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Introduction

By anyone's standards, Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu* (*In Search of Lost Time*, 1913–27) is a very long book: seven novels combine into a single overarching narrative, whose multiple strands keep even the most committed readers occupied for months, even years. *Time*, therefore, is an integral part of the enterprise. The story is relatively simple: an individual narrates his life in the first person, seeking to determine what it amounts to and whether he has it in him to become a writer. To read the novel, however, involves relearning our experience of time, not only in the novel's radically unconventional structuring but in its themes and the ways in which it takes over our empty minutes, fills our cramped commuter journeys and our soaks in the bathtub with expansiveness and capaciousness previously unknown in literature. A single evening party stretches out to fill scores of pages; and the fleeting real-time duration of sensations – a smell, a sound – are drawn out and intensified by the onward rush of prose that seeks tirelessly to capture every conceivable contour of human experience. This is not time wasted. It is time revitalized or, rather, it is the novel sensitizing us to literary time and, through this, to a store of experiential riches in the real world that might otherwise pass us by.

The novel's original translator, C. K. Scott Moncrieff, rendered Proust's title as *Remembrance of Things Past*, a phrase borrowed from Shakespeare's Sonnet 30, which begins 'When to the sessions of sweet silent thought/I summon up remembrance of things past'. Moncrieff's title is often still heard, but the voluntary, willed nature of 'summoning' runs counter to the importance granted by Proust to *involuntary* memory; 'Remembrance of Things Past' also loses the original balance between the 'temps perdu' (lost time) of the overall title and the 'temps retrouvé' (time regained) of the final volume. *In Search of Lost Time* was adopted as the novel's English title in 1992 when D. J. Enright revised Terence Kilmartin's 1981 revision of Moncrieff's translation. The *Search*, however, was not Proust's only work. Interested readers can dip their toes, even immerse themselves, in his early writings if they are so minded: the results are mixed, but the overall impression we come away with is that of a writer gradually honing a voice, refining his material and seeking a form that will let one

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express the other. Proust's generic experimentation was vitally instructive and the hybridity of his efforts in the determining year between 1908 and 1909 – pastiches, essay, dialogue, novelistic fragments, theoretical reflections on art – was never wholly eradicated from the *magnum opus*, whose corrections were still unfinished when its author wheezed his last shallow breath in 1922.

The *Search* is perhaps the greatest achievement of twentieth-century literary modernity, an improbable feat of individual creativity. It incorporates numerous traits of style and technique of nineteenth-century literature: romantic reflection and self-absorption; realistic accounts of people, places and events; naturalistic studies of genealogy and vice. It also takes in a vast sweep of history and culture, from cave paintings to Carpaccio, Mozart to music hall, Napoleon to Nietzsche and Nijinski, Leonardo to Lloyd George, Socrates to Sévigné. Proust's penchant for Russian doll-like clausal constructions, sentences that sprawl unhurriedly over several pages, sets him apart from his immediate forebears, yet his equally frequent habit of formulating laws and maxims puts one in mind of the seventeenth-century *moralistes* La Bruyère and La Rochefoucauld.

This remarkable stylistic palate and expansive range come to us from a narrator who turns his gaze outwards to the proliferating multiplicities of the material world but just as often looks inwards, at times with increased intensity, at the tensions and traumas, real and imagined, of his own subjectivity. A large measure of Proust's radical modernity stems from the non-linear unfolding of the novel. Prolepsis (anticipation) and analepsis (flashback) are narrative devices familiar to us in film and fiction nowadays but Proust was among the first to use them systematically in structuring a literary work. Using them, as well as subtle, sometimes unmarked shifts in perspective (movements between the Narrator's older and younger selves) in a novel as expansive as the *Search* tests readers to their limits and foregrounds the importance – and the fallibility – of memory, the mental faculty Proust prizes above all else. The result is a reading experience unlike any other in the Western tradition.

Most famously, near the start of the novel the Narrator's childhood, long thought to be a forgotten, and therefore inaccessible, chapter of his past, is recaptured for him as an adult when he tastes a *madeleine*, a small, sweet cake, dipped in lime-blossom tea. This sense experience, far more powerful than any willed act of the mind, revitalizes involuntarily the experience of tasting the same concoction as a child; this memory opens the floodgates and a crucial period of his existence is vividly restored to him.

Also key in the Proustian world are the complex workings of habit. Habit can dampen our senses to the stimuli of the outside world, cocoon us in an

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environment that is anodyne, in*habit*able. For Proust's Narrator, an absence of habit brings with it anxiety, uncertainty and fear. Coming to terms with a new environment (such as an unfamiliar room in which he must sleep) requires the Narrator to re-establish from first principles his identity and his relation to the world at large. While with time habit anaesthetizes the hyper-sensitive Narrator to the fears by which he is assailed, a routine existence shaped solely by habit (like that of Aunt Léonie in Combray) is one which threatens to limit his experience of the world and the things in it to a purely superficial level, dictating patterns of behaviour that curtail spontaneity and opportunities for real discovery. As a result the Narrator treads a treacherous path between his fear of being damaged by a complex, threatening world and his unparalleled thirst for knowledge. Whether we seek knowledge of a sonata or a salon, of how our lover finds his or her pleasure or, harder still, of his or her intimate thoughts and desires, we run the risk of ridicule by revealing our ignorance, our vice or our obsession. Worse, we might discover truths we are not equipped to handle, knowledge that with enlightenment brings suffering.

The conception of love and relationships that emerges from the *Search* is a pessimistic one. The Other is unknowable; what we call 'love' is a projection that comes from the self and whose reflection we mistake for reciprocal affection. Desire is all-powerful until the object of desire is possessed; then 'love' withers, our interest diminishing directly as intimacy with the Other increases. Although in the novel satisfaction from relationships is scant and suffering in love is the lot of individuals of every social station, there is in the many of the novel's lovers the same streak of resilience and tenacity that we find in Vladimir and Estragon in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, that keeps the embers of optimism aglow: against the odds they go on in the hope that happiness, or at least a cessation of suffering, may yet be near at hand.

The Narrator's compulsive knowledge-seeking together with his fear of the unknown combine to produce one of literature's most engaging and at times infuriating monologists. His urge to understand states of mind, impressions and sensations makes the *Search* a remarkable *roman d'analyse* or psychological novel, a sustained, rhapsodic study in interiority. Yet the Narrator's quest is not only for his own identity and vocation. He seeks an understanding of art, sexuality and worldly and political affairs: he is a snoop and a voyeur; he comments and classifies; his taxonomic impulse makes the novel appear to be a vast compendium, replete with burrowing wasps and bedsteads, military strategies, stereoscopes, asparagus and aeroplanes. The metaphors and analogies the Narrator persistently uses act as conduits between the realms of mind and matter and remind us of the fluidity of their boundaries for the creative artist.

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Proust's Narrator is at times an incisive thinker, a virtuoso splitter of intellectual hairs and an accomplished cartographer of the human heart and mind. Frequently, however, his greatest insights come from fumblings in the dark, wrong turns and contingent revelations. He swings between confidence and neurosis, is a dupe and an ignorer of good advice, often because of the blinding force of jealousy. He is a sensitive aesthete seeking affection and happiness who sequesters his beloved and slowly suffocates her with a brutal regime of surveillance and interrogation.

With the caveat that an *Introduction* can never be a substitute for the labour of reading and rereading Proust's work itself, what follows offers a crutch for the weary and a set of access routes for those setting out on the journey for the first time. *In Search of Lost Time* is a unique achievement and reading it is a life-changing process. The novel explores the ragged, shifting nature of subjectivity; it abounds in beauty, intelligence, cruelty and suffering. It is hoped that this volume will stimulate the readerly appetite of those jaded or misled by the much-peddled '*madeleine*-induced bliss', 'cork-lined room' conceptions of Proust and his work. This *Introduction* reminds readers that Proust's novel offers sustenance far longer-lasting, richer and more nourishing than cork or crumbs.

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Chapter 1

Life

Proust led an almost irresistibly intriguing life. It was one of wretched ill health combined with seemingly endless creative stamina; desire in surfeit but scant satisfaction; wealth and privilege coupled with perennial yearnings for the company and favours of those of a lower social station. These aspects of the life make for fascinating reading and can feed profitably into our understanding and appreciation of Proust's novel, but if we tarry too long over them we risk becoming bewitched by the man and his manias, losing sight of the art to which he dedicated his life.

As biographers and critics have profitably shown for decades, Proust drew on practically every aspect of his personal experience when creating his novel. His life and the rapidly changing world in which he lived provided inspiration, ideas and scenarios, which fed into the construction of his literary project. But this, crucially, does not mean that Proust and his Narrator are one and the same. Proust had a brother, a Jewish mother, a sinecure position for a time at the *Bibliothèque mazarine*; the Narrator of the *Search* has none of these. Proust was homosexual; for his heterosexual Narrator, lesbianism is a threatening, unknowable otherness that provokes in him pathological fear.

Detailing such divergences, however, is something of a fool's errand. For every aspect of the Narrator we consider that sets him apart from his creator, another will present itself that suggests congruity or sameness. Some readers (and critics of the novel) think of the Narrator as 'Marcel', a choice which implicitly aligns the Narrator's identity with that of his creator and asks a brief moment of the novel to bear a great deal of critical weight. In *The Captive* (which Proust had not finished editing when he died) the Narrator remarks that Albertine, awakening, would 'say "My – " or "My darling – " followed by my first name, which, if we give the narrator the same name as the author of this book, would be "My Marcel," or "My darling Marcel"', (*C*, 77; *P*, 1658). This sudden acknowledgement of the Narrator's fictional status and that of the text in which he appears introduces a bewildering ontological dilemma for readers to ponder but is not iron-clad 'proof' that the novel's protagonist *is* 'Marcel' and less still that being so named would mean that he and Proust are one and the same person.

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Matters are complicated by the fact that in his correspondence and the notes made during the writing of the novel, Proust habitually adopted the first person when referring to the Narrator of his novel, thus blurring the line between creator and created. Additionally, George Painter, Proust's first, highly influential, English-language biographer, worked on the premise that the *Search* was a 'creative autobiography'. Understanding the novel, for Painter, was largely a question of mapping Proust's fictional characters on to his real-life acquaintances. Taking all these matters into account, it is most straightforward, and it will be my practice in the present volume, to refer to the individual who leads us through the pages of the *Search* simply as the 'Narrator', similar to but separate from the work's author.

I shall discuss Proust's life not because the information thus imparted provides a necessary foundation upon which to rest one's reading of the *Search*, or because knowing which individuals from Proust's social circle may offer 'keys' to certain characters will make the novel easier to comprehend and enjoy. Rather, it is fruitful to begin with a consideration of Proust's life because an awareness of his family background, his health and upbringing, the relations he developed through childhood into adolescence and his conduct in the affairs of his adult life can provide us with a valuable sense of the forces that shaped this singularly complex individual. Readers whose primary interest is in Proust's novel should inform themselves of biographical fact and anecdote in the way that we might visit a vineyard in order to note how the breeze comes down the slopes, to see how the sun strikes the grapes and to feel the texture of the soil between our fingers, fingers that later will hold a glass of something quite distinct but inextricably related to that earlier experience.

The image of Proust that one might gather from journalistic references is that of a bedridden hypochondriac, a hyper-sensitive, moustachioed aesthete, notoriously nocturnal, independently wealthy and idiosyncratic in taste. There is, naturally, factual foundation for these enduring images: his biographers offer accounts of the treatments he took for his asthma, the installation of the cork lining on the walls of his bedroom, the unusual hours he kept, the drinks and dishes he favoured; and the photographs we have of him at different ages will permit those so minded to piece together a rough timeline for the growth and development of the famous moustache. The clichéd conceptions of Proust, however, which lodge in the collective imagination a picture of an author familiar even to those who have not read his work, are based largely on our knowledge of the adult Proust. What of his childhood and adolescence? Perhaps we should start there if we are to gain some sense of the child that would be father to this most exceptional man.

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Proust was born on 10 July 1871 in Auteuil, a village to the west of Paris where his mother's uncle had a house to which his parents had moved when the disruption and violence of the Paris Commune grew intolerable. He was a weak baby and the family harboured serious doubts about his chances of survival. When he was well enough they moved back to Paris. Their vacations were spent largely in Illiers, the paternal family seat to the south-west of Paris, near Chartres. Proust would later draw heavily on the landscapes and way of life at Illiers in constructing the 'Combray' section of *In Search of Lost Time*. In 1971, to mark the centenary of the author's birth, the village's name was formally changed to Illiers-Combray; it continues to attract a great many Proustian pilgrims. Proust's mother, born Jeanne Weil, came from a wealthy Jewish family (her grandfather made his fortune in porcelain manufacture and her father was a stockbroker) and his father, Adrien Proust, was Catholic, although neither practised their respective religion. Proust was baptized and confirmed in the Catholic Church and he and his brother Robert, born in May 1873, were raised as Catholics.

Proust's initial weakness and poor health are one explanation for the strong bond he developed with his mother. His relationship with her was closer than that with his father, in large part because of the latter's career. Adrien Proust was a successful doctor, held in high public regard, who published extensively on a wide range of subjects of medical science. His implementation of the use of the '*cordon sanitaire*' or quarantine line in the fight against cholera contributed to his election to the prestigious *Académie de médecine* in 1879; by 1885 he was elected Professor of Hygiene in the Faculty of Medicine. He travelled a lot, worked long hours and believed in the benefits of regular exercise and the strict scientific treatment of illness. As his career went from strength to strength his first son's health gradually deteriorated.

In the spring of 1881, returning with his parents from a walk in the Bois de Boulogne, Marcel had a sudden choking fit: this asthmatic seizure that almost killed him marked the beginning of his lifelong struggle for breath and inaugurated what would thereafter be a constant nervous fear of the open air and an extreme sensitivity to dust, pollen and smoke. After the onset of his asthma, longer spells were spent on the Normandy coast, where Adrien believed the sea air would have a beneficial effect on his son's respiratory problems.

Proust attended the Lycée Condorcet in Paris from 1882 until 1889 but missed a great deal of schooling for health reasons. At this time it was popular for children to have keepsake books, albums which included questionnaires friends filled out so as to learn more about each other. Proust completed one such questionnaire in 1886: judging by his responses, the adolescent Proust was romantic, idealistic and had pastimes befitting his age, health

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and upper-middle-class background (favourite occupations: 'Reading, daydreaming, poetry, history, theatre'). About six years later Proust took a similar questionnaire and his answers are revealing of his development. He was extremely fond at this time of Marie de Benardaky, a girl with whom he played in the gardens of the Champs-Élysées, and Jeanne Pouquet, the companion of Gaston, son of Mme Arman de Caillavet, a society hostess whose salon Proust had recently begun to frequent. It is at Pouquet's feet that Proust can be seen strumming a tennis racket-guitar, mock serenading her in a well-known photograph from 1891 or 1892. Despite his attraction to Pouquet and other young women in the late 1880s, tellingly, in the second questionnaire, Proust described his favourite quality in a man as 'feminine charm', his favourite qualities in a woman as 'Manly virtue and openness in friendship'. These answers anticipate his later challenging of commonplace conceptions of gender identities in his novel.[1]

Letters from the late 1880s offer evidence of Proust's sexual experimentation with his (all male) classmates at Condorcet. But his inquisitiveness was more than libidinal. From a young age he read widely; at the Lycée he read set texts such as Pascal's *Pensées* and Leibniz's *Monadology* as well as recent and contemporary writers such as Barrès, Renan, Leconte de Lisle and Loti. He began contributing to journals run by his classmates, amongst whom were Daniel Halévy, who became a noted historian and biographer; Fernand Gregh, later a major critic and member of the *Académie française*; and Robert de Flers, another future *Académicien*. As well as drawing on his reading and the intellectual and amorous stimulation he received from this remarkable peer group, Proust's perspective on the world also developed through his precocious participation in the salon life of *belle époque* Paris. He was an enthusiastic reader of Anatole France and it was in the salon of Mme de Caillavet, France's mistress, that Proust eventually met the eminent writer who, in due course, provided the preface for his first book, published in 1896, the year France was elected to the *Académie française*.

Proust's health was still precarious and he harboured desires to become a writer, so his decision in 1889 to sign up voluntarily for military service upon graduating from the Lycée may seem surprising. It was in fact calculated: those *volunteering* undertook just one year's service rather than being enlisted for the normal three. The young intellectual was stationed to Orléans, but his asthma disrupted his fellow cadets so he was lodged privately in the town (which now has its rue Marcel Proust). Early on in his service, in January 1890, Proust's maternal grandmother, Adèle Weil, died from an attack of uraemia. Proust's mother, devastated, went into mourning, travelling later in the year to Cabourg where previously they had holidayed, the three generations together;

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there she sought consolation in reading the letters of Mme de Sévigné, her mother's favourite author. Proust returned to Paris after his military service with thoughts of becoming a writer, but with little sense of how he might do so. His parents wished him to study with a view to a stable future (of the sort that writing could not guarantee), so, somewhat reluctantly, in November 1890, Proust enrolled in the Faculties of Law and Political Science, the conventional pathway for those seeking a diplomatic career.

His studies were a minor part of his existence, however, as writing of a number of non-academic sorts began to occupy him: he wrote for *Le Mensuel*, commenting on societal and political affairs, and founded, with a group of ex-Condorcet students, *Le Banquet* (the title borrowed from the French rendering of Plato's *Symposium*), a journal in which he published reviews and sketches based on his ever-growing experiences in the salons. It was at this time that Jacques-Émile Blanche (1861–1942), an established society painter, began his sketches and eventually completed the portrait by which Proust's youthful face would be forever remembered, his pallid complexion, pursed lips and narrow moustache looming enigmatically out of a dark background, atop evening dress, adorned with the sensual splash of a white orchid in his buttonhole. This painting, now in the Musée d'Orsay, captures Proust eternally as a twenty-one-year-old socialite, ironically perhaps for one whose novel shows him to be so exceptionally alert to the mutability of the human body and the effects of the passing of time.

In 1891, as Blanche worked on his portrait, Oscar Wilde published *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and visited Paris. One might anticipate that a meeting between the notorious Wilde and the impressionable young Proust would have been a momentous occasion. It is not certain, however, that they actually met.[2] Two years later Proust's first sustained creative piece, 'Violante ou la mondanité' [Violante, or Worldly Vanities], was published in *Le Banquet*. Thereafter short stories, criticism, satirical sketches and essays were published in *La Revue blanche* (a prestigious journal which provided a platform for writers such as Verlaine, Mallarmé and Gide) as well as other journals and papers. In the salons of Mme Straus, Mme de Caillavet and Madeleine Lemaire he met major artistic figures of all stripes: the actress Sarah Bernhardt, poets such as José-Maria de Heredia and Leconte de Lisle, painters including Degas and Puvis de Chavannes (Lemaire herself was a painter); as well as aristocrats and royals including Charles Haas and the Princesse Mathilde. Proust, whose background was solidly *haut bourgeois*, gained access to these social arenas where titled nobility rubbed shoulders with the artistic elite by dint of his ability to charm and entertain with his conversation, wit and considerable intellect. His interactions with the prominent worldly figures of his day exposed

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him to intrigues, to quirks of language, conventions of behaviour, patterns of prejudice and pretension – in short, gave him a sort of sociological training. The salons were the preserve of the wealthy, but they displayed to Proust's sensibilities deeper laws and configurations of human interaction that could be found throughout the social spectrum, as his lengthy conversations with domestics and hotel and delivery staff would later confirm.

In Madeleine Lemaire's salon Proust became acquainted with the dandy and poet count Robert de Montesquiou (1855–1921), one of the period's most remarkable figures. A decadent aesthete with wealth, pomposity and idiosyncrasy in vast measure, aspects of his behaviour and eccentricities fed into Proust's fictional baron de Charlus. The decadent novelist J. K. Huysmans had already drawn heavily on Montesquiou as a model for Jean Des Esseintes, the protagonist in his 1884 novel *A rebours* [*Against Nature*], which is thought to have influenced Wilde's *Dorian Gray*. Besides Montesquiou, *chez* Lemaire Proust also met a brilliant young composer named Reynaldo Hahn. His infatuation with Hahn lasted approximately two years but their friendship endured Proust's lifetime. His early letters to Hahn, frequently signed 'Your pony', reveal how rapidly his amorous devotions developed. In the Parisian salons as well as in country residences (such as Lemaire's château de Réveillon at which Proust and Hahn spent a month in 1894), musical recitals were heard, plays and paintings discussed and the polemics – and gossip – of the day were debated. A subject that began in 1894 to pique the interest of chattering socialites, bourgeoisie and working class alike was the case of Alfred Dreyfus.

A Jewish captain on the General Staff, Dreyfus was accused of having passed information to the Germans, convicted of treason and sent, for life, to the penal colony on Devil's Island off the coast of French Guiana. In 1896, suspecting that Dreyfus was being framed to protect a non-Jewish officer, Colonel Picquart proved that the evidence against Dreyfus – a memorandum stolen from the German embassy in Paris – had been written by another man, Major Esterhazy. The latter, however, was acquitted and Picquart jailed. This turn of events led to a public outcry and demands for a retrial of Dreyfus. Emile Zola (1840–1902), in a series of articles in the *Figaro* newspaper, called for truth and justice, protesting vociferously against the military cover-up and the systemic anti-Semitism of the time. Proust and other *Dreyfusards* campaigned amongst writers and public figures for signatures on a petition backing Zola's critique of the military's juridical violations. Proust famously won Anatole France's influential signature for the cause. The drama reached its peak with the publication in January 1898 of Zola's open letter 'J'accuse' and, the following day, the petition against the authorities, the 'Manifesto of the Intellectuals'. Tried for

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