

PROUST, BECKETT, AND NARRATION

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CHAPTER I

Remembering forgetting: Le Drame du coucher

For the important thing for the author is not what he experienced, but the weaving of his memory, the Penelope work of recollection. Or should one call it, rather, a Penelope work of forgetting? Is not the involuntary recollection, Proust's *mémoire involontaire*, much closer to forgetting than what is usually called memory?

Walter Benjamin¹

Literary history has tended to memorialize Proust's novel as a monument to memory, a *Remembrance of Things Past* (as the English translation is titled), rather than a monument to time or forgetting, a *Recherche du temps perdu* (as the French novel is titled). Proust's first-person narrator seems at first glance to support this reading. Over the course of the novel, he appears to tell the story of how he overcame forgetting and wrote a novel of memory. As a child he began to repress memories of his past. He later conquered this forgetting when, as an adult, he discovered the power of involuntary memories, which are produced by chance associations rather than conscious will. Finally, he began to write an autobiographical novel that was built upon his involuntary memories of his past and recounted his lifelong search for these memories.

If we were to assume that this traditional story of Proust's triumphant resurrection of memory is the central story in the *Recherche*, we would incorrectly conclude that the first-person narrator is a realist narrator who accurately represents past things through his memory. But, for Proust's narrator, realist representations of things are produced by what he calls "voluntary memories," which have nothing to do with the past. What the narrator does claim to narrate sometimes is involuntary remembrances of his past. Involuntary memories recreate not past things but the narrator's past mental impressions of things. These impressions theoretically express, in a present instant that is outside time, his unique past ways of seeing the world and the essence of his past selves. The famous madeleine passage in *Combray* and the repetition of similar experiences of involuntary memory

in *Le Temps retrouvé*, the last volume of the *Recherche*, reinforce, thematically and structurally, this “impressionist” reading of the *Recherche* as a novel written with, and about, involuntary memories of past impressions, past ways of seeing the world and past selves. According to Proust’s impressionist reading, the end of the *Recherche* represents the moment when the protagonist, the narrator’s past self, finally understands that only his involuntary memories can truly resurrect his past impressions of things. He rejects his past error of relying on voluntary memories and writes an autobiographical novel based on involuntary memories. It is this hypothetical autobiographical novel of involuntary memory that Beckett faithfully and sometimes ironically describes in his essay, *Proust*.

But Proust in fact builds his literary cathedral of memory on the quicksand of what Richard Terdiman calls a “massive disruption of traditional forms of memory” in nineteenth-century discourse, a disruption that Foucault associates with society’s increasing awareness of time as change.² This is the century that gave us Nietzsche’s essay on the advantages of forgetting history and the beginnings of Freud’s writings on how forgetting functions as both a negative means of repression and a positive means of sublimation.³ Proust’s narrator’s story of his past loss and involuntary rediscovery of memories of past impressions is in fact part of another story of how the protagonist discovered “[l]’heureux oubli,” which necessarily takes place in time (*R*, 3: 1040). Involuntary memory, Walter Benjamin pointed out, is “much closer to forgetting than what is usually called memory.” For Proust, involuntary memory and an impressionist autobiography based on it are an “infaillible proportion . . . de souvenir et d’oubli” (*R*, 3: 879), an interplay between a remembering “I” and a forgetting “I.” *A la recherche du temps perdu* splits its first-person narrator’s desires between a desire to remember and a desire to forget the past. Only in Beckett’s novel trilogy will Beckett delve into the functioning of this forgetting narrator. The narrator’s split between remembering and forgetting foreshadows the narrator, Molloy, in Beckett’s trilogy, who writes the story of his past relation with his mother even as he forgets his mother’s address, her name, his own name, and most words.⁴

The protagonist’s search to write an impressionist autobiography based on involuntary memories is part of the story of how he learned that involuntary memories not only remember his past selves, they forget and reconstruct these memories. “Chercher? pas seulement: créer,” the narrator says in the madeleine episode, as he tries to bring an involuntary memory to consciousness (*R*, 1: 48). The past vision of the world that arises out of the protagonist’s taste of a cup of tea and madeleine – “tout cela qui

prend forme et solidité” (*R*, I: 48) – is thus an artificial construction of the novel’s forgetting and writing narrator, the “I” who knows that the act of remembering the past is an active rewriting and transformation of the past. Whereas involuntary memory is theoretically outside time, this act of reconstructing past selves takes place in time. *A la recherche du temps perdu* asks whether the protagonist who ultimately decides to write a novel – the “Marcel” who finally comprehends the error of voluntary memory and the truth of involuntary memory – coincides with the writing narrator, and thus the author, Marcel Proust, who reinvents this past self. Is the *Recherche* autobiographical or fictional? Proust’s narrator, who is split between a remembering and a forgetting “I,” puts into question the very possibility of an historical discourse that not only recreates the historical past, but also accurately represents the temporal relation between its present of remembering/reconstruction and the historical past.

Proust’s story of how his protagonist came to write a novel based on involuntary memories recounts the latter’s search to comprehend the temporality of the narrative act of reconstructing the past. The narrative act is always already an interplay between losing and recapturing, forgetting and remembering the past. My emphasis on forgetting in this chapter is thus a strategic means of breaking down the conventional reading of Proust’s narrator as a remembering narrator and opening reading up to the interplay between the voices of Proust’s remembering and forgetting narrators. This interplay takes place within the words of a first-person writing narrator who never knows whether his words are linking him to, or cutting him off from, the past.

The “beginning” of the narrator’s story of his search for his past – the “drame du coucher” – marks his apprenticeship in forgetting the past.⁵ The protagonist’s obsession with forgetting arises out of an evening when his strict yet loving mother – against her strict principles – passed an entire night in her young son’s bedroom in order to calm his nerves and satisfy her husband’s apparent desire to sleep in peace. After this evening, the narrator tells us, he became obsessed with the memory of that moment, which recalled both his fear of going to bed without his mother’s goodnight kiss – “le drame de mon déshabillage” – and his desire for his mother: “C’est ainsi que, pendant longtemps, quand, réveillé la nuit, je me ressouvenais de Combray, je n’en revis jamais que . . . le décor strictement nécessaire . . . au drame de mon déshabillage . . .” (*R*, I: 43–44). The protagonist’s memory became fixated on the moment of hope and fear when he waited for his mother on the stairway that fateful night, on the moment of a desire that seemed to have once, if only once, been satisfied.

The satisfaction that the young Marcel felt he received during that one night was produced by his mother's mode of reading a novel by Georges Sand. She read it in a manner that, according to him, recreated and preserved the author's self.⁶ "[L]ectrice admirable," Marcel's mother spent the night reading Sand's romantic novel, *François le Champi*, to her anxious and sleepless child. This novel tells the story of a love affair between a woman and the orphan boy she adopts. It thus indirectly refers to the incestuous relation between the protagonist and his mother. Because of the mother's principles, which prohibit incest, she deliberately skips any passages that make explicit the incestuous implications of the mother/son relationship that the novel unfolds. However, by choosing to read this particular novel to her son, while skipping the passages on incest, she indirectly alludes to the relation that she is helping set up with her son, even as she hides it from him and from herself.

Marcel's mother indirectly expresses her ambivalence, not only in reading a novel about incest, but in the relation that she establishes, as reader, with the author, Sand. Although his mother is not faithful to all that Sand says, she is faithful, the narrator says, to the peculiar "accent" that distinguishes Sand's unique style. She reads with an extraordinary sensitivity to the author's distinct identity which, according to Proust's narrator, is expressed not by what Sand says or represents but by the way she writes: "Elle retrouvait pour les attaquer dans le ton qu'il faut, l'accent cordial qui leur préexiste et les dicta, mais que les mots n'indiquent pas" (*R*, 1: 42).⁷ Marcel's mother reads Sand with the same empathy for the author's emotions that she shows to her frightened son by holding his hands while he cries and allowing him to see her own desire to cry in the face of his pain. To read Sand's words and her son's tears in this way is, theoretically, to constitute herself as the receptacle of their unique selves, which are communicated, not by the content of their words, but by their manner of expressing this content.⁸ She is the ideal reader of autobiographical signs, who resurrects the author's selves, preserves them, and renders them timeless.

Such an ideal reading of Marcel's actions was the type of reading that he had hoped to procure when, earlier in the evening, in what Samuel Weber calls his "premier acte littéraire" (*R*, 1: 41), he had written his mother a message pleading for a goodnight kiss and had asked the maid Françoise to give her this message at the dinner table. The son's "demande de lecture," which Ross Chambers has taught us to read as a "demande d'amour," like the son's tears later on that evening, asked his mother for a reading that was sensitive to the anguish that his letter expressed and that would motivate her to leave her guests and come to console him.⁹ The very hope of such a loving

reading, however, depended upon his lying to Françoise: “[J]e n’hésitais pas à mentir et à lui dire que ce n’était pas du tout moi qui avais voulu écrire à maman, mais que c’était maman qui, en me quittant, m’avait recommandé de ne pas oublier de lui envoyer une réponse relativement à un objet qu’elle m’avait prié de chercher” (*R*, 1: 29).¹⁰ The child’s lie is not only a means of convincing the family servant to carry his words to his mother; it is also an act of self-deception by which he recreates his fantasy of an impossible writing and reading situation, one in which his mother, the ideal reader, gives herself totally to the emotions expressed by her son’s, the author’s, written words. He asks his mother to confirm the reality of this fantasized situation by leaving her guests and giving him a goodnight kiss. In this fictional writing and reading situation, his ideal reader, he deceitfully says, has already enjoined him to write to her about an “objet qu’elle m’avait prié de chercher.” The act of writing to his mother becomes an act of trying to satisfy what he believes to be her desire that he express in writing his emotions and desires, his self. This fantasized, openly incestuous motherly reader indirectly represents the remembering narrator’s ideal reader, the one whose desire to know Marcel is satisfied by the latter’s writing of remembrances expressing the essence of his self. The child’s demand for a loving reader maintains his self-deception about the possibility of such a reading, but his mother reveals this self-deception by rejecting his request when she tells the maid to tell him: “Il n’y a pas de réponse.” She leaves Marcel only with his ignorance about what she, his reader, really desires, motivating him to put off to a future moment any satisfaction of his desire to see that he is desired by his ideal reader (*R*, 1: 32).

This self-deception of autobiographical writing, along with reading’s demystification and deferral of the writer’s satisfaction of his autobiographical desire to be desired, precede and structure the later scene, in which the mother comes to his bedroom, shares his emotions, and spends the night, at his father’s behest. Marcel can never truly feel that he possesses his mother through her goodnight kiss, because her presence reminds him of her imminent departure. Its act of self-confirmation is a promise of a future end to this self-confirmation, which he fears as a death (*R*, 1: 13). Her calming stay in his bedroom this one time thus increases his anguished knowledge that she will never do it again. Her desires are in fact split. She wants to satisfy his desire for her to console him by means of her presence, but she also wants to strengthen his independence and ability to desire for himself by teaching him that he will not die in her absence. This desire to strengthen her son’s will is reinforced by her strong principles, which forbid the incestuous satisfaction of her son’s desires and which her husband has forced

her to break. From Marcel's perspective, he has achieved the presence of his compassionate mother only at the expense of rendering the rule-giving mother (who plays the role of the symbolic rule-giving father) absent. He thus imagines that his demand for her love has traced a "première ride dans son âme" and "fai[t] apparaître un premier cheveu blanc" (*R*, 1: 39). The result of this evening will be Marcel's daily alternation between his forgetting of his fear of death every morning in his search for his compassionate mother's presence and the remembering of this fear of death every evening, when the rule-bound mother refuses to stay in his bedroom and rejects his illusion that he can possess her. "Désormais," Samuel Weber says, "ce désir sera condamné à osciller entre deux pôles également intolérables: l'absence (maternelle), qu'il ne peut supporter, et la présence (maternelle) qu'il désire mais qui est sa destruction."¹¹

During the one night when Marcel's mother reads Georges Sands's incestuous novel to him in the bedroom, she displaces his dependence on signs of her love from her physical presence to an ideal, motherly reading, thus reinforcing his desire to write an autobiographical novel for her. The mother's contradictory responses to her son's demand to be loved – her satisfaction of this demand through her reading and her physical rejection of this demand – situates her son's autobiographical desire between conflicting and irreconcilable readings: on the one hand, he desires to write about his self, to be read autobiographically, and to be remembered by a compassionate motherly reader; on other hand, he desires to do penance for breaking his mother's rules against incest by putting off involuntary remembering and by forgetting and demystifying self-representation. As a result, any act of inscribing signs of self becomes a self-misrepresentation that is too early or too late to recapture the self. Self-writing takes on the form of allegory, which situates discourse in a temporal gap between a lost past self and an always-deferred future expression of a self. Proust, as we know, wrote the first drafts of the *Recherche* in *Contre Sainte-Beuve* as if he were speaking to his deceased mother. It was as if the writing son and the reading mother would forever be alone in the same room, he expressing his self through writing, she expressing her desire to find her son's self in his writing. But Proust replaced this fictional frame with the scene of waking to consciousness at the beginning of *Combray* and the demystification of this consciousness at the end, which I discussed in the Introduction. Proust thus reminds his readers that his narrator's apparent representations of past or present selves are always artificial reconstructions that necessarily lose these selves or defer their representation into an indefinite future.

Proust's "drame du coucher" suggests that his remembering "I" is an ambiguous sign that always also signifies forgetting as well. The narrator's story of remembering past selves turns out to be an allegory of how forgetting erases his past selves from consciousness and defers their expression into an indefinite future. This forgetting is rendered necessary by the split nature of both the narrator as subject and the reader as ideal object of the narrator's love. The narrator calms his and his reader's fears that his narrative has forgotten his past – he seduces himself and the reader into thinking that he is remembering his past – by erasing signs of the artificiality of his signs. This erasure produces a forgetting of the narrator's and reader's contradictory desires and creates the illusion of a single, shared desire for the presence of the author's past and present selves. It thus removes signs of the narrator's absence and creates the illusion of an escape from temporal difference, an escape from forgetting, in the absolute coincidence of the narrator's past with the present of his remembering discourse.

It is Marcel's drive to obsessively forget his forgetting of his rule-giving mother that motivates him to put off writing. For writing is associated with his mother's refusal to respond to his deceitful message. It is a reminder that his self-representation is a self-misrepresentation and that this misrepresentation defers, rather than ensures, his mother's confirmation of his self.¹² And yet there are everyday moments that repeatedly remind him that his memories are also signs of the death of self, of forgetting, such as Marcel's fear of dying when he falls asleep or his erasure of past selves from consciousness by fixating on a voluntary memory. Writing has in fact always already taken place, as he will later discover when, at the end of the novel, he speaks of the "livre intérieur de signes inconnus" that structures his mind's memories of his past and that consciousness can only "translate" (*R*, 3: 879).

Writing's reminder that Marcel forgets as well as remembers his self, along with his periodic alternation between remembering and forgetting, opens up the question of the moral and ethical status of writing, a question that, at first glance, seems to be absent from the *Recherche*.¹³ Marcel's desire to express himself in writing, I have argued, implies a desire to erase, symbolically to kill off, a self, alongside a desire to resurrect a self. This suicidal desire is mediated in the "drame du coucher" by his wish symbolically to kill off the mother who enforces the law against incest and who confuses a mother's goodnight kiss with a lover's promise. The son's anxiety before going to bed is not only anxiety about dying; it is also guilt over wanting to eliminate his rule-giving mother, who stands in for the absent father, who conventionally represents the law prohibiting incest. This anxiety conveys

a fear of being punished for expressing his incestuous desire: “on ne me laisserait plus rester à la maison, on me mettrait au collège le lendemain, c’était certain” (*R*, 1: 33). To separate Marcel from his mother would be to separate him from himself, the self he finds in his mother’s compassion. It would be to punish him with death for the capital sin of compulsively trying to possess the compassionate mother: “Mais dans l’éducation qu’on me donnait, l’ordre des fautes n’était pas le même que dans l’éducation des autres enfants, et on m’avait habitué à placer avant toutes les autres (parce que sans doute il n’y en avait pas contre lesquelles j’eusse besoin d’être plus soigneusement gardé) celles dont je comprends maintenant que leur caractère commun est qu’on y tombe en cédant à une impulsion nerveuse” (*R*, 1: 33).

According to the author, Proust, guilt for killing mother long preceded his incestuous relation with his mother. It coincided with his birth, for it is birth that generates the mother’s worries. Hence Beckett’s quotation in *Proust* of Calderón, as cited by Schopenhauer, where Beckett attributes sin in the *Recherche* to the son’s sin of being born: “Pues el delito mayor/Del hombre es haber nacido.”¹⁴ Soon after Proust’s mother died, his recent acquaintance, Henri von Blarenbergh, murdered his mother, then committed suicide. In response to this event, Proust wrote: “[N]ous tuons tout ce qui nous aime par les soucis que nous lui donnons.” The son’s demands for motherly love transform her love into a “douloureuse tendresse.” From birth, it is the son’s responsibility that the mother’s “cheveux longtemps restés indomptablement noirs” are “ensuite vaincus comme le reste et blanchissants.”¹⁵ But, as the “drame du coucher” makes clear, this guilt is also linked to the fundamentally incestuous nature of the mother/son relationship, which is accompanied by a desire to kill off the representative of the law, in Proust’s case the rule-giving mother, in order to possess the mother who is concerned for him.

The “drame du coucher,” however, puts into question the moral issue of whether Marcel can make reparation for his guilt of trying to kill off his rule-giving mother.¹⁶ Marcel tries to make reparation for his obsessive demands for his compassionate mother by repressing his past and destroying his will to write. But this repression only repeats his sense of guilt by erasing from consciousness the compassionate mother, who wants him to write. He thus must make reparation for this repression by resurrecting a self.¹⁷ To make reparation for guilt is to repeat the guilt otherwise, as Macmann discovers in *Malone Dies*. Marcel finds himself in a moral abyss: his obsessive attempts and failures to do penance for his desire to kill off his rule-giving mother by killing off his compassionate mother, for which he

must then do penance by bringing the compassionate mother back alive (as with involuntary memory), itself producing guilt for incest, *ad infinitum*. Marcel's compulsive drive to make reparation turns out to be a drive to eliminate the very possibility of distinguishing a guilty act from an act of reparation, and thus the possibility of making moral distinctions. The goal of Marcel's drive to make reparation is the destruction of the moral question itself and thus of guilt, but the drive only repeats this question over and over.

Only by learning to accept his compulsive drive to eliminate the moral question, which repeats this question, can Marcel gain a measure of freedom to choose what he does, to will, to act ethically. Recognizing the rule, while accepting the prohibited drive, makes possible a measure of freedom to choose between his compulsive drive and his love of the law, which, together, constitute his split self.¹⁸ Marcel's mother's attempt to give him freedom from his drive only reinforces his imprisonment within it, precisely because she forbids identification with his drive. Only when she signals her acceptance of his drive, when she gives him some madeleines later in life and evokes his involuntary memories, does she give him the possibility of freedom.

Throughout the *Recherche*, the narrator develops the relation between autobiography and the ethical and psychological questions posed by his drive to kill off the moral question. At the end of the novel, when he finally finds the will to write, the narrator comes back to the question of guilt and reparation by expressing his guilt for having symbolically killed all those who have loved him, most notably his motherly grandmother, and hoping that his writing will make reparation for his guilt (*R*, 3: 1037–38): “[J]e me demandais si tout de même une oeuvre d’art dont elles ne seraient pas conscientes serait pour elles, pour le destin de ces pauvres mortes, un accomplissement. Ma grand’mère que j’avais, avec tant d’indifférence, vue agoniser et mourir près de moi!” (*R*, 3: 902). Marcel associates writing itself, which theoretically resurrects his past impressions and past selves, with the guilty act of erasing others, who are associated with his mother – his grandmother and Albertine – and with erasing his own past, which he sought in their compassion. The proper names of the lost souls that will appear in his novel “ne sont plus pour nous qu’un mot incompris.” Even these words become “mots oubliés” (*R*, 3: 903). Writing is thus always already a symbolic form of Blarenberg’s murder/suicide, which obsessively reproduces the moral question and the question of self, even as it repeatedly breaks down the distinction between remembering and forgetting, and moral distinctions.¹⁹

But writing also becomes a step away from Marcel's dependence upon this obsessive repetition and towards a modicum of free will and ethical choice. For he concludes that he cannot write a novel based only upon his compulsive desire to recapture a past that has been irredeemably forgotten, or redeem the present that has forgotten it. He ends the novel by redefining the goal of his novel to dramatize time, in other words, the purely formal temporality of the interplay between allegory and irony that structures the interplay between remembering and forgetting, guilt and reparation, in the narrator's first-person discourse (*R*, 3: 902–3). This step involves the author's ethical sacrifice of the search for self and redemption, for self-expression to readers, and a transformation of writing into a gift to readers, such as Beckett:

En réalité, chaque lecteur est, quand il lit, le propre lecteur de soi-même. La reconnaissance en soi-même, par le lecteur, de ce que dit le livre, est la preuve de la vérité de celui-ci, et *vice-versa*, au moins dans une certaine mesure, la différence entre les deux textes pouvant être souvent imputée non à l'auteur mais au lecteur. De plus, le livre peut être trop savant, trop obscur pour le lecteur naïf, et ne lui présenter ainsi qu'un verre trouble avec lequel il ne pourra pas lire. Mais d'autres particularités (comme l'inversion) peuvent faire que le lecteur a besoin de lire d'une certaine façon pour bien lire; l'auteur n'a pas à s'en offenser, mais au contraire à laisser la plus grande liberté au lecteur en lui disant: "Regardez vous-même si vous voyez mieux avec ce verre-ci, avec celui-là, avec cet autre." (*R*, 3: 911)

Whether or not one reads the "drame du coucher" as an ontological discourse on the remembering and forgetting of the self, a moral discourse on sin and atonement, or a psychological discourse on guilt and reparation, the passage unfolds the subordination of these discourses to an allegorical search to write the temporal interplay between them. Allegory in the *Recherche* always puts into question its own adequacy. It seems to give first-person narration the form of a linear search to reconcile self-memory with self-forgetting. However, this search repeatedly discloses the truth of its own falling into error, its temporal "errance." First-person allegory thus becomes the search for an indefinitely deferred understanding, not of self, but of what language is doing. This deferral of language's self-representation deconstructs the narrative nature of autobiographical discourse. Allegory puts off indefinitely the moment when first-person narration will arrive at its end, which theoretically reveals its beginning, the author's origins. Allegory is thus never more than "the tendency of the language toward narrative," towards having a distinct beginning and end. But then allegory cannot even identify itself as the origin or destination of first-person discourse. It necessarily discloses that first-person discourse

is always too early or too late to identify itself as allegory. There is always an excess of the text for which allegory can never account, an excess of negation, which cannot be controlled by the ethical rules of the return to allegory and which reintroduces the question of what, if anything, writing is doing.

By deconstructing itself, first-person allegory in the “drame du coucher” can either continue to chase its fleeting tail or give way to an apparent “uniform subcurrent of irony,” as argued by Ellison: the virtually simultaneous negation of what the narrator says.²⁰ The disclosure of the indefinite deferral of self-memory which structures the temporality of Marcel’s desires invites an ironical reading of the first-person narrator’s discourse as an ironical simultaneity, in space, of signs of memory and signs of forgetting. Allegory’s revelation of its inability to be allegorical thus takes on the structure of the unhappy consciousness of Hegel’s slave, a self-consciousness that condemns the slave to the ironical knowledge that his words are always doing the opposite of what they say they are doing. Consequently, allegory produces the possibility of a non-allegorical, ironical rereading of the “drame du coucher.” We could thus read the mother’s act of obeying the law against incest by skipping over the semi-incestuous passages in Sand’s novel as an ironical act of revealing her incestuous desire to give herself to her son as an ideal reader if he becomes a writer.

Irony in the *Recherche* is most frequently associated with Marcel’s father as a failed representative of the law. The father’s act of forgetting the law against incest, when he tells his wife to spend the night in their son’s bedroom, ironically produces a reminder of the law. Immediately after the father tells the mother to spend the night in the son’s bedroom, he says: “Il ne s’agit pas d’habituer . . . Allons, bonsoir, moi qui ne suis pas si nerveux que vous, je vais me coucher . . . Il était encore devant nous, grand, dans sa robe de nuit blanche sous le cachemire de l’Inde violet et rose qu’il nouait autour de sa tête depuis qu’il avait des névralgies, avec le geste d’Abraham dans la gravure d’après Benozzo Gozzoli que m’avait donnée M. Swann, disant à Sarah qu’elle a à se départir du côté d’Isaac” (*R*, 1: 36–37). The father’s supposedly non-neurotic erasure of the law, whose neurotic nature is ironically suggested by his tying of a scarf around his head for his neuralgia, is itself ironically negated by the allusion of this gesture to Abraham’s gesture of enforcing the law. Unlike Marcel’s father, who forgets the law when he gives the mother to her son, Abraham, like Marcel’s mother, remembers and obeys the law of the Father by taking his son away from his mother and offering to sacrifice him, in blind obedience to the strict, Jewish, Old Testament God’s arbitrary command.

The assertion that the father's action resembles Abraham's redefines the first-person allegory of the son's search for self as a series of endless ironies. The narrator's analogy between his father's act of giving life to his son and Abraham's act of sacrificing his son ironically undercuts the apparent nature of the father's act. The ironic analogy suggests that the father's compassionate gift of life to the son in disobedience of the law is actually a cruel gift of death: the first wrinkle and gray hair in the mother's soul, and Marcel's atoning for his disobedience to the law by forgetting his past and present selves.²¹

But this ironical negation of the father's apparent gift of life is in turn ironically negated by Abraham's sacrifice, which results of course in God's giving life back to his son. Similarly, Marcel's long sacrifice of self-memory to making reparation through forgetting ultimately culminates in his apparent return to self-remembering through involuntary remembering, which is ironically made possible by the long forgetting that he owes to his father's actions. The narrator's ironical negation of the father's gift of life, and ultimate ironical negation of this negation, does not culminate in self-memory. Rather, it negates any possibility of saying what the father was doing. Irony of irony thus replaces the temporal difference that allegory establishes between the too-earliness and too-lateness of meaning with a repeated attempt and failure, in time, to constitute language as the atemporal co-existence of assertion and negation of meaning. Irony tends towards, but never arrives at, an ahistorical confusion of contraries that dissolves differences between memory and forgetting, self and non-self.

First-person narration in the "drame du coucher" thus seems, at first glance, to be an allegory of the first-person narrator's search for past selves. This allegory takes on the temporal form of an interplay between remembering and forgetting, where remembering is always too early or too late to recapture the real past selves that Marcel first seeks in his mother's presence. But allegory ultimately defers and puts into question any certainty of its own allegorical nature. It thus opens up the possibility that the first-person narrator is only positing the allegory of his search for self in an ironical mode, fully knowing that this allegory is deceptive. Hence the narrator's ironical comparison of his father's gift of life with Abraham's gift of death, a comparison that ultimately breaks down any distinction between life and death, self and non-self. By negating allegory in the very act of affirming it, irony redefines first-person narration as a tendency, not towards narrative, but towards the simultaneous, the atemporal, and the ahistorical.

Can irony in the *Recherche* truly collapse the first-person narrator's allegory into a repetition of ironical moments? Why then, in the very act of collapsing time and history in his ironical comparison of his father to Abraham, does the narrator reach out to Judeo-Christian history and his partially Jewish biography?