing and his immediate impressions of southern Europe (the Brig Jasper docked first in Malta) are vivid testimony to his acute sense of alienation with regard to his changed environment, his altered relationship with religion and God and, most importantly for the future author of the Essays, himself. This is vividly depicted in the fact that the voice that addresses Emerson as “pale face” and to which Emerson responds can only be read as speaking in the imagined accents of an indigenous “forefather,” the sepulchers of which Americans were even then building in unprecedented numbers: “What under the sun canst thou do then, pale face? Truly not much, but I can hope”; “It is doubtless a vice to turn one’s eyes inward too much, but I am my own comedy and tragedy”; “All this pomp is conventional ... But to the eye of an Indian it would be ridiculous. There is no true majesty in all this millinery and imbecility” (SPP, 517–518). While Emerson was able to jettison aspects of his upbringing, he clearly still harbored an acute sense of residual guilt at recent American history. The result is that he comes close to articulating something of the crises in the modern
sense of human subjectivity not being identical with itself, encapsulated in Rimbaud’s “Je est un autre” or Freud’s account of visiting the Acropolis and experiencing himself as two distinct presences: the one who made the comment “So this all really does exist, just as we learned in school!”, and the other who perceived it. “[A]nd both were amazed,” Freud adds. There is, Freud implicitly states, a world of difference between knowing a thing and experiencing it. Emerson was shortly to experience the same revelation when, having arrived in Paris, he visited the “Cabinet of Natural History in the Garden of Plants.”

“The universe is a more amazing puzzle than ever,” the Journal records for July 13, 1833. “Not a form so grotesque, so savage, nor so beautiful but is an expression of some property inherent in man the observer ... I say continually ‘I will be a naturalist’” (SPP, 520). The importance of this explosion of renewed feeling for the natural world and the place in it of humanity, argues Lee Rust Brown, cannot be overestimated. What Emerson saw in the Musée National d’Histoire Naturelle were “massive displays of mineral, plant, and animal specimens ... illustrat[ing] the classificatory models of individual naturalists,” including Lamarck, Cuvier, and Saint-Hilaire. Faced, as Brown comments, “with this startling combination of multiplicity and ‘reduction to a few laws,’ Emerson found the occasion ... sacramental” (1997, 60). Here, then, was an antidote to the divorce of humanity and nature which in Nature was to be characterized as ‘man is a god in ruins ... appl[y]ing to nature but half his force. He works on the world with his understanding alone” (EL, 45–46).

The importance of the naturalist, Emerson was later to tell an audience at the Boston Natural History Society, is that he marries “the visible to the invisible by uniting thought to Animal Organization” (Brown 1997, 60; the quotation comes from Emerson’s “The Uses of Natural History”). Natural history, then, provided a perspective from which order could be established. The naturalist’s was in effect a god-like power of reading and interpreting nature. Emerson wrote:

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7 Freud 2005a, 237. We might go further and say that there is a distinctly Emersonian strand to Freud’s “A Disturbance of Memory on the Acropolis.” For not only does he recount his own unconscious wish to destroy “the sepulchers of the father” in denying the existence of the Acropolis (“So this all really does exist”) but his analysis of the “disturbance” leads him to the realization, “It has to do with criticism of our father in childhood ... It seems as though the essential aspect of success lies in getting further than one’s father” (243).
A life in harmony with nature, the love of truth and of virtue, will purge the eyes to understand her text. By degrees we may come to know the primitive sense of the permanent objects of nature, so that the world shall be to us an open book, and every form significant of its hidden life and final cause. (*EL*, 25)

Such an elevated vantage point transformed the scientist into an artist: “There is a property in the horizon which no man has but he whose eye can integrate all the parts, that is, the poet” (*EL*, 9). To be able to read was not enough. For to read only would be to see the world as does “the sensual man”: as “rooted and fast.” The poet, though, sees through to the truth of the matter: that “the refractory world is ductile and flexible” (*EL*, 34). Once this is learned, we each become artists capable of transforming what we read of the old into the new works of the self. Above all, the poet is a fashioner of metaphors: he “unfixes the land and the sea, makes them revolve around the axis of his primary thought, and disposes them anew” (*EL*, 34). In this we can discern the presence of that most Emersonian of terms, “transition,” a metaphor that points to the centrality of poetic refashioning in our ability to clothe intellectual thought in words.

A further vital distinction between passive reading and active image-making is that the latter takes place unconsciously: “That which was unconscious truth, becomes when interpreted and defined in an object, a part of the domain of knowledge – a new weapon in the magazine of power” (*EL*, 25). It would be difficult to overestimate the influence of this on Proust, while acknowledging that the evidence isn’t straightforward. Certainly, Emerson’s theory of the relationship between reading and writing appears to have played a decisive part in Proust’s break with Ruskin. In “Sur la lecture,” Proust’s preface to his translation of *Sesame and Lilies* published in 1906, he takes issue with Ruskin’s view that “la lecture est exactement une conversation avec des hommes beaucoup plus sages et plus intéressants que ceux que nous pouvons avoir l’occasion de connaître autour de nous” [reading is ... a conversation with men much wiser and more interesting than those around us we may have the opportunity to know]. Proust’s reason for departing from Ruskin returns us to those passages from his own writings discussed earlier in which reading serves as a means of engaging in conversation a “kindred spirit”:
que ce qui diffère essentiellement entre un livre et un ami, ce n’est pas leur plus ou moins grande sagesse, mais la manière dont on communique avec eux, la lecture, au rebours de la conversation, consistant pour chacun de nous à recevoir communication d’une autre pensée, mais tout en restant seul, c'est-à-dire en continuant à jouir de la puissance intellectuelle qu'on a dans la solitude et que la conversation dissipe immédiatement, en continuant à pouvoir être inspiré, à rester en plein travail fécond de l’esprit sur lui-même.

[the essential difference between a book and a friend is not their degree of greatness of wisdom, but the manner in which we communicate with them, reading, contrary to conversation, consisting for each of us in receiving the communication of another thought, but while we remain all alone, that is to say, while continuing to enjoy the intellectual power we have in solitude, and which conversation dissipates immediately, while continuing to be inspired, to maintain the mind’s full, fruitful work on itself.] (OR, 30, 31)

What reading shows us is a way to access those aspects of consciousness that remain unacknowledged or inaccessible:

In every work of genius we recognize our own rejected thoughts: they come back to us with a certain alienated majesty. Great works of art have no more affecting lesson for us than this. They teach us to abide by our spontaneous impression with good-humored inflexibility then most when the whole cry of voices is on the other side. (EL, 259)

As Emerson found at the Muséum National d’Histoire Naturelle, and as he knew from his reading of Coleridge, the fragment contains both singularity and multiplicity. He was to develop the point in “History,” when he tells his reader to “read history actively and not passively; to esteem his own life the text, and books the commentary” (EL, 239). Authority, which contains the same root as “author,” resides not in the “rooted and fast” but in what Lee Rust Brown summarizes as “the fresh dictates of individual life, including its entire range of idiosyncrasy, contradiction, skepticism, and annihilating revelation” (1997, 10). Permanence is only a word; what

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8 The edition of “Sur la Lecture” used here is published as a parallel French-English text. The first page reference is therefore to Proust’s original French, followed by the page number of the facing English translation.
life tells us, says Emerson in “Circles,” is that its purpose is to “unsettle,” to surprise us “out of our propriety” and to help us “lose our sempiternal memory” (EL, 414).

That Proust absorbed Emerson’s lesson is apparent from “Sur la lecture.” Far from being “une sorte de beau mythe platonicien” [a beautiful Platonic myth], reading is “à la fois essential et limité” [at once essential and limited]. A book, however, marks two divergent points of knowledge and experience: for the author it is all “Conclusions,” while for the reader its role is one of “Incitations” [Incitements] (OR, 34, 35). In other words, a reader’s profit begins with the “death of the author.” And though Proust could not have known Emerson’s Divinity School Address, he would surely have concurred with what Emerson had to say: “[Truth] cannot be received at second hand. Truly speaking, it is not instruction, but provocation, that I can receive from another soul. What he announces, I must find in me, or wholly reject” (EL, 79).

I began this chapter by asking what the nature of Emerson’s influence could be on a person of Proust’s neurotic disposition. That Emerson’s influence had very personal associations for Proust in his struggle for self-reliance is apparent from the discussion that takes place in “Sur la lecture” regarding neurasthenia – the defining feature of which for Proust was “une sorte d’impossibilité de vouloir” [a kind of impossibility of willing]. Emerson, then, offered a theory of reading that, through its incitements, restored to the sufferer the will to act. In doing so Emerson becomes, at the end of a passage remarkable for its autobiographical content, a tutelary figure on a par with that most exemplary of literary father-figures, Virgil: “Emerson commençait rarement à écrire sans relire quelques pages de Platon. Et Dante n’est pas le seul poète que Virgile ait conduit jusqu’au seuil du paradis” [Emerson would rarely begin to write without rereading some pages of Plato. And Dante is not the only poet whom Virgil led to the threshold of paradise] (OR, 42, 43). Which makes Proust a modern Dante, with the figure of Emerson/Virgil rather than Beatrice providing a guiding hand to the achievement of jouissance.

Emerson gave Proust a mandate to take his own life as the subject matter of his fiction. For while “History” challenges us as readers to “dilate” to the dimensions of all mankind, “Self-Reliance” aims to make us more authentic by teaching us to inhabit ourselves. We can see, then, how between the twin poles of “History” and “Self-Reliance” is contained the whole expanse of A la recherche. The novel begins with a Marcel who has “dilated” to the extent that “il me semblait que j’étais moi-même ce
dont parlait l’ouvrage: une église, un quatuor, la rivalité de Françoise Ier et de Charles Quint” [it seemed to me that I myself was what the book was talking about: a church, a quartet, the rivalry between Françoise I and Charles V] (13; I:7). It ends with him vowing to show how the individual in time:

occupant une place si considérable, à côté de celle si restreinte qui leur est réservée dans l’espace, une place au contraire prolongée sans mesure puisqu’ils touchent simultanément, comme des géants plongés dans les années à des époques, vécues par eux si distantes, entre lesquelles tant de jours sont venus se placer – dans le Temp.

[occupies a place far larger than the very limited one reserved for them in space, a place in fact almost infinitely extended, since they are in simultaneous contact, like giants immersed in the years, with such distant periods of their lives, between which so many days have taken up their place – in Time] (2401; VI:358)

The “infinite extension” of Proust’s “monsters of time” is the dilation of the self to a point where each, in Emerson’s words, “can live all history in their own person.” The key to this is provided by the “simultaneous contact” between time past and time future that defines mémoire involontaire. A la recherche thus becomes a book in which, as Emerson says, “there is properly no history; only biography. Every mind must know the whole lesson for itself, – must go over the whole ground” (EL, 240). What Proust took from Emerson is the lesson that we are all biographers, “bios-writers.” To write is to “double-back” on our own lived experience and to translate it into language. For Emerson, the writer works primarily through metaphor. As such the self is shown not to be a stable, coherent agent but, as Jonathan Levin writes, a presence that resides in “the movement of his tropes” (Levin 1999, 28). Such fluidity and exchanges of identity mean that reading always implicates rereading. Like a pilot “looping-the-loop” we double back on ourselves, returning not through memory alone but through a “metaphorics of retrospection” to our earlier selves. However, to read A la recherche as a book about memory – voluntary or involuntary – is, as Deleuze says, to miss the point. Rather, as with Emerson’s evocation of the representative writer, Goethe, it is a book in which we are presented with a character engaged in an apprenticeship as a man of letters. The subject of our reading is life. “All things are engaged in writing their history,” Emerson wrote in “Goethe; or,
the Writer.” “The air is full of sounds, the sky of tokens, the ground is all memoranda and signatures, and every object covered over with hints, which speak to the intelligent” (EL, 746). If all nature is engaged in writing, then the proper study of humanity is translation, interpretation – what Deleuze defines as Marcel’s “apprenticeship to signs” (2000, 4).

Bon zig

Throughout *A la recherche* Marcel spectacularly and often comically fails to read various signs. Time and again he sees something and yet remains unsure of what exactly it is he has witnessed. He misinterprets Gilberte’s provocative gesture while out walking at Tansonville, a gesture which, if he had read it aright, the Narrator later comments, may have led him to discover some degree of future happiness. He is similarly incapable of judging whether the sight of Albertine and Andrée dancing together is, as Cottard whispers to him, evidence of their lesbianism. And following the conversation he has with Charlus during which he wishes to have been able to say that he, Saint-Loup, and Rachel had been soberly discussing Emerson rather than drinking themselves under the table, Marcel mistakes the Baron's hat for that of his brother, the Duc de Guermantes, having forgotten that they are related:

Je m'y dirigeais assez vivement quand M.de Charlus, qui avait pu croire que j'allais vers la sortie, quitta brusquement M.de Faffenheim avec qui il causait, fit un tour rapide qui l'amena en face de moi. Je vis avec inquiétude qu'il avait pris le chapeau au fond duquel il y avait un G et une couronne ducale ...

– Vous ferez bien de faire attention, monsieur, lui dis-je. Vous avez pris par erreur le chapeau d'un des visiteurs.

– Vous voulez m'empêcher de prendre mon chapeau ?

Je supposai, l'aventure m'étant arrivée à moi-même peu auparavant, que, quelqu'un lui ayant enlevé son chapeau, il en avait avisé un au hasard pour ne pas rentrer nu-tête et que je le mettais dans l'embarras en dévoilant sa ruse. Aussi je n'insistai pas. Je lui dis qu'il fallait d'abord que je dise quelques mots à Saint-Loup. « Il est en train de parler avec cet idiot de duc de Guermantes, ajoutai-je. – C'est charmant ce que vous dites là, je le dirai à mon frère. – Ah ! vous croyez que cela peut intéresser M.de Charlus ? » (Je me figurais que,
s’il avait un frère, ce frère devait s’appeler Charlus aussi. Saint-Loup m’avait bien donné quelques explications là-dessus à Balbec, mais je les avais oubliées.) « Qui est-ce qui vous parle de M.de Charlus? me dit le baron d’un air insolent. Allez auprès de Robert. Je sais que vous avez participé ce matin à un de ces déjeuners d’orgie qu’il a avec une femme qui le déshonore.

[As I was hurrying after him M.de Charlus, perhaps under the impression that I was leaving, brought his conversation with M.de Faffenheim to an abrupt end and wheeled round rapidly to face me. I was alarmed to see that he had taken the hat with the G and the ducal coronet in the lining ...

– Do take care, Monsieur,’ I said. You’ve picked up the wrong hat by mistake.

– You want to stop me taking my own hat?

I assumed, since the same mishap had recently happened to me, that someone else had gone away with his hat and his instinctive reaction had been to pick up one at random so as not to go home bare-headed, and that my remark had embarrassed him by exposing his ruse. So I did not pursue the matter. I told him that I needed to say a few words to Saint-Loup before I left. “He’s talking to that stupid Duc de Guermantes, I added. – What a charming thing to say. I shall tell my brother. – O! do you think that would interest M.de Charlus?” (I simply supposed that, if he had a brother, the brother must be called M.de Charlus too. Saint-Loup had in fact explained the family connections to me in Balbec, but I had forgotten them.) “What do you mean, M.de Charlus? Replied the Baron contemptuously. Go and speak to Robert. I know you were there this morning at one of those orgiastic lunches he has with a woman who is disgracing him.” (958–959; 3:274)

This is pure farce, yet still it contains elements that contribute to Marcel’s more tragic apprenticeship to signs. For example, his mistaking the G on the hat Charlus picks up anticipates the error he will make in misattributing a telegram from Gilberte to the dead Albertine. Similarly, the flurry of misreadings regarding Charlus’s identity prefigure his discovery that the Baron is an invert. The passage also puts in question the nature of Charlus’s friendship with Marcel. I would go further, and say that what Proust is dealing with here is the vexed question of how any gay man is to establish
same-sex friendships. For as the Narrator comments in *Sodome et Gomorrhe*, the invert is a person condemned to having “amis sans amitiés” [friends without friendships] (1219; IV:19).

Proust’s analysis (verging at times on dissection) of friendship is clearly indebted to Emerson, for whom a longing for sympathetic companionship had always to be balanced against the demands of self-reliance. Though seemingly antithetical, the two run parallel courses. This much is suggested by Emerson’s including in *Essays: First Series* both “Self-Reliance” and “Friendship.” Yet so idealized is his concept of true friendship – what we might call “transcendental friendship” – that it is difficult to imagine who could possibly live up to his expectations. Emerson was at least aware of the problem, and how it could lead not to communion but introspection: “The higher the style we demand of friendship, of course, the less easy to establish it with flesh and blood. We walk alone in the world. Friends, such as we desire, are dreams and fables” (*EL*, 352). Even where it was found to exist, he discovered limitations: “Two may talk and one may hear, but three cannot take part in a conversation of the most sincere and searching sort” (*EL*, 349). What Emerson wanted from friendship is never far from what he looked for in reading: the company of “a circle of godlike men and women ... between whom subsists a lofty intelligence” (*EL*, 352). Far preferable is the intimacy and seclusion that comes with reading. Tellingly, it is to reading that Emerson likens the first kindling of friendship: “Read the language of these wandering eye-beams. The heart knoweth” (*EL*, 341).

The intensity of Proust’s own friendships was famous. As an adolescent he was prone to pouring out his feelings to his classmates. Among them was Daniel Halévy, to whom, in addition to the course in reading referred

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9 This would seem to confirm the view of Emerson which appealed to the symbolists: that he was a figure remote from human society and seemingly indifferent to the logical expression and development of his ideas. But as the French scholar Maurice Gonnaud has pointed out, Emerson the man did not enjoy any such remove: “Between the cloistered life of the thinker and artist, living in the companionship of his books ... and the life of the pastor, the citizen, the ‘intellectual,’ subject to a complex and delicate play of outer pressures, there are complicities more profound and more essential than is generally admitted” (1987, xxiii). A similar situation arises with Proust, whom early critics saw as a celebrant of interiority and of a withdrawal from society. To read *A la recherche* solely in these terms, however, as Ingrid Wassenaar points out in *Proustian Passions*, is to ignore the dazzling set pieces of *Le Côté de Guermantes* and *Sodom et Gomorrhe*. 
to earlier, Proust offered a “lesson” in pederasty that anticipates aspects of the “essay” on inversion in *Sodom et Gomorrhe*, the obsessive love that wracks successive characters, and the mutual masturbation that defines the sexual boundary of Marcel’s affair with Albertine:

I know ... that there are some young men ... who love other boys, who constantly long to see them ... and weep and suffer when they are apart, and wish for only one thing, to hug them and kneel before them, who love them because of their *flesh*, who covet them with their eyes, who call them darling and angel ... And yet, generally, love overwhelms them and they masturbate one another. (cited in Tadié 2000, 70)

Unlike heterosexuality, there seemed to Proust to be at least the possibility that a homosexual could remain celibate. In 1908 he commented in a letter to Abel Hermant, “It is true that homosexuality shows more delicacy, for it still displays the effect of its pure origin, which is friendship, and retains some of its virtues” (cited in Tadié 2000, 508). Marcel, of course, isn’t gay; *À la recherche* concerns itself with the tension between homosexual desire with all its unstable meanings and heterosexual homoeroticism. Christopher Newfield has written about a not dissimilar tension within Emerson’s discussions of male friendship. One of the examples Newfield gives, Emerson’s admission that the “cold blue eye” of a male student “induces in [him] the hypnotic and obsessional states that form an erotic captivity he finds liberating” (1996, 97), has parallels with Proust’s description of the invert as someone who covets with their eyes. This in turn returns us to the opening paragraph of “Friendship,” with its mention of “wandering eye-beams.” It also reminds us of the importance the oracular plays in Marcel’s learning to “read” sexuality.

The first time Marcel meets Gilberte,

Elle jeta en avant et de côté ses pupilles ... elle laissa ses regards filer de toute leur longueur dans ma direction ... avec une fixité et un sourire dissimulé, que je ne pouvais interpréter d’après les notions que l’on m’avait données sur la bonne éducation, que comme une preuve d’outrageant mépris.

[She cast her eyes forwards and sideways ... she allowed her glances to stream out at full length in my direction ... with a concentration
and a secret smile that I could only interpret, according to the notions of good breeding instilled in me, as a sign of insulting contempt.] (118–119; I:142)

Marcel is by turn captivated, puzzled, then provoked into an interpretation of why the girl addresses him in this way. His bourgeois upbringing allows him to guess, or translate, its content and meaning. Heterosexuality proves readable. Or so he thinks.

The look he is given by the man escorting the girl and her mother evades any such transcription: “un monsieur habillé de coutil et que je ne connaissais pas, fixait sur moi des yeux qui lui sortaient de la tête” [a gentleman dressed in twill whom I did not know stared at me with eyes that started from his head]. The man is Charlus, and the nature of his stare is left uncommented on. Marcel meets with it again at Balbec:

j’eus la sensation d’être regardé par quelqu’un qui n’était pas loin de moi. Je tournai la tête et j’aperçus un homme d’une quarantaine d’années, très grand et assez gros, avec des moustaches très noires, et qui, tout en frappant nerveusement son pantalon avec une badine, fixait sur moi des yeux dilatés par l’attention.

[I had a sudden feeling of being looked at by someone at quite close quarters. I glanced round and saw a very tall, rather stout man of about forty, with a jet black moustache, who stood there nervously flicking a cane against the leg of his trousers and staring at me with eyes dilated by the strain of attention.] (594; II:332)

Again, what Charlus means by looking at Marcel remains unclear. Marcel should, however, recognize it. For the way in which Charlus stares at him is strikingly similar to how he himself responds to Gilberte at Tansonville. They are a sequence of glances at once anxious to be acknowledged but afraid of being recognized. To return to Newfield, they flicker between homo- and heterosexual desire.

The situation is markedly different with Robert de Saint-Loup. The first time he and Marcel meet, their eyes do not. Saint-Loup remains aloof, his gaze “impassible” [blank] and without “la plus faible lueur de sympathie humaine” [the slightest spark of humane feeling] (578; II:310, 311). Though the two soon become close, the Narrator provides a running commentary on the friendship which tells rather of disillusion and deceit – what Emerson
called “the shades of suspicion and disbelief” that haunt “the golden hour of friendship” (EL, 343). While Robert declares that, apart from his love for his mistress, his friendship with Marcel provides the greatest joy of his life, Proust’s Narrator tells a different version of events:

La conversation même qui est le mode d’expression de l’amitié est une divagation superficielle ... Nous pouvons causer pendant toute une vie sans rien dire que répéter indéfiniment le vide d’une minute ... Et l’amitié n’est pas seulement dénuée de vertu comme la conversation, elle est de plus funeste.

[Conversation, which is friendship’s mode of expression, is a superficial digression ... We may converse our whole life away, without speaking anything other than the interminable repetitions that fill the vacant minute ... Moreover, friendship is not just devoid of virtue ... it is actively pernicious.] (709; II:483–484)

Proust goes even further. Friendship, in as much as it is “basé sur le mensonge qui cherche à nous faire croire que nous ne sommes pas irrémédiablement seuls” [founded on a lie which tries to make us believe we are not inescapably alone] (710; II:484–485) interrupts the process of self-realization.

Self-reliance is further postponed by Robert’s desire that Marcel shine in society. This leads the Narrator to reflect on how “je m’apercevais tout d’un coup moi-même du dehors, comme quelqu’un qui lit son nom dans le journal ou qui se voit dans une glace” [I suddenly caught sight of myself from the outside, like someone who reads his name in the newspaper or sees himself in a mirror] (825; III:100). The experience may be flattering (we recall Marcel’s delight when his article appears in Le Figaro) but again it creates a self “incapable de me réaliser.” Robert’s friendship remains “external” [en dehors de moi sans doute] (1052; III:393), the reason being that to connect it with his true sexual self would be to acknowledge that he is living a lie. Like his uncle, Saint-Loup is an invert. This Marcel learns only after Robert’s death in the First World War. It is a death reported as being motivated by his love for his comrades (2247; VI:155), but it may rather remind us of what Eve Sedgwick writes about suicide among young gays and lesbians. Her comment that “I look at my adult friends and colleagues … and I feel that the survival of each one is a miracle” seems as bleakly applicable to war as to the “profligate way this culture has of denying and despoiling queer energies and lives” (1994, 1).
Something of this homoerotic tension and its containment in war as “brotherly love” and “unit cohesion” is discussed by Newfield in the context of Emerson and the “antebellum panic about writers who did not distinguish sharply between their hetero- and homosexual desires” (1996, 94). Proust implicitly states that such was the case with Saint-Loup when he writes that no man, “ever felt less hatred for a nation [Germany] than he did” [“Jamais homme n’avait eu moins que lui la haine d’un peuple”] (2247; VI:155). Saint-Loup, then, sacrifices himself on the altar of the heterosexual nation. His desire for men regardless of their nationality means that self-reliance gives way to self-harm. Robert’s friendship with Marcel is premised on the suppression of his inversion. When his cover is blown, when people learn of his affair with Morel, he reverts to the same coldly impassive figure Marcel first met at Balbec: “je sentais bien, à ses nouvelles manières froides et évasives, [mon affecion] ne me rendait plus, les hommes depuis qu’ils étaient devenus susceptibles de lui donner des désirs” [I felt clearly from his newly cold and evasive manner that [my affection] was no longer reciprocated, for, since he had found that men could arouse his desire, they no longer inspired his friendship] (2122; V:650).

Saint-Loup cannot act as a foil and provocation to Marcel because, ironically, he is trapped within conventional modes of behaving and thinking. He wants, in terms adopted from what Fiedler has written about a parallel impulse in American fiction, to return to the world of the epic: “a world of war, and its reigning sentimental relationship ... the loyalty of comrades in arms” (1967, 24). Such sentiments could not survive the reality of mechanized carnage. Moreover, Saint-Loup’s friendship, as Deleuze writes, is not enough for Marcel because he is “ignorant of the dark regions in which are elaborated the effective forces that act on thought, the determinations that force us to think; a friend is not enough for us to approach the truth. Minds communicate to each other only the conventional” (2000, 95). Ultimately, Saint-Loup’s averted gaze means that unlike Gilberte and Charlus he refuses to allow himself to be read.

La beauté convulsive

Marcel’s apprenticeship to signs reaches a further staging post with the deferred entry into the novel of an explanation of the nature of Charlus’s gaze at Tansonville and Balbec. Sodom et Gomorrhe begins with Proust acknowledging this delay. Indeed, so momentous a discovery is it, says the Narrator, “que j’ai jusqu’ici, jusqu’au moment de pouvoir lui donner la place
et l’étendue voulues, différé de la rapporter” [that up until now, when I am able to give it the position and dimensions it requires, I have put off reporting it] (1920; IV:5). What this initiates is a rereading of, a doubling back on, the existing narrative. It is the moment above all others, more so even than the discovery of mémoire involontaire, when Proust dramatizes the workings of the key Emersonian term, “transition.”

As Richard Poirier summarizes it, transition is “a movement away from substantives or ‘resting-places’ or settled texts” (1987, 16). It shifts. It unsettles. It is, Poirier suggests, “like catching a glimpse of a thing before it is possible to recognize or name it, the moment just before it can be classified by language and thus become composed or reposed in a human corpus or text” (1987, 46). Charlus’s gaze is one such “glimpse.” Marcel does not recognize it, therefore he cannot name it. There remains a potential contradiction here: how does one put in language a dynamic which, once named, ceases? Proust’s sensitivity to this is played out in the fact that what “drives” Charlus is a sexual identity that until the end of the nineteenth century had resisted precisely any such categorization. This changed with the emergence and construction of the “homosexual” as a “species.” What is significant about Proust’s resistance to such categorization is that he uses the discourse of the natural sciences not as a way of fixing and determining but, rather, as a metaphorical means of locating in language the dynamics of transition.

In Chapter VIII of Nature, Emerson writes: “In a cabinet of natural history, we become sensible of a certain occult recognition and sympathy in regard to the most unwieldy and eccentric forms of beast, fish, and insect” (EL, 43–44). Nowhere does Proust make more apparent his profound sympathy with the natural world than in Part One of Sodome et Gomorrhe, where the encounter between Charlus and Jupien in the Guermantes courtyard is framed and punctuated by Marcel anticipating, commenting on, and finally admitting defeat in his attempts at observing a bee pollinate a waiting flower. It is as though, like Emerson at the Jardin des Plantes, he is declaring “I will be a naturalist”: “À défaut de la contemplation du géologue,” the Narrator says, “j’avais du moins celle du botaniste” [Lacking

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10 Maurice Blanchot has written about Proust’s recherche as a means of discovering a simultaneity between different temporalities: “certains épisodes ... semblent–ils vécus, à la fois, à des ages fort différents, vécus et revécus dans la simultanéité intermittente de toute une vie non comme de purs moments, mais dans la densité mouvante du temps sphérique” (Blanchot 1959, 32–33).
the perspective of the geologist, I at least had that of the botanist] (1209; IV:5). There are certainly other affinities between the scene and the layout of the Muséum Royal d’Histoire Naturelle: both proceed from individual examples housed in glass-fronted cabinets (for which we can substitute Charlus and Jupien “framed” by the courtyard and by Marcel’s vantage point on high) to the botanical gardens where these classifications are shown on a larger scale (for which we read Proust’s teeming botanical metaphors, and his tracing of inverts back through evolutionary time and space through references to Darwin).

It would appear that Marcel has exchanged his glimpses of Mlle Vinteuil and her (unnamed) lesbian lover for the literal and metaphorical perspective that Emerson saw provided by natural history. The naturalist, we remember, had a god-like power of reading and interpreting nature. Integrating and communicating what is observed requires the gifts of a poet. Proust fuses the two in having his Narrator describe Charlus and Jupien as though they were on the one hand “insecte improbable” [the improbable insect] and on the other “le pistil offert et délaissé” [the tendered and forlorn pistil]. Thus the Narrator elides his botanical commentary on “la fleur mâle, dont les étamines s’étaient spontanément tournées pour que l’insecte pût plus facilement la recevoir” [the male flower, whose stamens had spontaneously turned so that the insect might the more easily receive him] with a “reading” of Jupien’s behavior that sees his metamorphosis into a plant and a woman: “de même la fleur femme qui était ici, si l’insecte venait, arquerait coquettement ses «styles” [similarly, the flower-woman that was here would, should the insect come, arch her “styles” coquettishly] (1210; IV:6). Come the insect does, literally and metaphorically: “Au même instant où M. de Charlus avait passé la porte en sifflant comme un gros bourdon, un autre, un vrai celui-là, entrait dans la cour” [At the selfsame instant that M. de Charlus passed through the gateway whistling like a fat bumblebee, another one, a real one this time, entered the courtyard] (1213; IV:10).

Just when it seems that Proust is settling on a way of portraying the “courtship” of Charlus and Jupien, he draws further distinctions between what Marcel sees, what the Narrator understands, and what language is capable of naming. In doing so he enables what it is we think we are seeing in the Guermantes courtyard to remain that “glimpse of a thing before it is possible to recognize or name it” discussed by Poirier.

Like Breton’s “convulsive beauty,” the Proustian invert shifts and unsettles our expectations. The parallel is a useful one. In Mary Ann Caws’s words the convulsive provokes “an emotional state of grace ... a dynamic recognition
of the ‘reciprocal relations linking the object seen in its motion and its repose,’ thus, a point diametrically opposed to any static perception, and readying itself – in a constant state of expectation – for the encounter with the marvelous, that unexpected ‘surprise, splendor, and dazzling outlook onto something other than what we are able to know.’”

This is strikingly similar to what the natural sciences showed Emerson: a world in which the only constant is change, and that “power ... resides in the moment of transition from a past to a new state” (EL, 271).

That Proust determined something analogous is evident from Sedgwick’s comment that for Proust sexuality is above all a form of action, it is “still in performance.” Sedgwick continues the theatrical metaphor when she adds that sexuality is at the same time both “definite ... in setting up positions and sight lines” and “mobile” (1990, 213). Charlus and Jupien embody this. Each attempt by the Narrator to define them results in a comparison that will not stay still: “la multiplicité de ces comparaisons est elle-même d’autant plus naturelle qu’un même homme, si on l’examine pendant quelques minutes, semble successivement un homme, un homme-oiseau ou un homme-insecte, etc.” [the multiplicity of these comparisons is itself all the more natural in that, examined over the course of a few minutes, the same man seems successively to be a man, a man-bird, or a man-insect, and so on] (1212–1213; IV:11). Rather, successive comparisons are needed in order to show “des aspects différents d’une même réalité” [different aspects of the one reality] (1225; IV:25).

Emerson’s “History” discusses how “there is one mind common to all individual men ... Of the works of this mind history is the record. Its genius is illustrated by the entire series of days. Man is explicable by nothing less than all his history” (EL, 237). Proust’s invert, then, can only be characterized – illustrated – through metaphor. In so much as a metaphor defers meaning by refusing to allow it to settle, it necessitates a process whereby reading begets rereading, and where rereading becomes a form of writing. Or as Emerson says in “Circles”: “Every ultimate fact is only the first of a new series. Every general law [is] only a particular fact of some more general law presently to disclose itself. There is no outside, no inclosing wall, no circumference to us” (EL, 405).

Language cannot be relied upon to prove itself a transparent medium of representation.

It obstructs as well as mobilizes, resists as well as liberates. Successive moments of apprehending the “truth” must give way to the realization that such glimpses are fluid and evanescent.

We see this in action elsewhere in the first part of *Sodome et Gomorrhe*, when the Narrator recounts the story of a solitary invert in order to attempt the presentation of a more definite law. Alone on a railway station platform, the man is successively likened to Griselda dreaming in her tower, Andromeda waiting for the Argonaut who will not arrive, “a sterile jellyfish that will perish on the sand” [“une méduse stérile qui périra sur le sable”] and, returning momentarily to Charlus and Jupien, an insect and a flower. The Narrator, however, does not simply narrate; rather, he becomes the (re-) reader of his own story in the process of telling it. Like Emerson’s ideal student who is to “read history actively and not passively; to esteem his own life the text, and books the commentary” (*EL*, 239), he turns the narrative back on it and himself:

Méduse ! Orchidée ! Quand je ne suivais que mon instinct, la méduse me répugnait à Balbec; mais si je savais la regarder, comme Michelet, du point de vue de l’histoire naturelle et de l’esthétique, je voyais une délicieuse girandole d’azur. Ne sont-elles pas, avec le velours transparent de leurs pétales, comme les mauves orchidées de la mer?

[Jellyfish! Orchid! When I was following only my own instinct, the jellyfish repelled me at Balbec; but had I known how to look at it, like Michelet, from the point of view of natural history and of aesthetics, I would have seen a delectable girandole of azure. Are they not, with the transparent velvet of their petals, like the mauve orchids of the sea?] (1228; IV:30)

The significance of the jellyfish, as I will return to in Chapter 3, is that *la méduse* was a common referent for the lesbian. Thus the Narrator’s attempts at classifying male homosexuality anticipate Marcel’s later efforts to determine the exact nature of Albertine’s sexuality. Such attempts result in Marcel being likened by the Narrator to an array of specialists capable of scrutinizing Albertine’s every word and gesture: a chemist, philologist, pathologist, logician, biologist, physiologist, astronomer, historian, botanist, and meteorologist.¹² What such scrutiny lacks is precisely the metaphor-

¹² This parallels in turn the various narrative selves (Héros, Narrateur, Sujet, Intermédiaire, Protagoniste, Romancier, Écrivain, Auteur, Homme, Signataire)
inducing flexibility and fluidity called for by Emerson, and enacted in the descriptions of Charlus and Jupien. Marcel will want to transcribe Albertine’s “notebook of memories” [ce bloc-notes de ses souvenirs] so as to turn her into a work of art that contains her rather than liberating himself. Their relationship thus descends into enacting all too literally that which Emerson most feared: “I should hate myself, if I then made my other friends my asylum” (EL, 345).

Saint-Loup’s refusal to allow himself to be read parallels Marcel’s own insistence on turning Albertine into a text that does not allow for, and enable, self-reflexivity. As Saint-Loup’s gaze remains always at some level averted, so Albertine is always in some essential way invisible: she is an aspect of the novel and of the world that remains for reasons that remain difficult to fathom “confuse, effacée, autant dire indéchiffrable” [confused, half erased, in other words unreadable] (1667; V:75).13 She is, in Nietzsche’s terms, associated with the mistaken Kantian belief that “Nature = world as idea, that is, as error” (Nietzsche 1984, 27). Marcel’s attempts at categorizing her are doomed to failure. “Whenever we establish something scientifically,” Nietzsche wrote in lines that echo his debt to Emerson,

we are always invariably reckoning with some incorrect quantities [because] numbers were invented on the basis of the initially prevailing idea that there are various identical things (but actually there is nothing identical) or at least that there are things (but there is no “thing”). The assumption of multiplicity always presumes that there is something which occurs repeatedly. But this is just where error rules; even here, we invent entities, unities, that do not exist. (1984, 27)

This, of course, is implicit in Proust’s use of “indéchiffrable” to describe Albertine – the root of the word being found in both the noun chiffre and the verb chiffrer: respectively, a number or a figure and the act of “putting a figure on something,” “costing it,” “adding up.”

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13 For Elisabeth Ladenson this means that Proust’s depiction of lesbianism fails to adequately imagine a female version of the invert, resulting in an “epistemological blindspot both in the novel and in the history of its reception” (1990, 9).
Proust’s metaphors of inversion can also be traced to Emerson’s “Compensation.” He refers to the essay in a letter of 1904 to Albert Sorel: “jamais malade ne fut aussi «gâté,» ne fut comblé, en vertu de la loi mystérieuse de «compensation» d’Emerson, d’une «surprise» plus féerique que moi ce soir” [no invalid was ever so “spoiled,” was ever so overwhelmed, by virtue of Emerson’s mysterious law of “compensation” by such a magical “surprise,” as I have been this evening in reading your article] (Corr. IV:177; SL II, 57). As in Jean Santeuil, we find Proust associating Emerson with the unexpected pleasure of discovering in “some newspaper installment, a passage … which we had not previously seen” – in this case Sorel’s favorable review in Le Temps of Proust’s translation of Ruskin’s La Bible d’Amiens. “Compensation” contains other elements that we know attracted Proust to Emerson, not least the call to reject family and friends in favor of individual destiny (EL, 288, 301). The essay returns to the earlier material of “History,” with “Every thing is made of one hidden stuff” (EL, 287) echoing and developing “There is one mind common to all individual men.” The examples Emerson gives to illustrate this take the form of a series of what we might call “hieroglyphs” which show how that “mind” pictures itself as series of hybrids: “The naturalist sees one type under every metamorphosis, and regards a horse as a running man, a fish as a swimming man, a bird as a flying man, a tree as a rooted man” (EL, 289). The parallels between this and Proust’s depiction of Charlus and Jupien as man-bumblebees, man-birds, and man-insects are striking. As is Jupien’s transformation, almost word-for-word, into Emerson’s “tree as a rooted man” (“enraciné comme une plante” [rooted like a plant]) (1211; IV:8). What Emerson’s “mysterious law” expounds is a theory similar to Proust’s l’inverti. Where Emerson writes of “an inevitable dualism bisect[ing] nature, so that each thing is a half, and suggests another thing to make it whole; as spirit, matter; man, woman” (EL, 287), so Proust’s male inverters are not men who desire other men per se but men who embody, so to speak, their other half. In Charlus’s case this leads him to being always on the look out for men who “compensate” for his own essential, if disguised, femininity: “je comprenais maintenant pourquoi … j’avais pu trouver que M.de Charlus avait l’air d’une femme: c’en était une! Il appartenait à la race de ces êtres moins contradictoires qu’ils n’en ont l’air, dont l’idéal est viril, justement parce que leur tempérament est féminin” [I understood now why … I had been able to think that M. de Charlus had the look of a woman: he was one! He belonged to that race of beings less contradictory than they appear to be, whose ideal is virile, precisely because their temperament is feminine] (1219;
IV:19). The authority and objectivity of the Narrator’s classifications, however, do not bear much scrutiny. Charlus’s behavior in the first chapter of *Sodom et Gomorrhe*, not to mention elsewhere in the novel, breaks apart the system that is being constructed around him. For example: if Charlus disguises his femininity, how is it that he reminds the Narrator of a woman? Such contradictions are, in reality, not at all contradictory. Rather, like transition, they allow us a glimpse of something in transit, “still in performance,” from which Proust does not allow his novel’s arbiter of objectivity — its narrator — to be exempt. Thus *A la recherche* inverts its own orders of meaning even in the process of establishing them.

Marcel’s apprenticeship to signs means that he must himself become an “invert.” Which is to say he must learn to incorporate the metaphorical, the transitional. His experiences in the Guermantes courtyard leave him with eyes that have become “newly opened” [mes yeux dessillés], and the Narrator likens him to Ulysses at the moment when he first recognizes the goddess Athena. “Mais les dieux,” Proust adds, “sont immédiatement perceptibles aux dieux, le semblable aussi vite au semblable, ainsi encore l’avait été M. de Charlus à Jupien” [But the gods are immediately perceptible to the gods, as like equally soon is to like, and as M. de Charlus had been to Jupien] (1218; IV:17). What this remarkable aphorism does is to relocate the god-like perspective Emerson discovered at the Jardin des Plantes, a perspective we remember that transforms the viewer/reader into a poet capable of forging new metaphors, new ways of establishing “like with like,” to Proust’s novel.

There is much more to this than what some, among them J. E. Rivers, have read as Proust’s reliance in dealing with homosexuality on the view that can be summarized as “it takes one to know one.” This isn’t what Proust says. What he actually says is that it takes an invert to recognize the moment of transition when one thing becomes another, and to be able to hold both in the mind at once. This, I need hardly add, is what the Narrator does when he describes a bee approaching an orchid, and at the same time uses it as a metaphor for Charlus and Jupien’s courtship. Inversion, then, becomes the Proustian metaphor *non pareil*. In reading, and in turning our reading to writing, we must all become inverts. For the word, as Rivers does usefully say, carries many different meanings and uses in the novel, not all of them to do with sex. *A la recherche* is itself “inverted,” moving as it does from *temps perdu* to *temps retrouvé* (1980, 216). Inversion, like a metaphor, is a kind of go-between. Such is the nature of Proust’s provocation to the reader and to himself as writer.
The nature of memory

Change, Emerson declares in “Compensation,” is a condition of existence: “And such should be the outward biography of man in time, a putting off of dead circumstances day by day.” Nevertheless, Emerson warns, it “comes by shocks” (EL, 302). This sloughing of the self’s habitual circumstances culminates in *A la recherche* in the discovery of mémoire involontaire.

What Emerson took home with him to Concord were a set of classificatory models and principles that were to underpin his own writing. On returning from Europe he began a journal that between December 1833 and December 1834 grew to some 167 manuscript pages. They are divided into eighty-two index topics, including “Analogy of Mind and Matter,” “Naturalist,” “Goethe,” and “Progress.” A few other topics, such as “Compensation,” were of longer-standing interest. What is perhaps less obvious from this urge to arrange and order is the importance Emerson attached to spontaneity. Far from seeing artistic expression as human beings at their most subjective, Emerson came to believe, as he writes in “Compensation,” that it was “the best part of each writer, which has nothing private in it; that which he does not know; that which flowed out of his constitution, and not from his too active invention” (EL, 293). As a result, his interest in writing as itself a process of discovery rather than the record of fixed definitions began to come more and more to the fore.

Tenuous as the connection may seem, the importance of the conjugation of subject and object as experienced by Emerson when looking at the various cabinets in the Muséum d’Histoire Naturelle has a parallel in Proust’s description of the room in the Grand-Hôtel de la Plage at Balbec where the young Marcel travels with his grandmother. It is a merging of self and other in the act of perception that was central to aspects of Symbolism. What the symbolists took from Emerson, as Charles Feidelson says, was “an attempt to find a point of departure outside the premises of dualism – not so much an attempt to solve the ‘old problems of knowledge’ as an effort to redefine the process of knowing in such a manner that the problem never arises” (Feidelson 1953, 4).

Proust’s description of the hotel room opens the third part of *Du côté de chez Swann*. It signals a decisive shift in the narrative from Combray, Paris, and childhood to the wider world of adolescence: “Parmi les chambres dont j’évoquais le plus souvent l’image dans mes nuits d’insomnie, aucune ne ressemblait moins aux chambres de Combray,
saupoudrées d’une atmosphère grenue, pollinisée, comestible et dévote, que celle du Grand Hôtel de la Plage, à Balbec” [Among the bedrooms whose images I summoned up most often in my nights of insomnia, none resembled less the rooms at Combray, dusted with an atmosphere that was grainy, pollinated, edible and devout, than the room at the Grand-Hôtel de la Plage, at Balbec] (309; I:387).

For all the idyllic aspects of Marcel’s childhood home-from-home at his aunt’s house in the country, the Narrator is clearly signaling in those adjectives “grenue, pollinisée, comestible et dévote” an atmosphere at once dangerous to the health of an asthmatic and steeped in a religiosity which Emerson saw as perpetuating the “dead forms of our forefathers.” Characterized not by the close-knit, stifling conformities of a bourgeois family upbringing but by multiplicity, art, and the involuntary, Balbec offers an altogether different world. The passage continues:

Le tapissier bavarois qui avait été chargé de l’aménagement de cet hôtel avait varié la décoration des pièces et sur trois côtés, fait courir le long des murs, dans celle que je me trouvai habiter, des bibliothèques basses, à vitrines en glace, dans lesquelles, selon la place qu’elles occupaient, et par un effet qu’il n’avait pas prévu, telle ou telle partie du tableau changeant de la mer se reflétait, déroulant une frise de claires marines[.]

[The Bavarian decorator who had been commissioned to furnish the hotel had varied the design schemes of the rooms and on three sides, along the walls, in the one I was occupying, had placed low bookshelves, with glass panes, in which, depending on the spot they occupied, and by an effect he had not foreseen, one or other part of the changing picture of the sea was reflected, unfurling a frieze of bright seascapes.]

Returning to Feidelson, we can see how the self-contained reflections of the seascapes within the glass-fronted cases are analogous to what he says about the relationship between verba and res in the symbolist text:

In poetry we feel no compulsion to refer outside language itself. A poem delivers a version of the world: it is the world for the moment … The elements of metaphor have meaning only by virtue of the whole which they create by their interaction: a metaphor presents
parts that do not fully exist until the whole which they produce comes into existence. (1953, 57, 60–61)

It is a relationship, Feidelson later argues, that is grounded in Emerson:

When Emerson says that the “perception of symbols” enables man to see both “the poetic construction of things” and the “primary relation of mind and matter”; and that this same perception normally creates “the whole apparatus of poetic expression,” he is identifying poetry with symbolism, symbolism with a mode of perception, and symbolic perception with the vision, first, of a symbolic structure in the real world and, second, of a symbolic relationship between nature and mind. (1953, 150)

What is significant with regard to Marcel’s hotel room is that the artistry of the decorator is allied to a law of nature which brings about “un effet qu’il n’avait pas prévu.” With its kaleidoscopic view of shifting scenes from nature projected not so much onto as into glass cases containing ordered rows of books, the room becomes at once a miniaturized version of the Muséum d’Histoire Naturelle, and a microcosm of *A la recherche* itself. (It also, to anticipate the discussion in Chapter 5 of Whistler’s influence, converts a seascape (see Plate 1) into interior design (see Plate 2) in such a way as again illustrates Emerson’s concept of transition.)

In a novel so concerned with the unconscious self – or, rather, with those moments when the unconscious is brought to consciousness – this shouldn’t surprise us. The world consists all too much of those invisible presences which, like the pollinated atmosphere at Combray, we are unable to detect until they have affected us. Nature is one such influence; culture, in the form of religion, another. Yet another is history, without which, Emerson says, no man is explicable. For the young Marcel, Balbec exists at the interstices between these various influences. Discussing his proposed visit with Swann, the older man tells him of the church there: “du XIIe et XIIIe siècle, encore à moitié romane, est peut-être le plus curieux échantillon du gothique normand, et si singulière, on dirait de l’art persan” [built in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, still half Romanesque, perhaps the most curious example of our Norman Gothic, and so singular! It’s almost Persian in style] (310; I:388). As with the hotel room, the “singular” appeal of the church lies in its opposite quality: multiplicity. For Emerson the idea of history is intricately bound up in a belief that “there is one mind
common to all individual men” and that history is the record of this mind “illustrated by the entire series of days” (EL, 237). The church at Balbec, then, is a record of those fluctuations in the “one mind” or unconscious “law of nature” capable of reconciling differing historical and cultural influences within a unique structure.

Only when Marcel hears Swann describing the church does Balbec come to life as a real place existing in time and space. It becomes for him a key illustration of the connection between the evolution of human consciousness and older processes of growth and change:

Et ces lieux qui jusque-là ne m’avaient semblé être que de la nature immémoriale, restée contemporaine des grands phénomènes géologiques – et tout aussi en dehors de l’histoire humaine que l’Océan ou la Grande Ourse, avec ces sauvages pêcheurs pour qui, pas plus que pour les baleines, il n’y eut de Moyen Âge – ç’avait été un grand charme pour moi de les voir tout d’un coup entrés dans la série des siècles, ayant connu l’époque romane, et de savoir que le trèfle gothique était venu nervurer aussi ces rochers sauvages à l’heure voulue, comme ces plantes frêles mais vivaces qui, quand c’est le printemps, étoilent çà et là la neige des pôles. Et si le gothique apportait à ces lieux et à ces hommes une détermination qui leur manquait, eux aussi lui en conféraient une en retour ... et le gothique me semblait plus vivant maintenant que séparé des villes où je l’avais toujours imaginé jusque-là, je pouvais voir comment, dans un cas particulier, sur des rochers sauvages, il avait germé et fleuri en un fin clocher.

[And that region, which until then had seemed to me similar in nature to the immemorial, still contemporaneous great phenomena of geology – and just as completely outside human history as the Ocean itself or the Great Bear, with those wild fishermen for whom, no more than for the whales, there had been no Middle Ages – it had been a great delight for me to see it suddenly take its place in the sequence of the centuries, now that it had experienced the Romanesque period, and to know that the Gothic trefoil had come at the proper time to pattern those wild rocks too, like the frail but hardy plants which, when spring comes, spangle here and there the polar snow. And if the Gothic brought to these places and to these men a definition which they lacked, they too conferred one upon
it in return ... and the Gothic seemed to me more alive now that, having separated it from the towns in which until then I had always imagined it, I could see how, in a particular case, on wild rocks, it had germinated and flowered into a delicate steeple.] (310; I:388–389)

The telling thing here is the intense interaction between nature and human beings. The result is a kind of architecture which, in its attempt at echoing natural forms, seeks to bring further into consciousness the human apprehension of the divine. And while we are used to acknowledging Ruskin’s influence on this aspect of Proust’s art, the passage in which Swann discusses the church at Balbec is full of references to Emerson’s own enthusiasm for the Gothic. Indeed we might assume from this passage that Swann, as his author, is an admirer of Emerson.

Swann’s evocation of a style of architecture that is both Gothic and Persian reiterates Emerson’s descriptions in “History” of the Gothic as “a blossoming in stone,” and his evocation of the Persian artist who “imitated in the slender shafts and capitals of his architecture the stem and flower of the lotus and palm.” In this way, Emerson says, “History becomes fluid and true, and Biography deep and sublime” (EL, 246). Whether Emerson had thought in such terms before visiting Paris in 1832 we cannot know. From the evidence of his Journal entry after visiting the Jardin des Plantes, however, the realization was profound: “The universe is a more amazing puzzle than ever, as you glance along this bewildering series of animated forms, – the hazy butterfly, the carved shells, the birds, beasts, fishes, insects, snakes, and the upheaving principle of life everywhere incipient, in the very rock aping organized forms” (SPP, 520).

As the transition from nature to culture, art is the clearest record we have of our attempt at bringing to consciousness all the freight of the unconscious self. Like “ces sauvages pécheurs” figured by Proust’s Narrator, art hauls its cargo from out the dumb depths of the human psyche. What distinguishes the work of art from the artifact is that the former remains fluid, not simply marking the point of transition but enacting it. This returns us to an 1847 journal entry which reads: “Every thing teaches transition, transference, metamorphosis: therein is human power, in transference, not in creation; & therein is human destiny, not in longevity but in removal. We dive & reappear in new places” (cited in Levin 1999, 3). What keeps the church at Balbec “alive,” both as an artwork and, for Swann, a Jew, a place of secular worship, is that it partakes, in Emersonian terms, not in a single moment of cultural and
historical “revelation” but, like the glass bookcases at the Grand-Hôtel, an infinite variety.

Emerson’s visit to the Jardin des Plantes was a primary influence when he came to write *Nature*. Throughout it he uses images that locate the essay firmly in that experience. This is particularly so when he comes to give a definition of art:

> The production of a work of art throws a light upon the mystery of humanity. A work of art is an abstract or epitome of the world. It is the result or expression of nature, in miniature. For although the works of nature are innumerable and all different [the] poet, the painter, the sculptor, the musician, the architect, seek each to concentrate this radiance of the world on one point ... Thus is Art a nature passed through the alembic of man. (*EL*, 18–19)

The importance of nature is its capacity to awaken us into “the present, which is infinite” (*EL*, 394). “Nothing divine dies,” Emerson wrote. “All good is eternally reproductive. The Beauty of nature re-forms itself in the mind, and not for barren contemplation, but for new creation” (*EL*, 18).

Such, though expressed in very different terms, is the movement of Proust’s thought as we approach, in the novel’s prelude, the first description and analysis of involuntary memory.

The adult Marcel is lying awake, unable to resurrect his memories of Combray. The failure, as he comes to understand it, belongs to the shortcomings of voluntary memory, “la mémoire de l’intelligence” [the memory of the intelligence], because “les renseignements qu’elle donne sur le passé ne conservent rien de lui” [the information it gives about the past preserves nothing of it]. Combray must remain dead. “Dead for ever?” he asks. “Possibly” [Mort à jamais? C’était possible]. The Narrator then goes on to discuss the Celtic belief that

> les âmes de ceux que nous avons perdus sont captives dans quelque être inférieur, dans une bête, un végétal, une chose inanimée, perdues en effet pour nous jusqu’au jour, qui pour beaucoup ne vient jamais, où nous nous trouvons passer près de l’arbre, entrer en possession de l’objet qui est leur prison. Alors elles tressaillent, nous appellent ... Délivrées par nous, elles ont vaincu la mort et reviennent vivre avec nous.
[the souls of those we have lost are held captive in some inferior creature, in an animal, in a plant, in some inanimate thing, effectively lost to us until the day, which for many never comes, when we happen to pass close to the tree, come into possession of the object that is their prison. Then they quiver, they call out to us ... Delivered by us, they have overcome death and they return to live with us] (44; I:46–47)

Quickly disavowing such supernatural phenomena, he locates the retrieval and redemption of the past not in the spiritual world but in the relationship between the material world and our own habits. It is a relationship that relies not on faith or deeds but the involuntary.

Having written off the efficacy of “la mémoire de l’intelligence” it is to his fledgling experience of the potency of the involuntary that the Narrator returns, remembering a day in winter when his mother “voyant que j’avais froid, me proposa de me faire prendre, contre mon habitude, un peu de thé” [seeing that I was cold, suggested that, contrary to my habit, I have a little tea]. At first he declines, only for the involuntary to break the chains of the habitual. For no particular reason, he says, he changes his mind [je ne sais pourquoi, me ravisai]. His mother then sends for “Petites Madeleines” which look as though “they have been moulded in the grooved valve of a scallop-shell” [“qui semblent moulés dans la valve rainurée d’une coquille de Saint-Jacques”]:

Et bientôt, machinalement, accablé par la morne journée et la perspective d’un triste lendemain, je portai à mes lèvres une cuillerée du thé où j’avais laissé s’amollir un morceau de madeleine. Mais à l’instant même où la gorgée mêlée des miettes du gâteau toucha mon palais, je tressaillis, attentif à ce qui se passait d’extraordinaire en moi. Un plaisir délicieux m’avait envahi, isolé, sans la notion de sa cause.

[And soon, mechanically, oppressed by the gloomy day and the prospect of a sad future, I carried to my lips a spoonful of the tea in which I had let soften a piece of madeleine. But at the very instant when the mouthful of tea mixed with cake-crumbs touched my palate, I quivered, attentive to the extraordinary thing that was happening to me. A delicious pleasure had invaded me, isolated me, without my having any notion as to its cause.] (44–45; I:47)
Trying to understand the meaning and origin of the sensation, he drinks a second mouthful, then a third. But each subsequent sip only dilutes the immediacy of the first. Undaunted, the Narrator decides to pursue the experience but along different lines: “Il est clair que la vérité que je cherche n’est pas en lui, mais en moi. Il l’y éveillée, mais ne la connaît pas, et ne peut que répeter indéfiniment ... ce même témoignage que je ne sais pas interpréter” [It is clear that the truth I am seeking is not in the drink, but in me. The drink has awoken it in me, but does not know that truth, and cannot do more than repeat indefinitely this same testimony which I do not know how to interpret]. What the Narrator must learn, as Emerson wrote in “Circles,” is that “In nature every moment is new; the past is always swallowed and forgotten; the coming only is sacred” (EL, 413). While this might appear to contradict what is often seen as the purpose of mémoire involontaire, the purposeful rediscovery and deliberate remembrance of lost time, this would be to misunderstand Proust. It is not the past per se that Proust aims to reclaim, but rather those aspects of our lives that are otherwise overlooked and that might, as with the madeleine, allow us the ability to read into ourselves whole new worlds of possibility. Mémoire involontaire, then, is less an act of remembrance than of forgetting. “Our faith comes in moments,” Emerson wrote; “our vice is habitual” (EL, 385). We must throw off the shackles of our habitual selves, which otherwise constrain and limit us within those bounded circles of knowledge that Emerson wished to “unsettle.” And it is in “Circles” that we have as good a definition of the workings of the involuntary in Proust as we might wish: “The one thing which we seek with insatiable desire is to forget ourselves, to be surprised out of our propriety, to lose our sempiternal memory, and to do something without knowing how or why; in short, to draw a new circle” (EL, 414).

Only at the point of mental exhaustion, when Marcel is about to return to the habit of giving himself up to the worries of the day that has passed, or his desires for tomorrow [“mes ennuis d’aujourd’hui, à mes desires de demain”], does the hidden memory reveal itself:

Ce goût c’était celui du petit morceau de madeleine que le dimanche matin à Combray (parce que ce jour-là je ne sortais pas avant l’heure de la messe), quand j’allais lui dire bonjour dans sa chambre, ma tante Léonie m’offrait après l’avoir trempé dans son infusion de thé ou de tilleul.
That taste was the taste of the little piece of madeleine which on Sunday mornings at Combray (because that day I did not go out before it was time for Mass), when I went to say good morning to her in her bedroom, my Aunt Léonie would give me after dipping it in her infusion of tea or lime-blossom.] (46; I:49)

The parallels between Proust’s cup of tea and Emerson’s “alembic of man” may be merely coincidental. What is surely more significant, if we can for a moment retrace the Narrator’s search for the origins of involuntary memory, is that Combray, a kind of Eden, arises from Aunt Léonie’s “medicinal” preparation: a cup of tea made from the desiccated stems of lime-blossom. Proust, with his Jewish mother and Christian upbringing, is clearly establishing a form of secular Holy Communion, with the madeleine as Body and the infusion of tea as Blood. We know, as must Proust from having read Dugard’s Ralph Waldo Emerson: Sa vie et son œuvre, that Emerson’s break with Unitarianism (and some would argue Christianity) came ostensibly because he was no longer willing to serve at Communion. “We buy ashes for bread; / We buy diluted wine,” he wrote in “Bacchus,” a poem which celebrates not Christ but an older god of a “remembering wine” that is capable of “Retriev[ing] the loss of me and mine / … / A dazzling memory revive” (SPP, 462). Similarly, reading Proust’s description of the tisane alongside Emerson’s declaration in Nature that “nothing divine dies … The Beauty of nature re-forms itself in the mind, and not for barren contemplation, but for new creation” (EL, 18), we cannot fail to be struck by the fact that Proust turns Emerson’s theory into practice:

dans de petites boules grises je reconnaissais les boutons verts qui ne sont pas venus à terme; mais surtout l’éclat rose, lunaire et doux qui faisait se détacher les fleurs dans la forêt fragile des tiges où elles étaient suspendues comme de petites roses d’or … me montrait que ces pétales étaient bien ceux qui avant de fleurir le sac de pharmacie avaient embaumé les soirs de printemps. Cette flamme rose de cierge, c’était leur couleur encore, mais à demi éteinte et assoupie dans cette vie diminuée qu’était la leur maintenant et qui est comme le crépuscule des fleurs.

[in some little grey balls I recognised the green buds that had not come to term; but especially the pink lustre, lunar and soft, that
made the flowers stand out amid the fragile forest of stems where they were suspended like little gold roses ... showed me that these petals were in fact the same ones that, before filling the pharmacy bag with flowers, had embalmed the spring evenings. The candle-pink flame was their colour still, but half doused and drowsing in the diminished life that was theirs now, and that it is a sort of twilight of flowers.] (50; I:54)

The progressive movement from the winter’s day on which his mother offers him tea and cake, through the resurrection of a sun-drenched Combray to the closing cadence of “le crépuscule des fleurs,” mirrors almost exactly Emerson’s description in *Nature* of his own experience of “seeing” a winter landscape coming again to life through his ability to re-imagine it as art: “The leafless trees become spires of flame in the sunset ... and the stars of the dead calices of flowers, and every withered stem and stubble rimed with frost, contribute something to the mute music” (*EL*, 15).

Julia Kristeva has commented on the fact that what we have in the episode of the *madeleine* is nothing less than “the taste of the sense of time, of writing as transubstantiation” (1996, 22). What she means by this latter phrase is that “writing is memory regained from signs to flesh and from flesh to signs through an intense identification (and a dramatic separation from) an other who is loved, desired, hated, and rendered indifferent” (1996, 245). Summoning the spirit of James Joyce, Kristeva quotes his description of writing as “the advent of new signs and a new body.” Kristeva is surely right in tracing a direct path from the “transubstantiation” at Combray to the final revelation when Marcel stumbles outside the home of the Prince de Guermantes, thereby initiating both the novel’s closing section and, at the same time, the rebirth or transubstantiation of Marcel, the third-person character into the first-person narrator.

Had Proust limited the discovery of involuntary memory to the episode with the *madeleine*, he would in effect have been circumscribing his central character’s experience within the “grenue, pollinisée, comestible et dévote” world of childhood. What the fall outside the Prince de Guermantes’s hôtel provides, with its correlative in time of Marcel tripping over the uneven paving stones in the baptistery of Saint Mark in Venice, is, to borrow a word from Kristeva, a “threshold” between the secular and the divine. Proust’s discovery is similar to that of Emerson when he says that the role nature plays in our lives is that of awakening us to the infinity
of the present. Proust puts it differently, of course, but even so there is a fascinating correlation between mémoire involontaire as it appears here in the final movement of A la recherche and Proust's earliest published work with its acknowledged debt to Emerson.

The memory of stumbling in Venice is quickly followed by two more moments of involuntary memory: the sound of a servant chancing to knock a spoon against a plate, and the sensation of wiping his mouth with a napkin. The latter, the Narrator tells us:

avait précisément le genre de raideur et d’empesé de celle avec laquelle j’avais eu tant de peine à me sécher devant la fenêtre, le premier jour de mon arrivée à Balbec, et, maintenant devant cette bibliothèque de l’hôtel de Guermantes, elle déployait, réparti dans ses pans et dans ses cassures, le plumage d’un océan vert et bleu comme la queue d’un paon ... je venais par trois fois en quelques minutes ... l’extrême différence qu’il y a entre l’impression vraie que nous avons eue d’une chose et l’impression factice que nous nous en donnons quand volontairement nous essayons de nous la représenter

[had exactly the same stiffness and the same degree of starch as the one with which I had had so much trouble drying myself in front of the window, the first day after my arrival in Balbec, and, now, in this library in the Guermantes’ hotel, it displayed, spread across its folds and creases, the plumage of an ocean green and blue as a peacock’s tail ... I had just experienced three times in a few minutes ... the enormous difference between the true impression we have had of a thing and the artificial impression we give ourselves of it when we try by an act of will to represent it to ourselves] (2264; VI:177)

Here in the Guermantes’s library, replete with its rare and valuable literary treasures, Marcel finally learns that it is to the involuntary that he must trust if, as Emerson wrote in The Method of Nature, he is to “enact our best insight” through an attentiveness not to the idealized but to the particular. “Do what you know, and perception is converted into character. The doctrine of the Supreme Presence is a cry of joy and exultation,” Emerson says (EL, 131). To which the Narrator rejoins:

Capables d’être utilisées pour cela, je sentais se presser en moi une foule de vérités relatives aux passions, aux caractères, aux mœurs.
Leur perception me causait de la joie; pourtant il me semblait me rappeler que plus d’une d’entre elles, je l’avais découverte dans la souffrance, d’autres dans de bien médiocres plaisirs

[I felt thronging within me a crowd of truths relating to passions, characters and conduct, all capable of being used in that way. Their perception caused me joy; yet it seemed to remind me that I had discovered more than one of them in suffering, and others in very ordinary pleasures] (2287; VI:207)

The truths of Proust’s mémoire involontaire as with Emerson’s transcendentalism do not exist above material and cultural experience, rather they reside within them. As Marcel learns through his prolonged struggle to comprehend and ultimately read the involuntary, it is a process that seeks the “arrest and fixation of the most volatile and ethereal currents” (EL, 131). Once arrested, however, it must then be let free to determine its own form and shape. These shapes, Proust writes, “people our lives with divinities” [peupler ... notre vie de divinités].

For the origins of Proust’s “divinités” we should look to lines from Emerson’s “History” that Proust, in Montégut’s slightly amended French translation, took for the epigraph to the opening story in Les Plaisirs et les jours: “Apollo kept the flocks of Admetus, said the poets. When the gods come among men, they are not known” (EL, 251). As if to take Emerson at his word when he writes, “Nothing in nature is exhausted in its first use. When a thing has served an end to the uttermost, it is wholly new for an ulterior service” (EL, 28), Proust refers again to the quotation in the series of short pieces called “Les Regrets, rêveries couleur du temps” when he describes a walk through a farmyard:

Mais quelle est cette personne royalement vêtue qui s’avance, parmi les choses rustiques et fermières, sur la pointe des pattes comme pour ne point se salir? C’est l’oiseau de Junon brillant non de mortes pierceries ... le paon dont le luxe fabuleux étonne ici ...

Mais non, c’est ici que le paon passe sa vie, véritable oiseau de paradis dans une basse-cour, entre les dindes et les poules ... Apollon qu’on reconnaît toujours, même quand il garde, rayonnant, les troupeaux d’Admète.

[But what is that regally attired personage carefully picking his way among the rustic farm implements as though afraid of soiling his
feet, offended by the dirt? It is Juno’s bird, gorgeous not with lifeless gems … the peacock, whose fabulous splendour seems so surprising in such a place ...

And yet it is right here that the peacock spends his life, a veritable bird of paradise in the barnyard among the turkeys and the hens … a radiant Apollo, recognisable always – even when he guards Ademetus’ flocks.] (JS, 107–108; PR, II:8–119)

So it is we first encounter the peacock whose tail will reappear as a napkin in the Guermantes’s library. Read within the context of the full discovery of the involuntary in *Le Temps retrouvé*, Proust’s epigraph to “La Mort de Baldassare Silvande” takes on a power and resonance that alone it doesn’t possess. Put at its simplest, Proust’s epiphany is that the power to transform one’s life is immanent in the world. In recognizing this, Proust makes it clear that the self, as realized in the work of art, becomes one with whatever materials the artist uses. For the writer this is language; thus the movement of his characters through their lives is figured in the movement of metaphors, joining as they do the physical world with that of the intellect, and ultimately marking the way in which the involuntary recollection of the past becomes an active metamorphosis of the present. It is a vision prospectively as democratic as anything offered by Emerson:

La vraie vie, la vie enfin découverte et éclaircie, la seule vie par conséquent pleinement vécue, c’est la littérature. Cette vie qui, en uns sens, habite à chaque instant chez tous les hommes aussi bien que chez l’artiste.

[Real life, life finally uncovered and clarified, the only life in consequence lived to its full, is literature. Life in this sense dwells within all ordinary people as much as in the artist.] (2284; VI:204)

Democracy, however, particularly the American model, was riddled with anxieties. It is to these that we now turn.